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## Going, maybe

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Pervez Musharraf may be on his way out. But he is taking his time.

MANY Pakistanis think that Pervez Musharraf's days as their president are numbered. They may be right. On June 4th a senior adviser to the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which heads the two-month old coalition government, said Mr Musharraf was "reconciled" to stepping down, and that the PPP wanted a "dignified" exit. It is certainly a slow one.

At the end of last month Pakistan was abuzz with rumours that he would throw in the towel and hop on a plane to a safe haven abroad. This followed reports of a late-night meeting when the army chief, General Ashfaq Kiyani, had leaned on the president to quit. It was also reported that the Musharraf appointee leading the crack "111" army brigade, whose remit traditionally includes coup-making, had been replaced by a Kiyani loyalist.

All this was provoked by an unexpectedly strong statement by Asif Zardari, Benazir Bhutto's widower and successor as PPP leader, calling the president "a relic of the past", who could be impeached if he did not quit. Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), or PML(N), the other big anti-Musharraf party, followed up with a blistering attack on Mr Musharraf.

But then the tension abated. The presidency swatted away the speculation and said Mr Musharraf was staying put. One army spokesman called the meeting with General Kiyani and the change in the command of the 111 brigade "routine". Another denied there were any differences between the president and army chief. George Bush weighed in with words of support for his beleaguered friend.

Mr Musharraf made himself hugely unpopular when he sacked the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Chaudhry, in March 2007. He was humiliated when the judiciary banded together to reinstate Mr Chaudhry. To make matters worse, he imposed a mini-martial law last November. And, when Mr Chaudhry threatened to block him from a second term as president, he sacked all the troublesome judges. Then he was accused of complicity in Benazir Bhutto's murder in December—she had pointed a finger at the presidency as a den of conspirators.

The anti-Musharraf mood was reflected in February's election, which swept the PPP to power and all but wiped out the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), or PML(Q), the Musharraf loyalists known as the "king's party". Since then Mr Zardari and Mr Sharif have united to try to strip him of his powers and force him to quit.

To impeach the president, or take away his powers, the PPP and PML(N) would need to pass a constitutional amendment, requiring a two-thirds majority in parliament, which they cannot muster. An alternative way to oust him would be to restore the sacked judges by an executive order, assuming they would go on to rule his presidential election unconstitutional.

That was the implied threat that may have provoked the reported showdown with General Kiyani. Mr Zardari wants to restore the sacked judges—but only if he can weaken their power to rock his boat. For this he needs a constitutional amendment, not an executive order. But he also wants to strip Mr Musharraf of all his powers, turning him into a lame duck.

This is partly because two previous PPP governments were sacked by powerful presidents. But it is also because it is a precondition set by Mr Sharif, who wants revenge for his toppling by Mr Musharraf in a 1999 coup and his subsequent exile. Mr Sharif says he will not support any constitutional amendment that stops the judges from turfing Mr Musharraf out, let alone one allowing him to keep most of his powers. So Mr Zardari is hoping to press Mr Musharraf into quitting. He would then bring the king's party into the coalition and pass a constitutional amendment incorporating reforms that clip the wings of the judiciary.

With one rumoured crisis over, a more serious one may erupt on June 10th, when angry lawyers demanding a restoration of the judges and the sacking of Mr Musharraf start a "long march" from all over the country to converge on Parliament in Islamabad and the president's temporary army house in nearby Rawalpindi. The federal PPP government has said it will call out paramilitary troops that day to deal with possible law-and-order problems. The constitutional wrangle may be about to take to the streets, and turn ugly.

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