
Bitter-Sweet (BBC)

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Bitter-sweet day for Musharraf

By M Ilyas Khan

BBC News, Karachi

President Pervez Musharraf must be harbouring bitter-sweet feelings about the latest ruling from Pakistan's Supreme Court.

Pervez Musharraf

Gen Musharraf must reflect on a mixed verdict

It says that Saturday's election, in which he looks a certain winner, can go ahead.

But it has blocked the election commission from announcing official results until it has finished dealing with the complaints about whether the general is entitled to stand in the election in the first place.

The bitter part for Gen Musharraf is that it will be probably another month or so before he is declared elected.

This delay is likely to favour former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto who is negotiating a power-sharing deal with him. She has been demanding a dilution of presidential powers and transparent elections, which Gen Musharraf is reluctant to concede.

But everything else appears to go in his favour... unless of course, the Supreme Court ends up by saying that he was ineligible to stand.

Failing opposition

The most important point of the court ruling is that there will be no disruption to the counting of votes on Saturday from the national parliament and the four provincial assemblies which choose the president.

This will help the pro-Musharraf PML-Q party to keep up its election tempo.

Soldier in Waziristan

The military has suffered many reverses in the tribal areas

Moreover, the timing means that opposition attempts to undermine the credibility of the election by dissolving the assembly in North West Frontier Province have failed.

The main opposition alliance, the APDM, is formed mainly of members of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's PML-N party, and a coalition of Islamic parties, the MMA.

The APDM has already made its most dramatic gesture against the election, with 200 resignations from the national and provincial assemblies.

But if the country's biggest party, Ms Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), takes part in the vote, then that would salvage much of the credibility of the election.

Gen Musharraf has now signed a law dropping corruption charges against Ms Bhutto and others, an important step on the way to a power-sharing deal.

A mess

Another big plus for Gen Musharraf is that the Supreme Court has implicitly accepted the government's position that it is the current parliamentary and assemblies that should choose the next president.

The opposition has argued that the presidential election should have been held after forthcoming parliament and assembly elections.

Pro-Musharraf demonstrators in Islamabad-

Pro-Musharraf demonstrators in Islamabad

They were confident that Gen Musharraf is now so unpopular that his parliamentary support would have dwindled, and hence he would not have been re-elected.

So on Saturday, even if the Election Commission may not be allowed to say anything, everyone will know the unofficial results showing a Gen Musharraf victory, giving him five more years in power.

It's an extraordinary mess.

Let us assume for now that all the court's findings go in his favour and that President Musharraf is sworn in for another five years and keeps his promise to resign as head of the army.

What next for Pakistan?

Some critics fear a repeat of the so-called 'trichotomy of powers' that kept successive civilian governments unstable during the period 1985-99.

Special powers introduced by the military in 1985 enabling the dismissal of the prime minister and government resulted in the president gravitating towards the military, which has traditionally held a monopoly of control over the country's nuclear and foreign policies.

Successive popularly-elected prime ministers often tried to wrest some control of those policies from the establishment, but invariably ended up losers in an uneven struggle.

Five governments during that period averaged three years in power - all of them held comfortable parliamentary majorities when they were dismissed.

Small wonder that one of Benazir Bhutto's key demands is that the power of the president to dismiss a civilian government be repealed.

And if her PPP party wins the forthcoming parliamentary elections it is likely to be in assertive mood.

Sinking morale

One big thing it can offer Gen Musharraf is much needed popular support for his policies against the pro-Taleban militants who have been increasingly daring in their attacks on the security forces in the country's tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan.

Lt Gen Ashfaq Pervez Kiani
Lt Gen Kiani - the man set to take over the army

The supposedly all-powerful army is currently facing the humiliating problem of how to free some 300 soldiers kidnapped in the region.

The government needs to come to grips with the sinking morale of the army in the tribal areas.

The Musharraf government has failed to come up with a considered policy on the issue, which most analysts believe requires a bold, surgical military operation followed by a prompt and efficient politico-economic package.

Gen Musharraf is likely to depend on the PPP's popular support and that of prominent Islamic politician, Maulana Fazlur Rahman.

The Maulana's JUIF party has considerable influence in the tribal areas. He has also worked with the PPP government in the past.

With a new army chief in the saddle, Gen Musharraf will be hoping that, for once, the challenge of tackling militancy will be off his shoulders and in the hands of a set of moderate and pro-Western leaders.

In a daze

What it all means for the ordinary Pakistani is another issue.

Most of Pakistan's intelligentsia and media commentators are agreed on a one-point agenda, that there should be no role for the military in politics.

They believe both the PPP and Maulana Fazal's JUIF have played into the hands of General Musharraf.

The lower-middle classes are in a daze. They do not understand legal hair splitting and believe the courts are favouring the country's military ruler.

They are not specifically opposed to military rule, but many have had enough of Gen Musharraf.

While the prices of essential items have gone up more than five times since 1999, the benefits of economic resurgence claimed by the government have not trickled down to them.

In the rural areas, where feudal control is still substantial and cable TV has no reach, people are not even aware of what is going on.

It is here that the PPP has the bulk of its support.

These voters are prone to pressure and if things get rough, could be forced to vote for non-PPP candidates or stay away from elections altogether.

But if the government stays neutral, they may yet carry the day for the PPP, as they did in 1970.

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Re:Bitter-Sweet (BBC)

Posted by GEO - 2008/04/02 14:54

THANKS

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