

Former Pakistan PM Sharif arrested in run-up to election

By Sampath Perera
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Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's recently deposed prime minister, was arrested last Friday on his return to the country and is now in prison, pending legal appeals of the 10-year jail sentence imposed on him earlier this month in a politically motivated and manipulated corruption case.

Sharif's arrest was a foregone conclusion once he boarded a plane for Pakistan. But he hopes that his return, in the face of what he has termed a military-orchestrated "judicial witch hunt," will rally public sympathy and support for his beleaguered Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML-N in the run up to the July 25 national and provincial assembly elections.

Determined to thwart such an eventuality, Pakistani state authorities banned all public gatherings in Sharif's home town of Lahore prior to his arrival, suspended mobile services, and deployed thousands of police and paramilitary Pakistan Rangers. Nevertheless, large crowds, estimated by some to number tens of thousands, took the streets to voice their support for Sharif.

According to press reports, at least 600 PML-N supporters have been arrested in recent days as part of the state campaign to prevent demonstrations in support of Sharif, whose PML-N led Pakistan's government, at least formally, from May 2013 until the beginning of June. It was then replaced by a "caretaker government" that will hold office pending the outcome of the July 25 elections.

On July 6 an anti-corruption court found Sharif guilty of charges filed by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) arising from the Panama Papers' 2016 exposure of the Sharif family's ownership of four luxury apartments adjacent to London's Hyde Park. Sharif's daughter, Maryam, who has been touted as his possible successor, has also been ensnared in the corruption case and was arrested with him on their return to Pakistan last Friday.

That Sharif has used his more than thirty-year-long political career to illicitly grow the family fortune is beyond doubt. But corruption is endemic within the Pakistani elite, especially in the military, the judiciary and other state institutions. The NAB, which has spearheaded the prosecution of Sharif, was created under the dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf and is notorious for its manipulation of charges against political

opponents of the military.

In an interview with Reuters just prior to his departure for Pakistan, Sharif denounced the blatant state campaign against his PML-N, which has included an order to television channels to stop airing speeches by "political leadership containing defamatory and derogatory content targeting various state institutions specifically judiciary and armed forces."

"What credibility will these elections have," complained Sharif, "when the government is taking such a drastic action against our people and this crackdown is taking place all over the country?"

"I'm aware of the fact that I'll be jailed," continued Sharif, "but it's a very small price to pay for the great mission to save the sanctity of the vote in Pakistan."

Sharif's attempts to portray himself as martyr for democracy are risible. He was a political protégé of the "Islamizing" dictator General Zia-ul Haq and came to power twice in the 1990s as the result of the political machinations of the military-intelligence apparatus against the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

Sharif had a falling out with the military in 1998 when he bowed to US pressure and ordered an end to the Kargil War against India in a remote part of disputed Kashmir. The following year, Musharraf ousted him in a coup.

A military court subsequently sentenced Sharif to life in prison, but under pressure from Riyadh and Washington he was permitted to go into exile in Saudi Arabia. He returned to the country in the fall of 2007 as Musharraf's, Bush administration-backed, regime unravelled. Following the February 2008 elections, his PML-N joined forces with the PPP to force Musharraf to relinquish the presidency and return to a prime ministerial-led government.

Exploiting popular opposition to the PPP-led government's IMF-dictated austerity measures and complicity in the US drone war in Pakistan's tribal areas, Sharif and his PML-N came to power after winning a plurality of seats in the 2013 elections. His government promptly intensified austerity and accelerated the selloff of state-owned enterprises and assets.

In the name of fighting terrorism, it also soon extended military operations to all parts of Pakistan, including Karachi; revived a military court system in which civilians can be tried

in secret; and greased the rope for hundreds of hangings by lifting a moratorium on the death penalty.

However, these attempts to placate the military proved too little, too late. The top brass pushed back aggressively when Sharif attempted, in his first months in office, to assert civilian government control over foreign and security policy. The military also opposed his attempts to revive the long-stalled “peace process” with India and his government’s championing of Musharraf’s prosecution on treason charges.

Sharp differences also emerged between the government and military over the oversight of the \$50 billion Chinese Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which not only promises a windfall for those in charge, but also has huge military-strategic implications.

The PPP, which has remained in the margins since being trounced in the 2014 elections for serving as a pliant instrument of the IMF and Washington, has maintained an ambivalent position on Sharif’s case. In response to last week’s crackdown against Sharif supporters, PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari issued a single tweet that questioned the “siege” of Lahore and urged respect for the right to “peaceful protest.”

However, the PPP and other opposition parties have had to raise their voices in recent days against the ever more intrusive efforts of the authorities to limit and disrupt their campaigning. The PPP has publicly charged that a mass vote-rigging operation is being prepared and on Monday, Bilawal’s father, former Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari, denounced reports that some sixty PML-N leaders and activists are being charged under the country’s draconian anti-terrorism laws for defying last Friday’s ban on public gatherings.

Everything points to the cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan and his right-wing Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) being the intended beneficiaries of the authorities’ manipulation and repression. Khan has given his full support to the flurry of judicial measures against Sharif and has spearheaded the campaign against Sharif under the banner of fighting corruption.

Khan, who has courted the support of the Islamist right by championing Pakistan’s sweeping “anti-blasphemy laws and state discrimination against the Ahmadiyya minority, is promoting himself as a civilian leader capable of working in tandem with the military. In an interview with *New York Times* in May, Khan justified the military’s bullying of the Sharif government, saying that if “a democratic government” lacks “moral authority, then those who have the physical authority assert themselves.” Khan said he was confident he would “carry the army with me.” “In my opinion, it is the Pakistan Army and not an enemy army.”

Pakistan’s political crisis is playing out amid a longstanding geopolitical crisis and a looming financial meltdown.

The Pakistani rupee has depreciated almost 15 percent against the US dollar since the beginning of the year, while the debt-to-GDP ratio has surpassed 70 percent, bypassing what

are deemed acceptable levels for a “developing country.” Although Pakistan has borrowed more than \$4 billion from China during the past year, the financial press considers it highly likely, if not inevitable, that Islamabad will have to seek IMF support to forestall a balance of payments crisis.

Pakistan’s relations with Washington remain fraught, with the Trump administration demanding that it bear more of the burden of the Afghan War and Islamabad eying nervously the ever-deepening strategic embrace between Washington and its arch-rival, New Delhi.

Pakistan’s attempts to compensate for the downgrading of its historically close ties with Washington by strengthening its military-strategic alliance with China have only further damaged its relations with the US. Washington supported India’s September 2016 “surgical strikes” inside Pakistan and, to Islamabad’s dismay, has urged New Delhi to play an even greater role in Afghanistan.

Tensions with India have lessened in recent weeks. But for the better part of two years, South Asia’s nuclear-armed states were exchanging virtually daily military barrages across the Line of Control in disputed Kashmir and continue to regularly issue blood-curdling threats of all-out war.

While the media focuses on the vicious factional fighting within Pakistan’s elite, there is seething social discontent within the working class and rural and urban poor. The draconian anti-terrorism laws, upheld and expanded by successive governments, have repeatedly been invoked against workers struggling for better living conditions and jobs and rural people fighting for land rights.

In a warning sign of what is to come, the military has brutally repressed a movement protesting against the state’s treatment of the Pashtun minority, who as part of Pakistan’s “anti-terrorism” campaign have been subject to harassment, forced disappearances, and colonial-style collective punishments.

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