All eyes are glued on Nawaz Sharif, and how he performs.

In the case of convicts, fourteen years is the period of imprisonment, often called the “transportation for life.” But 14 years in political wilderness can prepare one to perform a hat trick for the prime minister’s office as Mian Nawaz Sharif has recently demonstrated.

After his fall in October 1999, Sharif suffered many ups and downs of fortune. He was detained. He was prosecuted. He spent time in self-exile. Through adversity he learned his lesson in democracy. Today it is a different Mian Sahib who is in power.

Though how far he has changed will be discovered only after he starts working as prime minister, but it is expected that he will no longer be on a fighting binge with anyone perceived to be crossing his path; no repetition of his deadly combat with President Ghulam Ishaq Khan; sending raiders to chase Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah out of his court; easing President Leghari and Army chief, Gen. Karamat out or preventing the plane carrying the army chief from landing anywhere in Pakistan. Nor will journalists be harassed, abducted, and charged with preposterous allegations as during in his second stint.

Signing the Charter of Democracy with his political bête noire, Benazir Bhutto was a clear indicator that his sufferings had made Nawaz Sharif realize the virtue of democracy. In fact, it was his devotion to the “Charter,” that led him to refrain from attempting to rock the PPP government’s boat despite many standoffs thus allowing an elected government to complete its term for the first time in Pakistan’s history.

The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) has won 126 general seats in the National Assembly in the May 11 elections. Adding 18 independents, who have since joined PML-N, 32 women and five minority seats, the party’s total number has jumped to 181 in a house of 342. With this simple majority it has decided to form the government, though Sharif is angling for JUI (F) chief, Maulana Fazlur Rahman to coalesce.

Sharif’s election victory has set off a deluge of comments, analyses, gratuitous advice from kibitzers in newspapers, and endless debates on TV talk shows. Congratulations have been
received from foreign heads of state. President Obama, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Rahul Gandhi are among those who spoke with Sharif to felicitate while the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang made a personal visit, his first since being elected.

In an unprecedented move, Gen. Kayani made an informal visit to Sharif at his Lahore residence; “informal,” because he was dressed in mufti instead of fatigues. Their talk for a full three hours could certainly not have been about the weather. Kayani is completing his term in few months. His successor has to be chosen. He favors fighting the Taliban while Sharif supports talks. The army is chary of India’s rising clout in Afghanistan while Sharif has vigorously shaken the olive branch in Manmohan Singh’s face since his election victory.

A mountain of formidable challenges await Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, both on the home and international fronts. Compounding them is a judiciary and media different than what he had known in the past. Inside the NA, he will encounter a robust Opposition, comprising Imran Khan, Sheikh Rashid, Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, Khursheed Shah et al. Moreover, PPP has the majority in the Senate, which means that any legislation originating from the National Assembly could die in the upper house.

A prevailing countrywide energy crisis is the most urgent and immediate challenge. Next and extremely complicated is dealing with the Taliban. Sharif supports the policy of negotiations but the U.S. is deadly opposed to the idea and is eager to sabotage it. For example, recently, when there was some progress on the TTP’s offer for talks, a U.S. drone attack killed TTP’s second-in-command, Waliur Rahman. In consequence, the TTP promptly withdrew their offer.

Another intriguing issue relates to the fate of General Pervez Musharraf and whether Nawaz Sharif will illustrate political maturity and suppress his urge for revenge.

Interestingly, while PML (N) has swept the polls in Punjab, its representation in other provinces is nominal. This immediately creates an image problem for NS, making him look like the prime minister of Punjab. For Sharif to once again prove his legitimacy throughout Pakistan, the new Prime Minister will have to make some tough yet critical decisions that reverberate throughout the nation as opposed to being confined to a particular province.

Drone attacks present both domestic and diplomatic dilemmas. Mass feelings against drone
attacks are strong. Shooting them down if America persists, is Imran Khan’s election vow. Solving this issue satisfactorily will be a test for Sharif. One possible alternative could be to negotiate stopping the attacks as a quid pro quo for allowing transit of millions of tons of U.S. military hardware through Pakistan for shipment back home.

Other domestic issues include choosing a successor to Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, slated to retire in a few months, and resuscitate the economy in the shortest possible time.

On the international front, Sharif’s interest in cultivating peaceful relations with India has been evident from his statements since the elections. He wants to pick up the thread from where it had snapped following the Kargil episode. This augurs well because, “India is ready to lead a 500MW transmission wire over the border into Punjab. By extending its own pipeline network, it could also help supply natural gas, easing Pakistan’s reliance on oil.” (The Economist: May 16 2013).

Moreover, besides benefiting from direct trade with India, Pakistan may also be able to export its goods to Bangladesh and Nepal through India if it allows a transit route for Indian goods to be transported to Afghanistan and Central Asia through its land. But, here again is a caveat. As America sabotages talks with the Taliban, Hafiz Sayeed or any other “non-state actor” may throw the spanner in the work by staging an action replay of the Mumbai attacks.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. is “retreating.” Indian influence is increasing. Karzai is friendlier with India. Towards Pakistan he is hostile. What will happen after America’s departure? Would Karzai be dispatched like Najibullah? These are questions that will call for cool deliberation and sound decision from the “third-time-lucky” Mian Nawaz Sharif.

He has taken the oath. He has stepped on to centre stage. How he performs is what all eyes are glued to.