

With Washington's complicity, Musharraf imposes martial law in Pakistan

Vilani Peiris, Keith Jones
5 November 2007

Pakistani military strongman General Pervez Musharraf, a key ally of the Bush administration in its purported "war on terror," has again bared his fangs. On Saturday evening—as security forces fanned out across Islamabad to occupy the parliament and supreme court buildings, force private television stations off the air, and take oppositionists into "preventive detention"—Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup in October 1999, declared a state of emergency.

In what is tantamount to a second coup, Musharraf has indefinitely suspended the constitution and the rights to free speech, free assembly, free association, and free movement; abrogated the courts' constitutional authority to issue orders against himself as president, against the prime minister, or against anyone acting in their name; imposed rigorous press censorship; and introduced harsh penalties for the "crime" of "ridiculing" the president, the armed forces or any other executive, legislative or judicial organ.

Security forces have arrested and are holding indefinitely and without charge hundreds, possibly thousands, of opposition politicians and lawyers who helped spearhead the recent popular agitation against military rule. Those detained include Javed Hashmi, the acting head of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), and Aitzaz Ahsan, the head of Pakistan's Supreme Court Bar Association and a prominent Pakistan People's Party (PPP) supporter.

All non-state television stations and some international radio services, including BBC World, remained off the air Sunday. Police and paramilitary forces are manning checkpoints in the capital and, according to press reports, have moved quickly to break up any protests.

Musharraf has stripped the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, of his post. Chaudhry and six other Supreme Court justices who refused to endorse the General's emergency order—the so-called Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO)—are said to have been placed under house arrest. A Musharraf toady, Justice Abdul Hameed Dogar, has been sworn in as Chaudhry's replacement. The provincial high courts have also been purged, with many justices either refusing, or not even being asked, to pledge to uphold Musharraf's PCO.

All these measures carry with them the threat that the military will resort to mass violence should the Pakistani people resist. But the breadth of Musharraf's power grab and his readiness to militarize the country is exemplified by his decision to proclaim a Provisional Constitutional Order and do so in his capacity as Chief of Pakistan's Armed Services, rather than use his authority as president to invoke the emergency powers in the country's 1973 constitution.

"This is the imposition of real military rule," observed Hasan Askari Rizvi, an expert on Pakistani military affairs. "Because there is no Constitution and Pakistan is being run under a provisional constitutional order issued by Musharraf as the army chief, not as the president of Pakistan."

US complicity

The Bush administration, Britain's Labour government and the other western powers have responded to Musharraf's coup with the mildest, perfunctory criticism.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who like her boss, George W. Bush, has repeatedly lauded Musharraf and his supposed commitment to democracy, described the declaration of a state of emergency as "highly regrettable," while reaffirming that Washington will continue to cooperate closely with Pakistan's military regime. Rice called on "all parties to act with restraint in what is obviously a very difficult situation."

Speaking from a plane while en route to Israel, Rice said that the US had been counseling Musharraf not to take this step and wanted "a prompt return to the constitutional course". But she quickly qualified even this guarded criticism by adding that Musharraf had done "a lot" previously to put Pakistan on the "path to democratic rule."

On Sunday, Rice said that Washington will review its aid to Pakistan. Since September 2001 Washington has given Islamabad at least \$10 billion, mostly in military aid. Rice's statement, however, was not a threat, but an acknowledgement that certain US statutes may compel the Bush administration to cut back its financial support for Pakistan's military regime.

The Pentagon has been, if anything, even less critical of Musharraf's coup. Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said, "The declaration [of emergency] does not impact on our military support for Pakistan's efforts in the war on terror."

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband echoed Rice's comments. "We are working closely with friends of Pakistan across the international community to encourage all parties to show restraint and to work together for a peaceful and democratic resolution." Claiming to be "gravely concerned," Miliband said he would voice Britain's opposition to Musharraf's suspension of the constitution by speaking personally with the Pakistani Foreign Secretary, Khurshid Kasuri.

The placid reaction to Musharraf's coup and its implicit threat of a bloodbath is in stark contrast to the vigorous denunciations that emanated from Washington, London, and other western capitals last month after Burma's military junta violently suppressed demonstrations against oil price rises and the lack of democracy in that country.

The difference is that the Pakistani regime is a pivotal ally of Washington in the pursuit of its predatory interests in the oil-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. Musharraf has given vital logistical support for the US invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and has provided US intelligence agencies with offshore torture facilities. He has also reportedly allowed the US military to use Pakistan to prepare for a war with Iran, by conducting training exercises in Pakistan and staging exploratory cross-border incursions into its western neighbor.

That said, Musharraf's resort to emergency rule constitutes a major

debacle for the Bush administration.

Recognizing that the Musharraf regime was unraveling in the face of mounting popular opposition, Washington had long been trying to broker a rapprochement between Musharraf's military-dominated regime and Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People's Party.

As the *New York Times* noted Sunday, in an article titled "Straying Partner Leaves White House in the Lurch," "For more than five months the United States has been trying to orchestrate a political transition in Pakistan that would manage to somehow keep Gen. Pervez Musharraf in power without making a mockery of President Bush's promotion of democracy in the Muslim world.

"On Saturday, those carefully laid plans fell apart spectacularly."

And it is not only that Musharraf's imposition of martial law has once again put the lie to the democratic verbiage that the Bush administration and the US political and financial elite have used in justifying their criminal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Washington and London recognize that Musharraf's coup is a desperate gamble, which could well backfire, precipitating a popular explosion that would redound against the interests of the Pakistani generals, the Pakistani bourgeoisie as a whole, and US imperialism.

To forestall precisely such a development the Bush administration and the British government have been seeking to broker a deal between Musharraf and the populist PPP, which, on two previous occasions when US-backed military dictatorships collapsed, rescued the military from the wrath of the people and thereby preserved the principal bulwark of bourgeois rule.

Just before the October 6 sham presidential election, the US engineered a shaky understanding between the PPP and Musharraf, under which the PPP broke ranks with the rest of the opposition thereby lending legitimacy to the general's latest perversion of the constitution. Twelve days later Bhutto returned from exile, but within hours of her arriving in Karachi, she was the target of an assassination attempt in which 139 people died. Bhutto has charged elements in the military-dominated regime, but not Musharraf himself, of being the authors of the assassination attempt.

Mimicking her sponsors in London and Washington Bhutto's response to Musharraf's coup has been muted to say the least. While the military parades its contempt for the democratic rights of the Pakistani people, Bhutto has said that she does not want confrontation. Speaking on CNN Sunday, she refused to rule out holding further power-sharing negotiations with the General-President.

Mounting popular opposition

Musharraf and his cronies have for months been threatening to impose emergency rule, in the face of mounting opposition amongst all layers of society—opposition that has been fueled by the lack of democracy, spiraling food prices and increasing social inequality, rampant corruption and the crony capitalism practiced by the military regime and, last but not least, Musharraf's support for Washington's wars.

The trigger for last Saturday's coup was Musharraf's apparent failure to bully the Supreme Court into giving a judicial-constitutional imprimatur to last month's sham presidential election.

Pakistan's judiciary has a long and notorious record of sanctioning the illegal acts of military dictators. But, reflecting elite fears that military rule is fuelling mass popular discontent and elite complaints that the military has monopolized the benefits of capitalist growth, the Supreme Court under Justice Chaudhry issued a number of judgments that cut across the agenda of the military and its political cronies. Last March when Musharraf fired Chaudhry, because he feared the chief justice couldn't be

relied on to do his bidding in fixing the forthcoming elections, it became the occasion for mass protests and ultimately a humiliating defeat for Musharraf, when an emboldened Supreme Court ordered Chaudhry restored to his seat on the court.

For weeks this fall, a panel of the Supreme Court had been hearing petitions challenging the legality of the presidential election and Musharraf's candidacy. From a legal standpoint, it was an open and shut case: the Pakistani constitution bars a member of the military, let alone the Chief of Armed Services from running for elected office. It also clearly forbids Musharraf's ploy of having a national parliament and provincial assemblies that were elected in 2002, in a poll manipulated the military, choose a president for a five year term beginning in November 2007.

But Musharraf still hoped that by combining threats of a resort to emergency rule if his presidential election was deemed unconstitutional with participation in the US-sponsored rapprochement with Benazir Bhutto, he could coerce the court into endorsing his election.

Ultimately, however, Musharraf came to the conclusion that the court was about to rule against him. In the middle of last week, the court announced that it was suspending its deliberations on the case until November 13, that is just two days before Musharraf's current presidential term is to expire; then it reversed itself and indicated it could issue a ruling as early as yesterday. Hence Musharraf's sudden decision to impose martial rule.

Musharraf began his proclamation of emergency rule by referring to the growth of terrorist attacks and other challenges to state authority from armed Islamic groups—groups that historically have been nurtured by the military and intelligence services as a bulwark against the working class and as a tool of Pakistan's geo-political maneuvers against India.

But the bulk of the proclamation and Musharraf's justification for martial law is the claim that "some members of the judiciary are working at cross purposes with the executive and legislature." The proclamation charges that the judiciary has undermined the fight against terrorism by ordering the release of persons detained without charge and is destabilizing the Pakistani state by effecting some modest checks on the government and military.

It complains of "constant" judicial "interference in executive function, including but not limited to the control of terrorist activity, economic policy, price controls, downsizing of corporations and urban planning [that] has weakened the writ of the government" and that as a result of the judiciary's abuse of its constitutional authority "the police force has become completely demoralized and is fast losing its efficacy to fight terrorism and Intelligence Agencies have been thwarted in their activities and prevented from pursuing terrorists."

These complaints are not just a rationale for dictatorial measures. They constitute a warning that the Musharraf regime intends to use its authoritarian powers to intensify its implementation of neo-liberal economic policies and to use state repression to stamp out the growing opposition to the lack of democratic right and social inequality.

The Bush administration and the US political elite have for years sustained the Musharraf dictatorship. They no less than the general himself are responsible for the systematic rape of the democratic rights of the Pakistani people and the threat of state terror that now hangs over Pakistan.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact