# PPP leader to be sworn in as new Pakistani president

## Growing anger

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Asif Al Zardari, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) co-chairman and widower of former PPP leader Benazir Bhutto, will be sworn in today as Pakistani president after being elected to the post on Saturday. He comes to office amid deepening political turmoil, fuelled by escalating US attacks on Islamic militants in Pakistan's border areas with Afghanistan and a deteriorating economy.

Zardari's election, which was not by popular vote but in a joint sitting of the two houses of federal parliament and the four provincial assemblies, was a forgone conclusion. He received 481, or more than two thirds, of the 702 votes as compared to 151 for his closest rival, Saeeduz Zaman Siddiqui, nominated by the Pakistan Muslim League-Narwaz (PML-N) and 43 for Mushahid Hussain of the Pakistani Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q).

The vote followed the resignation of former military strongman Pervez Musharraf from the presidency on August 18. The PPP-led government of Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani had been about to commence impeachment proceedings against Musharraf over constitutional abuses, corruption and economic mismanagement. The PPP and PML-N won a decisive majority in national elections in February, reducing the PML-Q, aligned with Musharraf, to a small parliamentary rump.

After winning the presidency, Zardari pledged that parliament would be sovereign. "This president shall be subservient to the parliament," he declared. Insisting that he would be responsive to popular sentiment, Zardari added: "The man in uniform never performs but democracy talks and everybody hears."

However, for all his rhetoric about democracy, Zardari made no moves before the election to strip the presidency of the extraordinary powers that Musharraf wrote into the constitution following his army coup in 1999. Currently the president can dismiss the government, dissolve parliament and appoint top state officials, including the powerful head of the army. Reflecting widely-held scepticism that Zardari will relinquish these powers, an editorial in *Dawn* on Sunday expressed the hope that "his commitment to make himself a titular head of state will not waver".

Zardari is from a wealthy landlord family in the southern province of Sindh. His political standing stems from his marriage to Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the PPP's founder. He was arrested twice following the dissolution of Bhutto's two governments and served a total of more than 11 years in jail even though he was not convicted on charges of corruption and murder. While he insists that the charges were politically motivated, Zardari earned the nickname of "Mr Ten Percent" during Bhutto's terms in office because of widespread allegations that he received kickbacks for government contracts.

Zardari was released and allowed to go abroad in 2004 as part of Musharraf's manoeuvres to get PPP backing for his rule. He returned to Pakistan with Bhutto last November being offered immunity from corruption charges as part of a deal arranged by Washington to keep Musharraf as president while allowing Bhutto to become prime minister. When Bhutto was assassinated last December, Zardari assumed the role of party co-chairman along with his son Bilawal Bhutto.

The Bush administration, along with other major powers, immediately congratulated Zardari. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared: "I was impressed by some of the things that he said about the challenges that Pakistan faces, about the centrality of fighting terrorism, and about the fact that the terrorism fight is Pakistan's fight and also his very strong words of friendship and alliance with the United States."

Rice's comments highlight a major dilemma confronting Zardari. Like Musharraf, the PPP-led government, which is heavily dependent on US political and economic support, is under considerable pressure from Washington to intensify military operations against Islamist militia in areas bordering Afghanistan. Large sections of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which are bases of operations for anti-occupation insurgents inside Afghanistan, are already in a state of virtual civil war.

At the same time, there is widespread opposition inside Pakistan to the continuing US-occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, to US military incursions into Pakistan and to the Pakistani military offensives in the FATA region. An opinion

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poll conducted in May by the US organisation Terror Free Tomorrow found that 74 percent of Pakistanis opposed US military action against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The Awami National Party, which holds power in the volatile North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and backed Zardari for the presidency, has repeatedly called for ceasefires with various Islamist and tribal militias in the FATA.

Tensions in Pakistan have been greatly heightened by US attacks inside Pakistani territory over the past week. Last week US Special Forces carried out the first publicly acknowledged ground operation in Pakistan, killing up to 20 people, including women and children, in a South Waziristan village. The raid has been followed by three separate missile strikes by unmanned Predator drones inside Pakistan.

In the latest incident yesterday, the US fired as many as five missiles into a compound in North Waziristan, killing at least 14 people and injuring many others. The *Dawn* reported that the dead included three Taliban militants and a number of civilians, including two children. The target appears to have been a house and religious school founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani. His son Sirajuddin Haqqani is blamed by the US for attacks inside Afghanistan, including an attempt on the life of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

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The attacks have provoked angry opposition. Last week the Pakistani parliament passed a resolution condemning the US ground assault and warning of "retaliation with full force". While later denied by the government, Defence Minister Ahmed Mukhtar told the press on Sunday that NATO's supply lines through Pakistan into Afghanistan had been halted following US attacks on Pakistani territory.

On Saturday, the day of the presidential election, a suicide bomber rammed a car packed with explosives into a security checkpoint outside Peshawar, the provincial capital of NWFP, killing at least 12 people and injuring 50. The suicide bombing is the latest in a series of similar attacks against Pakistani officials and security forces.

While compelled by public opinion to be somewhat critical of US attacks, Zardari has repeatedly made clear his support for Washington's fraudulent "war on terrorism". On Saturday, he again condemned "terrorism" and warned that if suicide bombers continued their activities his government would use its might to "eliminate" them. The PPP-led government has made a point of inviting Afghan President Karzai to today's formal swearing-in ceremony. Karzai was bitterly critical of Musharraf for failing to crush Islamist groups operating in the FATA region and accused Pakistani military intelligence of involvement in insurgent attacks inside Afghanistan.

The Bush administration appears to be carrying out a two-track policy toward Zardari and the PPP-led government. Washington no doubt welcomes the installation of a man in the presidency with whom it can wheel and deal. At the same time, the US is escalating its attacks in the border areas, making clear it will extend the war into Pakistan if Islamabad fails to deal with Islamist militants.

Confronting a deepening economic crisis, the Pakistani government can ill-afford to lose US financial support. Hard hit by rising world oil and food prices, the country is facing a looming balance of payments crunch. Foreign currency reserves stood at $9.1 billion in August, down from $15.5 billion last December—an average decline of nearly $1 billion per month. During 2007-08, the oil bill surged from $7 billion to $11 billion a year.

The economy, which had been growing at an annual rate of 7 percent, is now slowing. The rupee has plunged in value by 40 percent and the share index has fallen by more than 30 percent over the past eight months. Earlier this year, the government was forced to take emergency action to stem the decline of share prices after the eruption of protests outside the Karachi stock exchange.

According to yesterday's *Dawn*, the government plans to impose austerity measures to slash fuel consumption. The budget deficit has mushroomed to 7.7 percent of GDP, against the target figure of 4.2 percent. The escalating war in the FATA region is a major contributing factor, with military spending consuming more than 15 percent of total government expenditure.

Rising food and fuel prices and deteriorating living standards are further inflaming anti-government sentiment and hostility to the entire political establishment. The inflation rate is hovering at around 25 percent. The United Nations Food Program estimated in April that up to half of the 168 million Pakistanis were struggling to afford food. The alienation felt by ordinary working people was expressed in a recent poll by Gallup Pakistan, in which 44 percent of respondents declared that they did not support any of the presidential candidates. The approval rating for Zardari was just 26 percent, as against 18 percent for Siddiqui.

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