

With tacit US support, Pakistan's military regime intensifies repression

By Keith Jones

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Pakistan's US-backed military regime mounted a massive police operation Friday to stamp out a Pakistan People's Party (PPP) rally called to protest the imposition of martial law.

The government admits to having mobilized 8,500 uniformed police and an undisclosed, but huge, number of undercover and intelligence operatives to prevent the PPP from mounting a mass protest in Rawalpindi. The country's third largest city, Rawalpindi is contiguous with Pakistan's national capital, Islamabad, and the headquarters of both the Pakistani army and air force.

To smother the protest, the military regime ordered Rawalpindi's shops closed and security personnel set up hundreds of checkpoints across the city, using dump trucks to blockade roads leading to the city center.

PPP supporters who managed to penetrate the security cordon and congregate near the rally site were met with tear gas and police baton-charges. Scores, possibly hundreds, were arrested and carted off in police vans. Many more had been taken into "preventive detention" on Thursday evening and early Friday morning.

The authorities claimed the total detained prior to Friday's scheduled rally was less than 500. But PPP Life Chairperson Benazir Bhutto—who was herself prevented from attending the rally by a second massive security operation in Karachi—said some 5,000 PPP activists had been detained between Wednesday and Friday.

Early Friday morning police effectively took Bhutto hostage. Her home in a prosperous Karachi neighborhood was surrounded by hundreds of police, who then cordoned it off using barbed wire and armored vehicles. Subsequently, the cordon was reinforced with concrete slabs.

On several occasions over the next fourteen hours Bhutto tried to leave, only to find her path blocked by the police and their cordon. Initially, government officials claimed that Bhutto was not under house arrest, only that she was being prevented from going to the Rawalpindi rally for "her own safety."

PPP officials were allowed to go through the police cordon to speak with Bhutto and the PPP leader was able to conduct media interviews by phone. But when PPP supporters tried to stage a protest just outside the police cordon, police immediately seized them and dragged them off to jail.

After long claiming Bhutto was not under house arrest, the authorities suddenly presented her with an order forbidding her from leaving her house for three days. Late Friday this order was rescinded.

While Bhutto from the outset condemned General President Pervez Musharraf's state of emergency, she continues to seek a power-sharing deal with Musharraf and the military, under which the PPP leadership, in return for a share of political power and patronage,

would provide a democratic façade for the Pakistani military, which would continue to play the predominant role in the country's governance, with the backing of Washington.

According to a *New York Times* article dated November 10, Western diplomats insist that the back-channel talks between Bhutto, Musharraf, and the military are continuing.

Friday's events underscore the brutal, unrestrained character of the Pakistani military regime. Under the Provisional Constitutional Order promulgated by Musharraf last Saturday evening, the constitution has been indefinitely suspended—indeed, the regime failed to avail itself of the emergency powers within the constitution because they were deemed inadequate.

All political meetings and rallies are banned. Pakistan's jails are quickly filling up with those deemed a threat to the regime. Ominously, several have been charged with treason, a crime punishable by death. Most private television stations remain off the air.

The top echelons of the judiciary have been purged, although the judiciary has a long and inglorious history of sanctioning military rule. The judges ran afoul of Musharraf and the military because, under conditions of mounting popular opposition to the regime, they had the temerity to oppose some of its most flagrant violations of the constitution, including the disappearance and detention without proper evidence of alleged terrorist suspects.

Musharraf's resort to martial law was triggered by his fear that the court would strike down his "re-election" in a sham vote last month that violated both the spirit and letter of the constitution.

Overhanging the entire situation is the threat that the military will unleash bloody violence. Last May 12-13, some 40 people were killed in Karachi when the Musharraf regime encouraged the pro-Musharraf MQM to launch thug attacks on anti-government protesters. On October 18, 140 people were killed in a terrorist attack aimed at Benazir Bhutto—an attack she has said was orchestrated by elements in and around the military government.

The Pakistani military has a long and infamous history of murderous violence, including staging the judicial murder of Bhutto's father, the deposed prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and killing hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis in the military's unsuccessful attempt to prevent the 1971 secession of what was then East Pakistan.

The Bush administration and the entire US political establishment, no less than Musharraf and the Pakistani generals themselves, are responsible for the escalating repression in Pakistan. Not only has the Bush administration, with requisite congressional support, sustained the Musharraf regime, giving it some \$10 billion in aid, most of it military, since September 2001, it has proclaimed Pakistan a "major

non-NATO ally” of the US, repeatedly lauded Musharraf as a pivotal ally in the “war on terrorism,” and provided alibis for his regime’s rape of the democratic rights of the Pakistani people.

In their response to Musharraf’s imposition of martial law, all sections of the political establishment, Republican and Democrat, have made clear that their overriding objective is to preserve the unity and power of the Pakistani military and its longstanding partnership with the US.

The US has supported one Pakistani military regime after another dating back to the 1950s, because the military has served as a tool of US geo-political interests, first in the Cold War confrontation with the USSR and now in the name of “the war on terror,” by providing pivotal support to the US elite as it seeks to gain a stranglehold over the world’s oil resources through the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and preparations for war with Iran.

The Bush administration responded to the suppression of Friday’s protest and the house arrest of Bhutto by administering yet another perfunctory and ritualistic hand-slapping to Musharraf.

In a statement dripping with cynicism, US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe said Bhutto “and other political party members must be permitted freedom of movement and all protesters released. We remain concerned about the continued state of emergency and curtailment of basic freedoms and urge Pakistan’s authorities to quickly return to constitutional order and democratic norms.”

But Bhutto herself has said that the US Ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson, added her voice to those in the military regime who were trying to persuade her to cancel Friday’s rally in Rawalpindi. When asked about this Thursday, US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack failed to deny Bhutto’s claim, saying he would not “get into the details of Anne’s conversation.”

Also on Thursday, Bush administration officials hailed Musharraf’s announcement that legislative elections will be held by February 15, one month later than the schedule announced prior to the declaration of a state of emergency. “We think it’s a good thing that President Musharraf has clarified the election date for the Pakistani people,” said White House Press Secretary Dana Perino.

The claim that this statement represents a step toward democracy exemplifies the US’s indifference and utter hostility to the most elementary rights of the Pakistani people.

Musharraf, who came to power through a military coup, time and again has broken similar promises, and his regime has a long record of trampling on democratic rights and stage-managing elections. In this instance, he has not even said that he will lift the emergency prior to the elections. Information Minister Tariq Azim Khan has observed that previous elections have been held in Pakistan under states of emergency.

The US’s other major demand—that Musharraf fulfill his pledge to give up his post as head of the military and become a “civilian president”—sanctions the sham October 6 presidential election and the constitutional changes Musharraf previously made to strengthen the powers of the presidency and ensure, through a National Security Council, the preponderant role of the military in setting government policy.

The real attitude of the Bush administration and the US political establishment toward the political crisis in Pakistan was laid out by US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte in testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Wednesday. Negroponte, who has a long record of abetting mass repression in Central America and

Iraq, vehemently opposed any reduction in US aid to Pakistan, declaring that there was “not a mission in the world more deserving of our persistence and considered patience” than the partnership between Pakistan and the US—that is, between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military.

Joseph Biden, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and an aspirant for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, has meanwhile called for a tripling of US non-military aid to Pakistan to \$1.5 billion per year for the next 10 years. As for military aid, he said it should be conditional on Pakistani performance—that is, on Pakistan doing even more to suppress pro-Taliban support in areas bordering Afghanistan. “It not clear we’re getting our money’s worth” in respect to security assistance, complained Biden.

Biden’s comments speak to the some of what are the real misgivings of the US establishment in respect to Musharraf. The central concern is that the recourse to martial law may backfire, provoking a mass political upheaval that redounds against the interests of the Pakistani military, the Pakistani bourgeoisie as a whole, and US imperialism.

The Pakistani elite shares the fears of the US political and corporate establishment that the crisis in Pakistan could provide an opening for the long-oppressed and abused Pakistani masses to enter the political arena.

Both the *New York Times* and BBC admitted that Friday’s events had to a large degree a choreographed character. For Bhutto, who has come under attack for her attempts to strike a power-sharing deal with Musharraf and her burgeoning alliance with Washington, it was important to be seen as challenging martial law.

By the same token, she was not all that unhappy to see the protest squashed, for she is anxious to avoid unleashing a series of escalating protests that could escape the control of the elite and /or result in bloody clashes between the military and the populace, which could raise the possibility of splits within the military itself.

Speaking under the cloak of anonymity, a Western diplomat said the major capitalist powers have been urging Bhutto to pursue negotiations with Musharraf and that Bhutto agrees with a course aimed at not “totally disrupt[ing] the entire apple cart.”

The other major opposition groupings, Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and the MMA, the six-party coalition of Islamic fundamentalist parties, bore more of the brunt of the initial wave of arrests than the PPP. But their failure to call for, let alone mount, mass protests against the regime cannot be explained by this.

Their popular following has been eroded by their right-wing socio-economic policies, religious obscurantism, and own record of conniving with the military in robbing the people of their democratic rights. Moreover, they too fear the possible consequences of a clash between a galvanized populace and the principal bulwark of capitalist rule in Pakistan, the military.

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