

Only 300 audit reports before PAC since 1973!

Situation calls for a strengthening of institutions

WE will begin at the beginning. Two per cent of Bangladesh's GDP growth is swallowed up by corruption. That is a distinctly uncomfortable sign of how the objective of a promotion of public welfare is all too easily and regularly defeated. And now comes the revelation, per courtesy of a roundtable in the city the other day, that of the thousand audit reports prepared and submitted to the Jatiya Sangsad since 1973, only 300 have been discussed by the Public Accounts Committee of parliament in all these years. Incredible as it may sound, the fact remains that the revelation shows up an image of the abysmal failure of institutional bodies where dealing with public concerns is the issue.

And now add to the failure issue the fact that no mechanism exists for the nation to know what has happened to the 700 audit reports which the PAC did not discuss. Clearly, an audit report is a serious issue and must lead to speedy action. But judging by what has been going on since 1973, it is now obvious that these reports have been treated in cavalier fashion. The attitude is indicative of a major drawback at work. In the first place, the efforts put in by the Comptroller and Auditor General's office while preparing audit reports are simply pushed aside, for the most part. In the second, the situation points to the ineffectual nature of the work the various Public Accounts Committees of the JS have been doing in the nearly four decades since the liberation of the country. In other words, our failure to have in place strong institutions responsible for upholding the public interest has led to corruption and its relentless proliferation across the board. A strong parliament and especially a powerful PAC is a much needed check on those with clear motives of indulging in corruption. Unless such a powerful body is there, exerting its power with full authority, corruption cannot be combated.

It has been a particular feature of politics in the last many years that too much time was wasted in setting up the various parliamentary bodies. That was reflective of a laid-back approach. Fortunately, the present JS, the ninth one in the nation's history, has corrected that failure by quickly moving to have all parliamentary committees formed in its very first session. The expectation now is these bodies will truly work in the spirit in which they are constitutionally set up. It is especially the PAC that must convey the message to the country that its actions are binding and that it means business.

Food rationing initiative

Corruption-free distribution key to success

THIS is a major worker-friendly and pro-poor undertaking the government has decided to embark on from the upcoming historic May Day. The labour and employment minister has announced a plan, albeit in broad outlines, aiming to feed as many as three million readymade garment workers at a subsidised price of Tk18 per kg of rice. Each worker will be entitled to buying 20kgs of rice per month.

Given that the garment workers as a major contributor to the country's export earning are ironically still in the low income bracket, it only heartens one to know that the government is about to initiate food rationing for them.

They deserve it, but the issues here are duration of the programme -- whether it would be for the lean period of three months or all the year round -- and, more importantly, what would be the modalities of distribution.

The chief bane of the food rationing in the past had been corruption-riddled distribution systems. The nexus between dealers and food officials or inspectors has been the spoiler. But, of course, garment workers belong to an organised sector and we are given to understand that the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) will shoulder the responsibility of coordinating with the government.

Potentially thus, the distribution mechanism can be straight-forward with lesser number of players and also layers involved in the process. Still, constant vigil will have to be maintained by government agencies to ensure that pilferage, black marketing, corruption and favouritism do not take place in any form or shape.

Let's not forget, four million mouths have swelled the ranks of ultra-poor due to rising prices in the recent past. They will all need to be sustained through VGF cards, Test Relief and Food for Work. It is all too known that the government is subsidising farmers in important ways, so that the entirety is a massive undertaking in which the cost of even partial failure could be heavy. Therefore, a high premium is automatically placed on the success of the rationing programme.

But it ain't like that

Not only was the mutiny not an uprising, it cloaked itself in such garb only in order to dupe the gullible into taking part and to obscure the true motives of the perpetrators.

ZAFAR SOBBHAN

WHEN the story initially broke on the morning of February 25 of the siege at BDR headquarters there was instant reaction among a considerable segment of the commentariat (and among significant sections of the general public as well) of qualified support for the mutineers and of solidarity with their ostensible cause.

The story was immediately and unquestioningly positioned within the framework of class struggle, and the initial responses to the incident for the most part uncritically adopted this framework as the prism through which to understand the incident and as the basis for analysis.

It is true that this framing of the incident was helped along by remarkably sympathetic coverage by the television stations, though I do think that some of the accusations that have been leveled against the stations have been a little unfair (it is incorrect to suggest, for instance, that no reporter thought to ask about the safety of the hostages).

But there can be no question that the images on television of the mutineers with red bandanas covering the lower half of their faces, brandishing weapons and shouting slogans, immediately seemed to give credence to the initial framing of the story as class revolt.

I recall listening to an older mutineer responding to the question as to what the mutineers wanted by explaining quietly (most of those seen on TV were clearly worked up and agitated) and with dignity: *BDR sena bahinir niyontre ar cholte raji na* (BDR is no longer willing to run under the control of the army).

Commentators both on-line and on TV sagely pointed out the working class cadences and regional accents of the mutineers that we are unaccustomed to hearing

on national television and expounded at length on the genuine grievances of the BDR jawans and how their concerns had long been neglected by the officer corps.

Stories were spread about the corruption of the army officers commanding BDR, the BDR daal-bhaat program was reviled as a titanic den of corruption that had led to the plundering of the public coffers at the expense of the starving masses, and vicious and utterly unfounded accusations were traded about the honesty of the head of the force.

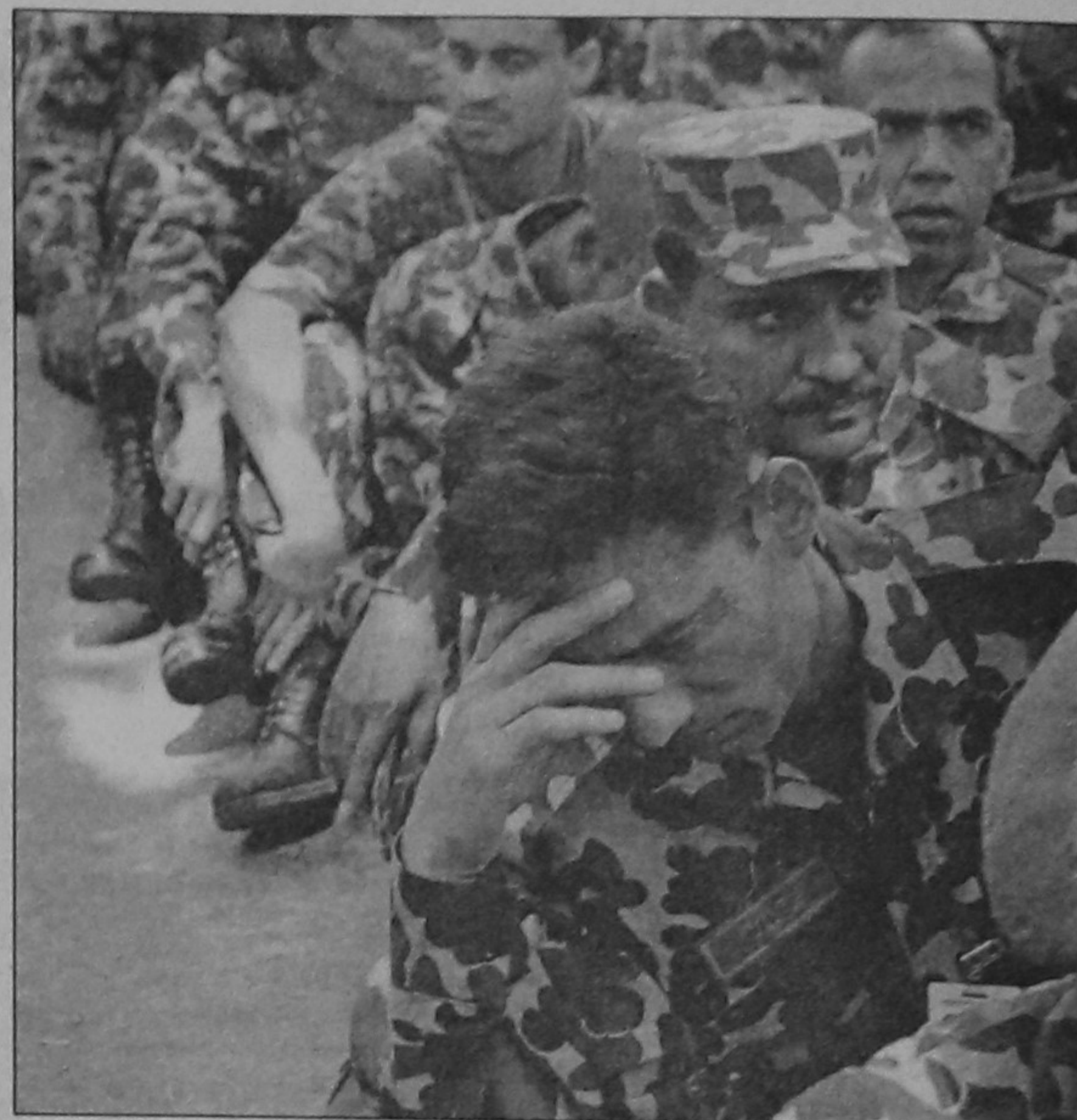
Now that the dust has settled, the siege is over, the investigation is underway, and we are left to count the dead and mourn, we know that the mutiny was no class struggle, that it was no blow for the rights of the marginalised and dispossessed, that it was not the first shot in a revolution that would bring justice and equality to this hapless land of ours.

I do not discount the possibility that significant numbers of the mutineers were duped into believing that they were taking part in just such an uprising, nor that there are genuine grievances that exist with respect to conditions of service and lack of opportunity for jawans to rise through the ranks to a senior command post.

But let's get one thing straight. The mutiny and massacre was no people's revolution. Not every uprising of the subaltern against his or her ostensible oppressor is a noble tale of resistance and insurrection.

Sometimes those rising up in arms are not romantic revolutionaries striking a blow for the oppressed everywhere, but murderous thugs, and sometimes those against whom they have risen are not heartless oppressors who glory in grinding down their charges under the heels of their jackboots, but decent and conscientious men and women who have committed no crime or wrong.

We still seem to have a predilection



Duped?

towards looking at everything through the prism of class. But, at least in this instance, that isn't a relevant or helpful narrative for framing the issue.

My beef with the framing is two-fold.

In the first place, focusing on the class struggle element of the massacre is a red herring that can only, in the final analysis, distract us from the true cause of the massacre and the more serious tensions and fissures in our society that it was a part of.

But, even worse, what we had here was the cynical co-option of the language and tropes of dispossession in the service of creating a

cover narrative meant to misdirect attention. Not only was the mutiny not an uprising, it cloaked itself in such garb only in order to dupe the gullible into taking part and to obscure the true motives of the perpetrators.

This being the case, even raising the class issue in one's post-facto analysis of the incident is not merely misdiagnosis of the root cause of the crisis, but in fact furthers the cynical co-option of the class struggle trope advanced by those who were behind the massacre.

Zafar Sobhan is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

More than money

For the rich, Madoff is a living lesson on madness. He sawed off the tree branch while he was sitting on it. Wealth creation is a relative thing, and for that matter if nothing is left for others, it has the vacuity of an empty theatre running an exciting show.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

BERNARD Madoff is an American businessman who made off with other people's money. He operated the largest investor fraud ever committed by a single person, defrauding 4,800 clients of \$65 billion. At 71, he faces spending the rest of his life in prison and could be forced to pay \$170 billion in restitution. Different people inhabit different worlds. In this country, Madoff would have been worshipped as an icon of inspiration, a role model for the rich.

Then, different worlds also inhibit different people. People flee their own countries to dodge taxes or run from the law. Seven-time motorcycling world champion Valentino Rossi took up residency in Britain to avoid paying taxes in his homeland Italy.

Roman Polanski, the noted Hollywood filmmaker, is wanted for having sex with an underage girl. He has been hiding in Poland and France since 1977 to avoid prosecution in the United States.

So, Las Vegas is the sin city of the world, but when you are in the Vatican City, Hallelujah,

praise the lord. If you steal from the public coffers of Zululand, you can stash that money in the banks of Switzerland. People and places have their characteristics. What is despicable in one country is desirable in another. One man's truth is another man's travesty.

Know it that when in Rome it's wise to do as the Romans do. People, like trees, are nourished by the soil in which they grow. Madoff grew up in the land of opportunity, but his unbridled opportunism has landed him in jail. Excess of anything is bad. Even God is upset when limits are crossed.

It's interesting that people and places move in lockstep. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed when their inhabitants went too far with their sins. When a tsunami hit coastal lands, people were its collateral damage, victims of no fault of their own.

"What is our task?" asked former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. "To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in," he replied. People can make places as places can make them.

The ancient Greek city of Sparta raised

warriors whereas another city, Athens, raised men of letters and arts. Japan was known as a war-loving nation before World War II. Switzerland never went to war in the history of Europe.

How does the Madoff story connect? It connects by the way of an important question: which comes first, chicken or egg? Is Madoff's greed a product of the American ethos? Or, are people like him to blame for where America stands today? Does he reflect on his country, or does the country reflect on him?

There is a larger context to this question, given the sphere of American influence across the world. Like the sky reflects in a waterhole, America reflects in its dominoes. The Hollywood movies, American education, its fashion industry, scientific inventions, and pop culture have the world spellbound. That, if nothing else, is the most atrocious outcome of the American supremacy. In dress, habit, mannerism, eating and lifestyle, the United States has produced across the world legions of cookie-cutter Yankees from Timbuktu to Tibet.

Likewise, America has also produced many gremlins of greed and dispersed them all over the world. Many of these proto-Madoffs will never go to jail, because while other countries have copied the American style, they haven't copied much of its substance. In these countries dictators run democracy and brigands run business; everybody does crime, nobody gets punished.

But Madoff's mischief reveals a terrifying

thing. When people shortchange places, places also shortchange them. Maurice Greenberg, a former CEO of the AIG Group, which owns the American Life Insurance Company, lost his net worth in the company stock and lost much of it. Richard Fuld, Chairman of Lehman Brothers, lost \$1 billion. Citigroup's former chairman Sanford Weill lost about \$500 million.

The message is both loud and clear. Hollow souls make hollow soils, and vice versa. And, how do the Madoffs of the world handle that tragedy? They build their webs of deception through fancy offices, flashy cars, and travel in private jets. They have pictures of governors, mayors, movie stars, and athletes hung on their walls. What they lose in reformation, they tend to make up with demonstration effect.

For the rich of the world, Madoff is a living lesson on madness. He sawed off the tree branch while he was sitting on it. Wealth creation is a relative thing, and for that matter if nothing is left for others, it has the vacuity of an empty theatre running an exciting show.

One hopes Madoff will change in prison as he gets his chance to think. Life is more than money. It's more than a legal tender that promises to pay the bearer on demand. At times, life forces the bearer to pay.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. Email: badrul151@yahoo.com.

Last-minute reversal

The official sense of panic was apparent in the measures it took to secure Islamabad, emptying university hostels, disabling text-message services, attempting to muzzle cable-news channels and closing down all schools and offices.

FASIH AHMED

THE announcement came shortly after 5 a.m. In an amazing turnaround, Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani came on television to declare that the country's deposed chief justice was being restored to his position, thus bringing an end to what was shaping up to be a bruising battle for the survival of his government and President Asif Ali Zardari.

"I restore the deposed chief justice and others according to the promise made by me and the president," said Gillani, after a tumultuous night of high-level meetings including a key session with the anxious army chief Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. Gillani also ordered the release of detainees and urged all sides to move forward. Rumours that a dramatic move was afoot had been making the rounds, and gained ground when cordons inside the capital began to be removed.

Celebrating the news, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and lawyers' movement leader Aitzaz Ahsan, who were separately en route to Islamabad, called off the national protest march that had begun last week. "I never had any doubts about our success," Ahsan told Newsweek in a phone call.

The news was also welcomed by the United States, which called the decision "statesmanlike." In a statement issued by the US Embassy in Islamabad, Washington called for "all Pakistanis and their political representatives to work together, with the support of their friends and allies, to peacefully strengthen their democracy and ensure a positive dialogue as they move forward to deal with the many issues confronting them."

Kayani and diplomats from the US and UK had been urging Zardari to allow the protest march and sit-in in the capital, to release detainees and to compromise on the issue of restoring the deposed chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry to defuse political tensions between erstwhile allies Zardari and Sharif.

The prime minister's startling announcement came hours before Islamabad was set to be besieged by tens of thousands of protestors and hours after the government's authority eroded in full public view in Pakistan's second-largest city, Sharif's hometown of Lahore.

Disobeying orders to detain opposition leader Sharif, police simply stood by as he left his Lahore home Sunday afternoon with several thousand supporters to participate in

the sit-in in the capital. Similarly, police didn't detain Ahsan, the leader of the lawyers' movement.

Heading Sharif's call for civil disobedience, some government officials in Lahore -- who had earlier in the day resisted the protestors by ordering police to use batons and tear gas on crowds in front of the Lahore High Court -- either relented or joined in. Lahore's district coordination officer, the city's top bureaucrat, announced his resignation outside the court as protestors cheered.

The government had placed shipping containers to seal all exits from Lahore and all entries to Islamabad to scuttle the protest march. Sharif's party overcame these impediments handily, hiring cranes to remove all barriers and getting help from sympathetic police officials.

Speaking to the party faithful Saturday night, Sharif dismissed threats to his personal safety and declared that change was inevitable. "No one can stop this people's tide," he said, evoking the populist rhetoric of Zardari's late wife, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated in December 2007.

Zardari had vowed to snuff out the protest march and sit-in, which sought to restore the judges, including Chaudhry, who were sacked under a martial-law order in November 2007 by his predecessor, Pervez Musharraf. Embarrassed by the meltdown of police discipline, the government announced that it hadn't tried to detain Sharif in the first place. Zardari's late Saturday night offer to undo the overthrow of Sharif's

government in the Punjab province was also rebuffed by Sharif.

The official sense of panic was apparent in the measures it took to secure Islamabad, emptying university hostels to prevent on-campus protests, disabling text-message services, attempting to muzzle cable-news channels and closing down all schools and offices. Zardari had also been weakened by differences emerging within his political party, with two senior cabinet members resigning in the last week.

Sharif's party polled the second-highest number of votes in last year's elections and had briefly been in a coalition with Zardari's Pakistani People's Party. Although 57 of the 62 sacked judges have been reinstated, the parties disagreed on Chaudhry. Zardari said the judge had become "politicised." Sharif said Zardari was afraid the judge was too independent-minded. Other politicians had said they expected Chaudhry to try Musharraf for violating the Constitution during his nine-year rule and reopen corruption cases against Zardari.

Relations were further strained when the Punjab government, led by Sharif's brother Shahbaz, was dismissed last month through a controversial court order. The province has since been ruled through federal fiat. But with the restoration of the top judge and Sharif's strengthened position, his brother's dismissed government is now likely to be reinstated.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.