

Obama on torture photos: cover-up and complicity

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President Obama's repudiation of his promise to comply with a court order and release Pentagon torture photos marks a qualitative deepening of the cover-up of the crimes carried out under Bush as well as their continuation under the new administration in only slightly altered form.

The president's decision amounts to the deliberate suppression of evidence that the US military-intelligence apparatus, at the direction of the White House, carried out systemic torture.

The about-face on the torture photos is of a piece with a series of actions taken by the administration in recent months. These include the Obama Justice Department's attempt to suppress lawsuits challenging extraordinary rendition, torture and illegal domestic spying, all hallmarks of the police-state apparatus erected under Bush in the name of a war on terrorism.

Moreover, according to press reports, the decision on the photos coincides with the administration's finalizing of plans to hold terror suspects indefinitely without charges in the US itself. It was precisely the Bush administration's designation of such detainees as "enemy combatants"—supposedly without the protection of either the Constitution or the Geneva Conventions—that facilitated the use of torture. Now, it appears that this status of legal limbo is going to be continued on US soil, with far-reaching implications for democratic rights.

Obama's statement Wednesday justifying his keeping the photos secret is a mixture of political hypocrisy and outright lies.

He began by insisting that the images in question "are not particularly sensational." If this is true, it begs the question of why the government refuses to release them, purportedly for fear that they would provoke attacks on US troops.

On this score, Obama is lying. It should be recalled that after the exposure of the Abu Ghraib photos in 2004, the Pentagon managed to suppress other images, which were described by then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as depicting acts "that can only be described as blatantly sadistic, cruel and inhumane." Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina was more explicit about these photos and videos. "We're talking about rape and murder—and some very serious charges," he reported at the time.

The *Washington Post* Thursday quoted an anonymous congressional staff member who said that the images "are more graphic than those that have been made public from Abu Ghraib." The staff member warned, "When they are released, there will be a major outcry for an investigation."

Obama further claimed that the photos would not add "to our understanding of what was carried out in the past by a small number of individuals."

Here the Democratic president embraces the contemptible claim by the Bush White House that the torture carried out at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere was merely the work of a few "bad apples," a handful of soldiers who have been jailed, cashiered or otherwise punished. This alibi has been thoroughly discredited by the Justice Department memos released last month, which gave pseudo-legal justifications for precisely the abhorrent abuse seen at Abu Ghraib. Senate investigations have also established that these acts of torture were discussed and approved by the top officials in the Bush administration.

Finally, Obama warned that the release of the images would "inflame anti-American opinion" and "put our troops in greater danger." This concern only makes sense given the Obama administration's refusal to seriously investigate—much less criminally

prosecute—torture and other war crimes carried out under Bush. Thus, instead of being seen as evidence in holding the guilty accountable and making a decisive break with their criminal policies, the photos represent more proof that those responsible—Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Tenet and others—enjoy impunity, and that the new administration is covering up for torture.

Obama's action was no doubt influenced by US military commanders, who exercise virtual veto power over political decisions in Washington. His primary concern, however, is not the reaction that the photos would provoke in Iraq and Afghanistan—where daily military atrocities weigh far more than photographic images. Rather, it is their political impact at home.

When Obama complied with another court order last month and released the Bush Justice Department's so-called torture memos, his aim was to put the issue behind him, coupling the declassification with a blanket guarantee that no one would be prosecuted for torture.

Instead, the memos have provoked a bitter internecine struggle within the capitalist state, with the Republican right led by Cheney in alliance with sections of the military-intelligence apparatus taking the offensive in defending torture and exposing leading Democrats like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as political accomplices in implementing these methods.

Obama fears that the release of the photos would not only intensify this conflict, but also provoke popular outrage in the US itself along with demands for investigations and prosecutions of former top officials.

This is something the Democratic president is desperate to avoid. He has no interest in defending democratic rights at the expense of a confrontation with the military brass and the CIA.

Moreover, Obama is continuing the two wars initiated under the Bush administration, pursuing their original aim of asserting US hegemony over the strategically vital and oil-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. He wants to avoid anything that would discredit these wars in the eyes of the American public, including the exposure of the systemic torture to which they gave rise.

Torture is not incidental to these wars, nor was it merely the preferred policy of the sadists in the Bush White House. It is integral to such colonial-style counterinsurgency campaigns, in which a major aim is to terrorize and intimidate the population. It was

employed by the French in Algeria, the British in Kenya, the Belgians in the Congo and the Portuguese in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. The American military is following in their bloody footsteps.

As his administration's policies are making ever clearer, Obama is a spokesperson for America's financial oligarchy. Whatever his differences in tactics and style from Bush, this entails political reaction across the board, from bailing out finance capital at the expense of working people, to waging imperialist wars, to defending torture.

None of these issues—the destruction of jobs and living standards, war, torture and the assault on democratic rights—can be confronted outside of a decisive break with the Democrats and the development of a mass independent political movement of the working class committed to the socialist transformation of society.

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