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## Pakistan's president facing military anger over his U.S. ties

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Suspicious by Pakistan's powerful army that the country's civilian leadership is growing too close to the United States are fueling a political crisis that analysts here believe threatens the survival of the government and could divert attention from the battle against Islamic extremists.

Military officials believe that secretly taped conversations between Pakistani President Asif Zardari and his ambassador in Washington, prove that it was at Zardari's insistence that a \$1.5 billion U.S. aid package passed by Congress in September contained several provisions that angered the Pakistani military. The military publicly protested the aid package last month.

"The reaction (from the military) was not so much to what was in the bill but to the thought that the government was trying to create a civilian-to-civilian dialogue (with Washington)," said a senior Pakistani official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The army has ruled Pakistan for most its existence, with civilian rule returning only last year.

Now the military is responding by pressing a confrontation with Zardari over the expiration of a legal amnesty for politicians that benefited many members of Zardari's government, including the president himself and his ambassador to Washington, Husain Haqqani.

The amnesty, known as the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), wiped away long-standing charges against politicians and bureaucrats who served between 1986 and 1999. But

the Supreme Court ruled that the measure, which had been decreed in October 2007 by then President Pervez Musharraf, was unconstitutional, and it will come to an end on Saturday.

That will expose serving ministers and senior aides to prosecution over cases that range from corruption to murder — including Zardari, who was charged with taking kickbacks when his wife, the assassinated Benazir Bhutto, served as the country's prime minister.

Most here argue that Zardari, who is head of the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party, will still have legal immunity as president. But analysts believe the military is behind a campaign to oust Zardari and, with the help of sympathetic media and opposition politicians, is using the end of the amnesty as an opportunity to strike. While dislodging the president will be tough, it is possible that he'll be forced to transfer most of his powers to the prime minister through a constitutional amendment.

Suspensions in the president's camp about an attempt to isolate him were heightened when the law ministry released a list of amnesty beneficiaries that featured those close to the president, including his top aide and several cabinet ministers, but none of the allies of Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani.

At the center of the civil-military conflict is the relationship between Zardari's government and Washington, with the Pakistani army resentful of the close ties and the government's agreement with some U.S. security policies that don't fit with the military's view.

The political confrontation came to the fore with the passage of the \$1.5 billion U.S. aid package, which insisted on civilian control of the armed forces and threatened to cut off assistance if there were a coup. The legislation also demanded that Pakistan crack down on extremist groups that were previously considered close to the country's army.

A military spy agency recorded Zardari and Haqqan discussing the legislation. Knowledgeable civilian and military officials, who spoke only if they were not identified by name, said the recordings captured the two discussing how to strengthen democratic institutions in Pakistan.

Even when there have been civilian governments in Islamabad, the military has viewed sensitive foreign and security policies as its purview. In particular, the military jealously guards its role in relations with India, Afghanistan and the United States, as well as the policy toward the country's nuclear arsenal.

Zardari, however, has intruded in all those areas since taking office. He's reached out to traditional enemy India, improved relations with Afghan President Hamid Karzai — usually seen in Pakistan as dangerously close to India — and agreed with the U.S. that Pakistan must eliminate extremist groups on its soil — the same Islamic militants that the military previously used to fight proxy wars in India and Afghanistan.

Zardari also unsuccessfully tried to place the main military spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence, under civilian control, and he offered a "no first use" policy on Pakistan's nuclear weapons to India.

"The army does not like too much civilian interference in their internal affairs," said Hasan Askari Rizvi, a defense commentator and author of *Military, State and Society* in Pakistan. "The military thinks that the Pakistan government wants to use this (U.S.) law to somehow interfere in the affairs of the military."

"Zardari is perceived as too dependent on or too pro the United States, and sometimes not quite in agreement with the strategic view of the army," said Arif Nizami, a political analyst and former newspaper editor.

The law ministry's list of amnesty beneficiaries contained over 8,000 names, including bureaucrats and party workers, on charges ranging from murder to embezzlement.

The list includes Interior Minister Rehman Malik, Ports Minister Babar Khan Ghauri, Overseas Pakistanis Minister Farooq Sattar, the governor of Sindh province, Ishratul Ebad, and the president's top aide, Salman Farooqui.

Also on the list are the high commissioner to London, Wajid Shamsul Hasan, and the ambassador to Washington, Haqqani — who both deny taking advantage of the amnesty. Haqqani has sued to have his name removed from the list.