

ISAS Brief

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Musharraf's Resignation – A Cause for Celebration and Concern for Pakistan

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On 18 August 2008, President Pervez Musharraf bowed to the inevitable and resigned from his post, two months short of the 10th anniversary of his coup d'état when he ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. In his resignation speech, Musharraf insisted that he was not guilty of any of the charges being made against him and that he was acting in the best interest of Pakistan by stepping down to avoid a protracted power struggle and political uncertainty. Despite his protestations, the writing was on the wall following the 18 February elections when the people spoke loudly and clearly through the ballot box, shifting the power base away from Musharraf to the civilian parties led by Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari. The nail in the coffin was provided by Musharraf's two indispensable backers – Pakistan's military and the United States, both of which were clearly reassessing whether continued support of Musharraf might prove to be an unacceptable liability. Without their full support, Musharraf had no choice but to step down. Already, the provincial assemblies in Punjab, Sindh, the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan had tabled motions with overwhelming support demanding Musharraf seek a vote of confidence, and it was obvious that he would have failed.

One might wonder why Musharraf's two institutional backers may have had a change of heart. Arguably, the military, under General Kayani, was genuinely trying to extricate itself from the political mess and give civilian rule a chance. Equally importantly, it was not going to risk having a former Chief of Army Staff being impeached, as this would tarnish the military's reputation of which it was fiercely protective. The United States, guided by its own security interests in the region, was also beginning to accept that not only was Musharraf fast becoming the wrong horse to bet but that other alternatives were viable. It is rumoured that Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's visit to Washington last month was to convince President George Bush to stop supporting Musharraf. It would be reasonable to speculate that Prime Minister Gilani would have reassured Washington that its primary interests in Pakistan would not be compromised, and that the new democratic government would continue to support the United States' fight against Al Qaeda and Taliban militants.

The one theoretical, but wholly unrealistic, option left would be for Musharraf to exercise his power under Article 58(2) (b) of the Constitution to dissolve the Assemblies and impose

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Presidential rule. Musharraf, in fact, referred to this possibility in his resignation speech but dismissed it. Clearly, any such attempt would fail as he would not have the political support of his party or allies and he would not have the necessary logistical support of the military.

On the face of it, Musharraf's resignation was the best news for Pakistan. By all accounts, the resignation was widely celebrated as a victory for democracy and vindication of the recent popular uprisings and civil society struggles. To that extent, Musharraf's removal was significant because it removed the final obstacle to the return of democratic, civilian rule. As we saw, even though the 1998 elections delivered an overwhelming mandate to the political parties and were seen as a vote against Musharraf, he continued to remain President. His continuation in office became an impediment in the smooth functioning of the government and rankled political parties who wanted to pursue democratic reform. The fact that President Musharraf, even at his weakest, could, in theory, use article 58 2(b) to dismiss the elected assemblies and re-establish his position was akin to the sword of Damocles hanging over Pakistani democracy.

There is, however, another side to the story. The focus on Musharraf has diverted attention from the more acute problems of soaring inflation and spiralling food and oil prices, as well as the sliding foreign exchange reserves and drop in foreign investment. In addition, terrorism remains the biggest threat to Pakistan's stability and a concerted effort is vital to tackling this problem. The last thing that Pakistan wants at this stage is political uncertainty and lack of direction in the fight against terrorism. The Indian National Security adviser, M. K. Narayanan, has drawn attention to this danger, saying, "We abhor the political vacuum that exists in Pakistan. It greatly concerns us."

Clearly, Musharraf's resignation is cause for celebration and concern. The key question is what implications this will have on the political stability and security of the nation. This turns on three dynamics: the relationship between the domestic political parties, principally the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N); the relationship between the military and civilian rule; and the relationship between the United States and the civil/military leadership in Pakistan. There is no running away from the fact that there is a huge cloud of uncertainty over the future of Pakistan in terms of the Presidency, the political parties and the military.

In terms of the domestic political parties, both the PPP and the PML (N) did come together to form the government, but they are political rivals with their own agendas. The glue holding the two parties together has been the common goal of ousting Musharraf. Now that he has stepped down, there is a real danger that innate differences and, more significantly, the intractable divergence on the critical issue of the restoration of the judiciary could tear the coalition apart. The PML-N has insisted that all the judges, including former Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, who had been dismissed by Musharraf during the Emergency, should be reinstated through a simple majority resolution passed by the parliament. The PPP, on the other hand, wants to link the restoration of the judiciary to broader constitutional reform, including changes to the terms and powers of judges. The speculation is that the leader of the PPP, Asif Ali Zardari, does not want the return of some of the judges, especially the former Chief Justice, for fear that old corruption cases against him could be reopened. The PML-N is holding steadfast to the need for restoration of the judges, failing which it would pull out of the coalition, throwing Pakistani politics into further chaos.

The military has been undoubtedly the centre of power in Pakistan; sometimes ruling directly through coups, but always lurking in the background as King-maker or power broker. It is likely to continue playing that role in the foreseeable future. But for now, the military has chosen to adopt a low profile and allow the civilian political process to continue. This is a win-win situation for the military; a successful democratic transition will help repair the military's image as a supporter of democratisation, but if the political parties continue to put self interest over national interest and implode the coalition, that will create the perfect excuse for the military to move in once again on the pretext of rescuing a dysfunctional state. The military, in any case, has its plate full with increased militant activities along the border areas, including a recent direct attack against a key military installation, resulting in almost 80 deaths and over 100 injured. How this civil-military relationship plays out over the coming period will be crucial to Pakistan's return to full democracy.

Finally, the role of the United States and its relationship with the civil and military leadership is an important factor. The United States' number one foreign policy concern with respect to Pakistan is the war on terrorism. Musharraf had been a favoured leader, as he had been accommodative of United States interests. As a military dictator, Musharraf was not constrained in adopting policies that may not have been popular domestically. This is not a luxury that the political parties have, and it is not clear to what extent the PPP and the PML-N have a consensus on the strategies to be adopted in the struggle against militancy and terrorism. If the parties have divergent policies on this, then whichever party is more United States-friendly will secure the United States' support. The issue will then inevitably become politicised, thereby undermining a concerted national effort. For example, Sharif has already indicated to the United States that Pakistan would adopt strategies that were apposite to Pakistan's interest, which would include greater negotiation and mediation with militant groups. The United States is not comfortable with too much emphasis placed on negotiation, for fear that this could allow the militants to regroup and strengthen themselves. Whether this means that the United States may, if it deems necessary, support the military instead of the democratic parties is something that cannot be ruled out.

Finally, while all this political uncertainty hangs over Pakistan, the immediate question of who is going to be President is an equally important one. The Election Commission has announced 6 September 2008 as the date for Presidential elections. Several names have surfaced as potential contenders, including Zardari. It will be very interesting indeed if Zardari does snare the top post.

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