

Beleaguered Pakistani President visits Europe to shore up support for military regime

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Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has been in Europe since January 21, on an eight-day trip aimed at ensuring continued Western support for his discredited and popularly-reviled military regime.

The recently retired head of Pakistan's armed forces had a hectic agenda last week, appearing at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, and meeting with a host of government leaders and politicians including US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the NATO Secretary-General, and EU parliamentarians.

Last Friday, Musharraf traveled to the UK, where he will meet today with British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. Britain, which ruled Pakistan until 1947, has been working closely with the Bush administration for well over a year trying to arrange a rapprochement between Musharraf and sections of the bourgeois opposition, so as to provide the military-controlled government with greater popular legitimacy.

Musharraf is facing a multi-pronged crisis due to growing popular unrest because of the lack of democracy, his collaboration with the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and mounting economic problems, including food and power shortages. His attempt last fall to stage-manage his "re-election" as president only served to further expose the dictatorial character of his regime, as he was forced to impose a six-week emergency beginning November 3, and purge the judiciary, in order to safeguard his rule.

The regime's political crisis has intensified since the December 27 assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the leader of the Pakistani People's Party (PPP) and its candidate for prime minister in parliamentary elections originally slated for January 8, and that are now promised for February 18. A majority of Pakistanis believe sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, its political allies, or Washington had a hand in Bhutto's killing.

During his European trip Musharraf has once again sought to cast himself as a democrat, but the mask has repeatedly fallen off as he has given voice to his anger at the pressure coming from western governments to make overtures to the opposition, especially in regards to freedom of the press and the conduct of the elections.

"We are for democracy, and I have introduced the essence of democracy," Musharraf told a press conference in Brussels January 21. Then in the next breath, he declared, "But we cannot be as forward-looking as you [in Europe] are. Allow us some time

to reach that state."

Later Musharraf chided western countries for allegedly being "obsessed" with democracy, conveniently ignoring that for the past eight years they have been happy to partner with his government, which was born of a military coup and has retained power by fixing elections and ruthlessly suppressing opposition. "Western governments must understand," declared Musharraf, "Pakistan's difficult political environment and stop their 'obsession' with democracy and human rights in the country."

When questioned by a representative of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) about curbs on press freedom, Musharraf said, "There are no limits on the freedom of the press." Just before he left for Europe, the government lifted a ten-week ban on cable distribution of popular TV channel GEO. However, measures introduced during the emergency that threaten harsh penalties, including prison terms, for media companies and journalists who insult or bring the president and government into disrepute remain in force. In its report for 2007, the IFJ announced that Pakistan is among the four most dangerous places for journalists in the world along with Iraq, Sri Lanka and Somalia.

Repeatedly during his European appearances Musharraf attacked former Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, calling him "inept and corrupt" and claiming that he had been seeking to "incapacitate" the government. Chaudhry and sixty other top level judges were purged under last fall's emergency, because Musharraf feared that the courts would not give legal sanction to his patently unconstitutional and stage-managed "re-election."

Musharraf vowed that the February 18 national and provincial assembly elections will be "free and fair" and denied news reports that he and his political allies had been seeking to postpone them by creating a "national government of reconciliation" involving one or both of the main opposition parties, the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). But his pledges that the elections will proceed on schedule were coupled with threats. "Nobody," said Musharraf "would be allowed to create chaos and agitation in the country before or after the polls."

During press conferences and interviews the dictator president "challenged" reporters to explain how the government will go about "rigging" the elections. On the day Benazir Bhutto was assassinated she was to give two prominent US lawmakers a report providing details of how the government and sections of the military had been plotting to rig the vote.

On January 25th, McClatchy Newspapers reported that

Islamabad has banned election observers from conducting exit polls, citing even the head of the Bush-allied International Republican Institute, Lorne W. Craner, as criticizing the ban: "An exit poll or a parallel vote tabulation is an extra assurance of the legitimacy of the election."

In soliciting the support of Europe's governments and business elite, Musharraf not only pointed to his regime's role in facilitating the "war on terror," in particular the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, he also touted his government's privatization and deregulation policies. He claimed 700 foreign companies are making high profits in Pakistan, while pleading to the EU to help Pakistan's economy by removing trade barriers. With total annual trade of US \$9 billion, the EU is Pakistan's largest trade partner.

In Brussels, Musharraf met with EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, acting Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, and NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. The media reported that all of them made the pro forma request that Musharraf hold "free and fair elections" on schedule next month.

Summing up the attitude of the European ruling elite towards the Musharraf regime, Reuters observed, "The message in Brussels was ... that given the importance of Pakistan in the fight against global terrorism, especially in stabilising Afghanistan, it is not in the interest of Europe or NATO to isolate Mr. Musharraf. But the dialogue comes with conditions."

In France Musharraf met President Sarkozy. According to Sarkozy's spokesman, David Martinon, the French president assured his Pakistani counterpart of continued "full support in the fight against terrorism, because France and the world have an interest in stability, unity and democracy building in Pakistan."

US Secretary of State Rice met Musharraf on the sidelines of the Davos summit. Just prior to this meeting, Rice, while on a visit to Germany, reiterated the US's support for Musharraf. While calling for "free and fair elections," Rice qualified the request, "No one has ever said that democracy is something that is born in a minute. It does take time, but you have to get started ..."

In keeping with recent Bush administration statements, Rice signaled that the US's principal concern is not with the personal fate of Musharraf, who in mid-December ceded the post of Chief of the Armed Services to General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, but in ensuring that the Pakistani military—with which the Pentagon has a five decades-long intimate partnership—continues to dominate Pakistan's government. Said Rice, "The situation in Pakistan is obviously complicated. But our strong view is that we have to have a long-term consistent, predictable relationship with Pakistan, not with any one person, but with the institutions of Pakistan."

For months last year, the Bush administration sought to secure a deal with Bhutto, under which the now dead PPP leader would have served as Musharraf's prime minister.

Washington viewed the fashioning of a secular-democratic façade for the government as preparatory to its unleashing a military offensive aimed at crushing opposition to the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan among the Pashtun of Pakistan, especially in the autonomous tribal region that borders Afghanistan.

The Bush administration is now trying to take advantage of

Musharraf's crisis to greatly expand its military presence in the country. According to an article in Sunday's *New York Times*, the US's two top intelligence officials, CIA director General Michael V. Hayden and director of national intelligence Mike McConnell traveled to Islamabad earlier this month to press the Pakistani government to allow the CIA and US military to mount increased operations within Pakistan. Last Thursday, Defence Secretary Robert Gates told a press conference that the US is "ready, willing and able" to deploy forces alongside Pakistan's military to combat armed Islamic groups in the country's border regions. (See: "Pentagon chief says US ready to deploy combat troops in Pakistan")

During his European tour, Musharraf referred to remarks made by CIA Director Hayden in rebutting questions about possible military and government involvement in Benazir Bhutto's assassination. In a long interview published in the January 18 issue of the *Washington Post*, Hayden endorsed the Musharraf regime's claim that her killing was the work of members of Al Qaeda and Baitullah Mehsud, a Taliban and tribal leader based in South Waziristan.

Within hours of Bhutto's killing, the Bush administration joined with the Musharraf regime in insisting that it was the work of Islamic extremists and denying any possibility that elements in and around the regime could have had a role in carrying out or facilitating the killing—despite the military's longstanding patronage of armed Islamic groups and Bhutto's own repeated complaints that the government was not providing her with proper security.

Hayden's interview, however, was the first time that the CIA had gone on record as fully endorsing Islamabad's explanation of Bhutto's murder, which places ultimate responsibility on Baitullah Mehsud. Without providing any evidence or explanation of how the CIA had arrived at this conclusion, Hayden asserted, "This [Bhutto's murder] was done by that network around Baitullah Mehsud. We have no reason to question that." He said the killing was "part of an organised campaign" of suicide bombings and other attacks on Pakistani leaders. Hayden went on to declare pacifying Pakistan's border areas to be among the "very highest priorities" of the CIA.

While Hayden's remarks provided Musharraf with ammunition to fend off reporters' questions in Europe, they clearly were aimed at furthering the Bush administration's push to greatly expand the role of US military and intelligence forces in Pakistan.



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