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The Dictators Are Returning

An Open Letter to the People of Pakistan

From

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Too infrequently have political leaders of Pakistan taken the nation into confidence.

Pakistan has entered a dark and dangerous hour. As the leader of the opposition, it is my duty to you, to the constitution, and to my own conscience to speak out about the perils we face.

Under the guise of foreign and domestic threats of his own making, Nawaz is destroying our beloved nation. Most tragically, he is destroying your hopes and dreams for prosperous and secure lives.

Since late May of 1998, the Nawaz regime has systematically dismantled our democracy, destroyed our economy and sullied Pakistan's good name throughout the world.

Recent actions by the Nawaz regime, including intimidation of the free press, direct confrontation with the Supreme Court by instituting military courts throughout the country, disbanding of the women's family courts and police stations, and freezing foreign currency accounts are reprehensible steps. Taken together, they echo repressive steps from throughout history by the darkest and most dangerous of dictators.

You, the people of Pakistan, sacrificed mightily during the Zia years to support a democratic and pluralistic society. You have continually sought — through the ballot box — the creation of a tolerant, free and prosperous nation. You have asked for governmental management that is responsive, fair and efficient. You have told the political leaders that you want opportunity, better education and the chance to improve your lives.

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On all of these accounts the Nawaz Government has failed you. Pakistan's prosperity and position in the world has never been under a darker cloud than now.

It is not true that our current economic crisis is due to the nuclear crisis. Rather, the Nawaz regime used the nuclear crisis to cover their mis-management and plundering of your hard-earned foreign currency accounts. Ask, people of Pakistan, where are your \$11 billion dollars in foreign currency, given in trust to the nation? They are not frozen in defence of New Delhi. They have been stolen by a corrupt and inept regime in Islamabad.

Second, Nawaz's decision to establish military courts throughout the country is in direct confrontation with the Supreme Court and a free and impartial judiciary. When Nawaz assumed the high office of the Prime Ministership, he swore to uphold the constitution and the sanctity of the rule of law. Attacking, mocking and cajoling the courts are acts of desperate men who cannot abide by the rule of law. Attacking and intimidating courts are steps taken by dictators, and are taken without mercy or compassion for the people of our nation.

Third, no democracy can long exist without a vibrant and independent press. Many in Pakistan, and I personally, have been proud of the progress achieved over the last decade to strengthen this fundamental tradition so critical to the long-term health of any democracy.

As you know, the Jang Group has been under continued and worsening intimidation by the Nawaz regime, including; threats, freezing of accounts, the unlawful withholding of newsprint and wire-tapping. Other free and independent media nation-wide are also under intense pressure by the Nawaz regime to silence their critical reporting of the Nawaz regime.

It is no coincidence that each abuse of power against Pakistan's free press by the Nawaz regime directly followed publication of articles critical of the Prime Minister and his family.

Silencing an independent and critical press is often the goal of those in power whose actions and deeds cannot withstand the light of day.

Nawaz is pursuing an unlawful reign of terror against Pakistan's independent press, which, if left unchecked, will destroy the foundations of our society.

Citizens of Pakistan, there are times in a nation's life when the forces of darkness must be challenged, no matter the costs. Pakistan is now at such a time.

And, as the Nawaz regime attacks our free press, constitutes military courts throughout the whole country, and threatens all critics with brute force, I must ask you whether your lives are better now than under the PPP governments.

Has the Nawaz regime, with all its promises of clean government, proven itself to be clean and fair?

Are you more financially secure, your children healthier, and your family better off than before?

Have your income and your savings grown since Nawaz came to power?

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Do you have access to clean water, safe food, electricity, health care and affordable housing?

Achieving a better life for all citizens must be the goal of any trusted and honourable government. We do not have that with Nawaz. Just the opposite, we have a regime ignoring the real and pressing needs of the people, all in the name of personal enrichment of the Sharif family and unabashed hunger for power.

These are the acts of a dictator. These are the acts of tyranny. These are acts leading to darkness and despair for our country.

Pakistan can not prosper under Nawaz's repression, mis-governance and corruption. My fellow Pakistanis, under Nawaz's brutal hand, our country is being taken backward, not forward.

It is time for those who love our country, for those who struggle for tolerance, freedom and prosperity for all citizens, to take a stand, to tell Nawaz that he has gone too far, and that the people of Pakistan will not tolerate a return to dictatorship, no matter the cost.

Taking you, the people of Pakistan, into confidence, you must know that those of us in Opposition can no longer extend a hand of co-operation and trust to the Nawaz regime. We have offered, time and again since his last election, to work in a non-partisan manner in addressing the deep and pervasive ills of our society.

But in the face of our highest intentions, our good will to help our country have been rebuffed, time and again, by Nawaz.

Others and I are convinced that the Nawaz regime is not and cannot lead Pakistan into a bright future. The Nawaz regime can only threaten, intimidate and destroy the fruits of your hard work and daily personal sacrifices.

But people of Pakistan; during these dark days do not lose your trust in democracy. I urge you to continue to fight for a government that upholds your wishes, a government that fights to improve your lives, and a government that is fair, just and free of autocracy.

People of Pakistan, I urge you to support a free press, and to continue to press Nawaz to answer for your \$11 billion dollars now mysteriously unaccounted for after his freeze of the foreign currency accounts. And to ask for an account of those who spirited away foreign currency on the night of its freezing.

People of Pakistan, I urge you to demand fresh polls, to withdraw your support for the Nawaz regime, and to demand an impartial, free and fair election.

Those leaders who have engendered the lasting trust of the people are those who earned that trust by giving the same to the people they would lead. It is time that you, the people of Pakistan, demand this from your leadership.

And again, a reformed PPP having reflected on how to improve its performance stands ready to right the injuries Nawaz has wrought our nation, our families and our future.

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