

Asif Ali Zardari And The Battle To Hold Pakistan Together

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By Ahmed Rashid

It is a sign of the times in Pakistan that Asif Ali Zardari, the man most likely to be elected president today, had to move from his heavily fortified house in Islamabad to the even more heavily fortified prime minister's residence. And not a moment too soon. There was an assassination attempt on prime minister Yousuf Raza Gailani on Wednesday.

Zardari, the controversial widower of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, who spent nine years in jail facing charges of corruption, is now the principal target for al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban.

His past and the fact that he has never held political office are the main concerns of most Pakistanis, but his presidency could determine nothing less than the future of his nuclear-armed state and the West's war on terror.

Pakistan has, since the September 11 attacks, become home to al-Qaeda's leadership and a gathering point for the Taliban, who continue to challenge Nato in neighbouring Afghanistan.

The new president's resolve will not only be tested by how he tackles these threats but also by the growing problem of Pakistan's own Islamic fundamentalists.

These groups, which often have links to the Taliban, are fostering an atmosphere in the country's religious schools, or madrassas, which British intelligence officials believe could help indoctrinate youths into committing acts of terror on Britain's streets.

The greatest fear for many is that if Pakistan's civilian government becomes weaker and more discredited in the eyes of the public, it could be toppled by Islamists. This holds out the prospect of fundamentalists winning control of a nuclear-armed state for the first time.

For Nato - and particularly British soldiers - fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, what happens in the next few weeks in Islamabad could mean life or death.

If Zardari succeeds in tackling even some of Pakistan's problems his chequered past may be forgiven, but if he does not, his opponents in the army may bring down the curtain on civilian rule.

Zardari has had many reincarnations. Born in 1955, he grew up in Karachi where he earned a reputation as a playboy, with a disco in his basement. In the 1980s, as the husband of prime minister Benazir Bhutto, he was dubbed Mr Ten Per Cent as stories circulated about alleged commissions earned from business deals.

None of the charges ever stuck - the one conviction he received was overturned - and when he left jail in December 2003 he was hailed a hero by many in his wife's Pakistan People's Party for enduring incarceration by President Pervez Musharraf and still being able to joke about it.

When Mrs Bhutto returned to Pakistan last year she left him behind in Dubai to look after their three children. Nobody expected him to enter frontline politics. But since his wife's murder last December he has had to again reinvent himself - this time as a ruthless, street-smart politician wielding power behind the scenes to hold the PPP together, easing out Musharraf, rebuilding relations with the army and trying to keep his main rival, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, at bay.

Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy but as a result of Musharraf's coup in 1999 the president is all powerful, able to appoint top officials and the army chief as well as dismiss the government. While the prospect of this massive accumulation of power in Zardari's hands worries many Pakistanis, he sees it as an opportunity to end political bickering so that the government can get on with tackling the two major issues of the economy and terrorism.

Much depends on how he uses his power. His biggest advantage is that the PPP is the only party in the country commanding support in all four provinces.

However, the PPP has had bitter relations with the army for 40 years - partly because it stands for civilian dominance over the military, seeks better relations with the army's traditional foe India and has opposed Islamic extremists whom the army has supported in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

An attempt by Zardari in July to curb the powers of the army's Interservices Intelligence (ISI), which interferes in local politics and directs policy on the extremists, failed miserably.

Washington is betting on both horses, supporting Zardari's election but also keeping close ties with the army chief General Ashfaq Kiyani. So far, Kiyani has refused to intervene in politics but the army, rather than the government, controls the on-off war against the Pakistani Taliban

Zardari has to now wean the army and the ISI away from its past policies, rather than confront it. To do so he has to forge a strong working relationship with Kiyani. There are already signs that Kiyani is undertaking a reshuffle in the army's top ranks, which may also see changes in the ISI.

That may be helpful to the West and Zardari as we approach the seventh anniversary of September 11 with Osama bin Laden still at large. Al-Qaeda and its allies may be defeated in Iraq but they are stronger than ever in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The Pakistani army and intelligence services fostered the Taliban to keep Afghanistan destabilised in the 1990s. Much to the fury of the US, the army still allows the Afghan Taliban to use Pakistani soil for recruitment and rearming. It maintains they are wholly different to al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban which they are trying, with little success, to turn out of the lawless regions.

Zardari's greatest challenge is to convince the army and ISI that such distinctions are now meaningless, as all three groups fight together to carve out a new Islamic state in the Afghan-Pakistani borderlands.

If Zardari acts responsibly, keeps his cronies at a distance and wise men close, he could gain the army's trust and help it create a new strategic policy towards all extremists. The future of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the West's war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban depend on it.