

Pakistan plunges deeper into crisis as prime minister ousted on corruption charges

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Nawaz Sharif stepped down as Pakistan's prime minister Friday after the country's highest court found him "not honest" in a corruption investigation and ordered his ouster.

Sharif is expected to ask the Supreme Court to review its verdict, but it is under no compulsion to do so. Meanwhile, the country's ostensible anti-corruption watchdog, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), has been ordered by the court to file criminal charges against Sharif, several family members, and Sharif's finance minister, Ishaq Dar.

In Friday's ruling, the court also ordered that Dar, who had served as Sharif's accountant, be expelled from parliament.

The political turmoil in Islamabad is taking place amid an escalating geo-political crisis. Washington, which over the past decade has made India its principal South Asia ally, is threatening to further downgrade its relations with Pakistan, even declare it a "terrorist state," if it does not target the Haqqani network. India, seeking to exploit its new status as Major (US) Defense Partner, has, for its part, adopted an ever more belligerent stance against Pakistan. For the past 10 months, Indo-Pakistani relations have been on the boil with almost daily cross-border artillery barrages in disputed Kashmir.

Sharif's disqualification from parliament, which made him constitutionally ineligible to be prime minister, was based on his failure to declare income from the United Arab Emirates-based Capital FZE, when he filed his nomination papers for the 2013 general election. However, the investigation into Sharif's finances was triggered by the publication in April 2016 of the so-called Panama Papers, which exposed his family's connections to offshore tax-havens.

Amid calls from the principal opposition parties for the next general election to be advanced from August 2018, Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain has summoned parliament into session today to elect an interim prime minister.

It goes without saying that Sharif, who began his political career in the 1980s as a protégé of the dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, has exploited his political ties to expand the family fortune. Corruption is endemic in Pakistan's ruling elite, including in the ranks of the military, which has directly ruled the country for almost half of its 70 years of existence. Yet the latter has repeatedly manipulated corruption charges to settle

scores with rivals in the political elite and assert its authority.

The NAB was formed by military strongman General Pervez Musharraf to intimidate the politicians, shortly after he led a 1999 military coup that ousted Sharif in a previous term as Pakistan's prime minister.

Sharif loyalists charge that the Supreme Court has shown a double standard in its treatment of the charges against the now defrocked prime minister and boss of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). While the court has moved expeditiously in the Panama Paper case, it has let cases against other government officials and politicians languish for years.

There is no doubt the immediate beneficiary of Sharif's ouster and the weakening of the PML (N) government is the military.

On assuming office in June 2013, Sharif sought to augment civilian control over the military. But the military, with tacit US support, successfully pushed back, maintaining effective control over the country's foreign and national security policies and forcing Sharif to renounce his plans for a rapprochement with India.

Commenting on US "national security interests" in Pakistan, the *New York Times* said the current political crisis in Islamabad has "raised eyebrows at the State Department and the Pentagon, but little else."

"The Pakistani military is largely viewed as the real source of power in Islamabad, and that is not going to change with a new prime minister," said the *Times*.

Vikram J. Singh, a former US deputy assistant Secretary of Defence for South and Southeast Asia, told the *Times*, "[Sharif's ouster] means even more power in the military's hands because the military is truly the only institution in Pakistan that's not in turmoil."

Other press reports observe that the military's hands are all over Friday's court verdict.

The Supreme Court acted on evidence compiled by a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) it appointed last April, when it was split over whether there was enough evidence from the Panama Papers to disqualify Sharif. Extraordinarily, the court ordered that Military Intelligence and the notorious Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) agency each have a representative on the six-member JIT.

The JIT report found “significant disparity” in the Sharif family’s wealth and the declared sources of its income. The London-based *Financial Times* says the outcome of the JIT investigation “is believed to have relied heavily on military intelligence gathering.”

The campaign against Sharif over the Panama Papers has been led by cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), which some accuse of acting as a stalking horse for the military.

The PTI refused to accept the results of the 2013 election, claiming that Sharif and his PML (N) had engaged in ballot-rigging. In August 2014, PTI supporters occupied central Islamabad, provoking a political crisis that the military-intelligence apparatus, at the very least, leveraged to win greater power. Soon after Sharif greatly expanded the military’s reach. This included giving the military police powers where it had been deployed to fight “terrorism,” sanctioning secret military-run courts that can try civilians on “terrorism” charges, and lifting a moratorium on executions.

When the Panama Papers implicated Sharif family members, the PTI launched a similar campaign. But it failed to gain traction after the government declared the protests illegal. Khan then called off the agitation on the pretext that the Supreme Court would hear the case against the Sharifs.

Khan and sections of the Pakistani media are touting Friday’s court verdict as a victory for democracy. This is absurd. Democracy in Pakistan—a state founded on an expressly communal basis through the 1947 partition of the subcontinent—is a sham. While a tiny elite wallows in luxury, paying little or no taxes, the vast majority lives in poverty and squalor, with much of the state budget squandered on the military and the Pakistani elite’s reactionary strategic rivalry with India.

Sharif’s removal conforms to the rule. No elected Pakistani prime minister has ever served a full five-year term without a military coup or the judiciary intervening to oust them from office.

During Sharif’s years in office, the military has expanded its “anti-terrorism” operations to virtually the entire country. Paramilitary Rangers occupy the country’s largest city, Karachi. In Balochistan the military has been waging a counterinsurgency war against ethno-nationalist separatists for over a decade. In 2014, after Sharif repudiated his “peace” overtures to the Pakistani Taliban, the military launched a scorched-earth offensive in North Waziristan which has since been expanded into other tribal areas. In March 2016, when the military launched an “antiterrorism” offensive in Punjab, the powerbase of PML-N, overriding the opposition of the provincial government, Sharif meekly submitted, issuing a statement that claimed his government had given prior approval to the military’s actions.

According to the Justice Project Pakistan, which analysed the data of 465 prisoners sent to the gallows since December 2014,

executions are being “used as a political tool” and in cases that have nothing to do with terrorism. In June, a man was given capital punishment by an anti-terrorism court under medieval blasphemy laws for a Facebook comment.

The “anti-terrorism” laws are frequently used against workers coming into struggle against the severe austerity policies that successive governments have implemented under the diktats of the International Monetary Fund. In one incident on July 22, 14 Pakistan Railway workers were arrested on government orders when train drivers launched a strike demanding a pay hike.

While the ruling elite is united in fleecing and repressing the working class and toilers, it is bitterly divided over which faction will control the state’s purse strings. A further source of conflict is the “pivot” in the country’s foreign policy. For decades the Pakistani elite was more than happy to serve as a satrap for US imperialism, but with the US now aligned with its arch-enemy India, Islamabad has tightened its military-security partnership with China. With Washington’s encouragement, some sections of the ruling elite are questioning this policy. At the same time, a bitter fight has erupted as to who will glean the profits from the \$50 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The Supreme Court has ordered the NAB to file criminal charges within six weeks against Sharif, three of his six children, Dar, and others. A Supreme Court judge will oversee the entire proceeding until its completion.

Sharif is expected to elevate his brother and current Chief Minister of Punjab’s provincial government Shahbaz Sharif to head the government. However, he has to first win the by-election to be held for the National Assembly seat left vacant after Sharif’s disqualification. Until then, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, a close ally of Sharif, is expected to serve as interim prime minister.

At least for now, the PML-N is expected to be able to enforce its will in parliament using its majority. However, cracks in its ranks were exposed when Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan announced last Friday that he is quitting politics. Previously there had been suggestions Khan might step in as prime minister if Sharif was ousted.

Sharif’s favored political heir is said to be his daughter Maryam. But because of her deep embroilment in the corruption scandal, including the unexplained ownership of luxury flats in an exclusive London neighborhood, she has been effectively sidelined.



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