Court verdict against former Pakistan prime minister threatens to split ruling coalition

K. Ratnayake
1 July 2008

A Pakistani high court ruling last week, barring former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from contesting a by-election, has widened the rift inside the ruling coalition, which is teetering on the brink of collapse.

Sharif is the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML (N)], a main partner in the ruling coalition led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The by-election for a seat in Lahore, capital of the Punjab, was scheduled for last Thursday.

The Lahore high court delivered the politically charged ruling on June 23, in a case filed by Sharif's rival candidate from the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid), or PML (Q). The PML (Q) was set up by the former military dictator and current president, Pervez Musharraf, a key ally of the US Bush administration. The judge who issued the ruling was among the pliant higher court judges appointed by Musharraf.

The PML (N) immediately denounced the court verdict as politically motivated. Party leader Ashan Iqbal told *Geo Television* that "They [the courts] were implementing Musharraf's agenda."

Musharraf seized power in a military coup in October 1999, when he was Pakistan's army chief, ousting Sharif from the post of prime minister. Eight years later, in November 2007, Musharraf reluctantly abandoned his army general post amid a deepening political crisis, limiting himself to the civilian position of president. Sharif is calling for the impeachment and trial of Musharraf.

Sharif is also pressing for the reinstatement of fired Pakistani high court judges, including Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, a former Musharraf yes-man who subsequently fell out with the latter. Musharraf sacked the judges last November 3, shortly after imposing a state of emergency, fearing they would invalidate his unconstitutional second term as president. Musharraf had to back down, lifting the state of emergency under US pressure and amid the growing discontent of the masses. But the judiciary is still packed with judges who support Musharraf.

In last February's general elections, the Supreme Court barred Sharif from running, citing his conviction on trumped-up charges dating from the 1999 coup. The new military government at the time accused Sharif of planning to kidnap Musharraf while returning from Sri Lanka, leveled criminal charges against him and had him convicted. Musharraf launched these charges to justify his coup, claiming he was forced to oust Sharif.

After Musharraf's party suffered a humiliating defeat in the February elections, the PPP and PML (N) formed a governmental election commission, which allowed Sharif to contest the Lahore by-election.

But the PML (Q) candidate resurrected the earlier conviction, filing a case against Sharif to disqualify him. The latter's brother, Shahbaz Sharif, was elected in the February Punjab state assembly elections and sworn in as the chief minister. The PML (Q) has also petitioned against him in the Lahore high courts; that verdict is pending.

The recent Lahore court decision has sharpened the differences between the PPP and the PML (N). *The Post* wrote on Saturday that PML (N) leaders are accusing the PPP of involvement in the decision, while the PPP for its part is attacking a "conspiracy by the forces of dictatorship [meaning Musharraf] to destabilise the coalition government."

Right after winning three of five assembly seats in Thursday's by-elections, Sharif said he would push for the reinstatement of the judges. The PML (N) refused to appeal to the Supreme Court against the ruling, saying that it does not recognize the judges appointed by Musharraf.

Sharif's opposition to Musharraf and his pressure to restore the judges are not based on sympathy for the democratic rights of the masses or opposition to US imperialism, but rather on hopes of exploiting rising discontent for his own political ends.

The PML (N) is trying to distance itself from the PPP, the leading ruling coalition partner, which is currently discrediting itself by hobnobbing with Musharraf and acquiescing to US influence. On May 12, PML (N) cabinet ministers resigned to show opposition to the PPP's reluctance to reinstate the sacked judges.

Sharif, from a wealthy industrial family in Punjab, entered the political limelight in the early 1980s as a crony of then-military dictator Zia ul Huq. He supports the Bush administration's "war on terror," but, to appease Islamic groups, argues that Pakistan's fight against terrorism is different.

The PPP-led government of Prime Minister Yousuf RazaGilani appealed the court ruling against Sharif, apparently

to fend off criticism that the PPP had a hand in the Lahore decision. The Supreme Court postponed the by-election and scheduled a hearing on the case for Monday. It is not clear when the court will render its verdict.

PPP leader Asif Zardari is on record as saying that the government does not have a large enough majority in the assembly to impeach Musharraf. According to the constitution introduced by Musharraf, a two-thirds vote of assembly members is needed to impeach the president. The PPP is not interested in reinstating the sacked judges, asserting they were hostile to Zardari and worked against him and the late PPP leader, Benazir Bhutto.

But these are not the real reasons for the reluctance of Zardari's party on both matters. The Bush administration is pressing the PPP to work with Musharraf and opposes the reinstatement of the Supreme Court judges, out of fear they might rule that Musharraf's re-election was unconstitutional.

In the case of the sacked judges, Zardari is trying to reach a compromise with the PML (N). The government included a clause in the budget for the current fiscal year passed in early June, proposing to expand the number of judges to 39 from the current 16. Zardari's formula includes keeping the Musharraf appointees. The PML (N) voted for the budget, but later said it did not support increasing the number of judges.

Musharraf has been one of Washington's key allies in its so-called war on terror. In 2001 he supported and assisted in the US-led invasion of Afghanistan to oust the Taliban government. He has also helped American-led NATO forces in Afghanistan suppress tribal communities along the Pakistan border with that country and Taliban groups operating in those areas.

The US has opposed the PPP-led Islamabad government's attempts during the last two months to arrange cease-fire pacts with Pakistani Taliban groups in tribal areas. Facing a mounting crisis in Afghanistan, Washington and Kabul are pressuring Islamabad to launch a crackdown. The Gilani government Saturday ordered Pakistan military operations in the tribal areas, which have recently seen major combat operations. Even before the current offensive, Pakistan had 90,000 troops deployed along the border.

This offensive will only intensify the political crisis in Islamabad, deepening opposition against the Gilani government, Musharraf and US imperialism. The results of a recent survey by a Washington-based think tank, the New America Foundation, reveal the politically explosive conditions there.

According to this opinion poll, Sharif has emerged as the most popular politician with 86 percent of those surveyed approving him. His approval rating was 74 percent in January, one month before the election and last August it was 57 percent. In contrast, PPP leader Asif Zardari received the approval of only 13 percent of those surveyed.

If national elections were held now the PML (N) would get

42 percent of the vote, according to the poll calculations. On the other hand, the PPP—which came in first place in the February elections and leads the government—would sink to 32 percent. Eighty percent of those polled do not believe the country is heading in the right direction.

Sharif is receiving high approval ratings due to popular confusion over his posturing as a democrat. These results are more than anything a measure of the mass indignation against Musharraf and the US and the developing discontent against the PPP-led coalition.

The survey also showed that people are opposed to a military regime. Last August, 45 percent were in favor of the military playing a leading role in economic and political affairs. This number had sunk to 28 percent by June. Sixty-four percent are opposed to military rule.

When asked who posed the greatest threat to Pakistan, 44 percent thought it was the US—far ahead of the second most often cited country, India, which was named by 14 percent. Threats from Al Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban represented only a negligible 6, 4 and 8 percent respectively, according to the poll.

Fifty percent of Pakistanis favour negotiation with Al Qaeda and less that 30 percent favor military action. Likewise, 58 percent want discussion with the Pakistani Taliban, while only 19 percent approve of military action.

Even before the June 6 US air strike on tribal areas, which killed 11 Pakistan soldiers, only 12 percent supported unilateral military action against Al Qaeda. The survey added: "Three quarters of Pakistanis say that the real purpose of the US-led war on terror is to weaken the Muslim world and dominate Pakistan." When asked who was "most responsible for the violence that is occurring in Pakistan today, 52 percent say it is US—only 8 percent blame Al Qaeda."

Attacks on living and social conditions are increasing the anger of wide layers of the population. According to the survey, "the high cost of food and fuel is hitting ordinary Pakistanis hard. An overwhelming 86 percent of Pakistanis have faced increasing difficulty in obtaining flour for their daily food consumption—primarily because of high prices."

Many Pakistani people believe that the Islamabad government is responsible for their worsening living conditions. Eighty-one percent have been affected by high oil prices. They believe the Pakistani government is most responsible for the hike in fuel prices—and after that, the American and other Western oil companies.