

INTERNATIONAL

The irony is unmistakable: rewind to March 15, 2009 when Mian Nawaz Sharif defied house arrest orders to lead a rally to restore the then Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry. As his convoy moved through Lahore, thousands lined up on the street and more waved at him from their rooftops. CJP Chaudhry was ultimately restored and Nawaz had stolen the political plaudits for having an 'independent judiciary' installed. His third term for prime minister looked nailed in.

And indeed that was the case. Nawaz breezed through the 2013 polls with ease and until the Panama Papers leaks blew the lid early last year, he looked indomitable and set for a fourth term as prime minister.

industrialists and emerging commercial groups mostly belonging to Punjab. The re-engineered Muslim League leadership was largely constituted of politicians who owed their political rise to the military's patronage. And the most favourite child of the establishment at the time was to lead them all.

Nawaz was of course politically baptised by General Ziaul Haq's military government. A scion of a prominent business family from Lahore, Nawaz owed his entry into politics to his father's proximity with General Ghulam Jilani, a former chief of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) who had been appointed as the governor of Punjab as a reward for his role in the 1977 coup.

But the role handed to Nawaz Sharif was beyond any

reputation of a man of mediocre talents. He neither had charisma nor any political roots to really challenge the young and fiery Benazir Bhutto. He retained his position as the chief minister of the province after the restoration of democracy in the country following Zia's death in an air crash.

Although Nawaz could not form a government in the Centre after Zia's demise, his trajectory from Punjab chief minister to prime minister in the 1990s owed much to the backing of the military and the powerful civil establishment of Punjab. It is no more a secret that the military and the ISI formed the alliance of right-wing parties known as Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) under Nawaz Sharif to stop the PPP from returning to power.



Pakistani former prime minister Nawaz Sharif addresses the crowd during an election campaign meeting.

PHOTO: AFP

Indeed the devastating Supreme Court (SC) ruling has not only delivered Nawaz Sharif the ultimate humiliation of being unceremoniously ousted from power, but has also put him and his entire family in the dock over corruption allegations. This unprecedented and controversial court action has kept a Damocles' sword hanging over his children as well as his younger brother, Shahbaz Sharif, who has now been nominated to take the mantle of power on a permanent basis.

That also raises questions about the future of the House of Sharif that has dominated the country's political scene for the past three decades, whether in or out of power. Surely the three-time prime minister has gone through such trials and tribulations in the past too when his government was ousted twice, once by a military-backed constitutional coup and the other by direct military intervention that sent him into exile. Each time he returned to power with a much greater electoral mandate.

But will he be as fortunate this time?

**From protégé to nemesis**

The rise of Nawaz Sharif to the highest echelon of power and the birth of a new urban-based political dynasty reflected changing realities of Pakistani politics after the 1977 military coup. The military regime needed a measure of legitimacy and a social base of support. It co-opted substantial segments of landlords,

# THE UNMAKING OF NAWAZ SHARIF

ZAHID HUSSAIN

short-termism of gaining legitimacy. He was groomed by the military regime as an alternative and counterweight to Benazir Bhutto, who had emerged as the uncontested leader of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) after her father had been executed by General Zia's government.

The protégé's first test came in 1981 when Nawaz was appointed as the finance minister of Punjab. A couple of years later, he was elevated to the position of the provincial chief minister despite his not-so-enviable

The military-sponsored alliance largely comprised of the politicians who emerged on the scene during the 1980s under Zia's military rule.

Sharif's rising political power also saw an exponential growth in the family's business fortunes. Within years, the Sharif family emerged as one of the richest business families in the country. In fact, financial scandals continued to plague Nawaz throughout his political career, particularly after his ascent to the country's top position. It finally caught up with him after the Panama Papers named him and his children.

Continued to page 11

INTERNATIONAL

## THE UNMAKING OF NAWAZ SHARIF

After page 10

With his rise to the pinnacle of political power, Nawaz Sharif tried to break away from the influence of the military establishment that also brought him down in his previous terms. His ambitions to accumulate absolute power reflected in his move to declare himself "Amir-ul-Momineen" (Leader of the Believers) was also a factor in the conflict with the military leadership leading to his government's ouster in 1999.

Although the Muslim League has historically remained close to the military establishment, Nawaz Sharif tried to transform it into a mass populist party, though he may not have been fully successful in his endeavour. Still, over the years, despite various ups and downs, he developed a popular mass base that elected him to a record third term in office. The backing of the powerful Punjabi civil establishment, including the bureaucracy and sections of the judiciary, also appeared to have helped his family's stranglehold over Punjab.

But such moves turned the former protégé into a nemesis of the military establishment. It is not surprising that he remained locked in perpetual conflict with the military leadership throughout his third term in office. This mostly had to do with past baggage of mutual distrust. It was difficult for Nawaz to let go of events following the 1999 coup, when he was taken out of the Prime Minister's House, handcuffed and put on trial for treason.

In fact, Nawaz found himself locked in conflict with the generals within a few months of his returning to power for the third time. The standoff was triggered by his government's decision to put former military ruler General Pervez Musharraf on trial on sedition charges. The generals would not allow their former chief to be humiliated. The confrontation turned more ominous with Imran Khan staging a sit-in before the parliament demanding the ouster of the Sharif government in 2014.

There was some credence to the suspicion that the PTI agitation had the blessings of a strong group of Generals. Sharif, however, won that round with the support of the parliament. Most opposition parties stood by him to prevent any Bonapartism. Civil-military relations remain uneasy following the 2014 standoff.

However, there was a resetting of civil-military relations following the appointment of a new army chief in November 2016 and a major reshuffling of top commanders that boosted the confidence of the Sharif government. It was the second time within three years that the prime minister had appointed an officer of his choice to lead the most powerful institution in the country. Both times he picked a dark horse for the coveted post, hoping to tilt the balance of power towards his civilian government.

He may not have been successful in his endeavour during the tenure of the previous high-profile army chief General Raheel Sharif. Civil and military tensions cast a huge shadow over the country's political landscape throughout that period often threatening to derail the entire political system. His own ineptitude and absence of governance and a clear policy direction on key national security issues contributed hugely to the power imbalance.

But this time, Sharif appeared much more confident about taming the military by appointing a low-profile general who did not represent continuity in the policies of his predecessor. On the surface, at least, things seemed to be looking up for Nawaz.



PHOTOS: WHITE STAR



Maryam Nawaz, a woman leading the largest party of Punjab would have been a game-changer for Pakistani politics but for the charges of corruption and money laundering.

**Democracy under attack?**

Of course this time it wasn't the military getting rid of him but the apex court, using a highly controversial constitutional clause, a legacy of General Zia's military rule, to remove him from office for being a dishonest leader.

There is a strong perception prevailing among the senior members of the ruling party that the top military brass may have not been involved in Nawaz's ouster, but that some senior- and middle-rankers with the military intelligence agencies were active in feeding to the press anti-Sharif material. But as for the allegation of a nexus existing between the judges and the military, it remains merely that so far: an allegation without any substance.

Yet a major concern is that the military could regain its position as an arbiter of power as the deepening political crisis creates a power vacuum. However, there seems to be no possibility of direct military intervention or derailment of the political process. The balance of power may tilt more towards the military but not drastically.

The ruling appears to have generated an upheaval and a period of political uncertainty—that is bound to

happen when any entrenched political dynastic order is shaken. It also appears that the ruling has further deepened political polarisation in the country. But it certainly does not threaten the democratic political process as feared by many.

A major consequence of the 'Panamagate' scandal is the changing balance of power among various branches of the state that may influence the future of the democratic political process in the country. Undoubtedly, the judiciary has emerged as an arbiter of power with the apex court becoming the main venue of settling political battles.

The role of the top court has further expanded with the parliament becoming increasingly ineffective as well as Sharif's disregard of institutional decision-making processes. Given this situation, it is not surprising that the political fate of the country's two most powerful political leaders has been tied to the Supreme Court rulings in the respective petitions filed against them by their rival parties.

Significantly, the political crisis triggered by the Panama Papers has helped the military establishment expand its space. Interestingly, the scandal unfolded when some major problems in civil-military relations remain unresolved. That may also be the reason behind suspicions that the military intelligence agencies used the scandal to destabilise the government. The inclusion of members of the ISI and Military Intelligence (MI) on the joint investigation team probing the matter further reinforced this conspiracy theory.

**Party versus cult of personality**

Unlike the past, however, Nawaz's party remains in power. And with his younger brother to take charge if he gets elected to the National Assembly, power will continue to reside in the Sharif family. Nawaz Sharif may be out of office but the dynasty lives on.

So far the party appears to be standing united behind Sharif, however, some cracks in the party have already emerged, with former interior minister Chaudhry Nisar announcing his decision to quit the federal cabinet.

The future of politics in Punjab will depend on whether the PML-N remains united despite the ouster from power of Nawaz Sharif.

**Challenges ahead**

Surely the court ruling against the prime minister has given the opposition, particularly the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), which was the main petitioner in the Panama case, a cause to celebrate. But it is not clear how disparate groups can build on the ouster of Nawaz Sharif. Undoubtedly it was the sheer determination of Imran Khan and his one-dimensional campaign against the Sharifs that finally got him the prime minister's scalp. That will certainly boost the morale of the PTI. But it remains to be seen whether the opposition can actually dislodge the PML-N and the Sharif legacy from their stronghold of Punjab.

The Supreme Court ruling is not the end of the 'Panamagate' episode. The trial of the entire Sharif family in the accountability court could fuel further political instability in the country. A long drawn-out legal and political battle lies ahead.

Most worrying is that the application of the controversial articles 62 and 63 of the constitution against a sitting prime minister could open a floodgate of petitions challenging other members of the government as well as the opposition of being "dishonest" thus creating an unprecedented turmoil. There is certainly a need to reform the system before it is too late.

Zahid Hussain is a senior journalist at Dawn. By arrangement with Dawn, an ANN partner.