

PAKISTAN'S SUPREME COURT RULES GILANI NO LONGER PRIME MINISTER

On April 26, Pakistan's Supreme Court found Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani in contempt of court for his refusal to ask Switzerland to reopen a corruption investigation into President Asif Ali Zardari. Today, the Supreme Court ruled that as a result of that conviction, Gilani is no longer Prime Minister (and has not been so since the April conviction).

From Reuters:

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Tuesday declared Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani ineligible for office, plunging the country into another political crisis.

In April, the Supreme Court found Gilani guilty of contempt of court for refusing to reopen corruption cases against the president. Gilani's lawyer, Fawad Chaudhry, said only parliament could dismiss the prime minister.

"Since no appeal was filed (against the April 26 conviction) ... therefore Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani stands disqualified as a member of the Majlis-e-Shoora (parliament)...," said Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry in a packed courtroom.

Dawn brings us more:

"Yousuf Raza Gilani has become disqualified from being member of the parliament," said Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, reading the order.

"He has also ceased to be the prime minister of Pakistan with effect from

the same date (April 26) and office of the prime minister shall be deemed to be vacant accordingly.

“The Election Commission is required to issue notification of disqualification... The president is required to take necessary steps under the constitution to ensure continuation of democratic process through parliamentary system of government in the country,” he added.

A three-member bench, comprising Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, Justice Jawwad S. Khawaja and Justice Khilji Arif Hussain heard a set of constitutional petitions challenging National Assembly Speaker Fehmida Mirza’s ruling over the reference against Yousuf Raza Gilani.

The Express Tribune cites a report by the Express News that Gilani will have 30 days to appeal the ruling. The Tribune also reports that the PPP, the political party of Zardari and Gilani, is holding an emergency meeting. There also is increased security in the government zone:

Security in the Red Zone has been put on high-alert, while a heavy contingent of police has also been deployed at the Gilani House in Multan.

It will be very interesting to see how Zardari and the PPP choose to go forward from this point. Will they simply support an appeal of the Supreme Court ruling, even though they did not appeal the initial contempt ruling? Will they instead choose a new Prime Minister and seek to finish the current term until elections next year? Will they choose to call early elections?

Whatever course Zardari and the PPP choose, Pakistan is now in uncharted waters. I have seen no reports, however, suggesting that the military plans to step in and take control of

the government during this crisis. That is a major step forward for democratic processes as the judiciary and the elected government seek to find a way to move forward.

Update: Dawn is now reporting that the PPP has decided not to call for early elections and will instead name a new Prime Minister within 24 hours.