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**The rise of Maryam Nawaz**

Whether one likes her or hates her, one cannot ignore the phenomenal rise of Maryam Nawaz on the political stage in Pakistan.

For her supporters, Maryam represents the hopes and aspirations of millions of Pakistanis across Pakistan. For her opponents, she is perhaps the most credible political opponent among those currently on the political stage. She has attained unprecedented success in a very short period – perhaps the first leader to make it this big on the national scene in a such a short period.

This phenomenal rise has not come without extreme hard work, dedication, high level of professionalism, personal sacrifices, commitment to the cause and above all passion for the country. Maryam Nawaz has also shown remarkable courage in the face of many challenges including threats and intimidation. Despite all challenges, she has remained steadfast and with each passing day has shown more resolve.

Maryam has been inclined towards active politics since 2012 or so but only as support for her father, Mian Nawaz Sharif, who was then aspiring to become the prime minister for the third time. She played a major role in Campaign 2013, ensuring a vibrant and effective social media network for the party. She also campaigned for her father’s constituency in Lahore during the 2013 campaign. She later successfully managed the campaign for her mother in 2017 after the disqualification of Mian Nawaz Sharif. This was far more challenging, considering the odds and the massive pre-poll rigging.

After Election 2013, Maryam’s potential as a savvy politician was beginning to be recognised. She had strong insight into politics and history – important ingredients for any rising politician. In addition, she consistently worked hard to better understand the complex nature of Pakistan’s economic challenges. She has always had outstanding communication skills both in Urdu and in English, something that helped her reach out to millions of Pakistanis. Which is why, within a short period, she has become a political star without whom no major political event of the opposition can take place.

As for the party in power, it is Maryam Nawaz who gets the maximum attention. Right from the PM down to government and party spokespersons, the party in power seems rattled by her rising popularity.

Maryam’s emergence as a political leader has to be seen in the context of Pakistan’s bitter political history since 2013. Dharna 2014 posed the first major challenge for Mian Nawaz Sharif as the PM in his third stint. Behind-the-scenes intrigues to oust him affected everyone in government and in the party; and Maryam was no exception. Much was made of the media cell which was set up during the dharna in September 2014 – although its only function was to manage the media strategy for the then party in power. Later she was unnecessarily dragged in controversies such as Dawn leaks and the Panama scandal even though she had nothing to do with these issues. The objective was to discredit former Nawaz Sharif – and Maryam became an easy target.

Following the Panama judgment, Mian Nawaz Sharif was disqualified for life. Later references were filed not only against him but also against Maryam Nawaz. She was not only given jail sentences but also disqualified from holding any public office. Interestingly, she had never held any public office. So, the question of misuse of office or kickback or commission never existed – and yet the punishment.

As was expected, the judgment was announced just a few weeks before Election 2018. At the time, Maryam Nawaz was in London along with her father, taking care of her mother who was in hospital facing serious medical conditions. Leaving her ailing mother virtually on the death bed, she returned to Pakistan with her father, knowing full well her fate in jail. Her decision to go to jail instead of opting for the comforts of London instantly won her praise from her supporters. Since then, she has faced innumerable hardships but never succumbed to pressure from those in power.

The disqualification of Mian Nawaz Sharif, electoral rigging during Election 2018, persecution of the PML-N leadership under the garb of accountability, muzzling of the media etc all provided Maryam Nawaz the perfect platform to for her politics of defiance and resistance – which is what she has come to symbolise. And that is why she has become a popular leader in the real sense. Raising the issue of civilian supremacy is not so easy in our country, especially when one is challenging the forces of the status quo, yet she has managed it brilliantly.

In recent months, Maryam Nawaz she has returned to active politics – travelling to places such as Gujranwala, Karachi, Quetta, Gilgit-Baltistan and Swat. She creates a sensation wherever she goes. The enthusiasm and love among supporters is almost impossible to define in words and can only be understood if one is present there.

Her opponents would surely want her to fade away from the political scene. Nothing has worked so far – including threats, NAB cases, references, disqualification, jail terms and media censorship. Each time any of the above has been thrown at her, Maryam has come out stronger, braver and more committed than ever before. By now, it should be clear to her opponents that the only way to fight her is in the political arena where the people of Pakistan can decide for themselves whether she comes up to their expectations or not.

The political future of Pakistan is uncertain in many ways but what is certain is the emergence of Maryam Nawaz as a serious candidate to lead the country into the future. Love her or hate her, Maryam Nawaz is here to stay. It would be better for her opponents if they started taking her more seriously than what has been the case so far.

The writer is the spokesperson for Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz, and former governor Sindh.

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