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Daunting challenges await Sharif

By Sajjad Ashraf

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Speaking Freely is an Asia Times Online feature that allows guest writers to have their say. Please click here if you are interested in contributing.

After a better than expected win by the Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), led by two-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the 11 May elections in Pakistan, the country awaits the change of government with a lot of hope.

This is the first time in Pakistan's volatile 66-year-old history that one democratic dispensation will replace another. Hangings, dismissals, coups d'etat and assassination of leaders have accompanied all of Pakistan's previous elections.

As he heads into a third term as prime minister, Sharif deserves credit for patiently waiting for five years despite taunts of "friendly opposition", when he could have easily joined others to topple the Asif Ali Zardari-led government - arguably the most inept and corrupt in Pakistan's history.

Reflecting its consistent stand against US drones and calling for disengagement from the US-led war, Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), swept the national and provincial assembly polls in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and made some inroads into Sharif strongholds in the Punjab. Khan's campaign against corruption partly energized people to vote.

Except for presence in Sindh, Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Mutthida Qaumi Movement (MQM) other partners in previous coalition were wiped out from the assemblies.

By eliminating the whole family of former prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, and PPP from Southern Punjab, the voters rejected the idea of dividing Punjab into smaller units. The PPP could only win one seat in the area this time, from 27 in the previous assembly.

The media's role in bringing forth Pakistanis to vote shows in the over 60% turnout rising from a measly 44% during last elections in 2008.

Pakistan's elections this time were held against the backdrop of a failing economy, debilitating power cuts, widespread corruption at the highest levels, militancy within and the unpopular partnership with the US over the "war on terror".

Notwithstanding total mismanagement by the PPP regime, PML-N's electoral success is largely due to the performance of the Government of Punjab, led by Sharif's brother, Shahbaz Sharif. The younger Sharif has a reputation of getting things done by delivering several projects on time, and he faces no corruption charges.

Sharif's two previous terms as prime minister have raised confidence among the business community for his third tenure. The Karachi Stock Exchange 100 index crossed 20,000 for the first time within the first session of trading the day markets opened after the business tycoon's victory.

"You see privatization, free market economy, deregulation - they have been hallmarks of our party in government. We are going to pick up the threads from where we left off," Nawaz Sharif said following his electoral triumph. Yet making businesses pay taxes to bridge the resource gap is not going to be easy.

Sharif has said he could work with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to put the economy back on track. The usual IMF recipe, accompanied by cutting subsidies, will be too much for the hard-pressed common man. "We need stabilization with growth - all we need from the IMF is a little more time to pay back \$5 billion that we owe them," said Sartaj Aziz, Sharif's two times finance minister who drafted PML-N's election manifesto.

In foreign policy, Sharif faces a cluster of immediate challenges. Finding a balance in relations with India is an urgent task, where he will need to increase the momentum achieved by the previous government. Setting the tone during the "long chat" with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh both invited the other to visit their respective countries. There is perhaps no better time for Pakistan and India to move forward.

With PML-N and PTI calling for the end of drone strikes defining new terms of engagement with the US poses the big challenge. Any perception like the PPP policy of publicly opposing and privately condoning drone attacks will shorten Sharif's honeymoon with the people and that he is unlikely to risk. It is now for the US to respect the expressed wishes of the Pakistani people.

The Saudis and other Arab countries felt somewhat cut off during the previous regime, which they suspected was cozier with Iran. Balancing these relations between the two opposing sides will pose its own dilemma for the incoming government.

Among the challenges Sharif faces is his relations with the military. When earlier in power these relations soured to a point of his ouster by Musharraf in 1999. A visibly chastened Nawaz Sharif has played down prospects of conflict with the military, which under General Kiani has no proclivity to interfere in civil affairs. This will be tested when military's interests over vital elements of foreign and security policy are reconciled with civilian control.

Having used their votes decisively, Pakistanis feel Sharif is the harbinger of change for the better. This resounding win means that he is independent of smaller parties for forming government and will have fewer excuses in case of failure.

With many hard decisions expected Nawaz Sharif would need all the wisdom, support and luck to revive the sagging economy, balance the foreign policy and meet people's expectations.