

# How Nawaz Sharif Was Brought Down by the “Thief” Narrative

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**Abstract:** This article examines the political downfall of former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif through the lens of political branding and narrative construction. While legal rulings and corruption investigations provided the formal grounds for his disqualification, it was the persistent framing of Sharif as a “thief” (chor) that ultimately eroded his credibility and political standing. Drawing on the Panama Papers revelations, subsequent judicial proceedings, and the role of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf’s anti-corruption campaign, this study highlights how slogans, media narratives, and institutional alignments transformed allegations into public perception. The analysis suggests that in Pakistan’s political landscape, the power of political labeling and moral discourse often outweighs policy performance or legal complexities. Nawaz Sharif’s case underscores the enduring influence of perception management in South Asian politics.

**Keywords:** Nawaz Sharif; Political Branding; Corruption Narrative; Panama Papers; Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf; Political Communication; Disqualification; Perception Management; Pakistani Politics; Civil–Military Relations.

## INTRODUCTION

Nawaz Sharif, a three-time Prime Minister of Pakistan and one of the country’s most influential politicians, has experienced repeated rises and falls over the past three decades. While his political career has been shaped by power struggles with the military, economic controversies, and rivalries with other parties, the single most powerful factor behind his latest downfall was not just a court judgment or an election result — it was a narrative. Branded as a “thief” (chor) in the public imagination, Sharif’s political capital eroded under the weight of an image carefully crafted and aggressively propagated by his opponents.

## FROM BUSINESSMAN TO POWER BROKER

Sharif’s early image was that of an industrialist-turned-politician who represented the interests of business and Punjab’s elite. His political success in the 1990s rested on infrastructure projects, populist slogans, and strong support from Punjab’s power centers. Yet corruption allegations were never far away. Accusations regarding the Hudaibiya Paper Mills and questionable wealth accumulation set the stage for an image problem that would haunt him decades later.

## THE PANAMA PAPERS AND THE BREAKING POINT

The defining blow came in 2016 with the Panama Papers leak, which revealed offshore companies connected to Sharif’s children. Although offshore holdings are not illegal per se, the revelations were seized upon by his rivals as proof of hidden corruption. Imran Khan and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) transformed the issue into a nationwide movement, demanding accountability. The slogan “Nawaz Sharif chor hai” (Nawaz Sharif is a thief) became a rallying cry, echoed from political rallies to drawing rooms and across social media platforms.

## JUDICIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURES

The Supreme Court’s 2017 verdict, which disqualified Nawaz Sharif under Article 62(1)(f) for failing to disclose a receivable salary from a UAE-based company, marked the legal turning point. Yet beyond the technicalities, the decision validated the corruption narrative. NAB references and accountability court cases followed, ensuring that the perception of dishonesty stuck. At the same time, many analysts argue that the military establishment’s quiet backing of this process amplified its force. Sharif, who had repeatedly clashed with the military over foreign policy and civilian supremacy, appeared increasingly isolated.

# THE ROLE OF POLITICAL BRANDING

Political branding proved decisive. Imran Khan's PTI relentlessly used the language of morality, corruption, and "clean politics." Unlike complex court documents or financial records, the label "thief" was simple, memorable, and emotionally powerful. Through speeches, chants, hashtags, and memes, Sharif was reduced to a caricature of dishonesty. For a younger, digitally connected population, this narrative carried more weight than policy performance or developmental achievements.

## PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND THE EROSION OF TRUST

By 2018, Nawaz Sharif's long-standing support in Punjab was under strain. The middle class, increasingly resentful of dynastic politics and corruption, embraced PTI's message. While PML-N still retained a core vote bank, particularly in rural Punjab, the credibility gap created by the "chor" branding limited Sharif's ability to reclaim national legitimacy. For many, the question was no longer whether he had delivered on infrastructure or

economic growth — it was whether he could be trusted at all.

## CONSEQUENCES

The combined weight of judicial rulings, media campaigns, and political slogans forced Nawaz Sharif from office and into exile. PML-N's weakened standing in the 2018 elections allowed PTI to claim the mantle of a "clean" alternative, even as questions about accountability standards persisted. The narrative of corruption had succeeded in reshaping the political landscape, cementing Nawaz Sharif's downfall.

## CONCLUSION

Nawaz Sharif's story illustrates how political battles in Pakistan are fought as much in the realm of perception as in the corridors of power. Court judgments may provide the legal foundation, but it is the simplicity and repetition of slogans like "thief" that sway the public. Once such a label becomes part of the national consciousness, it is nearly impossible to undo. For Sharif, the most damaging verdict was not delivered by judges or rivals, but by the collective imagination of a public persuaded that their leader had betrayed their trust.

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