

Bush reaffirms support for Musharraf as Pakistani dictator intensifies military repression

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12 November 2007

President George Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reaffirmed US support for Pakistani military ruler Pervez Musharraf over the weekend, even as the general stepped up the mass repression he launched with the imposition of de facto martial law on November 3.

At a Sunday morning press conference, Musharraf announced that elections would be held in early January, but indicated that emergency rule and the suspension of the Pakistani constitution would continue indefinitely, likely through the election period itself. Bush, Rice and other US officials have hailed Musharraf's plan to hold sham elections while political dissent is banned, independent newspapers are suppressed and thousands of political opponents remain in prison a "welcome" step toward democracy.

Speaking to the press at his Texas ranch following a meeting Saturday with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Bush insisted that the US and Musharraf "share a common goal" in opposing Al Qaeda. Repeating the standard justification for every aspect of US foreign policy, Bush said that support for the Pakistani military ruler was a necessary response to September 11.

Bush called Musharraf's pledge to hold elections and remove his military uniform (while remaining president) sometime in the future "positive steps." While reiterating his pro-forma calls for Pakistan to "get back on the path to democracy," Bush made clear that the US would support Musharraf regardless.

Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup in 1999, "was given an option," Bush declared, referring to the US ultimatum given Pakistan following the 9/11 attacks. Bush said Washington had confronted the Pakistani ruler with the question: "Are you with us, or are you not with us? And he made a clear decision to be with us, and he's acted on that advice."

Bush's categorical support for Musharraf was echoed by Secretary of State Rice on Sunday. In an interview with George Stephanopoulos on ABC News' "This Week," Rice said that the situation in Pakistan was "not perfect." However, "The key is to take this in steps," she said. Rice sidestepped Stephanopoulos's question as to whether Musharraf should

step down as president.

At his press conference with foreign journalists, Musharraf clearly felt bolstered by Bush's reaffirmation of US support. The general refused to set a date for ending emergency rule. Parroting the line of the Bush administration, Musharraf insisted that the emergency—used to purge the courts and crack down on lawyers, human rights organizations and other domestic opponents—was a necessary part of the "war on terror."

Musharraf said he had received calls from "foreign leaders" expressing "understanding" for the decision to suspend the constitution. He also made clear that any elections would be held under the threat of arrest and violence. Anyone who "disturbs law and order and wants to create anarchy in the name of elections and democracy, we will not allow that," he said.

The comments from Musharraf and the Bush administration follow a wave of repression involving the arrest of thousands of protesters, who are being held under military confinement. No one knows what is happening to those arrested, but torture is routinely used by the Pakistani military and civilian police.

On Friday, the military regime shut down a planned protest by the Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) and its leader Benazir Bhutto and arrested many organizers. The government has also amended a 1952 law to allow the military to court-martial civilians.

Among the charges that can now be prosecuted by drumhead military tribunals are treason—which carries the death penalty—sedition, and "giving statements conducive to public mischief." Some of those arrested over the past week have already been charged with treason.

According to an account in the *Washington Post*, "The changes were also made retroactive to 2003, which [human rights] groups asserted was aimed partly at legitimizing the disappearance and torture of prisoners, including separatist dissidents from Balochistan province, whose cause had been taken up by civilian courts."

The response by PPP leader Bhutto, whom the US has been promoting as a potential partner with Musharraf in a power-

sharing government, mirrored that of the Bush administration. Bhutto called the election announcement “a first positive step” on Sunday. In spite of the crackdown on her own supporters, Bhutto said that she “had not shut the door for talks” with Musharraf.

Washington’s support for Musharraf is driven by US imperialism’s strategic interests in South Asia and the Middle East. Pakistan borders on Afghanistan to the northwest, Iran to the west, China to the northeast and India to the east. Iran and China are considered threats to US hegemony in Asia. The US is in the eighth year of a bloody and precarious occupation of Afghanistan, and is seeking to develop India, a country riven by explosive social and political tensions, as a nuclear-armed ally and counterweight to China.

The Bush administration is all the more firm in its backing for the Pakistani military regime because it requires a measure of stability in Pakistan in advance of a decision to launch a military attack on Iran. The statements by Bush supporting Musharraf came after a meeting with Merkel and shortly after a visit to the US by French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The primary purpose of these visits was to discuss stepped-up sanctions and possible military action against Iran. In opening the press conference with Merkel, Bush said that the two leaders had agreed on the need to “send a common and firm message to the Iranians.”

The contrast between the attitude of Bush to Pakistan and his denunciations of Myanmar, formerly called Burma, is just one measure of the brazen double-standard that pervades US foreign policy and the cynicism of its supposed crusade for democracy. While in the case of Burma, a longstanding ally of China, the US has pressed for economic sanctions, the Bush administration has made clear that it has no plans to cut off military aid to Pakistan, which has totaled more than \$10 billion since 2001.

The strategically important position of Pakistan, and concerns that political and social instability in the country could lead to a government less amenable to US interests, explains why criticism within the US media and political establishment of the administration’s open support for Musharraf has been extremely muted. Criticisms that have been raised center on concerns that the US is backing a completely discredited and isolated regime that is doomed to fall, potentially unleashing social and political upheavals that could assume revolutionary dimensions.

A letter to the Bush administration from the Democratic Party Senate leadership, released over the weekend, voiced these concerns. “It is increasingly clear that the administration’s policy has served neither the needs of the people of Pakistan nor the security interests of our country,” the Democrats warned. Without making any concrete demands in relation to US support for Musharraf, the letter said that “events in Pakistan and elsewhere convincingly demonstrate it is long past time for a more effective strategy for dealing with Pakistan, the

related situation in Afghanistan, as well as addressing the other threats and challenges America faces in the world.”

Some critics warn that US support for Musharraf could lead to a debacle for US imperialism similar to that which followed the fall nearly 30 years ago of another key US ally in the region, the Shah of Iran.

An editorial in the *Washington Post* published Sunday clarifies the position of those within the US ruling elite who are concerned with the administration’s attitude to Musharraf. Entitled, “The General Must Go,” the editorial states, “The only way to preserve US interests and the cause of moderation in Pakistan is to eliminate the obstacle of Mr. Musharraf’s desperate and destructive hold on power.”

The *Post* goes on to praise a likely successor to Musharraf, General Ashfaq Kiyani, as a “pro-Western moderate who supports the US-sponsored counterinsurgency program.” The newspaper voices the hope that a new army leader would be able to form an alliance with sections of the Pakistani political establishment to create a more stable government—but one that would still back US policy in the region. “Mr. Musharraf’s actions in the past week have destroyed any chance that he could lay a leading role in that process,” the newspaper concludes.

A news article in the *Post*, published November 9, reported on concerns among US military officials that the turmoil in Pakistan could disrupt US military operations along the Pakistani border with Afghanistan. The officials indicated that the operations were proceeding in spite of Musharraf’s actions. Central in these efforts, the *Post* reported, is Kiyani, who is the vice chief of the Pakistani army.

The *Post* also noted that there is little enthusiasm for US operations within the Pakistani military itself, which has longstanding ties to the Islamic fundamentalist groups that the US is presently targeting.

All factions within the US political establishment agree that the US must continue to back the Pakistani military as the guarantor of the political integrity of Pakistan, the chief bulwark against the popular masses, and the most reliable instrument for US imperialist interests in the region.



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