

## Commentary: To be or not to be: The Commonwealth and Pakistan

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The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group's (CMAG) past record of dealing with Pakistan has been notoriously indecisive and often riddled with miscalculations. In 1999, CMAG suspended Pakistan from the Council's of the Commonwealth only to re-admit it during 2004, when General Musharraf became a favourite in the so-called "war against terror". From 2004 until only last month, CMAG continued to naively tolerate Mr. Musharraf despite warnings from civil society groups, who in the end have been shown to be correct.

One could say that Mr Musharraf's recent transition from General to civilian President appears as ceremonial as his lifting of the emergency ahead of the promised 8 January 2008 elections. With a sabotaged judiciary, skewed rule of law, tampered constitution, extraordinary military powers, suppressed civil society, restricted media and pre-election manipulations all steps taken by Musharraf after CMAG's 22 November 2007 suspension of Pakistan, they remain mere window-dressing. Given the undemocratic context it seems that the outcomes of the 8 January elections will only add to such flourishes. In this context, it is imperative at this stage, that CMAG not become carried away by such window-dressing, by considering the immediate re-admittance of Pakistan into the Commonwealth.

In 1956, in the heights of the Cold War, Ayub Khan, the first military dictator of Pakistan, gave the world a new idea. It was called "guided-democracy". This idea justified authoritarian military rule as legitimate and necessary to prepare certain countries for democracy. At that time this idea survived with the support of the Western bloc that was eager to counter the spread of Communism in Asia. Today, half a century later, not much seems to have changed in Pakistan. The Cold War is over, but the fight for democracy continues - the enemy is now terrorism.

Mass public support in the favour of judicial independence and fair elections show that the people of Pakistan are not exactly ill-prepared for democracy. CMAG should not fall prey to the neo-colonial idea of guiding peoples to democracy and endorse it in any way. CMAG should instead act to uphold the Commonwealth's heritage of struggling against injustice and authoritarianism by helping the Pakistani people to realise their democratic aspirations.

The Commonwealth's Harare Declaration enunciates human rights and rule of law as fundamental political values. Latimer House Rules adopted by the Commonwealth Heads of Governments in Abuja in 2003, lays down the independence of the judiciary as a fundamental aspect of democratic governance. These have to be the standards that guide CMAG's future decisions on Pakistan. In accordance with these standards CMAG's most important task has to be to ensure that the independence of the Pakistani judiciary is restored at the earliest. CMAG also has to ensure that foreign policy and real politik considerations do not overpower the democratic promises of these principles.

As 8 January 2008 draws closer, Mr Musharraf's regime in Pakistan is busying itself with the task of sugar-coating a bitter and abusive election process. CMAG has to analyse both the pre-election scenario and the post-election scenario in the light of the Harare Declaration and the Latimer House Rules. Any decisions taken by the CMAG, should be taken according to these principles. In the meanwhile, the remaining Commonwealth mechanisms, including that of the Secretary-General's good offices as well as Commonwealth governments, have an important duty - to help Pakistan's people in this, their time of struggle for democracy.