

Pakistan averts crisis for now

Cleric strikes deal with govt leaving a breathing space ahead of polls

AFP, Islamabad

Islamabad has brokered an end to a protest challenging its rule that paves the way to historic elections, but rising violence in the weak nuclear-armed state is still a threat, analysts say.

After another week of profound instability, Pakistan's civilian politicians are arguably more resilient than ever, credited with averting fears of a rumoured military-judicial plot to subvert a democratic transition of power.

Charismatic preacher Tahir-ul Qadri brought the centre of Islamabad to a standstill for four days in the largest rally seen in the heavily guarded capital for years, but retreated overnight after winning few concessions.

Qadri secured only a vague date for parliament to dissolve by mid-March and a promise that he would be consulted on the appointment of a caretaker prime minister in the run-up to polls, as well as a 30-day period for candidates to be screened.

"We are moving in the right direction. It shows Pakistan is not as fragile as people think," said political analyst and retired general Talat Masood.

It fell far short of his call for an Egypt-style revolution and the immediate collapse of the government to make way for an administration of technocrats to introduce sweeping reforms before elections.



Supporters of Pakistani Muslim cleric Tahir-ul Qadri, inset, celebrate the victory of a demand for electoral reform at a protest rally in Islamabad on Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP

For the moment, an order from the Supreme Court to arrest Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf over corruption allegations has been left hanging and even if he is detained, he can continue on the job until and unless he is convicted.

President Asif Ali Zardari's government looks more certain now of holding on to become the first civilian government in Pakistan history to complete a term in office and achieve a democratic transition at the ballot box, by mid-May.

Analysts and newspapers fell over them-

selves to congratulate politicians for showing maturity and uniting against Qadri, regardless of the lack of evidence that the military was engineering a fourth coup from behind the scenes.

"This time we surely have moved on," Raza Rumi, director of policy at the Jinnah Institute think tank, told AFP. "Because all political parties that have a stake in the democratic system stood together and resisted the attempt to derail the constitution. And that is a major development in the Pakistani context," he told AFP.

But Qadri's protest also underscored deep frustrations.

The economy is in a worse state now than when the government was elected in 2008, Taliban attacks are on the rise, Shia Muslims are suffering record levels of violence, as is Karachi, the country's business and economic hub.

Appalling gas and electricity cuts are getting worse, making the lives of millions of people unbearable and hammering industry.

The military, which is still dominant in policy making, is also in flux. Army chief Ashfaq Kayani is to step down this year creating a void.

"Further chaos cannot be ruled out. The government wants to hang on. But they have no capacity," warned political analyst Hasan Askari.

Pakistan PM probe officer found dead

AFP, Islamabad

A case officer investigating a corruption scandal involving Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf was found dead yesterday in Islamabad, officials said.

The Supreme Court on Tuesday demanded Ashraf's arrest in the long-running case, but anti-corruption watchdog the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) told the chief justice on Thursday that it did not yet have enough evidence.

Officials said the officer, Kamran Faisal, was found dead in the government hostel where he lived with other colleagues from NAB.

"He was found dead in his room. He is suspected to have committed suicide. Police have taken the body. A post-mortem is being carried out," a NAB spokesman told AFP.

SECURITY CHARGES

Libya tries Saif Gaddafi

AFP, Tripoli

Slain leader Muammar Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam, wanted by the ICC for crimes against humanity, appeared for the first time in a Libyan court on Thursday on charges of "undermining state security," a judicial official said.

He was charged after a controversial June visit to Libya by an International Criminal Court team to help prepare his defence against the charges of crimes against humanity in the conflict that overthrew his father.

Thursday's hearing was held behind closed doors in Zintan, a hilltop town southwest of Tripoli, where Saif has been in custody since his arrest in November 2011 in the wake of the uprising that ended Gaddafi's 40-year rule.

It was closed to the media except to state broadcaster Al-Watania television, which broadcast footage of the hearing on its mid-afternoon news bulletin.

Saif, 39, with a salt and pepper beard, looked well as he stood behind a metal grille in the courtroom.

Karachi shuts down after politician killing

AFP, Karachi

Shops, businesses and schools shut across Pakistan's financial capital Karachi Friday, as the city braced for further unrest following the funeral of a politician the Taliban claimed to have killed.

Manzar Imam, 42, a lawmaker from the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a coalition partner in the federal government and the dominant political party in Karachi, was shot with three of his guards in a drive-by shooting on Thursday.

Pakistan's umbrella Taliban faction claimed responsibility for his death and threatened further attacks on the party.

Overnight violence in Karachi left five people dead and around 30 wounded, according to police.

It is the second shooting of an MQM provincial lawmaker in just over two years in the city, Pakistan's business centre, which has a population of 18 million.

The death of MQM lawmaker Raza Haider in an ambush in August 2010 sparked a fierce wave of ethnic and politically linked violence that killed scores of people.

Most eligible bachelor

CNN ONLINE

Heavy may be the head that wears the crown, but not is the head that's third in line.

Prince Harry, 28, has been named the Top Bachelor, according to the editors at Town & Country, which named the current top 50 bachelors in the world.

"Prince William's baby brother flirts and flies Apache helicopters with equal aplomb," the magazine wrote. "Harry might not possess a towering intellect," the magazine explained. "But he is cooler and more appealing than his older brother, sweet as William undoubtedly is."



Prince Harry

Suu Kyi in donation row

Democracy icon defends fund linked to junta

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday defended her party's controversial decision to accept donations from businessmen close to the former junta for its education fund.

The issue has highlighted the Nobel Peace laureate's dilemma of how closely to work with members of the former junta and their associates as the country also known as Burma emerges from almost half a century of military rule.

"Let them donate if they donate for good things," Suu Kyi, the opposition leader and lower house lawmaker, told AFP in the capital Naypyidaw when asked about the controversy.

"I don't understand why we cannot accept it. If it's illegal money, we won't accept it. If it's legal money, why not as it's for a good cause?"

The decision by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) to take money from "cronies" of the generals who ruled the country with an iron fist for decades has raised eyebrows given her long stand against the regime.

The donors at a party fundraising concert in December included Air Bagan and Asia Green Development Bank, both owned by prominent tycoon Tay Za, once described by the US Treasury as "a notori-

ous regime henchman and arms dealer".

The NLD says it received a total of 500 million kyat (\$580,000) from the event, making a profit of 320 million kyat after costs. Tay Za's companies donated a combined 70 million kyat.

The family of another crony Kyaw Win, head of the media giant Skynet, paid nearly \$50,000 for a jumper knitted by Suu Kyi at a charity auction last month.

The NLD says the money will be used to help provide free education for 10,000 students.

Suu Kyi, who spent much of the past two decades under house arrest, is focused on her new political role following her election last year to a parliament dominated by the military and its political allies.

With the NLD setting its sights on those polls, the veteran activist has also been careful not to antagonise voters over sensitive issues such as

the plight of the country's stateless Rohingya Muslims, disappointing some rights campaigners who want her to do more to help minority groups.

"We have survived the past two decades with only our spirit of belief. It's important to continue with this spirit," said NLD lawmaker Min Thu. "Without using our own money, we couldn't have survived more than 20 years."



INDO-PAK TENSION

'Dialogue must be based on civilised behaviour'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Sonia Gandhi, heading India's ruling Congress party, yesterday said dialogue with immediate neighbours must be based on accepted principles of civilised behaviour, an apparent reference to Pakistan's recent offer for talks to deescalate tension along the border.

"Better and closer relations with our immediate neighbours will not only make for regional peace - they will also have a positive impact on some of our own border states.

"However, let us be clear. Our dialogue must be based on accepted principles of civilised behaviour. We will never compromise on our vigil and preparedness to deal with terrorism and threats on our borders," she said in her address at a brainstorming meeting of top Congress leaders in Jaipur, Rajasthan state.

Her remarks came as Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, speaking on the sidelines of the Congress meet, noted to mediapersons the "positive indications" from Pakistan and said India will give an "appropriate" response if Islamabad makes a formal proposal for



talks between the foreign ministers of the two countries.

He was asked by on the offer of Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar for discussions following tension at Line of Control (LoC). Khar had made the offer in a statement two days ago.

Sonia Gandhi said India's foreign policy has always had a vision of the country occupying its "rightful place" and exercising its "unique influence" in world affairs.

"That place and that influence will be significantly enhanced by successfully overcoming poverty, improving our secular values, strengthening our democratic institutions and engaging constructively with the international community," she said.

Netanyahu vows to protect settlements

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday pledged that there would be no dismantlement of any Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank if he wins a general election next week.

Asked in an interview with the Maariv newspaper: "Can you promise that during the next four years, no settlement will be dismantled?" Netanyahu answered: "Yes."

"The days when bulldozers uprooted Jews are behind us, not in front of us. Our record proves it," he said.

"We haven't uprooted any settlements, we have expanded them," he said, recalling that his government had established the first university in a settlement, in Ariel deep in the West Bank.

"Nobody has any lessons to give me about love for the Land of Israel or commitment to Zionism and the settlements," he added.

Netanyahu was alluding to the strong opinion poll showing of the pro-settler Jewish Home party which has been championing accelerated settlement expansion and looks set to take seats from the prime minister's rightwing list in Tuesday's election.

Opinion polls on Friday, the last day they may be published before the election, showed the Likud-Yisrael Beitenu list winning 32-35 seats in the 120-member Knesset, down from 42 in the outgoing parliament.

The centre-left Labour party would win 16-17 seats and the centrist Yesh Atid and HaTnuah, 10-13 and 7-8, respectively.



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