

Pakistan: Nawaz Sharif has gone. But the country's high-level corruption survives

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The supreme court verdict that ousted the prime minister is exceptional. But political corruption on a colossal scale has irreparably damaged the country.

Since Pakistan's foundation in 1947, not one prime minister has served his or her full term. Things like assassinations and military takeovers happen. Today it was money rather than force that did for Nawaz Sharif. The Pakistan supreme court surprised itself by voting unanimously to ensure that he was not going to be the exception.

The court declared him guilty of small crimes and misdemeanours linked to offshore accounts in Panama and undeclared monies in the Gulf, triggering his immediate resignation. Is the Sharif family's power, which has dominated rightwing politics in the country for so many decades, finally coming to an end? And if so, who will fill the vacuum?

In a cricket-obsessed country where the leader of the main opposition is Imran Khan, the metaphors came fast and furious - Pakistanis have always been good at self-derision: "This is just the 20-20 opener. We're waiting for the Test Match (general election)" ... "The supreme court is the third umpire. Decision is final" ... "The Sharifs have been fixing matches for ever". The mood is one of cynicism: Sharif has looted the country long enough; other parties deserve a chance.

Sharif's party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, is fighting back, accusing the court of a vendetta - which usually means that his billions could not buy a single judge. This is truly exceptional. Life in Pakistan has not been morally salutary for any of its citizens. The family politics represented by the Bhutto-Zardaris and their rivals, the Sharifs, is swathed in corruption. Each has learned from the other how best to conceal it, minimising paperwork and juggling accounts. Many years ago, when Benazir Bhutto was prime minister, she asked me what people were saying about her. "They're saying your husband is totally corrupt, but are not sure about how much you know ..."

She knew all right, and was not in the least embarrassed: "You're so prudish. Times have changed. This is the world we live in. They're all doing it. Politicians in every western country ..." Her husband, the president-to-be Asif Ali Zardari, was imprisoned by Sharif [[1](#)], but no actual proof of corruption was discovered: Zardari's loyalty to his cronies was legendary, and they remained loyal in return. Sharif, it appears, has been less fortunate.

Protesters celebrate ousting of Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's prime minister

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Protesters celebrate after a verdict from Pakistan's supreme court that forced Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister, out of office. Photograph: Arshad Arbab/EPA

Many are suggesting that the not-so-invisible hand of the army ensured the unanimous verdict of the supreme court. Did force actually trump money? This notion was given a boost when the current interior minister, Chaudhry Nisar, calmly informed the press that the country faced four serious

threats, known only to four key players - including himself, of course. The other members of this quartet were uniformed, and therefore unnamed.

The other problem confronting the country is the endemic violence against minorities, women and the poor

What of the threats? The US (as always) is supposedly angry about Pakistan's closeness to China. Sharif's servility to the Saudi monarchy is vexing Iran. Then there is Sharif's continuing obsession with wooing India, despite the revanchist Modi government in New Delhi. Add to this the heavy US pressure to end all support for anti-Nato outfits in Afghanistan, and threats to target drone strikes at Pakistan proper, not just the tribal badlands bordering the war zones. So runs the semi-official interpretation. Sharif was an obstacle and had to be removed.

There is little doubt that political corruption has acquired colossal proportions in Pakistan - but it's the same in other south Asian states, even China. Attempts by military dictators to harpoon this whale fail because they refuse to acknowledge the scale of corruption in the armed forces' top layers. The other problem confronting the country is the endemic violence (apart from the jihadist variety) against minorities, women and the poor. Pakistan's social fabric is damaged beyond repair.

Sharif was brought down on a technicality, but he is out. Sharif was felled by a constitutional clause inserted by his one-time patron, the late dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, stipulating that every MP must be "honest and sincere". Were this applied, the National Assembly would probably be permanently empty.

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Pakistani court removes PM Nawaz Sharif from office in Panama Papers case

Disqualification from office over corruption allegations is the most serious political ramification yet of 2016 leak.

Pakistan's supreme court has removed the prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, from office in a unanimous verdict over corruption allegations that will further upset the country's unstable political landscape.

The verdict by the five-member court caps a year of political controversy over corruption allegations unleashed by the 2016 Panama Papers leak.

The governing party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), said Sharif had stepped down immediately. The party must now choose an interim prime minister to be accepted by parliament.

The ruling will throw the governing party and the country at large into turmoil ahead of elections due next year.

The 10-year disqualification of Sharif cut short the third tenure of a man who has been a leading figure in Pakistani politics for nearly three decades since his first term from 1990 to 1993.

It is the most serious political ramification yet of the Panama Papers leak, which detailed financial dealings of the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca.

The papers linked Sharif's children to the purchase of London property through offshore companies in the British Virgin Islands in the early 1990s. At that time the children were minors, and the purchase is assumed to have been made by Sharif.

Last year, Sharif told parliament that his family wealth had been acquired legally in the decades before he entered politics.

Hassan Askari Rizvi, a political analyst, said the judgment had been expected. The big challenge for the PML-N party would be to maintain unity while finding a candidate who would be acceptable both within party ranks and to a majority of parliament, he said.

At least in the short term, the ruling is a big win for the opposition leader, former cricketer Imran Khan, who has been relentlessly calling for Sharif's removal since the beginning of the scandal. "Khan's political fortune has improved after this ruling, and he will try to cash in on this," Rizvi said.

Khan called for a public rally on Sunday, in a press conference after the verdict. "Our struggle proves that mighty people in our country can also be held accountable now. Until and unless these powerful people of the country are held accountable there is no future of Pakistan."

Local media reported on Friday minor clashes between activists affiliated with PML-N and the opposition PTI party in several locations around the country.

In its ruling, the court referred all material gathered in the investigation to the court of the national accountability bureau, and recommended opening cases against Sharif, his three children, Mariam, Hassan and Hussain, his son-in-law Muhammad Safdar and his finance minister Ishaq Dar.

Ali Zafar, a barrister and former president of the supreme court bar association, said: "We are currently without a government because the constitution doesn't envision the disqualification of the prime minister."

Sharif is the second head of government to have lost office in the Panama Papers scandal, which in April 2016 forced out the Icelandic prime minister, Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, after he and his wife were revealed to have held bonds in collapsed Icelandic banks through an offshore company.

Dozens of senior government figures worldwide were among those identified in the leaked files as the controllers or beneficiaries of offshore interests. The UK's HMRC placed 22 people under investigation and it was reported last month that German tax authorities had paid several million euros to acquire its own copy of the information.

The case against the Sharif family took a turn in July when forensic experts cast doubt on documents central to the defence of the prime minister's daughter, Mariam Nawaz Sharif, who claimed she was only a trustee of the companies that bought the London flats.

The documents were dated to 2006 but appear to have used a font, Microsoft Calibri, that was available only from 2007, raising suspicions that they were forged.

"During the course of the proceedings, certain documents had been given, which were blatantly

false, and on the basis of those documents the supreme court could conclude that there has been forgery. On that basis, they have the right to disqualify the prime minister,” said Zafar.

Still, some might perceive the ruling to be political, said Asma Jahangir, a prominent lawyer. “The judgment has caused cracks in the walls of supreme court because it is so unique. It will create doubts about whether it is a political judgment,” she said.

The information minister, Maryam Aurnagzeb, said: “Some verdicts are announced by the court and some are given by the people of Pakistan. In the political, democratic and historic perspective of Pakistan, it is a sad judgment. PML-N is the biggest political party of Pakistan and will remain so.”

A PML-N spokesperson said Sharif had stepped down immediately, despite “serious reservations” about the judgment. He said the principles of a fair trial had been gravely violated.

“History will make its own judgment after this verdict. And Nawaz Sharif will be successful in the court of God and people of Pakistan,” he said.

Transparency International and Global Witness said UK authorities must now work to establish whether the Sharif family still own the London properties, and consider seizure proceedings if they were found to be bought with the proceeds of crime.

“When these leaks first came out the UK government promised to clean up the property market to show the world that ‘there is no home for the corrupt in Britain’ - it’s time they made good on that promise,” said Naomi Hirst, senior campaigner at Global Witness.

Sune Engel Rasmussen

Additional reporting by Waqar Gillani

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/28/pakistani-court-disqualifies-pm-nawaz-sharif-from-office>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/30/lukeharding>