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Center for Research and Security Studies

House # 60, Main Nazim-ud-Din Road, F-6/1, Islamabad

Tel: (+92-51) 8314801-3. Fax: (+92-51) 8314804

Email: mail@crss.pk. Web: www.crss.pk

Pakistani Nation: Between Curry and the Court

1. Background:

March 8, 2007– Just a day before his meeting with the then Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, President General Pervez Musharraf seemed in absolute control; a rubber stamp parliament offering

“70% of the Pakistani population is living under the daily income of 2US\$,” Federal Information Minister, Sherry Rehman said.

no resistance whatsoever to anything that the General wished. Fast forward to March 8 2008. President General

(retired) Pervez Musharraf crippled and helpless. A ceremonial president, a “tiger parliament” in confrontational mode, army support in decline and a nation up in arms. This is what meets an ordinary eye but Pakistani politics have always been more than ordinary.

Here’s the other side of the coin. May 2008. President Musharraf, though not in direct command of power, has proven to be an expert politician still playing last of his strategic cards while keeping them extremely close to his chest and letting none of his opponents know about his next move. His constant decline in holding executive power has been phenomenal in just one year’s time and it is widely believed that he is ruling Islamabad mainly because of Washington and partly London. He has shown resilience typical of a Special Services Group commando – wouldn’t give up till the end and if he has to go down, he would take a few of his enemies along. According to a columnist in Daily Nawai Waqt, “He has done this in such an evil way that faced with other crushing problems, people of Pakistan have now started questioning the wisdom and management of the new government and this sense strengthens Musharraf’s bargaining position with the ruling coalition in the parliament.” The columnist adds that this is “really shameful for Asif Ali Zardari that his name is now being associated with Musharraf in the same manner as were Shaukat Aziz and Chaudhary Shujaat.

To be certain, this column in Nawai Waqt is not the only voice that is criticizing the handling of the restoration of the judiciary issue by the political coalition but a lot is now being said both on the screen and the street that this government better get over with this crisis and should provide the much needed relief to the masses. “People are crushed under the phenomenal price hike, loose government control on the wheat crisis, extremely troubling shortage of the electricity and most importantly, the political uncertainty that people had

hoped would end when they voted on February 18, 2008,” a TV compeer remarked while ending his program.

The restoration of the judiciary appears to be an extremely important issue to the ruling coalition in Islamabad but the people of Pakistan are crying for the basic necessities of life that this government has simply failed to provide thus far. According to the statement of Pakistan’s Federal Minister for Information, Sherry Rehman on May 6, 70% of the Pakistani population is living under the daily income of 2US\$ and relief would be provided to them before the Federal Budget is announced. At present, the whole Pakistani nation is confused and is watching the political drama unfold itself while, at the same time, they are crushed yet unable to prioritize between their curry and the court.

2. Present Situation:

The issue of the court is certainly important but equally important is the issue of curry that is – and should be – cooked in every household of Pakistan. But at present, curry-cooking seems out of the priority paradigm.

A delegation of PML-N had to fly to Dubai to hold talks with PPP on the issue of the restoration of judiciary on/before the promised date of April 30. Many rounds of talks proved futile and then Mian Nawaz Sharif, the two-time PM, flew to Dubai to break the impasse. Upon his return to Lahore in early May, he was able to announce some achievement and understanding with the PPP and talked of “sacrificing” for a greater cause. His press conference implied that both parties had agreed to restore the judiciary on/before May 12. “Would that be the beginning of a new Pakistan and if so, what is the social, political and economic roadmap to achieve that” a student of a public university reacted in a quick TV survey. A large part of the Pakistani population is asking the same question if the PML-N’s “principled stance” will provide necessary bread and butter to the masses.

“We elected a parliament and the parliament elected our government; we need to see our government do something for us,” a customer queuing in front of Utility Stores of Pakistan.

No; it will not but the restoration of judiciary will ensure the rule of law and the independence and empowerment of the judges would ensure that the market also operates on just lines,

Imran Khan, Chairman of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf said in an interview on Express News TV.

Speaking in Senate on May 8, 2008, PPP's senior leader and Federal Minister for Labor and Manpower, Syed Khurshid Shah said that the previous government had left "nothing but only thorns and we would need to work together to pluck them out." Many observers question his sincerity with his words and if the party is sincere, then it should get over with the judicial crisis as soon as possible so that the actual business of the state is paid attention to. With the commodities prices sky-

The plummeting economy is begging closer coordination between various coalition parties.

rocketing, dearness of the necessary livelihood supplies and sharp rise in the Sensitive Price Index have already broken the bone of the vast majority of the Pakistani population. Pakistani PM, Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani also noted

this situation and remarked that if the present market trends were not stopped then "the middle and white collar class will be finished in Pakistani society."¹ We will not let this happen, the PM further resolved but "this nation now needs practical measures and steps instead of mere hollow announcements as people have had enough of these."²

Since "hungry people are not happy people," there are serious indications that this unhappiness and discontentment will further frustrate the people of Pakistan and their belief and participation in the political process will lessen. Such a situation will push Pakistan deeper in the state of political instability and deficit. The masses are now craving – and crying – to see tangible solutions to their daily problems instead of indulging in constitutional or political debates at the leadership level. "We elected a parliament and the parliament elected our government; we need to see our government do something for us."³

3. Recommendations:

Understanding the importance of first 100 days of any political government, CRSS strongly suggests that:

1. The coalition government should expeditiously resolve the issue of judiciary and start paying closer attention to the problems that ordinary people of Pakistan face every day.

¹ PM addressing a public rally in Multan, May 4, 2008.

² Capital Talk, Geo News. May 7, 2008.

³ A customer queuing for wheat flour in front of Government operated Utility Stores of Pakistan.

2. Parliament should take a final decision – and quick one – and civil society organizations must adhere to and respect any form or shape of that decision.
3. The plummeting economy is begging closer coordination between various coalition parties.
4. The Government should take urgent steps to address the issues of price hike, dearness of daily commodities, shortage of wheat and electricity and deteriorating situation of law and order