

Howard, Rudd hypocrisy on martial law in Pakistan

Peter Symonds
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The reaction of the Howard government and Labor opposition to the imposition of martial law in Pakistan has exposed the hypocrisy of their campaigns for “democracy” in other parts of the world.

Since Pakistani military strongman Pervez Musharraf suspended the country’s constitution and imposed emergency rule on Saturday, hundreds of lawyers, civil rights activists and political leaders have been detained. Police have cracked down on protests against the regime with intensifying violence. All private TV channels have been shut down and any criticism of the military has been banned. The president, who first seized power in 1999, has effectively mounted a second coup and dispensed with any pretence of “restoring democracy”.

Musharraf has struck with particular venom against lawyers and the judiciary, who have become increasingly critical of his rule. Fearing that the Supreme Court was about to overturn last month’s presidential vote—a military-orchestrated sham that explicitly violated the constitution—Musharraf has begun purging the judiciary and the Supreme Court. While protestors demanding democratic rights are being bundled into police vans, the president incongruously claims that his draconian measures are needed to fight the bogus “war on terrorism”.

While US President Bush has voiced pro forma objections to the crackdown, the White House has emphasised Musharraf’s strong stance in “fighting terrorism” and taken no action. Washington is reliant on Pakistan as a base of operations within the region—to shore up its faltering occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan and to assist in preparations for a US military strike on Iran.

Both Labor and Liberal have immediately echoed the US response. Speaking to journalists on Monday, Howard declared that he could not “justify or excuse extra-constitutional behaviour”, but then stressed that he had

“considerable respect and admiration” for Musharraf’s stand against terrorism. The prime minister expressed his sympathy for “the very difficult path” that the Pakistani dictator had had to walk and urged “restraint ... in this difficult situation”.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer emphasized on ABC radio the importance of Musharraf’s efforts to combat “terrorism” in ensuring that “our intervention in Afghanistan is successful and our troops are secure”. While he described the imposition of martial rule as “a very unfortunate situation,” Downer explicitly ruled out any cutback in Australian aid to Pakistan—again duplicating Washington’s response.

Labor quickly followed suit. On Monday, Labor leader Kevin Rudd declared his commitment to calling on “the government of Pakistan to restore that country’s democratic and constitutional processes as early as possible”. But as Labor’s foreign affairs spokesman Robert McLelland added, cooperation from the Pakistan government is “absolutely essential” in addressing “the threat posed by Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan”.

The sympathy and understanding displayed by Howard, Rudd et al towards the Musharraf dictatorship stands in marked contrast to their attitude to other juntas. The Coalition and Labor immediately joined the chorus of condemnation of the Burmese military regime after it cracked down on protestors in September. Likewise, the Howard government, backed by Labor, immediately applied punitive measures and denounced Fiji’s military chief—Commodore Frank Bainimarama—when he seized power in December 2006.

Then there is the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. After the lies about WMDs and Baghdad’s connection to Al Qaeda had collapsed, Howard’s justification for the occupation of Iraq has been that it removed the dictator Saddam Hussein. Yet neither the government nor the

Labor opposition is suggesting that any punitive action be taken against Musharraf, let alone that a war should be launched to oust his regime.

This highly selective denunciation of dictatorships serves definite political purposes. In the case of Burma, the Bush administration, backed by Canberra, is exploiting the issue of “democracy” to undermine the influence of rival China in the country and in the broader region. In the case of Fiji, the Howard government opposed Bainimarama’s coup because it upset Canberra’s relations with the ousted Qarase government and opened up the possibility of Australia’s rivals gaining influence.

As for Iraq, the past four years have demonstrated conclusively that the ousting of Hussein was never to establish democracy. The US occupation has devastated an entire society, and the overwhelming majority of Iraqis want the US military to leave immediately. Washington’s aim was, and remains, to secure control of Iraq and its oil as part of its broader ambitions to dominate the Middle East. Canberra’s goal in joining the “coalition of the willing” was to obtain US backing for its own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific.

Howard’s and Rudd’s comments on Musharraf have quickly dropped out of sight. The establishment media has barely reported, let alone criticised, this bipartisan support for the Pakistani dictatorship. Like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the preparations for a US attack on Iran, the events in Pakistan are being excluded from the election campaign. Any discussion would raise, after all, disturbing questions about the consequences of the Coalition’s and Labor’s support for the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”.

One noteworthy exception is a comment in today’s *Australian* by foreign editor, Greg Sheridan—in defence of dictatorship and dictators. Headlined “If only Pervez Musharraf were more like Suharto”, the article argues that “there are disastrous dictators and there are dictators who do good.” His criticism of Musharraf is that he is turning out to be the former— “a weak, ineffective and foolish dictator”.

The problem, Sheridan declares, is that “sometimes the word ‘dictator’ can prevent clear thinking in the Western liberal mind ... There are more or less ruthless, bloodthirsty, legitimate and effective dictators.” By way of an example, he singles out the Indonesian dictator Suharto, who “built a modern Indonesia that was capable of sustaining democracy.... When Suharto took over in the mid-1960s, his nation was in worse shape than Pakistan

was when Musharraf seized power in 1999. Suharto genuinely restored order, not least by consulting widely and shrewdly coopting social forces into his new social order.”

The most revealing aspect of Sheridan’s comment is its open repudiation of any, even nominal, defence of democratic rights and its support for the most brutal forms of rule. The Suharto dictatorship was erected on the basis of one of the bloodiest coups of the 20th century, in which the Indonesian military and its allies slaughtered at least 500,000 people and imprisoned many more for decades in concentration camps. If that is what is required to “genuinely restore order” in Pakistan, then presumably Sheridan will not object.

Sheridan’s arguments reflect the fact that the Australian political establishment as a whole is increasingly ditching Western liberal precepts and any commitment to the principles of bourgeois democracy. He simply spells out explicitly what is implicit in the remarks of the Coalition and Labor spokesmen: that the Pakistani dictator should not be judged against the benchmark of democracy, but on whether or not he is effective in maintaining order and serving the strategic interests of the US and Australia.

Moreover, the same logic applies at home. In the name of the “war on terror”, deep inroads have been made into longstanding civil liberties and legal rights. To cement relations with the Bush administration, the Howard government allowed David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib to languish in the Pentagon’s concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay without charge for years. And Howard, with the full backing of Labor, has passed a raft of regressive “anti-terror” laws that tear up basic democratic rights.

If Sheridan’s arguments are followed to their logical conclusion, what is good for Pakistan, is also good for Australia. The willingness of the Australian political establishment to embrace Musharraf and other dictators is a sharp warning of what it will be prepared to do in Australia as social tensions rise and political opposition intensifies.

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