

The Political Crisis in Pakistan: The Looming Possibility of a Military Takeover

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Region: [Asia](#)

Global Research, June 23, 2012

21 June 2012

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's ouster this week was more than merely a significant development for national politics, it was an unequivocal message to the people of Pakistan that ineptness, subservience, and corruption will not go unpunished. Though it is fashionable to conclude that Gilani was dismissed because of his failure to investigate charges against President Zardari – undoubtedly a major part of this story – the reality is that his ineffectiveness in dealing with a range of issues from energy policy to bilateral relations with the United States is what cost him the premiership.

Political power in Pakistan – always a complex issue – is now up for grabs. The ruling [Pakistan People's Party \(PPP\)](#) has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the people while other parties struggle to establish a significant base of support. In the background, the military leadership, which has, since the early days of Pakistan's independence, played a dominant role in the political establishment, grows ever stronger. With such doubt surrounding the nation's political future, and Pakistan at the center of some of the most pressing global issues of our time, the one thing that is certain is that the eyes of the world are watching Islamabad closely.

Corruption and Contempt

The event, which directly precipitated Gilani's ouster, was the contempt of court charge in relation to his refusal to investigate his close ally, President Zardari, and the outstanding corruption charges against him. Despite being [ordered by the court](#) to lead a probe into allegations of [money laundering through Swiss bank accounts](#), Gilani refused and continued in his role as Prime Minister, thumbing his nose at the order issued by the Supreme Court. This week, this brazen disregard for the judiciary finally caught up with the Prime Minister. Although Gilani defied the court order, this was not his only judicial transgression. As Pakistani journalist Atif K. Butt noted in an interview for [StopImperialism.com](#), "Gilani and other members of the PPP continuously ridiculed the court publicly, in gatherings and on television." This sort of blatant disrespect undoubtedly angered the Supreme Court Justices and fueled their desire to remove the Prime Minister. Despite the personal animosity that exists between the PPP and the judiciary, this was merely the legal explanation for the Prime Minister's removal. The series of mistakes and sheer ineptitude of the PPP in dealing with the energy crisis, maintaining productive relations with the United States while protecting Pakistani sovereignty, and addressing the growing unrest in Balochistan and elsewhere, caused the people of Pakistan to be fed up with Gilani and, possibly, made the political decision a "no brainer" for the court.

PPP Loses the People

The [recent rioting throughout the Punjab province](#) is in direct response to the continued policies of “load-shedding” which are the result of Gilani and Zardari’s failure to address the energy crisis effectively. Pakistan, which suffers from a severe energy deficit, has been clamoring for practical solutions to the crisis while the PPP could only offer load-shedding – the policy of shutting off power for hours at a time – as a temporary solution. The people began to take to the streets and, as one might imagine, protests turned to riots in many cities. This sort of unrest on the streets contributed to the climate of anger and frustration directed toward the PPP for which, it seems, Gilani became the scapegoat and sacrificial lamb.

Although the energy crisis formed the immediate backdrop, perhaps the most critical issue for which the PPP was blamed is the continued degeneration of relations with the United States. In the wake of the repeated violations by the US of Pakistan’s sovereignty, the people held the ruling party responsible for having ineffectively dealt with the Americans. The raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound, the NATO air strike that killed 24 Pakistani military officers and subsequent NATO supply route closures, created tremendous animosity within the population. However, the indignation was not merely directed toward Washington. Instead, the people looked at the lack of leadership in Islamabad – the government’s inability to take a hardline position with the Obama administration – as a sign of both weakness and ineptitude. Journalist Atif K. Butt [notes](#) that, “The people of Pakistan want to have positive relations with the United States however they feel that, without taking a tough stance on the provocations, the PPP’s weakness only emboldened Washington and contributed to the breakdown of diplomatic relations.”

The mismanagement of the relationship with the US, in light of the fact that Pakistan has sacrificed more than any other country to actively contribute to the so-called War on Terror, was too much for the people to bear. This feeling of distrust, coupled with the anger caused by the continued energy crisis, likely played a significant role in motivating the judiciary to act and to remove Gilani now, rather than later. As in the United States and elsewhere, everything in Pakistan is political and, like any other politicians, the Supreme Court acted in their own political interests and ousted Gilani.

Who Will Lead?

The question of Pakistan’s political future is a complex one. There are some who see this moment as the opportunity for yet another military takeover of the government as has happened numerous times in the country’s history. There are other analysts who believe that there will be new elections held and that another party may emerge to lead the formation of a coalition government. Regardless of who rises to take the reins of leadership, they will face a very difficult challenge. The demise of the PPP has opened the door for other parties to establish themselves as significant players on the political scene. Among these parties are the conservative [Pakistan Muslim League \(PML-N\)](#) and the fast-growing [Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf \(PTI\)](#) led by national sports hero turned politician Imran Khan. The PTI, which is still in the infant stages of development into a major political force, represents a possible change on the political horizon. As a party representing a progressive agenda, Khan and his allies might be poised to win a significant proportion of seats in the parliament and establish themselves as legitimate political force.

Despite the range of options in terms of the civilian government, there is always the looming possibility of a military takeover. Army General Kayani leads a military faction that

wields considerable power both in terms of the people of Pakistan and foreign policy and diplomacy. They are very close with the Chinese, generally distrustful of the United States, and much more rigidly represent what could be called a hardline approach to diplomacy. For these reasons, their reputation among the people is generally positive and, though most Pakistanis do not want a return of military rule, there is a significant portion of the population that would not see it as an entirely negative development.

The Challenges of the Future

However when the next government is constituted, it will undoubtedly face very complex challenges the moment it takes over. The energy crisis looms large in the public mind, as does the issue of Pakistani-US and Pakistani-Chinese relations. In addition, the myriad development projects and other forms of economic investment both nationally and internationally will have to be evaluated along with addressing the unrest in Balochistan and militancy along the border with Afghanistan.

Pakistan finds itself facing a severe energy deficit that must be dealt with by the incoming government. A number of international investments, some in progress with others still in the planning stages, are designed to address this. The most significant, both economically and geopolitically, is the controversial [Iran-Pakistan pipeline](#). This project, designed to provide Pakistan with immense amounts of energy from neighboring Iran, has undergone intense scrutiny in light of the economic warfare in the form of sanctions and other extreme measures initiated against Iran by the United States. This pipeline, dubbed the “Peace Pipeline,” is an essential part of any long-term solution to Pakistan’s energy woes. In addition to this project, the [Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India \(TAPI\) pipeline](#) is also a critical artery for the energy future of the country. Likewise, the [CASA-1000](#) will bring significant amounts of electricity to Pakistan from the former Soviet republics of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. All of these projects represent a viable economic and energy future for the nation, the kind of future that seems to have become impossible with PPP at the helm.

Aside from energy-related issues, the new government faces difficult challenges with regard to relations with both the United States and China. While the US relationship seems to become more adversarial by the day, Pakistan’s ties with China, though strong as ever, also face significant obstacles. China looks to Islamabad to develop the infrastructure connecting the Chinese-funded Port of Gwadar to the rest of the country, thereby allowing the Chinese to utilize the port to its full potential, providing a critical land-based entry point for Chinese imports coming from Africa and the Middle East. There is, of course, the potential too that some of the pipeline projects could, in the future, be extended into China, completely altering the face of the Asian economic region. In addition, China and Pakistan must cooperate on eradicating the terrorist group known as the [East Turkestan Islamic Movement \(ETIM\)](#), also referred to as the “Chinese Taliban” which uses the Waziri region as a base of operations. For these reasons, along with desire of Islamabad to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the new government must be quick to establish a positive working relationship with China while, on the other hand, working to mend fences with the Americans.

Domestic security concerns will also dominate the agenda. The new government must address the [militant separatist movement in Balochistan](#), which seeks to destabilize Pakistan through terrorism, kidnapping, and other means. This conflict is understood as being [fomented by outside intelligence agencies](#) and will require a very delicate touch. Separately, the new government must work to carve out its place in a post-

occupation Afghanistan – a nation that will be vital to Pakistan and the region’s future. The ouster of PM Gilani and the fall of the PPP create more questions than answers. Pakistan’s future depends on a recognition of the failures of elected officials and the inadequacies of Pakistani development. However, at the same time, Pakistan is a nation of potential prosperity. If the new government can reconcile a broken political system with the tremendous economic, political and diplomatic potential, Pakistan is poised to become a regional power able to exercise leadership and promote peace on the world stage.

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