

As Pakistanis risk life and limb to oppose Musharraf, US elite rallies round military regime

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Tens of thousands of Pakistanis have taken to the streets over the past two days—risking arrest, assault and even shooting at the hands of the country’s security forces—in opposition to the imposition of martial law by General Pervez Musharraf’s US-backed military regime.

The government admits that in the first 24 hours after Musharraf’s Saturday evening proclamation of a state of emergency, security forces took hundreds of opposition politicians, journalists, and lawyers into “preventative detention.” On Monday and again yesterday, security forces broke up widespread anti-government protests, attacking demonstrators with batons and dragging large numbers off to jail.

Under the emergency, the constitution and its guarantees of free speech, free movement, and free association have been indefinitely suspended. Police have been given new powers to arrest and detain people without charge and the media, especially broadcasters, are subjected to rigorous censorship. Since Saturday evening, only the state television network has been allowed to broadcast. Musharraf’s Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) strips the judiciary of its constitutional prerogative to review the legality of government actions, decreeing that the courts have no right to instruct President Musharraf, Prime Minister Aziz, or anyone acting in their name to do anything.

Large sections of the top echelons of the judiciary, a body hitherto notorious for its complicity in military rule, including the majority of the judges on the Pakistani Supreme Court, have been purged, either because they refused to pledge to uphold the PCO or because, deemed insufficiently pliant, they were not asked to take the military’s new oath of office.

In a desperate attempt to give the Musharraf regime—which came to power in a 1999 coup and now has aborted its own effort to construct a democratic façade for continued military rule—a fig leaf of legality, the remaining supreme court justices and some fresh Musharraf-appointees met Tuesday. Their first action was to rescind a ruling issued by Pakistan’s highest court last Saturday, just before it was disbanded by security forces, declaring the state of emergency unconstitutional.

Faced with mounting and emboldened popular opposition, Musharraf and his cronies threatened repeatedly during the past six months to invoke emergency rule. Ultimately, the trigger for what has aptly been dubbed Musharraf’s second coup was the general-president’s apprehension that the Supreme Court was about to declare unconstitutional his recent “election” to a further five-year presidential term. The October 6 presidential vote

was a military stage-managed sham that flagrantly violated both the letter and spirit of the constitution.

While Pakistan seethes with opposition to Musharraf and the military, the Bush administration and the US ruling elite as a whole have made manifestly clear that they stand with the military regime and will, in the name of the war on terror, continue to provide it with massive injections of aid.

Speaking publicly Monday for the first time on Musharraf's declaration of a state of emergency, US President George W. Bush did not demand that martial rule be immediately lifted, let alone that the general and his government resign. Rather he voiced the "hope" that Musharraf "will restore democracy as quickly as possible"—something that the Pakistani dictator has claimed that he was doing throughout the past eight years of military rule.

Bush mixed tepid, ritualistic criticism of the general's latest actions with praise for his record, telling reporters "President Musharraf has been a strong fighter against extremists and radicals."

The US president pointedly did not spell out any measures the US government would, or even might, take in the event Islamabad does not comply with Washington's call for Musharraf to lift the emergency and make good on his earlier pledges to quit as head of the armed forces before being sworn in for a new presidential term and to hold legislative elections in January. "All we can do is continue to work with the president as well as others in the Pak (sic) government," Bush said.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates echoed Bush's remarks. He said the various programs under which US aid is provided to Pakistan—since September 2001, the US government admits to supplying some \$10 billion, most of it military aid, to Islamabad—will have to be reviewed, since some may be subject to statutory restrictions on funding countries whose constitution have been suspended. That legal necessity notwithstanding, insisted Gates, "We also want to be mindful of the fact that Pakistan continues to be an extremely important ally in the war on terror, so we have an interest in an ongoing security relationship."

An unnamed senior US official told the Associated Press, "The question is what do you do when someone makes [a] mistake that is a close ally? You know, do you cut him off, hit him with sanctions, walk out the door? Or do you try and see if you can work them to get them back on track?"

The Democratic Party leadership has taken essentially the same position.

Over the past year, the Democrats have repeatedly criticized the Bush administration for not having made better use of US aid to Pakistan to prod Musharraf to take a more aggressive stand against Taliban and other Islamicist militias in the border regions of Pakistan and thereby strengthen the US occupation of Afghanistan.

(In fact the Musharraf regime has launched several major offensives in Pakistan's tribal regions and as a result the Pakistani military has suffered large casualties and increasing defections from its ranks.)

In the wake of Musharraf's coup, several Democratic Party leaders repeated these criticisms saying future aid to Pakistan should be tied to Islamabad doing the US's bidding, even its risks further destabilizing the country.

But all echoed the Bush administration's insistence that Pakistan is a pivotal ally in the war on terror and that the US must continue its close alliance with the Musharraf and, above all, the Pakistani military on which his regime rests.

Hilary Clinton commented, "We now find ourselves having to cope with yet another threatening challenge made worse by the failed policies of this president."

Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd, a second tier candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, said, "I am firmly opposed to cutting assistance to the government and people of Pakistan at this time—in fact I would argue that additional assistance might even be necessary in the coming days."

The principal press mouthpieces of the US elite have staked out similar ground. "The main US interest here is a stable Pakistan that can help defeat the jihadists," declared the *Wall Street Journal* Monday. "That interest won't be served by precipitously moving to sever ties with Mr. Musharraf, or with the Pakistan military the way the US did in the 1990s."

In an editorial published Tuesday, the *New York Times*, the leading voice of the US liberal establishment, criticized the Bush administration for having "centered" its Pakistan policy "slavishly on a single, autocratic ruler." The US, it complained, "had gained little leverage for the more than \$10 billion that has fattened Pakistan's coffers."

But it quickly arrived at a policy prescription not far removed from the White House's: "The United States is increasingly left with bad options. Cutting off aid would only make it harder to enlist Pakistan's military in the anti-extremist fight and renew doubts about America's reliability as an ally."

The *Times* urged the Bush administration to renew its efforts to bring about a power-sharing agreement between the military and Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP). "Reviving General Musharraf's back-room deal with the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, however distasteful, may be a way back from the abyss ..."

The *Times'* hopes may well prove forlorn. Bhutto has signaled time and again her readiness to serve Washington's interests and to work with the Pakistani military to prevent the eruption of mass popular opposition to Musharraf. She has indicated she would help reconfigure the Musharraf regime so as to provide the PPP with a share of power, in return for providing a popular and "democratic face" to a government that would continue to be dominated by the military and its US patrons.

Even after Musharraf's declaration of emergency, Bhutto said she would not rule out further talks with the general and her PPP has been largely absent from the protests against martial law..

But she has had to retreat from that stand, announcing that she will not meet with the general-president and will lead a protest rally on Friday.

Bhutto's objectives remain the same. But with the opposition to the government swelling and Musharraf more and more relying on outright repression, the PPP's popular support

threatens to hemorrhage, if she does not distance herself from the dictatorship. Already there are reports of deep fissures in the PPP leadership.

The US establishment's rallying round Musharraf and the Pakistani military as they trample on the most elementary democratic rights of the Pakistani people, has once again put the lie to the democratic verbiage in which both the Bush administration and the Democrats seek to cloak US diplomatic and military aggression around the world.

The US elite is utterly indifferent and hostile to the democratic rights of the Pakistani people. The Musharraf regime has been a pivotal and highly-touted US ally in the war on terror for the past six years. The Bush administration has connived in and apologized for its innumerable violations of democratic and human rights, from the phony elections of 2002, to the violence unleashed against anti-Musharraf protesters in Karachi this May, to the deportation of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, when he tried to return to Pakistan in September, to the current recourse to martial law.

Washington's attitude toward Pakistan is entirely shaped by US predatory strategic interests. Pakistan is pivotal to US efforts to control the adjacent oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Pakistan has been the principal logistical support base for the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and with the neighboring Central Asian republics becoming, under Russian influence, less cooperative, Pakistan has become even more important to the US position in Afghanistan. Pakistan's military regime has allowed the US military to use the country to prepare for war with Iran, by staging training exercises and mounting incursions into Iran. Pakistan is also widely reported to have provided US security forces with sites to conduct the illegal torture of alleged terrorist suspects.

This is not to say that the US elite is not gravely troubled by Musharraf's coup. It is widely and rightly seen as a debacle for the Bush administration's foreign policy, since it has so graphically exposed the hollowness and hypocrisy of the claims to be promoting democracy. The regime that the Bush administration has itself lauded as a pivotal US ally has once again bared its fangs.

Even more importantly, there are widespread fears that Musharraf's actions will backfire, sparking a popular mobilization that will redound not only against the interests of the military but against those of the US, which has been its chief patron.

Given the stakes, it is not impossible that US will try to remove Musharraf from the equation, by encouraging another general to strike the deal with Bhutto that Musharraf has proved unwilling to make—that is, to try to preempt a popular upsurge by reconfiguring the military regime.

The one thing the entire US elite is determined to avoid, including by countenancing mass violence, is the genuine intervention of the Pakistani masses into the country's political life.

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