

Pakistan Crisis Could Benefit Obama Administration: A Coup in Slow-Mo?

by Ramtanu Maitra

June 23—*For a country all too familiar with military takeovers under one pretext or another, it was enough to set alarm bells ringing: Television anchorman Farukh Pitaqi reflected the exasperation of many when he tweeted: “Bhai, takeover kar lo” (“You might as well take over”).*

On June 19, an already stumbling Pakistan was thrown into another crisis when its home-grown missile, the Supreme Court, evidently in alliance with the once-all-powerful military, struck Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani. The Court demanded and obtained his immediate dismissal on a contempt of court charge. After a couple of days of horse-trading by the diverse and highly confused political forces that constitute the government, Pakistan’s National Assembly elected former Water and Power Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf as the new Prime Minister on June 22. As of today, the new Cabinet has yet to be announced.

The latest crisis centers around the charge of contempt of court against Gilani. However, seemingly the real target of the Court, and, in essence, of the military, is President Asif Ali Zardari. If that is indeed what the Pakistani military is shooting for, the incoming prime minister is not standing on secure ground. It is likely that he will be forced by the judicial/military combination to make the choice: “Give us the head of Zardari on a platter, or else, you will be history.”

It is also a certainty that the Zardari government, whose relationship with the United States is presently at its worst ever, will get no help from Washington. In fact, Washington, whose bonhomie with the Pakistani military is now a thing of the past, would like to see Zardari go, for its own geostrategic reasons. It will not embrace Pakistan’s military rule with open arms, unlike in days of yore; instead, a military takeover will be considered as the best of a bad bargain. Moreover, Washington believes that it holds the trump card on Pakistan’s much-weakened, and presently hostile, mil-

itary. That trump card is the military hardware that Washington supplies and Rawalpindi (military headquarters) pines for to remain “professional” and powerful.

In return, the Obama Administration, which has swallowed hook, line, and sinker the British policy to keep the regional countries suspicious of each other, would not like to see Pakistan develop interdependent relations with Russia, India, or Iran—three important nations in the region. Such a role for Pakistan would be “geostrategically” unacceptable to the Obama Administration.

And, in fact, because of the tense relations between Washington and Islamabad over the last few years, President Zardari’s government has been moving in that direction. A Pakistani military takeover, or a takeover which would put the World Bank-IMF-trained technocrats in power under the military’s shadow, would nip that initiative in the bud. That, no doubt, would please Washington, London, and Riyadh.

Military-Judiciary Nexus

The dirty powerplay that has become the hallmark of Pakistan’s establishment was in full display during the 48 hours that lapsed between Gilani’s dismissal and Ashraf’s election. On June 21, President Zardari and his coalition partners had selected as Prime Minister, Makhdoom Shahabuddin, who had served as Minister of Finance during the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) government from 1993 to 1996, under the assassinated Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto; he is now Minister for Textiles. Things changed dramatically within 24 hours when the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF), headed by Maj.-Gen. Shakeel Hussain, and a federal executive bureau of the Government of Pakistan, issued warrants for Shahabuddin’s arrest on the day he filed his nomination paper for the prime ministership. Again, the brass knuckles of the military were out in the open to convey the knuckle-owner’s message.



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Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani (right) was sacked on orders of the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Chaudhry (left), in an apparent alliance with the all-powerful military; but the real target is President Zardari.

Gilani's dismissal was no surprise since the Supreme Court, under Chief Justice Iftikhar Ahmed Chaudhry, had earlier convicted the premier of contempt of court. On June 19, a three-judge panel, headed by Chaudhry, disqualified Gilani as prime minister and as a member of the lower house based on the earlier conviction. Although some experts said the judge's dismissal of Gilani was legally contentious, the PPP responded meekly, and party secretary general Qamar Zaman Kaira urged supporters to show "patience and restraint," indicating that the government did not want a head-on clash with the Supreme Court.

What exactly transpired behind the scenes is unclear, and the jury is out on who told the Chief Justice to pull the trigger at this juncture. What is available for the consumption of the Pakistani people is that Chaudhry and Zardari had been at loggerheads since 2009, when Zardari opposed Chaudhry's reinstatement as Chief Justice. They have engaged in proxy combat through the courts ever since; indeed, Gilani's dismissal stemmed directly from his refusal to heed court orders to pursue a corruption inquiry against the President.

Briefly, the contempt of court charge emanates from a case filed in 1998 against Benazir Bhutto and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, now President of Pakistan. In 1998, Nawaz Sharif, whose political career is owed fully

to the Pakistani military, was re-elected as prime minister; he initiated the case in Switzerland which accused Benazir and Zardari of embezzlement of \$60 million in kick-backs and the deposit of the funds in Swiss bank accounts. In August 2003, both Benazir and Zardari were found guilty of the scam. However, the penalties—a \$100,000 fine, and the order that they return some \$2 million to the government—were suspended on appeal. In 2009, soon after his reinstatement, Chief Justice Chaudhry ordered the Swiss case reopened. In

2011, the Supreme Court ordered Prime Minister Gilani to send a letter to Swiss authorities to reopen the graft case against the head of state. However, Gilani did not comply with Court's orders because he was of the view that Zardari enjoyed immunity as head of state.

Get Gilani, To Get Zardari

It is evident that Gilani crossed swords with Chaudhry over the issue that brought him down, but years before that he became a target of the Pakistani military. In February 2001, when Pakistan was under the military rule of Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who later became Washington's most prized "ally" in its vague "war on terror," Gilani was arrested by the military police functioning under the military-controlled National Accountability Bureau (NAB)—an anti-corruption agency set up by the military government in 1999. The charge was that he had, along with other politicians, misused his authority while he was Speaker of the National Assembly in 1993-97. He was convicted by an anti-corruption court headed by an active-duty military officer appointed by General Musharraf, and spent nearly six years in prison.

Although Musharraf left the country, and remains in-self-imposed exile in Britain, Gilani remained a target of Pakistan's military brass. When Gilani became

Pakistan's prime minister in March 2008, after the PPP took power in the post-Musharraf era, the development did not please Rawalpindi. Gilani continued to challenge the unconstitutional power that the Pakistani military had exercised over the years and which it now took for granted. As prime minister, Gilani accused Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and the then-head of Pakistan's principal intelligence agency, ISI, Lt. Gen. Ahmad Shuja Pasha, of acting unconstitutionally when they expressed their disapproval of the government.

The rift became more evident last January when Gilani sacked Defense Secretary Gen. Khalid Naeem Lodhi (ret.), a confidant of Kayani. Gilani accused Lodhi, who acted as the liaison between the military and the government, of "gross misconduct and illegal action" and of "creating misunderstanding between the state institutions."

Following his dismissal on June 19 from the prime ministerial post, on June 23, Gilani moved his residence to the sixth floor of the President House where he has been allotted three rooms for himself and his family. Sources told the *Express Tribune*, a Pakistani news daily associated with the *International Herald Tribune*, that security reasons are behind this decision.

Since the target of both the Pakistani military and of Washington is President Zardari, it would be foolish to believe that removal of Gilani from the prime ministership will satisfy the antagonists. The prime objective at this point for the military is to prevent the Zardari government from completing its five-year term and to hold elections next February.

It has already been reported that the newly appointed Prime Minister Ashraf has himself a number of counts against him. In an op-ed with the Indian news daily, *The Hindu*, Anita Joshua pointed out that it is amply clear that the PPP is determined not to write to the Swiss authorities to reopen graft cases against President Zardari. "Among the first tasks awaiting the new man in would be the Supreme Court order asking that the letter be sent. Or go the Gilani way."

Why the Coup Is on a Slow Track

There was a time, not far back, when the military would order the 111th brigade, or the Triple-1 brigade, to roll the tanks into Islamabad from Rawalpindi whenever it had serious differences with the civilian government. In those days, beyond securing tacit support

from the U.S.-U.K.-Saudi clients of Pakistan's military, the people also would welcome the military removal of ineffective, corruption-laced civilian governments.

But those halcyon days of the Pakistani military are history. Although it serves the Saudis without a whimper, its image in Pakistan is that of an outfit out to satisfy the much-hated United States and other Western nations. Its "go-along, get-along" policy to support the U.S. and NATO in the so-called "war on terror" had led the military to killing thousands of Pakistanis and rendering many other thousands homeless.

These killings, carried out by the Pakistani military over the last five years, in particular, did not satisfy Washington or Brussels, which wanted even more killings. In addition, Rawalpindi quietly allowed the Americans to base their drones at the Shamsi airbase in Balochistan, to target whomever Washington chose to target. This did not go down well in Pakistan, where the Islamic jihadis have grown massively, and Pakistani military ranks are now infested with the British-controlled Hizb ut-Tahrir caliphate-seekers. Those Shamsi-based drones have killed many Pakistanis, and the people have become angry realizing that their "protectors" were a part of this deadly game.

Even today, the protectors of Pakistan's sovereignty can do little more than express indignation from time to time as the Obama Administration continues to shout from the rooftops that the drone-fired missile attacks will not only continue, but will increase until such time as the terrorists, such as the Haqqani group, which allegedly operates from Pakistan and is protected by its security apparatus, are altogether eliminated. Washington says clearly that taking such measures is necessary to enhance security for the American people.

Under the circumstances, when the majority of the Pakistani people cannot decide whether they hate their military or the U.S./NATO troops more, it is well nigh impossible for the military to organize the fifers and drummers, and the Triple-1 brigade, to get the tanks rolled into Islamabad and take President Zardari prisoner. Nonetheless, the military, sulking after a series of humiliations at home and abroad, is not only watching from the sidelines, but using the civilian institutions to cut each other up, and hand the morsels over to Rawalpindi.

Chief Justice Chaudhry's ongoing role against the

civilian government on behalf of the military is not unprecedented; it has been a characteristic of Pakistan's judiciary. In the past, the Supreme Court has hanged one elected prime minister—Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on trumped-up charges by a military ruler—and sentenced another—Nawaz Sharif—to life imprisonment. “It has also mastered the art of selective justice. The same supreme court that has been sitting on an ISI corruption case for 15 years, the same judiciary that can't look a retired general in the eye or force a serving colonel to appear in court, feels it perfectly constitutional to send a unanimously elected prime minister home,” wrote Mohammed Hanif, in the guardian.co.uk June 22.

So, once again talk about a coup is heard in Pakistan. “In Islamabad's drawing rooms, it is being speculated that a government of technocrats backed by the army will soon be installed through a soft coup. . . . Another theory is that the judiciary-executive tussle will result in the announcement of early elections and when the assemblies are dismissed, names in the aforementioned list will be adjusted in the caretaker cabinet, which in time, will be granted two to three years of extension,” according to Farrukh Khan Pitafi, writing in the *Express Tribune* June 23.

What Will the Obama Administration Do?

To answer the above question in one word: Nothing. In fact, it is likely that Washington was kept abreast of developments vis-à-vis the Supreme Court's decision by its allies in Pakistan. Washington's technical team, negotiating for 45 days with the Pakistani authorities for the reopening of the supply lines that had been used to bring a significant portion of the basic necessities for the 150,000 foreign troops engaged, now for almost 11 years, in the “war on terror,” was pulled out on June 11. No real explanation was given for the pull-out. All that was said is that the team would be back, whenever.

No doubt, Washington will wait and watch expectantly. U.S.-Pakistan relations hit a nadir during Zardari's Presidency and Gilani's prime ministership. Washington may choose to claim that the duo was responsible for this downturn, but in reality, it was the



Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khar visited Moscow in February, where she met with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov (shown here). Moscow is playing a pro-active role in stabilizing Pakistan, and in the process, Afghanistan and Central Asia as well.

duplicitous transactional relations—tit for tat—that Washington has maintained over the last six decades with Rawalpindi, and not Islamabad, that have led to this situation. It is evident to the Obama Administration that when the military gets hold of the reins of Pakistan's fragmented power structure, things will not be any better. But there are reasons to believe the Obama Administration would still like to see the back of the Zardari government. And, this is why.

Traditionally, Pakistan has been aligned with the United States, and India with Russia. But the mistrust developed between the U.S. and Pakistan during the last few years, notably under the Obama Administration, is bringing about a shift, with great strategic implications for the region, should it continue and be consolidated. It has become evident that Pakistan is making an effort to improve relations with both Russia and India, both of which have responded positively.

Improved Russia-Pakistan relations would not only benefit Russia and Central Asia, but would provide Pakistan with an opportunity to break out of the instability in which it is presently entrapped.

It is significant that in the midst of such instability, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar visited Moscow recently and concluded a number of agreements there. It also indicates an understanding in Moscow of the importance of playing a pro-active role in stabilizing Pakistan, and in the process, Afghanistan and Central Asia as well. Moreover, President Putin has expressed his desire to visit Pakistan. When that visit

occurs, it would be the first such visit by a Russian President to Pakistan.

It is of equal relevance to note in this context that the deterioration of U.S.-Pakistani military relations has given a boost to Pakistan-India relations, a development that is important for regional stability. One of the highlights was the April 8-9 “unofficial” visit by President Zardari to India, and his one-on-one meeting with Premier Manmohan Singh. Reports indicate that during their talks, Zardari argued that an improvement in economic ties between the two countries should not be held hostage to the various irritants, and cited the Sino-India template to drive home his argument.

The two have promised to throw open their economies to each other by the end of the year, and have already liberalized some commercial ties. A new border depot for trade was inaugurated recently. India’s Commerce Minister Anand Sharma, who visited Pakistan recently, said that investment “can form the basis for building political trust.”

In recent months, Pakistan has drastically reduced the number of Indian products barred from the country, and said it will eliminate the bans completely by the end of the year. Islamabad also said it planned to grant

India most-favored-nation trade status, which would reduce tariffs on Indian imports. New Delhi gave that status to Pakistan in 1996. New Delhi said in May it would lift the ban on Pakistani investments inside India, held a Pakistani trade fair in the capital, and is talking about exporting electricity and petroleum to the energy-starved country. Both countries’ central banks are exploring opening branches across the border.

At the same time, during Foreign Minister Khar’s visit, Russia indicated its keenness to take over the 1,640-km TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) gas pipeline project. The project, estimated to cost \$7.5 billion, had been hanging fire for years because of the geopolitical tussle between the United States, another interested party, and Russia.


Russian investors have also expressed interest in the Thar coal project. This is quite an ambitious project for Pakistan, and will involve developing a large energy complex, to produce 6,000 MW of coal-based power, and will bring about gasification and production of liquid fuel from coal. Moscow has also shown interest in the Pakistan-Iran gas pipeline project, and has indicated to Islamabad that it wants Gazprom, the world’s largest gas company, to have a role in the project. Pakistan has conveyed that it would welcome such Russian participation. Foreign Minister Khar was told by her Russian counterpart that Moscow is also interested in participation in Pakistan’s railroads, agriculture, and metallurgy.

The two countries have also been discussing the possibility of developing rail links from Pakistan to Iran and other areas in Central Asia. Russia had shown some interest in Pakistan’s desire to develop rail links to Central Asia from Gwadar Port, located on the Makran coast in southwest Baluchistan, close to the Strait of Hormuz.

These developments are of great importance to Pakistan, an economically depressed nation. It would also benefit the region as a whole were this 175-million-person nation, caught in a vortex of instability, and virtually isolated for decades, to become integrated with its neighbors.

In Washington, however, these developments are eyed with suspicion and unease. It is not unlikely that the Obama Administration, unconcerned about the welfare of Pakistan’s people, will welcome those in Pakistan who will adopt unconstitutional means whenever necessary to maintain the status quo.

**THE
EURASIAN
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**‘The New Silk Road’—Locomotive
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An EIR Special Report



Available from
EIR News Service
P.O. Box 17390 Washington, D.C. 20041-0390
Phone: 1-800-278-3135 or www.larouchepub.com

(1997) 260 pages \$100
(EIR 96-007)