

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Politics in Pakistan: Nawaz Sharif vs. Imran Khan

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Key Points

- Former PM Nawaz Sharif's attack against the Pakistan Army and Prime Minister Imran Khan has elicited strong responses from them.
- This is not the first time that Pakistan's three-time Prime Minister, who has had strained ties with the army, has hit out at the latter, but his tone this time is more aggressive.
- Sharif, who is currently in the UK, may not benefit directly from his criticism, but he could mobilise the opposition, even though there are voices within it that see an aggressive approach to the army as not being beneficial.
- The Pakistan Army is unlikely to take Sharif's criticism without some form of retaliation.

Summary

Former Prime Minister and Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) supremo, Nawaz Sharif's, tirades, first in a video address last month and then at a rally in Gujranwala, on 16 October, against the current Prime Minister, Imran Khan, as well as the army, has elicited a strong response from Imran Khan, his colleagues and the Pakistan army.

After his address last month, warrants were sent to Sharif, who is currently [in the UK](#) for medical treatment. While he was convicted in one case, and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in another, he received bail for both cases and was allowed by the court to travel to the UK for medical treatment. Sharif, who has been in the UK since November

2019, was given eight weeks to return to Pakistan, but has not returned due to health complications.

A case of sedition was consequently filed against Nawaz Sharif [by an individual close to the ruling PTI](#), for his fiery speech. The complainant, Badar Rasheed, alleged that ‘Nawaz is carrying out a planned conspiracy to defame Pakistan and its institutions by making inflammatory speeches.’ Sedition cases, which were also filed against Sharif’s daughter Maryam Nawaz and workers of PML-N, were withdrawn, but not the charge against Sharif. Sharif’s brother and former Punjab Chief Minister, Shehbaz Sharif, was also arrested by the National Accountability Bureau on 28 September after his bail plea in a money laundering case was rejected. Sharif, along with other opposition leaders, was likely to be part of a protest against the sitting government. Shehbaz’s son, Hamza Shehbaz, is already in prison.

At the Gujranwala rally, which the media described as impressive, all PDM leaders, including PMLN Supremo Nawaz Sharif, his daughter and a senior party leader, Maryam Nawaz, PPP Chairman, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Maulana Fazl Ur Rehman (JUI-F) [hit out at Khan](#) for his failure to provide good governance. They alleged that Khan's energies were focused on targeting the opposition, while turning a blind eye to the failures of his government and the corruption of his own colleagues and party members. Significantly, hours after a rally by opposition parties on 19 October in Karachi, Maryam Nawaz’s husband, [General Safdar](#), was arrested.

Analysis

Contents of Sharif’s Address to the APC

Sharif, while addressing the All Parties Conference (APC) in September, organised by the Pakistan People’s party (PPP), accused the army of plotting his downfall through protests by Imran Khan, which were [organised in 2014](#), and then through judicial cases, which led to his ouster in 2017 on charges of corruption. Nawaz Sharif had previously been ousted in a military coup by General Pervez Musharraf in 1999.

It is pertinent to point out that Pakistan’s eleven main opposition parties have combined to form the People’s Democratic Movement (PDM). The PDM has appointed Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) chief, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, as its head. The alliance also rubbished the charge levelled by the [government](#) that it is working at India’s behest.

Sharif named several individuals, including Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, who he alleged plotted his downfall. The Former PM also alleged that during the protests organised by Imran Khan in 2014, then Director-General of the Inter-Services Intelligence, retired Lieutenant-General Zaheer Ul Islam, [warned him to step down](#), or martial law would be imposed. Sharif said, while referring to the incident, during the course of his address to the APC, ‘I was told to step down and go home. I said whatever you want to do, do it [...] I will not resign [from the office of the prime minister].’

While earlier, too, Sharif (whose last tenure was from 2013-17, before he was deposed), had not minced words in attacking the army, he was particularly stinging this time. The former Prime Minister went to the extent of saying that the army was now ‘a state above a state’

and while witch hunts were launched against politicians in the name of accountability, the same was not expected of army officials. Said [Sharif](#):

When a dictator [referring here to former Chief of the Army and President, Pervez Musharraf] was first brought into the courtroom for violating the Constitution, you saw what happened. [The] Court gave dictators the right to play with the Constitution and acquitted someone who broke the Constitution twice.

He also stated that no democratically-elected government was allowed to complete its tenure, while dictators enjoyed longer tenures.

Comments on Imran Khan

Sharif also said that Khan was an appointee of the army and that the 2018 general elections, which saw him take office, had been clearly rigged. Said [Sharif](#):

...Today, our struggle is against those who installed Imran Khan and who manipulated elections (of 2018) to bring an inefficient man like him into power and thus destroyed the country.

The PML-N supremo also attacked Imran Khan's PTI government for failing on the governance front and in handling economic challenges.

Imran Khan's Response to Nawaz Sharif

Prime Minister Khan did not take kindly to Sharif's remarks. In a [media interview](#), he said that his government and military were both on the same page, unlike in the past. The Pakistani Prime Minister said that the military could not be [maligned](#) due to its past mistakes.

Imran Khan accused the former Prime Minister of acting at the behest of [India](#). Interestingly, Imran Khan also equated Sharif with Altaf Hussain, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) leader who is in exile in London.

This is not the first time that Imran Khan has hurled accusations of being compromised by India against Nawaz Sharif. Even while in opposition, he accused Sharif of adopting a soft stance on India due to his business interests.

To be fair, such accusations are not just restricted to Pakistan, but are becoming increasingly common globally, even in the more established democracies that have stronger democratic institutions. The trend is certainly increasing in South Asia. In India, criticism of government is often linked to an "external hand", which is one way of suggesting that a person is acting on Pakistan's behalf, but it is an unhealthy trend that has a negative impact on a country's democracy.

Imran Khan did not hesitate to respond to Nawaz Sharif's attack on his government and the army. Khan alleged in an address to a [convention](#) that Sharif himself had been initiated into politics by the army, and, by attacking the army, was harming Pakistan's interests. Mr Khan repeated the charge that Sharif was speaking the same language as India.

Responses of the Army and Members of Imran Khan's Cabinet

Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa categorically stated that the army had no role in Pakistan's politics while addressing Sharif's remarks. Interestingly, Bajwa had held meetings with representatives of political parties to convert Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan's fifth province.

Like Imran Khan, Sheikh Rasheed, the Railway Minister in Khan's Cabinet and a former colleague of Nawaz Sharif as well, lashed out at the latter and stated that the Pakistan army had played an important role in promoting democracy and that the [army](#) stood by the civilian government.

It is ironic that Rasheed urged the opposition to avoid the path of agitation. In 2014, the PTI itself had used agitation to destabilise the then PML-N government.

Several analysts have argued in favour of greater political consensus, especially at a time when Pakistan faces numerous economic challenges (according to a World Bank survey), as a result of the Covid19 pandemic.

While Nawaz Sharif may not himself benefit politically from the accusations that he levelled, he has mobilised the opposition, just as he has done in the past. Sharif has also further embellished his credentials of being pro-democracy, and shown that he is the only leader who can stand up to the Pakistan Army. At the same time, there is an elevated degree of dissonance within the opposition, it being argued that within Sharif's own party, and other frontline opposition parties like the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), several members are against adopting a [belligerent stance](#) vis-à-vis the army and prefer to negotiate instead. In fact, days after the APC, the meeting between a PML-N leader, Mohammad Zubair, with Qamar Javed Bajwa, during which the future of Nawaz Sharif and his daughter, Maryam Nawaz was discussed, created an uproar. Instructions have been issued to PML-N members to not hold individual meetings with officials of the Pakistan army.

Conclusion

Accusing Khan of being a total failure on governance may be premature, because he has now been through less than half of his tenure in office, and in terms of his economic progress, as well as foreign policy, the record is mixed. The Imran Khan Government, however, needs to be more open to criticism as it has been far from welcoming of even legitimate criticism. As former diplomat and prominent commentator, [Maleeha Lodhi](#), in an article for the *Dawn* newspaper, rightly pointed out:

The government should develop a habit of welcoming, not demonising dissenting views. Adopting an intolerant attitude creates an illiberal environment which undermines democracy and denudes the government of the opportunity to test its policies against criticism.

She goes on to say that the government needs to unite rather than polarise and to accept constructive suggestions from the country's opposition. Said [Lodhi](#): 'Treating opponents as enemies and dissent as sedition are hallmarks of dictatorships, not democracies.'

Khan may be legitimately accused of faltering in his attempt to dissociate his government from the [security establishment](#) and cashing in on his personal charisma and appeal, even though, on more than one occasion, the army has snubbed him and not really made any bones about him being inefficient; it has stepped in on issues pertaining to [foreign policy](#), such as relations with China, as well as to control the pandemic. Apart from that, Khan's fight against corruption has been selective, with Pakistan's top court observing that it has been [one-sided](#), and that only leaders from opposition parties have been targeted.

The Pakistani Prime Minister needs to dispel his image of being a puppet of the army, but has been unable to do so, and Sharif is likely to capitalise on that, especially if Khan is unable to deliver on the governance front, and pull the economy out of the woods. Quite apart from that, he also needs to be open to fair criticism, rather than coming down with a heavy hand on his critics.

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