

Pakistan urgently needs stability

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By Ahmed Rashid

Pakistan's deepening political crisis has escalated dramatically, with the Supreme Court [initiating contempt proceedings against Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani](#). The judgement could lead to the dismissal of Mr Gilani and eventually President Asif Ali Zardari, as the army appears to be giving full backing to the courts.

Since the 1950s every political crisis Pakistan has faced has been a result of civilians trying to wrest power and control from the military. This crisis is no different except for one important aspect - the military has no intention of seizing power. Instead it has [allied with the Supreme Court](#) in an attempt to get rid of a government that is widely perceived to be corrupt and irresponsible.

But in an era when hope of democracy is spreading through the Arab Muslim world and powerful armies in countries such as Thailand and Turkey have learnt to live under civilian control, Pakistan is an ongoing tragedy. Its military refuses to give up power, its huge stake in the economy and its privileges, while its politicians refuse to govern wisely or honestly and decline to carry out basic economic reforms such as taxing themselves.

The crisis would be more manageable if Pakistan was not so important. But for the fifth largest nuclear power to be tipping into economic and political disarray, just as the US and Nato needs Islamabad's help in extracting itself from Afghanistan and be supportive in dealing with Iran is clearly troubling the world.

In the past, friends such as the US, the UK or Saudi Arabia have been able to mediate between political factions and the army, but this time nobody is trying to play such a role. No country wants to back a military that continues to sponsor Islamic extremism, but no country can afford to support a government that is so inept.

Pakistanis face a similar dilemma. One reason the military is so wary of a coup is that it knows that having staged four coups and messed up the country's political progress so completely, a large section of the population would never support another military takeover.

In the past year Pakistan has become more and more isolated even in its own neighbourhood while a 60-year-long relationship with the US collapsed - for which both sides are to blame. The [killing of 24 Pakistani troops by US helicopters](#) in November on the border with Afghanistan was the last straw for Islamabad.

To the frustration of Nato forces, Pakistan has continued to support the Afghan Taliban even while the government called for talks between the Taliban, the US and Kabul. These talks are finally underway but the three sides have effectively bypassed Pakistan, thus further infuriating the military.

For weeks now the army and the prime minister have been engaged in an escalating war of words, with Mr Gilani insisting there cannot be a state within a state run by the military and that the army is breaking the law. The army in turn has accused Mr Gilani of violating the constitution and telling lies. A separate battle has ensued between the courts and the government, with Mr Gilani insisting that parliament is supreme and should decide all issues and the courts should not interfere with how he runs the country or the constitution.

Meanwhile the country is [paralysed with huge energy shortages](#), the shut down of industry, the near collapse of the railways and the national airline as well. It comes against the backdrop of a continuing war against the Pakistani Taliban and Sunni sectarian extremists. Every week dozens of people are killed in suicide attacks, bombings, shootings and sectarian massacres. Unsurprisingly, all this has made the government extremely unpopular.

The government, which rules through a coalition, is also facing loss of support from some of its coalition partners thus weakening its position. Smaller regional parties are reluctant to oppose the wishes of the all-powerful army, while others have had enough of the misrule of Mr Zardari's Pakistan People's Party.

The military cannot afford a coup nor do they need one. Once the courts order the expected dismissal of Mr Gilani and perhaps Mr Zardari, the army and opposition politicians can mount relentless pressure on the two leaders to accept the court's verdicts and resign.

What would follow would be an interim government followed by general elections within three months. That may not be such a bad thing. The tragedy is that nothing is in place to prevent such a crisis occurring again and again.

The writer is author of books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, most recently 'Descent into Chaos'