

Pakistan military ousts prime minister

Keith Jones
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Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has been ousted from power in a military coup.

In a terse announcement Tuesday evening, Pakistan Television said Sharif and his Muslim League government had been dismissed and that General Pervez Musharraf would address the nation shortly.

The coup came in response to Sharif's announcement earlier on Tuesday that Musharraf had been "retired ... with immediate effect" as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and head of the Pakistani army. However, the speed with which the Pakistani military moved suggests the ouster of Sharif may have been in the planning for some time. Three weeks ago, Washington issued a statement saying the US would oppose the removal of Sharif's two-and-a-half year-old government by "extra constitutional" means.

Shortly after Musharraf's firing was announced, army troops moved through Islamabad, seizing government buildings and state-run television and radio stations and surrounding the homes of Sharif and other cabinet ministers. According to a military spokesman, the Prime Minister and his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, the chief minister of the Punjab, Pakistan's largest state, are now in "protective custody."

Musharraf, who was in Sri Lanka when Sharif moved against him, arrived Thursday afternoon at a Karachi International Airport already under military occupation, then left for a nearby garrison accompanied by senior military officers.

India has responded to the political crisis of its neighbor and longtime foe, by placing all three of its military forces on high alert.

Reports of serious differences between Sharif and Musharraf have been rife for months, particularly over the Pakistani-organized military incursion in the Kargil-Dass-Batalik region of Indian-held Kashmir. The Pakistani military did comply with the orders for withdrawal from Indian Kashmir that Sharif issued

following a July 4 meeting with US President Clinton, but the pull back was widely criticized by Sharif's political opponents and Musharraf was rumored to be opposed. In September, a close associate of Sharif claimed Pakistan's civilian authorities had learned of the Kargil operation only in late April, months after the Pakistani-organized force had begun infiltrating across the Line of Control that separates Indian and Pakistani-held Kashmir.

Whoever was ultimately responsible for initiating the Kargil operation, there is no question it ended in a geopolitical defeat for Pakistan. Not only were the Pakistani forces compelled to withdraw, but Pakistan failed to draw the US into mediating the Kashmir dispute. Instead the US, for decades a close ally of Pakistan, threw its support behind India in the Kargil conflict and has indicated its eagerness to forge a strategic partnership with New Delhi.

There also are reports of differences within Pakistan's ruling elite over Pakistan's relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In recent weeks, undoubtedly due to pressure from Washington, Sharif had taken his distance from the Taliban, even accusing Kabul of fomenting sectarian violence within Pakistan. And there was much adverse commentary in Pakistani political circles over Sharif's sending a letter of congratulations to Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee on his re-election last week. Vajpayee's first government placed considerable military and economic pressure on Pakistan with its May 1998 nuclear tests and its subsequent decision to equip India's military with nuclear weapons.

The US's September 20 statement warning against "extra-constitutional change" in Pakistan reportedly heightened tensions between Sharif and the military leadership. In an apparent bid to mend fences with Musharraf, Sharif recently announced Musharraf's tenure as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs would be

extended to October 2001.

Benazir Butto, the former Prime Minister and head of the largest opposition party, the Pakistan People's Party, has indicated support for the military's action. She denied the coup was triggered by differences over Kashmir and blamed it instead on Sharif's attempts to monopolize power. "He has sought to dismantle democracy, he has been sacking everyone — the chief justice, the president — attacked the press, the foreign investors, the opposition_

"I don't think the army has any choice but to revert to civilian rule because Pakistan is financially bankrupt, we've got a tense situation with India and we cannot afford an internal front."

Pakistan is currently in the middle of implementing an unpopular IMF restructuring plan.

For about half of Pakistan's 52 years of independence, the military has directly ruled the country.

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