

Pakistan's tensions stoked

TheStar.com - World

By-elections threaten to ignite nation after most popular politician is barred from running

June 25, 2008

Olivia Ward

FOREIGN AFFAIRS REPORTER

Pakistan, in a spiralling political crisis, faces by-elections many hoped would strengthen the turbulent country's transition from military to civilian rule.

But Nawaz Sharif, its most popular political figure, has been barred from running in tomorrow's poll by a high court in the eastern city of Lahore. And already-overheated Pakistan is threatening to ignite anew.

As anger against the government, President Pervez Musharraf and the United States grows, experts say the country is in such serious meltdown that only radical changes can put it on the course to stability.

"The by-election will simply generate controversy," says Ahmed Rashid, a leading expert on Pakistan and author of *Descent into Chaos*.

"There's conflict within the (ruling) coalition and no one person is in power. People are in a state of total confusion."

The by-elections to fill 38 national and provincial assembly seats have already been postponed because of ongoing instability. But tensions rose again as Sharif's party called his disqualification a "script written by Musharraf."

Yesterday, Sharif's supporters demonstrated outside the parliament building in Islamabad, and allies in his Pakistan Muslim League-N party walked out of the National Assembly in protest at the court ruling.

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said the government would ask the Supreme Court to halt the disqualification, and postpone the vote in Sharif's riding.

However, the top court has been stacked in favour of Musharraf, Sharif's main foe, since the president dismissed judges he considered rebellious, during a period of emergency rule.

In Sharif's hometown of Lahore, about 600 protesters took to the streets and burned tires, while hundreds of others set an effigy of Musharraf afire in the Punjab province's city of Multan.

The unrest has also aggravated tensions between Sharif's party and its coalition partner, the larger Pakistan Peoples Party of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Their most serious falling-out was over the reinstatement of the 60 senior judges whose ouster had sparked demonstrations and violence in parts of the country.

Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, who heads her party, has failed to press for the judges' return, while Sharif has put it on top of his agenda.

The two have also clashed over Musharraf, whom Sharif wants to impeach or put on trial for treason, while Zardari favours a quiet retirement that would not arouse public passions.

But, Rashid said in an interview in Toronto yesterday, neither of the men is an elected leader, and an unelected military is still the main power in Pakistan – months after Musharraf removed his military uniform under strong international pressure.

"It's a problem that has bedevilled Pakistan for 60 years," Rashid said. "It cannot decide whether civilians or the military should be in charge."

The result is disastrous for the U.S.-led "war on terror," with the military making its own deals with Taliban forces, and the government often in the dark, he added.

Support from Washington for Musharraf has compounded the problem.

"About 80 per cent of the money the U.S. has given Pakistan has gone directly to the military," Rashid said. But instead of fighting the Taliban, it has negotiated with them and diverted its forces to the Indian border.

Musharraf is widely disliked, and the war on terror opposed by the majority of Pakistanis.

The man who comes out on top is Sharif, a religiously conservative, but not extreme, politician. He has reaped the benefit of the country's anger over the escalating cost of food and fuel, which is blamed on the PPP-led government.

Polling organizations, including the Washington-based think tank Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion, say that if there were new elections, Sharif's party would win overwhelmingly.

Its survey released last week showed his support at 86 per cent, compared with 13 per cent for Zardari.

"Sharif is gaining popularity by the day," says Karamatullah Ghori, a commentator on Pakistan and former Pakistani ambassador.

"But this is his moment of truth. He can't go on riding two horses. He must decide whether he wants to continue his coalition with Zardari, or take a clear stand," on the judges' reinstatement.

But a change of leader would not necessarily solve Pakistan's deep problems, says Toronto-based Kamran Bokhari, director of Middle East analysis for Strategic Forecasting Inc.

"Sharif is on the winning side. But it's doubtful that he could deliver any better if he was in charge. There's a real poverty of thought in Pakistani politics, and the system is very broken."