

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton impeached by state House of Representatives on corruption charges

Andy Hartmann, Tom Carter
28 May 2023

A sharp crisis has broken out at the highest levels of the Republican party in the US with the abrupt suspension and removal of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who was impeached by the Texas House of Representatives on Saturday for corruption and abuse of power.

On Thursday, the General Investigating Committee of the state House of Representatives voted unanimously to recommend articles of impeachment. On Saturday, the House voted to impeach him by a vote of 121-23. The case will now likely proceed to a trial in the state Senate, although no trial date has as yet been set.

Paxton is considered a close ally of former President Donald Trump, who rushed to Paxton's defense with a series of menacing posts on his Truth Social platform. Calling the removal of Paxton "election interference," he threatened any Republicans who voted to impeach Paxton with retaliation.

Ted Cruz, one of the two US senators from Texas and a powerful Trump ally, likewise sided with Paxton. Another Trump ally, US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, also came to Paxton's defense.

The impeachment of Paxton has national political implications. Texas, the second most populous US state, is the most populous state controlled by the Republicans. The post of attorney general is one of the three most powerful elected positions in the Texas government, along with the governor and lieutenant governor. Paxton has held the position since January 2015.

The impeachment proceedings had a sudden and rushed character, taking many in the state capital by surprise. Before the recommendation of articles of impeachment on Thursday, the investigating committee had been conducting its business in semi-secrecy since March, so as not to alert Paxton and his allies. When Paxton became aware of the looming impeachment on Tuesday, he went

on the offensive, demanding that House Speaker Dade Phelan resign because Phelan was allegedly "in a state of apparent debilitating intoxication" while presiding over a session of the House. Paxton was referring to a video in which Phelan stumbled over some words while addressing the House.

Using the thuggish methods that underscore the fascistic transformation of the Republican Party, Paxton called Republican lawmakers personally and threatened to retaliate and "destroy" them if they voted to impeach him. He also called for public demonstrations in his defense, and his supporters in the Capitol gallery had to be gaveled down at least once for disrupting the proceedings.

With both Trump and Paxton making public threats of retaliation against any Republicans who voted to impeach Paxton, it is significant that Paxton was swiftly impeached anyway.

The 20 articles of impeachment are related to Paxton's relationship with Austin real estate mogul Nate Paul. Flagrantly abusing his position in the Texas government, Paxton intervened to shield the multi-millionaire campaign donor on numerous occasions, even after he was confronted by other officials within the Office of the Attorney General.

Paxton is a repugnant and fascistic figure. Following the 2020 election, Paxton supported Trump's efforts to overturn the election results. Among other things, he sued the states of Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania to invalidate Joe Biden's victories in those states. On January 6, 2021, Paxton spoke at Trump's rally immediately before the Capitol was attacked by Trump's thugs. Following the coup attempt, Paxton was the only state attorney general who did not condemn it.

Paxton has championed many extreme-right causes. In 2020 and 2021, he sued the City of Austin over its

COVID-19 mitigation policies. In 2017 he defended Texas in a federal lawsuit over gerrymandering of congressional districts. He was one of 11 Republican attorneys general who intervened in a lawsuit on behalf of ExxonMobil against the state of Massachusetts, which was attempting to investigate ExxonMobil's marketing of fossil fuel products as part of an investigation of climate change. In 2016, Paxton sued the United States Department of Labor over a new rule implemented by that agency making more workers eligible for overtime pay.

In 2016, Paxton sued the City of Austin over its policy of barring handguns from the city hall. Paxton not only won, but the city was ordered to pay a fine to the state for each day investigators from the Attorney General's office were prevented from carrying firearms in the building.

During the 2020 election, Paxton sued Harris County over that jurisdiction's efforts to distribute absentee ballots and voting by mail. Paxton also investigated and prosecuted alleged cases of voter fraud as part of Trump's trumped-up claims of a stolen election.

In another right-wing provocation, Paxton recently requested that the Texas Department of Transportation check its records for people who had made requests to have their gender changed on their driver's license so as to identify transgender people. The DOT response was that it could not determine, without an extensive investigation of the individual cases, whether the change requests were due to clerical errors or actual cases of gender change. Paxton has also intervened to promote religion in schools and to support the building of a wall along the Texas-Mexico border.

The Republican governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, for years worked closely with Paxton to use the power of the state to pursue far-right causes. He has thus far maintained an extraordinary silence on Paxton's impeachment. The Bush family, including former president George W. Bush, a kingmaker in Texas politics, has likewise been conspicuously silent.

While Paxton is a repugnant and fascistic figure, his Republican opponents within the Texas legislature are hardly champions of the democratic rule of law. Paxton's corruption has been well known for years. He has been under indictment for securities fraud since 2015. In 2020, four former aides in his office filed whistleblower complaints against him, accusing him of crimes including bribery and abuse of office.

The Texas legislature itself—or “the ledge,” as it is sometimes called in Texas—is a cesspool of anti-democratic, racist, bigoted and Christian fundamentalist

provocations and outrages. The impeachment of Paxton by the Texas Republicans cannot be understood as an assertion of the “rule of law” by forces who for years refused to lift a finger against the attorney general. Rather, it must be seen as a manifestation of internal conflicts within the Republican Party in the run-up to the 2024 elections.

In this context, Trump's charge that the removal of Paxton is “election interference” is significant. It suggests that Paxton is somehow connected to intrigues related to Trump's efforts to regain the presidency, by electoral means or otherwise. It underscores the fact that the failure of the mob attack on Congress on January 6, 2021 has not lessened the danger of a far-right coup.

According to opinion polls, Trump currently has the support of approximately 40 percent of Republican voters, about twice the level of support for Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, his nearest rival for the Republican presidential nomination. Both figures are competing for the title of the most bloodcurdling fascist.

But the emergence of DeSantis points to a crisis of the Republican Party as it deepens its fascistic transformation, with some elements looking for a far-right alternative to the mafia-style apparatus around Trump. This transformation has brought the most unprincipled, thuggish and reckless elements in the party to the forefront, and the knives are coming out as these elements struggle behind closed doors for control of the party machine.

The impeachment of a Texas state official is historically rare, having occurred twice to date. The only prior impeachment of a high-ranking state official occurred in 1917, when Governor James “Pa” Ferguson was convicted by the state Senate, removed from office and barred from running for statewide office again. The other impeachment was against a judge in 1975.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact