

Pakistan Establishment and the PML-N

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It appears, the Establishment's plans of getting Nawaz Sharif rid of the PML-N has started working. Though there have been talks of a "Shahbaz League" during the last few weeks, for the first time, there is a formal request from within the PML-N asking Shahbaz Sharif to take over the party presidency.

There has been no word so far from the Sharif brothers. Nawaz seems to be clear on what he wants – to anoint his daughter as the successor, and even project her as the Prime Minister candidate. Is the rest of the PML-N agreeable to such a proposition? What will constitute a tipping point for Shahbaz Sharif to make a decision?

Establishment and Nawaz: Why?

The first question is: after propping up Nawaz Sharif in the 1980s, why has the Establishment turned against him?

The Establishment saw Nawaz Sharif as an asset in the late 1980s. A businessman from Punjab, with no great popular support who could win elections on his own, or family roots running deep with a strong political clout, he was seen as a good choice by the Establishment to counter Benazir Bhutto.

Nawaz Sharif was an asset, and the Establishment thought he would be amenable. And he did remain so until the mid-1990s.

Perhaps the 1997 election changed the game. The huge victory margin in that election placed the PML-N miles ahead of other political parties. In the election, where only four parties could win seats in double digits, the PML-N won maximum – more than 135 seats. PPP, which was the second largest party, could win only 18 seats. This victory margin, perhaps made Nawaz believe, he had become invincible in Pakistani politics. An ugly tussle with the judiciary and the resignation of Jehangir Karamat should have made Sharif believe he has become the Iron Man of Pakistan, leading him to dismiss the next Army Chief - Musharraf.

The Establishment could not take any further. By that time, outside politics, the Sharifs also built a huge business empire stretching from Lahore to London. For the Establishment the asset has turned into a

liability. The coup and exile followed. Ever since, Sharif's relations with the Establishment were strained.

One expected Sharif would have learnt when he returned after 2013 elections. Nawaz Sharif became the Prime Minister, while Shahbaz Sharif silently continued his work in Punjab.

Though the Establishment would not have been happy to see Nawaz return, it worked with him. There were rumours of a section of the Establishment trying to use Imran Khan against Nawaz and overthrow the government. But the PML-N is strong, and the Sharif brothers had credibility.

The Panama Papers happened. Neither the Establishment nor Imran Khan would have predicted about the Panama Papers and its contents. While rest of the world absorbed the political weight of the Papers, Pakistan's parties wilted down.

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), perhaps added another dimension to the fault line between the Establishment and Nawaz. Perhaps both wanted to control the CPEC; the former saw it as a strategic project – linking Gwadar with Kashgar and Beijing, while the latter saw as a huge economic opportunity for Punjab, and also for his own business empire. Though this is more of a conjecture, who controls the CPEC should have expanded the divide between the Establishment and Sharif.

Today, there is enough evidence in the public literature to prove, that the Special Investigation Team had an agenda and was driven against Nawaz. Even mainstream newspapers have questioned the judiciary's verdict in disqualifying Nawaz.

The writing was clear. But only if Nawaz could read. He made his wife contest from the NA-120 Assembly, despite the latter being hospitalized and unable to even campaign. He made his party to pass a quick legislation in the National Assembly, enabling him to become the President of the Party. And made statements of not learning the lessons of Dhaka, and respecting the verdict of the people; the former hinting at the Establishment, and the latter at the judiciary. Clearly, Nawaz has not learnt, and is playing with fire.

The Establishment cannot take it any further. Read the statements from the ISPR during October on the objections of political leadership to the Army commenting on Economy, and deploying the rangers in the courts and removing them from the Parliament.

PML-N and Nawaz: Why the party prefers Shahbaz now?

The problem today for Nawaz is not the Establishment. But his own party.

The party may not want to desert Nawaz in the first place. At the same time, it may not be willing to sink with him either. There have been adequate hints and reports in the public, that the majority within PML-N would not like to adopt a confrontational position vis-à-vis the other two institutions – the judiciary and the Establishment, especially, the latter.

Nawaz does not seem to be open to that idea, as the statements and his actions, as explained above would underline. The party then would have preferred Nawaz to hand over the party leadership to Shahbaz, and continue to remain with the party in some advisory capacity. Instead, Nawaz has retained the party leadership, and seems to be projecting his daughter Maryam Nawaz as his successor – both within the party and also as the prime ministerial candidate for the forthcoming elections.

The majority in the party may not be against Maryam. But she has also been indicted in few other cases. The party would prefer Shahbaz, for his record as the Chief Minister of Punjab, and also for his acceptability cutting across Punjab, and even outside it. For the party, Shahbaz is a better bet for the next elections. More importantly, Shahbaz is also acceptable to the Establishment.

Those who see Nawaz as a liability within the PML-N also realize that they cannot leave the party and create another faction of the PML-N. They have seen the fate of the PML-Q under the Chaudhrys. For them, the best bet would be the PML-N, but under Shahbaz Sharif.

For the Establishment as well, such a proposition should be acceptable. They will not be able to create another faction of the Muslim League and face the elections next year. Perhaps, the Establishment is also not sure of Imran Khan's temperament. Also, one is not sure, whether he would be acceptable to a majority within Punjab. Despite the growth of the middle class, and new electorates (more than 40 percent of them in 18-35 bracket), one is not sure whether Imran and his PTI will be able to form a government both within Punjab and at the national level.

Though there has been a debate on "mainstreaming the militants," and the record of the extreme right in the recent NA-120 elections (winning 13 percentage of votes polled) is an option, it would create more headaches than resolving any. The political entry of extreme right could be of nuisance value, then providing concrete numbers for the legislative assemblies – at provincial and national levels.

So, for the Establishment, PML-N is acceptable, as long as Nawaz is replaced with Shahbaz. This should drive the intra-party politics within the PML-N.

Besides, historically, the Punjabi leadership is known to have shifted their allegiance to the party that is likely to win the elections, then sailing or sinking together. Even the pre-partition election history in undivided Punjab would reveal how the Muslim League and Jinnah became acceptable much later.

So, what next for Nawaz? And for Shahbaz?

A tough question indeed. Nawaz's position is clear so far. What about Shahbaz?

He is with his brother until now. But, if he is forced to choose between his blood and the party, what will be his options? He can stand with his brother, and let the party sink and see Nawaz taking the party down with him. Or reach an understanding silently, behind the scenes with Nawaz and Maryam. That will be an ideal option, with Nawaz making a principled position, that he would let Shahbaz continue as the leader, until all court cases are addressed.

Hope the situation does not galvanize into a coup not only within the party, but also within the family. Or leading to the creation of another Muslim League - PML-S.

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