

In the Wake of Bhutto Assassination, Democratic Concerns in Pakistan are Heightened

Today's assassination of Benazir Bhutto has raised a series of questions about the fate of democracy in the former Prime Minister's country, particularly the heightened threat an increasingly unstable Pakistan poses to U.S. regional interests.

The recent imposition of military "emergency rule" by Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf, and the frustration expressed by American officials over the inability of Musharraf's government to effectively reign in Islamic extremists operating in the country's tribal areas, has raised calls for a re-think of U.S. policies toward Pakistan.

Bhutto's assassination has left many political and diplomatic officials from around the world adding to that concern. In commenting on Bhutto's death, many world leader expressed concern about the future of Pakistan's tattered democracy.

This was the topic of a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing in November, entitled "Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Terrorism in Contemporary Pakistan."

In written congressional testimony submitted to the Committee, the Department of State's second-highest ranking official, Ambassador John D. Negroponte, emphasized the need for America to continue working toward a cohesive long-term partnership with the Pakistani people . . .

Long-term partnership with the Pakistani people aimed at building a stable, democratic society is the only option. We cannot afford to have on-again, off-again interactions that characterized our relationship in the past. Pakistan's future is too vital to our interests and our national security to ignore or to down-grade.

Our challenge is to effectively support the Pakistani people and to help them strengthen the influence of the moderate, democratic center and fight violent extremism. With strong Congressional support of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship since 2001, we are helping the Pakistani people move down a difficult but necessary path of moderation, stability, democracy, and prosperity.

We are asking for Congressional support in renewing our commitment to long-term partnership with the Pakistani people. There is not a mission in the world more deserving of our persistence and considered patience.

(Written Opening Statement of John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State, Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 11/7/2007.)

Read Amb. Negroponte's Full Testimony

In a written statement to the Committee, Gus had this to say about America's future relationship with Pakistan . . .

We must demand that Pakistan is committed not only to democratic principles, but also to partnering with the United States in implementing global non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The best and most prudent path forward for Pakistan is for the restoration of constitutional democracy, for General Musharraf to agree to resign as leader of the armed forces, and for free and fair elections to go ahead as scheduled.

Our role in this is to use every tool available to help Pakistan achieve these goals. Failure could result in disaster for Pakistan, its people, the surrounding region and the foreign policy and security interests of the United States.

Musharraf has since resigned as leader of the Pakistan military, handing his power over to his close hand-picked successor, General Ashfaq Kayani. He has also suspended emergency rule and vowed to hold elections, tentatively scheduled for early January.

Following today's assassination, the world will be watching closely, including many in Congress, to see what happens next in the turmoil crippling Pakistan's path toward full democracy.