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The opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif, sealed his place as the most popular politician in Pakistan this month when he defied his house detention and led a triumphant protest that forced the government to restore the country's chief justice.

Mr. Sharif spoke to thousands of party supporters on Monday at a medical center in Raiwind.
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Now, as the Obama administration completes its review of strategy toward the region this week, his sudden ascent has raised an urgent question: Can Mr. Sharif, 59, a populist politician close to Islamic parties, be a reliable partner? Or will he use his popular support to blunt the military's already fitful campaign against the insurgency of the Taliban and Al Qaeda?

A former two-time prime minister, Mr. Sharif once pressed for Islamic law for Pakistan, tested a nuclear bomb and was accused by his opponents of undemocratic behavior during his tenure in the late 1990s.

That political past has inspired distrust here and in Washington and left some concerned that Mr. Sharif is too close to the conservative Islamists sympathetic to the Taliban to lead a fight against the insurgents.

His supporters and other analysts say that Mr. Sharif is now a more mature politician, wiser after eight years of exile in Saudi Arabia and London, and that he is eager to prove he can work with Washington and to put his imprint on a workable approach toward stabilizing Pakistan. In any case, opponents and supporters alike note, Mr. Sharif has made himself a political leader Washington can no longer ignore.

Just weeks ago, Mr. Sharif appeared to be sidelined, when a Supreme Court ruling barred him from office, citing an earlier criminal conviction. After forcing the government to reinstate the chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who seems likely to reverse that decision, Mr. Sharif is now front and center in Pakistani politics.

His protest tapped a deep well of dissatisfaction with the government of President Asif Ali Zardari, who seems increasingly unable to rally Pakistanis behind the fight against the insurgents.

The new breadth of Mr. Sharif's support will make him either a drag or a spur to greater Pakistani cooperation, and it positions Mr. Sharif as a potential prime minister, if the already shaky public support for the Zardari government completely erodes.

"If Washington is going to carry Pakistan, it is important they do it with popular support," said Senator Enver Baig, a disaffected member of the governing Pakistan Peoples Party, who resigned from a party post last month. "There's the realization in Washington that he is the next guy we should talk to."

That would be a change. After Mr. Sharif's return from exile in late 2007, the Bush administration kept him at a distance, choosing instead to broker a power-sharing deal between Pervez Musharraf, the president at the time, and another former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto.

More secular in outlook, Ms. Bhutto and her Pakistan Peoples Party were considered more amenable allies for Washington. After Ms. Bhutto was assassinated in December 2007, her husband, Mr. Zardari, took up the party mantle.

Both Mr. Musharraf and Mr. Zardari forged their own alliances with Pakistan's religious parties. But Mr. Sharif's ties have raised deeper suspicion.

More nationalistic and religiously oriented, he and his party, the Pakistan Muslim League-N, have traditionally found common cause with the religious parties, some of which have run madrasas that have funneled fighters to the Taliban.

Those who worry that the insurgency will engulf the country are perplexed by what they see as Mr. Sharif's failure so far to mobilize a Pakistani public inured to its dangers.

"Nawaz Sharif is a reflection of Pakistani society," said Pervez Hoodbhoy, a physicist and a critic of current government policies. "He is silent on what matters most: the insurgency. What we need is a leader."

Some diplomats and analysts argue, however, that Mr. Sharif's affinity with the Islamic parties could now be an asset as Washington tries to win Pakistani support to fight the militants.

"We, and all sensible Pakistanis, need the support of Saudi Arabia and the more moderate Islamist parties, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami, if we are ever going to tame the jihadis," said a former American ambassador to Pakistan, Robert B. Oakley. "Nawaz's good standing with them is very, very important."

Maleeha Lodhi, a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States, said Washington's suspicions of Mr. Sharif might actually be helpful.

"He is sufficiently distanced from the United States to be a credible partner in the eyes of Pakistanis," she said.

For his part, Mr. Sharif says the impression in Washington that he is too close to the Islamists is propaganda promoted by his political rivals.

Mr. Sharif and his aides point to his close relationship with former President Bill Clinton and recite a litany of decisions Mr. Sharif made as prime minister that were favorable to Washington,

like his politically risky decision to support the United States in the Persian Gulf war in 1991.

Mr. Sharif, in a recent interview, emphasized the similarities between the approach he would take toward militancy and that currently being discussed in Washington, including separating the Taliban, whose members can be talked to, from Al Qaeda, whose adherents cannot.

Some experts are skeptical that Mr. Sharif can distinguish between the militants and the conservative Islamic parties. "There's no evidence that he understands the difference between these groups," said Stephen P. Cohen, a scholar at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

Mr. Sharif served twice as prime minister, from 1990 to 1993, and then from 1997 to 1999. His second term was marked by a series of misadventures that rankled Washington, including his decision in 1998 to test Pakistan's nuclear weapons after India tested its arsenal.

In 1999, he introduced a parliamentary bill to enforce Islamic law, or Shariah, legislation that eventually failed in the Senate. Some of his supporters stormed the Supreme Court building in 1997.

But Mr. Sharif made some remarkable initiatives as well. Previously unheard of for a Pakistani leader, he met with the Indian prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, in early 1999.

In July 1999, he dashed to Washington in a gamble to avert war with India after the Pakistani Army, led by General Musharraf, made incursions into Indian-held territory in Kashmir. Mr. Sharif agreed to Mr. Clinton's demands to force the army to withdraw to its original positions. Two months later, General Musharraf ousted Mr. Sharif in a coup and forced him into exile.

How much Mr. Sharif has changed is a question many in Pakistan's elite are asking.

Pakistan's lawyers had agitated on behalf of the chief justice, Mr. Chaudhry, for two years. But it was not until Mr. Sharif backed the protests, bringing Jamaat-e-Islami with him, that the government was forced to cave in.

Aitzaz Ahsan, the leader of the lawyers' movement, said it would not be difficult for the United States to work with Mr. Sharif. On March 15, the Sunday of the protest, Mr. Ahsan accompanied Mr. Sharif in a two-and-a-half-ton, bulletproof Land Cruiser, as the men were swamped by crowds.

Their time together, Mr. Ahsan said, revealed an important characteristic about Mr. Sharif that Washington should know. "He's about personal relationships," he said. "If you befriend him, you can get him to move mountains."