
How serious is Pakistan government split?

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The Pakistan Muslim League-N decision to quit the cabinet has been on the cards for a while.

So when the party's nine ministers handed in their resignations on Tuesday it did not come as a surprise.

The biggest party in the cabinet is the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Its leader is Asif Ali Zardari, widower of Benazir Bhutto.

Since the PPP and the PML-N trounced President Pervez Musharraf's allies in February's general elections, Mr Zardari and Mr Sharif have appeared to enjoy an excellent relationship.

And Tuesday's cabinet split may not be as dramatic as it appears.

Mr Sharif says his party will continue to support the government from the backbenches, rather than join the opposition.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani is refusing to accept the resignations until Mr Zardari returns from abroad.

But the question on everybody's mind is whether Mr Sharif's move is just the end of the political honeymoon or if it marks the end of the young love affair between the two parties altogether.

Full powers

Mr Sharif's decision, as he has made clear to journalists, is based on a single point agenda.

This is the reinstatement "with full powers and privileges" of some 60 judges sacked by President Pervez Musharraf when he declared emergency rule on 3 November, 2007.

President Musharraf had accused them of interfering in executive matters and making the running of his government "impossible".

But many here feel his decision was more to do with his own political survival. The top judges were set to rule on the validity of Mr Musharraf's re-election as president.

Emergency rule proved disastrous for the president.

In the ensuing domestic and international pressure he had to lift the emergency and finally fulfil his promise to step down as army chief and become plain Mr Musharraf.

And then his allies took a hammering at the polls.

Many felt that it was a matter of weeks before President Musharraf stepped down or was forced out.

He had placed the judges under house arrest. The first thing the new prime minister did was to reverse that.

All, it seemed, was at an end for President Musharraf.

But subsequent events have shown that he still has a few cards to play.

Exit plans

"That President Musharraf has to go is a given... what he wants is what he calls an honourable exit," explains one analyst. "This means leaving at a time of his choosing rather than being forced out."

In this, observers agree, he is backed by the army and his key Western allies, particularly the US.

But if the judges are reinstated with all the powers they had before the state of emergency, that could scupper Mr Musharraf's hopes of a dignified exit.

If they were to rule his re-election invalid and his state of emergency unconstitutional, he could face impeachment and even prison.

It is unlikely that the army, still the most powerful institution in the country, would allow that to happen to one of its former

leaders.

Moreover, the United States and other Western countries still see Mr Musharraf as a necessity in Washington's self-declared war on terror.

Prison fears

But the strongest objection to the "full restoration" of the judges comes from Asif Zardari and the PPP. It has its roots back in the days - not so long ago - when President Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto were working on a power-sharing arrangement that would have sidelined Nawaz Sharif.

In October President Musharraf signed a controversial amnesty that, in effect, cleared Ms Bhutto from a number of corruption charges, but left Mr Sharif still facing prosecution.

Many other PPP members, including Mr Zardari, benefited from the amnesty.

But the Supreme Court judges, before their November sacking, had said they would examine whether the amnesty violated the constitution.

So, if they get their jobs back with full powers, Mr Zardari and other members of the top tier of the PPP could end up behind bars.

Horrible replay

That hasn't stopped Mr Zardari's coalition partner, Mr Sharif, from continuing to push for the judges' "full restoration". He says he has no choice as he was given a mandate by the people in the February elections in which his party did much better than expected.

"How can we go back on our word when every PML-N candidate made the restoration their first election pledge?" he asked on Monday.

But is it just a question of honouring the wishes of the voters? The reason, many feel, is Mr Sharif's animosity towards President Musharraf.

In 1999, the then General Musharraf, overthrew Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup. Mr Sharif and his family were subsequently exiled.

In public, the PPP are making light of Tuesday's cabinet split, with party members describing it as a minor complication that will soon be resolved.

And Mr Sharif says his party will support the government on an issue-by-issue basis.

But this may be bad news for the wider population which cares less about political alliances and more about sorting out more pressing problems, not least the deteriorating economy.

The sight of leaders fighting while problems are unsolved looks like a horrible replay of previous episodes of democratic rule in Pakistan.

The country could be set for an increasingly fractious relationship between the right-wing, urban PML-N and the leftist, rural PPP.

Already some political analysts are predicting dates for early elections.

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