

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1935
May 21, 2008

Preserving Coalition Government Key to U.S. Objectives in Pakistan

Lisa Curtis

A power struggle is underway between Pakistan People's Party (PPP) co-chairman (and widower of Benazir Bhutto) Asif Ali Zardari, Pakistan Muslim League/Nawaz (PML/N) leader Nawaz Sharif, and President Pervez Musharraf. This struggle threatens to unravel the newly elected coalition government and plunge Pakistan back into political chaos.

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani is desperately trying to maintain the integrity of Pakistan's coalition government. Zardari and Sharif have failed to agree on a formula to restore judges deposed by President Musharraf last November, and as a consequence, nine PML/N ministers have submitted their resignations, which the Prime Minister has refused to accept.

The U.S. should support Gillani's efforts to keep the coalition intact, which involves fulfilling election promises, including the reinstatement of deposed judges. Continued cooperation between the PPP and the PML/N is the best hope for stabilizing Pakistan as it copes with economic and terrorism challenges that threaten further political unrest.

Building on Election Success. Pakistanis largely greeted the February 18 elections that brought the coalition government to power with jubilation. The elections were viewed as an indictment of Musharraf's policies, particularly his crackdown on civil society following the November 3, 2007, emergency decree during which the Supreme Court bench was dismissed, judges and political activists were jailed, and the press was stifled. As part of their agreement to rule in coalition, Asif Zardari and

Nawaz Sharif agreed to restore the deposed judges by April 30.

Pakistanis are therefore confused by the PPP's backtracking on restoring the judges. There is a perception that the party is under U.S. pressure to avoid steps that might threaten President Musharraf's hold on power.

The resignation of nine PML/N ministers represents a tremendous loss for the coalition government. Their departure will degrade its ability to deal with the economic, energy, and terrorism crises facing the country. Pakistan currently faces power outages lasting six–eight hours per day throughout the country and spiking food prices that threaten to bring people into the streets. No party can handle these challenges alone. Maintaining the “grand alliance” of the strongest political parties will prevent Pakistan from sliding back toward political unrest.

Firefighting Against Militants in the Northwest. The most dangerous development in Pakistan is the advance of Taliban-backed militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and some of the settled areas of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). The new civilian government, in tandem with the Army, is pursuing negotiations

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm1935.cfm

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

with hard-core militants. Among them is Baitullah Mahsud, who is accused of masterminding the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and several other suicide bombings throughout the country.

The government hopes that negotiations will separate tribal leaders from the extremists and encourage them to turn against the terrorists. The problem is that the tribal leaders don't have the wherewithal to confront the extremists, and the negotiations so far only seem to have strengthened the radicals in the region.

The Pakistani government says that it needs time for the negotiations to bear fruit and is ready to back the negotiations with force if necessary. The danger lies in promoting a negotiating process that legitimizes the extremists and increases their influence.

There are signs that this is already happening. Media reports indicate that the Pakistani government has agreed to allow Taliban-backed militants to establish Shariah law in Malakand Division, which would essentially block the people of this region from appealing the decisions of the Shariat Court to the Peshawar High Court or the Pakistani Supreme Court. It appears that the government may be negotiating away the people's rights despite the fact that religious parties suffered a major electoral defeat in the NWFP. Allowing Taliban-backed militants to demand political changes through force undermines the legitimacy of the elected government and will be viewed by the militants as a victory in their efforts to turn Pakistan into a Taliban-like state.

NATO commanders signaled their concern about the negotiations last week and noted that increased attacks in eastern Afghanistan—up 50 percent from the same time last year—were due partly to insurgents' ability to find safe haven in Pakistan's border areas.

Awareness among Pakistanis about the terrorist threat from the tribal border areas is increasing. Pakistanis are beginning to understand that the Taliban-backed elements are competing for political power with the Pakistani state. Some even acknowledge that the battle between Pakistani authorities and the violent extremists in the border areas is pivotal to the future of the province, if not to the future of Pakistan itself.

Strategic Approach Needed. Instead of engaging in tactical negotiations to buy time, Pakistan needs to develop a strategic approach to dealing with the Tribal Areas that is closely coordinated with and supported by the U.S. Islamabad and Washington must develop a strategy that relies on economic, political, and military tools to undermine the terrorists in the region.

In addition to implementing large-scale economic development programs in the FATA, the U.S. should move forward expeditiously on Reconstruction Opportunity Zone (ROZ) legislation that was introduced in the U.S. Senate on March 13, 2008. The ROZs are meant to encourage investment in and around underdeveloped tribal areas by permitting certain products produced there to enter the U.S. duty-free. Delays in moving ahead with this initiative in the U.S. are creating mistrust in Pakistan about U.S. commitment and undermining the broader U.S. objective of winning hearts and minds through social uplift programs.

The U.S. should also support efforts to bring political reform to the FATA, including incorporation of the region into Pakistan proper in order to increase government writ in the areas. The leadership of the PPP and Awami National Party (ANP), currently ruling the NWFP, supports implementing the Political Parties Act in the FATA, which would extend Pakistani election laws to the region and encourage political activity. Political parties are currently prohibited from operating in the FATA, and a political agent, or federal bureaucrat, runs the affairs of each of the seven FATA agencies. There are 12 seats reserved for FATA members in the National Assembly and eight in the Senate. However, parliament has no authority to legislate on matters concerning FATA, and the FATA legislators wield little authority.

Finally, the U.S. should speed up plans to provide counterinsurgency training to Pakistani paramilitary troops stationed in the FATA. The training of Pakistan's Frontier Corps is scheduled to begin this summer, but it should have started long ago. Washington must encourage Pakistani security forces to remain on the offensive in the border areas until the terrorist threat dissipates. The alternative—relying solely on American military action in

the FATA—risks destabilizing Pakistani politics in favor of the extremists and could leave the U.S. facing a far larger terrorist threat in Pakistan than it faces today.

Conclusion. The political maneuvering in Islamabad over the deposed judges is distracting the Pakistani government from dealing with the grave challenges facing the country, especially the burgeoning Taliban threat in the Northwest.

President George W. Bush's meeting with Prime Minister Gillani on Sunday in Egypt during the World Economic Forum highlighted U.S. support for the new democratically elected civilian government. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently noted that the "absence of freedom is one of the conditions that produces terrorism" and that Pakistan's transition to democracy "could not be more affirming of everything that President Bush believes about the power of democracy, the power

of those principles, and their power to defeat terrorism long term." Now that the new government is facing challenges in its transition to democracy, Washington can best support Gillani's efforts to keep the coalition together by allowing him to fulfill the government's election promises, including reinstatement of the deposed judges.

Washington also must level with Pakistani civilian and military leaders on its concerns over the government's approach to the rising terrorist threat in the northwest border areas. Washington should emphasize that it stands ready to assist Pakistan in its fight against the terrorists as long as the government avoids negotiations that strengthen the Taliban's ability to conduct attacks against coalition forces in Afghanistan and/or al-Qaeda's ability to project terrorism throughout the world.

—Lisa Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.