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Al Jazeera

## Bill seeks to curb Zardari's powers

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Pakistan's parliament has begun debate on a constitutional bill that will reduce the presidency to a more ceremonial role.

The bill, submitted to parliament's lower house, or the national assembly, on Friday, aims to transfer powers from Asif Ali Zardari, the president, to Yousuf Raza Gilani, the prime minister.

The move is expected to end months of political tensions.

Known as the 18th Amendment Bill, the bill seeks to reverse constitutional changes adopted by Pervez Musharraf, the former military ruler, and to force Zardari's ruling Pakistan People's Party to enact a long-standing promise.

It was not immediately clear when the national assembly would vote on it.

The bill also devolves greater autonomy to the provinces and drops the North West Frontier Province name, which dates back to British colonial rule, in favour of Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa.

The renaming recognises a long-standing demand of the province's Pashtun-majority population.

"I congratulate the entire nation on this 18th amendment," Gilani told parliamentarians on Friday.

"Some people think that the prime minister will be stronger now. But in fact these constitutional amendments will strengthen institutions."

### **Unanimously adopted**

Both the upper and lower houses of parliament will debate the issue for up to three days.

The motion was adopted unanimously by the lower house, but it was not immediately clear when it would vote on it.

"The Friday meeting has been adjourned and no date has been confirmed," Kamal Hyder, Al Jazeera's correspondent in Islamabad, said.

Drafted by a parliamentary committee made up of all political groups, the bill is expected to be passed by more than the two-thirds majority needed.

Under the bill, the president loses the power to dismiss the prime minister and would also allow prime ministers to be eligible to stand for three terms in office.

### **Sharif's advantage**

The change would allow Nawaz Sharif, opposition party leader, who has already served two terms before being toppled in Musharraf's 1999 coup, to again become prime minister.

The president would also no longer be able to dissolve elected parliaments or appoint the commander of Pakistan's armed forces, as has been done in the past.

Zardari would also lose the power to appoint judges to a commission comprised of senior judges and government figures.

These developments may help calm political opposition to Zardari, but the government is facing mounting pressure from the supreme court to reopen corruption cases against the president after it threw out a controversial amnesty law in December.

Zardari has summoned a joint session of parliament on Monday and will be addressing the combined session, Farhatullah Babar, the presidential spokesman, said.