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## WHAT NEXT FOR PAKISTAN'S NAWAZ SHARIF AFTER SUPREME COURT CORRUPTION RULING?

BY ELEANOR ROSS

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Pakistan's Supreme Court ruled Thursday that there is not enough evidence to convict Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of corruption after the 2016 Panama Paper leaks linked his children to three offshore accounts.

Sharif repeatedly denied the charges of corruption—arguing that they were politically motivated—but the court's decision may not put to bed a scandal that has dogged the Pakistani leader for the past two years. For his critics, many questions remain.

Sharif has not explained publicly how he was able to amass a fortune of around \$19 million while working in politics since the 1970s, and opposition leaders accuse him of lying to parliament.

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It is the first time a sitting prime minister has ever faced an investigation panel probing into his financial affairs, according to Dawn newspaper.

According to papers leaked from Mossack Fonseca law firm, Sharif's daughter and two sons owned offshore holding companies that were registered in the British Virgin Islands. His children later used the holding companies to purchase properties in London, according to the court.

Sharif is one of Pakistan's richest men but he has told the court his family wealth was acquired legally before he became a politician.

Three out of five judges on the supreme court supported Sharif—with the remaining two arguing that he should be disqualified from running in the next election—and the 3-2 decision means that while the corruption charges will not be levied, an investigation will be conducted to delve deeper into Sharif's offshore accounts.

In a 540-page document published after the judgment began with a quote from The Godfather : “Behind every great fortune there is a crime.”

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Pakistan is facing a general election next year, and the court case was seen as a pre-emptive strike against Sharif. Supporters of his opponent, Imran Khan, who is chair of the Pakistan Movement for Justice Party, protested outside the court. Khan originally filed the case against Sharif in 2016.

Meanwhile pro-Sharif supporters chanted “Go Nawaz, go Nawaz,” according to Reuters.

There are now fears that the decision could ramp up tension between the two parties ahead of elections next year. Over 1,500 police officers were stationed in Islamabad on Thursday.

Pakistan's economy has been growing modestly. Earlier this year it was described as the fifth fastest-growing emerging economy in the world. Nawaz is seen as a pro-business politician and Pakistan's stock market jumped after the court decision, with the benchmark index KSE closing up 2.39 percent.