

ISAS Brief

No. 476 – 4 May 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Challenges Ahead for Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan Politics

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has been buffeted by one crisis after another in recent times. These may have weakened him politically and caused him to be down but he is not quite out – not just yet.

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif seems to have been buffeted by bad luck in recent times. Indeed, there is a classical saying that misfortune does not come singly. Though Prime Minister Sharif's political misfortunes appear to be relentless, this tried-and-tested politician has remained unrelenting. So far, at least! But can he carry on like this? That is the million dollar question that confronts Pakistan's politics of the day.

For months, Pakistan awaited the judgment of the Supreme Court on the so-called 'Panama Gate' case with bated breath. The Court was evaluating the charges of corruption with regard to the off-shore wealth of the Sharif family. Naturally, as in all such situations, the nation expected definitive answers, as well as the legal way forward in cutting the Gordian knot in which the nation's politics had been tied. The judgment finally came on 30 April 2017.

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

However, many issues remained unresolved. The pronouncements of the judiciary were so circumspect that they could put many diplomats to shame. The apex court's bench of five was divided, three to two. The 574-page judgment was balanced enough to allow for celebrations by both sides – those who sought a legal remedy (such as Imran Khan of Tehrik-e-Insaf) and those who faced charges, the Sharif family and the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML(N)], and, to a significant extent, the opposition Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) of Asif Zardari.

Some of the conclusions the Court reached are significant. One was that Prime Minister Sharif and his family were unable to justify how they acquired their overseas assets. It was pretty damning that the chief of the bench, Justice Asif Khosa, and the next senior Judge, Gulzar Ahmed, wanted Sharif 'disqualified'. Khosa came down particularly hard. He quoted the author Balzac's statement that behind every great unaccounted fortune was a "crime". He said the Prime Minister had "economised with the truth" and "had not been honest to the nation". These were strong words, despite the flowery language (a trait common enough among South Asian judiciary).

The Prime Minister was, however, saved by the skin of his teeth, as the three other judges – Justices Ejaz Afzal Khan, Azmat Saeed Sheikh and Ijazul Ahsen – would not go far enough to send him packing immediately. Instead, they opted for a Joint Investigation Team (JIT), formed within a week, to probe and report on the case within 60 days.

As such, the matter of disqualification of the Prime Minister was postponed rather than abandoned. The bench reserved the right to act upon the periodic or the final report of the JIT to consider the matter of "disqualification". The JIT would comprise five officials, perhaps three civilians and two military. Normally officers in Pakistan would be unlikely to act against a sitting Prime Minister. But alas for him, given that the civil-military relations are currently at their nadir, such a course of action on the part of the military component of the team cannot be taken for granted. So, if not a deepening crisis, most certainly, a growing uncertainty lies not too far beyond the rim of the saucer. The sword of Damocles that hangs over the head of a Pakistani Prime Minister at any given time was lowered, and rendered sharper and more deadly.

Simultaneously, another issue came to the fore, exacerbating the situation for the Sharif government. The Pakistani English newspaper, *Dawn*, reported that in October last year, an

important meeting was held, chaired by the Prime Minister, bringing the Army top brass and civilian government leaders together. On that occasion, the then Foreign Secretary, Aizaz Chaudhry, reportedly reprimanded the Army brass for providing a safe haven to known “terrorists”, thereby isolating Pakistan in the international arena. As if that were not enough, it found its way to a reporting in the paper’s front page by a journalist named Cyril Almeida. To the Army, it was a red rag to the bull.

The military suspected that the leak was provided to Almeida by senior civilian functionaries to put its headquarters in place and clip its wings. Immediately a ban was placed on Almeida’s departure from the country and the government was pressured to send the Information Minister Pervez Rashid packing. An inquiry committee provided a report on the basis of which, on 29 April 2017, Prime Ministerial Special Assistant Syed Tariq Fatemi, a trusted and capable aide to Prime Minister Sharif, was relieved of his portfolio of foreign affairs, and Rao Tehseen Ali Khan, the government’s Principal Information Officer, was removed from office. Their precise roles in the leakage were not made public; neither the report itself.

What followed was nothing less than a drama. Almost immediately, the military’s public relations spokesman, Major General Asif Ghafoor, issued a Twitter message (which, now thanks to President Donald Trump of the United States, is catching on in some circles as the most favoured means of official communication), “rejected” the Prime Minister’s actions, demanded the report be made public, and urged the government to implement all its resolutions.

In most countries, a uniformed officer taking on the head of government in this manner would be seen as an act of “high insubordination”. However, in Pakistan, things are somewhat different. Here, the politicians are often seen as representing the feudal segment of society and moneyed capitalists, sometimes portrayed as corrupt and incompetent. The Army, on the other hand, is said to, in the words of a respected ex-general, Jahangir Karamat, a “mirror image of the society”, reflecting the urges of the common man, the peasantry and the professionals. It is almost a Weberian “status group”, pitted against a Marxian feudal “exploiting classes”. The analogy may not survive a rigorous sociological test but it is widely believed to be true.

In a bold retort to the General Headquarters of the Armed Forces, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan described such tweets as “poisonous to the country’s democracy”. The stand-off between the Army and the civil leadership was now complete. Anyhow, the Army was obviously

powerful enough to force some actions on the Prime Minister and show him up as eating the humble pie but to what end, it was unsure. For those who are rallied against Prime Minister Sharif, these developments do not offer much to crow about. Even if the Prime Minister were to be “disqualified”, his PML(N) would still have the parliamentary majority to choose a successor. There is no dearth of candidates from the dynasty itself – Maryam, his daughter, and his brother, Shahbaz, the Chief Minister of Punjab, to name two. Even if the changes would require an election to legitimise the new authority, the PML(N)’s discomfiture would be far from certain. This is particularly true as the judgment in the ‘Panama Case’ has gone a long way to show that Asif Ali Zardari, the chief of the main opposition PPP is no Caesar’s wife. Also, the other major opposition figure, Imran Khan, is seen by Pakistanis to be as likely to be their next Prime Minister as Indians see Rahul Gandhi to be theirs!

True, electoral processes have not always been the main means of effecting governance changes in Pakistan. Judicial activism and military interventionism have played their due share in this. However, this time round, the price to pay would be heavier than in the past. For starters, China, to whom Prime Minister Sharif has been extremely decent, and whose huge investments in Pakistan are at stake, would be unhappy with any undesirable instability. It is noteworthy that Pakistan derives much of its strategic strength from China. So also will be the United States whose President, Donald Trump, has showered fulsome praise on Prime Minister Sharif in the not-too-distant past. The Army’s ‘remote control’ of the system, anyhow, is near-optimal. The judiciary, despite its penchant for literary flourish, would not like to use this intellectual tool to invite chaos. So, for now, Nawaz Sharif is likely to remain in charge, either in person or through a proxy. Prudence would dictate a status quo of sorts. Sadly, that is not how the politics of that country has always been conducted.

.