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Pakistan's Age-Old Battle: Sharif vs. The Army

By Jason Ditz

May 14, 2013

After a decisive win in this weekend's election, Pakistani politician Nawaz Sharif is set to form a record third government in his 30 year political career. In exile before the last election, Sharif's return shows he is nothing if not a survivor.

But Sharif is also one half of the most fierce rivalries in the nation's history, one against Pakistan's powerful and largely independent military. There is a reason that the three-time ruler is seeing only the first peaceful transition of power between civilian governments in Pakistan's history.

Sharif's first term in office as Pakistan's Prime Minister (1990-1993), ended with another first, the first time a government willingly resigned in the face of a threatened military coup. He resigned in July of 1993.

Sharif's second term (1997-1999) ended even worse, with the prime minister falling to a military coup by Pervez Musharraf, ending up in jail and eventually being forced into exile where he lived until his return in 2007.

Even as the opposition leader after the 2008 elections, Sharif had a contentious relationship with the military, openly facing down troops in the 2009 protests known as the Long March, which ended with the government giving in to his demands to restore the Supreme Court's Chief Justice.

Pakistan's current military leader, Gen. Parvez Kayani has shown a reluctance to meddle in politics that is peculiar in Pakistan's history, which is rife with juntas. At 61, Gen. Kayani is believed to be nearing retirement, however, and while he may give Sharif a fairly wide berth, particularly after his election success, it seems another showdown is bound to happen sooner or later.