

The Two Ministries of Nawaz Sharif: Scandals, Political Conflicts, and Military

Introduction:

Political Rise of Nawaz Sharif

After the dismissal of Benazir Bhutto's first government in 1990, Nawaz Sharif emerged as the new face of Pakistan's democratic leadership. Supported by the **Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI)** — a coalition believed to have backing from the military and intelligence establishment — Nawaz Sharif became Prime Minister for the first time. His leadership represented the growing influence of the **business and industrial elite**, contrasting with the populist roots of Benazir Bhutto's PPP.

During the 1990s, Nawaz Sharif's governments focused on economic liberalization, privatization, and infrastructural development. However, his tenure also witnessed a series of major corruption scandals, political crises, and ultimately, confrontation with the military establishment that resulted in his overthrow in 1999 by General Pervez Musharraf.

Nawaz Sharif's First Ministry (1990–1993)

Nawaz Sharif's first term began in November 1990 after winning the general elections. His government emphasized **economic reforms**, privatization of state enterprises, and encouragement of private sector investment. He introduced policies aimed at reducing state control and promoting industrial growth. However, despite economic promises, his administration quickly became associated with corruption, favoritism, and the misuse of authority.

The **Gulf War of 1991** and internal sectarian unrest affected Pakistan's foreign and domestic stability. Relations with the President, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, began to sour over power distribution and control of state institutions. Although the government initially appeared stable, political tensions were growing behind the scenes between the Prime Minister and the Presidency.

Major Corruption Scandals: BCCI and Co-operative Scandal

a. The BCCI Scandal

The **Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI)** scandal was one of the most significant financial controversies of the early 1990s. The BCCI collapsed in 1991 after being accused internationally of money laundering, illegal funding, and corruption. In Pakistan, the scandal revealed the involvement of powerful political and business figures, including alleged links to ruling elites. Although Nawaz Sharif's direct involvement was debated, his government faced severe criticism for failing to ensure accountability and financial transparency.

b. The Co-operative Scandal

Another major financial disaster during his first tenure was the **Co-operative Societies Scandal** (1992–93). Thousands of depositors across Punjab lost their savings when politically connected cooperative societies collapsed due to mismanagement and corruption. Many of these societies had links to government officials and industrialists close to the ruling party. The scandal destroyed public trust in the financial system and damaged Nawaz Sharif's reputation as a promoter of economic reforms. It became a symbol of elite exploitation and financial irresponsibility in Pakistan's political system.

Kalashnikov Culture and Law-and-Order Deterioration

During Nawaz Sharif's first ministry, Pakistan witnessed the growing phenomenon of **Kalashnikov culture**, a term used to describe the widespread availability and use of automatic weapons, particularly AK-47 rifles. This culture originated from the Afghan War of the 1980s, when arms and militants flowed into Pakistan.

By the early 1990s, the proliferation of weapons led to an increase in **sectarian violence, tribal conflicts, and political assassinations**. Karachi and interior Sindh became hotspots of violence between political and ethnic groups. The government was accused of failing to implement effective law enforcement and allowing political patronage networks to protect armed groups. This environment of insecurity weakened governance and contributed to the erosion of state authority.

Conflict with President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and the 1993 Resignation

Relations between Nawaz Sharif and President Ghulam Ishaq Khan deteriorated rapidly after initial cooperation. Both leaders struggled for supremacy under the controversial **Article 58(2)(b)** of the Constitution, which allowed the President to dissolve the National Assembly. The President accused Nawaz Sharif of corruption, misuse of power, and poor governance, while the Prime Minister charged the President with conspiracies to weaken the democratic mandate.

In 1993, their confrontation reached a constitutional deadlock, leading to political chaos. The military, under General Waheed Kakar, intervened to mediate the crisis. As a result, both Nawaz Sharif and Ghulam Ishaq Khan **resigned from office** in July 1993 to restore political stability. Their departure paved the way for **fresh elections**, bringing Benazir Bhutto back to power later that year.

Nawaz Sharif's Second Ministry (1997–1999)

Nawaz Sharif returned to power in 1997 with an overwhelming parliamentary majority after Benazir Bhutto's second dismissal. His second government began with ambitious goals of constitutional reform, economic progress, and national unity. The **Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment** removed the President's power to dissolve Parliament under Article 58(2)(b), thereby strengthening the Prime Minister's office.

However, Nawaz Sharif's concentration of power soon led to accusations of authoritarianism. His government clashed with the **judiciary, media, and opposition parties**. While some economic progress was achieved through infrastructure projects and privatization drives, corruption and mismanagement continued to plague the administration. The Kargil War of 1999 and tensions with the military eventually led to his downfall.

Dispute Over the Chief Justice and Institutional Confrontation

One of the most significant events of Nawaz Sharif's second tenure was the **dispute with Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah**. The confrontation began when the judiciary challenged several executive actions of the Prime Minister. Nawaz Sharif attempted to exert control over judicial appointments and decisions, leading to a direct standoff with the Supreme Court.

In 1997, an unprecedented incident occurred when a mob of ruling party supporters stormed the Supreme Court building while contempt proceedings were being held against the Prime Minister. The judiciary's internal divisions and political manipulation weakened the court's independence. Eventually, Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah was removed, and a more compliant judiciary emerged. This incident became a turning point in Pakistan's institutional decline, showcasing executive dominance over constitutional bodies.

Overthrow by General Pervez Musharraf (1999)

The final phase of Nawaz Sharif's rule was marked by deteriorating relations with the military. The **Kargil conflict** in 1999, initiated under the supervision of General Pervez Musharraf, turned disastrous for Pakistan both militarily and diplomatically. The international backlash and domestic embarrassment deepened mistrust between the civilian and military leadership.

Nawaz Sharif's decision to **dismiss General Musharraf** as Army Chief in October 1999 while Musharraf was abroad returning from Sri Lanka triggered a military coup. The army seized power immediately, deposing Nawaz Sharif's government. He was arrested, charged with hijacking and treason, and later sent into exile in Saudi Arabia under an agreement brokered by foreign governments.

The coup ended another cycle of Pakistan's fragile democracy, demonstrating the persistent dominance of the military establishment over civilian governments.

Political Legacy and Evaluation

Nawaz Sharif's two ministries represent a critical period in Pakistan's political evolution. His early economic reforms modernized infrastructure and encouraged private enterprise, but corruption and political favoritism overshadowed these achievements. The scandals of the early 1990s — including the BCCI and Co-operative Society crises — damaged public confidence in democratic governance.

His confrontations with the President, judiciary, and ultimately the military revealed deep institutional imbalances within Pakistan's political system. Despite his eventual ouster, Nawaz Sharif's political resilience and repeated returns to power in later years demonstrated his lasting influence. His era (1990–1999) remains a reflection of both Pakistan's democratic ambitions and its recurring struggle against institutional instability and authoritarian tendencies.

Conclusion

The two ministries of Nawaz Sharif from **1990 to 1999** illustrate the complex interplay of democracy, corruption, and power politics in Pakistan's post-Zia era. His governments faced major financial scandals, political feuds, and institutional conflicts that weakened democratic consolidation. The eventual military coup of 1999 marked the end of civilian rule for nearly a decade. Yet, Nawaz Sharif's rise and fall highlight the continuous tension between elected authority and the entrenched power of the establishment — a defining feature of Pakistan's political history in the late 20th century.