

Obama, Private Manning and human rights

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Even as the United States preaches the sanctity of human rights to the world—in order to disguise its efforts to prop up besieged dictatorships in Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain and install a new client regime in Libya—President Barack Obama is defending the torture of a US citizen at home.

State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley is a casualty of Obama's determination to defend the Pentagon's sadistic abuse of Private Bradley Manning. Crowley, a long-time government public relations official, resigned Sunday, forced out for publicly criticizing the military's treatment of the 23-year-old Army intelligence specialist accused of leaking classified documents to WikiLeaks.

Last Thursday, speaking before a small audience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Crowley was asked about the treatment of Manning, which the questioner described as the military "torturing a prisoner in a military brig." Crowley, who has played a prominent role in the US government witch-hunt of WikiLeaks and its co-founder, Julian Assange, defended Manning's incarceration but called his treatment "ridiculous and counterproductive and stupid."

Crowley was responding to mounting international protests over the treatment of Manning, including denunciations by Amnesty International and other human rights groups and the launching of a formal investigation by the United Nations.

At a White House press conference Friday, Obama was asked about Crowley's remark and responded by defending the abuse of Manning—who is being held in maximum custody and virtual isolation, locked in his cell 23 hours a day, kept under 24-hour surveillance, stripped of his clothing at night, and permitted only the most limited access to reading material. Earlier this month and for more than a week, he was forced to stand completely naked for morning inspection in front of his

cell.

Manning is incarcerated in the brig at the Quantico, Virginia Marine Corps base, where he has endured these conditions for nearly 8 months. He is awaiting a court martial, and has neither been tried nor convicted of any crime. His cruel treatment is designed to break his will and force him to provide evidence against WikiLeaks and Assange.

At the press conference, Obama dismissed Crowley's criticism by saying he had received assurances from the Pentagon that "the terms of [Manning's] confinement are appropriate and are meeting our basic standards."

In his resignation statement, Crowley did not retract his comments on Manning's treatment. On the contrary, he wrote: "The exercise of power in today's challenging times and relentless media environment must be prudent and consistent with our laws and values." This verges on a charge that the abuse of Manning is illegal.

The "offense" of which Manning stands accused is leaking evidence of US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq and classified State Department cables exposing American intrigues around the world. A principled and courageous young man, Manning is being tortured by the real criminals—those responsible for massive crimes against the people of Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries.

The Obama administration has over the past two weeks increased its persecution of Manning, adding new charges against him, including that of "aiding the enemy," which carries the death penalty.

Manning last week delivered an 11-page letter to the brig authorities reiterating his request to be removed from maximum custody and Prevention of Injury (POI) status, a designation that allows his jailers to restrict his freedom of movement and subject him to humiliating and punitive conditions—including sleeping without a pillow or sheets, being frequently awakened at night

and barred from sleeping during the day.

In the letter, Manning documented the fact that the brig psychiatrist has repeatedly called for him to be removed from POI status and been overruled by the authorities. In addition to detailing episodes of harassment by guards, Manning pointed out that inmates normally remain in maximum custody or POI for less than two weeks and that he is the only detainee in the entire brig currently being held under these conditions.

Obama's support for the torture of Manning coincides with his order last week reversing his earlier pledge to close the Guantanamo prison camp and instead resuming the drum-head military tribunals there. Obama also issued an executive order affirming and institutionalizing the indefinite detention without any trial of 48 Guantanamo detainees.

Obama and the United States government have no standing to lecture anyone on human rights and democracy. Having won election by posing as an opponent of Bush's war policy and attacks on democratic rights, Obama has continued and expanded all of the police-state agencies and measures instituted by his predecessor.

He has rejected any prosecution of Bush officials who authorized torture and continued the "rendering" of alleged terrorists to foreign countries for interrogation under torture. He has cited "state secrets" to block access to the courts by torture victims and victims of domestic spying, expanded the "targeted assassination" of insurgents in Pakistan and elsewhere, ordered the assassination of at least one American citizen, and upheld the "right" of the president to unilaterally imprison anyone declared by him to be an "illegal enemy combatant." He has maintained the full panoply of police-state laws and structures, from the Patriot Act to the Homeland Security Department to the Northern Command.

These policies are of a piece with the expansion of the war in Afghanistan and the intensification of attacks on social programs and working class living standards. They define a right-wing administration that is, in all essentials, a continuation of the hated Bush administration.

With the battery of anti-worker laws making their way through state governments across the country—laws that strip workers of collective bargaining rights,

outlaw strikes and, in some cases, bar workers from political advocacy—the assault on democratic rights of the past decade is merging with the declaration of war by the American ruling class on working class living standards. Obama has remained virtually silent while the Republicans spearhead a drive to criminalize any form of collective resistance by workers.

The Democrats and Republicans have differences over the trade unions—the former prefer to use them to impose attacks on the workers, while the latter seek to marginalize them—but they both share the goal of suppressing working class struggle and driving workers' conditions back to those of the 19th century.

It was the Obama administration after all, with the aid of the United Auto Workers union, that imposed a five-year strike ban on auto workers as part of the forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler.

Obama's defense of the torture of Private Manning and the nationwide onslaught on workers' rights and conditions are closely related. The buildup of the infrastructure of a police state under the auspices of both big business parties is the preparation for the use of state violence against the mounting struggles of the American working class.

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