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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: pager@crss.pk. Web: www.crss.pk

Pakistan's Three Major Challenges after Musharraf

General (retired) Pervez Musharraf's nearly nine-year long turbulent and controversial rule over Pakistan came to an end on Aug 18 with his resignation that he announced in a nationally televised address. Musharraf's exit marked the culmination of a vicious campaign that both mainstream political parties – the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, assassinated on Dec 27, 2008 and the Pakistan Muslim League (N) of another ex-premier Nawaz Sharif had mounted on him. Resign or face impeachment, was the message. Musharraf chose the former because that most probably saved him from possible prosecution. Secondly, it saved the ruling coalition from a long-drawn parliamentary wrangle involved in the impeachment process whose fate appeared somewhat uncertain.

Musharraf's resignation thus brought to an abrupt, though not surprising, end the conflict between the pro and anti-Musharraf political parties that had been brewing since the general elections on February 18 in which both the PPP and PML-N emerged as the largest parties.

But uncertainty still clouds prospects for political and economic stability. Reason: failure of the ruling coalition to fulfill its promise of restoring former Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and some five dozen judges whom Musharraf dismissed after imposing a state of emergency on Nov. 3, 2007. Both parties had committed themselves to restoration within 72 hours of Musharraf's departure. With differences between the two coalition leaders, PPP & PML-N, the matter is now (August 21, 2008) referred to three junior partners: Awami National Party (ANP), Jamiat-e-Ulma-e-Islam-Fazal (JUI-F) and MNAs elected from the troubled Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

With this state of the ruling coalition, the uncertainty continues and Pakistan faces three major challenges:

1: Political Deadlock:

This means the issue that became the root cause for the undoing of the Musharraf legacy i.e. initial suspension of the Chief Justice Chaudhry on March 9, 2007 following his refusal to become pliant in Musharraf's plans for his reelection as president, remains unresolved and a thorn in the heart of the coalition. Mr. Sharif wants immediate and unconditional restoration of all the sacked judges. I gave my word to the nation on this, he has reiterated on a number of occasions. Asif Ali Zardari, the PPP co-chairperson, on the other hand, has – certain reservations – reservations thus far not expressed publicly. But insiders say he has issues with Justice Chaudhry, a person considered by all as head-strong and uncompromising on principles as well as matters of law. Mr. Zardari now has leaned on the maverick chief of the religio-political party JUI-F – Maulana Fazlurrahman, and the ethnic Pashtun nationalist ANP to blunt Mr. Sharif's insistence on the restoration – at least of Justice Chaudhry if not all those who had rejected Musharraf's state of emergency.

Another thorny issue overshadowing the coalition's success in securing Musharraf's resignation is finding a consensus replacement for Pervez Musharraf; Mr. Sharif's party desires a president, preferably from the smallest (in population) of four provinces i.e. Balochistan. Mr. Zardari apparently is lobbying for a presidential candidate from his home i.e. the southern Sindh province. In the process, it seems, he has also won over the support of another maverick Altaf Hussein, the self-exiled head of the ethnic Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which is concentrated in Pakistan's largest city Karachi. Mr. Hussein has proposed Zardari as the most suitable candidate for the Presidency. With 25 members in

Stop the operation or face more suicide strikes, is the message by Taliban spokesman Maulvi Omar Khalid to the 120,000 Pakistan army and paramilitary forces currently deployed along the 2,475 kilometer long border to Afghanistan.

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the national legislature and six in the Upper House, the MQM possesses considerable leverage that can tilt the balance either way should the coalition fall apart either on the issue of judge's restoration or the presidential candidate.

2: Economic Decline:

Political parties' preoccupation with these issues is taking its toll on economy and governance as well; Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves are down to under nine billion dollars (from 17 billion in early December 2007), food inflation has cut deep into the pockets of the dominant majority of Pakistanis, with the sensitive food index averaging an increase of 30 percent a month in the first half of the current year, unusually high fuel prices have added to daily cost of living, while a massive 4,000 Megawatt power shortage has not only curtailed production but also making lives for the vast majority difficult.

Continued inter-party squabbling over the two issues has so far prevented the coalition from addressing the pressing economic crisis, which can stoke unrest and despair among people at large, and thus precipitate the already volatile political landscape.

3: War on Terror:

The third challenge that stems from Pakistan's partnership in the US-led war against terrorism since late 2001 is the spiral of violence that is currently sweeping across northwestern and border regions next to Afghanistan. In the first three weeks of August alone, close to 850 people have fallen, including over three hundred militants, in firefights involving the military and Taliban militants in the Bajaur and Kurram tribal regions as well as in the Swat valley. As many as 32 deaths in an August 19 suicide attack in a hospital at Dera Ismail Khan, the doorway to the embattled North Waziristan region, also exemplify the extent of Taliban retaliation to the army operations in the areas mentioned above. On August 21, two suicide bombings on the army fortified area of Wah Cantonment, 30 kilometers from the Federal Capital, claimed the lives of nearly 100 people and

wounded 80. This was the 5th attack in 2008 on the Pakistani Armed Forces while 7 suicide attacks were against the police and paramilitary forces from within a total of 26 suicide attacks in year 2008. Rahman Malik, Advisor on Interior Affairs to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, in a policy statement to the

“Either we give in to Taliban and hand over Pakistan to them or conduct operation against them,” Pakistan’s Interior Minister, Rahman Malik said in a policy statement in National Assembly.

National Assembly said that there were two options available to the government: “Either we give in to Taliban and hand over Pakistan to them or conduct operation against them.”

A dominant majority of the Pakistani public and legislature sees this deployment as the continuation of the policies adopted under Pervez Musharraf and thus despised as "US diktat." Although the army is now operating "under the civilian leadership" the governments – both central and provincial have yet to convince common Pakistanis of the "ownership" of the war against militants, which can be likened with a low scale insurgency.

While fighting insurgents, who are held responsible for violence in neighboring Afghanistan, is a necessity dictated by Pakistan's international obligations, the government in Islamabad has yet to market it as "our war because of its inherent hazards to the society."

The government's predicament lies in the compulsion of cooperation in the anti-terror war; even if common Pakistanis disapprove the counter-insurgency efforts led by the Army, it must continue battling Taliban and extending cooperation to the US and NATO-led troops (based in Afghanistan) to help them eliminate insurgency there. Any deviation from this path, as many nationalists and religio-political groups demand, is likely not only to undermine the "war on terror" but could also jeopardize the international goodwill that Pakistan badly needs under circumstances to cope with the looming economic crisis. So far the "Musharraf glue" kept major parties together. With Musharraf gone, the situation now requires them, more than ever, to stick together and put the country on the path of political stability as well as take it out of the economic crisis.