

Pakistan's ruling coalition on brink of collapse

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Just one week after the resignation of military strongman Pervez Musharraf as president, Pakistan's ruling coalition is on the point of breaking down. The Pakistan Muslim League-Narwas (PML-N) of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is threatening to quit the alliance today unless the government reinstates 57 high court judges sacked last year by Musharraf.

However, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)—the largest coalition partner—has given no indication that it will bow to the PML-N's demands, which also include a reduction in presidential powers and a one-month delay in the choosing of a new president. On Friday, the PPP announced that Asif Ali Zardari, the husband of assassinated PPP leader Benazir Bhutto, would be the party's presidential candidate. The national assembly and four provincial assemblies are due to come together on September 6 to select the next president.

The coalition was formed in March after the PPP and PML-N inflicted a humiliating defeat on Musharraf's party—the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q)—in national elections in February. As part of the deal, Zardari promised to reinstate the judges within 30 days, but repeatedly stalled on the issue as well as on the removal of Musharraf as president. The government only moved to impeach the president in early August when Sharif threatened to pull out of the coalition. The PML-N had already withdrawn from the cabinet in May.

Since Musharraf resigned last Monday, the feuding between the PPP and PML-N has become increasingly bitter. Sharif has accused Zardari of renegeing on an agreement to reinstate the judges within 24 hours of Musharraf's removal. A meeting of the two parties last Wednesday broke up without any resolution. Sharif set a deadline of Friday, then revised it to Monday, for the reinstatement of the judges.

Musharraf sacked the judges, including chief justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, last November when they refused to endorse his imposition of de facto martial law. After he was initially suspended earlier last year, Chaudhry became the focus of protests by the country's lawyers and their supporters, demanding his reinstatement and the establishment of basic democratic rights and the rule of law.

As many commentators have noted, Zardari may well be concerned that Chaudhry could revive corruption charges against him. Musharraf granted Zardari and his wife Benazir

Bhutto immunity from prosecution when they returned to Pakistan last year. The move was part of a deal put together behind the scenes with the assistance of the Bush administration to pave the way for elections and a PPP-led government that would work with the widely unpopular President Musharraf.

Zardari has undoubtedly been involved in various corrupt dealings. During his wife's term as prime minister, he became known as "Mr 10 percent" for demanding kickbacks from government contracts and payoffs from foreign companies. Pakistani investigators have alleged that Zardari amassed a fortune of more than \$100 million in bank deposits and properties abroad.

Zardari, however, is hardly the only prominent Pakistani political figure to be involved in corruption. Before his ousting in the 1999 military coup by Musharraf, Sharif and his government were widely accused of economic mismanagement and dishonesty. Zardari's foot dragging on Chaudhry must reflect deeper concerns about the reinstatement of a chief justice who has demonstrated a modicum of independence in a country where the judiciary is notorious for its subservience to the government of the day.

The PPP-led government is under considerable pressure from Washington and the Pakistani army to grant some form of amnesty for Musharraf. The PML-N has indicated, however, that it wants Musharraf to be held to account for his crimes and constitutional breaches. There is no guarantee that Chaudhry would simply accept any deal worked out with Musharraf, thus cutting across the government's relationships with the US and the military hierarchy.

More fundamentally, the failure to reinstate the judges is a warning of the anti-democratic methods that the PPP will use in dealing with any opposition to its policies. The government is confronting a deepening economic crisis, to which it has no solution, and is under continuing pressure from Washington to step up the military operations against anti-US insurgents operating in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

To date, Musharraf has been the focus of widespread public hostility over deteriorating living standards and what is emerging as a fully fledged civil war in the border regions. In the wake of his resignation, however, the PPP will soon

become the target of protests and political opposition. Not only has the government failed to reinstate the sacked judges, but it has also made no move to revise the constitutional charges made by Musharraf.

Under the 17th amendment to the constitution, Musharraf gave himself extensive powers as president, such as to sack the prime minister and dismiss the elected parliament. The president can also make key appointments, including the army chief. While Sharif is demanding that the 17th amendment be expunged, the PPP has yet to indicate whether it will support such a step.

At the same time, no credibility should be given to the democratic posturing of Sharif and his PML-N, a party of businessmen and landlords that was historically patronised by the military. Musharraf's ousting of Sharif in 1999 produced no outbursts of public indignation, in part because the rival PPP tacitly supported the move, but also because Sharif's government was deeply unpopular.

Sharif is demanding the reinstatement of the sacked judges and constitutional changes as a means of bolstering the electoral position of his PML-N. According to an opinion poll conducted by the International Republic Institute, which is linked to the Republican Party in the US, 83 percent of Pakistanis want the old Supreme Court reinstated. A large majority also supported the PML-N's demands for Musharraf to be removed.

No doubt there are also concerns in Pakistani ruling circles that the failure to make at least these cosmetic changes will lead to a political eruption that will make far more extensive social and political demands. Huge increases in food and fuel prices have led to inflation running at more than 25 percent. The Pakistani rupee has fallen by around 25 percent against the US dollar and foreign investment is dropping.

Housewife Ayesha Amir voiced a common sentiment to the *Al Jazeera* web site: "It doesn't matter who runs this country, they are all the same. They are members of the political elite and they do not represent the working class. It will just be a change of face, but Pakistan won't see any benefits. It is the poorer people of society who have to deal with inflation". Anger will only grow as the Pakistani military intensifies its operations in the border areas. An estimated 300,000 people have fled from recent fighting and the indiscriminate use of air attacks that have killed hundreds of civilians. Islamist militias have responded with a series of bombings. On Thursday, two suicide bombers killed more than 70 people outside the country's main defence industry complex near Islamabad. On Saturday, troops claimed to have killed 35 militants after a suicide car bomb killed 8 policemen in the Swat Valley.

The political instability in Pakistan is producing deep concern in Washington, which backed the military strongman Musharraf to the hilt as the best vehicle for pursuing its phony "war on terrorism". An article in the *New York Times* commented that "the political sniping [between the PPP and

PML-N] has heightened jitters among American officials that no one is actually in charge as the Taliban insurgency gains steam".

The newspaper also raised questions about the reliability of the Pakistani military chief, declaring: "[D]oubts are growing among American officials over the level of cooperation they can expect from the new army chief, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, a former head of intelligence who took over the post from Mr. Musharraf last November." The article speculated that the army was more interested in consolidating its own position after Musharraf's departure than carrying out US demands to intensify the war against anti-US insurgents.

After reviewing the pros and cons of the main political figures—Zardari, Sharif and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani—the *Times* concluded that Zardari may well end up holding the presidency and wielding the considerable constitutional powers previously held by Musharraf. "The coalition has pledged to abolish that provision [the 17th amendment]," the article stated. "But if Mr Zardari manages to keep that power, the United States could be back to its one-stop shopping window, though with a different character behind the counter."

Other commentators are holding up Sharif as a possible ally for the US. *Time* magazine, for instance, noted that he was not an "extremist", adding: "If the Bush Administration invests some serious diplomatic energy on courting him—even half of the effort it has spent over the past year on trying to save Musharraf from humiliation—it can build a working relationship with Nawaz."

Whatever the tactical differences, it is clear that Washington is looking for a new political strongman, not unlike Musharraf, who will carry out its demands, particularly in suppressing insurgent activity on the Afghan-Pakistan border, and ruthlessly deal with any political opposition that such methods will inevitably generate.



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