

Pakistan Supreme Court ousts prime minister

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Pakistan is in deep political turmoil after the Supreme Court disqualified Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani from office for refusing to request the reopening of Swiss corruption allegations against President Asif Ali Zardari. Gilani and Zardari are both members of the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

Tuesday's ousting of Gilani reflects bitter factional feuding in the country's ruling elites, involving the opposition parties and the military, as well as the courts. Yesterday a magistrate's court ordered the arrest of Makhdoom Shahbuddin, who had been nominated to become the new prime minister, on charges related to the import of an illegal drug. An arrest warrant was also issued for Gilani's son, Ali Musa Gilani.

The Supreme Court ruling was based on Gilani's conviction on April 26 for contempt of court. The court had earlier ordered the prime minister to write to Swiss authorities to reopen cases of money laundering against Zardari and his wife, the late prime minister Benazir Ali Bhutto. Gilani refused, claiming that Zardari, as president, had legal immunity.

The two main opposition parties—the Pakistani Muslim League (PML-N) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)—filed petitions seeking Gilani's removal as prime minister. Both parties are seeking to capitalise on the government's crisis by pressing for early elections—now due until the spring of 2013.

Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry issued an order on Tuesday directing the country's Election Commission to formally disqualify Gilani from continuing as prime minister. The order was carried out within hours. Zardari cancelled a visit to Russia and called an emergency meeting of party leaders of the coalition

government, which decided to abide by the court decision.

Even if a prime minister is finally appointed, the political turmoil is certain to continue. Any new appointee is certain to face the same Supreme Court demand to reopen the Swiss cases, which Zardari is seeking to avoid.

Moreover, the court ruling that Gilani ceased to be prime minister as of April 26 has created other constitutional uncertainties. It calls into question the validity of all the measures adopted by Gilani and his cabinet since that date, including the federal budget for the 2012-2013 financial year.

Zardari and the PPP government are deeply unpopular as a result of their support for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and the country's worsening economic and social crisis. On Tuesday, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to protest against widespread power shortages. Some areas of the country are without electricity for up to 18 hours a day.

The government has continued to give its tacit support to US military drone strikes against alleged terrorists in areas bordering Afghanistan. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in these attacks, provoking bitter resentment throughout the country. Gilani only shut down the US and NATO supply routes through Pakistan to Afghanistan after a US attack killed several members of a Pakistani border patrol last November.

Zardari and Gilani have been under intense pressure from Washington to give the green light for the resumption of supplies. Earlier this month, US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta threatened to launch US ground operations inside Pakistan if the Pakistani

military failed to take action against pro-Taliban militants based in North Waziristan.

The standoff with the US has only compounded the country's political crisis. Any move by the government to reopen the supply routes would almost certainly trigger opposition protests. Well aware of the fragile situation, Washington responded cautiously to Gilani's removal. US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland simply expressed the hope that the US would be able to work through the "difficult" issues.

The protracted confrontation between the Supreme Court and the government reflects acute divisions within the ruling elite. Chief Justice Chaudhry justified the decision to remove the elected prime minister by claiming it was necessary to ensure the country's "democratic process through the parliamentary system of government".

For years, Chaudhry rubberstamped decisions made by the previous military junta under President Pervez Musharraf, before coming into conflict with the regime as it was breaking up. He made a name for himself as "a democrat" when Musharraf removed him from his post and subjected him to house arrest. He became the focal point for protests by the legal profession against Musharraf.

Chaudhry's posturing as an opponent of corruption and supporter of democracy is bogus. He is supported by layers of the ruling establishment and upper middle classes who feel their interests are being stymied by the main political parties and the state apparatus.

The Supreme Court's ruling on Gilani also conveniently diverted attention from corruption allegations against Chaudhry's son. Last week Malik Riaz Hussain, a billionaire property developer with connections to the military and the PPP, alleged that he gave \$3.7 million to the chief justice's son to influence the outcome of court cases.

Sections of the media warned that the Supreme Court had gone too far by removing Gilani from office. An editorial in the *Dawn* stated: "In disqualifying a sitting, democratically elected prime minister, the Supreme

Court has taken an extraordinary—and unfortunate—step."

There are grave concerns in the political establishment as a whole about the potential for upheavals that no party can control. Following the court decision, PPP spokesman Zaman Kaira called on party supporters not to protest against the order. He told the media there was "a danger of a civil war" if PPP supporters took to the streets.

Salman Raja, a lawyer for Gilani's son, told the media: "You have to place this in the later context of the army flexing its muscles. Today, all of Pakistan's institutions and centres of criticism—the courts, parliament, the media—are under a question mark. Except the army."

In other words, amid bitter factional infighting in ruling circles, the danger of a military coup is steadily growing.



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