

A chill ushers in new diplomatic order in Pakistan

By Jane Perlez

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan: If it was not yet clear to Washington that a new political order prevailed here, the three-day visit this week by America's chief diplomat dealing with Pakistan should put any doubt to rest.

The visit by Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte turned out to be series of indignities and chilly, almost hostile, receptions as he bore the brunt of the full range of complaints that Pakistanis now feel freer to air with the end of military rule by Washington's favored ally, President Pervez Musharraf.

Faced with a new democratic lineup that is demanding talks, not force, in the fight against terrorism, Negroponte publicly swallowed a bitter pill at his final news conference on Thursday, acknowledging that there would now be some real differences in strategy between the United States and Pakistan.

He was upbraided at an American Embassy residence during a reception in his honor by lawyers furious that the Bush administration had refused to support the restoration of the dismissed judiciary by Musharraf last year.

Negroponte once told Congress that Musharraf was an "indispensable" ally, but the diplomat was finally forced to set some distance after months of standing stolidly by his friend. Musharraf's future, he said, would be settled by Pakistan's new democratic government.

Perhaps the most startling encounter for the 68-year-old career diplomat was the deliberately pointed question by Farrukh Saleem, executive director of the Center for Research and Security Studies, at the reception Wednesday evening.

"How is Pakistan different to Honduras?" Saleem asked, a query clearly intended to tweak Negroponte about his time as ambassador to Honduras in the 1980s, when he was in charge of the American effort to train and arm a guerrilla force aimed at overthrowing the leftist government in Nicaragua. He was later criticized for meddling in the region and overlooking human rights abuses in pursuit of United States foreign policy goals.

The diplomat demurred, according to Saleem, saying, "You have put me on the spot."

Negroponte had no reply to his next question, either, Saleem said. "I asked him, 'What do you know about our Chief Justice that we don't know?'"

That question was meant to reflect, Saleem recounted afterward, that the Bush administration had refused to recognize the illegality of the firing of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, and that many Pakistanis were angered that the United States had signaled it did not favor the

reinstatement of Chaudhry who, it appeared, was too opposed to Musharraf for Washington's taste.

Negroponete and the Bush administration were tone deaf, Saleem and others said, to the changes in Pakistan, though the message of the tune seemed inescapable.

As they stood on the lawn of a diplomatic residence here in the spring evening, the chairman of the Supreme Court Bar Association, Aitzaz Ahsan, who has led the campaign to restore Chaudhry, picked up the challenge to Negroponete.

First, Ahsan said he told the diplomat, the lawyers were miffed that Negroponete had not included them on his planned round of meetings. When the lawyers asked for an appointment on Tuesday, they were rebuffed by the American Embassy, Ahsan said.

Then, Ahsan, a graduate of Cambridge University in Britain and one of Pakistan's most talented orators, gave Negroponete a 10- to 15-minute discourse on why an independent judiciary was important to fight terrorism.

"I told him that the most effective weapon on the war against terror is a people who have enforceable rights — then they have a stake in the system," Ahsan said of his conversation with Negroponete.

Ahsan said he argued that an independent judiciary was "a middle ground" between the military and religious fanatics.

When Negroponete countered that the new Parliament had pledged to deal with the question of the restoration of the judges within 30 days, Ahsan said he retorted: "I said you can't build a Parliament on the debris of the judiciary."

In contrast to Negroponete, a delegation of congressmen, led by Rep. John F. Tierney, Democrat of Massachusetts, chairman of the National Security Subcommittee of the House Oversight Committee, visited Chaudhry at his home Thursday. They were the first foreigners to see the judge since police barricades were removed Tuesday after four months of house arrest.

"He believes the Parliament has a vote in the next 30 days and the judges will go back to work," Tierney said after talking to Chaudhry. "That's his position, and they're sticking with it."

Although he had little to do with the lawyers or the judiciary, Negroponete, accustomed to seeing a limited circuit of figures, starting with Musharraf, had to widen his list of contacts this time.

He met with the leaders of the two main parties in the new coalition government, Nawaz Sharif, and Asif Ali Zardari. They were both in exile for much of Musharraf's rule. He also met with prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, who was an unknown politician until this week, and the speaker of the National Assembly, Dr. Fehmida Mirza.

Zardari and Sharif have said they want to change the military approach of Musharraf toward the extremists, and work toward talks.

At a news conference in Karachi before leaving, Negroponte said Washington could work with the new government, but drew the line at negotiations with extremists. "Security measures are obviously necessary when one is dealing with irreconcilable elements who want to destroy our very way of life," he said. "I don't see how you can talk with those kinds of people."

There was some hope, however, he said, of working with "reconcilable elements" who "can be persuaded to participate in the democratic political process."

In a marked change of tone from the Musharraf era, the new prime minister, Gilani, said after meeting Negroponte on Wednesday that Parliament was now the supreme decision-making body. Pakistan supported its long alliance with the United States, but the fight against terrorism would be discussed in the legislature, he said.

Negroponte's visit was generally poorly received. Coming in the week that the government was still being formed — a cabinet is yet to be announced — it was widely interpreted as an act of interference, a last effort to prop up a vastly weakened Musharraf. One television commentator called the visit "crude diplomacy."

Others said that Negroponte did not understand that Musharraf was a disappearing figure, isolated and with little power. One of his last loyal aides, Attorney General Malik Mohammad Qayyum resigned Thursday.

By the end of his trip, Negroponte indicated that perhaps Musharraf's usefulness for Washington had diminished. The future of Musharraf was up to the Pakistanis. "Any debate or any disposition as regards his status will have to be addressed by the internal Pakistani political process," he said.

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