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Hearing of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs

“Pakistani Elections: Will They Be Free and Fair or Fundamentally Flawed? (Part II)”

2247 Rayburn House Office Building, 29 January 2008, 11:00 AM

The National Security and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee held a second hearing on the Pakistani parliamentary elections currently scheduled for February 18, aiming to assess the legitimacy of the upcoming elections. The hearing featured one witness: **Ambassador Richard A. Boucher**, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

Subcommittee Chairman John F. Tierney (D-MA), stated in his opening remarks that “the **essential goal of free and fair elections in Pakistan seems to be slipping from our grasp.**” He urged the subcommittee, audience, and Ambassador Boucher that “our long-term national security interests are best served by forging bonds with the Pakistani people and not with any, one, particular leader.”

Ambassador Boucher of the State Department told the committee that the “**success of a moderate prosperous Pakistan is in the U.S.’s vital interests.**” While he stated that there has been increased militancy in the northeastern frontier of Pakistan, the **U.S.’s fundamental goals remain unchanged: “successful transition to democracy and civilian rule and a strong moderate center to help provide solid basis to fight extremism.”** Ambassador Boucher stated that there have been seeds of transition in Pakistan where the civil society is becoming stronger, the army has taken on extremist elements, and all the major parties have made the judgment that “its better to be in than out.” The Pakistani government and the U.S. are working closely with the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the European Union to send people to conduct observations of the elections.

Boucher said that the judiciary is “a difficult question in Pakistan.” In response to the Pakistani government’s detentions of members of the Supreme Court, Boucher noted that the U.S. has urged the government to release those in detention/house arrest. With that in mind, Boucher emphasized that any changes towards an independent judiciary would not be addressed until after the election and thus after new leaders have arisen.

Chairman Tierney asked if the U.S. has been aggressive in supporting the investigation of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, to which Boucher responded with stating that the U.S. has been very strong in its efforts in this matter, and that Pakistan has the support of credible organizations like the Scotland Yard. Tierney further asked if the current administration would support the possible United Nations mission to investigate this, and Boucher replied that the administration

has not taken that position, and that rather it is confident in first relying on the local authorities and Scotland Yard. Tierney stated that “this Administration should take a strong stand on this,” and turned to the issue of the judiciary in Pakistan, asking, “**unless Musharraf releases those who are detained and doesn’t elect puppets, how will this election be seen as legitimate?**” Boucher responded with the claim that the first priority is to allow many observers in to Pakistan to witness a clean and transparent election, which will then allow the judiciary to come into play.

Congressman Darrell E. Issa (R – CA) asked about IRI election observers who were told to cease and desist in Pakistan, and the “game of cat and mouse to get visas” that they are experiencing. He expressed concern about “not pushing for the minimum observation of elections.” Boucher responded in agreement that **close observation of elections is an important part of what is currently at stake in Pakistan.**

Congressman Stephen F. Lynch (D – MA) expressed his concern about the level of election rigging that will go on, asking if it is even worthwhile for the U.S. to assist with the upcoming elections. To that, Boucher noted that while we expect some fraud, we “shouldn’t give up on these elections.” He emphasized that it is harder for the Pakistani government to get away with restrictions now, partly due to the explosion of media. Lynch pressed Boucher on the issue of U.S. aid to Pakistan, asking, “**Are we delivering a clear message that Congress will decrease U.S aid if there is not demonstrable change in election?**” Boucher expressed his concern that the U.S. needs to be careful about its assistance, and that “it’s not smart to retract aid.”

Congressman Peter Welch (D – VT) stated that there is a threshold question here to consider: On the one hand it is clear stability in Pakistan is crucial to U.S.’s interest yet there are officials in the Administration like Negroponte who are quoted as saying, “Musharraf is indispensable.” Welch believes that from Musharraf’s actions, it is clear he “has fundamentally comprised the integrity of the electoral process that follows,” and thus he asked Boucher if he agreed with the sentiment that Musharraf is indispensable. When Boucher answered in the affirmative, Welch continued his questioning, asking, “Why is it not the position of the U.S. government as a condition of confidence that the electoral process will be free and fair? Why don’t we require this?”

Congressman John A. Yarmouth (D – KY) asked if there are measures that will be used to determine whether the election will be legitimate or not, and furthermore if Musharraf is rejected overwhelmingly, will the U.S. not be in a difficult position? Yarmouth was concerned that since **it seems that the only measure of fairness in this election is whether Musharraf is rejected, how will the U.S. show that we are not complicit in flawed elections?** Boucher responded with the statement that while some will depend on what the results are, it is more important and relevant to analyze the reports from the people on the ground.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum (D – MN) expressed her concern that since there is **a high potential for violence and instability, similar to what is going on in Kenya right now, she wonders what steps have/should the U.S. & the international community take(n) to deal with a potential breakdown that could affect the region?** “Is there a Plan B?” In response, Boucher stated that “our first plan is Plan A, to make these elections possible. Exactly what we would do in case of widespread violence depends on what happens and where it came from.”

Congressman Christopher Shays (R – CT) couldn't get beyond the fact that Musharraf has dissolved the judiciary and that all that has ensued thereafter has been seen as a farce. He urged Boucher to pinpoint where his fears were misplaced. Boucher responded that while those fears are correct, we will not know the true effects until things come to place after the election.