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Panama Papers Challenging Pakistani Prime Minister

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The six-member Joint Investigation Team (JIT) that probed Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif family's business dealings in its 10-volume report submitted to the Supreme Court on July 10 recommended that a corruption case should be filed against Sharif and his sons Hassan Nawaz and Hussain Nawaz, as well as daughter Maryam Nawaz, under the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) ordinance 1999.

The leaks in April 2016 revealed that three of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's children owned offshore companies and assets not shown on his family's wealth statement. The JIT investigated Sharif's daughter Maryam Nawaz at the Federal Judicial Academy (FJA) in Islamabad set up by the Pakistan's Supreme Court. The JIT said that Maryam Nawaz, her brothers Hussain and Hassan Nawaz as well as her husband Captain Mohammad Safdar, had signed false documents to mislead the Supreme Court. Maryam claimed to be "trustee not the owner" – which was denied by JIT saying that she was the real and ultimate beneficial owner of the Avenfield apartments. It said that the font used in documents submitted by Maryam Nawaz suggested that the 2006 declarations were fake and called it a federal crime. Sharif's brother and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif strongly objected to Maryam's summoning. "There is no moral justification of the JIT decision to summon the daughter of the prime minister," he is cited as saying.

The case was first highlighted in 1996 by a UK newspaper, which alleged that Sharif laundered money to buy the apartments in London's expensive Park Lane area. A case was registered against him but was shelved when he came back to power in 1997.

Moreover, in April last year, the prime minister found himself in a precarious position following the "revelations" made by the famed Panama Papers. Leaked documents showed that three of Sharif's children had links with offshore companies that owned properties in London. Sharif denies any wrongdoing.

The Pakistani Prime Minister called the leaks the work of people targeting him and his family for their political aims. In an address to the nation on 5 April 2016, he said those "who use ill-gotten wealth don't keep assets in their own names". Sharif and his family have denied wrongdoing. In November, they told the Supreme Court that their London property was bought through investments in companies owned by the Qatari ruling family.

The case harmed PML-N in two ways. First, it triggered a strong sense of mistrust among Pakistani nation and led to controversial issues. The graph of discontent heightened tremendously and the air of acrimony is likely to continue unabated especially with the Pakistani media pursuing the issue seriously.

Second, the opposition parties, which seek to participate in Pakistan's future election, are capitalizing on the issue and deem it a ripe time to win the public support. Therefore, all major opposition political parties have demanded Sharif step down and stay away from power until his name was cleared. Pakistan People's Party (PPP) chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari called on Nawaz Sharif to step down, until an inquiry into the money laundering allegations levelled at his family are completed. "As long as the investigations into the Panama leaks are ongoing, you should resign. You can resume when you are absolved of the charges," he said, reminding Sharif of advice he had imparted for the former Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani when the latter was facing multiple charges in court. Moreover, With the Panama leaks hitting the headlines, the government came under pressure from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) which was founded in 1996 by former national cricket captain Imran Khan who demanded Sharif's resignation. In brief, many opposition leaders, including former President Asif Zardari, have suggested Sharif should resign as a fair investigation is not possible if he remained in power. However, Sharif said in response to the demands that his PML-N party had bagged more votes than the opposition parties combined. "The people of Pakistan have elected me and only they can remove me from this post," he said. Similarly, the court stopped short of removing Sharif from public office. Instead, it ordered investigators drawn from civilian investigation agencies and military intelligence services to examine the money trail, look at records where available and obtain testimony from key players.

Besides marring Sharif's reputation, the case has brought serious trouble for him and his political position is at great stake since political figures turned against him. Indeed, now Sharif is seeking to do everything in his power to survive the issue until the 2018 election. But it seems that there is a faint chance for survival in this terrible ordeal.

