[Another anti-corruption crusader?](https://nation.com.pk/15-Feb-2019/another-anti-corruption-crusader" \t "_new)

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The arrest of Punjab Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan by the National Accountability Bureau shows the pitfalls of its accusation-means-guilt approach to guilt. It also shows the vulnerability of the PTI to corruption charges, because of the past deeds of ‘electables’.

Aleem Khan is the third high-profile victim from the PTI who has been forced from office because he has been accused of having assets beyond his known sources of income. He also owns an offshore company, and is being asked to explain where he got the funds for it. Also, his association with a housing society has been impugned, reflecting NAB’s continuing fascination with wrongdoing in housing or real-estate projects. It means that the present government’s Naya Pakistan Housing Scheme will be a high-risk proposition for everyone involved, and may well be the rope used to hang the Prime Minister himself.

It should not be forgotten that housing projects and real estate has made NAB order the arrest of National Assembly Leader of the Opposition Mian Shehbaz Sharif, former federal minister Kh Saad Rafiq and his brother Kh Salman, and now former ports and shipping minister Kamran Michel. While Mian Shehbaz was arrested over a public scheme (the Aashiyana Housing Scheme), and the Rafiq brothers over a private scheme, Michael’s arrest has been ordered over a combination. He is accused of having received bribes to get plots allocated to certain people in the Karachi Port Trust housing society, which was under his control.

It is worth noting that while party Secretary-General Jehangir Tareen ended up disqualified by the Supreme Court because of flats in London, PM’s Adviser Babar Awan resigned after NAB filed a reference against him in the Nandipur power plant reference, for the legal advice he tendered as the Law Minister in the PPP Government which led to a delay in its construction, and cost escalation. Aleem Khan has been arrested over a housing scheme of which he was already secretary when he became a provincial minister under Ch Pervez Elahi. Like Awan, but unlike Tareen, he has been brought under the NAB spotlight for something he is supposed to have done when he was part of an earlier, non-PTI, government.

Both Awan and Aleem have been personally close to PTI chief Imran Khan, as has Tareen. The latter provided Imran the use of his personal plane over the years. Awan was his counsel in numerous cases. Aleem and Tareen were known as Imran’s ATMs, and there was a photograph of the three in a plane cabin, on their 2017 trip together to the UK, that became quite famous on the social media. Aleem is the type Imran finds admirable, being a member of the diaspora who had returned, having made his pile. However, Aleem became really wealthy after getting into the real estate market. His having been in the Pervez Cabinet means that he has links to the same sort of people Imran is linked to. As a matter of fact, Jehangir Tareen is even more directly linked, for he was a Punjab adviser on agriculture in the Musharraf years; a post he had first enjoyed under Mian Shehbaz Sharif in his first tenure.

Aleem Khan’s resignation may be an exit, or else it may be a hiatus meant to allow a fair investigation, and to clear him, in which case he will be back. It might be remembered that Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah had resigned over the Model Town killings, but had returned after being cleared. Aleem Khan may find himself coming up against the PTI culture, in which accusation is proof. Even if he is released by NAB, or acquitted by an accountability court, he might not find it as easy to make a comeback to the Cabinet.

Aleem had enjoyed a particularly powerful position. One sign of this was his being given the Local Government portfolio, which was a little risky, for someone involved so deeply in real estate would be acquainted with local government, but would also be able to use his position to obtain favourable decisions from the department for pet projects. Local Government is a major portfolio in itself, but more significant was Aleem Khan being designated Senior Minister, something unprecedented in Punjab, except in a coalition situation as prevailed when the PML(J) formed a government with the PPP. Then the PPP had the post, for it had not taken the Chief Ministership despite being the larger coalition partner. The only purpose here was to compensate Aleem Khan for the Chief Ministry, which he had expected as a PTI MPA with previous ministerial experience. Another MPA with ministerial experience, Hasnain Bahadur Dreshak, who had held the Finance portfolio in the same Cabinet, has now been given the Livestock and Dairy Development portfolio.

Aleem was one of three power centres in the Punjab government, along with Governor Ghulam Sarwar and Chief Minister Usman Buzdar. This is apart from the ability of federal officebearers to influence official machinery. With his resignation, this ability is at least degraded considerably, and may well be lost entirely. One advantage Aleem Khan has is that he has been important to the party. Apart from contesting against outgoing Speaker Ayaz Sadiq thrice, he was also elected PTI Lahore President, until the party’s organisations were dissolved, not before allegations being made that he had bought the election. His being a power centre also owed much to the fact that his hat was still in the ring– he still has chief ministerial ambitions. So does Speaker Ch Pervez Elahi of the PML(Q). He had hoped to be a separate power centre, but was unable to develop, except for the PML(Q) MNAs and MPAs. It was the PML(Q) that revealed, back when the video leaked of a meeting of Ch Pervez and MNA Tahir Bashir Cheema with Jehangir Tarin, in which they complained of Ch Sarwar not letting Buzdar work. Aleem was not mentioned, though in this conflict, he had created space for himself, and if Buzdar was ever replaced, he would be frontrunner to replace him.

Thus the arrest, and consequent resignation, has given Buzdar more room. Apart from the removal of a potential replacement, he has also gained control of the Local Government portfolio as personal to himself. Buzdar came into contact with it as tehsil nazim of Taunsa Sharif in 20001-2008, but now that the PTI aims to replace the present local bodies, elected under the PML(N), the portfolio has become all the more important.

The bottom line depends on whether the enquiry proceeds to trial, and that trial’s outcome. At the same time, it indicates that real estate is another area that politicians should leave alone. That is interesting, for the PTI’s military sponsors are particularly partial to real estate. After all, it involves making an investment and leaving it for a time, something particularly suited to someone pursuing some other vocation.

The PTI has made corruption its signature issue, and has seemingly thrown efficiency out of the window. One of the symptoms has been the assumption that accusation means guilt. This is probably because the guilty often get off, because the judiciary was corrupt. Now that the focus is on alleged corruption, there is little chance of escape. However, whatever the process, the PTI is finding that corruption is a whip that stings it harder than other parties. One small mercy is that no allegation of corruption in government has been made, even against Aleem Khan.

The writer is a veteran journalist and founding member as well as executive editor of The Nation.