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## Pakistan's Kingmaker - Or Next King?

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One month after Pakistan's landmark elections, the country still has no prime minister.

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The man who is playing a key role in deciding who will hold this post is Benazir Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, who now heads her Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

He has emerged from the 18 February elections as one of the most powerful politicians in the country.

The nondescript street where he lives in Islamabad is little different from any other apart from the large blocks of concrete strewn randomly across it to prevent any suicide car bomb attackers.

Numerous men in black, with the word Benazir blazoned across their T-shirts, efficiently frisk anyone who enters the street.

Outside a sprawling house near the end of the street, dozens of media men sit, walk or smoke endlessly. They spend most of their time watching who is visiting or simply waiting for the next newsy morsel to drop out from behind the towering gate.

Despite the long hours and non-existent facilities, few are complaining.

They are, after all, reporting on a man who has emerged from the 18 February polls as the most powerful politician in Pakistan.

And all of them have only one question on their mind: is Asif Ali Zardari going to remain a kingmaker or will he be tempted to become the king?

### Nervous energy

I am ushered inside the house after a few more security checks and taken to a small room where large Pakistan and PPP flags flank a sofa reserved for Mr Zardari.

He walks into the room briskly, almost at a trot and offers me a short but vigorous handshake.

The nervous energy so evident in his handshake is just as visible in his talk. He is quick to answer, eager to offer short, snappy lines and very careful not to speak his mind.

So, what about his prime minister, why the delay?

"Would you ever go to a movie where there are no lines outside the ticket window?" he grins.

"Do you think they aren't enjoying the show?" he adds, waving towards the dozens of journalists gathered outside.

He does most of the talking over the next 30 minutes or so. I wonder how much of it is "part of the show" and how much is real.

### Conspiracies and bitterness

After a while, one gets the feeling that Mr Zardari has learnt to smell intrigue in every word uttered before him.

He seems to trust no one, in or outside his party.

There are many sentences reinforcing the impression. "I was denied a majority" and "they have already let the media hounds loose".

"They" in Pakistan is often used as a collective reference to the army leadership, intelligence agencies, militants and anybody else who may be opposed to the development of democracy here.

For Mr Zardari, there is also a lot of bitterness just under the surface.

Does he think that after the nationwide outpouring of grief following Benazir Bhutto's death, "they" might be having a

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rethink about politicians?

"There is not an iota of remorse," he literally spits out the words. "They remain as callous and ruthless as ever."

He also is clearly not going to let all the questions surrounding his wife's death in Rawalpindi in December rest, even if some of them involve his own party's organisation.

"I had sent 170 guards for BB's Rawalpindi rally," he says without being prompted.

"I would like to know who sent 90 of them back."

Next prime minister?

For a man whose decisions will have a critical impact on a nation of 160 million people, isn't he being distracted by these thoughts?

Before he can answer, Yusuf Raza Gillani, a party leader from southern Punjab, joins us in the small room.

Mr Gillani is one of the three main contenders for the post of the prime minister and I wonder why he has been suddenly summoned. Perhaps a signal that he could be Pakistan's next PM?

Our talk turns to the formation of the cabinet.

"There are too many people and not enough (posts) to dish out," he sighs.

So why doesn't he do something different, like going for a lean, mean and efficient cabinet?

"Lean, mean and efficient," he mimics me, leaning closer with surprising intimacy. "I would have done that had they not denied me my two-thirds majority."

Tasks ahead

Mr Zardari seems convinced that his mandate will be meaningless if he doesn't use it to empower politicians. And he seems happy that former prime minister and ally Nawaz Sharif shares his vision.

The two have shared bitter political rivalry in the past, can he trust him now?

"He has not given me a single reason not to trust him," Mr Zardari says confidently. "Why should I not trust him?"

What about President Musharraf? Has he thought of who will replace him?

"Whom would you like as your president?" he queries in response. "A man elected by a majority of the parliament or someone struggling to keep his job, too eager to compromise just so that he can hang on?"

There have been too many ambiguous statements already, ambiguous but very deliberate it seems. Isn't that putting his party under too much pressure?

"The politburo has to be broken," he says referring to the old guard or "uncles" within the PPP.

"We cannot get anywhere with the politburo intact," he says without batting an eyelid.

I leave the house no wiser about Asif Ali Zardari's plan than I was before meeting him. Perhaps that was exactly how he had planned the meeting to go.

He is sharp, street smart, tough and politically seasoned by his 11 years in jail and the corruption allegations that have dogged him.

He is also oozing with power and quite unlike anyone that Pakistan's military or the US policy makers have ever had to deal with before.

That is perhaps what many now find most appealing about the man - no matter whether he chooses to remain a behind

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the scenes king maker or opts for the throne for himself.

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