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The Sharifs of Pakistan: A House Divided Against Itself

The 'House of Sharif', acknowledged as Pakistan's ruling family is threatened with a split, arising out of what is seemingly an internecine rivalry. This paper looks at its possible impact on Pakistan's immediate political future.

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In late October 2017, Pakistani politics were marked by a flurry of activities. However, the remarkable thing about them was these were taking place not in Pakistan, but in the one-time imperial country, the United Kingdom. Political elites in Pakistan, at times, seem to be attracted more by the pomp and circumstance surrounding the Westminster model of governance, than by the values and virtues of the system's democratic ideals. The meetings in question were described by the Pakistani media as the 'London huddle' of the ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML (N)]. The key players were the former prime minister and current party chief Nawaz Sharif (who now has a bailable warrant issued for his arrest on allegations of corruption), his brother and Punjab Chief Minister Shehbaz Sharif, current Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, the Finance Minister Ishaq Dar (who too has a warrant of arrest pending against him, together with orders for the seizure of bank accounts,

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a peculiar predicament for the political master of the Ministry of Finance) and Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif.

It was initially thought that the senior Sharif, Nawaz, had summoned them to the British capital to mull over together the pros and cons of his return home from England. His stated purpose of the long-term sojourn in London was to tend to his ailing wife, Kulsum. Many believed, however, and not without plausibility, that the purpose was to evade court appearances and possible arrest. However, a flip-side view is that his brother Shehbaz and successor Abbasi were there to try to calm Nawaz's vituperative stance against what in Pakistan is euphemistically called 'institutions', that is, the military and the judiciary, with the former really calling the shots (no pun intended). It is true that, in many situations of 'questionable democracy', it is the opposition leaders who tend to avoid arrest and imprisonment. It is rare, however, to have the head of a ruling party and government ministers making efforts to avoid incarcerations. This reflects an unusual and, indeed, some would argue, unique facet of the politics of Pakistan. Obviously, governance there does not appear to be conducted by the government alone!

The truth of the matter is that the PML(N) leaders, other than Nawaz, believe that, with elections due in 2018, the military and the judiciary – the so-called 'institutions' – could become instrumental in affecting the results in a negative manner for their party, if given unnecessary umbrage. Nawaz, on the other hand, feels that the 'institutions' had given him a raw deal, ousting him from power on fabricated charges through a court order. Also, Nawaz's attempts to try bury the hatchet, to the extent possible, with Narendra Modi's India aroused the military's ire and exacerbated the already-testy relations between Nawaz and the army headquarters. While it is true, the armed forces' chiefs are Nawaz's appointees, in Pakistan, the culture of the military eventually shapes and dictates the behaviour pattern of its top-brass leadership.

The other reason for the 'London huddle' was the attempt to patch up differences within the PML(N)'s first family – the 'House of Sharif'. To many, it was a house divided into two, each led by the Sharif brothers, Nawaz and Shehbaz. Between the elders, there still appears to exist a modicum of mutual loyalty. However, their off-springs, Nawaz's daughter Maryam, and Shehbaz's son Hamza, give all signs of being at daggers drawn. Maryam is said to be

unduly ambitious, a woman in a hurry, impatient to inherit the mantle of her father even though there is an uncle, far more experienced in the waiting, much less a cousin, Hamza, whose claim is also seen to be not far beyond the rim of the saucer. The ‘cussin’ cousins are seen to view each other harshly. The ‘London consensus’ appears to be that, for now, the governmental leadership would pass on to Shehbaz after the elections in 2018, if, of course, all remain as it is. However, politics in Pakistan, as with its favourite sport cricket, is fraught with uncertainties, and everything beyond a year is proverbially dark!

Now that Nawaz has returned from London, the question whether the party will continue to remain as it has emerged is the million-dollar question. There are already rumblings of a rebellion. Leaders such as Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, a former minister under Nawaz, are already displaying unwillingness to remain under the yoke of any of the Sharifs. It is said that 40 to 65 of the members of the National Assembly (as the members of parliament in Pakistan are called) are ready to ditch either the senior Sharif or the Sharifs altogether. This offers the likes of Nisar an outside chance. The ‘institutions’, particularly the army, would not be violently opposed to such an outcome. Its brass could accept Shehbaz, though, as the best of a bad bargain. The alternative is to have Abbasi continue as prime minister beyond the elections. However, right now, he seems to be too much of a Mark Antony to Nawaz’s Julius Caesar, to agree to such an arrangement that would smack of disloyalty.

There are also the whispers of what is known as the ‘Bangladesh option’. This is the possibility of a government led by technocrats for a period of two years or so, much like in Bangladesh between 2007 and 2009. The aim would be to ‘clean up the system’ and then hand over the reins of government to the politicians. The ‘institutions’ may not be averse to it and it may even command public support. However, just as was the case in Bangladesh where the model ran into opposition from all major political parties, in Pakistan, too, all major political factions dismissed the notion. The Bangladesh experience demonstrated that, despite best of intentions, it is never easy to run a polity without politics. The Pakistani political leaders seemed anxious to underscore this reality.

However, the man in the street in Pakistan would not be averse to a role of the army in governance even from behind the curtains, leading to the elections next year, and even beyond. It is often believed the army mirrors the society in Pakistan and reflects the urges of

the ordinary citizenry, pitted against the political parties, led by feudal lords and business elites. Such a monitoring role of the military is not pristinely democratic by textbook standards, but a compromise with reality is what could enable a civilian-led dispensation to continue to run the country with the ‘deep state’ exercising an element of oversight. Lowering expectations from their politicians in order to avoid disappointment is a lesson that has been inculcated in the Pakistani public mind, a situation that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

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