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## Three-way struggle

Posted by Zia - 2008/05/09 13:45

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LESS than three months after surprisingly free general elections on February 18th and the smooth formation of coalition governments across the country, Pakistan is in a mess again. It is teetering on the brink of food riots, industrial lay-offs and strikes against daily 12-hour nationwide power cuts. The economy is slipping. Capital flight has taken nearly 5% off the value of the rupee against the dollar in the past few weeks. The war against extremists in the tribal badlands is going nowhere.

Instability has returned to haunt politics. The new coalition government, led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Asif Zardari, the widower of Benazir Bhutto, is besieged by the press and a relentless lawyers' movement. They demand the restoration of the senior judges sacked by President Pervez Musharraf last November. The PPP's main partner in the federal and Punjab-provincial governments, the Pakistan Muslim League, or PML(N) of Nawaz Sharif, a former prime minister, is threatening to quit the coalition if it does not honour its pledge to reinstate the judges. The two agreed in March that they would do so by April 30th but later squabbled over how to go about it. The latest deadline is May 12th.

The two parties have agreed on the wording of a parliamentary resolution to bring the judges back. Mr Sharif insists that once it is passed the government should simply issue an order. But Mr Zardari wants a constitutional amendment. He fears that the incumbent Supreme Court judges, appointed by Mr Musharraf and due to lose their jobs if the deposed judges are reinstated, will strike down an executive order and ask Mr Musharraf and the army to protect them, bringing a confrontation with the government. As the constitution amended by Mr Musharraf stands, the appointment of senior judges is the task of the president and the chief justice of the Supreme Court can ask any organ of the state to protect and defend it.

The constitutional niceties mask a political power struggle. Those who want the old judges restored by a stroke of the executive pen also want to see the back of President Musharraf immediately. They expect the restored old judges, infuriated by the president's high-handed treatment of them, to overthrow him, declaring his election and all his edicts illegal. For its part the press was angered by a crackdown by Mr Musharraf last year. He shut down the leading television channels and banned some outspoken anchors who were supporters of the lawyers' movement. And Mr Sharif sees the ousting of the man who overthrew him in 1999 as the first step in his bid to reclaim the prime ministership.

Mr Zardari, however, believes any confrontation with the president, army and judiciary would play into the hands of his political opponents. That means, above all, his coalition partner, the PML(N), which is hoping for a new general election sooner rather than later. He also thinks that Mr Musharraf should be weakened politically but not eliminated at once. He argues that the economy would suffer if he goes, because American annoyance and doubts about Pakistan's commitment to fighting extremism would damage confidence. Civilian governments, sensitive to popular opinion, may find it hard to take tough decisions involving the continued use of force. So Mr Zardari wants a constitutional amendment that would accommodate both old and new judges while clipping Mr Musharraf's power to sack the government and parliament at will.

But the political scene gets murkier by the day. In a shocking move on May 5th the Election Commission postponed by-elections for 30 provincial and eight federal parliamentary seats from June 18th to August 18th. It cited rising security concerns in the North-West Frontier Province, which is badly hit by Taliban militancy. It later relented and set a new date of June 26th. The PPP had strongly condemned the delay, but it emerged that the initiative came in fact from Mr Zardari's aide, Rehman Malik, who is also the de-facto home minister. The signal was clear enough: if the PML(N) doesn't play ball with the PPP and leaves the coalition, the PPP would have no option but to ally with the "king's party" of Mr Musharraf. This would enhance Mr Musharraf's role, annoy most Pakistanis and erode popular goodwill for Mr Zardari. But with deadlock over the judges looming, Mr Zardari has few appealing options. Nor does Pakistan.

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