

ISAS Brief

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The Reincarnation of Nawaz Sharif: Pakistan's Deepening Democracy¹

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Introduction

Barring an act of God, Nawaz Sharif is poised to become Pakistan's Prime Minister for the third time round. Each reincarnation implies changes, and so will this one. We are likely to see in him a seasoned politician, chastened by experience, matured over time and also hardened by adversity. His Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML(N)] has won sufficient number of seats of the 272 elected to form government, albeit with the support of some eager independents. There are 70 more seats in the Lower House of the Parliament, reserved for women and minorities, which will be proportionately divided among the parties elected, which means PML(N) will walk away with the major share.

He has already held out the olive branch to all others in the political landscape, including the 'old-new kid on the block' Imran Khan and his Tehreek-e-Insaf, who is second in the pecking order of winners. In doing so, Nawaz Sharif has displayed much wisdom and sagacity; for the party worst off in the polls, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Asif Ali Zardari, still has a

¹ This Brief is the first in a planned series of ISAS papers focused on Pakistan and its historic opportunity at this time.

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majority in the Senate and should it wish to, can queer the pitch for Nawaz with regard to major legislations. The situation may not be altogether bad because this will entail the need for cooperation and understanding across the broad political spectrum, which might have positive ramifications for Pakistan's divisive politics.

Priorities

Perhaps more than the principal victor, Nawaz Sharif, it is the people of Pakistan who deserve to be congratulated on this historic election. They turned up at the polling booth in droves, over 60 per cent of the electorate, the highest numbers, it is said, since 1970, the last elections before the breakup of the country and the de-linkage with Bangladesh. By their enthusiasm the voters were demonstrating incredible physical courage and also commitment to democracy, for they were braving the very real Taliban threats. The Taliban had declared the elections 'un-Islamic', vowed to disrupt them, and targeted the more secular parties with their bombing spree. This list included the PPP, and excluded the parties of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan; but even if the PPP could have campaigned unimpeded, they were unlikely to win. Thus Pakistanis showed a huge appetite, and desire, for a return to normalcy, and democratic norms and values.

A logical corollary is that Nawaz Sharif will take this into account, and focus on the people's immediate needs. So his top priorities are likely to be domestic. Four issues come to mind: First, energy shortages; Pakistanis have been suffering severe power-cuts, sometimes 18-20 hours a day, adversely impacting not just urban life, but also industry and rural agriculture; second inflation, hovering between 11 per cent and 25 per cent in an economy that appears to be in a free-fall; third corruption, currently eroding the very foundations of society: And fourth, insurgency, not just of the Taliban and religious *Salafist* extremists, but also in the troubled province of Balochistan. These are no mean tasks and Nawaz Sharif's capabilities will be severely tested. But one must bear in mind the PML(N), led by his brother Shahbaz Sharif, has been able to deliver reasonably good governance in the Punjab, Pakistan's largest province which they have been ruling, and the Punjab has amply rewarded them in the polls through an overwhelming number of votes.

Managing the Military

It is true that a modicum of mistrust has pervaded the relationship between Nawaz Sharif and the military in the past. Nonetheless, it is also true his closeness to a former military ruler, General Zia-ul-Haq had led some to see him as almost a protégé of the dictator. But he and yet another military strongman Pervez Musharraf were at daggers drawn. Indeed it was Musharraf who had dislodged him in a military coup fourteen years ago, and treated him shoddily forcing upon him exile to Saudi Arabia. It will require a Christ-like disposition on the part of Nawaz Sharif to forgive Musharraf – a quality which, even with all the goodness

he appears to have mustered, he may not be capable of; but Musharraf is no longer a factor in Pakistani politics and if not forgiven, can be safely ignored.

Happily over the years both Nawaz Sharif and the military have matured, and they are likely to be out of each other's hair. Moreover, during the last several years the Army has displayed pronounced proclivities in favour of non-interference in politics. To make a point of commitment to democracy, the Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Kayani went to vote in ceremonial regalia, rather than mail his, as army chiefs in the past were wont to do. Of course, the military will claim its share of national resources, which it is likely to be given, and a say on matters of security and foreign policy, which could be a subject of some negotiations with the civilian government, and in which Nawaz Sharif's mettle is likely to be tested.

The Rise and Fall of Imran Khan

Doubtless, Imran Khan's rise has been meteoric, though not sufficient to be catapulted into federal governance. He had hoped to do better. His physical fall off a forklift during a rally, and consequent hospitalisation, made global news and earned him considerable national sympathy, some of which may have been translated into votes.

But his Tehreek-e-Insaf has done well enough to form government in the frontier region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There Imran has bested the arguably more secular Awami National Party. The Taliban has shown a kind of favouritism with Imran that can be both his strength and weakness. Imran Khan has a strong dislike for US drones, which he has trenchantly criticised, but he and Nawaz Sharif will have to agree on the best method to counter the insurgency in the province and in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

Nawaz's Relations with the West and India

Undeniably, the fact that Nawaz Sharif had publicly postured against the so-called US 'War on terror' also helped buttress his electoral position. He was able to successfully tap on the palpable and widespread public sentiments in Pakistan in this regard. But to be able to work with the West is a necessity for Pakistan; and as necessity is the mother of invention, *modus vivendi* with the US and the West would have to be invented. Given the plans of US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, non-cooperation between Pakistan and the West is not an option. Indeed Nawaz Sharif's good working relations with the Taliban can be an asset. But it can also rapidly become a liability, if it emboldens the insurgents in Afghanistan, because there is actually no firewall separating the Taliban in these two countries. What divides them are but lines in the sand or rocks.

With regard to India, Nawaz Sharif must endeavour to alter the current 'India narrative' in Pakistan, and stop viewing India as an existential threat. The Pakistani military has been publicly saying for some time that the primary perceived enemy is not India, but the

insurgents. If the military is serious, this could be a huge shift. India will also need to take initiatives, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's prompt message of congratulations to Nawaz Sharif was a good start. One reasonable way forward is to address the smaller issues first, that is the 'low hanging fruits', thus creating an appropriate atmosphere for tackling larger issues in due course. That is to say the 'K' word (Kashmir!) should not be allowed to overshadow everything, though this is not in any way to limit its importance.

Conclusion

The world cheers Pakistan's deepening democracy. The weight on Nawaz Sharif's shoulders is heavy. But he is well-equipped to carry it, and should he require so, support from outside to discharge his responsibilities should and will be forth coming. People who had said Pakistan is tethering on the verge of a 'failed State' may well be proved wrong. Only time will tell!

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