
Why Pakistan's Government Collapsed

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Allow President Pervez Musharraf a little chuckle: The general had always rationalized his military rule in Pakistan by claiming that the country's civilian politicians were too feckless and self-serving to govern effectively. And he may be feeling vindicated by the collapse of the coalition that took power in March after Pakistan's electorate delivered a stinging rebuke to Musharraf. On Monday, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif inaugurated a new season of political instability by announcing that his Pakistani Muslim League (PML-N) would withdraw on Tuesday from the government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) — the party now led Asif Ali Zardari, the husband of slain former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

The two parties had been at loggerheads for more than a decade, but joined forces after the election to restore civilian rule and offer Pakistanis hope that a coalition of their country's two largest parties would bring much-needed stability to the troubled South Asian nuclear power. "Please give us a chance," Zardari said soon after a coalition agreement was finalized in March. "We are bound together in the spirit of democracy."

Not very tightly, it turned out. The issue that broke the coalition was how to restore the Supreme Court judges dismissed by Musharraf late last year, when he feared they could deem his reelection as president unconstitutional. While Sharif's party has insisted on their immediate and unconditional reinstatement, the PPP has argued any reinstatement should form part of a wider judicial reform process that would also limit the powers of the Chief Justice. But the issue may be more than simply technical: given Musharraf's opposition to the return of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry as head of the judiciary — which would raise the prospect of Musharraf's ouster on legal grounds — a restoration of the judges could provoke a backlash. Zardari's party is more willing than Sharif is to work with Musharraf, who still enjoys considerable support within the military and from the U.S. (which sees him as a reliable ally in the war on terror). Zardari, moreover, may have his own problems with Chaudhry: the judge last October ruled that the Supreme Court would hear legal challenges to an amnesty granted by Musharraf to Zardari and his late wife that nullified earlier corruption charges against them.

Despite the breakdown, neither party seems willing to finalize a split. A PPP statement following Sharif's announcement said that there was "no doubt that the sacked judges have to be restored ... the only question is how best to do it." Sharif, for his part, also took a conciliatory tone, saying he was "very pained" by his decision. But after weeks of talks, including a crisis meeting between the two men in London over the weekend, the issue is unlikely to be resolved, and there is a real chance that the two parties will slide back into the destructive merry-go-round of power swapping and political mudslinging that predominated in the 1980s and '90s. And, of course, if the PPP finds itself unable to work with Sharif's party, it could always seek a new deal with the opposition, which comprises Musharraf's own political supporters. After all, a Musharraf-PPP coalition was exactly what Washington had in mind last year when it brokered the political deal that allowed Benazir Bhutto's ill-fated return to Pakistan.

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