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# **The Army Strikes Back**

**Nawaz Sharif's Return and Democratic Backsliding  
in Pakistan**

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### **Introduction**

Since early 2020, the political volatility in Pakistan has steadily grown amid a worsening economic and security situation and continued political infighting. The COVID-19 pandemic put severe stress on the Pakistani economy, which was further hit by catastrophic floods that submerged much of the country through the second half of 2022. Furthermore, Pakistan grapples with the escalating militancy of the Pakistani Taliban, commonly known as the TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan), as well as continued attacks on military infrastructure and personnel in the southwestern province of Balochistan. In the midst of all of this, is a power struggle between former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who was ousted in a no confidence motion in 2022, and the country's powerful military establishment that has dominated domestic politics in some shape or form since Pakistan's birth in 1947. Following the ousting of Khan, the Army has largely put its support behind the caretaker administration of Shahbaz Sharif from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), one of Pakistan's largest political parties. In August 2023 Shahbaz Sharif dissolved the National Assembly, Pakistan's parliament, to allow for the holding of new elections. While the national constitution commonly requires general elections to be held within 90 days following the dissolution of the National Assembly, the supposed need to redraw constituency boundaries has now been used as a justification to delay the elections, which are now planned to be held in early February 2024 (Parkin, 2023). Given accusations of rigged voting practices and the military's crackdown on Khan and his party, these elections are suspected to be neither free nor fair (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2023). As of late 2023, it is not even entirely certain that the elections will take place at all (Afzal, 2023). As elections loom, Pakistan descends further into chaos.

Amid these trends is one man who perhaps reflects the ambiguities and cynicism of Pakistan's political system more than anyone else: Nawaz Sharif, the brother of Shahbaz. Born in December 1949 in Lahore, Punjab, Sharif has served as Prime Minister on three non-consecutive occasions since the early 1990s. During his terms, his relationship with the military establishment has been ambivalent: initially a protégé of key factions in the Army, Sharif partially sought to establish more autonomy for the civilian government and repeatedly fell out with key officials in the Army, leading to him being removed from office twice. Sharif has been in exile twice as well, first in Saudi Arabia and then in London. Despite this mixed track record, however, the Army has now allowed Sharif to return to Pakistan and lead the PML-N in the 2024 general election against Imran Khan and the broader political opposition. Long a mainstay in Pakistani elite politics, Sharif's return reflects the renewed alignment between Sharif, the PML-N, and the military establishment.

This article situates Nawaz Sharif's return to elite politics within his broader career and the trends shaping Pakistani politics since the mid-1980s. Initially, the article discusses Sharif's political career in Punjab and his first Premiership. Then it examines his return to power in 1997, the defeat in the Kargil War with India, and the military coup of Pervez Musharraf that removed him in 1999. After this, the article discusses Pakistani politics under Musharraf, Sharif's return in 2007, his third stint as Premier, and the political rise and fall of Imran Khan, which has brought about the contemporary circumstances in Pakistani politics. The article concludes that Sharif's return must be viewed as an attempt by the military establishment to reassert military power in the face of Khan's populist politics and his degree of support in the population.

### **Sharif's rise to power and Premiership between 1990 and 1993**

Sharif's career in top-level Pakistani politics commenced in the second half of the 1970s, when he joined the PML branch in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. Prior to this, the Sharif family's business in the steel industry had been nationalized by the civilian government of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (who was later executed following the military coup of Zia ul-Haq in 1977), sparking a long-term political rivalry between the Bhuttos and the Sharifs (Johnson & Macfie, 2018). Sharif quickly rose through the PML ranks of Governor Ghulam Jilani Khan, under whom Sharif served as the provincial Finance Minister from 1980 onward. Ghulam Khan had previously served as the Chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's prime spy agency, and was a close ally of Zia, who had assumed the role of de facto military dictator after the 1977 coup. As Ghulam Khan vacated the position of Governor in 1985, he nominated Sharif to take over as Punjab's Chief Minister. During his time as Chief Minister, Sharif continued cultivating close personal and commercial relations with key figures in Pakistan's military establishment, including General Rahimuddin Khan and Hamid Gul, who would serve as head of the ISI between 1987 and 1989. Sharif also developed a close connection with Zia, who dismissed the Pakistani government prior to his death in a 1988 plane crash but had retained Sharif in his position, speaking to the close relationship between Sharif and the military establishment at the time. Zia's death triggered calls for enhanced democratic governance and the end of military rule. Zia was succeeded as President by Ghulam Ishaq Khan, then Chairman of the Senate. In November 1988 the transitional administration held general elections that saw the victory of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led by Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of Zulfikar Bhutto.

Sharif first assumed the role of Prime Minister following the 1990 general elections, in which the Sharif-led conservative alliance Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) defeated Benazir Bhutto's PPP-led People's Democratic Alliance (PDA). Bhutto had been sacked by President Khan due to corruption allegations in 1990, paving the way for new general elections (Reuters, 2007). The ISI, led by Hamid Gul, actively supported the conservative IJI alliance as a counterweight to the left-leaning PPP (Yasmeen, 1994). The 1988 and 1990 elections thus reinforced a growing coalition between the military establishment, most notably the ISI, and conservative Islamists (Hughes & Shaffer, 2021). Once in power, the Sharif government promoted the deregulation of the economy by encouraging liberalization, privatization, and seeking to attract greater foreign capital inflows (Bhowmik, 1995, p. 932). However, tensions between factions within the PML also intensified. In 1988, the PML had become divided between factions that were supportive of Prime Minister Junejo, who had been dismissed by Zia, and factions that remained supportive of Zia and the broader political arrangements of military rule. This second faction was led by Nawaz Sharif, leading it to become known as PML-N ('PML-Nawaz'). The buildup to and the course of the general elections in 1990 thus set the stage for a reorganization of party lines in a way that emphasized the personalized role of Nawaz Sharif within the PML-N.

Besides the fractioning of the party, Sharif's first premiership also became characterized by growing tensions between Sharif and the military establishment, which ultimately contributed to the return of Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister in 1993. The hybrid regime arrangement struck between Sharif and the Army started becoming undone when Sharif dismissed the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Mirza Aslam Beg in August 1991, with Asif Nawaz Janjua replacing him. Within the Pakistani military hierarchy, the COAS is generally considered to be the most influential position and, given the centrality of the Army in Pakistani politics, the

COAS operates as a quasi-political leader (The Economic Times, 2022). Sharif's dismissal of Beg was viewed as an attempt to assert civilian control over the military, heightening tensions between the political leadership and the military establishment (Hussain, 1999). Tensions accelerated further in 1993 when Sharif also dismissed Janjua as Janjua did not provide consistent support to Sharif's policy positions (Yasmeen, 1994). Amid increasing disagreements between the civilian government and the military elite, Sharif and President Khan were forced to resign in 1993 to allow for renewed general elections, which saw the PPP, led by Benazir Bhutto, return as the strongest party. Sharif's first stint in power thus came to an end and had become increasingly defined by power struggles between Sharif and the military.

### **Sharif's second term, the Kargil War, and exile**

Bhutto's return to power, her popular appeal, and left-leaning politics saw the military aiming to reassert control and replace Bhutto with a more pliant Prime Minister, paving the way for the return of Sharif in 1997. From the start, the Bhutto government faced allegations of corruption, a worsening macroeconomic situation, inflationary pressures, and tensions with the presidency, all of which combined to constrain her ability to pursue comprehensive policy agendas (Hughes & Shaffer, 2021). Bhutto's leftist policies also alienated conservative Islamist elements in the armed forces that plotted an unsuccessful coup in 1995 (Khan, 1995). Bhutto's position was also weakened by public tensions between Bhutto, her husband Asil Ali Zardari, and Bhutto's brother Murtaza Bhutto, who Bhutto had arrested on terrorism charges. Murtaza then became a political opponent before being killed by police in Karachi in 1996. Following Murtaza's death and a worsening economic crisis, her government was dismissed by President Farooq Leghari, who cited Murtaza's death as well as allegations of corruption and mismanagement as justifications for her removal (Khan, 1996). While corrupt practices were well-recorded, Bhutto's renewed removal also allowed the Army to install a Prime Minister that appeared more aligned with its strategic objectives. With new elections scheduled for February 1997, Malik Meraj Khalid was appointed as caretaker Prime Minister to oversee the interim period until the new elections. The Sharif-led PML-N recorded a landslide victory in the elections, resulting in Sharif returning to power for a second time.

The PML-N's dominance in the National Assembly allowed Sharif to weaken the position of the President and, thus, formally reduce the Army's influence in domestic politics. In April 1997, the new government repealed the Eighth Amendment to the constitution, which deprived the President of the power to dismiss elected governments (as had happened during Bhutto's previous administration). The repeal of the amendment effectively eliminated the Army's ability to pressure the sitting President and therefore removed a key policy instrument ensuring military control over domestic political processes (Kumar, 2001). In response, factions within the Army began proposing a National Security Council that would be practically dominated by the Army. After COAS Jehangir Karamat had publicly discussed the creation of the Council, Sharif forced Karamat to resign, with Pervez Musharraf replacing Karamat as COAS. As during his first time in office, Sharif's relationship with the military establishment was thus often uneasy and dominated by tacit efforts of Sharif to shore up the autonomy of the civilian government at the expense of the influence of the military establishment.

In foreign policy terms, the first major crisis Sharif oversaw during his second stint as Prime Minister was Pakistan's testing of nuclear weapons in response to the Indian nuclear tests in 1998. In May of that year, India conducted a series of nuclear explosions now commonly known as the Pokhran-II tests. The successful execution of these tests made India a de facto

nuclear power that operated in overt violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which Pakistan had also not signed. Less than two weeks later, Pakistan detonated a series of nuclear bombs following a number of meetings between Sharif and top military officials (Rizvi, 2001). The testing of the nuclear arsenal replaced Pakistan's previous strategy of nuclear ambiguity with one that was aimed at maintaining a "*credible minimum deterrent*" vis-à-vis India (The Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2019). The India-Pakistan conflict, which had been brewing ever since both countries had gained independence in 1947, now had obtained a nuclear dimension. In response to the Indian and Pakistani nuclear explosions, the US momentarily cut off aid to Islamabad and New Delhi in accordance with the Glenn Amendment, which the US Congress had passed in 1994 as part of the Arms Export Control Act. Under the Glenn Amendment, any US government was prohibited from delivering any economic and military assistance to any non-nuclear-weapon State that carries out a nuclear explosion (Wagner, 2001). The sanctions imposed on India and Pakistan included the suspension of economic and military assistance, restrictions on high-technology trade, and the withdrawal of loans from international financial institutions such as the IMF. India's and Pakistan's nuclear tests significantly raised strategic tensions in South Asia and led to the nuclearization of the conflict that had been going on since 1947.

The second major foreign policy crisis was the subsequent Kargil War, fought between India and Pakistan between May and July 1999. In early May, Pakistani troops entered the Kargil district on the Indian-administered side of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which has been disputed between India and Pakistan since 1947. The decision to attack had ostensibly been made without the prior approval of Sharif's civilian government (Ahmad, 2018). The conflict ended in late July with the complete withdrawal of Pakistani regular and irregular forces from Indian-administered territory, restoring the territorial status quo ante bellum and inflicting a humiliating defeat on Pakistan.

The war with India had immediate implications for Islamabad's relations with the US. Through much of the Cold War, Pakistan had been a key ally for the United States as a balancing force against both Indian and Soviet power in South Asia. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan also served as a key partner in the US strategy of support for anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan, some of which would later become the Taliban. As noted above, however, relations had already taken a hit due to the 1998 nuclear tests. Now, the US supported India's rather than Pakistan's diplomatic position as Washington called on Pakistan to immediately withdraw its troops from the Indian side of the Line of Control (LOC) and work towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Pressure on the Sharif government also ramped up as Washington had not been informed about the Pakistani plans to attack in advance (Riedel, 2019). The 1999 defeat was thus embarrassing for Pakistan as a whole whilst increasing the foreign pressure on the Sharif government.

Sharif's fallout with Musharraf over the Kargil War culminated in a new military coup in late 1999, Sharif's subsequent arrest, and Pakistan's return to direct military rule under Musharraf. Following the defeat in the war against India, Sharif had squarely blamed the loss on Musharraf who, as COAS, had been responsible for devising the overall war strategy and, according to Sharif, had made the decision to ultimately go to war. Musharraf in turn blamed the defeat on Sharif, thus publicly illustrating the impending collapse of civil-military relations. Sharif sought to dismiss Musharraf and block him from re-entering Pakistan during a trip Musharraf made to Sri Lanka in October 1999. In response, Musharraf-administered military forces took control over public infrastructure and detained Sharif. On the 14th of October 1999, Musharraf declared martial law, suspended the Pakistani Constitution, and dissolved the National Assembly alongside four province-level assemblies. Unlike during previous transitions of

power, when the Army had sought to maintain an element of democratic legitimacy by supporting some civilian actors, the events in 1999 marked a formal coup d'état and Pakistan's return to direct military rule.

Following his initial arrest, Sharif left Pakistan and at least formally distanced himself from domestic politics. The new military government, which Musharraf headed in the newly created role of Chief Executive between 1999 and 2002 before declaring himself President, led a broader crackdown on civilian forces in Pakistan, arresting both members of the Bhutto and Sharif clans on charges ranging from corruption to conspiracy to murder (Gannon, 1999). In April 2000, Sharif was convicted on hijacking and terrorism charges and charged with life imprisonment (Khan, 2000). In December 2000, however, the Musharraf government announced that it had commuted the life sentence following secret negotiations with the government of Saudi Arabia, where Sharif would go to live in exile (Harding, 2000). The deal also freed Sharif's brothers Abbas and Shahbaz while committing Nawaz Sharif to not become involved in Pakistani politics for 21 years and give up property valued at \$8.3 million at the time (Harding, 2000). The declining political fortunes of the Sharifs were also reflected in the repression of the PML-N. The PML-N had lost ground to the PML-Q, which had been founded by PML-N defectors and collaborated closely with Musharraf's military regime. Between 2004 and 2007, the PML-Q politician Shaukat Aziz served as Prime Minister under the military government. After 1999, Nawaz Sharif's career had thus appeared to come to a dramatic conclusion.

### **Sharif's return and third term**

Sharif returned to Pakistan in 2007 as the popular support for the Musharraf government declined. Musharraf's government was characterized by a range of ambiguities, with Musharraf's position on violent Islamism being a case in point. After the 9/11 attacks, Musharraf faced growing international pressure to clamp down on Jihadist networks in Pakistan, which were closely linked to the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Yamin, 2015). While ramping up counterterrorism operations in North and South Waziristan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Musharraf administration also granted significant "staging and overflight support" for American air force and drone operators, including through the lease of an airfield in Balochistan to the CIA (Haqqani, 2016, p. 336). The ISI also provided intelligence concerning Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives to the CIA, effectively enabling the execution of these operatives on Pakistani soil by US drone operators, all while maintaining its collaboration with key Taliban factions (Khan, 2018). Domestically, the apparent threat of Islamist extremism allowed Musharraf to legitimize his crackdown on civil society actors in the name of the global war on terror (Haqqani, 2003). However, Musharraf's opposition towards extremist groups was highly inconsistent as his government only targeted groups that were deemed anti-Pakistani, with significant leeway given to groups that the State could employ as strategic assets in Afghanistan and India (Tellis, 2008, p. 4). Musharraf's publicly largely supportive position for the US and his crackdown on anti-Pakistani Islamists nevertheless alienated large elements of Pakistan's Islamist scene, which had become increasingly radicalized in the previous years and decades (Hoodbhoy, 2017). In July 2007, the Pakistani Army laid siege to the Red Mosque in Islamabad, in which Islamist teachers and students had barricaded themselves while advocating for the nation-wide implementation of *Sharia* law (Sayed & Hamming, 2021). When the Army stormed the mosque, it killed up to 40 Islamists (Gall & Masood, 2007). The siege on the Red Mosque marked a major inflection point for large parts of Pakistan's Islamist scene, already disillusioned by the State's support for the US. In the months following the siege, Pashtun Jihadi leaders gathered in the FATA

and held a *Shura* (Pashto for council) that culminated in the founding of the TTP. Sharif's return to Pakistan from Saudi Arabia in late 2007 thus occurred in a broader political context in which Musharraf's legitimacy had become significantly undermined and volatility had increased.

As Musharraf became more and more incapable of clinging on to control, the 2008 general elections saw Sharif reclaim his role as head of the PML-N. The build-up to the elections exemplified the growing instability in the country. Like Sharif, Benazir Bhutto had returned to Pakistan in 2007 to run in the general elections. In December 2007, Bhutto was assassinated in Rawalpindi, leading to a delay in the elections. The PPP, now led by Benazir Bhutto's husband Asif Ali Zardari emerged as the single largest party in the National Assembly, leading the PML-N and the PML-Q, which had been increasingly relegated to the sidelines. The PPP and PML-N initially joined a coalition government that saw Zardari become President while Yousaf Raza Gillani was appointed Premier. In May 2008, the PML-N left the coalition with the PPP, which led to a reconfiguration of coalition arrangements. However, the PML-N continued supporting the PPP's efforts to impeach Musharraf, who resigned in August 2008. While the assassination of Benazir Bhutto highlighted the growing volatility and especially the growing influence of armed actors in domestic politics, the 2008 elections also highlighted the deeply hybrid nature of the system as the civilian government reasserted some control and autonomy.

Sharif led the PML-N to electoral victory in the 2013 general elections, after which the third Sharif administration specifically emphasized infrastructure development, including by attracting funding through China's Belt-and-Road Initiative. The elections were highly controversial, with key members of the opposition claiming that the elections were not fair and demanding investigations into irregularities (Boone, 2013). Once in power, the government heavily focused on infrastructure development in the context of the M2 Lahore-Islamabad Motorway, which was completed and inaugurated under Sharif (Salman, 2017). In 2015, Chinese and Pakistani representatives formally launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects the port of Gwadar in Balochistan with the Chinese city of Kashgar in Xinjiang. Pakistani policymakers hope that CPEC can bolster Pakistan's integration into global trade networks, provide external infrastructure investment, and address Pakistan's chronic electricity shortages (Aggarwal, 2021). CPEC consists of several mining projects, the construction of power plants, the upgrading and construction of new transport infrastructure throughout Pakistan, the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs), and the broader investment in "*regional connectivity*" (CPEC Authority Office, n.d.). Worth up to \$62 billion, CPEC was hailed by the Sharif government as a 'game changer' for the Pakistani economy. The Sharif government's focus on CPEC reflected the broader narrative surrounding transnational infrastructure as a driver of economic development.

Another key policy issue during Sharif's third stint as Prime Minister was the escalation of terrorist attacks by the TTP. Aiming to emulate its Afghan namesake, the TTP is a highly radical extremist entity that seeks to overthrow the Pakistani State and replace it with a *Sharia*-governed polity (Afzal, 2022). Following its formation in 2007, the TTP launched a large-scale terrorist campaign in Pakistan that was defined by its indiscriminate targeting of civilians. Pakistani authorities have blamed the TTP for the 2007 assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi, a charge TTP representatives have denied (Rafiq, 2022). The TTP has repeatedly made use of suicide attacks, including in an attack on a weapons factory that killed 66 people in 2008 and an attack on an American military base in Afghanistan in 2009 (Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2022). Other major attacks include a 2009 car bombing in Peshawar (125 victims killed), the 2014 Peshawar school massacre (149 victims killed,

mostly children and teenagers), and multiple attacks on Shia mosques throughout Pakistan. By the time Sharif re-entered office, Pakistan was thus facing a rapidly deteriorating security situation.

In response to a TTP attack on an airport in Karachi in June 2014, the government launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb (“sharp and cutting strike”) against TTP bases in the FATA along the Pashtun border belt with Afghanistan. In its efforts to remove the TTP, the Army displaced up to one million people and committed widespread human rights abuses against the local Pashtun population (Kakakhel & Farooq, 2015). Presumably to reduce coverage of the crimes committed against civilians, the Army also severely restricted the access of journalists and media outlets to the FATA (Afzal, 2022). While the military offensive was effective in eroding TTP influence in the tribal areas, it led to the TTP relocating to Afghanistan, from where it now launched attacks on Pakistan (Mir, 2022). As part of its counterterrorism strategy, the government also published the National Action Plan (NAP) in December 2014, which included measures such as the establishment of military courts for the speedy trial of terrorism suspects and the revival of the death penalty for convicted terrorists (Khan & Saeed, 2018). As Pakistani policy became more militarized, the role of the Army thus expanded further. A growing emphasis on counterterrorism measures and repressive policy instruments was thus another key element during Sharif’s third time as Prime Minister.

Sharif’s political career appeared to be close to ending again following the leaking of the Panama Papers in 2016, which implicated Sharif’s family and forced him to resign amid a ruling of the Pakistani Supreme Court. The Panama Papers, leaked in April 2016, revealed illegal offshore financial dealings of powerful individuals worldwide. The leaked documents suggested that Nawaz Sharif’s children, including his daughter Maryam, owned offshore companies linked to properties in London (Phillips, 2017). These findings, which spoke to the long-standing corrupt practices of members of the elite, triggered a public outcry in Pakistan and demands for accountability. The opposition, including the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led by Imran Khan, called for an investigation into the offshore assets of the Sharif family. In response to public pressure, the Supreme Court of Pakistan formed a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) in May 2017 to investigate the financial dealings of the Sharifs and determine the legitimacy of the assets revealed in the Panama Papers. The JIT submitted its report in July 2017, concluding that Sharif and his family could not provide a satisfactory money trail for their London properties. The report recommended filing a reference against the Sharif family. On July 28, 2017, the Supreme Court delivered its verdict in the Panama Papers case, disqualifying Nawaz Sharif from holding public office, citing Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution, which pertains to the disqualification of individuals that are not “*honest and trustworthy*” (Bhatti, 2018). In compliance with the court’s verdict, Sharif resigned on July 28, 2017, and was replaced by Shahid Khaqan Abbasi as interim Prime Minister. In 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that Sharif would be disqualified from holding public office for life due to his involvement in the Panama Papers case, and further sentencing him to ten years in prison. Jail sentences and fines were also given to Sharif’s daughter Maryam and her husband Safdar Afwan. In September 2018, their court sentences were suspended and in November 2019, Sharif was granted bail on medical grounds, allowing him to travel abroad to receive treatment for various medical conditions, including heart-related problems (Shah, 2019). Sharif remained in the United Kingdom for the following months, fuelling debates that he had once again chosen exile and now exerted influence over the PML-N through his brother Shahbaz, who remained in Pakistan (Shahid, 2017). The Panama Papers scandal and the subsequent JIT investigation and Supreme Court verdict thus played a pivotal role in the collapse of the third Sharif government. The disqualification of Sharif marked a significant political development in Pakistan and had lasting implications for the country’s political landscape.



## The rise and fall of Imran Khan

Sharif's departure from office opened the door for the PTI and Imran Khan, who Sharif accused of having sided with the military to oust him. In response to the corruption allegations, Sharif consistently maintained his innocence and accused then COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa and ISI Chief General Faiz Hameed of orchestrating a coup against him and rigging the 2018 general elections, which saw the Khan-led PTI register a resounding victory (Bukhari, 2020). Sharif's allegations spoke to a broader conflict with the Army, which was displeased with Sharif's efforts to improve relations with India and his attempt to call out the Army's support for violent Islamists (Afzal, 2018). Seeking to distance itself from Sharif and the PML-N, the Khan government emphasized an anti-corruption agenda and pledged to hold powerful individuals accountable for alleged corruption and the misuse of public funds (Siddiqi, 2018). In this sense, Khan sought to present himself as a politically clean alternative to the Bhuttos and the Sharifs, with both families stained by past corruption scandals and their dynastic presence in post-independence Pakistani politics (Guyer, 2022). Building on his immense popular support base, Khan effectively framed himself as a non-elite candidate, appealing to populist sentiments in a strategy reminiscent of other populist politicians elsewhere. Khan's rhetoric focused on alleged threats from the outside, most prominently from India and the United States, and offered seemingly simple solutions to complex policy challenges such as corruption, Islamic extremism, climate change, and macroeconomic underperformance. "Like most populists", Ihsan Yilmaz and Kainat Shakil (2021) note in a policy brief for the European Center for Populism Studies, "*Khan promised deliverance without clear plans, yet the pro-public sentiment of his statements earned considerable support among the disaffected populace*". Khan's anti-elite rhetoric also ignored Khan's own role as part of the national elite he was criticizing, as well as his initially close ties with the military establishment (Masood, 2018), which lent him significant support in the 2018 elections (Fair, 2018). Khan's rhetoric thus appeared to oppose the elite forces dominating domestic politics while Khan initially aligned with the military.

Over time, however, Khan's relationship with the military elite became more fraught. Khan's PTI government failed to decisively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic that began hitting Pakistan in the early months of 2020. As Khan failed to impose lockdowns to spread the stop of the virus, instead urging adolescents to join the Corona Relief Tigers Force to fight a '*Jihad*' against the pandemic, the military took matters into its own hands and started locking down large swaths of the country (Findlay & Bokhari, 2020). Khan's substantial policy deficiencies aggravated previous concerns by the military establishment related to Khan's overly belligerent rhetoric surrounding the J&K conflict and his government's failure to remove Pakistan from the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force, which aims to combat international terrorist financing (Findlay & Bokhari, 2020). Khan's policy failures also provided renewed political ground to Nawaz Sharif, who, besides alleging that Khan and the military had conspired to remove him from power, also blamed Khan and the military for the escalating cost of living crisis while framing himself as removed from the military, which he decried as a "*State above a State*" (Kaura, 2020). By mid-2020, Khan was thus under growing pressure from both the PML-N, still practically led by Nawaz Sharif, and the military establishment.

This falling out with the military led to Khan's fall from power in April 2022 and the return of the PML-N, formally led by Shahbaz Sharif. From 2020 onward, the PTI government grappled with growing inflation, increased unemployment, and an IMF aid program that did not substantially contribute to the stabilization of Pakistan's rapidly declining economy (Guyer, 2022). Khan's support for valid anti-corruption campaigns, which became more contentious as it became evident that PTI politicians were also indulging in corruption, were situated in a

broader strongmen approach to politics that weakened the national bureaucracy while becoming increasingly ineffective as time went on. The relationship between the Army and Khan deteriorated further as COAS Bajwa and Khan clashed over the position of Bajwa's successor as COAS, with Khan seeking to install ISI Chief Faiz Hameed, who Bajwa aimed to relieve from his duties (Mir, 2023). Khan's relationship with the United States also took a hit as Khan visited Moscow just days after Russia had invaded Ukraine in February 2022, signalling Pakistan's growing strategic proximity to both China and Russia (Raja Mohan, 2022). In early March 2022, the political opposition in the National Assembly filed a no-confidence motion against Khan, accusing him of governance failures, the oppression of political opponents, and the mismanagement of Pakistan's foreign and economic policy (Afzal & Pita, 2022). In response, Khan portrayed the motion as an attempt by the United States to remove him from office, citing a meeting between Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States and US State Department official Donald Lu in which, Khan alleged, Lu demanded that Khan should be removed in a coup (Gul, 2023). While anti-Americanism had long been a part of Khan's rhetorical repertoire, this open accusation further alienated Bajwa, who had sought to rectify the increasingly fraught strategic relationship between Islamabad and Washington (Ghosh, 2022). In early April, the motion of no confidence was dismissed by the PTI Deputy Speaker in the National Assembly, leading PPP leader Asil Ali Zardari to challenge the dismissal in Pakistan's Supreme Court. Khan also dissolved parliament to prevent the vote on the motion from taking place. These steps were rebuked by the Supreme Court, which ruled that the PTI had acted unconstitutionally and thus enabled the no confidence motion to go ahead. Khan was defeated in the motion, leading to his removal from office and sparking pro-PTI protests around Pakistan (Al Jazeera, 2022). Shahbaz Sharif became the new Prime Minister in a PML-N-headed coalition administration which, over the following months, expanded the military's political powers while launching a repression campaign against the PTI (Afzal, 2023). Formally led by Shahbaz, it was widely believed that Nawaz Sharif was the one pulling the strings from London (Afzal, 2023). The return of the PML-N thus represented an effort by the Army to reassert control over the civilian government by renewing its cooperation with the Sharifs.

After Khan's dismissal the new government faced a series of domestic challenges that have further exacerbated the political volatility in the country. Only days after Khan was removed, arrest orders against Khan were given by the district and sessions court in Islamabad. Khan was arrested in May 2022 over alleged corruption, sparking further and increasingly violent protests throughout the country that began openly criticizing the interference of the military in domestic politics (Hussain, 2023). From June 2022 onward, Pakistan was also battered by large-scale floods that exposed the country's unpreparedness toward climate disasters while destroying agriculture and resulting in mass displacement (Kelman, 2022). The Sharif government also engaged in protracted negotiations over an IMF bailout that led to Pakistan almost defaulting on its sovereign debt in 2023 (Rana, 2023). In response to the IMF financing conditions, the government undertook highly unpopular public policy measures, such as the cutting of fuel subsidies, thus further propelling popular support for Khan (Human Rights Watch, 2023). At the same time, TTP attacks in Pakistan began escalating as Pakistan's relations with the Taliban deteriorated (Sayed & Hamming, 2023). As the legitimacy of the government, which was already weak to begin with, declined further, Khan began organizing a *'March on Islamabad'* to demand early elections (Al Jazeera, 2022a). In early November 2022, an assassination attempt on Khan during a rally failed, leading to pro-Khan protests erupting again (Baloch, 2022). In general, the continued popular support for the PTI and Khan speaks to his appeal to much of the Pakistani electorate, generating growing concerns for both the Army and the PML-N. In August 2023, the Sharif-led government announced that it would

dissolve parliament to allow for fresh elections to be held. Although the general elections are legally required to be held 90 days after the parliament's dissolution, they were later delayed and have now been scheduled for February 2024.

Despite his removal from power, the Army clearly views Khan as a continued threat to its role in Pakistani politics. To a greater degree than any other Pakistani politician in the modern era, Khan has demonstrated the capacity to mobilize significant parts of the population against both the military establishment and what he has framed as its political cronies. This narrative tracks well with a disillusioned public that has to cope with growing militancy and a rapidly worsening economic situation that has direct and material effects on the livelihoods of ordinary Pakistanis. Khan's popular appeal has therefore created an immediate challenge to the military establishment. As Aqil Shah (2023) has written in *Foreign Affairs*,

*“Once the army’s proxy, he [Khan] has now gone rogue with a vengeance and is trying to tear apart the military’s institutional integrity by sowing dissension in its ranks against the army chief. The army is also probably concerned that Khan finds his main support base among the traditionally pro-military urban middle classes in Punjab, Pakistan’s largest province and the heartland of army recruitment”.*

While much of Khan's criticism towards the social forces arrangements dominating Pakistani politics is legitimate, Khan's own role in generating the chaos that has now engulfed Pakistan cannot be ignored. As with previous governments, Khan's administration too was corrupt and actively repressed political dissent while engaging in economic policies that aggravated socioeconomic issues. However, Khan being *perceived* as a political outsider by much of the population provides him with leverage. In response, the political establishment has reverted to using classical tools of repression, including the partial ban of the PTI and the arbitrary arrest and intimidation of PTI members (Khan, 2023). Khan himself was arrested in August 2023 after a court convicted him of alleged corruption, creating a court order for an imprisonment of three years that also disables Khan from competing in the upcoming election (Bukhari et al., 2023). *“The primary aim here”*, analyst Arif Rafiq has argued, *“is to remove Khan from the political process, as he’s no longer reliably obedient and has amassed popular support that gives him political capital independent of the military”* (cited in Masood & Goldbaum, 2023). These blatant methods of political repression are, unfortunately, hardly novel in Pakistani politics. As Madiha Afzal (2023) notes in a piece for Brookings, however, *“what is different this time around is the ferocity with which the state has gone after Khan and his political party, [...] almost entirely hollowing it [the PTI] out [...] Pakistan’s democracy stands badly damaged; there is little hope that the next election will be free or fair, if it is held in February at all”*. The military establishment has given up any pretences about support for democratic governance and has actively opted for the repression of political factions providing a credible threat to its role.

It is in this wider context of growing political repression and the de facto reassertion of military control that Nawaz Sharif's return to Pakistani politics must be understood. Sharif returned to Pakistan in October 2023, shortly after seeing his previous convictions overturned and rival politicians defecting to the PML-N (Afzal, 2023). The clearing of all remaining graft charges in mid-December 2023 now enabled Sharif to run again in the presumably upcoming general election (Gul, 2023a). In this context, Sharif's return reflects an attempt of the military establishment to balance against the continued popularity of Khan and the PTI. That said, Nawaz Sharif was already presumed to effectively run policy decisions while his brother Shahbaz was in charge. Given the unpopularity of the previous government, *“it is less clear*

*how he [Nawaz] would perform in a free and fair election” (Afzal, 2023). Considering the repression facing the PTI, it is unlikely that these elections will be fair to begin with.*

## Conclusion

In many ways, Nawaz Sharif’s return to Pakistani politics closes the circle for both Sharif personally and his historically mixed relationship with the military establishment in Pakistan. In what appears likely to become his fourth stint as Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif has once again demonstrated a historically ambiguous relationship with the military, which he has opposed when politically convenient but often treated as a patron if circumstances allow it. What is arguably different now is that there are little pretences about Sharif’s role as a proxy for the military, which has clamped down hard on the sole form of legitimate opposition: Khan’s PTI. Noting the popular legitimacy of Khan and the PTI must not legitimize the PTI’s partially undemocratic and corrupt practices - however, the party represents a form of political organization that has openly criticized the military whilst enjoying large-scale popular support. Although Khan largely collaborated with the Army before the relationship hit the rocks, his populist appeal creates a credible opposition to the arrangements of social forces that have propped up Pakistani politics in some way or another over the decades.

Examining Nawaz Sharif’s role is not just important due to his presumable return as Premier but also because it is reflective of the broader shifts and trends in Pakistani politics since the late 1980s. The end of the military regime following Zia’s death did not eliminate the military’s influence over domestic politics, instead resulting in a shift in tactics that saw the military embracing a more hybrid form of control that relied on the close collaboration with select individuals and key interest groups. At times, the military had to accept a somewhat reduced role in domestic politics, for instance during the Benazir Bhutto years. During these periods, the military worked to regain control, eventually shifting its tactics to an overt form of control when Musharraf took power from Sharif in 1999. Sharif’s break with the military in the late 1990s indicates that alignments in Pakistani politics are often fleeting and can be rearranged in a variety of ways over time. This combination between select cooperation and competition for autonomy between civilian and military governments continued after the fall of Musharraf, thus entrenching a policy environment that remained wholly unequipped to generate public goods and contribute to the improvement of the material livelihoods of ordinary Pakistanis. Imran Khan’s appeal to the Pakistani population must be understood in this context. Although Khan focused more on rhetoric than policy substance, his populist messaging spoke to the concerns and challenges facing many people in contemporary Pakistan. His removal and the repression of the PTI since then epitomizes the continued fragility and the declining scope of democracy in Pakistan.

Nawaz Sharif’s return to power, should it materialize, spells further trouble for Pakistan’s already highly imperilled democratic structures.

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