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Vultures are circling in Pakistan

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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[Pakistan](#) is reeling in the wake of a devastating flood, rampant militancy, bad governance and a crisis between the executive and the judiciary. Far less testing conditions than these have in the past led the military to wade in with the imposition of martial law.

General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani, the wise and highly literate Pakistan army chief, who is also well-connected to [Washington](#), is fully cognizant that the country faces a precarious situation in which a third force - the military - could take the country out of the quagmire. This is especially so as the southern [port city](#) of Karachi is burning with ethnic and sectarian violence and Baloch insurgents have forced over 90,000 Punjabis to leave the provinc so that the Balochi separatist movement can grow.

All it might take to trigger military intervention is one incendiary incident, possibly a clash between the judiciary and the government.

This centers on the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) passed by the Pervez Musharraf regime that granted amnesty to politicians, political workers and bureaucrats who were accused of corruption, embezzlement, money laundering, murder and terrorism. It was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court on December 16, 2009.

Some politicians and bureaucrats resigned as a result, but many others who had received amnesty are still in office. On Friday, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani urged people who took advantage of the NRO to voluntarily resign. This might affect Interior Minister Rahman Malik and the ambassador to the US, Husain Haqqani.

The main problem, though, relates to President Asif Ali Zardari, who had benefited from the NRO. After its annulment, the Supreme Court ordered the government to reopen cases against the president in a Swiss court, where he is alleged to have misappropriated money. The government defied the order, claiming that no action could be taken against an incumbent president. However, constitutional experts believe the Supreme Court will come up with a different interpretation of [presidential](#) immunity.

A ruling against Zardari could bring down the government - and open the way for the army to intervene.

First, the politics of peace

During Musharraf's regime (2001-2008), the Pakistan army fought a very limited war against militants; after every operation there was a peace agreement. However, under Kiani, who took over as army chief in November 2007, the military has waged all-out war against militants, and they were never offered an olive branch. The reason was simple - he fought as a soldier without any political ambition.

However, the situation took an abrupt turn while the army was heavily engaged with the Afghan Taliban in soliciting them to engage in talks, which are bearing fruit. Backchannel negotiations began with the al-Qaeda-linked Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (PTT - Pakistani Taliban) in the North Waziristan tribal area.

This coincides with military operations being shelved in the tribal areas due to the floods.

Maulana Muhammad Deendar, 80, is no longer active in politics. He is a member of the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (Fazl) that is part of the coalition government and an ex-member of parliament. Nonetheless, he is respected by all, including the militants.

His astute diplomatic skills have resulted in several ceasefire agreements in the past between militants and the military. This year, when the flood played havoc in Pakistan and militants began to mobilize, Deendar's services were once again requested by the Pakistan military and once again he worked a miracle. Despite all of al-Qaeda's clout, he brought the military and the PTT together to work on a peace agreement.

Yar Muhammad, Mohammadullah and Waqas belonged to the PTT were released from the detention of the Frontier Corps, and FC's personnel Noor Wali and Shakeel were freed in return by the Taliban last week. This marks the beginning of a peace agreement between the previous arch-rivals of the PTT and the Pakistan army. The swap was carried out after prolonged negotiations between the militants and the [military](#), through Deendar.

If the peace process begun in North Waziristan continues without interruption, it could help the country both domestically and internationally.

At the international level, it helps Pakistan isolate al-Qaeda while it engages the Afghan Taliban on one side and Pakistani militants on the other. And on the domestic front, it gives the country breathing space to disengage from war and focus on domestic politics to defuse any event that could trigger military intervention, not necessarily a coup, but an arrangement under the constitution that would allow the military to intervene in running the country.

Setting up the political stage

Kingri House in Karachi is the home of veteran politician Syed Shah Mardan Shah Pir Pagaro II, a spiritual guide and the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League. His great-grandfather was a lieutenant of Syed Ahmad Brelvi, the founder of the jihad movement in South Asia and his father was executed by the British government.

Pagaro was sent to Oxford University as compensation by the British government and after the partition of British [India](#) in 1947, Pakistan's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, brought Pagaro back to Pakistan to lead the spiritual legacy of his family and disciples known as Hur (independent and brave). Pagaro's disciples always supported the Pakistan army during its fights against India and always provided support to all military governments. Pagaro proudly call himself "a representative of GHQ" (military headquarters).

When the clash between the judiciary and the government began, Pagaro's residence became the hub of all political wheeling and dealing.

Sheikh Rasheed, a former Musharraf cabinet minister was one of the first to visit Pagaro, followed by other politicians from Musharraf's administration.

The president of the former "king's" party the Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-e-Azam, Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain, along with the secretary general of the party Mushahid Hussain Syed, announced the merger of the party with Pagaro's Muslim League (Functional group). Pagaro publicly announced that he expected cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan would soon join the new platform.

International players like Nasir Lotha, a businessman and a member of the royal family in the United Arab Emirates, also visited Karachi and hosted dinners for other visiting political personalities.

Meanwhile, at General Headquarters Rawalpindi Kiani met with opposition leader Sheikh Rasheed, constitutional expert and former law minister S M Zafar, and a former minister, Ameer Muqam.

In a separate development, Pakistan proposes to raise defense spending 61% to 552 billion rupees (US\$6.4 billion) in the year to next June, after adding a further 25%, or 110 billion rupees, to the amount already approved by parliament for this financial year. About 343 billion rupees were allocated in the 2009-10 budget.

The latest increase was disclosed last week when the International Monetary Fund released the government's revised budget projections. Neither the government nor the military "has seen fit to divulge any details, making it difficult to comment on the need for such an extraordinary increase", Dawn newspaper commented on Friday.