

Incoming Pakistani prime minister pledges loyalty to Washington

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Nawaz Sharif—whose Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) emerged from last Saturday’s election as far and away the strongest party in the country’s National Assembly—has moved quickly to signal his readiness to work with Washington in prosecuting its AfPak War and with the International Monetary Fund in imposing punishing austerity measures. Sharif has also lost no time in pledging his fidelity to the Pakistani military.

The Election Commission has yet to provide final results for all 272 directly elected National Assembly seats. (70 additional seats—60 reserved seats for women and 10 for religious minorities—will be apportioned among the parties based on the number of directly elected seats they captured.) But the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML (N) is already assured of 124 directly elected members and has begun negotiations with many of the 26 independents so as to secure a National Assembly majority.

Almost as soon as it had become clear that Sharif would be leading a new government he gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal* in which he emphasized his desire for close relations with Washington. After observing that he had worked well with Washington on the two previous occasions in the 1990s that he was Prime Minister, Sharif declared, “I’d like to take this relationship further. We need to strengthen the (US-Pakistani) relationship.”

During the election campaign, Sharif found it electorally beneficial to criticize the U.S. drone strikes that have killed thousands of civilians and terrorized the population in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas. But on Monday, when speaking to foreign journalists, he reportedly “used measured language,” saying that Pakistan’s “concerns” about the strikes “must be understood properly.”

At the same time, he pledged to take “serious

measures” against terrorism. The previous Pakistan People’s Party-led government gave a green light to U.S. drone strikes and at the US’s behest ordered the military to suppress Taliban and Taliban-aligned groups, plunging much of the country into civil war and displacing millions. Yet the Obama administration continuously demanded that Pakistan do still more to support the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

In a further signal to Washington, an aide to Sharif said the incoming PML (N) government would review its predecessor’s commitment to build a natural gas pipeline to Iran so as to ease the country’s massive energy crisis. The Obama administration is determined that the pipeline should not be built, because it would undercut its efforts to cripple the economy of Iran, which it views as the principal regional impediment to the US’s strategic dominance of the oil-rich Middle East.

“We will have to see whether the (pipeline) initiative was genuine or just a political gimmick by the Pakistan Peoples Party,” said the aide. Underscoring the real considerations behind this review, he added that it will not only consider the pipeline’s economic viability but “whether it will damage our relations with other countries.”

US President Barack Obama has telephoned Sharif to congratulate him. A White House statement said the “two leaders agreed to continue to work together to strengthen U.S.-Pakistan relations and advance our shared interest of a stable, secure, and prosperous Pakistan and region.”

The statement expressed the White House’s confidence that the new government will be a reliable enforcer of US interests, providing the same type of neocolonial rule as did the PPP-led coalition that preceded it.

In a published statement, British Prime Minister David Cameron publicly praised Sharif after speaking with him by phone Monday, saying he had agreed to strengthen the “strong bond” between Britain and Pakistan and to work with the British (and their U.S. allies) in stabilizing Hamid Karzai’s puppet government in Afghanistan.

“The (British) Prime Minister,” said the statement, “welcomed Nawaz Sharif’s commitment to prioritise economic reforms.”

In one of his first acts following his election win and with the transparent aim of reassuring international financial capital and Pakistani big business, Sharif announced that he would appoint Ishaq Dar as his finance minister. Dar is a former World Bank and Asian Development Bank technocrat, who in two previous stints as finance minister under Sharif, implemented IMF restructuring programs.

He will almost immediately be working with the IMF again to forestall an imminent current accounts crisis.

The caretaker election-period government already negotiated the basic framework for an emergency IMF loan of at least \$5 billion. The loan will be contingent on the new government cutting if not eliminating energy price subsidies, slashing public spending and public sector jobs, pushing forward with the privatization of key state-owned enterprises and raising taxes, including regressive goods and services taxes.

The PML (N) has already made clear its support for such socially regressive measures. Its election manifesto promised to “bring about fundamental and far reaching” economic reform, through the establishment of Special Economic Zones, the replacement of price subsidies with means-tested “targeted subsidies” and the corporatization and privatization of key state-owned industries, including power generation and distribution companies and the railways.

Confident that the new government will cater to big business, Karachi’s stock market rose to an all-time high Monday.

Given that Sharif’s last term as prime minister ended with him being toppled by the military, there have been concerns expressed in the Western press about the likelihood of tensions between the new government and the military, which the Obama administration and Pentagon, notwithstanding the former’s paeans to

Pakistani democracy, view as the true crux of Washington’s relations with Islamabad.

Sharif, however, was quick to signal his fidelity to the military, declaring, “There is no problem with the military. Referring to General Pervez Musharraf’s 1999 toppling of his government, he declared, “I don’t think the military is responsible for what Musharraf did.”

Sharif, who began his political career as a protégé of the US-backed dictator General Zia-ul Haq, and his right-wing wing PML (N) owe their electoral victory to the mass anger with the PPP-led coalition. The Pakistani bourgeoisie’s traditional “left” party of government, the PPP led a corrupt, neocolonial regime that was complicit in the AfPak war, imposed IMF austerity, and presided over a series of socioeconomic disasters from massive floods to chronic power cuts. It has been reduced to a shadow of its former self, with all but one of its 30 National Assembly seats coming from Sind, where it used regionalist appeals and traditional landlord-peasant relations to muster votes.

The PPP’s ally, the Pashtun-based Awami National Party, also an ostensible party of the left, suffered an even bigger drubbing. It was reduced from 13 National Assembly seats to 1 and saw its government in Khyber Pakhtunkwa swept from office.

Sharif’s government will pursue fundamentally the same policies, acting as a satrap for US imperialism and imposing IMF austerity, and will soon face mounting opposition from Pakistan’s workers and toilers.



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