

GILANI TO APPEAR BEFORE PAKISTAN SUPREME COURT JAN 19 ON CONTEMPT CHARGES; EARLY ELECTIONS LIKELY

Pakistan's Supreme Court stopped just short of declaring Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani unfit for office today, and instead found him in contempt of court. He is to appear personally before the court on January 19 to answer the charges. He could be thrown out of office at that proceeding. In the meantime, the Guardian is reporting that early elections are beginning to look likely. This would appear to be the only way out for a government that is facing a military that doesn't want it in office along with two serious proceedings against it underway in the Supreme Court.

The Express Tribune reports on the contempt finding:

The Supreme Court of Pakistan issued a contempt of court notice to Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani on Monday and directed him to appear personally before the bench on January 19, *Express News* reported.

During the proceedings, National Accountability Bureau (NAB) Chairman Fasih Bokhari tendered an unconditional apology to the court, on which the court said that a written apology should be submitted.

Speaking to the media after the hearing, Federal Law Minister Maula Bux Chandio said that he will inform the government about the court's verdict and admitted that the contempt notice is not

something to be taken lightly.

A bit further along in the article, the Express News describes the six options that the Supreme Court had outlined last week as its possible courses of action on the NRO case. Here is the entry on a contempt finding:

Option 2: Contempt proceedings

The bench said the prime minister and the law minister could face contempt proceedings for “persistently, obstinately and contumaciously resisting” to implement the judgment. A possible conviction may entail a disqualification from being elected as a member of parliament for five years, the bench warned.

In a meeting of Zardari and Gilani’s PPP political party, it appears that Gilani has offered to resign if that is what is needed for the country:

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani has offered to step down in the wake of the worsening political situation in the country, sources informed *Express News* on Monday.

/snip/

Gilani also agreed to appear before the Supreme Court after he was issued a contempt of court notice today during the hearing of the NRO implementation case.

An important vote is also scheduled for tonight in the National Assembly:

Sources say that the opposition will re-emphasise on holding early elections, while both the government and the opposition will show their support for the pro-democracy resolution in the

National Assembly session which will be held later during the day.

In an article last night, the Guardian outlined some of the situation regarding the possibility of early elections:

Pakistan's embattled government is preparing to call early elections in an attempt to find a way out of the political crisis that has paralysed the country, as a confidence vote in parliament and critical court cases loom on Monday.

At war with the courts, the opposition and the military establishment, President Asif Zardari's administration has agreed to an opposition demand to hold early national polls, but only after the separate election takes place in March for the Senate, the upper house of parliament, according to members of the ruling coalition and its advisers.

If the political parties cannot find a way out of the crisis, the threat of a coup remains, analysts warn.

The precise timing of early elections is still very much under discussion:

An early election should placate the courts and military. A supposedly neutral caretaker government would have to be installed to oversee a three-month election period.

Another coalition member said: "It is 100% certain that there will be elections in 2012. The only solution is elections. It doesn't matter whether they are held in June or October."

Imran Khan has chimed in on the call for early elections, saying that they already should have been held:

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan said on Sunday that if the government was truly democratic, then it would have held elections by now.

Had the current government come into power through the people and not the NRO, elections would have been held by now, Khan said during his address in Kahuta.

Quoting Supreme Court's earlier statement about Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani being a "dishonest person", Imran hit out at the premier, saying if Gilani had some 'shame,' he would have held the elections. "There is a deficit of shame," Khan added.

Meanwhile, Geo TV has put up a recent report that suggests Gilani will not resign:

Law Minister Maula Bux Chandio said Monday that Yousuf Raza Gilani will remain the prime minister of Pakistan.

Chandio further said that members of parliament would accompany Prime Minister Gilani when he appears before the Supreme Court on January 19.

/snip/

Commenting on the call by opposition parties to call early elections the Law Minister said that the government would announce a schedule when need be.

The situation in Pakistan remains quite fragile, but the move to change tonight's confidence vote in Zardari into a vote on democracy generally appears to have been a good move. By maneuvering all sides into reaffirming their support for democracy, it would appear that there will at least be sufficient time to negotiate a peaceful transition to elections and a new government. Setting the precedent of changing governments through called elections rather than a military

coup will be a tremendous accomplishment for the people of Pakistan.

Crucial groundwork for a peaceful outcome was laid in meetings between the government and the military on Saturday, as Kayani and Zardari met face to face for 45 minutes prior to a previously planned meeting government and military figures:

Prime Minister Gilani apparently extended an olive branch to the army as mediation efforts by senior politicians and 'foreign friends' got into top gear.

Hours before the DCC meeting, Army chief Gen Kayani had, in a surprise move, called on President Asif Ali Zardari. The one-on-one meeting is said to have lasted 45 minutes, possibly laying the ground for a rapprochement.

The army, according to one of the mediators, is ready for backing off, but wants the government to make the first move towards peace. This possibly explains the conciliatory stance taken by Mr Gilani at the meeting and devoting significant part of his opening speech to the civilian-military tiff which, otherwise, was not part of the agenda.

Stay tuned for further developments.

Update: Dawn reports that the pro-democracy movement has passed in the National Assembly:

The National Assembly on Monday endorsed a resolution in favour of democracy originally moved by Awami National Party (ANP) leader Asfandiyar Wali Khan, DawnNews reported.

"I respect the courts, and I would appear before the Supreme Court on Jan 19," said the prime minister amid applause from assembly members.

"When I became prime minister, what was

my first decision? I ordered the freedom of the judges under house arrest," said Gilani. "We are responsible members of the Parliament and we are committed to democracy."

/snip/

Meanwhile, members of the Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N) and Aftab Sherpao staged a walk out of the assembly in protest.