

US-Pakistan ties fray, as Washington seeks to bully new government

Keith Jones**27 March 2008**

US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Richard Boucher, the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, arrived in Islamabad early Tuesday, with almost no advanced warning to their Pakistani hosts. Their sudden visit exemplifies the Bush administration's apprehensions about the change of regime now underway in Pakistan.

The day before the US envoys' arrival, Pakistan's new-elected National Assembly chose, by an overwhelmingly 312-42 margin, a leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to head a "national consensus" government comprised of parties opposed to Pakistani President Pevez Musharraf, long a close US ally.

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gillani was himself a prominent victim of the Musharraf dictatorship having spent five years in prison on politically-motivated, trumped-up corruption charges.

Gillani's first action on being elected was to order the release from house arrest of the supreme and high court justices whom Musharraf had purged last November, because he feared they would declare unconstitutional his illegal and stage-managed "re-election" to a further five-year term as president.

The new PPP-led government is pledged to pass a resolution within 30 days restoring the purged judges to the bench. Such action would open the door to legal challenges to Musharraf's presidency and likely provoke a constitutional crisis. Musharraf has said that the judges can be restored only through an amendment to the constitution and repeatedly vilified the sacked head of the Supreme Court, Mohammad Iftikhar Chaudhry, as the "scum of the earth."

Despite numerous indicators of mass popular opposition to Musharraf, including opinion polls and the nationwide wave of riots that erupted following last December's assassination of PPP leader Benazir Bhutto, the Bush administration was, from all accounts, shocked by the drubbing Musharraf's political allies received in the February 18 national and provincial assembly elections.

It has been urging the PPP and its coalition partners—the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), the Pashtun-based Awami National Party, and the Islamic fundamentalist JUI-F—to let the judges issue lie or, at the very least, to work out a deal with Musharraf under which he retains the presidency. As a result of changes to the constitution Musharraf and the military rammed through parliament in 2003, Pakistan's president has vast powers, including the right to sack the prime minister and dissolve the National Assembly.

A US State Department official said that the purpose of this week's high-level visit to Islamabad was to ask the new government "how they see the way forward and what their plans are."

In reality Negroponte and Boucher descended on Pakistan in order to strong-arm the new government into guaranteeing that Pakistan will

continue to play a leading role in supporting US imperialism's predatory ambitions in central and west Asia.

Pakistan is pivotal to the US occupation of Afghanistan. It is the conduit for most of the fuel and many other essential supplies used by US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan is also serving as a staging area for US preparations for future military action against Iran.

In recent months, US military and intelligence agencies have expanded their presence in Pakistan, with a view to stamping out support for the insurgency against Afghanistan's US imposed government in Pakistan's Pashtun-speaking tribal belt. US forces have repeatedly carried out air strikes inside Pakistan and some 100 US military personnel have been deployed to Pakistan to assist in counter-insurgency operations.

Negroponte's mission appears to have only stoked anger in the Pakistani elite and the population as a whole over the subordinate relationship that has long-existed between Pakistan and the US and over Washington's unwavering support for Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, and his trampling on the democratic rights of the Pakistani people.

Pakistani officials have complained that Negroponte and Boucher more or less bullied their way into the country. "The visit was not planned and only relevant Pakistani officials were informed about it at the last moment," reported the Pakistani *Dawn Times*. When Pakistani officials objected that this was not the appropriate time for such a visit, they were reportedly told, Negroponte was traveling in the region and his schedule would not permit a postponement.

Nervousness over the US's arrogant intrusion into Pakistani affairs was voiced by *Dawn* editor Zaffar Abbas. "The arrival of the US delegation on the day the new prime minister had been sworn in suggested," said Abbas, "they were trying to dictate terms. The problem with America is they do not understand the domestic pressure on the new government."

The *News*, another major English-language daily ran an editorial Tuesday titled, "Hand off Please, Uncle Sam." "For most citizens," said the *News*, "indications that Washington is eager to enforce its writ in parts of the country or dictate policy decisions are highly distressing."

Negroponte's first meeting was with Nawaz Sharif and other leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz. Sharif, according to the *New York Times*, gave the US envoy a "dressing down."

Speaking to reporters following the meeting, Sharif repeated his call for Musharraf to resign, said he had told the US emissary that the days in which the country's government was a "one-man show" were over, and added that he could not give Washington the "commitment" it wanted on fighting terrorism.

“Pakistan,” said Sharif, “wants to see peace in every country, including the US. However to secure peace in other countries, we cannot turn our own country into killing fields.”

In a pointed reference to recent US air strikes in Pakistan—whether carried out by drones launched from the CIA’s recently disclosed secret base in Pakistan or missiles shot across the border by US forces in Afghanistan—Sharif declared, “If America wants to see itself clean of terrorism we also want that our villages and towns should not be bombed.”

Sharif is a wealthy industrialist with close ties to the Saudi regime and despite his criticism of the Bush administration has never questioned the decades-long partnership between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military. But he is incensed that the US has supported and continues to cling to the Musharraf, who deposed him as prime minister and put him on trial for treason. And, like many in Pakistan’s elite, he resents the extent to which the officer corps, with Washington’s connivance, has been able to gain control over a vast network of capitalist enterprises.

Sharif is also acutely aware that his party did far better than expected in last month’s elections precisely because it cast itself as the party of intransigent opposition to Musharraf and denounced Washington for its role in propping up his dictatorship.

Negroponte also met with PPP leaders including Asif Ali Zardari, Bhutto’s widower. Zardari is the true head of the PPP and underscored this by making it known that he, and he alone, ultimately decided that Gillani should be the PPP’s nominee for prime minister.

Zardari did not address reporters after the meeting. But his advisor Husain Haqqani, said that Washington had been served notice that Musharraf has been shorn of much of his power. “If I can use an American expression,” said Haqqani, “there is a new sheriff in town. Americans have realized that they have perhaps talked with one man for too long.”

For much of 2007 the PPP leadership was working in tandem with the Bush administration in seeking to reconfigure the Musharraf regime so as to provide it with a fig-leaf of popular legitimacy. If the power-sharing negotiations failed, it was because of the refusal of Musharraf and his cronies to part with a real share of power and because the growing mass opposition to Musharraf caused the PPP leaders pause.

To this day Zardari and the PPP leadership have not ruled out a compromise with Musharraf. Similarly, they have been far less critical of Washington than Sharif and his PML-N.

On Tuesday when Bush phoned Gillani to congratulate him on becoming prime minister, the PPP leader said, according to his office, that “Pakistan would continue to fight terrorism in all its forms,” but added that this must include “a political approach with development programs.”

Even this stance, however, is likely not to satisfy Washington. The Bush administration has repeatedly pressed Islamabad to be more ruthless in asserting its authority in Pakistan’s historically autonomous tribal regions, notwithstanding that it has mobilized 80,000 troops, carried out indiscriminate attacks on villages, imposed collective punishments on villages and tribes accused of harboring anti-government insurgents, and routinely “disappeared” people.

The *Dawn* reported Wednesday that a senior, unnamed US diplomat had told its reporter that “while the Americans may consider a proposal for a dialogue with the militants they do not want military operations [against them] to stop, not even briefly.”

Negroponte also met Tuesday with Musharraf. Nothing of substance

was said about their talks, but speaking the same day from Washington, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack lauded the beleaguered autocrat.

Asked if Musharraf was “indispensable”—a term Negroponte had previously used to describe him—McCormack said that the Pakistani president is “a good friend and ally.”

“Those are the kinds of questions that I think ultimately have to be answered by the Pakistani political system,” added McCormack. “But, you know, he remains somebody that we have worked with and will work with closely.”

Sections of Democratic Party leadership and the *New York Times* have suggested that Washington should expend no more energy and influence in maintaining Musharraf in office. But the Bush administration is determined not to ruffle feathers with the Pakistani military—for decades the nexus of US influence and interest in Pakistan.

General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, whom Musharraf named to succeed him as head of Pakistan’s armed forces when he resigned in mid-December, recently made a statement strongly supporting Musharraf and his role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. That said, it was noted by many observers that on Monday, the same day an anti-Musharraf prime minister was elected, Kayani reassigned two of the eleven Army corps commanders, both of them reputedly close to Musharraf.

Pakistan’s coalition government is highly unstable. The principal coalition partners, the PPP and the PML-N are longstanding bitter rivals.

Theirs is a combination born of the common interest of the traditional political elite and sections of big business to remove Musharraf, because they resent the military’s domination of economic and political life and because of their fear that the growing popular opposition to Musharraf—due to his regime’s dictatorial character, its obtrusive support for US aggression, and the worsening economic situation—could provoke popular unrest that would threaten their interests.

In recent months Pakistan has been plagued by rising food prices and flour and power shortages. Yesterday the *Dawn* reported that development projects in the country’s largest province, the Punjab, “have come to a virtual halt as contractors have stopped work on thousands of roads and building infrastructures citing [the] sudden rise in the prices of construction materials.”

It is common knowledge in elite circles that the incoming government will be forced to take unpopular austerity measures to stabilize Pakistani capitalism.

Among the major reasons that the new government has been unable to unveil a cabinet is a bitter dispute between the PPP and PML-N over which party should have the finance ministry portfolio. Each is insisting that the other should accept this ministry and assume direct responsibility for imposing still more hardship on Pakistan’s toiling masses.



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