



Speech by

Rachel Nolan

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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PARLIAMENTARY AMNESTY GROUP: INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ACTION, PAKISTAN

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (6.52 pm): It is my privilege to speak in support of this motion. I want to begin by commending the member for Murrumba for establishing this convention whereby this parliament ends every year with a motion devoted to the higher principles of human rights and democracy. I think that is an extremely fitting note on which to finish what are always constructive but sometimes difficult years. I think that those values are important and I think that the member for Murrumba's continuing role, in some ways as the conscience of this place, should be acknowledged and commended by all of us.

I am pleased to rise to speak in support of the member's motion, which condemns the Pakistan military regime's installation of emergency rule, the suspension of its constitution and the continued denial of the human rights of the citizens of Pakistan. The average Australian would view with dismay the news that comes daily from that country. As the member for Mudgeeraba has outlined, they see scenes of murder, maiming and the unlawful detention of citizens such as Imran Khan. Why? For their efforts to restore democracy to their country through their calls for a free and lawful election process—hardly too much to ask.

The installation of emergency rule by Pakistan's army chief, President Pervez Musharraf, in response to what is clearly a move from the pro-democratic forces to end the military—and now clearly unenforced by the court—rule by the general is an affront to all Australians and the value of democracy itself. The arrest of pro-democracy activists and opposition leaders, such as the Sharif brothers and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, along with hundreds of judges and lawyers under the guise of terrorism activities is clearly nothing more than a duplicitous attempt by the military regime to silence the voices of Pakistan's people.

Here in Australia there has been substantial debate about the use of anti-terrorism laws. Indeed, we have seen the appalling abuse of those laws—not just incompetently but, I fear, with genuine ill will in the Haneef case. What is happening in Pakistan today with the clear abuse of its anti-terrorism laws gives us pause to think about why we should oppose very strongly and passionately that slippery slope, as many of us here did in the Haneef case.

Quite rightly, a country such as Pakistan cannot take its place among the world's decision makers while it continues to deny its citizens the basic right of democracy. We understand that, in turn, denying those people democracy and the rule of law has genuine effects on the people of that country. For instance, corruption affects the distribution of income in the country. It leaves women and children unable to take the opportunities that a free and democratic society should provide, such as educational opportunities and other opportunities in life.

Pakistan is an important player in the world with respect to its geographical proximity to countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, China and India—countries that share borders with Pakistan. Pakistan is the second largest Muslim country in the world. It has the sixth largest population. It is experiencing a period of intensive economic growth and it is a rapidly developing nation.

The health of Pakistan's democratic process is fundamental to ensuring Pakistan's place as a genuine player in world events. We need Pakistan to show that it has an accountable and democratically elected and transparent government so that it can, with confidence and with the support of countries such as Australia, the US and Britain, work to ensure that terrorists are unable to take refuge in the border communities between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Pakistan as a country is critical in the fight against terrorism, but the path away from terrorism is the path to democracy. That Pakistan should at this critical time be moving away from democracy and to a more fundamentalist and anti-democratic regime genuinely threatens not only the human rights of the citizens of Pakistan but also the security of the world. In that sense, this motion is important—not just for the compassion that we hold for the people of Pakistan but for the principle of democracy there and in the world broadly. With that, I sincerely endorse this motion and commend it to the House.