

Pakistani regime allows jailed prime minister Sharif to go into exile

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In a suddenly announced move on December 10, Pakistan's military regime released the ousted former prime minister Nawaz Sharif from jail and sent him into exile in Saudi Arabia. As part of the deal, Sharif has agreed to keep out of politics while in exile and to forfeit more than \$10 million in land, bank accounts and industrial property. While Sharif has been formally pardoned, he remains disqualified from holding public office for 21 years.

The Pakistani military led by General Pervez Musharraf overthrew the elected government in a coup in October last year. Sharif was detained and then put on trial on trumped-up charges of hijacking and attempted murder in a special anti-terrorism court. He was found guilty along with his close aides and sentenced to life imprisonment. He was subsequently also charged with corruption.

Nineteen members of the Sharif family, including his wife Kulsoom, his father, son, and brother Shabhas Sharif, flew with him in a plane provided by the Saudi royal family. They were received by a member of the royal family, Abdel Majed, and have been accommodated at a luxury villa in Jeddah. According to a Saudi official, Saudi Arabia will ensure that Sharif does "not take part in political activities hostile to the military regime".

Speaking to cabinet last week, Musharraf said "the decision was taken in the larger national interest" but did not elaborate. Negotiations had been underway for months. Musharraf had made several visits to Saudi Arabia and referred in his speech to a "brotherly country's request". The Sharif family had been calling for clemency, insisting that the ousted prime minister had health problems and required specialist care.

Musharraf's decision to free Sharif is linked to the regime's weak position both internationally and at

home. While the United States and other major powers took no action against Musharraf at the time of the coup, he has been under pressure to give a more democratic gloss to the junta and to provide a timetable for the "eventual" return to democratic forms. As a first step, local elections are due to be held next year.

Following a marked shift by the US towards Pakistan's rival India over the last year and a half, the country has been left rather isolated politically and diplomatically. The release of Sharif appears to be part of a series of moves aimed at strengthening Pakistan's international position. At the beginning of December, the regime responded positively to India's unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir by announcing that the military would observe "maximum restraint" along the line of control separating Indian and Pakistani held Kashmir.

The US and other Western powers welcomed the decision to free the ex-premier. There are indications that the US may have been directly involved in the negotiations. The Pakistan-based newspaper, the *News*, quoted a US National Security Council spokesman Crowley as saying: "We were in touch with the Saudi authorities, the Sharif family and the Musharraf administration." The newspaper reported that some of Sharif's family had recently met with US President Clinton, who promised to assist.

Musharraf has been desperate for extra loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to shore up the country's precarious financial position. Pakistan has a foreign debt of \$38 billion. On November 29, the IMF decided to release funds worth \$596 million for the first time since international sanctions were imposed on Pakistan and India following their nuclear tests in 1998.

But the IMF package includes a number of austerity measures, including the imposition of indirect taxes, which will fuel opposition to the military regime. In a

recent report the State Bank of Pakistan predicted that utility bills, petrol prices and taxes would all rise. It also warned that present high levels of unemployment could increase as the government attempted to privatise state-owned industries.

By exiling Sharif, the regime no doubt calculates that it will remove one of its key political opponents and at the same time divide the opposition. The cabinet noted in its statement that “it felt it [Sharif’s release] would reduce polarisation and bring harmony on the political scene”. Interior Minister Lieutenant General Moinuddin Haider has already announced his readiness to strike a similar deal with Asif Zardari, the jailed husband of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Sharif’s decision to cut a “no politics” deal with the military has opened up divisions inside his Pakistan Muslim League (PML). Sections of the party are critical of Sharif for having fled the country and want to replace him as party leader. A provincial leader, Maqbool, was quoted in the media as saying Sharif’s departure was “a setback for the party”. Sharif loyalists insist that he still heads the party. The PML is already divided over a recent decision to join with its arch-rival—Bhutto’s Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)—in a loose anti-junta coalition known as the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD).

Sharif’s flight has put a question mark over the ARD coalition. Benazir Bhutto, who has left Pakistan herself, said she never expected “such a baffling move” from the PML, adding, “it is strange that we were not taken into consideration about such a clandestine deal”. A coordinating committee of PPP leaders inside Pakistan attacked the junta for pardoning Sharif, claiming that it was “in open violation of the constitution”.

When Musharraf seized power last year, he exploited the widespread hostility to the Sharif government and Bhutto’s opposition PPP by pledging that the military would clean up corruption. As a result the decision to pardon Sharif and allow him to go into a life of luxury in Saudi Arabia has been seized upon by some opposition parties and sections of the media for their own demagogic purposes.

An article in the *News* entitled “Another dark day in the power game” commented: “Whatever the immediate benefits to both sides, the deal does raise questions about the accountability drive of the government. If the biggest fish from among the corrupt

lot has been sent off in exile, why should the small fish be serving sentences?”

The Islamic fundamentalist party Jamaat-e-Islami organised public protests on December 17 calling for Musharraf to resign. A party spokesman Ghafoor Ahmed stated last week: “After releasing Nawaz there is no justification for the military government to remain in power and continue depriving 140 million citizens of their fundamental rights.”

Far from solving its political problems by releasing Sharif, the military junta has simply compounded its difficulties. As for the opposition parties, their refusal to oppose the jailing of Sharif, whatever their political differences with his party, reveals just how shallow and cynical is their claimed adherence to the defence of democratic rights.



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