

ZARDARI FLEES TO DUBAI AGAIN UNDER COVER OF “ONE DAY” TRIP: IS HE FINISHED?

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfqrl17tZCw>[/youtube]

Events continue to unfold at a very rapid pace in Pakistan. On Tuesday, I had noted, in comments to my post on the constitutional crisis facing the country over implementing the repeal of the National Reconciliation Ordinance, that Dawn was reporting that Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari had said that he is ready to resign if that is what his political party desires. Further, Zardari had called for a meeting of Parliament for today, along with a meeting just before that with high officials in his PPP political party.

In the meantime, Wednesday was very eventful, as the civilian government and military traded multiple charges back and forth over the continuing memogate controversy. In the midst of that tussle, Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani fired the country's defense secretary and the military announced a new head for a “brigade known for its prominent role in coups”.

Today, it appears that Zardari has once again fled to Dubai. Both a scheduled medical follow-up to last month's hospitalization in Dubai and a wedding have been given as reasons for this trip. So far, I've seen no mention in any of the stories on his departure of the Parliament meeting and political party meeting that he had called for today. Neither a “scheduled” medical trip nor a trip for a wedding make sense as explanations for a sudden trip which cancels these hastily called meetings. Despite the explanation that this is a one day trip, I'd be very surprised if he chooses to return to Pakistan.

Reuters reports on Zardari's departure:

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari flew to Dubai on a scheduled one-day trip on Thursday, a member of the ruling party and sources said, while tensions grew over a memo seeking U.S. help in preventing a coup by Pakistan's powerful military.

/snip/

Relations between Pakistan's civilian government and the military have reached their lowest point since a coup in 1999, reducing the chances that the leadership can take on the country's enormous social and economic challenges.

Military sources say that while they would like Zardari to go, it should be through constitutional means, not another of the coups that have marked Pakistan's almost 65 years of independence.

"There is no talk in the military of a takeover," a mid-level army officer, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak on the matter, told Reuters.

"I don't foresee a military coup."

The stage is set, of course, for the "constitutional" removal of Zardari, as his government has a deadline of Monday for responding to the Supreme Court on the NRO case. As noted earlier this week, the Supreme Court has threatened to find the civilian government unfit to rule if it does not respond properly to its rulings. Zardari's sudden departure, only four days before that deadline, would appear to be an admission that he and his government have no response to the charges.

Meanwhile, as if the Supreme Court breathing down its neck weren't enough, the Zardari government has further enraged the military with

the firing of the defense secretary:

Pakistan's military warned of "grievous consequences" from its worsening relations with the civilian government on Wednesday and Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani fired the top defense bureaucrat as a crisis deepened in the country's leadership.

The powerful military has often been at odds with civilian leaders and has ruled Pakistan for more than half of its 64-year history as an independent state after repeated coups.

/snip/

Gilani's office said it sacked the defense secretary, retired Lieutenant General Naeem Khalid Lodhi, for "gross misconduct and illegal action which created misunderstanding" between institutions. Lodhi was the most senior civil servant responsible for military affairs, a post usually seen as the military's main advocate in the civilian bureaucracy.

A bit further down in the same article, we see a move by the military that I think played a major role in Zardari's decision to go to Dubai:

In another move some analysts described as ominous, the army replaced the head of a brigade known for its prominent role in coups. The military said it was a routine matter.

Despite the military saying this move was routine matter, it smacks to me of the military prominently cleaning a gun while saying something along the lines of "Nice government you have there, Zardari. It would be a shame if anything happened to it."

Interestingly, the Supreme Court is being asked to overturn the firing of the defense secretary

and to prevent any “unconstitutional” acts by the military in response. From Dawn:

A petition has been filed in the Supreme Court against the sacking of the defence secretary by Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, DawnNews reported.

Advocate Tariq Asad in his petition pleaded that Lt-Gen Naeem Khalid Lodhi was sacrificed by the government due to the Supreme Court’s orders in the memo case and the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) implementation case.

The petitioner further sought the court’s role in stopping the army leadership from taking any unconstitutional steps.

The military is meeting to consider its options. Also from Dawn:

Pakistan’s military chief met top commanders Thursday amid a widening rift between the powerful armed forces and the civilian government.

Military spokesman Maj. Muhammad Ali Diyal declined to say what the talks at army headquarters were about, but the meeting is likely to fuel speculation about the army’s next move in the country’s political and legal crisis.

Recalling Dawn’s usual description as being quite close to the military, we see further along in the article:

The Zardari government, which was democratically elected in 2008, is determined to see out its term. General elections are scheduled for next year, but could well take place sooner. Moreover, the government has been widely criticised for ineptness, poor or ineffectual governance, and alleged corruptio [sic]

It would be very surprising to me if Zardari and Gilani remain in office much longer. Their response to the Supreme Court's demand to implement the fraud and corruption investigations called for by the overturning of the NRO appears to have been to decide that the defense secretary is the only public official who merits dismissal. That move seems remarkably inept, as it now seems that the military and Supreme Court will be wrestling over which of them gets to be the one to remove this government from power. That plays directly into a characterization of Zardari seen in one WikiLeaks cable described in what appears to be Reuters' first "retrospective" on Zardari:

Some Western officials concluded early on that he lacked the skills to lead a country seen as critical to Washington's global efforts to tackle militancy. In a 2008 diplomatic cable carried by WikiLeaks, then chief of the British Defence Staff Jock Stirrup said Zardari was "clearly a numbskull."

Stay tuned for further developments. (Oh, and by the way, see the video above. The US re-started drone strikes in Pakistan.)