

JUDGEMENT LEAVES NAWAZ SHARIF FREE TO PREPARE FOR ELECTIONS.

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For months Pakistanis have been engrossed in a case being heard in the supreme court that could have led to the dismissal of the prime minister on charges of corruption. But on Thursday, the verdict came that there was insufficient evidence to remove Nawaz Sharif from office. The court did, however, order further investigation into the wealth of his two sons.

While the verdict – on which the judges were split with three in favour and two dissenting – does not clear Mr. Sharif, it means that he will be free to run for a second term in elections next year, with time to rethink his strategy in the face of the economic and political problems confronting his government, tensions with the army and public frustration with widespread corruption within the political elite.

The judgment now calls for a joint investigative team to be established, made up of the country's military and civilian intelligence agencies, to investigate the money trail of how Mr. Sharif's sons, Hussain and Hassan, were able to fund their businesses in London and the Gulf states. The JIT will have 60 days to present its report.

Last year, three senior opposition politicians, including the former cricketer Imran Khan, petitioned the court to disqualify Mr. Sharif as prime minister, for allegedly making misstatements to parliament regarding investments made by his children in offshore companies. They hoped a guilty plea would help them topple the government and force early elections to be held.

The charges came after the Panama Papers leaks disclosed by the law firm Mossack Fonseca linked many prominent people around the world with secret offshore companies and funds. The Panama Papers did not name the prime minister, but appeared to show that his daughter and two sons owned offshore holding companies registered in the British Virgin Islands, which were then used to buy properties in London. Mr. Sharif asked the court to set up a judicial commission to which he and his children presented account details of three generations of his family.

There is little doubt that the court did not have the evidence to find Mr. Sharif guilty, nor did it want to plunge the country into greater political mayhem. The court case had become much more than just a corruption allegation against the prime minister, as the opposition mounted protests in the streets and parliament demanded that the political system be cleansed of corruption.

There were widespread fears that the army may be dragged into the conflict while governance by the Sharif administration has appeared to be paralysed for months. Services are collapsing: in the past few weeks with temperatures in many areas hitting 47 degrees there has been no electricity for 18 hours a day in rural areas and 12 in urban areas.

The army has stayed away but Mr. Sharif's competence has been repeatedly questioned. The court's decision to include two military intelligence agencies in the JIT – Military Intelligence (or MI) and the Interservices Intelligence or ISI – will not please the Sharif camp, as the prime minister's relations with the army are tense.

This year, Pakistanis have been shocked by several horrendous incidents involving Islamist extremists. After resisting the military's requests to be given greater control over curbing terrorism, Mr. Sharif has allowed the army to take over law and order from the civilian controlled police and it is taking a tougher line than the seemingly helpless government. On Tuesday the army chief General Qamar Bajwa signed the execution order for 30 alleged terrorists.

As a result of the Supreme Court verdict Mr. Sharif is not in the clear, but he at least has time to take a breather before the elections, and to address the accusations of incompetence and corruption that have been heaped on his family and inner team of ministers.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, including Pakistan on the Brink. Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2017.