

Pakistan's Sharif Faces Major Tests as Prime Minister



From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is.

Hello, I'm Steve Ember.

Today we go to Pakistan, where Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif faces major tests as he takes command of a new government...and then to Libya, where the national legislature has decided to remove officials who worked in the government of former leader Moammar Gadhafi.

We begin in Pakistan, where the Pakistan Muslim League recently won the largest number of seats in Pakistan's National Assembly elections. The head of the party, Nawaz Sharif, has already served two times as prime minister. He now faces major tests as he takes command of the new government.

Some political observers say the new government will have to deal with serious financial problems. Waseem Sajjad is a former chairman of the Pakistani Senate. He says a deepening energy crisis will be a major worry for the government when temperatures start to rise. Extreme heat is predicted in the coming weeks.

"And the people would expect the government to deliver. They will give them some time. But I don't think the people will give too much time to the new government to resolve this issue."

Nawaz Sharif comes from a business family. The business community praised policies that he proposed during his earlier terms to help the nation's economy. His party officials say they want to take control quickly so that they can work hard on the economy.

Militant attacks have killed thousands of Pakistanis in recent years. The Pakistan Muslim League has supported calls for talks with the Pakistani Taliban as a way to end the problem of militancy.

Some people hope the policies of Nawaz Sharif will bring peace. But others worry about a possible rise in Islamic extremism.

Human rights activist Tahira Abdullah remembers Mr. Sharif's efforts to amend the constitution just before the military ousted him as prime minister in 1999. He supported an amendment to establish Sharia or Islamic law. Ms. Abdullah says the measure would have moved the country further toward an Islamist constitution and an Islamist government.

Mushahid Hussain is chairman of Pakistan's Senate Committee on Defense. Mr. Hussain notes that a large number of people voted in the May eleventh election. He says this shows critics in Pakistan and overseas that Pakistanis oppose religious extremism. He also praised Pakistanis' sense of democracy.

"I think the biggest message is: no to terrorism, no to militancy, no to extremism and a resounding yes to the power of the ballot over the bullet. And I think it shows that the Pakistani society at its core has a deeply democratic ethos."

Other observers say Pakistani relations with India are likely to improve under Nawaz Sharif. The two nations have fought three wars -- and almost fought a fourth war earlier this year. The issue was clashes between their militaries along the disputed border in Kashmir. But the dispute became a war of words instead of bullets.

Mr. Sharif has attempted in the past to improve his nation's ties with India. And recently, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh invited him to India. Mr. Singh says he hopes to make way for a better atmosphere between the two.

Nawaz Sharif began a peace process with India in 1999. But the suspicious relations between the countries intensified again. Now the Pakistani leader says that he wants to return to the remains of that peace process.

Lalit Mansingh is a former Indian foreign secretary. He praises Nawaz Sharif as, in his words, "the best bet for India."

"He is somebody with whom we have a certain degree of comfort because India has dealt with him, has had good results with negotiations when he was in power. And therefore it is better to deal with him than deal with somebody new and inexperienced."

Indian officials hope for good signs from Pakistan in the coming months. For a start, the Indian government wants Pakistan to increase economic ties. India also wants a more liberal trading policy.

Pakistan has not yet acted on a promise to give India Most Favored Nation trading status. Many people now hope that will happen with Nawaz Sharif returning as prime minister.

Mr. Sharif has described his nation's relations with the United States as good. But America's use of drones to attack suspected militants angers many Pakistanis.

Nawaz Sharif promised his supporters during the election campaign that he will seek an immediate end to the American program.

You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

Libyan Legislature Removes Gadhafi Era Officials

Libya's national legislature recently decided to remove officials who worked in the government of former leader Moammar Gadhafi. A noted Islamist politician says ousting them from office will help rebuild the country. But as we hear from Kelly Jean Kelly, some Libyans are not so sure.

Reaction is growing after the General National Congress approved a law dismissing officials who worked for the Gadhafi government. The measure is known as the political isolation law. Some Libyans worry that it will add to loss of skills in government and harm the country's progress. There is also concern that the congress surrendered to the wishes of militiamen, who demanded passage of the law.

The militiamen have been blocking ministry offices and demanding the ouster of Libya's Prime Minister, Ali Zeidan.

Rim Jabril, an artist, has been joining small anti-militia protests. She says Libya will not have enough people with experience to govern the country.

"I am with the political isolation in principle but I am against the method they are going with, because the way they are going with it, I think it will isolate more people than we can afford."

Nizar Kawan is a Congress member from the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party. He says the isolation law is a way to clean up the government. He notes that other countries have followed similar courses after oppression or conflict.

It is not clear how the political isolation law will be enforced. A committee is expected to oversee its enactment. And it is hard to know how many people will be banned from public office or government employment for the next 10 years.

Politician Mahmoud Jibril was a planning minister in the Gadhafi government. He now leads a moderate political coalition. He predicts that 500,000 Libyans could lose their positions under the law. He says it is unfair because he and others who had worked for Moammar Gadhafi were also important in plotting to end his rule.

But businessman and militia supporter Farag Alhamadi says there are many people ready to take the place of those who are dismissed. He says Libya is a young nation, and he suggests using young people to fill government jobs.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And that's our program for today. For the latest world news, join us at the top of the hour Universal Time for VOA News on radio and here on our web site. I'm Steve Ember. Thanks for joining us.