

It's just not cricket: Commonwealth must suspend Pakistan

Media release from the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative Wednesday 7 November 2007

Things have gone very wrong in Pakistan. Its journey towards democracy was further derailed last Saturday, when General Musharraf, the head of army, declared a state of emergency that suspended the Constitution, sacked members of the Supreme Court and suppressed all dissent across the country. The declaration came days before the Supreme Court was due to hand down a decision that may have stripped the General of the presidency, on the basis that it was illegal for him to head both the army and the Government. The response of the global community has ranged between outright condemnation of a virtual coup to reserved comments based in alliance, rather than recognition of the absolute disregard for democracy, the rule of law and judicial independence.

Next Monday – the 12th of November – a little known mechanism, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, or CMAG, will meet to consider the declaration of emergency in Pakistan. The Group will look at whether the declaration of emergency represents such a strong blow against the commitments to democracy and human rights underpinning Commonwealth membership that Pakistan should be suspended. This is a critical moment, both to confirm the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth, but also for the world, as CMAG is one of the few mechanisms that has the power to sanction a government treading so far from globally accepted standards of good governance. The United Nations doesn't have this power – and its actions are moderated by eternal deliberation.

No one – least of all its South Asian neighbours – want an unstable, fragmented and ungovernable Pakistan. General Musharraf claims that the emergency is a move to ensure stability – and uses the threat of terrorism to justify the suppression of political opposition. The reality is that the emergency is creating exactly the environment that it seeks to prevent, and is putting regional security, democratic governance and the wellbeing of Pakistani communities at grave risk.

CMAG is the opportunity for the Commonwealth to reaffirm unequivocally that democracy, democratic processes and institutions, the rule of law and just and honest government are the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth (as set out in the Harare Declaration, the set of principles that CMAG is mandated to protect). Swift action signalling total disapproval of the General's actions will reinforce that membership of the Commonwealth is predicated on an absolute promise to protect and promote these values. CMAG has taken action before – in Nigeria following the imposition of military rule in 1995 and in Fiji late last year, after Commodore Bainarama overthrew the democratically elected government.

Pakistan itself was suspended from the Commonwealth following General Musharraf's military coup in 1999. It was readmitted as a member of the Commonwealth in 2004, on the basis of a promise to entrench democratic governance. General Musharraf also promised to hang up his army uniform, in recognition of the clear breach of democratic standards that comes with a leader heading up both the army and the government. General Musharraf has not kept this promise, despite further prodding from the Commonwealth Heads of Government in late 2005, international pressure, and the latest rounds of legal action inside Pakistan that precipitated the declaration of emergency. Pakistan has remained on CMAG's agenda since it rejoined the Commonwealth, in recognition of the tenuous state of democracy and human rights in the country.

CMAG must suspend Pakistan from the Commonwealth on Monday. It is a particularly significant moment, as the Commonwealth Heads of Government come together in a little over a fortnight for their biennial meeting, to discuss issues of concern in the Commonwealth and to set policy for the next two years. Pakistan's attendance at this meeting as a member of the Commonwealth would make an absolute mockery of the very basis of Commonwealth membership. It would also be the loss of a real chance for the world to demonstrate that internationally accepted principles of good governance and democracy are true standards and not just comforting words.

For more information regarding this media release contact Daniel Woods at CHRI (daniel@humanrightsinitiative.org). Visit the CHRI website for the latest on the situation in Pakistan (www.humanrightsinitiative.org).

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, international NGO working for the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth.