

Pakistani court threatens to disqualify PM

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Pakistan's political crisis has worsened since the Supreme Court issued a notice to Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf to appear next Monday to explain why he should not be charged with contempt of court.

The court notice, issued on August 9, followed Ashraf's refusal to ask Swiss authorities to reopen corruption charges against Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari. In June, the Supreme Court disqualified the previous prime minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, from holding office after he was found guilty of contempt of court over the same issue. Ashraf, like Gilani, claims that the president is constitutionally immune from prosecution.

The conflict between the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government and the Supreme Court sharpened after Zardari, Ashraf and other PPP leaders publicly opposed the court directive to Ashraf.

Speaking on Independence Day on August 14, Zardari warned of "new forms of assault on the constitution and parliament." Last Friday, Ashraf declared that "the situation in the country can only be improved if the parliament and democracy are strengthened and there are no threats to the elected representatives of the people." Though no one was named, the obvious target was the Supreme Court and Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

Several PPP leaders, including Gilani and Attorney General Iftikhar Qadir, have advised Ashraf not to appear in court. Gilani declared that the court had become a new form of "dictator." If Ashraf were disqualified, Gilani said, "we will resist the move and take the matter to the people."

The PPP's posturing as a defender of democracy is phoney. Like the rest of the Pakistani political establishment, the party is riddled with corruption. Since

coming to office it has functioned as a political tool of US imperialism, backed its neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan and suppressed opposition to the war.

Far from appealing to the masses, the deeply unpopular government has been engaged in a series of legal manoeuvres. Attorney General Qadir filed a formal request for a court review of the directive to Ashraf, arguing that the Supreme Court had no power to take that action. However, the judges rejected Qadir's arguments, saying the court had the power to interpret the country's constitution.

The ruling coalition also passed an anti-democratic amendment to the constitution in parliament last month that gave blanket immunity for ministers in the performance of their official duties. The Supreme Court ruled the new law unconstitutional.

The PPP is seeking to establish "a historic milestone" by completing its five-year term of office. No civilian government has run its full term since formal independence in 1947, due to the country's continual political instability and frequent military coups. If the PPP remains in office to the next general election, due in early 2013, it will control the state apparatus during the election campaign, giving it a marked advantage over its rivals.

The Supreme Court's stance as a protector of the constitution and opponent of corruption is no less cynical. Chief Justice Chaudhry was appointed by the former military dictator Pervez Musharraf and had a long record of rubberstamping his regime's anti-democratic methods. Chaudhry fell out with Musharraf only as popular opposition to the military strongman mounted and the US made clear that he had to go.

Behind the sparring between the government and the Supreme Court lie longstanding rifts in the country's ruling elite, involving the PPP, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and

the military hierarchy.

While Chaudhry has not overtly supported the opposition parties, he is more closely aligned with the PML-N. The PML-N strongly backed the reinstatement of the Supreme Court judges sacked by Musharraf, demanding their recall when it left the ruling coalition in 2009. President Zardari only reluctantly did so, adding to the tensions with the court.

The rivalry between the PPP and PML-N is rooted in the competition for power between ruling class factions in the Sindh and Punjab provinces. Both factions have similar programs—fully supporting the agenda of international finance capital and its austerity demands, as well as the US-led war in Afghanistan.

Army chief Ashfaq Parvez Kayani has intervened in the political standoff. He declared in his Independence Day message that the “major concerns of the common man in Pakistan are the critical economic situation, corruption and the aggravating situation of the civic amenities”—a reference to severe electricity shortages.

Kayani did not refer to the government, but his language indicates that the military is again putting itself forward as a political player, claiming to speak in the name of the “common man” as the saviour of the nation. While a coup does not appear imminent, such rhetoric has been used to justify coups in the past.

Significantly, the army and its powerful intelligence wing, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), have been mending their differences with Washington following a US air attack that killed 24 Pakistan soldiers last November near the Afghan border. Facing pressure from the military and popular anger, the government shut down NATO’s supply routes through Pakistan to Afghanistan.

Last month, the Pakistan parliament agreed to allow NATO supplies to flow again. Such a step could only have been taken with the military’s approval.

Since then, the Pakistani military has been cementing better ties with the US. ISI chief General Zheer ul-Islam visited Washington last month and discussed the issue of US drone attacks in Pakistan’s border areas with CIA Director David Petraeus.

US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta responded cautiously, saying he had previously “lost hope” of Pakistani military’s cooperation, but “it appears they are going to take that step.” Panetta praised Kayani’s Independence Day message for sounding “the right themes.”

Behind the escalating rivalry in Pakistani ruling circles is the country’s deepening social and economic malaise. The annual economic growth rate has fallen to 3.7 percent over the past three years. The impact of the global economic breakdown has been compounded by major electricity shortages—estimated to have cut the annual growth rate by 3 to 4 percent. Frequent power blackouts have sparked protests, virtually on a daily basis.

Pakistan is due to make debt repayments of \$US7.5 billion to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over the next three years. Facing the prospect of a 2008-style default, the government is seeking another IMF loan.

According to the *Express Tribune*, the IMF is demanding the “highest level” guarantee to implement “reforms”—that is, for the president to sign a loan agreement containing severe austerity measures. The budget deficit shot up to 7 percent of gross domestic product last fiscal year and the IMF is insisting that it be sharply cut.

Even as they tussle for power, all factions of the ruling class deeply fear the prospect of an independent political movement of the working class and rural masses provoked by worsening unemployment and poverty. Whatever the regime in control, it will not hesitate to use the security forces to repress opposition by working people to its austerity measures and support for the US war in Afghanistan.



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