



PAKISTAN: PM has good credentials, limited authority

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SUBJECT: A profile of Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani.

SIGNIFICANCE: Gilani is leader of a coalition government with a strong mandate but facing difficult problems. It is also committed to policies that could cause turbulence, particularly reinstating judges deposed by President Pervez Musharraf. Gilani's position is further complicated by political circumstances, with the leaders of the dominant parties in the ruling coalition directing policy from outside parliament.

ANALYSIS: Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani was on March 24 elected prime minister by the National Assembly. He had been nominated by the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led coalition that was formed after the February 18 elections (see [PAKISTAN: PPP comes to power with mandate for change - March 25, 2008](#)). It also includes the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz, PML-N) and the Awami National Party (ANP). Gilani's nomination was supported overwhelmingly by legislators, his only contender being Chaudhry Pervez Elahi of the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam, PML-Q).

Popular choice. The welcome his nomination received was due partly to the fact it was a surprise. It followed weeks of speculation about splits in the PPP, and rumours that PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari was planning to nominate a close friend or confidante to the post with a view to assuming it himself as soon as he could contest a by-election and win representation in the National Assembly. (By-elections are due in several constituencies in a couple of months, including in Larkana, Sindh, where former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was due to contest the election before her December assassination. See [PAKISTAN: Bhutto death leaves election in doubt - December 28, 2007](#))

His background -- a Punjabi with links to Sindh from a revered Sufi order-- has also contributed towards favourable perceptions of his appointment:

- The 55-year-old, who is married with four sons and a daughter, hails from Multan.
- After completing his schooling, Gilani graduated from the prestigious Government College in Lahore and earned a postgraduate qualification in journalism from Punjab University.
- He is a direct descendent of a Multan saint famed for opposing a Mughal emperor in the 17th century.
- He is also related to the Pir Pagaro (a religious leader), Sindh, who is politically aligned with PML-Q.

His religious orientation is aligned with the forces that are pitted against orthodox and conservative Deobandi and Salafist traditions. This background gives him a good understanding of the religious extremism challenges faced by the country (see [PAKISTAN: Militants focus on 'pro-Western' forces - March 7, 2008](#) and see [PAKISTAN: Flawed policy exacerbates jihadist threat - August 16, 2007](#)).

Political background. Gilani is an experienced politician from an influential political family:

- His father was a signatory to the 1940 Pakistan Resolution that preceded the creation of the country.
- His grandfather was a legislator in the 1940s.
- His great-grandfather was mayor of Multan in 1921 and a member of the Central Legislative Assembly of British India.

Milestones

- Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani comes from a political family and has a strong background in parliamentary politics.
- He joined the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) in the late 1980s while Benazir Bhutto was in opposition and is regarded as a party loyalist.
- His refusal to support President Pervez Musharraf also bolstered his credentials.
- Yet his authority is limited. PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari will direct policy from outside parliament, along with coalition partner former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.



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Gilani joined the PPP in 1988, but his political career actually began five years earlier when he defeated minister Syed Fakhar Imam in local elections. The electoral result was significant because Imam was an influential member of the Zia-ul-Haq cabinet.

Party credentials. Gilani entered the National Assembly in 1985, later joining the pro-Zia-ul-Haq Muslim League to become a minister. However, he changed his party affiliation and joined the PPP while Bhutto was in the opposition and her political future was uncertain. In 1988 National Assembly elections, Gilani defeated Nawaz Sharif, then PML Punjab president and caretaker chief minister of the province and viewed highly in the military and intelligence establishments.

Gilani was then included in the Bhutto cabinet as minister for housing and works. He sat in the National Assembly as a member of the opposition in 1990, before becoming speaker after the PPP won 1993 elections. He lost the 1997 elections and did not contest those of 2002, having been imprisoned for corruption and misusing authority. He has always asserted that charges made against him were politically motivated, a result of his refusal to support President Pervez Musharraf. He was released in 2006.

Authority limits. His loyalty to the PPP and to Bhutto (combined with an independent streak -- he once refused to preside over the assembly as speaker during a dispute with Bhutto) and his refusal to negotiate with Musharraf are the keys to his appointment as premier. He has assumed a position that, under the constitution, has considerable powers, including setting the parliamentary agenda, dissolving parliament and calling new elections. The president is largely a figurehead. Under a recent amendment, the president selects the chiefs of the armed forces, and has the right to dismiss the government, albeit with Supreme Court approval. However, such a move would be unlikely to have the support of the military, and the Gilani administration is committed to restoring judges deposed by Musharraf within the next few weeks.

Policy decisions. Gilani has already made several warmly received and bold moves, starting with releasing judges from house arrest. He has since:

- announced plans to disband the National Accountability Bureau (the authority that imprisoned him) and remove discriminatory media laws that had been used by Musharraf after he imposed emergency rule in November;
- declared that colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulations that operate in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas granting autonomy to tribes and restricting access by government forces will be withdrawn or amended (see [PAKISTAN: Pashtun tribes defy pressure on militants - May 3, 2007](#)); and
- declared that anti-terrorism and law and order will be top priorities.

Authority limits. However, the real test of his leadership will be managing the large and multi-party cabinet (expected to include 70 people when all appointments have been made). The PML-N has already threatened to withdraw from the cabinet if judges deposed by Musharraf are not restored and the task of maintaining unity is complicated by the fact that Gilani's authority is limited. To a large extent, he will be reliant on and must respond to decisions taken outside parliament by Zardari and Sharif, who did not contest the election. Gilani has the capacity to be assertive, but he is unlikely to challenge Zardari. In a context in which expectations are high and the media are scrutinising every move, Gilani will be under pressure. He may have to communicate difficult and unpopular decisions on the economy and terrorism, and deal with policies that may cause problems within the PPP (see [US/PAKISTAN: New counter-terror strategy is emerging - March 27, 2008](#) and see [PAKISTAN: Economy woes will test new government - March 20, 2008](#)).

CONCLUSION: A strong background in the PPP and in opposition to Musharraf, coupled with links to both Punjab and Sindh, bolster the credentials of the new prime minister and the cabinet he leads. However, he will not be shaping major policy decisions, which will be directed by coalition party leaders outside parliament, and his leadership will be tested by coalition management difficulties and by his ability to communicate and implement difficult, contentious or emotive policy decisions.

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