

Pakistan's new prime minister to continue close relations with US

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In his acceptance speech this week, Pakistan's new Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared he would fix the crisis-ridden economy and "end" US drone strikes in Pakistan. However, his speech indicates that Sharif's government has a right-wing economic program and will adhere to US policy in the region, including continued drone attacks.

The Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) led by Sharif won a majority of seats in the national assembly in the May 11 election, and he was sworn in as prime minister on Wednesday. His party gained in the election by default, amid mass opposition to the former Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led ruling coalition—which backed the US war in Afghanistan, collaborated in drone strikes on Pakistan's FATA tribal areas and attacked the living and social conditions of workers and the poor.

Speaking in the national assembly, Sharif declared that other countries "should respect our sovereignty and independence. These drone strikes that rain in every day must stop." However, he immediately softened his statements, saying, in reference to the US: "We must learn others' concerns about us, express our concerns about them."

One of Washington's concerns is the suppression of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is allied with the Taliban and attacks US-led NATO forces that have occupied Afghanistan for more than a decade. Sharif's conciliatory remark was of a piece with what he has said before and since the elections about his readiness to work with the US.

When a May 29 CIA drone strike reportedly killed a TTP second-in-command Wali-ur Rehman Mehsud, Sharif offered only muted criticism. He said he "regretted" the attack, in a pro-forma statement issued on his behalf. He complained that Pakistan's

sovereignty had been violated, but said "meaningful consultations and close cooperation between the two countries should be the desired course of action, rather than unilateral measures."

However, after this drone strike and Sharif's conciliatory statement, the TTP suspended peace talks with Islamabad.

The CIA routinely carries out these illegal attacks, defying international law and massive popular opposition. So far this year alone, 69 people have been killed in 12 drone strikes. Since 2004, an estimated 3,587 people have been killed, mostly civilians, including countless children and women. All the while, Sharif and his PML-N did not oppose the US occupation of Afghanistan or the extension of that war into Pakistan.

Rehman Mehsud's assassination was a signal from Washington of its concerns about Sharif's much-publicised peace talks with TTP. Significantly, Sharif made no mention of the peace talks in Wednesday's speech to parliament.

US President Barack Obama insisted last week in a speech that these attacks would continue, as part of the US war policy. On Friday, US Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated that the drone strikes were not only "legal" but "necessary."

He cited Obama's speech: "Under domestic law and international law, the United States is at war with al-Qaeda and the Taliban and their associated forces."

Sharif so far has made no attempt to clarify even the basic questions raised by these remarks: whether the US is conducting a war inside Pakistan, and whether it abides by international law and the UN Charter.

The newly-elected provincial administration of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, led by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) on Wednesday submitted a resolution that

“strongly condemned the US drone strikes” as breaching the “country’s security and sovereignty” and international law. The resolution said the provincial assembly would back any move by the federal government to stop them immediately.

PTI and its allies issued rhetorical denunciations of US drone strikes during the election campaign. The PTI was able to win 28 seats in the national assembly because it sought to identify with popular anger against the attacks.

Despite their claims, however, both the PTI and its ally Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) are on record backing the US “war on terrorism.” Nonetheless, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa resolution will heighten the crisis of Sharif’s government, which is bound up with intensifying US pressure on China.

Sharif told the parliament that he discussed with visiting Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang the building of the Gwadar-Khunjerab-Kashgar rail network, connecting Pakistan’s Indian Ocean port at Gwadar with the western Chinese city of Kashgar.

If it materialised, this network would provide China a secure land trade route, including for its vital oil supplies, bypassing the US-dominated Indian Ocean. Washington will strenuously oppose such a strategic railway.

According to media reports, Sharif plans to retain the key defense and foreign ministers’ portfolios for himself, with a small initial cabinet of 20 members. Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, the former opposition leader in the assembly, a retired army general from Balochistan, will be appointed as interior minister.

Former World Bank and Asian Development Bank technocrat Ishaq Dar has been named finance minister, the same post he held during Sharif’s previous stints as prime minister, when he implemented International Monetary Fund (IMF) policy dictates. He also held the position in the PPP-led coalition, before Sharif’s PML-N quit the government. His appointment signals major attacks on the social and living conditions of the working class and the poor.

Local and international media outlets, as well as business chambers, considered Dar’s nomination a commitment to “fundamental and far-reaching” reforms outlined in the PML-N election manifesto.

A *Foreign Policy* article quoted an unnamed PML-N source saying the government would “phase out costly

subsidies and institute energy pricing reforms.” Privatisation of state-owned enterprises will also be part of the agenda.

Sharif’s government will depend on Washington for its economic survival. Pakistan’s foreign reserves fell to \$US11.5 billion at the end of May, just enough to fund six weeks of imports. Pakistan’s foreign debts have reached \$60 billion. The IMF is already in discussion on the terms of a future loan that would demand brutal cuts to living standards, but the final decision will require Washington’s approval.

Sharif has agreed with Saudi Arabia, a close US ally, to accept up to US\$5 billion cash and a line of credit, especially to address an energy crisis. The Saudi loan, however, could lead to the scrapping of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline: the autocratic Saudi monarchy is hostile to the Iranian government and backs US efforts to remove it. The US has demanded a halt to the pipeline project, despite Pakistan’s urgent energy needs, and Sharif has signalled he would review it.

The Saudi loan indicates increasing influence in Pakistan, where the Saudi regime has played a major role in the Islamisation of the country, dating back to the 1970s. Saudi Arabia has been blamed for providing funds to sectarian Sunni Muslim groups. The escalation of sectarian conflicts has already dragged the country into civil war, further fuelled by the US military onslaught.



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