

Thousands Fill Streets for Protest in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, [Pakistan](#) — In the darkness of night, thousands of protesters, many of them lawyers, converged on the main boulevard of Islamabad on Friday, chanting and calling for the dismissal of President [Pervez Musharraf](#) and the restoration of the senior judges he dismissed.

The crowd, including an unusual number of women for this Muslim country, along with families and members of small political parties, continued to swell after midnight, waiting in a festive atmosphere for the main speakers to arrive by bus and plane from around the country.

Dubbed the “long march,” the protest started earlier this week with lawyers marching and driving from the major cities toward Islamabad, the capital.

It was organized by the lawyers’ movement, which has been fighting for the restoration of the chief justice of the Supreme Court, [Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry](#), and about 60 other senior judges who were fired in November by Mr. Musharraf under his emergency rule.

The demonstrators jammed on Constitution Avenue in front of Parliament were good-natured in the balmy summer night.

But they presented a challenge to the new civilian government led by [Asif Ali Zardari](#), the widower of [Benazir Bhutto](#), and to the embattled president, Mr. Musharraf, whose power has steadily eroded since his political party lost in elections in February.

Shouts of “Go Musharraf, Go Musharraf” burst from the crowd. At one point, a speaker taunted Mr. Zardari, saying that the food he had sent for the crowd to enjoy during the speeches had been rejected.

Many offices, and almost all embassies, were closed on Friday amid fears of a terrorist attack or provocateurs, but in the end the rally proceeded smoothly. “Constitution Avenue has never seen so many people, ever,” said Farrukh Saleem, executive director of the Center for Research and Security Studies, an independent research group. The police estimated that 40,000 had joined the procession at its height, The Associated Press reported.

Mr. Saleem said the turnout from around the country showed that the lawyers, by sustaining their protests since March 2007, had managed to create a new power center in Pakistan.

“This is historic: civil society has established itself as an alternative source of power,” Mr. Saleem said. “For 60 years, we’ve had executive dictatorships whether military or civilian.”

Mr. Musharraf first fired Mr. Chaudhry in March 2007, but the chief justice refused to quit on the grounds that his dismissal was unconstitutional. The lawyers' movement campaigned on his behalf, and he won his legal case before the Supreme Court.

Mr. Chaudhry was reinstated in July 2007 but fired again in November, when Mr. Musharraf feared the Supreme Court was about to rule against the legality of his re-election as president. He was detained at home with his family for more than four months, and he was released when Mr. Zardari's political party, the Pakistan Peoples Party, won elections in February.

Mr. Zardari alienated many lawyers when he backtracked on a pledge he made in March to restore Mr. Chaudhry and the other judges through a parliamentary resolution. Instead, the Pakistan Peoples Party introduced a series of constitutional changes to Parliament last week, which were interpreted by the lawyers as limiting the independence of the judiciary.

The leader of the junior political party in the coalition, former Prime Minister [Nawaz Sharif](#) of the Pakistan Muslim League-N, withdrew his party members from the cabinet in protest over Mr. Zardari's decision not to support the restoration of the judges.

Mr. Sharif showed solidarity with the lawyers, appearing on the stage with by his party's activists at 2:30 a.m. Saturday to address the demonstrators. Mr. Sharif said there should be a process of public accountability for Mr. Musharraf, and he should not be granted a safe exit. In recent weeks, Mr. Sharif has repeatedly called for the impeachment of Mr. Musharraf.

Aitzaz Ahsan, the leader of the lawyers' movement, who drove in a caravan of cars for three days from Lahore, also arrived after midnight as local television channels continued to show the event. At an earlier stop, 60 miles outside the capital, Mr. Ahsan said: "We are out in the streets to save Pakistan. We want social justice; we want political justice and constitutional justice."

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