

Bush applauds Musharraf as he makes himself Pakistan's President till 2012

Keith Jones
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US President George W. Bush was the first foreign leader to congratulate General Pervez Musharraf after he had himself sworn in Thursday to a further five-year term as Pakistan's president.

Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 military coup, imposed de facto martial law on November 3, because he feared the country's Supreme Court was about to rule that his "re-election," in a sham vote staged a month earlier, violated the constitution. Under the state of emergency, the top levels of the judiciary have been purged of those deemed by the military as unreliable, thousands of opposition political activists, trade unionists and lawyers have been taken into detention, private broadcasters forced off the air, and government opponents made subject to military trials.

According to a Pakistani government spokesman, Bush telephoned Musharraf Friday and in addition to extending his congratulations "lauded the president's commitment to fight extremism and terrorism."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other Bush administration spokesmen have heaped praise on Musharraf for formally stepping down as Chief of Pakistan Armed Services Wednesday and for announcing Thursday, soon after being sworn in as a civilian president, that the state of emergency will be lifted December 16.

These "are all positive steps that will help get Pakistan back on the pathway to democratic and constitutional rule," declared State Department spokesman Sean McCormack, Thursday.

While Washington has been publicly urging Musharraf to lift the emergency and to stage "free and fair" national and provincial assembly elections in early January, it has repeatedly made clear its support for Musharraf retaining a pivotal role in Pakistan's government—endorsing the sham presidential election, praising the dictator's commitment to democracy, and implicitly sanctioning Musharraf's purge of the judiciary.

Asked if the US government did not consider Musharraf a "tainted" president—given that he was "elected" October 6 by legislative assemblies chosen five years ago and in a vote that was rigged by the military and given that he had resorted to martial law to purge the supreme court and thereby quash the constitutional challenges to his election—McCormack declared, "Look, we are where we are ... And it is important that

President Musharraf get Pakistan back on the road to constitutional rule and democratic governance, a pathway that he really himself had put Pakistan on since 2001."

Musharraf's promise to lift the emergency is far less than it seems. Key decrees and changes, including the purge of the judiciary, a ban on the broadcast of live political events and severe penalties for press reports that bring the government or army into "disrepute" will remain in effect.

Over the weekend Musharraf met with the leaders of the interim provincial governments and instructed them to impose a ban on "protest demonstrations, rallies and sit-ins" in the run-up to the elections, which are scheduled for January 8.

Previously, the government announced that in the name of preventing terrorist attacks all street processions would be banned and campaigning severely limited.

While the government claims to have released several thousand detainees, an untold number remain in jail or under house arrest, including Aitzaz Ahsan, the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association. Several of the prominent detainees who have been released bear the hallmarks of abuse and maltreatment. Munir Malik, a leader of the lawyers' protest movement, was hospitalized with severe kidney problems after being held in a cell so tiny he could not stretch his legs.

Musharraf's choice of December 16 as the day on which he plans to lift martial law is no happenstance. It is the day after the deadline for candidates to withdraw from the January 8 elections. His hope is that he can pressure the major opposition parties into contesting the elections and thereby lending his presidential coup legitimacy, with the lifting of martial law offered as a potential inducement.

The Bush administration, for its part, is actively encouraging the opposition parties to work with Musharraf and, as a first step to so doing, to contest the elections. To this end, US Ambassador Anne Patterson has been making the rounds meeting with leading opposition figures. According to the *Dawn*, Paterson will meet today with Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister whom Musharraf deposed in 1999.

Sharif, albeit not with great conviction, has been promising to lead an opposition boycott of the election.

In the speech meant to inaugurate his second presidential term, Musharraf threatened to crush any boycott, just as he has

the democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people for the past eight years: “No destabilization or hurdle will be allowed in this democratic process.” In an interview with the US television network ABC the following day, he amplified this threat saying political protests would not be allowed during Pakistan’s “democratic” elections. Said Musharraf, “The opposition, they have all along these five years tried to destabilize me and the government. You have to understand we don’t want agitation here ... Agitation means breaking down everything, burning things. That cannot be allowed.”

For months the Bush administration has been seeking to recalibrate Pakistan’s government so as to give it greater popular legitimacy while ensuring that the military, with which the Pentagon has a five decades long partnership, retains effective control.

But the Bush administration’s plans, which centered on brokering a power-sharing deal between Musharraf and Pakistan People’s Party life chairperson Benazir Bhutto have repeatedly been upset by the erosion of popular support for Musharraf and the sharp divisions within the Pakistani elite. While Musharraf boasts of an economic revival, the bulk of the population has seen their livings standards badly eroded by soaring prices and the increasing marketization of life. And many in the elite resent the extent to which the military and their business cronies have appropriated the fruits of Pakistan’s capitalist economic expansion. Musharraf is also increasingly seen as a toady of the Bush administration and an accomplice of its predatory wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the view of important sections of the US establishment, the Bush administration has been reckless in so demonstratively supporting the discredited Musharraf. The US would have more leverage over Islamabad, including in getting it to do its bidding in suppressing pro-Taliban elements, and would not be so popularly identified as a bulwark of militarily rule, argue the Democrats and the *New York Times*, had the Bush administration begun distancing himself from Musharraf before his regime started to unravel last spring.

Musharraf however is clearly chagrined by the pressure that the Bush administration has placed upon him, first to seek an accommodation with Bhutto and now to step down as head of the army, his one true power base.

In the address inaugurating his second presidential term, Musharraf lashed out at the assembled western diplomats. He chastised them for “an unrealistic or even impractical obsession with your form of democracy, human rights and civil liberties, which you have taken centuries to acquire and which you expect us to adopt in a few years, in a few months.”

“We want democracy,” added Musharraf, “but we will do it our way, as we understand our society, our environment, better than anyone in the West.”

That Musharraf continues to see his principal constituency to be the military was well-illustrated by the speech he gave the day before, when handing over the post to of army chief to the

US-trained General Kayani. “I am fortunate,” said Musharraf, “to have commanded the best army in the world. The army is an integrating force, the saviour of Pakistan. Without this army, the entity of Pakistan cannot exist.”

While the mass of the Pakistani people are seething with hatred toward the military-dominated government, the opposition parties are preparing to bow to Washington’s wishes and contest the elections.

Bhutto has announced that her PPP will stand candidates in “protest”, claiming that otherwise the pro-Musharraf PML (Q) and MQM will have an open field. After Musharraf announced he will lift the emergency later this month, Bhutto said that she was “not in a hurry” to accept Musharraf as a civilian president. But she has already shown she is willing to collaborate with him. Under the Bush administration’s sponsorship, the PPP has been seeking to reach a power-sharing deal with Musharraf and the military for at least the last eight months.

On Friday, the PPP issued an election manifesto chock full of populist phrases and commitments to Pakistani big business, international capital, and the military. The *World Socialist Web Site* will have more to say about the PPP manifesto in future articles. But its right-wing character is summed up in the following passage that could have been penned by one of Tony Blair or Gordon Brown’s minions: “The PPP is proud of being the voice of the poor, the working classes and the middle classes. Our policies, while dedicated to the underprivileged, created conditions that enabled the business and trading classes to compete in the open market. The Party will foster a social market economy, a partnership of the public and private sectors, predicated upon a synthesis of economic liberalism with a strong social democratic agenda of Stare responsibilities for satisfying basic human needs ...”

Nawaz Sharif’s PML (N) is an openly right-wing party and a traditional ally of the military. Like the PPP, it is opposed to any genuine popular movement against the Musharraf regime for fear of facilitating the masses’ entry into politics and undermining the army, the bulwark of the privileges of the entire Pakistani elite.

Since returning to Pakistan last week, Sharif has been hedging on his earlier boycott threats, while make a series of statements meant to convince the Bush administration that he can be a reliable ally. Indeed in an article he penned for the *Washington Post*, Sharif said of the US, the country that has supported, armed, and financed one military dictatorship in Pakistan after another, “America has always been a friend of Pakistan. It is our strategic and natural ally.”



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