

Pakistan: Challenges to Nawaz Sharif Government

ALOK BANSAL

The elections held on the 11th of May, 2013 have ushered in Mian Nawaz Sharif as the Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for an unprecedented third term. Although, the elections gave Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) a clear majority, the new government faces monumental challenges. Politically, the emergence of Imran Khan led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) poses a major challenge to Nawaz Sharif in his traditional strong holds. Imran Khan, who has no love lost for Nawaz Sharif, ensured that his party emerged as the largest opposition party in terms of votes polled. PTI's emergence as the largest political party in Taliban afflicted Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (KP) and Imran Khan's pro-Taliban proclivities have severely restricted Nawaz Sharif's options of dealing with the menace of Talibanisation. In the run up to the elections, both Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan had spoken against US drone attacks and had supported negotiation with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). While this did win them some votes, it has become extremely difficult to deliver on their electoral promises. Although, handling the Taliban, and the inherent radicalization of society are the most significant issues requiring the government's attention, the issues that needs utmost attention can be broadly divided into four aspects: sectarianism, economic crisis, ethno-nationalism, and Talibanisation.

Sectarianism

Sectarianism is the natural corollary of the divisive 'Two Nation Theory', which required an 'object of hate'. After the liberation of Bangladesh, the number of

minorities became so insignificant that new demons had to be created within the fold of Islam and this aggravated the sectarian faultline.

Pakistan is believed to be the home to the second largest Shia community in the world after Iran. Shias have had disproportionately larger share of political power in Pakistan. From Jinnah, Nazimuddin, Mohammad Ali Bogra, to Yahya Khan, Bhuttos and Zardari have all been Shias. In recent past the sectarian violence in Pakistan has worsened and within the first sixty days of 2013, over 300 Shias were killed. The Shia pilgrims going to Iraq and Hazara community, who are easily discernable because of their Mongoloid features, have been targeted regularly. Till recently, the Shia community found succor and security in the fact that President Zardari and chairpersons of both houses of parliament were Shias. However, the election results have aggravated the sense of insecurity amongst Shias. Not only will many of the top Shia functionaries like the presiding officers of the two houses will have to go, but also the Shia community is concerned by the fact that Nawaz Sharif and his brother Shahbaz have had close relations with various Sunni sectarian outfits and many successful legislatures of PML(N) have been members of these outfits and some have even spent years in jail. Nawaz Sharif's reported proximity to Saudi Arabia further enhances these fears.

The Shia fears were quite evident in the victory of Shia political party Majlis Wahadat Muslimeen (MWM) from a Hazara dominated seat in Quetta. MWM won the seat defeating Hazara Democratic Party (HDP), clearly indicating that the beleaguered community is now giving eminence to their sectarian identity over ethnic identity. Their fears were not wrong, because as soon as the new chief minister was sworn in, the dreaded Sunni sectarian outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangavi struck targeting women students and thereafter the hospital, where the injured were being treated. This was followed by an attack on an Imambarah in Quetta on 30 June, that resulted in killing of 28 Hazaras, who are all Shias and injuring of 60 others. On the same very day, the sectarian terrorists allied to TTP went on to target foreign mountaineers and Shia locals at Nanga Parbat base camp at a height of 4200 m in Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK).

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Nawaz Sharif and his party is not seen as neutral in this conflict.

Economic Crisis

Nawaz Sharif has given a clear indication that improving the economy is going to be a priority. The GDP growth for the last four to five years has been approximately at the same level as the population growth. This has resulted in per capita income remaining stagnant, and taking into account the huge income inequality that persists, the poor have actually turned poorer.

The foreign exchange reserves, which had touched a high of \$18.313 billion on 30 July 2011, have come down to \$11.344 billion as on 21 Jun 2013, of which only \$6.256 billion are with State Bank of Pakistan. During the next financial year (Jul 2013-Jun 14), Pakistan has to pay back 3.2 billion dollars to the IMF, which could place Pakistan on the verge of default. Foreign investment has dried up, the industries are relocating and the Public Sector Units are losing millions every day. The only redeeming feature has been the rising remittances, but even there the rate of growth has been coming down and the target of \$ 15 billion for the financial year 2012-13 is unlikely to be met. Fiscal deficit has been rising and the tax to GDP ratio has remained abysmally low.

One issue that needs Nawaz's immediate attention is the endemic power shortage, especially in his pocket borough of Punjab. After the 18th amendment, the province where the power plant is located has the first right on power produced - Punjab has very few of them. Consequently, there are power cuts for 14 to 20 hrs every day. Despite increasing the power generation capacity, the

power generated has come down since 2007 due to the problem of circular debt. Although Nawaz had promised succor within 100 days, he has now asked people to show patience. However, the diversion of power from other provinces ruled by opposition governments, at this juncture may aggravate tenuous centre-state relations.

Nawaz is looking at India to provide some power to ameliorate the sufferings of his vote bank, however, India's capacity to release power at this juncture is severely limited. Nawaz also realises that trade with India could bring the ailing economy out of the woods. However, he will have to surmount the huge opposition from religious parties and the Army. At this juncture, there seems to be no other option but to go back to the IMF. According to reports, the government has successfully negotiated a fresh loan of \$ 5.3 billion from the IMF.

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Ethno Nationalism

After the current elections, three different parties with no mutual understanding will be ruling the three most populous provinces of Pakistan: Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (KP). In fact even in Balochistan, where the PML(N) eventually emerged as the single largest political party, courtesy independents climbing on to its bandwagon; the government is headed by a Baloch nationalist and the coalition also includes Pakhtoon nationalists. Consequently, for the first time in history, the chief ministers of all four provinces belong to four different political parties. Consequently, the provincial governments are likely to follow more jingoistic policies, when it comes to their provincial interests and are likely to be less accommodative of the requirements of the centre and the other provinces.

There is likely to be a competition of sorts between PTI, which polled the second highest votes and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which won the second largest number of seats, to emerge as the real opposition. Both the parties would like to project themselves as the real opposition and will oppose the government in Islamabad, tooth and nail to discredit the other. As they control the provincial governments in KP and Sindh, it could strain the fragile centre-state relations.

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The polling percentage in Balochistan has been extremely low in the areas affected by Baloch insurgency. Pakhtoons emerged on top in all the mixed constituencies. Both Nawaz Sharif and Achakzai the leader of Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PMAP), despite winning larger seats, have been sensible in agreeing to make Dr Abdul Malik Baloch, from the National Party, a Baloch nationalist party, as the Chief Minister. However, that has not prevented underground Baloch nationalists from striking and in one of the strongest challenges to Pakistani state, they attacked a building associated with Pakistan's founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah in Ziarat, hauled down the Pakistani flag, hoisted the Baloch flag and eventually burnt the entire building. Handling ethnic faultlines and the centre-state relationship are going to be a major challenge for Nawaz Sharif, as his government is perceived to be Punjab dominated.

Talibanisation

Having propagated talks with Taliban and an end to drone attacks during electioneering, Nawaz has found it difficult to convince the Army and the US to deliver on his promise. The drone attacks continue unabated and the US in one of these successfully eliminated Waliur Rahman, TTP's second in command. Consequentially, TTP has not only withdrawn the offer of talks, it has renewed attacks with a vengeance. It has not only targeted the security personnel and collaborators, but also the foreign tourists, giving a body blow to whatever remained of foreign tourism in Pakistan.

In drone attacks, PTI, which is ruling in KP, has got a tool to corner Nawaz Sharif. As Pakhtoons are at the receiving end of the violence, there is large-scale support for talks amongst them. The growing alliance of TTP with Sunni sectarian outfits like Lashkar-e-Jhangavi, has given it enormous reach in areas like Punjab and Karachi, where TTP was relatively weak. TTP has grown enormously in strength in Karachi and this was quite evident from the election results, where ANP, which hitherto claimed to represent the Pakhtoons in Karachi was wiped out. It is not only using its new found influence to consolidate its hold over the

Pakhtoon localities, it is also using it to target sectarian and religious minorities to enforce its version of puritanical Islam.

The right wing vote bank of Nawaz Sharif wants him to accommodate Taliban. However, if past is any indication, any accommodation with the Taliban will give them space to enhance their influence and could invite opposition from sections of the Armed Forces, which have lost large number of their compatriots to TTP and are threatened by the growing radicalisation within their ranks. Nawaz, who in the past has exhibited a rightist streak and has close relations with religious parties, will find it extremely difficult to balance his electoral promise of negotiations with the Taliban, in the face of stiff opposition from the armed forces and international community.

Conclusion

The success of the present government depends to a great extent on managing these delicate faultlines. Good relations with India and enhancement of Indo-Pak trade could provide some relief, but in a country where political discourse has decidedly shifted right of centre after the elections, any normalisation of relations with India will not be easy. However, if Nawaz fails, the faultlines may get aggravated and could lead to the Lebanonisation of Pakistan – a nuclear power, which could be catastrophic for regional security.

Capt (IN) **Alok Bansal** is a Senior Fellow at CLAWS.