

Pakistan opposition calls on Zardari to quit

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's main opposition party yesterday called on President Asif Ali Zardari to resign after a court threw out an amnesty protecting him and senior government figures from corruption charges.

The Supreme Court declared Wednesday that a 2007 National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) which contained the amnesty was unconstitutional and struck it down, paving the way for thousands of criminal cases to be revived.

Zardari is immune from prosecution while in office, but that immunity and his eligibility for president could now be challenged, as a number of graft cases were pending against him when the NRO was passed.

"We are suggesting President Zardari should resign on moral grounds. All the cabinet members must immediately tender their resignations," said Siddiqui Farooq, spokesman for the opposition

Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N).

"President Asif Ali Zardari should resign on moral grounds and should not depend upon the crutches of the constitution," he added.

Pakistan's constitution guarantees Zardari immunity, but also states that presidential candidates must be pious, honest and truthful and never have been convicted in a criminal case.

Although Zardari has spent years in jail over corruption charges, he alleges the charges were politically-motivated and questions hang over whether he was ever actually convicted of any crime.

The NRO was passed in October 2007 by then-president Pervez Musharraf, under pressure to hold elections and end about eight years of military rule.

It quashed charges against a number of politicians including Zardari and his wife and ex-prime minister Benazir Bhutto -- who was assassinated two months later -- to allow them to stand for office.

Zardari's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) went on to win elections in 2008, restoring civilian rule, but the NRO expired at the end of last month and the PPP did not have enough support to renew the ordinance in parliament.

Other NRO beneficiaries include the interior and defence ministers.

Senior figures in the PML-N, led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, have already called on Zardari to give up wide-reaching powers inherited from Musharraf to sack the prime minister and dissolve parliament.

Analysts say such a move may be the only way to save his struggling presidency as he faces rock-bottom public approval ratings and strained relations with the powerful military.

Any political fracas will likely unsettle Islamabad's Western allies, who want stability to allow Pakistan to focus on quashing Islamist extremism.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani lawyers set fire to US and Israeli flags during a march to celebrate the Supreme Court's decision on the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) in Lahore yesterday. Pakistan faced fresh upheaval after a court annulled an amnesty protecting President Asif Ali Zardari and ministers from corruption charges, a move that could threaten his political survival.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters cheer for Sri Lanka's ex-defence chief and presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka after delivering his nomination papers to the Election Commission in Colombo yesterday. Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse and his main rival, former army General Fonseka handed in their nomination papers for next month's nationwide elections.

UN official proposes to replace 'tainted' Karzai with US-friendly figure

ANI, Kabul

A top UN official in Afghanistan had proposed a plan to replace President Hamid Karzai with a more Washington-friendly figure three months ago - when the widespread fraud in the presidential election was becoming clear.

The top UN official in Kabul, Norwegian Kai Eide, has revealed that his deputy, American Peter W Galbraith, proposed that he would begin with "a secret mission to Washington."

"He told me he would first meet with Vice President Biden. If the vice president agreed with Galbraith's proposal they would approach President Obama with the following plan: President Karzai should be forced to resign as president," the New York Times quoted Eide, as saying.

Then a new government would be installed led by a former finance minister,

Ashraf Ghani, or a former interior minister, Ali A Jalali, both favourites of American officials, he added.

According to Eide, Karzai was "deeply upset when he learned of the plan put forth by Galbraith."

"I spent quite some time trying to calm down the accusations of international interference by talking to the president," he said in a letter responding to a critical report by the International Crisis Group, a research organisation.

Galbraith left the country in early September and was fired weeks later.

In an interview with the paper, Galbraith denied actively promoting the idea of persuading Karzai to leave office.

Galbraith said he only considered an effort to persuade Karzai to leave so that an interim government could be installed in case a runoff election did not occur until May 2010.

Difficult for Zardari to save his chair: Expert

ANI, Islamabad

Following the Pakistan Supreme Court's monumental judgement declaring the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) as 'unconstitutional', corruption cases against President Asif Ali Zardari are set to be re-opened.

"The NRO is in conflict with the constitution," the court, headed by Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, said in a late-night decision.

The apex court's ruling has lent a voice to the opposition's call for Zardari's resignation, and experts believe that it would be a difficult task for the President to save his chair amidst the fast multiplying demand for his resignation.

"With no moral authority it will be difficult for the President to stay in power," The Times quoted Hasan Askari Rizvi, a former professor of politics at Punjab University and a leading political

commentator, as saying.

Political leaders involved in massive corruption cases is not a new thing in Pakistan, but the scale of Zardari's undisclosed assets has shocked many.

The President, who was known as 'Mr.10 percent' during Benazir Bhutto's regime, has been accused of accumulating assets worth 1.5 billion dollars (900 million pounds) around the world through illegal means.

While the apex court's verdict is likely to witness restoration of all corruption cases against Zardari, including a money-laundering case in a Swiss court, Presidential spokesperson, Farhatullah Babar, stressed it would not affect the immunity enjoyed by the President.

"We believe that no criminal case can be instituted or continued in any court against a president or a governor during the term of office. So, this doesn't affect the president of Pakistan," Babar told

media persons minutes after the judgement, which is being described as a defining moment for the judiciary in the country.

However, legal experts seem to differ on the repercussions of verdict.

Some believe that the 17-member bench ruling could open the way for a challenge to the legitimacy of Zardari's election to the top post, but others opine that Zardari enjoys immunity under Article 248 of the constitution for the cases pending in the country's courts.

"Presidents of US, India and France also enjoyed exemption from appearing before the courts," said retired Justice Fakharuddin Ibrahim.

Former Supreme Court Bar Association president Aitzaz Ahsan also backed Ibrahim, saying "He (Zardari) would not be affected by the decision. A sitting president could not be summoned in court and no action could be taken against him."

Gene code of common cancers cracked

AFP, London

Two common forms of cancer have been genetically mapped for the first time, British scientists said Wednesday, in a major breakthrough in understanding the diseases.

The maps have exposed the DNA mutations that lead to skin and lung cancers, in a discovery scientists said could transform the way these diseases are diagnosed and treated in coming years.

All cancers are caused by damage to genes -- mutations in DNA -- that can be triggered by environmental factors such as tobacco smoke, harmful chemicals or ultraviolet radiation, and causes cells to grow out of control.

Scientists from Britain's Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute and their collaborators have mapped this genetic damage from the tumours of two patients suffering from lung cancer and malignant melanoma, a deadly skin cancer.

Pakistan holding up some US visas, says diplomat

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan has held up visas for US diplomats, military service members and others, apparently because of hostility within the country toward the expansion of US operations in Pakistan, a senior US diplomat said Wednesday.

American diplomats have also been stopped repeatedly at Pakistani checkpoints as part of what US officials say is a wider focus on foreigners working in Pakistan. US cars are searched, although diplomats are told to open the trunk but to refuse access to the passenger compartment.

The visa holdup is the latest tangible sign of the volatility of official US-Pakistani relations. The two nations have an improving military relationship but mistrust and suspicion still shadow many government interactions, including US attempts to help Pakistan.

The visa clampdown seems to be a reaction to widespread anti-American sentiment, even though many of the affected workers would be

doing jobs that bring aid and other help to Pakistan.

The senior US official said the US does not plan to do more than press Pakistani authorities to relent. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to describe sensitive interaction between the two countries.

The US Embassy already is large and expanding, with plans to go from about 500 employees to more than 800 over the next 18 months. Most of the growth is related to the expansion of US aid to Pakistan, some of which comes with requirements for accounting and oversight that have rankled Pakistanis.

The official said that at the embassy, several employees have gone home for Christmas leave and will be unable to return because the Pakistani authorities have not extended their visas. In all, 135 visa extensions have been denied, the official said. Other visa applications have been rejected outright, but US authorities have not collected data on how many.

Doctors airlift boy with 42 needles stuck in him

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

A 2-year-old boy with more than 40 sewing needles stuck in him is being airlifted to another hospital in north-eastern Brazil because two of the needles are close to his heart, an official said Thursday.

A police official, meanwhile, told The Associated Press the boy's stepfather had been arrested, that he had confessed to sticking the needles into the boy with the help of a woman and that authorities were investigating whether black magic was involved.

Surgeons at a hospital in the town of Barreiras in Bahia state decided not to try to remove any needles after discovering that two were very near the boy's heart, said an official at Hospital do Oeste. Like the police official, she spoke on condition of anonymity as she was not authorized to discuss the case.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian tribals shout slogans against Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Home Minister P Chidambaram during a rally near the parliament house in New Delhi yesterday. Hundreds of tribals and farmers from all over the country gathered in New Delhi to protest against the Forest Rights Bill and asked the government to accept the recommendations of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Scheduled Tribes, and sought enhancement of their social and economic status.

Two killed in US drone strike in NW Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

Two militants were killed Thursday in a US missile strike in northwest Pakistan, officials said, as Islamabad faces growing American pressure to dismantle Islamist extremist networks.

The missiles from an unmanned US drone aircraft slammed into a house allegedly used by militants near Miranshah, the main town in the North Waziristan tribal district bordering Afghanistan, security officials said.

It was not clear which group was targeted, with North Waziristan rife with Taliban militants, al-Qaeda fighters and members of the Haqqani network, a powerful group known for staging attacks on foreign troops in Afghanistan.

"The American drone fired

two missiles, killing two militants and badly damaging a house and an attached guest portion. A car was completely destroyed," said a security official based in Miranshah.

"Roofs of some rooms caved in but nobody else was injured as the house was empty. The militants rented out this house and were using it as a base."

A local intelligence official confirmed the strike and the death toll in the village of Dattakhel. Officials refused to be named because of the sensitivity of the US strikes in Pakistan, which inflame anti-American sentiment.

The official said the targeted building belonged to a local tribesman named Lahkta Mir, but the identity and nationality of the dead remained unclear.

Demand for new states could change India's map

AP, New Delhi

From scores fasting in demand of a new state in India's hilly northeast to a powerful chief minister suggesting her region be split up, the map of the nation is facing an overhaul.

Ethnic minorities and activists in economically deprived regions are seeking states of their own, following the government's surprise decision last week to give in to a hunger strike and create a new state in southern India.

Now, India is confronting serious calls for a grand reorganization of this sprawling, diverse nation of 1.2 billion. "We are looking at what could be a major crossroads in the political evolution of the Indian system," said Mahesh Rangarajan, a prominent political analyst at Delhi

University. "Are 28 states enough for a billion people when 300 million Americans have 50 states?"

China, which India is expected to surpass in 2025 as the world's most populous country, uses centralized, authoritarian rule to maintain order and unity. India's democracy has relied on constant negotiation and compromise to empower its different ethnic groups and bind the diverse country, from the rural hill people who live on the Tibetan border to the business tycoons of Mumbai.

The Indian system gives broad power to the states. It was largely created after a Gandhi disciple died from a 58-day hunger strike in 1952, while pressing for the creation of Andhra Pradesh, a new state in the south.

Following the ensuing street protests, the government agreed to reorganise the country based on language groups. India has occasionally tweaked its internal boundaries since then, most recently with the creation of three new states in 2000 that brought the total to 28.

Some states remain so large they have become difficult to govern, leaving politically marginalised regions out of the country's economic boom.

"You've got to try something new," Rangarajan said. "Something's not working about it."

Parties across the spectrum including the ruling Congress Party have backed appeals for new states to garner regional support during elections. But as the campaigns fade, so does the pressure for statehood.



PHOTO: AFP

People pose as they are pictured in front of the Arc de Triomphe on the snow-covered Place de l'Etoile in Paris on Wednesday during the first snowfall of the season.