

Towards a PML minus Sharif?

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Regional Diary

The Panama Scandal trial in Pakistan seems to be taking a dangerous political path. Developments relating to the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) that has been asked to investigate is not inspiring and hints an institutional bias against Nawaz Sharif. With the JIT process politicized, and analysts questioning the impartiality of judicial process – the immediate political future of Pakistan looks anything but stable.

Is the stage being set for ousting the Sharif government? Is there a “Go Nawaz Go” movement already set in slow motion? Is the opposition ready to fill in, given their present political position, without any extra-judicial or extra-constitutional intervention? Will the PML-N be forced to look for “minus Nawaz” formula in the near future?

The JIT: A Match Fixed?

A section in the media and the PML-N are critical of the JIT. After appearing before the JIT, Sharif has recently called the process as a joke and a circus. Many independent observers in media do highlight the shortcomings of the JIT and of having a bias – both in its composition and its actual functioning.

When the Supreme Court constituted the JIT, there were complaints that the team was manipulated by someone from the judiciary. Instead of going by the recommendations of the six organizations that provided members to the JIT, few suggestions were rejected. Nawaz group feels, that the members chosen instead have an anti-Sharif bias. Two members from the Military Intelligence (MI) and the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) in the JIT further raise doubts about the nature of the JIT. Why would a team investigating a corruption scandal have representations from the military and intelligence?

If there are questions about the formation of the JIT, there are doubts over its motivations in its conduct. The Nawaz team highlights a leaked video by the JIT of Sharif's son - Hussain Nawaz who was taking part in the process. One of its initial reports submitted by the JIT talk about monitoring TV shows, even before it was formed! So a section asks: was the JIT fixed, even before it was formed?

The anti-Sharif section argues that the PML-N is purposefully indulged questioning the credibility of the

JIT. The argument goes, in case if the JIT report is not favourable to Sharif (which seems more likely), the PML could then launch a public protest against the verdict.

Institutional bias against the Sharifs?

Though it is not stated in the open, the Sharifs feel that a section inside - both the judiciary and the military are acting against them. The initial verdict of the Supreme Court bench was divided on whether Sharif was guilty. Instead of a clear verdict at the end of Panama trial, the judiciary by forming a JIT has extended the confusion and even provided an opportunity for the opposition parties. The Sharif faction also feels that the judiciary is downplaying their complaints against the JIT process.

The tensions between the Establishment and Sharif are well known; despite Nawaz Sharif choosing the present Chief of Army Staff, there is a general belief that the top leadership of the military is against Nawaz Sharif. The fact that the two officers from MI and ISI in the JIT are linked with an earlier enquiry related to Dawn leaks, further question the motivations of the Establishment. Though the *Dawn Leaks* episode was settled between the civilian and military leadership, it has only addressed the symptom and not the root cause of divide.

The differences between Sharif and the military are sharp and appear unlikely to be bridged. Almost like an earlier relation between the Establishment and the PPP. The differences between the two, despite public rhetoric, is unlikely to get addressed in the near future. Given the existing tensions with Nawaz Sharif, the military should have stayed away from the JIT process. It does not seem to be the case.

An impending “Go Nawaz Go” movement?

With an institutional bias against Sharif, is Pakistan all set to witness a movement led by the opposition against Nawaz Sharif, once the JIT submits its report?

Perhaps, this movement is already set in slow motion, and is likely to pick up, once the report is submitted. For the opposition, especially Imran Khan and his PTI, the contents of JIT report is likely to be immaterial. Irrespective of the outcome of the JIT report and the final verdict from the judiciary, Imran is likely to start the movement, demanding that Sharif accepts moral responsibility and resign immediately. Unfortunately for Sharif, Imran Khan has the street power, and few individuals like Tahirul Qadri who become seasonally conscious of democracy and transparency could descend in Islamabad with their supporters.

For Imran Khan, it would be a repeat of what had happened earlier in terms of anti Sharif political protests in the streets after the elections. However, this time, they would have more meat in terms of Panama scandal and JIT report to beat Sharif politically.

Towards PML minus Nawaz Sharif?

Despite the impending protests against Nawaz Sharif, the harsh reality for the PTI and PPP is their political strength in the Parliament. PML-N has the majority, and also has control over Punjab – the largest province. If a Sharif call for an early election, his party is likely to repeat its performance, or even

better it, if it remains free and fair.

The PPP, as its desertions in the recent months would highlight – is in no position to make a strong presence outside Sindh, certainly not in Punjab, where the votes and seats matter the most. Imran Khan and his PTI would have an online support and street support; will he convert them into votes and seats? The youths may be willing to join him and sit in front of their smart phones to support him in the social media, but will they stand in the queue and vote for him? Except for Khyber Paktunkwa and perhaps Karachi in Sindh, the PTI is less likely to succeed in rural Sindh or Punjab.

As a result, PML-N is likely to gain and repeat its performance, if there is an early poll. Who knows, the Sharifs may even get a sympathy wave and get more seats than the previous elections. Certainly, PML-N is unlikely to become irrelevant within Pakistan. This is where, those who are opposed to Nawaz Sharif among the political opposition, and their backers in certain institutions including the Establishment, may force the PML-N to distance from Sharif.

For Imran Khan, it is never about Panama scandal or corruption charges against Sharif. He just cannot wait any longer. With the MQM in a disarray, and desertions continuing unabated in the PPP (into PTI), he sense an opportunity.

For the Establishment, besides the ongoing tensions with Sharif, perhaps it does not want to deal with him for one more term. Especially, if he is going to return to the Parliament, and that too with support in both the Houses, it would make him more powerful, than he is already.

If the PML-N cannot be defeated electorally, at least cut its head off, and make it amenable in the near future. The slogan “Go Nawaz Go” is imminent. If the JIT report is likely to be ready by July, as expected, then one could be reasonably certain, that Pakistan will celebrate its 70th independence day in an unstable political environment.

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