

PML-N After the Disqualification of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif:

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Abstract

The 2017 disqualification of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif by Pakistan's Supreme Court initiated a significant shift in Pakistan's political trajectory and deeply affected the internal working, leadership, and public standing of the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N). This study explores the party's political transformation following the verdict, contextualizing the episode within broader debates on judicial activism, civil–military relations, and democratic fragility. Scholarly works such as Jatoi et al. (2022) on judicial activism, Cheema (2018) on judicial overreach, and Malik (2001) on recurring political stalemates help frame this analysis. The paper further evaluates the political roles of Maryam Nawaz and Shehbaz Sharif, who emerged as central figures in ensuring party cohesion, electoral relevance, and narrative control during a turbulent period. The research concludes that despite institutional pressures and leadership disruption, PML-N demonstrated resilience, reorganized effectively, and eventually restored Nawaz Sharif as party president in 2024.

Introduction

The disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in July 2017 was a watershed moment in contemporary Pakistani politics. Declared ineligible under Articles 62 and 63 of the Constitution over undeclared assets, Sharif's removal had immediate and long-term impacts on PML-N. The Supreme Court further ruled that disqualified individuals could not head political parties, leaving PML-N organizationally paralyzed.

This study examines the political and institutional aftermath of the disqualification, focusing on PML-N's internal reorganization, strategic adjustments, leadership restructuring, and electoral performance. The paper also integrates scholarly analyses on judicial activism and civil–military relations in Pakistan to situate the crisis within the broader political system. Additionally, it provides detailed assessments of Maryam Nawaz's political mobilization and Shehbaz Sharif's administrative and parliamentary leadership, both of which were pivotal in sustaining PML-N during a period of institutional confrontation.

Contextual Background: The Disqualification and its Political Outcomes

The Supreme Court verdict that removed Nawaz Sharif from office also stripped him of party leadership,

dissolving PML-N's decision-making bodies. This structural blow threatened party stability, especially with upcoming elections.

However, PML-N responded more cohesively than expected. Shehbaz Sharif was appointed interim president, while Nawaz Sharif retained symbolic leadership. The party adopted a narrative of political victimization, arguing that the verdict reflected judicial activism and undue establishment influence.

Judicial Activism in Pakistan: Implications for PML-N.

According to Jatoi, Mustafa, and Kataria (2022), the Saqib Nisar era witnessed unprecedented judicial assertiveness, where the judiciary frequently intervened in executive functions. They argue that this activism blurred constitutional boundaries and intensified political tensions.

Nawaz Sharif's disqualification occurred within this judicial climate, making PML-N's political struggle not just electoral but also institutional. This perspective highlights how judicial behavior shaped political realities, influencing PML-N's narrative strategy and public discourse on democracy.

Historical Patterns of Democratic Disruption

Malik (2001) identifies recurring patterns of political stalemate, military influence, and institutional confrontation in Pakistan's history. Although written earlier, these insights apply to later events, including Nawaz Sharif's disqualification.

The pattern is consistent: elected leaders face interruptions, judicial interventions, or institutional resistance. PML-N's post-2017 crisis fits this model, illustrating how structural constraints continue to challenge democratic continuity.

Judicial Overreach and Democratic Concerns: Scholarly Interpretation

Cheema (2018) directly connects Nawaz Sharif's disqualification to judicial overreach. He argues that expansive interpretation of Articles 62 and 63 allowed the judiciary to influence political outcomes, raising concerns about separation of powers and military-judiciary alliance. This scholarly view reinforces PML-N's narrative that the verdict was politically motivated, affecting the party's position in public opinion and shaping its electoral messaging.

Internal Reorganization of PML-N After 2017

PML-N brought immediate structural reforms to maintain functionality:

1. Restoration of Internal Committees

The party reconstituted its Central Working Committee (CWC), parliamentary board, and provincial bodies.

2. Narrative and Media Strategy

PML-N adopted a strong anti-judicial-activism stance, framing Nawaz as a victim of institutional unfairness—a narrative that resonated with its core base.

3. Preservation of Unity

Despite leadership uncertainty, PML-N avoided fragmentation. Senior leaders stayed loyal, unlike earlier splits in the party's history.

The Role of Maryam Nawaz: Political Mobilization and Narrative Construction

Maryam Nawaz emerged as one of the most influential political actors after the disqualification.

Public Mobilization

She led massive political rallies across Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, energizing the voter base. Her speeches emphasized judicial overreach, civilian supremacy, and Nawaz Sharif's victimhood.

Digital Leadership

Maryam modernized the party's media strategy, using social media to shape narratives, counter opponents, and mobilize youth—something PML-N had previously lacked.

Symbolic Continuity

As Nawaz's successor in political symbolism, she preserved PML-N's emotional connection with its supporters.

Electoral Impact

During by-elections in NA-75, NA-133, and Punjab constituencies, her active participation contributed to PML-N victories, demonstrating her growing influence within the party.

Maryam's performance ensured political survival at a time when PML-N faced existential threats.

The Role of Shehbaz Sharif: Administrative Stability and Parliamentary Leadership

While Maryam represented narrative strength, Shehbaz Sharif provided administrative and parliamentary stability.

Party Presidency

As interim president, Shehbaz maintained discipline, prevented factionalism, and kept the party functioning legally and organizationally.

Coalition Leadership (2022–2023)

As Prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif led a challenging coalition government amidst economic crisis. His governance was marked by:

*Diplomatic re-engagement with allies

*Attempts to stabilize the economy

*Improved civil–military coordination

Though criticized for inflation, he restored relative administrative order. Election Strategy Shehbaz managed candidate selection, provincial coordination, and party meetings during a politically volatile period.

Moderation and Institutional Balance

His moderate political style helped prevent confrontations that could have caused further party fragmentation.

Shehbaz's contributions ensured organizational survival while Maryam mobilized the public, creating a dual leadership model essential for PML-N's resilience.

Electoral Resilience and Return of Nawaz Sharif

Despite setbacks:

PML-N remained Punjab's largest party. By-elections showed strong support.

Legal relief allowed Nawaz Sharif to return in 2023.

In 2024, Nawaz was re-elected unopposed as PML-N president.

This re-election symbolized political rehabilitation and internal stability after years of judicial and political pressure.

Conclusion

The disqualification of Nawaz Sharif in 2017 deeply affected PML-N, yet the party demonstrated remarkable resilience. Scholarly perspectives reveal that the verdict occurred amid heightened judicial activism and historical patterns of institutional imbalance. In response, PML-N reorganized internally, strengthened its narrative, and relied on the complementary leadership of Maryam Nawaz and Shehbaz Sharif. Maryam kept the party alive in the streets and public imagination, while Shehbaz preserved administrative stability and political structure. Together, they ensured PML-N survived one of its greatest crises. Nawaz Sharif's return to party leadership in 2024 reflects not only personal rehabilitation but the party's long-term endurance. The PML-N experience demonstrates both the fragility and resilience of democratic politics in Pakistan.

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