

US envoy lauds Pakistani dictator's "democratic vision"

Keith Jones

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US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte ended a three-day visit to Pakistan, which has been under de facto martial law for the past two weeks, with a press conference Sunday at which he reiterated the Bush administration's strong support for General Pervez Musharraf and his military regime.

"We value our partnership with the government of Pakistan under the leadership of President Musharraf," declared Negroponte, the number two man in the US State Department.

In a flagrant display of the Bush administration's hostility and contempt for the most elementary democratic rights of the Pakistani people, Negroponte prefaced this endorsement with high praise for the dictator's "vision for a moderate, prosperous and democratic Pakistan."

"Under his [Musharraf's] leadership," affirmed Negroponte, "Pakistan has made great progress toward that vision. Over the past few years, the Pakistani people have witnessed expanded and freer media, unprecedented economic growth and development, and the moderation of gender-based laws and school curricula. President Musharraf has been and continues to be a strong voice against extremism."

Last week the US media and the Western press as a whole made much of Negroponte's impending visit to Islamabad, claiming that he was going to read the riot act to Musharraf—who, since declaring a state of emergency November 3, has jailed thousands, purged the judiciary, suspended the rights to free speech, free assembly and free movement, and empowered military courts to try government opponents.

In reality, as was exemplified by Negroponte's press conference, his visit was aimed at salvaging the Musharraf regime and, above all, the decades-long partnership between US imperialism and the Pakistani military.

The naming of Negroponte as the US government's emissary to Islamabad had itself a significance that would not have been lost on Musharraf and the Pakistani military. Even within a Bush administration that has waged two predatory wars, mounted sweeping attacks on the democratic rights of the American people, and publicly advocated torture albeit by another-name, Negroponte has an especially unseemly, bloodstained, political record. As US ambassador to Honduras in the early 1980s, Negroponte provided alibis for the savage repression the Honduran government mounted against leftists, while helping to organize the Contra war against Nicaragua's Sandinista government. The US's UN ambassador in the run-up to the Iraq war, Negroponte subsequently served as US

ambassador to Iraq from June 2004 to April 2005.

In his press statement Sunday, Negroponte devoted a scant two paragraphs to what could be construed as criticism of Musharraf and, in so doing, drew an entirely spurious contrast between the recent imposition of martial law and the rest of Musharraf's rule. Born of a 1999 coup, the Musharraf regime has for the past eight years savagely suppressed dissent and organized various sham elections, while pursuing neo-liberal economic policies that have drastically increased economic insecurity and social inequality.

State Department officials had said that Negroponte would demand Musharraf lift the state of emergency prior to the national and provincial legislative elections slated for early January. But the general refused to give or accept any time limit on the emergency, in recent media interviews and, according to his aides, in his two-hour meeting with Negroponte. Instead Musharraf insisted, under the guise of the threat of terrorism, that the only way to ensure "free elections" is by maintaining an extra-constitutional regime under which all political meetings and rallies are banned and persons can be jailed, if not charged with treason, for criticizing the government.

In his opening statement at Sunday's press conference Negroponte did concede that "emergency rule is not compatible with free, fair, and credible elections." But, subsequently, he qualified even that statement, saying in response to a reporter's question that if the government didn't lift the emergency and release opposition party members "it will certainly undermine the government's ability to conduct satisfactory elections."

Just prior to Negroponte's visit, Pakistan's military regime released from house arrest Pakistan People's Party (PPP) chairperson and former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto and Asma Jahangir, a former UN official and the head of the country's autonomous Human Rights Commission. It also allowed several private television stations to resume broadcasting, but only after they agreed to abide by a draconian code of conduct that threatens those deemed overly critical of the government with military fines and jail.

Otherwise, the repression continued unabated over the weekend, with police breaking up anti-government protests with baton-charges and mass arrests. Musharraf had promised as much. "Anyone who breaks the law of the land will be back in jail or restricted," he announced Friday. "We don't want anyone in agitation mode and I will tell Negroponte that ..."

Acting under pressure from Islamabad, the Dubai government

forced off the air GEO TV and ARY, two private television channels that prior to the emergency broadcast into Pakistan via cable and continued to have large audiences in the Pakistani expatriate community in the Gulf states.

Negroponte telephoned Bhutto Friday, but apparently refused to meet her after she rejected his appeal for her to ally with Musharraf. Nor did Negroponte meet with any other opposition leaders, in yet another demonstrative show of Washington's support for the government.

Over the past six months, the Bush administration has invested much time and energy in seeking to bring about a rapprochement between Bhutto and Musharraf. Its hope was that the PPP, in exchange for a significant share of political power and control of the government patronage network, would provide a democratic fig leaf to the increasingly isolated and unpopular military regime.

Bhutto, for her part, publicly auditioned for the role, repeatedly making clear that were she in government she would be even more accommodating to US wishes than the current government. For example, she said she would allow US troops to openly undertake military operations in Pakistan's Afghan border regions.

Following Musharraf's imposition of martial law, Bhutto tacked the Bush administration's policy pronouncements and continued behind-the-scenes-contacts with the government. But last week, after she had twice been placed under house arrest and after the government had arrested thousands of PPP members, Bhutto was forced to announce that she could not serve in a government with Musharraf as president and urged the US to help facilitate the general's "exit."

On Thursday, Bryan Hunt, the US consul general in Lahore, met Bhutto, then under house arrest, in an attempt to persuade her to resume negotiations with Musharraf and the military. According to Associated Press, she told him it would be "very difficult." As it is, Bhutto has suffered a major decline in her credibility and support due to her readiness to bargain with Musharraf and the US, the sponsor of successive Pakistani military dictatorships and the occupier of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Musharraf, for his part, has spoken with increasing scorn of Bhutto. In an interview Friday with the *Washington Post* he ruled out further talks with her on the ground that she was "too confrontational" and vowed to quash her challenge to his rule. According to the *Dawn*, he delivered the same message to Negroponte in their meeting.

In his remarks Sunday, Negroponte said that he had "encouraged reconciliation between political moderates"—Washington-speak for Musharraf and Bhutto—"as the most constructive way forward." But given his failure to meet the PPP leader and high praise for Musharraf, Negroponte's call for "all parties" to pursue "engagement and dialogue-not brinksmanship and confrontation" was directed principally at Bhutto, not the general who imposed martial law and is presiding over a wave of repression.

Ever since Musharraf imposed martial law, Bush administration officials have been claiming that there are serious limits to their leverage over Islamabad and that all they can do is plead with the Pakistani military to move toward democracy. Such claims are ludicrous. If the US wanted to exert pressure on Islamabad, it and the other Western powers would have a vast array of tools with

which to exert economic and political pressure on the Pakistani government. The Pakistani military has a decades-long close partnership with the Pentagon and has pocketed most of the \$10 billion in aid Washington admits to having provided Pakistan over the past six years.

When it viewed the US's vital strategic interests to be at stake, the Bush administration had no compunction about threatening Musharraf and the Pakistani military. Musharraf claims in his autobiography that Negroponte's predecessor as deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, said in September 2001 that the US would bomb Pakistan back into the Stone Age if it didn't break ties with the Taliban regime and provide logistical support for the US invasion of Afghanistan.

The reality is the Bush administration and the US establishment as a whole are terrified at the prospect that a popular struggle against the Musharraf regime could precipitate a social upheaval, causing fissures in the military and escaping the political control of the PPP and the other traditional bourgeois parties.

At the very least, such a development would seriously disrupt the US war in Afghanistan—almost half of the oil and the majority of other supplies used by US forces in Afghanistan come through Pakistan—and US plans for war against Iran.

Hence the rallying of the Bush administration and, albeit with some grumbling about the Bush administration's mismanagement of US affairs, the Democrats behind Musharraf and the Pakistani military.

The Bush administration is, however, exploring other options, in case the popular opposition to Musharraf swells—options, that is, for replacing him with another, more politically palatable, general. According to press reports Negroponte met with General Ashfaq Kiyani, the man Musharraf has designated as his successor as the chief of armed services, three times during his three-day visit. In reporting this, the *Washington Post* observed, "Negroponte's meeting with Kiyani was a sign that the United States was looking to court other possible leaders who could keep the country stable and be a partner in its fight against terrorism, analysts said."

Come what may, Washington is determined to thwart the democratic and social aspirations of the Pakistani people.



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