

As Pakistanis battle martial law, US vows continued aid to Musharraf

Bill Van Auken
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Protesting lawyers, students and other civilians staged pitched battles with riot police in cities across Pakistan Monday, the third day of the martial law regime imposed by the country's military strongman General Pervez Musharraf.

Even as the protests mounted and Pakistan's jails were filled to overflowing with thousands of political prisoners dragged off of the streets or from their homes, the Bush administration signaled that it will not take any substantive reprisals against the regime in Islamabad.

Speaking at the White House Monday following a meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Bush summed up his administration's position in remarks characterized by his usual ignorance and cynicism.

"Our hope is that he will restore democracy as quickly as possible," Bush said of Musharraf. He claimed that in discussions with the Pakistani regime his administration had "made it clear that these emergency measures would undermine democracy."

But he quickly added that "President Musharraf has been a strong fighter against extremists and radicals," and that "All we can do is continue to work with the president."

Asked whether he would order a cut in US aid to Pakistan—which amounts to some \$150 million a month, totaling close to \$11 billion since September 2001—if Musharraf did not rescind martial law, Bush dismissed the question as "a hypothetical."

Bush's remarks echoed those of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Speaking in Jerusalem, Rice declared: "We are going to review aid. But we do have concerns, continuing counter-terrorism concerns, and we have to be able to protect American citizens by continuing to fight against terrorists."

Rice reiterated this position twice, declaring that the primary concern of the White House was "to protect America and protect American citizens by continuing to fight against terrorists," and adding, "We have to be very cognizant of the fact that some of the assistance that has been going to Pakistan is directly related to the counterterrorism mission."

And, while the Pentagon announced that it canceled a trip to Pakistan by Eric Edelman, US undersecretary of defense for policy, who was to head a US delegation for annual talks with the Pakistani military, Gates also stressed that aid would continue to flow.

Washington was "mindful not to do anything that would undermine counterterrorism efforts," Gates stressed.

Islamabad clearly got the message. According to the *Times* Monday, aides to Musharraf described the US response as "muted." Speaking of Washington's attitude, Tariq Azim Khan, Pakistan's minister of state for information, said, "They would rather have a stable Pakistan—albeit with some restrictive norms—than have more democracy prone to fall into the hands of extremists. Given the choice, I know what our friends would choose."

According to a report in the *Washington Post* Monday: "A close adviser to Musharraf said Sunday that the president's inner circle believed that before he issued the order, the United States and Britain had grudgingly accepted the idea of emergency rule, despite earlier objections. He said he did not expect any action against Musharraf by the West. 'When we convinced them that it would only be for a very short time, they said, Okay,' the adviser said."

Of course, it is precisely the so-called "war on terrorism" that Musharraf invoked as the pretext for his Saturday night martial law decree suspending the Constitution, sacking the Supreme Court, shutting down the independent media and indefinitely postponing parliamentary elections set for next January.

"The government system, in my view, is in semi-paralysis," Musharraf declared. "All government functionaries are being insulted by the courts. That is why they are unable to take any action."

He continued: "Terrorism and extremism are at their peak. I suspect that Pakistan's sovereignty is in danger unless timely action is taken. Extremists are roaming around freely in the country, and they are not scared of law enforcement agencies.

"Inaction at this moment is suicide for Pakistan, and I cannot allow this country to commit suicide."

Specifically, the military ruler charged the judiciary with interfering with the struggle against terrorism by challenging the government's right to detain people indefinitely without charges and interfering "with the executive function," i.e., Musharraf's exercise of unlimited dictatorial powers.

No doubt, in surveying the actions taken by the Pakistani regime, there are not a few in Washington who envision the Bush administration or its successor taking similar measures in the name of the "war on terrorism."

Musharraf's invocation of this war and, for that matter, the war itself are pretexts designed to justify the pursuit of definite interests.

In the case of the Pakistani regime, the martial law decree was imposed to block an imminent ruling by the Supreme Court that would have invalidated last October's presidential elections, which were rigged to give the military strongman another five-year presidential term. Musharraf issued the decree as head of the armed forces rather than president, leading some to call it his "second coup." His first was in 1999, when he led the military in the overthrow of then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

After the decree was announced, Pakistan's chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry—whose firing earlier this year provoked mass protests that forced his reinstatement—joined with six other justices in ruling it illegal and unconstitutional. Musharraf responded by firing Chaudhry and placing him and the other justices under house arrest.

The martial law decree combined with the firing and imprisonment of the judges sparked a renewal of the mass demonstrations by lawyers that shook the country earlier last spring, when Musharraf first attempted to fire Chaudhry.

On Monday, over 2,000 lawyers gathered outside the High Court building in the eastern city of Lahore. When they attempted to march onto a main road, chanting "Go Musharraf, go," riot police fired tear gas into the crowd and beat them with batons, leaving many injured and bloodied. Hundreds were grabbed by squads of plainclothes police and thrown into waiting police vans.

Violent confrontations also erupted in the western city of Peshawar, the southern city of Karachi and in other parts of the country Monday. In Islamabad, larger demonstrations have so far been blocked by the virtual militarization of the city, with the Supreme Court building and other government installations ringed with concertina wire and guarded by heavily armed army rangers. Nonetheless, a few hundred lawyers assembled at the district courts shouting "Go Musharraf, go!" and "Musharraf is a dog!" but were blocked by police from marching in the street.

"This police brutality against peaceful lawyers shows how the government of a dictator wants to silence those who are against dictatorship," said Sarfraz Cheema, a senior lawyer at the demonstration. "We don't accept the proclamation of emergency."

"He has held the whole nation of 160 million people hostage, just with the backing of the gun and the Western powers," said M.S. Moghul, another of the protesting lawyers.

Protests were also reported at a number of Pakistani universities, both against the martial law decree and against the arrest of faculty members.

An Interior Ministry spokesman acknowledged Monday that as many as 1,800 people have been detained nationwide in the martial law crackdown. Opposition parties and human rights groups, however, put the number at twice that. Those arrested have not been charged and their whereabouts are unknown to their families.

Meanwhile, the independent broadcast media remained shut down for a third day, with the government station, broadcasting Musharraf's decree, the only one operating. According to media sources, the government has attempted to impose a "code of conduct" sharply restricting political coverage as a condition for allowing the stations to resume their broadcasts.

Behind the cynical balancing act playing out in Washington, between token criticism of Musharraf's brutal crackdown and

continued support for his reactionary regime, the Bush administration is facing a deep crisis of its own making in Pakistan.

It has counted this regime, particularly since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, as a useful ally and accomplice in the drive by American imperialism to employ military aggression to impose its hegemony over a broad swath of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Now it fears that the methods used by Musharraf and his cronies in their attempt to hold onto power could provoke a massive popular backlash.

One telling indication of the extreme instability of the regime came Monday when Musharraf found himself forced to deny rumors sweeping Pakistan that he had been placed under house arrest by other sections of the military. "It is a joke of the highest order," he told the Reuters news agency. When such a "joke" is believed by a large part of the country, however, it undoubtedly reflects deep divisions within the military and the country's ruling establishment as a whole.

Meanwhile, Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister who returned to Pakistan last month to further a power-sharing deal being brokered by Washington and London with the aim of rescuing Musharraf's regime, has largely echoed the "muted" reaction of the US, leaving even supporters of her own Pakistan

People's Party (PPP) uncertain of which way she would turn.

While initially declaring her opposition to confrontation and refusing to rule out a resumption of the power-sharing negotiations, on Monday she indicated that she intended to go to Islamabad to participate with other opposition parties in a November 9 protest against martial law and for the restoration of the constitution.

In the final analysis, the vacillation of Bhutto and the PPP is a function of Washington's own flailing about in search of a way of stabilizing the situation in Pakistan, either through propping up Musharraf, or perhaps searching for another general to replace him.

In the meantime, political and social tensions in this country of 160 million are building to the point where Washington could soon confront in Pakistan the kind of debacle it suffered in Iran nearly three decades ago.



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