

New Pakistani prime minister appointed

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The ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led coalition last week installed a new prime minister, Raja Pervez Ashraf, after the Supreme Court ousted his predecessor Yousuf Raza Gilani earlier in the week.

The new appointment has done nothing to resolve the country's acute political crisis. Gilani was removed for refusing to obey a court order to reopen Swiss corruption allegations against President Asif Ali Zardari.

Ashraf has already indicated to the media that he will not reopen the investigation against Zardari. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court responded by giving Ashraf two weeks to explain his statement. If he refuses to do so he is expected to face the same contempt of court proceedings that led to Gilani's removal.

Ashraf was elected prime minister on June 22 in the National Assembly by 211 to 89 for the nominee of the opposition Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). Ashraf's main qualification for the task was his loyalty to Zardari.

Ashraf earned the nickname "Raja Rental" through his allegedly corrupt offering of rental power supply contracts to private companies during the partial privatisation of the energy sector. He was minister for water and power for three years and presided over a chronic energy crisis that produced power outages of up to 20 hours a day, provoking widespread protests and opposition by working people.

One of Ashraf's first actions as prime minister was to announce the construction of a private helipad at his country home to facilitate his travel to the capital of Islamabad, some 20 kilometres away.

The PPP was compelled to withdraw its first choice to replace Gilani as prime minister when a magistrate issued an arrest warrant last week for Makhdoom Shahbuddi. Shahbuddi is accused of using his ministerial position to facilitate the import of banned substances used in the manufacture of drugs.

The removal of Gilani, who was convicted of contempt of court on April 26, also opened up the possibility that government decisions for the past two months could be challenged in court as illegitimate. The president has issued a decree legitimising the government's actions, but his constitutional authority is also in question.

The legal warfare between the courts and President Zardari continues. In a separate case on Wednesday, the Lahore High Court ordered Zardari to quit his post as co-chairman of the ruling PPP before September 5. As president and PPP co-chairman, Zardari wields broad political powers over the party and the country.

The bitter infighting within the ruling elites reflects broader political instability fuelled by the country's worsening economic crisis and widespread hostility to the government's support for the US-led occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan. Washington has put intense pressure on Islamabad to take further military action against anti-occupation insurgents based in regions bordering Afghanistan.

The Supreme Court under Chief Justice Chaudhry has postured as a defender of democracy and a campaigner against corruption. But under the previous military junta led by President Pervez Musharraf, Chaudhry routinely rubberstamped its decisions and only came into conflict with Musharraf as the regime was breaking up. The court moves against Zardari and the PPP reflect

the interests of layers of the upper middle classes who feel their interests are being stymied by the main political parties and the state apparatus.

Amid the continuing political paralysis, there is a real danger that the military will seize power. A Pakistani columnist Cyril Almeida told the *New York Times*: “If the Supreme Court pushes this further, and there is more instability, the fear is that a uniform will come along and say ‘All right, boys, it’s our show now. Time to go home’.” Military dictatorships have ruled Pakistan for more than half of the time since it was formed through the reactionary partition of British India in 1947.

With the PPP-led government under siege, the various pseudo-radical groups have stepped in to prop it up by peddling the illusion that the PPP represents a progressive alternative to the military and opposition parties. The leader of the Struggle group, Lal Khan, who has a regular column in the *Daily Times*, last weekend wrote scathingly of the current PPP leadership and the prospects of an election. But he nevertheless indicated that the PPP could be reformed under new leaders, concluding that “with a [new] revolutionary uprising, 1970 will be repeated on a much higher plane.”

The reference to 1970 is a desperate attempt to revive popular illusions in the PPP that go back to its founder Zulfikhar Ali Bhutto, the scion of a feudal family, who formed the party amid rising opposition to military rule and a severe crisis of bourgeois rule. Almost from the outset, Bhutto collaborated with the military and state bureaucracy in opposing the Bengali-based bourgeois opposition led by Sheik Mujibur Rahman and supported the brutal military repression of the Bengali people.

Bhutto was installed as president in December 1971 when the military dictator General Yahya Khan was forced to step aside after the military’s ignominious defeat in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War and the loss of East Pakistan/Bangladesh. As the working class came into struggle, the PPP government did not hesitate to use police state measures to jail trade unionists and suppress protests and strikes.

At the time, the Stalinist parties played a critical role in fostering illusions in the PPP even as it suppressed the working class, paving the way for the return of military rule in 1977. In the same way, by attempting to tie the working class to the bourgeois PPP, the Struggle group and other pseudo-lefts are blocking any independent political movement of workers and the rural poor, thus opening the door again for the military to seize power.

The Obama administration is concerned about the mounting political crisis. US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland declared: “We are pleased that the leadership issue appears to have been settled.” But with no agreement with Islamabad to reopen supply routes through Pakistan to NATO forces occupying Afghanistan, the US is obviously considering all options, including the military one. Nuland expressed Washington’s desire to “roll up our sleeves and get back on track with all of the things that we want to do with Pakistan.”

NATO’s top commander in Afghanistan, General John Allen, met this week with Pakistan army chief General Ashfaq Kayani. While the purpose of the meeting was nominally about securing greater Pakistani military support for the US-led war in Afghanistan, there was undoubtedly discussion about what should be done about the political crisis in Pakistan.



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