

# A Nawaz Reconciliation Plan?

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Pakistan seems to be living in interesting times! Not a single week, during the recent past, has been uneventful. Last week, four significant developments took place – all relating to Pakistan's politics. Though irrevocable proof would be difficult to provide, these four developments appear to be linked with each other.

The primary question in this context would be: is there a "national reconciliation plan", as it happened with the PPP a decade ago under Gen Musharraf's regime,? The implication in today's context is about a possible deal between Nawaz Sharif and the Establishment leading to some kind of an understanding between the PML-N and the Deep State.

Consider the following four developments during the last week:

## 1. The London Plan

What is projected as a "London Plan" in the Pakistani media relates to the last week statement made by the PML-N leadership in London. According to the plan, Shahbaz Sharif will be projected as the next Prime Minister candidate from the PML-N.

Why did the PML-N leadership decide to project Shahbaz as the next PM candidate, instead of backing Nawaz? Perhaps, the top PML-N leadership outside the Sharif family saw the writing on the party's Wall. It was loud and clear – Nawaz will have to go. Even an amateur Pakistan watcher would know whose writing it is, and what it means, if it has to be ignored.

Though Maryam Sharif (Nawaz's daughter) did hint at projecting herself as the next Prime Minister candidate, (though she retracted from the Newyork Times story later) it appears clear that rest of the party is not willing to consider that option. During late October 2017, PML-N leaders started publicly demanding that Shahbaz Sharif is made as the party leader and also projected as the Prime Minister candidate.

The PML-N leaders are acutely aware that the party needs a clear mandate and a good leader to take

them through the next elections. The party is not sure, whether the Deep State is unhappy only with Nawaz, or his entire family, including Maryam. Also, one is not sure, whether the courts will give her a clean chit. The charges against her are substantial.

For the party, obviously, Shahbaz is the best bet. The PML-N would want to “sail” with the Sharif brothers, and not “sink” with them. Backing either Nawaz or his daughter would mean, party sinking with the former.

Though the PML-N leaders attempt to project that they do not accept “Minus Nawaz” formula, the London Plan exactly means that. The London Plan also would underline the political reach of the Deep State even within an established party like the PML-N.

### **1. Nawaz returns to Pakistan to face the Courts**

The second major development during the last week was the decision of Nawaz Sharif to return to Pakistan and face the courts. As a part of ongoing trial related to multiple cases, the accountability courts have issues summons earlier. Nawaz Sharif ignored them and failed to appear before the respective courts, though his legal counsel did.

He left Pakistan last month, and was in London, attending to Kulsum Nawaz, his ailing wife. Kulsum recently won the NA-120 national assembly seat in Lahore, vacated by Nawaz Sharif. She is also ill, and could not take part in the election campaign. Nawaz has been shuttling between London and Islamabad in the recent weeks.

Last week, Nawaz Sharif made an announcement in public regarding his decision to face the courts. A section did consider, that he would remain in exile in London, until an understanding is reached politically.

The courts surprisingly did not show any leniency. As if it is a case of national emergency, the case against Nawaz Sharif has been on a fast track. Nawaz did/does have a legitimate reason to be away; his wife is seriously unwell. But the courts would not relent. Had it been another day and another person, it would have. Not in Nawaz Sharif's case.

Nawaz's options were limited. Either he stays in exile in London, (or in Saudi Arabia). Or, he returns and faces the courts. There was no third option - that he could be in Pakistan and not take part in the trial. Non-bailable warrants were ready and he could have been arrested.

His decision to return was a political one and a brave one as well. It would strengthen the case of PML-N; the party could project itself as "accountable" and be willing to follow the procedures established by the institutions. This would be a better strategy electorally, than getting politically hanged every day by the PTI and rest of the opposition parties.

## 1. Parliament excludes Judiciary and Military from Accountability Commission

The present accountability process is the brainchild of Gen Mushrraf. It was the result of National Accountability Ordinance passed by him in 1999, leading to the establishment of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

The NAB is pursuing the current cases against Nawaz Sharif. Earlier, both the PML-N and PPP had agreed to replace the NAB with a new institution – National Accountability Commission.

Last week, the Parliament held a discussion on establishing the Commission; surprisingly, the PPP had to withdraw its legislation on including military and the judiciary into accountability process. The PML-N could have insisted in getting the provision included in the proposed legislation. But, there seemed to be an un-spoken and un-written consensus in the Parliament – in excluding the military and the judiciary from the purview of the accountability commission.

Why would the Parliament do it? Why would the PML-N agree to such a move? If the PML-N would have wanted, the PPP could have gone ahead with, instead of withdrawing it.

Including every institution in the accountability process would have ensured an across the board process. It would also have established the supremacy of the Parliament in legislating rules without any fear or favour. But, the opposite seems to have happened. It seems to be either out of fear or favour. How else can one read the position taken by the PML-N in the Parliament on accountability?

### 1. Statements on “No Deal with Establishment” and “Nation won’t accept another NRO”

During the last few days, Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan have made interesting statements relating to a possible deal between PML-N and the Establishment.

Nawaz Sharif announced a few days ago that there is no underhand deal with the Establishment. Imran Khan, on the contrary, addressing a gathering on Sunday, threatened that he would launch another agitation if there is to be a new “National Reconciliation Ordinance.”

Clearly, both are referring to the NRO, that saw Gen Musharraf providing an amnesty to the PPP leaders, enabling Benazir Bhutto to return to Pakistan and take part in the 2008 elections. NRO became a subject of controversy latter; it was not similar to an understanding reached between the PML-N and the PPP. Referred as “Charter of Democracy” in 2006, the understanding between the two parties was a part of another “London Plan” and a political one. On the contrary, the NRO was a formal ordinance issued by the President (Gen Musharraf) in 2007, granting amnesty to political leaders. Even Sharif and Altaf Hussain were a part of Ordinance’s ambit.

### Is there Nawaz Reconciliation Plan?

Is there a link between the above four developments in Pakistan?

Much would depend on the Deep State. Is it interested in reconciliation plan for Nawaz Sharif? It would be difficult to accept – that after its methodical initiatives during the last year in going after Nawaz Sharif and close to becoming successful in implementing “minus Nawaz” formula, why would it want to provide a deal? Rather, won't the Deep State want to make an example out of Nawaz Sharif, for all future leaders of Pakistan, whether they are from Punjab and have a political base or not?

Perhaps, if there is a reconciliation plan, it would not be aimed at getting Nawaz back to lead the PML-N and letting him become Prime Minister for the fourth time. It is less likely to happen. This would go against the entire Minus Nawaz plan. Perhaps, the reconciliation plan, if there is one, would be about Nawaz Sharif and his family members not getting a jail term. In return, the PML-N keeps Nawaz Sharif away from contesting the elections. Perhaps, this could be an unstated part of the London Plan.