

Beyond Musharraf

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By Ahmed Rashid

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan -- The resignation of President [Pervez Musharraf](#) yesterday after nine years in office is a major victory for Pakistan's long-battered and still fragile democratic forces. But particularly given the meltdown the country has endured in recent weeks, there are still many obstacles to effective civilian governance. Although the United States will expect things to change in a hurry, they are unlikely to do so right away.

Three of Pakistan's past four military rulers have been driven from power by popular movements, but the politicians who followed the military all failed to take advantage of the people's desire for democracy and economic development and were eventually forced out by the military on charges of corruption and incompetence.

The most pressing issues today involve the long-standing tension of Pakistan's politics and the relationship between the civilian government and the military. The government is led by the [Pakistan People's Party](#), Now run by [Asif Ali Zardari](#), The widower of former prime minister [Benazir Bhutto](#), but his party governs through a complex coalition of parties.

The PPP's main antagonist is former prime minister [Nawaz Sharif](#), head of the Pakistan Muslim League-N, who never misses an opportunity to try to pull down the PPP, his longtime rival, rather than working with it to consolidate the few democratic gains the country has made.

Overthrown by Musharraf in a 1999 coup and humiliated by the army, Sharif rejects concessions to the army and offers no support to the war against [Taliban](#) extremists. Busy pandering to his right-wing supporters, he has little time for American demands.

Sharif believes that his popularity and the parliamentary seats he controls in the majority province of Punjab will eventually regain him the prime ministership.

In the next few days, internal coalition battles will continue as key questions arise, including where Musharraf should live, whether impeachment should proceed, how the senior judges Musharraf dismissed last November should be restored to their offices and who should become president

Sharif is taking a hard line, while Zardari wants to move slowly and not confront the army by further humiliating Musharraf, a former army chief.

These power struggles within the coalition are magnified by the enormous mistrust that exists between the army and both parties. The army's mistrust of the PPP has a nearly 40-year history, and the military dislikes Sharif.

In the past six months, the army and the coalition government have failed to work out a joint strategy to combat the [Pakistani Taliban](#) which is swarming across northwestern Pakistan, or to prevent Taliban fighters from crossing the border and fighting in Afghanistan.

The army, which is not popular, wants the civilian government to take political responsibility for going after the extremists. Sharif has no intention of doing the army's bidding, and Zardari has yet to hammer out a position that can garner coalition agreement. Meanwhile, the economy is in meltdown, with inflation running at 25 percent, but the government has not been able to lift investor confidence.

The mess that Musharraf leaves behind will haunt Pakistan and the world in the months ahead. The international community is likely to grow even more nervous about Pakistan as extremists become stronger and more audacious.

The government and the army are besieged by escalating U.S. and NATO threats that Pakistan must either help catch Osama bin Laden and do more to stop the Taliban's offensives or face stepped-up U.S. bombing against the Taliban inside Pakistan.

Much of the fault for this situation lies with Musharraf's aversion to democracy and his failure to capitalize on the opportunities offered by joining the Western alliance in the war against terrorism after Sept. 11. After the 2001 attacks, Musharraf received massive financial aid (\$11.8 billion from Washington alone) and unstinting international political support -- yet failed to use it for the common good.

He rigged his own reelection in 2002 and long disrupted attempts at a transition to a democracy. After millions of Pakistanis took to the streets last year, demanding the rule of law, Musharraf imposed a state of emergency. Under extreme public pressure, he was forced to rescind his measures and agreed to hold free and fair elections in February, in which his political supporters were trounced.

Meanwhile, Musharraf's relationship with the West disintegrated as the Taliban gained ground in Afghanistan, using its bases in Pakistan. There was a Taliban blowback inside Pakistan as the Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen who protected bin Laden and the Afghan Taliban when they retreated to Pakistan in 2001 were themselves radicalized. They formed their own militias with their own agenda: to turn Pakistan into an Islamic Taliban-style state. In December, they assassinated the one person who could have pulled the country together -- PPP leader Benazir Bhutto.

Most Pakistanis see the coalition government as the country's last chance for democracy, and they want it to work. The army, the government and the international community have to work together so that Pakistan can start tackling its real problems.