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March 09, 2009

## Pakistan's Political War with Itself

P090309I0057

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### Unending tumult of Pakistan:

Pakistan's gradual drift into political anarchy following the Feb 25 disqualification – from holding any public office – of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and incumbent provincial Chief Minister, Shahebaz Sharif, his younger brother, followed by the controversial imposition of the Governor's rule in the country's politically most influential Punjab province, have once again exposed the fragility that afflicts this country of nearly 180 million. It also exemplifies the contradictions under which Pakistan continues to reel i.e. the political elites' craving for "true democracy" when under either Military rule or in political opposition, and yearning for a military intervention when some of the ruling elite feel they are at the receiving end. The latest turmoil dates back to the Feb 18, 2008 elections, which produced a split mandate, with the Pakistan People's Party of the slain Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz emerging as the majority parties. Both formed coalitions at the centre and in the Punjab province, led by the PPP at the centre and by Shahebaz Sharif in the largest province. Both parties joined forces and politically ousted President General (R) Pervez Musharraf in August last year but Asif Ali Zardari, Bhutto's widower, refused to restore former Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and a few other judges whom Musharraf had dismissed. Five words that would haunt PPP for a very long time in future were when Zardari unilaterally withdrawing from the joint agreements with the PML-N that "agreement are not Quran or Hadith" that they have to be adhered to. These words underpin *the* sense of deception that PML-N feels from President Zardari and hence the instability and the crises continue.

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Sharif to end his support to the PPP government. Already in May, the PML-N ministers had relinquished their offices to protest Zardari's inaction on the judges' issue – a subject that had drawn huge public support during the

entire election campaign and continues to resonate across the country. According to a recently held survey, 60% Pakistanis favor the restoration of the deposed Chief Justice, Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, 18% oppose while 22% are undecided. These results came out from a sample that included male/female adults selected randomly and representing socio-economic cross-sections interviewed face to face on March 1-2, 2009 had the error margin of +3-5% at 95% confidence level.<sup>1</sup> In late February 2009, President Zardari was at the approval rating that of General (R) Musharraf in February 2008 and this has further plummeted making Pakistan's political situation more precarious.<sup>2</sup> Opposition's senator Mushahid Hussain Syed was quoted in media that the government has only seven days to handle and resolve the present and ongoing crisis implying yet another undemocratic intervention otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

**Sharif's disqualified; government discredited:** As Sharif, twice Prime Minister in the 1990s, kept pressing for Justice Chaudhry's restoration, the Supreme Court delivered a blow to him and his brother by upholding a provincial court order, which, based on controversial criminal cases instituted in the 1990s, had found both brothers unfit to hold public offices. Even the Prime Minister Gilani said that he was unaware as to who issued instructions to the Attorney General of Pakistan to change the pleading arguments before the court.<sup>4</sup> Government filed the appeal against the decision of the lower court and was contesting the case as the Sharifs, as per their political position, did not recognize the courts and the judges who took oath under the Provisional Constitutional Order of in November 2007 that dismissed then Chief Justice, Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. Musharraf himself in an interview in Brussels admitted that this was an

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### Constant political decline:

Zardari, who cleverly went on to become the president on September 9, with the support of Sharif's PML-N reneged on his promises of restoring Chaudhry and other judges, thus forcing

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ijaz Shafi Gilani, The News. March 8, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Wall Street Journal, February 26, 2009. President Musharraf's rating was 15% in February 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Daily Express P5, March 8, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> PM Gilani speaking to media, March 1, 2009.

unconstitutional order and PPP, when in opposition, had then and now fiercely termed Musharraf's actions as unconstitutional.<sup>5</sup> Following on the Supreme Court verdict, Zardari had the Provincial Assembly suspended quickly and threw the province under Governor's Rule, thereby depriving Sharif's PML-N of the government in the province. The Governor rule was met by a strong political resistance from the PML-N and the social resentment from the people. 77% strongly opposed the Governor's rule while only 14% approved.<sup>6</sup>

### **PML-N and lawyers together:**

The move triggered a reaction by Sharif that has seen him galvanize supporters in major Punjab cities such as Sheikhpura, Lahore, Faisalabad and Jhelum. Sharifs accuse Zardari of having engineered the Supreme Court ruling to "blackmail" them into silence on the judges' issue. They have also urged people across the country to join the "Lawyers' Protest March" that, if allowed, will culminate at Islamabad on March 16, and continue until the restitution of Justice Chaudhry. This is at least the stated objective of the move. In his fiery speeches, Sharif has been asking supporters and people at large to head to Islamabad as a mark of solidarity with the judges, who he says "symbolize the nation's craving for an independent judiciary." Heartened by Sharif's support, Ali Ahmed Kurd, the president of the independent Supreme Court Bar Association, also declared on March 8 in Islamabad the lawyers will continue their protest in Islamabad until all judges sacked by Musharraf on November 3, 2007 are "honorably restored."

**Government unnerved:** The relentless anti-Zardari campaign being mounted by Sharif appears to have unnerved the federal government, clearly visible from a press conference on March 8 by Raja Pervez Ashraf, a federal minister. "We have parted ways, the window of reconciliation is shut," Ashraf declared. This meant the two mainstream parties are now headed for a showdown on the street, with Sharif's putting their political careers at stake. No more truce and there will be a political contest with the PML-N, Ashraf said. Amidst his war-cries, the federal government, clearly under the instructions of PM Gilani, kept on making peace overtures by sending Balochistan Chief

Minister Aslam Raisani, Maulana Fazlur Rahman and Asfandyar Wali Khan to hold talks to work out a formula for political reconciliation. Many political observers say that the government's best chance to avoid a total political breakdown is to enter a political agreement that helps saving all faces in the conflict. This will not be a "winner takes all" situation and the political leadership is required to exhibit maturity to settle political matters via political means. President Zardari, reportedly surrounded by either unelected or indirectly elected advisors, is being advised to "administratively manage" the issue of lawyers' long march without paying much attention to the politics that this move

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involves. The government must understand that the political problems are never settled in the courts or via stringent administrative measures.<sup>7</sup> One of PML-N's allies in support of the long march, Jamaat-e-Islami said that it was becoming increasingly hard for Zardari's government to survive.<sup>8</sup> Given Pakistan's history of such events, the government would not be able to cap the violence and casualties would mean more political fever, anger from the opposition and weakness for the government.

**Pakistan's friends rattled:** The mutual "war declarations" have also sent jitters outside Pakistan, manifest also in a word of concern by the British Foreign Secretary David Miliband. "It's now vital that all politicians come together to unite against the mortal threat that Pakistan faces which is a threat from its internal enemies, not its traditional external enemies," Miliband said in an interview with BBC Radio-4 on March 07, 2009. Miliband said "the degree of political disunity that exists at the moment "was contributing to the problem (of fighting terrorism and its fallout). You've got the combination of a political crisis precipitated by the recent Supreme Court judgment, so democratic politicians are not coming together to fight terrorism." Miliband's characterization of Pakistan's crisis as a "mortal threat from the internal enemies" drew criticism and invited flak from nationalist elements within Pakistan but a dispassionate analysis of the events of the last year or so clearly underscores that the country faces a double threat; on the one hand, al-Qaeda linked radical Islamists have ratcheted up a low-intensity insurgency

<sup>5</sup> State Minister for Shipping and Ports, Nabeel Gabol in Capital Talk, Geo TV, March 5, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Ijaz Shafi Gilani, The News. March 8, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> "The right place for the political decisions is the political field but not the court," Asfandyar Wali Khan, March 5, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Qazi Hussain Ahmed, Ameer JI, March 9, 2009.

that has shaken the country to the core. The second threat flows from an immature and seemingly selfish leadership, currently personified by the PPP co-chairperson Asif Zardari, who defied all analysis and political norms on the way to becoming the president, and thereby also at least thrice went back on the commitments he made with Sharif.

**Pressure on army:** As the nation waits in awe to see which course the events before and after the March 16 lawyers' protest take, Pakistan's mighty military establishment, that has ruled the country for more than half of its existence, is again under sharp domestic and external focus. Observers have started wondering whether the army, currently the core of the US-led war against terrorism in Afghanistan and border areas, keeps its nerves and stays away from the showdown between the two main political parties. Or whether the squabbling sucks the institution, which immensely suffered under Musharraf's almost nine year, rule again into the political arena.