

Pakistan Supreme Court orders arrest of PPP prime minister

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Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered Tuesday that Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf be arrested within 24 hours on corruption charges. The National Accountability Bureau has balked at carrying out the order and the government intends to challenge it in court today. Nevertheless, the order, which was signed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, has again placed the government and judiciary in headlong conflict and thrown into question the continued tenure of the Pakistan People's Party-led coalition government.

The ruling coincided with the entry into Islamabad of a "long march" led by right-wing Islamic cleric Tahir ul-Qadri. In the name of fighting corruption, Qadri has vowed that he and his followers will occupy the avenue leading to the parliament buildings until Pakistan's national and provincial governments are dissolved. He is also demanding that a mechanism be established to prevent "corrupt" people from standing for election and that the military and Supreme Court be given a say in the composition of the interim government that will soon be formed, based on an all-party agreement, to supervise elections due this spring.

Pakistan's highest court, which has been deliberating on the charges against Ashraf for a year, manifestly timed the issuing of its order for the prime minister's arrest to boost Qadri's protest and throw the government into disarray, and this has been widely commented on in the Pakistan media.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leaders, including President Asif Ali Zardari, are publicly warning that there is a conspiracy to push the government from office. One of Ashraf's aides, Fawad Chaudhry, told Reuters, "There is no doubt Qadri's march and the Supreme Court's verdict were masterminded by the military."

The *New York Times*' Pakistan correspondent noted Tuesday that "the drawing rooms of the political elite have been humming" for some time "with speculation of

a 'soft coup'—the imposition of a technocratic government, backed by the generals."

A two-judge panel of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice Chaudhry ordered criminal proceedings be initiated against Ashraf and 15 others because of alleged irregularities in the issuing of contracts for power-plant construction. Ashraf, who served as Water and Power Minister for three years ending in February 2011, is accused of accepting millions of dollars in kickbacks.

Relations between the Supreme Court and the PPP government have long been acrimonious. Initially the PPP-led government balked at reinstating Chaudhry, who had given legal imprimatur to General Mushraff's 1999 coup but later run afoul of the general and been illegally sacked. Last June, after a long-running legal battle, the Supreme Court removed Yousuf Raza Gilani as prime minister, citing his earlier conviction on contempt charges for failing to heed its order to petition Switzerland to reopen corruption cases against the president and PPP co-leader Zardari.

This new clash between the judiciary and government comes under conditions where the PPP-led regime is largely discredited because of its implementation of IMF-type austerity measures and complicity in the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, and confronts multiple crises.

Pakistan's fragile comprehensive peace process with arch-rival India is in danger of collapse following repeated fatal border clashes in recent days along the Line of Control in the disputed Kashmir region.

The PPP central government sacked the PPP-led coalition government in Balochistan this week after protests from the Shia Hazara community that it has failed to protect them from sectarian target killings by Sunni fundamentalists. The army, which has mounted a bloody "dirty war" against Balochi separatist insurgents and who many accuse of complicity in the sectarian attacks on the Hazaras, is now reportedly preparing to intervene even

more aggressively in Balochistan.

Washington continues to press Pakistan to intensify military action in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan so as to support the Afghan war and has begun 2013 with a wave of drone attacks.

Last but not least, Pakistan's economy is reeling under the impact of a declining growth rate, a depreciating rupee and a mounting balance of payments crisis. The IMF prevented Pakistan from accessing all of its last loan because the government, fearing social unrest, hesitated at implementing some of IMF diktats. But preliminary discussions with the IMF on a new loan have begun.

The PPP is touting the civilian government's imminent conclusion of its full five-year tenure in office as a great victory for democracy, citing that fact no elected Pakistan government has ever completed a full-term. But the past five years have shown that the difference between "civilian" and military rule is largely window-dressing. The government has continued the policies of the Musharraf regime, intensifying Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan war and pursuing privatization and other pro-market reforms. The military continues to wield vast economic power, while effectively controlling foreign and national-security policy. And the elite continues to act with impunity, legally and illegally escaping taxation and siphoning off government funds and brutally exploiting the country's workers and rural toilers.

Qadri, who has spent the last seven years living in Canada, is seeking to exploit popular anger over corruption and economic hardship and, in the name of purging Pakistan of a venal political elite, hopes to strengthen the hand of the army and the state.

In his address in Islamabad Tuesday, he denounced parliament as a "group of looters, thieves and dacoit," while praising the military and judiciary, saying that they are the only institutions in the country that "are functioning and doing their duties of the people."

He attacked the current government, saying it "has wasted and brought a bad end to our armed forces, those armed forces who are highly sincere, highly competent, and highly capable."

While Qadri claimed he would mount a "million man march," media estimates place the crowd gathered in central Islamabad at only 25,000 to 50,000.

The PPP-led government, however, because of its own apprehensions about the erosion of its popular support, has been anxious to shut down Qadri's protest. Interior Minister Rehman Malik appealed to the cleric Wednesday night to end the protest immediately on the grounds that

the government has information of an impending terrorist attack. He added that if the protest continued much longer the government would use security forces to disperse it.

On Wednesday evening, the Muslim League (Nawaz) convened a meeting attended by representatives of most of Pakistan's other major opposition parties. At its conclusion. The meeting vowed to "stay united" in the face of "conspiracies being hatched to derail the democratic process." While disassociating themselves from Qadri's protest, the opposition parties demanded the government immediately set an election date and begin the process of constituting an interim government.

One prominent opposition politician not attending the meeting was Imran Khan who, like Qadri, has reportedly benefited from covert support from the military or at least sections of it. The head of Tehreek-e-Insaf, Khan called earlier this week for President Zardari to resign immediately.

To date Washington has said little about the crisis in Pakistan, apart from issuing pro forma statements declaring its support for civilian and constitutional government. A report in the *Dawn* claimed "diplomatic circles in Washington ... will neither help the Zardari government survive ... nor will it push them out."

Relations between Pakistan's military and the Pentagon were badly strained in 2011-12 due to mounting anti-war sentiment in Pakistan and repeated gross US violations of Pakistan sovereignty. But in recent months the two sides have resumed close cooperation in waging Washington's AfPak war.



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