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In historic first, Pakistan's civilian government completes its term without a coup

By Saeed Shah

March 16, 2013

Pakistan's Parliament completed its term Saturday and the coalition government was dissolved, the first time in the country's history that a democratically elected government has served its full five years in office.

The way is now open for elections and an unprecedented peaceful transfer of power to another elected administration, even though the country is plagued by political instability.

"This is a milestone in the political history of Pakistan," said Rasul Bakhsh Rais, a political science professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. "The significance is that there is consensus among all political parties that democracy must continue, no matter how good or bad."

He added, "The only way to improve the quality of democratic government is democratic continuity."

Pakistan has long been dominated by its giant military, which until Saturday had scuttled every previous Pakistan experiment with democracy. The United States, which has supported military governments in Pakistan in the past, blames the military for supporting radical Islamist groups and keeping relations tense with India and hopes that the establishment of democracy will weaken the army sufficiently to force it to give up its support for extremist groups.

Under Pakistan's constitution, a neutral interim government will rule for a two month period to oversee the election, which will take place in early May.

Civilian rule was restored in Pakistan in February 2008, when elections ended Pakistan's most recent period of military rule, under Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in 1999. During the last election campaign, the Pakistan Peoples' Party leader and two-time prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, was assassinated, leaving her husband, Asif Zardari, to lead the party and the country as president.

The PPP government that held on to power until Saturday was widely criticized for corruption, poor governance, failing to tackle extremism, and a lofty rule that disregarded the problems of most Pakistanis. But it ruled without a majority Parliament and weathered terrorist attacks across the country and insurgency in the north west. Simply surviving was an accomplishment in itself, many believe.

Parliament itself was criticized for not effectively holding Zardari's government to account, but it passed twice as many bills as the previous Parliament, a puppet assembly installed by Musharraf. Zardari's skills proved to be in knitting together coalition partners.

"For all the unhappiness with the federal government's performance, Parliament turned in a stellar performance when it came to its essential duty: selecting from among its numbers a stable government," said an opinion piece published Saturday in Dawn, Pakistan's leading English language daily.

The government's challenge lay not so much in fighting off the official political opposition, but in dueling with two institutions of state: the judiciary and the military. The executive, the Supreme Court and the army wrestled over the levers of power for the entire five year term of the government, and the limits of their individual powers are still not settled. Last year, the Supreme Court even fired the prime minister, while the army engaged in repeated public spats with the government.

Opposition leader Nawaz Sharif has won praise for not seeking to topple the PPP government, and army chief Gen Ashfaq Kayani has been lauded, especially by the United States and other Western powers, for staying out of politics more than his predecessor had.

In the 1990s, four elected governments were ousted prematurely by military-backed political maneuvering by opposition parties. The army executed Pakistan's elected prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto's father, in 1979. By his own admission, Sharif learned to be wary of the military after it overthrew his last government, in 1999. He resisted pressures from many within his own party to join intrigues against the government this time, plots thought to have the support of the military.

The elections promise to be close, resulting again in no party getting a majority. But polls predict Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N will emerge as the single biggest party. Sharif, who in the past has ruled as a mild Islamist, would then need to forge a coalition with smaller parties. In opposition, Sharif's party has been criticized for being soft on extremist groups. Hardline

religious parties could come to power in the provincial government of Northwest province, which borders Afghanistan, a development that would concern the United States.

The outcome of the election depends partly on the performance of Imran Khan, a cricket star turned politician, who is popular among the young. Khan appeals to both the young and liberal who traditionally vote for the PPP, as well as conservatives, who are usually drawn to Sharif's party. The number of seats Khan takes and from which party could be decisive, though few rate his chances of sweeping to power himself.