Associate Paper

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The Removal of Nawaz Sharif and Changing Role of Punjab in Pakistani Politics

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Key Points

- The removal from office of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif could be the precedent for a change of approach towards the civil-military relationship on the part of the influential province of Punjab.
- The most populous province of Pakistan, Punjab has long dominated the Pakistani polity and military.
- Sharif’s party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), heads both the Punjab provincial government and the national government.
- If the PML-N decides to continue Sharif’s attempts at better relations with India, it will again place the government at odds with the army, which wants oversight of foreign policy issues pertaining to Afghanistan and India.
- If the PML-N is interested in improving links with India, it will need to take action against terrorist groups.

Summary

The most populous province of Pakistan, Punjab has long dominated the Pakistani polity and military. Initially, at least, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif – a Punjabi – enjoyed a close relationship with the army. That relationship soured, however, following his dismissal from office during his first term as Prime Minister in 1993. A key factor for the falling out between Sharif and the army was the former’s attempts to build a better relationship with India. Arguably, that enmity only increased during Sharif’s third, most recent, term in office. In the wake of Sharif’s disqualification on 28 July 2017, the influential, traditionally pro-army
Punjab leadership is now instead backing Sharif’s party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), or PML-N.

**Analysis**

For a long time, the province of Punjab, which is home to well over 50 per cent of the population of Pakistan, has been accused of having hegemonic tendencies towards the other provinces. Pakistan has even been referred to as “Punjabistan” by certain scholars, such as Yunas Samad, to highlight the level of domination by the province.¹ Samad has argued that, even though in the initial years after independence, it was the Urdu-speaking migrants known as “Mohajirs” who dominated both the politics and bureaucracy of the country, Punjabi domination gradually increased.

Punjab’s stranglehold over Pakistan’s polity is attributed to the fact that a large chunk of those serving in the army come from the country’s most populous province, even though – going by the figures – Punjab’s contribution does not seem so disproportionate. Out of 16 army Chiefs, seven have been Punjabis; the current Chief, Qamar Javed Bajwa and his predecessors, Raheel Sharif and Ashfaq Kayani have all been Punjabis. The Pathans, with a lesser population, have provided four army chiefs. The army also claims to be working towards reducing the domination of Punjab in the service.

Other provinces (including Sindh, where the Pakistan People’s Party is dominant) have for some time accused political groups from Punjab of letting down democracy and, at decisive moments, backing the all-powerful army. With Sharif’s recent disqualification from Parliament and resignation from the Prime Minister’s chair, and the recent notice to appoint a new party leader of the governing PML-N, it remains to be seen whether Punjab (where the PML-N is the government and key player) will rally behind democratic forces, as happened with the “lawyers’ movement” in 2007 that led to the ouster of General Pervez Musharraf. The PML-N also has the opportunity of taking bold steps to reach out to India while sending a clear message to the army.

Two things are now clear. Sharif will leave nothing to chance in Punjab and will want to win big there at the next election. Second, he will pull no punches as far as the army is concerned. The first point is reinforced by the fact that Sharif began an aggressive public outreach campaign, taking a long and very public drive along the main Grand Trunk Road to his home town of Lahore. He will also be aided by the fact that his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, was chosen to be his replacement as PML-N leader on 29 July. Shahbaz will stay on as Chief Minister of Punjab province, where he is immensely popular as a result of his efficiency and dynamism, until the next election.

Second, while it is true that Sharif avoided a direct conflict with the army by quitting, he did lash out at the army’s past political involvement at a rally in Jhelum:

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It is being done for 70 years. Every prime minister had 1.5 years in the office on an average. Dictators had ruled for 10 years. They ran away on the pretext of backache. Is there any court that could punish those dictators ... They subverted [the] Constitution. Judges give them legitimacy and said Musharraf had done a good job by ousting Nawaz Sharif.

**The Rise of Nawaz Sharif and the Role of the Army**

One of the reasons for Punjab's domination of the Pakistani polity was the alliance between the military and right-wing political groups from Punjab. Interestingly, the only leader of national stature from the Punjab, Nawaz Sharif, who today does not share the most cordial of relations with the military, was brought into the politics by the military dictator, General Zia-Ul-Haq. Sharif, who served as a Minister in the Punjab Government and, later, as Chief Minister of Punjab, was brought in as a counter to the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), led by Benazir Bhutto. Two factors determined this alliance between Sharif and the army. A number of properties belonging to the Ittefaq Group of Foundries – the Sharif family’s business – had been nationalised during Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s term in office (1973-77). As a result, Sharif found common cause with the military. There was also some convergence between Sharif’s conservative views and General Zia-Ul-Haq’s religious leanings. The latter even called Sharif his spiritual son.

In 1990, the right-wing Islamic Jamhoori Ittihad (IJI) coalition, backed by the establishment and led by Nawaz Sharif won the election, defeating the PPP government of Benazir Bhutto. The IJI was later disbanded and Sharif’s PML-N dominated the political scene, especially in Punjab. It would be fair to point out that, while Sharif may have been initiated into politics, what also led to his rise and acceptance, especially in Punjab, were his pro-reform credentials as a provincial minister and, later, as Prime Minister.

**Initiation into Politics**

Sharif’s relationship with the army began to sour following his dismissal in 1993. One of the reasons for the tensions with the army has been Sharif’s desire to improve the situation with India, something that is not acceptable to the army leadership.

One his main planks in fighting the 1997 general election was better ties with India, something quite unheard of. It has been argued that Sharif deserves credit, especially in Punjab, for moving Pakistan’s elections away from the anti-India narrative.

Indeed, during his second term as PM, he did make attempts to improve ties with India. This was driven by both his desire to take charge of foreign policy, as well as a sense of pragmatism from his background as a businessman. The visit of then Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in February 1999, raised hopes of a rapprochement between the two neighbours. The army, however, evidently had other ideas; within a few weeks of Vajpayee’s visit, aggression between both countries had broken out in Kargil. Four months after the Kargil war, Pakistan witnessed another coup by General Pervez Musharraf, a non-Punjabi and Sharif's own choice as the Chief of Army Staff. The coup further soured Sharif's ties with the army and also strengthened his resolve to work for the strengthening of democracy.
While in exile, Sharif signed a Charter of Democracy with his rival and former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. The main aim of the Charter was to jointly work for the end of the dictatorship and the restoration of democracy. Sharif also supported the lawyers’ movement, raising hopes of Punjab having become a supporter of democracy. It is pertinent to note that, while there were numerous differences between Sharif and the PPP, he did nothing to destabilise the Gilani/Ashraf PPP government.

After his re-election in 2013, it seemed that Sharif would be well and truly in command, that there would be a redefining of civil-military ties and that he would be able to set Pakistan’s foreign policy. Sharif’s policy of reaching out to India was thwarted at every stage by the army, this time by three Punjabi army chiefs: Kayani, Raheel Sharif and Bajwa. As a result of numerous constraints, Sharif could not take on the army.

In particular, Sharif was dependent upon the army chiefs in the fight against terrorism and the Zarb-E-Azb counter-terrorism operation raised Raheel Sharif’s popularity. During the protests headed by opposition leader Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (PTI) party in 2014, the army had to intervene, with Raheel Sharif acting as mediator between the civilian government and the protestors. The army took full advantage of Nawaz’s weakness and, slowly but surely, sent the clear message that it would like to have the final say on foreign policy issues pertaining to Afghanistan and India. Raheel Sharif’s popularity rose and he began to be looked upon as something of a messiah.

Second, the Mossack Fonseca “Panama Papers” leak which revealed that Sharif’s family had offshore companies which possessed properties in London weakened the PM and further strengthened the army. In August 2016, Imran Khan’s PTI submitted a petition seeking the disqualification from office of Nawaz Sharif based on the Mossack Fonseca files.

With Sharif weakened, rumours of a coup began to circulate and, in June 2016, army chief Raheel Sharif met with the Cabinet at the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi while Nawaz Sharif was in the UK for open heart surgery. According to a later clarification from the army, the meeting was to discuss issues pertaining to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project.

Sympathy for Sharif and another Defining Movement for Democracy

After Sharif’s disqualification from office on 28 July, it was interesting to note that a large number of analysts and individuals unequivocally criticised his disqualification, even dubbing it a ‘judicial coup’, while also alluding to the hand of the Pakistani establishment in the same. A number of analysts pointed out that General Musharraf, in spite of serious charges against him, had been allowed to escape to London.

After the anti-Musharraf lawyers’ movement of 2007, there is a chance that this could be a game changer for Pakistani politics, with the Punjab (traditionally considered to be pro-army), now backing the PML-N, which is leading the fight for democracy. It is important for the strengthening of democracy that Punjab dispels the impression that it does not care for the concerns of the other provinces and the PML-N needs to take the lead in that. A number of scholars have argued, for instance, that due to Punjab’s stranglehold over Pakistan, funds
have been diverted for developmental projects in Punjab, which has led to resentment by other provinces, such as Baluchistan. The CPEC project has been dubbed a **Punjab-centric project** and other provinces are concerned that it will benefit Punjab the most. The PML-N will need to address this issue seriously.

**The Punjab Government and Terrorist Groups**

Turning to India, if the PML-N is interested in improving links with New Delhi, taking action against terror groups will be necessary. The PML-N government, especially the Punjab provincial government that it also heads, needs to stop its kid gloves approach towards terrorist groups, which harms the relationship with India and strengthens the army. Prominent among those groups are the *Jamaat-Ud-Dawaah* (JuD) and *Jaish-e-Mohammed* (JEM). While Hafiz Saeed, of the JuD, was put under house arrest, a number of prominent ministers have confessed that the province has been backing both organisations and that taking action against such groups is impossible. Saeed’s JuD has also formed its own political front, the “Milli Muslim League”.

No action has been taken against JEM head Masood Azhar, one of the masterminds of the Pathankot terror attack in 2016. Similarly, once Nawaz Sharif was weakened vis-à-vis the army, he took a more aggressive stance on Kashmir, even making belligerent statements that glorified Burhan Wani, the deceased commander of a Kashmir-based militant group Hizbul Mujahideen.

**Punjab’s Role in Strengthening Democracy**

In the wake of Nawaz Sharif’s removal from office, it is possible that Punjab will now play a role in strengthening democracy in Pakistan. For that to happen, it is important that its leaders exhibit political shrewdness, display more sensitivity to the concerns of other provinces, and are not rash in their dealings with the army. It is also important, that the Punjab provincial government – like its national counterpart – takes on the terrorist groups that are working to prevent a better relationship with India.

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