

MASSIVE DEMONSTRATIONS, ARREST WARRANT FOR PRIME MINISTER THREATEN UPCOMING PAKISTAN ELECTIONS

For the first time in its 65 year history, Pakistan is poised to see an elected government fully complete its term in March. With chaos erupting on several fronts, though, the path toward electing a new government appears to be full of obstacles.

Last week saw sectarian bombings kill 96 Shi'ites in Quetta on Thursday alone, and tens of thousands of protesters filled the streets, refusing to bury the dead until Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf came to Quetta and agreed to fire the entire provincial government, as it was suspected of being involved in sectarian violence.

Ashraf finds himself at the center of a controversy, as well. The Pakistan Supreme Court issued a warrant for his arrest today in a long-simmering scandal dating back to when Ashraf was minister of water and power before he became Prime Minister. From Dawn:

The prime minister has been accused of receiving kickbacks and commission in the RPPs [Rental Power Projects] case as minister for water and power.

In the case, nine RPPs firms were accused of receiving more than Rs22 billion [1 R = .01 US \$] as a mobilisation advance from the government to commission the projects but most of them did not set up their plants and a few of them installed them but with inordinate delay.

From the Reuters article on today's developments in Pakistan, we have a description of how the election process is supposed to proceed:

The government and opposition are poised to start negotiating the formation of a caretaker administration to oversee the run-up to the polls as soon as parliament is dissolved, which is due to happen in March. An election date has yet to be announced.

The New York Times article on developments informs us that the elections are required to take place within 60 days of the end of the term for the parliament. Complicating the process immensely though, is the sudden appearance of cleric Tahir ul Qadri, who has returned to Pakistan from Canada to lead massive protests demanding that the government resign immediately, instead of in March. The Times explains that some see the hand of the military behind Qadri:

The court order came as an enigmatic preacher turned politician, Muhammad Tahir ul Qadri, addressed thousands of supporters outside Parliament and repeated calls for the government's ouster. In earlier speeches, he said that a caretaker administration led by technocrats should take its place.

The confluence of the two events stoked growing speculation that Pakistan's powerful military was quietly supporting moves that would delay general elections that are due to take place this spring, most likely through the imposition of a military-backed caretaker administration.

The AP has more on what Qadri had to say at today's rally:

The dramatic entry into Pakistani politics of Tahir-ul-Qadri, a preacher

who until recently lived in Canada, has sparked concern from some that he is seeking to derail elections at the behest of the powerful army. Polls are expected this spring.

Qadri has denied that and insisted his vague demands for election reform are simply meant to root out corruption in the political system. He pledged several weeks ago to lead a "million-man march" on Islamabad to press his demands.

During a 40-minute speech delivered behind bullet-proof glass in the early morning, Qadri told his supporters that the government's mandate was finished.

"I give you time until tomorrow to dissolve national and all four provincial assemblies otherwise the nation will dissolve them on their own," he said. He vowed to address his followers later in the morning in front of the parliament building.

Much more of the speech comes from Pakistan Today, although the two stories differ on how much time Qadri gave for the government to dissolve. While the AP story above says Qadri gave them until tomorrow, the Pakistan Today article states that the deadline expired this morning:

He said that the populace was in "Chains of poverty with no money to treat a sick child and no protection of life and liberty". He said that 99 percent of the citizens of Pakistan are "have nots" whereas the 'one percent haves' had rendered the "government and law enforcing agencies paralyzed and dysfunctional." He said that "the government does not accept the rulings of SC, does not enact laws to eradicate terrorism, grants no health insurance, ignores education, human development and

the last five years saw no economic growth”.

He said that the Parliament is “no more democratic and priorities of the parliamentarians are looting and corruption even though there is no gas, water and electricity in the country”.

He Quoted Article 281 of the constitution and people representative act 1976 which state that the electoral process should be free and fair.

He said that “democratic mechanisms do not exist in the political parties of the country... criminality exists here. Power vests in lying and dishonesty. The law of the land is ‘three M’s’: money, might and manipulation. 70 percent of the parliamentarians’ do not pay taxes”

He said that the only saviors of the country are the army and the judiciary, adding, that Pakistan’s democracy is full of Tauqeer Sadiq’s ; president’s appointee as OGRA chairman who fled the country after looting Rs 84 billion.”

Gosh, I wonder where Qadri could have gotten the theme of the 1% controlling the government at the expense of the 99%? At any rate, Qadri’s claim that the military and judiciary are functional while the government is not has been seen as further evidence of him being somehow aligned with the military.

Qadri did point out in his speech that he favors religious tolerance. Again from the Pakistan Today story:

Underscoring his Braelvi leanings, he said that “we are brethren of all religions and ideologies. Chrisitans, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians enjoy the same rights as Muslims in Pakistan. They are Pakistani citizens and their rights were guaranteed to them by M.A Jinnah

but his promises have been annulled by rulers”.

Stay tuned for further developments.