

Pakistan's ruling coalition splits amid continuing political uncertainty

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Pakistan's governing coalition split on Monday when its second largest partner, the Pakistan Muslim League-Narwas (PML-N), withdrew its support, citing the failure of the leading party, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), to honour its promises. The rupture will deepen the country's political instability after former military strongman Pervez Musharraf resigned his post on August 18 rather than face impeachment.

PML-N leader Narwas Sharif told a press conference: "We have taken this decision after we failed to find any ray of hope and none of the commitments made to us were fulfilled. This situation forced us to withdraw our support." The PPP and PML-N formed the coalition in March after decisively defeating Musharraf's party in national elections in February.

The immediate issue was the refusal of the PPP to reinstate 57 high court judges sacked by Musharraf last November when he imposed emergency rule. On Monday, Sharif made public an accord between the PML-N and PPP signed on August 7 that agreed to restore all judges to their positions on the day after Musharraf was impeached or resigned. The PML-N had given the PPP until Monday to carry out the agreement.

The August 7 accord also specified that the two parties would agree on a common candidate for the presidency. Last Friday, the PPP unilaterally announced that its party leader Asif Al Zardari, the husband of assassinated PPP head Benazir Bhutto, would be its candidate. The national assembly and provincial assemblies are due to be convened on September 6 to choose the president.

Sharif has now announced the PML-N's own candidate—former chief justice Saeed uz Saman Siddiqui, who resigned his post following Musharraf's military coup in 1999 that ousted Sharif as prime minister. The PML-N has called for a delay in the selection of the next president and is demanding the removal of the 17th amendment to the constitution inserted by Musharraf in 2003. The amendment gives sweeping powers to the president, including the right to sack the prime minister and to dissolve the national assembly.

In comments on Saturday, Zardari dismissed the PML-N's complaints about broken promises, declaring that his agreements with Sharif were "not holy like the Koran". He was more conciliatory on Monday, saying: "We want to move together and solve the problems". Zardari appealed for Sharif

to return to the coalition, but gave no indication that he was prepared to meet any of the PML's demands.

The PPP calculates that it can retain a majority in the national assembly and install Zardari as president even without the support of the PML-N. It has the backing of two smaller coalition partners—the Awami National Party (ANP) based in North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal (JUIF). The Mattihida Quami Movement (MQM), based among Muslims who fled India after the 1947 partition, has also declared its support for Zardari as president.

Zardari's opposition to the reinstatement of chief justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry stems in part from his concern that Chaudhry could overturn the National Reconciliation Order signed by Musharraf last October. The measure, which granted immunity to Zardari and his wife Benazir Bhutto over corruption charges, was part of a deal arranged by the Bush administration to help prop up Musharraf's faltering regime.

More fundamentally, however, the PPP's refusal to take basic steps to overturn the anti-democratic measures taken under Musharraf is a sharp warning that the government will resort to similar means. It already confronts rising popular opposition over its support for the US "war on terrorism" and the crackdown by the Pakistani military currently underway in the tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan. It is also facing growing hostility over its failure to deal with rapidly rising prices and deteriorating living standards.

Zardari has indicated his continuing support for the US occupation of Afghanistan. He told the BBC on Saturday that "the world is losing the war [on terror]," adding: "I think at the moment they definitely have the upper hand". His comments are designed to cement relations with Washington, on which Pakistan relies heavily for financial and military aid.

Zardari also called for the banning of the Tehrik I Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—the so-called Pakistani Taliban—which has been blamed for attacks against US and NATO forces inside Afghanistan and suicide bombings inside Pakistan. On Monday, the government outlawed the TTP and froze its bank accounts and assets.

Publicly the US has supported the PPP-led government and maintained the charade of "non-interference" in Pakistan's internal affairs. US State Department spokesman Robert Wood

told reporters on Monday that the US did not “anticipate” that Sharif’s decision to split from the ruling coalition “will have any impact on our joint efforts to combat extremism”.

Behind the scenes, however, there are deep concerns in Washington that the departure of Musharraf, who the Bush administration backed to the hilt, will open up a new period of political instability. Confronting a rising insurgency in Afghanistan, the US and NATO are insisting that Pakistan crush armed Islamist groups in the border areas and have been highly critical of the government’s equivocal steps so far.

There appear to be some doubts in ruling circles in the US and Europe that Zardari is up to the task. An odd article appeared in yesterday’s *New York Times* highlighting the fact that the US ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, had been hauled into line by senior State Department officials for “unauthorised contacts” with Zardari. Apparently Khalilzad had been in regular contact with the PPP leader to offer “advice and help” and had planned to meet with Zardari privately in Dubai next week.

Ostensibly the reason for rapping Khalilzad over the knuckles was that he was compromising Washington’s “neutral” stance on Pakistan’s political affairs. As the saying goes, there is the official reason, then there is the real reason. For well over a year, US officials have been intimately involved in behind-the-scenes political manipulation aimed at stabilising the Musharraf regime—not to speak more broadly of decades of interference in Pakistani affairs. If Khalilzad has been told to back away from Zardari, it can only be that Washington is concerned about his viability and wants to maintain its distance.

Another story appeared on the front page of the *Financial Times* on Tuesday entitled “Doubts cast on Zardari’s state of mental health”. The newspaper leaked medical reports that had been tabled by Zardari’s lawyers in British court proceedings to justify postponing a corruption case against him. The reports claimed that Zardari had suffered from a range of serious illnesses ranging from dementia to depression and post-traumatic stress. The only obvious reason for publicising these documents now is to compromise Zardari’s bid for the presidency.

By thrusting himself forward as a champion of democratic rights, Sharif is attempting to capitalise on the growing opposition to the PPP-led government. At the same time, he has been careful to offer reassurances to the Pakistani elite and to the major powers that he would protect their interests. He declared on Monday that his party would play a “constructive and positive role” in opposition and would not seek to destabilise the government.

Sharif has been extensively interviewed in the international media. He told the *Boston Globe* on August 24 that he was not averse to the “war on terrorism”. He added: “I have nothing against the Americans and I know they have their own fears, but any policy that is devised to deal with these issues should not be perceived as an American issue. Without [the]

ownership of the [Pakistani] people, no strategy will work”.

Time magazine declared that Sharif was not an extremist and could be a reliable US ally. “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,” it suggested.

Sharif is certainly no democrat. He was a protégé of former military dictator Zia ul Haq and became chief minister of the Punjab province in 1985. He was appointed to the same post by Zia in 1988 when the Punjab assembly was dissolved. In 1997, during his tenure as prime minister, Sharif sent his thugs to attack the court where a corruption case was being heard against him. He forced the then chief justice to vacate his post and gagged the press from criticising his actions. When Musharraf’s coup removed Sharif from office in 1999, there was no groundswell of popular opposition.

In Pakistan, there is consternation in the ruling elite over the collapse of the PPP-PML-N coalition. An editorial in the *Dawn* criticised Zardari over his failure to overturn Musharraf’s anti-democratic measures, declaring: “The man who is certain to be the next president is now in a morally indefensible position. The issue, however, is not who is to blame more but the consequences of the grand coalition’s break-up.”

The editorial concluded: “The implications for the coalition’s break-up are immense. The people wanted an end to the crisis ... but the coalition’s collapse has disappointed them, for they see further uncertainty and a blurring of the national horizon. More frighteningly, besides a worsening of the economic situation, the political instability could encourage the Taliban to step up their war on Pakistan”.

The *News* editorial expressed similar sentiments: “While only the passage of time ... will tell which leader is to blame more, one thing is for sure: neither will gain much in this process and that the biggest losers will be democracy, political stability and perhaps even civilian rule.”

The perplexity of these editorials simply underscores the complete incapacity of any section of the ruling elite to meet the aspirations of working people for basic democratic rights and decent living standards. Just over a week after one military strongman has been forced to resign, the press is already speculating that “civilian rule” may be short-lived.



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