Afghans Nervous as Nawaz Sharif Returns

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Incoming Pakistani prime minister seen as serial meddler in Afghan affairs, but some hope things will now change.

While some Afghans view the recent election victory of the Pakistan Muslim League with alarm, other commentators hope the party’s leader Nawaz Sharif will have the vision to turn over a new leaf in relations.

As Sharif, 63, becomes prime minister for the third time, Afghans recall his role in backing the mujahedin resistance against the Soviet-backed administration in the 1980s, culminating in a change of government that plunged their country into years of civil war. In retrospect, many Afghans look back on those events as a deliberate plot by Islamabad to render their country defenceless.

In his second term as prime minister, Sharif recognised the Taleban government in Kabul in 1997.

That troubled history leads some like Abdorrahim Ayubi, a member of parliament from the southern Kandahar province, to regard Sharif as a long-term enemy of the Afghan nation.

“There can be no hope his policies will lead to an improvement in relations with Afghanistan,” Ayubi told IWPR. “He was the individual who set about destroying this country once the pro-Soviet regime collapsed, and we are still burn in that fire”.

Kabul student Matiullah put it even more bluntly, saying, “It would be pretty stupid of Afghans to expect a murderer to salve their wounds.”

Sharif begins his third term as prime minister at a time when Afghan-Pakistani relations are under great strain. Kabul continues to assert that Islamabad harbours the Taleban as a deliberate tactic to undermine Afghan statehood, not simply as the result of loss of control in the wild border regions of Pakistan’s northwest. Recent skirmishes between Afghan and Pakistani troops on a still disputed frontier have added to the tensions. (See Afghan Taleban Fighters Turn on Pakistan.)

In a May 12 phone call congratulating Sharif on his win, Afghan president Hamed Karzai expressed hope that relations would improve and that Islamabad would work with his country in the “war on terror”.

Foreign ministry spokesman Janan Musazai added that the new Pakistani government should destroy “terrorist sanctuaries” on its territory.

But Afghan commentators point out that Sharif seemed to be leaning the other way, at least based on what he said during campaigning. He indicated that he would withdraw from international counter-terrorism efforts and seek a negotiated peace deal with Pakistan’s home-grown Taleban movement. This leads some in Kabul to fear that if the Pakistani militants are dissuaded from carrying out attacks in their own country, that will make it all the easier to redirect them to join the Afghan Taleban in creating mayhem on the other side of the border.

Abdul Wahed Taqat, a political and defence analyst, believes Sharif is part of a conspiracy between the country’s powerful military and the ISI intelligence service, on the one hand, and Islamist groups including the Taleban on the other.

“It is not civilian governments that define the policy towards Afghanistan,” he said, accusing the military-intelligence-Islamist alliance of “attacking other political parties, driving them out and clearing the ground for Nawaz Sharif’s party alone.

“What can we expect from a government been created by such groups? It is obvious - war and destruction in Afghanistan,” he said.

Political analyst Satar Saadat agrees that the army and ISI play a dominant role in all Pakistani governments, but argues that Sharif is more a hostage than a free agent in the relationship.

“The last government tried to bring about change in the army and the ISI, but it failed. In my opinion, if Nawaz Sharif wishes to free himself from the army and ISI’s captivity and is able to do so, there will be some hope of an improvement in relations with Afghanistan, the wider region and the world. But because of Sharif’s bitter experience of the power of the militants, he might not dare shut them out of controlling and influencing political power.”
On the positive side, Saadat said, “Nawaz Sharif is a businessman. He well understands that Pakistan’s economic ties with Central Asia can be facilitated via Afghanistan. If he really wants to get Pakistan’s economy out of its current chaos, there is no other option than friendship and peace with Afghanistan.”

Another analyst, Mohammad Yunus Fakkur, accepts that Sharif’s record on Afghanistan is not good, but he believes this could change, just as political circumstances have changed.

“We must not judge people by their past records. Politicians always shift position to further the interests of their country and their party,” he said. “It is up to Afghans what kind of relationship they forge with the new government in Pakistan, and how they convince it to establish a friendly and honest relationship that benefits both countries.”

Sayed Fazel Hussein Sancharaki, spokesman for the opposition National Coalition, was also prepared to give the new Pakistani government the benefit of the doubt.

“Pakistan is suffering from many domestic problems, and in this situation, Nawaz Sharif will go into action with a new strategy. Establishing good relations with neighbouring states will be one of the goals of this strategy,” he said.

Afghanistan is not the same as it used to be, Sancharaki said, adding that “the presence of the international community in Afghanistan will prevent Pakistan from interfering openly as it previously did”.

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