

# NO ENTRY

**By deporting Sharif back to Jeddah, Musharraf punctured his comeback bid but in doing so embarked on a perilous confrontational approach.**

■ **By Hasan Zaidi in Karachi**

It had been billed as the “return of the prodigal”, “history in the making”, and even “the beginning of the revolution”. A million-strong crowd was to have received exiled former premier Nawaz Sharif at the Islamabad airport, his arrival marking a triumphant return to his country after seven-and-a-half years in political wilderness. It was to be the last nail in the coffin of President General Pervez Musharraf’s military-led regime and the birth of a people’s movement for democracy. Of course, none of this actually happened.

As it turned out, Sharif’s homecoming on September 10 was a damp squib and played more like a farce from the beginning to the end. If anything, it only demonstrated how far Pakistan’s politicians still had to go for their words to match their deeds. Or their hopes to match the bitter realities on the ground.

Sharif stayed on Pakistani soil for barely three and a half hours after his Pakistan International Airlines flight touched down at Islamabad airport. With hopes of a massive reception vapourising and his ragtag supporters unable to break a fierce five-kilometre government cordon around the airport or get through to their leader—cell phones had been jammed around the airport—the befuddled and isolated former prime minister was soon bundled back into a plane bound for Jeddah, beginning what is likely to be another three-year stint in the Saudi kingdom. And given the Saudi royalty’s annoyance at his violation of an agreement they had brokered and guaranteed, his exile this time round will, in all probability, be considerably harsher than the last time.

In retrospect, the signs had been there all along that things would not go quite the way Sharif had been hoping for. He had been living in comfortable exile for the past two years in London, since being allowed to leave

**A FARCE:** Sharif landed at the Islamabad airport only to be packed off again



Saudi Arabia, where he had been in exile since 2000 under a—until recently—secret agreement. The agreement had allowed him, in effect, to escape a life-term prison sentence for “hijacking” and endangering an airborne commercial airliner—carrying General Musharraf whom he had attempted to sack as army chief—in return for a promise to stay away from the country and its politics for 10 years. He had received an unexpected shot in the arm from a Supreme Court judgment in August this year that affirmed his fundamental right as a Pakistani citizen to return to his country, despite the Pakistani Government’s plea that this would violate the terms of the agreement he had signed.

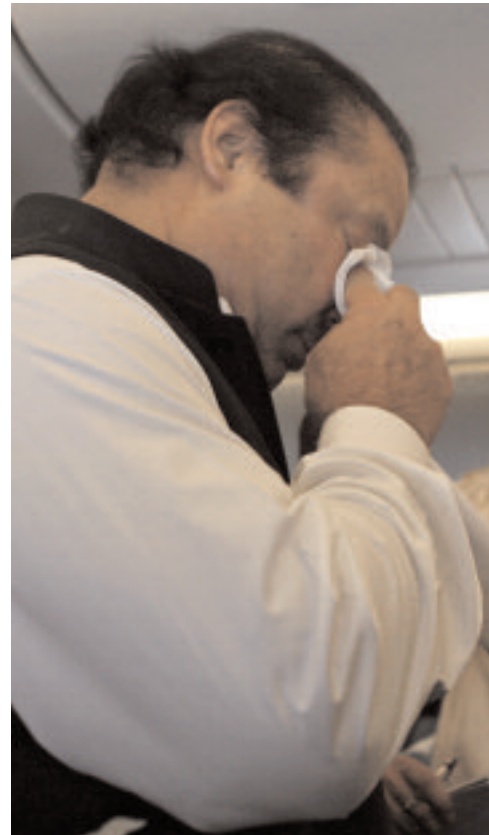
Buoyed by the new-found assertiveness of the Supreme Court, Sharif had probably under-estimated General Musharraf’s ability and resolve to keep him away. It seems he had also been goaded by his supporters within Pakistan to take the plunge, without much planning. From eye-witness accounts, Sharif and supporters

But even before he took off from Heathrow, there had been ominous signs of the Pakistani Government’s intentions. Sharif had been stunned to see on television the images of a most unusual press conference that took place in Islamabad a day before his departure from London. Saudi intelligence chief Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz had landed in the Pakistani capital along with Saad Hariri—the son of the assassinated former Lebanese premier and business tycoon Rafik Hariri whom Sharif was close to—and after meeting General Musharraf, had held a press conference on the lawns of the President’s camp office.

In it, the two Arab visitors had shown the press an agreement signed by Sharif and his brother Shahbaz—former chief minister of Punjab—with Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz and affirmed that Hariri had played a role in brokering it. Even more ominously, they had tersely warned Sharif to honour it.

The Sharif brothers—who until then had flat out denied any such

REUTERS



AP



**DEFIANT: Musharraf (R) stands firm as Sharif leaves in tears**

The end result of these events, however, is that Sharif is ostensibly out of Musharraf’s hair for the foreseeable future. And while the Government’s actions have been met with widespread condemnation, the expected street protests have failed to materialise. Even the call for protests on September 11—given by the All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM) formed recently in London by Sharif comprising most Opposition parties other than Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)—was a tepid affair.

Analysts believe part of the reason for the lukewarm political response to Sharif’s return—only a couple of thousand activists were arrested trying to get to the airport—may have had to do with the other parties within the APDM not wanting to bolster Sharif’s position before the general elections due within the next few months.

But, assuming that the assessment of a rise in Sharif’s popularity is correct, part of the lukewarm response was also due to the lack of organisational skills of his own party

cadres. This is a damning indictment of Pakistani politicians, who are riding more on the back of popular support for the lawyers’ movement against Musharraf than on their own political work.

Whatever the case may be, Sharif’s removal from the scene gives more space to Bhutto to finalise a deal with Musharraf that would allow the General to remain in power. Musharraf may have got some breathing space for now but he is not out of the woods yet. Should such a deal fail, he may be left with very few options. He will not have the requisite votes to bring about a constitutional amendment allowing him to be re-elected president from the current Parliament, and relying on a new parliament after general elections may be too big a gamble to take.

An adverse judgment from the Supreme Court regarding Sharif’s deportation could be the last straw. In such a stand-off between the Presidency and the judiciary, imposing martial law may be the only option for the army. Where that takes Pakistan is anybody’s guess. ■

**AN ADVERSE JUDGMENT FROM THE SUPREME COURT REGARDING THE DEPORTATION COULD BE THE LAST STRAW**

had chalked out no action plan as to what he would do once he landed back in Pakistan. He had banked heavily on the scores of journalists accompanying him to shield him even as his party organised a ‘spectacle’ to embarrass the Musharraf Government for the world media.

Optimistically, Sharif had been led to believe that the worst the Government would do was arrest him, turning him into a political martyr. The Government did go through the whole charade of serving arrest warrants on him inside the airport’s VIP lounge, on charges of money laundering related to one of his business concerns. “But the ruthless efficiency with which he was eventually deported had a kind of brutal choreography to it,” says Mohammed Hanif, the head of BBC’s South Asian service. “The commandos around him suddenly formed a ring around him and despite the efforts of his supporters to intervene, simply whisked him away,” says Hanif. According to his family, Sharif may have been led to believe he was being taken to jail in Karachi or Quetta.

agreement and had even discounted an earlier official Saudi statement referring to it as concocted—were reduced to ruing “Musharraf’s attempts to drag a brotherly Islamic country into Pakistan’s internal affairs”. Eventually, Sharif held a press conference in London on September 8 in which he admitted the existence of the agreement, but bizarrely claimed that while he had signed the 10-year promise, he had been told by Hariri that it “should be considered as only for five years”. Government spokespersons in Islamabad gleefully ridiculed this late admission.

The Sharif brothers obviously did consider the worst case scenario, despite their optimism that the Pakistan Government would not blatantly go against the Supreme Court judgment. At the last minute before boarding the flight in London, Sharif announced that Shahbaz would stay back in the UK “to manage party affairs” in case something happened to him. Arrest warrants for Shahbaz had already been issued earlier in the week by an anti-terrorism court in Lahore in a

case accusing him of extra-judicial killings while he was chief minister.

For its part, the Pakistani Government has been sticking to its stand that Sharif was allowed back into the country as per the Supreme Court ruling but was presented with a choice upon his arrival—to return to Saudi Arabia under the old agreement or face arrest and jail. According to information minister Mohammad Ali Durrani, he chose the former. “All the legal formalities were complied with,” said Durrani. Sharif’s party, the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), has filed a contempt of court petition in the Supreme Court challenging this interpretation of events and it remains to be seen how the Government will defend itself.

While most people do not believe the Government’s line, it may be difficult to prove otherwise with Sharif sequestered away in Jeddah. The Government could also claim that having received an official request for extradition from a strategically important friendly state, it had to comply for reasons of national security and that Sharif was no longer in its jurisdiction.