

Musharraf clings to power

THE INDEPENDENT, Islamabad



Pervez Musharraf

The motivation of the black-suited lawyer, campaigning noisily in front of barbed wire, barricades and several dozen riot police, could not have been simpler.

"We're gathered here for the defence of justice and the release of the confined judges," said Mumtaz Ahmad, as his fellow lawyers chanted slogans calling for the ousting of Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf and the release of Chief Justice Iftikar Chaudhry, whom he sacked and placed under house arrest. "This has been done by Musharraf. We are here for solidarity."

In the wake of Benazir Bhutto's assassination in December, and the dubious process by which Musharraf became president, few expected last week's National Assembly elections to be fair or peaceful. Remarkably, however, for the most part they were.

With Musharraf's parliamentary allies sorely beaten, there is now optimism among Pakistanis that, for the first time in several years, a genuinely civilian-led government is to take control. Yet the issue of what to do with the President, and the Chief Justice who defied him, could yet derail the agreement that the two successful parties are trying to forge.

On the surface, the issue appears reasonably straightforward. Nawaz Sharif, a former prime minister and head of the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), which unexpectedly won the second-largest number of seats, called for Chaudhry's restoration through

future, and the restoration of Chaudhry and other judges sacked by the president when they refused to ratify his imposition of a state of emergency.

"We want to form the parliament first and then let the parliament look at the issue of the judges," a senior PPP member told The Independent on Sunday. "We need to have some legal basis on which to do this." Sharif, for the time being at least, gone along with the PPP line. Surprisingly, the question of who should be prime minister is not causing any friction: various names have been mentioned, but the only sure thing is that it will not be Sharif or Zardari, neither of whom have a seat in the National Assembly.

Yet for all the diplomatic nuance, many within the lawyers' movement believe, Musharraf is being given a lifeline by the West. One of the demonstrators near Chaudhry's house last week was carrying a banner that read: "US Shame On You."

Yesterday the PPP indicated that if it does not immediately push for Musharraf's ousting for which it would need a two-thirds majority it may try to reduce his powers as president. In particular, it said, it wished to change Article 58 (2b) of the Pakistani constitution, which allows the president to dismiss the prime minister and the parliament a power which has been used against both the PPP and Sharif's party in the past.

Just a week ago, few would have predicted that Musharraf would find himself in a situation in which he could be fighting for his political life.

Ahmad, the lawyer demonstrating outside Chaudhry's house, saw a simple solution. "We are against Musharraf, we are saying he should quit his office," he said. "The people, with their votes, rejected him."

Pakistan's politics is a three-dimensional game of chess, however. Alliances and agreements that appear solid can quickly evaporate, while bitter rivalries can vanish and a partnership be formed if suddenly the situation demands it.

Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari, Benazir Bhutto's widower and the PPP's leader, have said that their parties will, for the first time, work together to form a government. But to preserve harmony they have skirted the issue of Musharraf's

future, and the restoration of Chaudhry and other judges sacked by the president when they refused to ratify his imposition of a state of emergency.

Aitzaz Ahsan, a veteran leader of the lawyers' movement who has been in regular contact with Sharif throughout the election period, said: "Iftikar Chaudhry must be restored, for how will we ever have an independent judiciary if a judge knows that acting independently could mean a life behind barbed wire?"

The US and Britain have been urging the two main parties to move swiftly towards forming a government. They say this is more important than becoming fixated on the issues of Mr Musharraf and

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Philippe Daily Inquirer/Ann, Manila

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"Because they say, if you want your left and right sides of the brain to work efficiently, it should be customary for you to have seven to eight hours of sleep at night," she added in a mixture of English and Filipino.

When asked by radio commentator Joe Taruc about the "Gloria resign" call, the President said she would rather focus on the economy than think about it.

She said the economy would not have drastically improved if she had paid attention to "political disturbances".

"That's why I am focused like a laser beam on the economy. So you can see the fruits of that focus, and that's my attitude until now," she said.

Arroyo said that despite the current political tumult, she remained on track to fulfill her duties as President.

"Yes, that's part of my discipline," she said, recalling the advice of her late father, President Diosdado Macapagal to "do what's right; do your best and let God take care of the rest".

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