

The Scary Unraveling of Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

As Obama announces an aggressive counter terror campaign in Afghanistan, the region's most dangerous nation—Pakistan—gets more grim by the day. Ahmed Rashid on President Zardari's loss of control. In their recent visits, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, national security adviser James Jones and CIA chief Leon Panetta promised to push the Indians on regional issues. But the Pakistani army does not trust American promises and has leaned on the civilian government in Islamabad to scale back its largely pro-U.S. positions.

Under unrelenting pressure from the army and political opposition parties, President Asif Zardari has ceded authority over Pakistan's nuclear-weapons command infrastructure to the prime minister. But that may be just the beginning. The move comes as Zardari prepares to hand over further powers to Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani in order to avoid impeachment on possible corruption charges, as well as to satisfy the army—which appears determined to weaken him, if not oust him from power altogether.

There has been an unrelenting campaign by the military and political parties who are allied to the army to weaken Zardari so irreversibly that he is forced down from office and a new, more pliant president could be appointed who would do the bidding of the army—viewed by many as the largest and most effective political party in the country. Zardari is seen by the army as too pro-American and unwilling to support the military's hardline against U.S. policy in Afghanistan, the Afghan government, and India.

The turmoil comes at a critical moment.

The U.S., Britain and other NATO countries are now strongly demanding that the Pakistan army do more to hunt down Osama bin Laden and confront the Afghan Taliban leadership—all of whom are based in Pakistan, according to U.S. intelligence.

Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown gave a virtual ultimatum to the army and the intelligence services in Islamabad on November 29 to "take out" Osama bin Laden, after castigating Pakistan for doing little on the issue. "Three-quarters of terrorist plots that threaten Britain arise from that area of Pakistan," Brown said.

The same tough words are expected to be repeated by President Barack Obama in his speech Tuesday when he outlines further U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Two weeks ago, Obama had sent a private letter to President Zardari urging him to do more to root out the extremists on Pakistan's side of the border. Gordon Brown will be meeting Prime Minister Gilani in London this week. "If we are putting our strategy into place, Pakistan has to show that it can take on al Qaeda," said Gordon Brown.

The army's relationship with the U.S. administration is becoming increasingly strained as the military accuses the Americans of failing to put pressure on India to reopen stalled talks between the two countries and also to address Islamabad's accusations that India is undermining Pakistan through its large presence in Afghanistan.

The tensions may be coming to a head, but they have been building for some time toward the crescendo on Saturday, November 28: the day of Eid, the most important religious festival on the Muslim calendar. That day, an amnesty expired that had protected Zardari—along with more than 8,000 other politicians, bureaucrats and officials—from thousands of charges of corruption, murder, and the like.

That immunity deal, known as the National Reconciliation Ordinance, was introduced in December 2007 to facilitate a deal between the then-president, General Pervez Musharraf, and Benazir Bhutto, so that she could return home from exile and contest the elections freely. After her assassination in December 2007, Bhutto's

Pakistan People's Party, or PPP, went on to win the elections, and Zardari, her husband, was elected president in August 2008.

The government was unable to renew the NRO, either through parliament or the courts, because of a ruling against it by Pakistan's supreme court. Hundreds of leading PPP politicians could now be prosecuted for corruption. Although Zardari has immunity from prosecution because he is president, he could still be impeached by parliament. He has previously spent a total of 11 years facing corruption and murder charges that were never proven by earlier regimes.

By giving up control of the official body—the National Command Authority—that controls the deployment and use of Pakistan's estimated 60 to 100 nuclear weapons, Zardari further conceded another key demand of the army. Key cabinet ministers and the heads of the army, navy, and air force are members of the nuclear authority. But the army manages and controls the nuclear weapons and its budget and personnel are a deeply held secret.

Civilians have never controlled Pakistan's nuclear program—and neither Zardari nor Prime Minister Gilani, who is also from the PPP, have ever been taken into confidence by the army on the subject. Zardari's move is symbolic, but it does show his continuing weakness and his inability to take on the powerful army.

At the same time, there is a more genuine democratic need for Zardari to hand over his powers to the prime minister and parliament. Ostensibly, Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy, but Musharraf—who was both army chief and president—had accumulated extraordinary powers for the office.

The political parties are insisting that these powers, now written into Pakistan's constitution as its 17th Amendment, are given back to the prime minister and parliament.

In the weeks ahead, Zardari is likely to comply with this demand and surrender his powers, which will leave him as a figurehead. There is enormous political speculation as to whether that will satisfy the army or only embolden its members to press further for Zardari's resignation.

The president has support from the Obama administration, which has tried to strengthen Pakistan's civilian government. A bill passed by Congress commits \$1.5 billion a year for five years to help rebuild civilian institutions, as well as up to \$2 billion a year in military aid and military support funds.

The Bush administration provided more than \$12 billion to Pakistan between 2001 and 2007. But over 70 percent of that money went directly to the army. That helped fuel rising anti-Americanism in Pakistan. The dilemma for the U.S. is that even as it tries to prop up the civilian government with aid, the army continues to increase its dominance of the political sphere.

The army is now virtually controlling all aspects of foreign policy toward India and Afghanistan. Balancing the relationship between the army and the civilians has become the most difficult task not only for Pakistani politicians but also for the U.S. and NATO.