

Pakistan can survive the chaos of Nawaz Sharif's ousting.

THE FINANCIAL TIMES. July 30 2017

Ahmed Rashid

Pakistan can survive the chaos of Nawaz Sharif's ousting The country can benefit if the military lets the judiciary deal with corruption Ahmed Rashid.

He has been elected Pakistan prime minister three times, twice elected chief minister of Punjab and now he has been ignominiously disqualified from seeking any political office ever again. The verdict of Pakistan's supreme court on Nawaz Sharif's alleged corruption threatens to plunge Pakistan into political chaos.

Moreover, the country's most powerful and coherent political force – the military – will now be in a position to take even firmer control of national security and foreign policy. The army will face little interference from what will undoubtedly be a weak interim civilian government in charge until general elections are held next year.

The verdict means Mr Sharif will have to give up his seat in parliament and will face a further criminal trial for corruption, after he was unable to account for flats his family bought overlooking London's Hyde Park and failed to disclose his role in a Dubai based company. This follows the disclosure of off shore companies and properties held by the Sharif family and other Pakistani politicians in the Panama papers leak last year.

The original five-member bench of Pakistan's Supreme Court which heard the Panama Papers case had given a split verdict on April 20, which led to the formation of a joint investigative team (JIT) made up of all military and civilian intelligence agencies. The JIT report was then submitted to the Supreme Court on which Friday's judgment was based.

Also facing criminal charges for corruption are Mr. Sharif's two sons Hussain and Hassan Nawaz, his daughter Maryam and her husband Muhammad Safdar Awan. Cases are also ongoing against his brother Shabaz Sharif, who is currently chief minister of Punjab and has been named the next PM by Mr. Sharif.

Also facing criminal charges is the now-former finance minister and Sharif relative Ishaq Dar. To Mr. Sharif's supporters, it looks as if the court and those supporting its enhanced role want the Sharif family destroyed politically.

The courts could prevent all Pakistan's major politicians from playing any role in the elections Family has meant everything to Mr. Sharif. He has been constantly criticised by his own party, the Pakistan Muslim League (PML), for relying more on family members than party members. As a consequence, many seasoned politicians in the PML are unlikely to stand by Sharif and will seek out other political patrons.

Wider chaos is likely to follow. A number of leading opposition politicians – including Imran Khan, the former cricketer and leader of the Movement for Justice, and Asif Ali Zardari, husband of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and head of her Pakistan People's party – also face corruption and money laundering charges.

In the next six months the courts could prevent all of the country's major politicians from playing any role in the elections. Although bringing in new faces and new leaders is a good idea, the uncertainty that it would create in a deeply conservative country could lead to an economic downturn and political turmoil. No elected prime minister in Pakistan has ever completed a full term in office – a sad reflection on democracy in a country that was founded on the principle of one person, one vote.

The fact that rich politicians are finally feeling the heat from corruption probes has pleased many middle-class voters. But it has made little impact on the poor majority in the countryside for whom corruption is an accepted part of life. Consequently, it is unlikely that there will be street protests or any mobilisation in support of Mr. Sharif.

However, there is also a strong feeling in some sections of the middle class that Mr. Sharif should have been allowed to complete his term before being barred or that early elections should have been called. They also fear overt manipulation of the political scene by the military.

Pakistan has known little political stability since its birth in 1947. And it appears that the judiciary will now have its hands full cleansing the Augean stables. As long as that is left to the judges, and the military does not try to turn the situation to its own ends, Pakistan may benefit in the long term.