

Pakistan's problems will only get worse.

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Ahmed Rashid in Lahore.

Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari is unlikely to challenge [the Supreme Court's decision](#) to dismiss his Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani and deprive him of being a member of parliament for five years. However Mr Zardari's attempt to avoid a confrontation with the courts that could result in country-wide violence and the return of the army stepping, could also open the door to his own judicial dismissal.

For four years there has been a steady and increasing rise in conflict between Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudry and the ruling Pakistan's Peoples party. The courts have failed to try and dismiss Mr Gilani and Mr Zardari. Mr Gilani [was convicted on April 26](#) for protecting Mr Zardari in a corruption case, but also for refusing to accept the court's interference and jurisdiction in the constitution. Pakistan's parliamentary democracy and [constitution](#) gives the power of sacking a prime minister to parliament – not to the courts.

Given the economic, social, foreign policy and political crises faced by the government, Mr Zardari and the PPP have decided not to block this second attempt by the Supreme Court to sack Mr Gilani. There have been [three days of widespread rioting](#) in the Punjab province due to massive cuts in electricity just as summer temperatures are soaring, there is a severe economic crisis, [a state of civil war in Balochistan](#) province and the continued terrorist actions by the Pakistani Taliban. Meanwhile Pakistan's relations with the US and its Nato allies are not improving.

What happens next? In these dire circumstances a confrontation between the courts and the government over whether Mr Gilani should resign or not, in which ultimately the courts call upon the army to intervene on their behalf could easily lead to the country's fifth martial law. Mr Zardari may be trying to avoid that by calling upon his party to show calm and quickly nominating a new prime minister from the PPP, who will easily get sworn in by Parliament because the PPP and its political allies hold the majority.

However that is unlikely to satisfy the opposition parties – led by politicians such as Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif – who are demanding early general elections (these are due in spring 2013 but could be bought forward to the end of 2012). The opposition has broad support for its demand because of the multiple failures of the government. It may be Mr Zardari's best bet to agree to early elections and take his party to the hustings as a martyr in the cause of the democracy. It would keep the army in its barracks and sustain the democratic process despite its heavily tainted appearance right now.

If the PPP wishes to fulfil its full term until 2013 there are likely to be more bruising conflicts between the courts and Mr Zardari. One issue that is hanging over Pakistani heads is the so called [Memogate affair](#) in which a judicial commission formed by the Supreme Court found former Ambassador to the US Hussain Haqqani guilty of treason. Mr Haqqani, who now lives in the US, vehemently denies the allegations. That judgement is now in the hands of the Supreme Court, which is likely to send it for a full trial in the weeks ahead. If that happens the case will also try and implicate Mr Zardari and other government figures for treason. Avoiding such an outcome would be best for everyone and early elections is the only possible way that Pakistan could get back on the rails.