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Pakistani military, politicians swap jibes over corruption

By Mehreen Zahra-Malik

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Pakistan's main opposition party on Thursday accused the powerful army of trying to usurp the powers of a provincial government, intensifying a showdown between the military and politicians in Pakistan's biggest and richest city.

For the past week, politicians and the military have traded barbs over corruption in the southern port city of Karachi, home to 20 million people and the country's financial heart.

Pakistani politicians are deeply wary of the military, which has a history of launching coups and has ruled the nuclear-armed nation of 190 million people for around half of its history.

Politicians from the southern province of Sindh, whose capital is Karachi, say the military is seeking to weaken the main political parties in the city.

They point to other steps that have tightened the military's grip on national security, foreign policy and the judiciary over the past two years.

Last week, the head of the paramilitary Rangers, which falls under military command, announced that "a major political party" was protecting mafias who made \$2.3 billion annually in Karachi through extortion, smuggling, control over the water supply and land-grabbing.

On Monday, paramilitary Rangers raided the Sindh Building Control Authority offices searching for evidence of land-grabbing, provoking a furious response.

In a heated speech after the Rangers raid, former president Asif Ali Zardari, who heads the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP), warned the army not to overstep its mandate. Sindh is the PPP's heartland.

"Don't disturb us or we will also respond to a brick with a brick," he said. "There is a limit to everything. Do not interfere in matters where you have no authority."

He threatened to expose the "misdeeds" of generals.

The province's chief minister wrote a letter on Wednesday accusing the Rangers of overstepping their authority and Qamar Zaman Kaira, a senior leader in the PPP, told reporters on Thursday, "this is an attempt to usurp the mandate of the political government".

The Rangers did not respond to phone calls seeking comment.

The Rangers launched an operation against militants and criminals in Karachi in 2013, but political parties are increasingly saying it appears to be aimed at them.

In March this year, Rangers swooped on the headquarters of the MQM, one of Karachi's most powerful political parties, seizing arms and detaining "criminals", including a fugitive convicted of murder.

Police in Karachi say many criminals have powerful political protection.