

Pakistan's spies 'quit politics'

By Haroon Rashid
BBC Urdu service

Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has said that the controversial "political wing" of the top secret service agency has been disbanded.

A senior security official used the term "made inactive" when asked about the Inter-Services Intelligence wing.

The political wing is widely believed to have been engineering domestic politics to safeguard what it considers national security interests.

This has led to the sacking of several elected governments, analysts say.

Mr Qureshi made the disclosure to the media in his home city of Multan on Sunday. The news was welcomed in political circles.

Civilian control rejected

A senior security official, requesting anonymity, told the BBC Urdu service on Monday: "The ISI is changing, it wants to keep out of politics and concentrate on counter-intelligence."

However the official said that the wing had only been rendered inactive and its staff had not been given any new assignments.

[The ISI] is not screening ministers and governors for their eligibility anymore

Senior security official

Historians say the ISI has been heavily involved in Pakistani politics since the 1950s, when the bureaucracy and the military emerged as the top power brokers.

But its activities to engineer domestic politics became more pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s.

The service is widely believed to have created an anti-Pakistan People's Party alliance before the 1988 general elections to ensure that the PPP, which it considered to be a security threat, would not win a comfortable majority.

In 1996, two ex-military politicians placed documents before the Supreme Court suggesting that the ISI funded anti-PPP factions before the 1990 elections, but the case never reached a verdict.

The ISI is also believed to have created a pro-army faction of the Pakistan Muslim League which came to power after the 2002 elections.

The ISI is also reputed to have been given the final say on the appointments of ministers and governors under political governments.

The senior security official confirmed on Monday that the ISI was "not screening ministers and governors for their eligibility anymore".

Western powers have recently blamed some in the ISI for offering clandestine support to Taleban militants to destabilise Afghanistan.

An attempt by this year's elected government to bring the service under civilian control backfired due to resistance from military circles.

It had to withdraw a move to place the ISI under the interior ministry.

ISI insiders believe the agency's over-indulgence in politics has cost the service the trust of the public.

Nevertheless, analysts say that if the political wing is not actually disbanded, the threat of its revival will remain.

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