

Paralysis in Pakistan

The National Interest, 04/10/2010

By Ahmed Rashid

Four NATO helicopter-gunship incursions into Pakistani territory leaving three Pakistani soldiers dead, Pakistani retaliation by closing down the border crossing for NATO goods convoys entering Afghanistan, a war of words between top officials and a suspected megaterrorist strike in Europe plotted by the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda in the mountains of Pakistan's tribal areas.

It is enough to make anyone's head turn. Except most Pakistanis are more intently watching the domestic political drama that has paralyzed the country, undermined the economy and dearly impacted desperately needed flood-relief efforts and Western donor support.

For the third time in two years the army appears to have lined up with Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry to try and legally disqualify either one or both Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and President Asif Ali Zardari and force them to resign. It would be a constitutional rather than a military coup, but the army would be even more in the driver's seat as a result of an ousting.

Several petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court that have resurrected various charges of alleged corruption against Zardari and accused Gilani of contempt of court for not carrying out the judiciary's orders. Since 2008, two earlier attempts to unseat Zardari through the courts were patched over in behind-the-scenes talks.

The court has now given the government until mid-October to accept its demands and mend its ways. In a tense three-way meeting on July 27 between General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Gilani and Zardari, the army chief is reported to have warned the other two to carry out a drastic reshuffle of the cabinet, end corruption and carry out tough reforms of the economy.

The government has come in for enormous criticism for its incompetence in the wake of the floods which since July have affected 20 million people and left 2 million homeless.

The United States, Britain, Japan, the World Bank and even the usually noncombative UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon have publicly warned the government that its efforts at transparency in receiving flood-relief money are not good enough, while it also must raise money itself through new taxes.

Pakistan is caught in a terrible dilemma. Whether the government stays or a new civilian setup emerges, Western donor suspicions about Pakistan's effectiveness in helping itself will continue.

That is partly because of the army, which has increased its powers. In July Gilani gave General Kayani a three-year extension in a bid to gain his support. Kayani has acted responsibly in refusing to be lured by calls for military intervention from the usual lineup of disgruntled politicians, but he has also asserted himself and acted increasingly independent of the government.

The army dictates the government's foreign and national-security policy and has stymied attempts by the civilian government to improve relations with India or Afghanistan.

The recent blowup on the border with NATO forces seems to be more a result of General Petraeus's growing frustration with Pakistan continuing to give sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban leaders, while at the same time Petraeus tries to notch some battlefield successes and high-profile kills before President Obama undertakes his December policy review on Afghanistan.

On the border things will calm down because, despite Pakistan's desperate plight, there is little Washington can do to force the army to end its multiple policies with the U.S. administration, NATO, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the Taliban.

The government has a few days (mid-October) before the next hearing of the Supreme Court, to carry out a meaningful cabinet reshuffle and show more resolve in curbing its bad practises. But it's not certain that it will even do that.

There are huge regional and international risks involved if Pakistan's crisis is allowed to get worse. Worsening relations with Washington are just the tip of the iceberg of the dangerous massive social unrest, huge spikes in inflation and joblessness, and a corresponding rise in the spread of the Pakistani Taliban. All stakeholders need to take a deep breath and step back from the brink, including the Americans.

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Source: <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/paralysis-pakistan-4175>