

# Pakistan faces creeping military coup

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Relations between Pakistan's civilian government and its military establishment have deteriorated sharply in recent days, leading to widespread speculation in the Pakistani and international press that the military, with the support of the Supreme Court and much of the country's business and political elite, is preparing to oust President Asif Ali Zardari and the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led coalition government.

On Wednesday the military top brass warned of "very serious ramifications" and "grievous consequences," after Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani accused the heads of Pakistan's army and its principal intelligence agency of intervening in a highly contentious court case in defiance of the government and the constitution.

Later that same day, the military responded angrily to Gilani's dismissal of the Defence Secretary, the civil servant who acts as the pivot in government-military relations. According to all reports, the sacked Defence Secretary, retired General Nareem Khalid Lodhi, was a close confidante of Pakistan's Chief of Armed Services, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

In response to Lodhi's dismissal, Kayani called an emergency meeting of army corps commanders. While little has been said about that meeting, highly placed military sources have told the press that the top brass will not cooperate with Lodhi's successor.

The reputed cause of Lodhi's dismissal was the support he lent the military in its intervention in an explosive, politically-motivated court case arising from a memo forwarded to the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff in the days immediately following the illegal raid that the US mounted deep within Pakistan to assassinate Osama Bin Laden.

The memo, whose authorship and veracity is in bitter dispute, said that the PPP-led government would place "US-friendly" personnel in the top positions in Pakistan's national-security apparatus and give the US carte blanche to carry out military operations in Pakistan, if Washington assisted the government in thwarting an impending military coup.

Manzoor Ijaz, the shadowy US-Pakistani businessman who first brought the memo's existence to light in an October op-ed piece in the *Financial Times*, has claimed that Pakistan's US Ambassador Husain Haqqani dictated the memo to him, on behalf of President Zardari. Haqqani has vehemently denied the charge and in November resigned as ambassador so as to fight to clear his name.

Although the government has convened a parliamentary committee to investigate "memogate," the Supreme Court, acting on a petition from the leader of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and in express opposition to the wishes of the government, has claimed jurisdiction. In this it has been egged on by the armed forces. Both Kayani and Lieutenant-General Ahmed Pasha, the

Director-General of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), have filed briefs with the court in which they urged it to pursue the matter. The military top brass has claimed that the memo undermined the "morale of the armed forces" and has implied that the secret quid pro quo offer to the US was treasonous.

This is rich coming from a military that for decades has conspired with Washington, serving as its proxy in Asia and the Middle East in exchange for the US's support for its dominant position in Pakistani political life, including for a succession of military dictatorships.

Significantly, the Supreme Court has shown no interest in investigating the memo's claim that the military was plotting a coup last May. Yet Ijaz has alleged that Pasha visited the Gulf States in the days before the memo was drafted to canvass support for a military takeover.

In recent weeks, Pakistan's highest court has also reiterated its demand that the government petition Switzerland to reopen criminal cases against Zardari on corruption charges—effectively opening up a second legal front against the elected civilian government.

At the beginning of the month, the court ordered the government to explain why it had not acted on its earlier judgment striking down the immunity given Zardari (and thousands of other politicians and government officials) under the former dictator General Pervez Musharraf's 2007 National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO). The PPP-led government has always balked at the court's order in respect to Zardari, arguing that under Pakistan's constitution legal proceedings cannot be initiated against a sitting president.

Then on Tuesday, a panel of the Supreme Court chastized Gilani for failing to ask the Swiss authorities to revive the cases against Zardari and said that if he persisted in ignoring its orders he could be dismissed as prime minister.

Labelling Gilani as "willfully disobedient," the court said the prime minister had placed his "party over the constitution." "Prima facie ... he may not be an honest person on account of this not being honest to the oath of office."

Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry has made a show in recent weeks of proclaiming that the days in which Pakistan's highest court gives *ex post facto* legal sanction to military coups are over. But the court's actions indicate that it is seeking to provide the military with one or more legal-constitutional façades for the removal of Zardari, Gilani and the PPP government.

The NRO was a reactionary, anti-democratic measure—the product of a Bush administration-brokered deal between the PPP and Musharraf, to secure the former's support for Musharraf's

staged “re-election” as president.

But the Supreme Court has a manifest double-standard. It has led a crusade over the NRO issue, saying that the corruption cases launched against politicians, many of them patently manipulated and trumped up by the Musharraf regime’s National Accountability Bureau, must be revived and, where warranted, prosecuted. Yet it has shown not the slightest interest in prosecuting those in the military and bureaucracy who engineered the 1999 coup that brought Musharraf to power and sustained his rule for a decade.

Relations between the military and the nearly four-year-old PPP-led government have always been fractious. Early in its tenure, the government attempted to assert control over the ISI, under the principle that the military should be subordinate to the elected civilian authorities, but in the face of threats from the military it retreated in less than 24 hours. Ever since, the government has accepted in fact, if not in name, the military’s effective control of the country’s military-security and foreign policies.

Unquestionably, the unpopularity of the government, which has presided over a deepening economic crisis, while implementing IMF austerity measures and prosecuting the AfPak war, has emboldened the military.

But the government’s weakness does not alone account for the military’s eagerness to challenge the government’s authority, let alone the support accorded the maneuvers to oust Zardari, the PPP’s co-chairman, and the PPP government by the judiciary and much of the Pakistani establishment—especially if such a coup can be given a legal-constitutional imprimatur.

US-Pakistani relations are in deep crisis due to massive popular opposition to the US’s wanton disregard for Pakistani sovereignty and lives and Washington’s relentless pressure on the Pakistani elite to do more in support of the Afghan war, even at the expense of its geo-political interests. Under such conditions, the military is clearly determined to secure and exercise untrammled control over Pakistan’s relations with Washington.

Second, Pakistan’s elite fears that the current government, after almost four years in office, lacks the popular support and legitimacy to impose the brutal economic restructuring needed to win the approval of the IMF and foreign investors. Recent months have seen growing protests over power shortages, inadequate flood relief, and the government’s privatization program.

Third, as is always the case among Pakistan’s venal bourgeois elite, there is widespread elite anger over the current government’s “corruption”, that is, its monopoly over pelf and patronage. With the government clearly emitting a *fin de regime* stench, the appetites of the PPP’s rivals have been whetted.

The PPP vehemently opposed any mass movement against the Musharraf dictatorship for, as Zardari’s late wife and the then PPP leader Benazir Bhutto repeatedly declared, it feared any popular mobilization would escape its control and that of the political elite as a whole. Instead, it sought to convince the Bush administration that the PPP would be a better ally of Washington in the “war on terror.”

Since coming to power in March 2008 the PPP has pursued the same tack, seeking to secure Washington’s support in restraining the military’s political and economic reach by proving itself even

more pliant than the military in pursuing US imperialism’s agenda.

But Washington, while making ritualistic claims of support for Pakistani democracy, has continued to view the military as the bulwark of the Pakistani state and its principal partner. It has accorded Kayani and the military top brass preeminence in all substantive discussions of US-Pakistani relations and the conduct of the war.

On Thursday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a pro forma statement acknowledging “concerns” over Pakistan’s political crisis and voicing support for a “democratically elected civilian government” in Pakistan. But the scenarios now under discussion in Islamabad and Rawalpindi involve the Supreme Court and military pushing the current president and government from power, while claiming to uphold the constitution and in the name of organizing a timely transition to “an elected government.”

Also Thursday, the US carried out a drone strike in North Waziristan, killing at least six people. In carrying out the second such attack this week, Washington sent a clear message to both the Pakistani elite and people—whatever the political crisis in Islamabad, it will continue to violate Pakistani sovereignty at will and carry out summary executions with wanton disregard for Pakistani lives.

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