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Hundreds protest against Musharraf as top court weighs his re-election plan

The Associated Press

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ISLAMABAD: Hundreds of Islamists chanting slogans against the Pakistani president, General Pervez Musharraf, rallied outside the Supreme Court on Friday as judges heard petitions challenging the president's right to run for re-election.

Musharraf, meanwhile, appointed a new intelligence chief and promoted five other army generals in a shake-up Friday just days after signaling that he would resign from the military if he won a new five-year term as president.

Opposition parties, who contend that it would be illegal for Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, to contest the vote, staged street protests throughout Pakistan on Friday, but the turnout was low in most major cities.

In Islamabad, about 1,000 supporters of Pakistan's biggest religious party, Jamaat-e-Islami, gathered outside the grand white marble courthouse shouting "Go, Musharraf, Go!" They were joined by supporters of the exiled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

"We will not tolerate Musharraf. We will continue our campaign against him," Hanif Abbasi, a lawmaker, told protesters. "We will not tolerate him in or out of uniform."

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Scores of police with riot gear blocked the road in front of the court and surrounded the rally.

After several hours, the protesters dispersed peacefully.

In the eastern city of Multan, about 400 people rallied and burned a portrait of Musharraf.

In Karachi, the police detained about a dozen opposition supporters to foil a planned protest. Only a few dozen people rallied in Quetta, Peshawar and Lahore.

On Tuesday, Musharraf signaled that he would step down as army chief if he was re-elected president - restoring civilian rule eight years after he took power - but opposition parties say that for him to contest the election would still violate the Constitution.

A nine-member bench of judges in the Supreme Court continued Friday hearings of a slew of petitions before

adjourning until Monday.

A ruling that could determine Musharraf's eligibility for the election is expected early next week.

An electoral college comprising all federal and provincial lawmakers is to choose the next president on Oct. 6. Parliamentary elections are to follow by mid-January.

Musharraf's popularity has dropped since he attempted to dismiss the chief justice earlier this year.

His administration is also struggling to contain an upsurge in Islamic militancy amid unpopularity over Pakistan's alliance with Washington.

Underscoring the threat to his government, Osama bin Laden urged Pakistanis to rebel against Musharraf in a new audiotape made public Thursday, saying the military siege of a militant mosque stronghold in July made him an infidel.

In a preliminary shuffling of the army's top ranks announced by the military Friday, Musharraf appointed Nadeem Taj, who was his military secretary in the 1999 coup, as director-general of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

He replaces Ashfaq Kiani who is among the top generals named by analysts as a possible successor to Musharraf as army chief.

The military did not say whether Kiani would retire or be promoted.

Even if Musharraf restores civilian rule, the top post in the army would remain a key position in Pakistan, which has alternated between weak civilian governments and military rule during its 60-year history.

On Oct. 7, Musharraf's two top deputies in the army are due to retire.


In all, Musharraf promoted six top commanders to the rank of lieutenant general.

Another possible successor, Tariq Maïid, was replaced as the corps commander of Rawalpindi

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