

Judgment day for Musharraf: Commonwealth leaders meet to discuss suspension

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Last week, following the illegal imposition of emergency rule in Pakistan, the Commonwealth told General Musharraf that unless he restored Pakistan's Constitution, allowed the return of judicial independence, relaxed oppressive media policies and hung up his army uniform, Pakistan would face suspension from the Commonwealth on the 22nd of November, the eve of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kampala. Today, two days before that meeting, Pakistan is still in crisis, constitutional rule is an unfulfilled dream, the judiciary continues as an arm of government and Musharraf remains as head of the army. When the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group meets on Thursday to discuss the situation in Pakistan, it must act to protect the basic values of the Commonwealth and suspend Pakistan.

Membership of the Commonwealth is predicated on a promise of democracy and human rights. Every member of the Commonwealth agrees to abide by a set of principles set out in the 1991 Harare Declaration, a set of principles that affirm commitment to fundamental political values – democracy, the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, just and honest government and human rights. This declaration was agreed in 1991, at a CHOGM hosted by Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth in 2002, after it failed to comply with the principles that were agreed on its own soil. In 2001, a Zimbabwean delegation had met with members of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) – a group of nine Commonwealth Foreign Ministers that monitor member compliance with the Harare Declaration – and agreed to halt land-reform related violence, stop suppression of legitimate opposition and uphold human rights. Presidential elections in 2002 were monitored by a Commonwealth Observer Mission, which found that the elections had been marred by violence, particularly targeted at the political opposition, in contravention of the Harare Declaration. Shortly after this finding, the Commonwealth suspended Zimbabwe for one year, pending the end of politically motivated violence, the restoration of law and order and the holding of free and fair elections. Mugabe attempted – unsuccessfully – to attend the 2003 CHOGM in Abuja, where Zimbabwe's suspension was extended. Zimbabwe withdrew from the Commonwealth shortly after.

Zimbabwe has continued to pose serious human rights concerns for the communities and people of the Commonwealth following its withdrawal, and is likely to be the focus of considerable civil society discussion in the sides of this year's Ugandan CHOGM. The Commonwealth must be strong and decisive in order to protect the fundamental political, democratic and human rights that it holds dear. Its approach to the situation in Zimbabwe earlier this decade, as well as its suspension of Nigeria and Fiji following military coups in 1995 and 2006, shows that the Commonwealth has, in the past, acted with strength and conviction.

Pakistan under Musharraf's emergency rule has no place in the Commonwealth. Each day, more and more reports of media blackouts, police brutality and oppression of legitimate opposition hit the global news headlines. Judges and the political opposition remain in home detention. The Constitution, the rule of law and a head of state separate from the head of the army, are no more than concepts. The Commonwealth gave Pakistan an opportunity to clean up its house and it failed to do so. Allowing General Musharraf and his entourage to sit beside the leaders of the Commonwealth in Uganda later this week would make a mockery of the central tenets of Commonwealth membership. The Commonwealth has no choice but to stand behind its fundamental values and suspend Pakistan.

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 and information on the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (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.