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AP News

Pakistani president turns over nuclear authority

Pakistani president relinquishes nuclear control as country faces fresh political turmoil

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Pakistan's embattled president has relinquished command of the country's nuclear arsenal amid political wrangling that has posed a major distraction to the U.S.-allied government as it fights Taliban and other militants near the Afghan border.

The move came as President Asif Ali Zardari faced the expiration on Saturday of an amnesty protecting him and thousands of other bureaucrats and politicians from a host of corruption and criminal charges.

Zardari enjoys general immunity from prosecution as president, but the Supreme Court could choose to challenge his eligibility for the post since the amnesty decree by ex-military leader Pervez Musharraf was never formally approved by parliament.

Zardari has come under tremendous pressure over past corruption allegations, which he denies, as well as military objections to his overtures toward archrival India and acceptance of a multibillion dollar U.S. aid bill that came with conditions some fear impose unwanted controls over the military.

Zardari's office said the president would be prepared to fight any charges against him.

"These cases were all made by two hostile governments and they were politically motivated cases not just against the president but many other political leaders," spokeswoman Farahnaz Ispahani said.

Zardari transferred control of the National Command Authority, which oversees the nuclear arsenal, to Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani late Friday, according to his office. He also reissued 27 other Musharraf-era ordinances ahead of a midnight Saturday deadline.

The decision was the result of a Supreme Court ruling aimed at reversing the 2007 imposition of emergency rule by Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 military coup and quit last year. Zardari's office said the transition posed no threat to the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

"Transferring the chairmanship of the National Command Authority to the prime minister is giant step forward to empowering the elected parliament and the prime minister," presidential spokesman Farhatullah Babar said in a statement.

Analysts said the move signaled Zardari's willingness to shed powers as part of a compromise that would enable him to keep his job.

"It appears to be a self-defense and survival strategy," said Rasool Bakhsh Rais, a political science professor at Lahore University of Management Science.

In an interview with Express News TV, Zardari said Friday he was also likely to give away his powers to dissolve parliament and appoint services chiefs by the end of this year.

Speculation over Zardari's future has escalated after he was forced to abandon an effort to get parliament to approve the Musharraf decree that granted more than 8,000 government bureaucrats and politicians, including the president and many others from his Pakistan People's Party, immunity from a host of corruption and criminal charges.

The amnesty list was part of a U.S.-backed deal to allow Zardari's late wife, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, to return from exile in 2007 and run for office safe in the knowledge she would not be dogged by corruption allegations. The U.S. and other Western powers supported the bid by Bhutto, who was seen as a secular and pro-Western politician.

But Bhutto, who was forced from her post twice in the 1990s because of alleged corruption, was killed by a suicide bomber shortly after she returned to Pakistan. Zardari took over as co-chairman of her party and was elected president in September 2008 by federal and regional lawmakers.

Last weekend, the government released the list of some of those who had been protected by the decree, including the interior and defense ministers. Those listed have protested their innocence against what they deem politically motivated charges filed by a military-led investigative body from 1986 to 1999. Many have expressed a willingness to fight in court.