
New Leadership for Pakistan

Posted by Zia - 2008/03/26 11:29

The Pakistan People's Party, the largest party in the newly elected National Assembly, and its three other coalition allies have nominated Yousaf Raza Gilani, a career politician and former assembly speaker, as their candidate for prime minister, making him a shoo-in to head the new government. Reading from a statement issued by PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of the late former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, and his and Bhutto's 19-year-old son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, also a party co-chairman, party spokesman Farhatullah Babar announced Gilani's nomination in Islamabad Saturday night "in the name of martyr Benazir Bhutto."

"He is not afraid to lead and he knows the way," the statement said of Gilani. When the national assembly convenes on Monday, Gilani is assured of being elected by a two-thirds majority. In a show of the coalition's political strength earlier this week, the PPP's candidate for assembly speaker, Fehmida Mirza, was elected by a whopping two-thirds majority, making her the country's first ever woman to lead the lower house of parliament.

"At this point, I only urge the nation to pray for me," Gilani told a Pakistani TV station soon after the announcement. Gilani is the scion of a powerful and spiritually influential feudal family from Multan in southern Punjab Province, the country's most populous and politically powerful. The soft-spoken politician was a government minister in the mid-1980s during the rule of Islamist dictator Zia ul-Haq. But soon after the dictator's mysterious death in an August 1988 plane crash, Gilani switched allegiance to Benazir Bhutto, who was elected prime minister later that year. In Bhutto's second administration, Gilani served as assembly speaker from 1993 to 1997. Gilani had maintained a low profile as several other candidates had lobbied for the job. "The distance between Adiala jail and the prime minister's house is very small," he had said earlier this week, disingenuously implying he was not interested in the job.

Gilani, 55, has suffered some hard knocks in politics, indeed. Soon after Musharraf overthrew the elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup in 1999, he launched a crackdown of Bhutto's and Sharif's supporters in the name of an anti-corruption campaign. Gilani was arrested, tried and convicted on flimsy charges of having misused his authority while heading the national assembly. He spent more than five years in jail before being freed in 2006. Pakistanis believe that one reason he may have been selected as the coalition's candidate is that Zardari and Gilani share a bond of having spent several years in prison at the same time. At one point Zardari, who had languished in jail for some 11 years on various corruption charges, for which he was never convicted, and Gilani were both incarcerated in Rawalpindi's Adiala jail.

The most immediate loser is Makhdoom Amin Fahim, who was the front-runner for the premiership almost from the day that Bhutto was assassinated in late December. A few days after her death, Zardari, who was named in Bhutto's will as party co-chairman along with her son Bilawal, said that Fahim would be the party's candidate for prime minister. But Fahim's star faded quickly. He had been indispensable to Bhutto while she was negotiating a power-sharing agreement with Musharraf that ultimately lifted the corruption cases against her and allowed her to return from exile to lead her party in the general elections. Fahim, a long-time confidant and loyalist, had been a trusted go-between with Musharraf and his top aides during the drawn-out negotiations last year. But after her death, and certainly after the Feb. 18 elections that saw Musharraf's political allies routed by the PPP's and Sharif's forces, a new political equation emerged. Fahim, the man whose contacts with Musharraf had served Bhutto well, was now seen as having been too close to the widely disliked and unpopular president. When Sharif, a key coalition ally who leads the party with the second most number of seats in the assembly, learned that Fahim had had secret meetings with Musharraf in early January, he made it clear to Zardari that the old PPP loyalist was unacceptable. Always gracious, Fahim welcomed Gilani's nomination. "Yousaf Raza is my friend and the PPP is my party," he said when he heard of the official announcement. "I congratulate him."

Zardari and Sharif, two former enemies, are working well together. Each has made concessions to the other. Sharif, who had initially refused to have his assembly members become part of the new government, even though he promised to support the PPP-led coalition in the assembly, relented. In return, Zardari agreed to support Sharif's obsession of working to have the 60 or so high court justices, including the Supreme Court's Chief Justice, Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, restored. Zardari agreed to support Sharif's call for parliament to pass a resolution demanding the restoration of the justices within the first 30 days of the assembly's session.

As a result, Musharraf is in danger of not only facing a hostile Supreme Court that could rule that his reelection as president last October was unconstitutional, but also of having the new assembly strip him of his remaining, ultimate power to dismiss the newly elected government and assembly. Musharraf would lose that authority if both the lower and upper houses can muster a two-thirds majority. The national assembly already has the votes, and Musharraf's once solid support in the upper house, or Senate, is quickly crumbling.

Gilani and the new assembly have much more on their plate than curbing the president's powers. They have to begin dealing with the recent surge in militant attacks in Pakistan's cities as well as with the crippling electricity shortages and the dramatic rise in fuel and food costs. No matter how well Gilani responds to the crisis, his days as premier could well be numbered. Most Pakistanis expect that ultimately Zardari sees himself as prime minister. He is expected to run for the assembly in a by-election in the next two months or so, thus putting him in a position to be elected premier. It is unlikely

that Gilani, also a party loyalist, would stand in his way.

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