[**Democratic transition?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1758412/democratic-transition)

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JUST about nine weeks are left for the current term of the National Assembly to end. The Lower House of parliament will stand dissolved on Aug 13, and, under the Constitution, elections must be held on a date not beyond Oct 12. Yet, a democratic transition remains uncertain.

The statements of some of the leaders of the ruling coalition have reinforced doubts about the elections taking place on the due date. Riding on the shoulders of the security establishment, the ruling politicians don’t seem willing to go to polls. While some PML-N leaders want ‘accountability’ before the polls, some others seek to fix the economy first.

Meanwhile, the project of dismantling the PTI remains a top priority for both the government and the establishment. Elections can wait till the mission is accomplished, it seems.

The future of an already shaky democratic process hangs in the balance, raising fears of extra-constitutional action to extend the term of the current dispensation. There is even some talk about a long-term caretaker arrangement to clear the mess. The country seems to be heading towards an uncharted course.

Despite the forced exodus of a large number of senior party members, there is no indication yet of Imran Khan’s popular support diminishing. The party structure has certainly crumbled, affecting the PTI’s electoral prospects, but the ‘project’ is far from over. Notwithstanding his restricted movement and the ban on telecasting his statements, he is holding his ground.

The doors for political dialogue must not be shut even in the worst situation.

The PTI chief remains a nightmare for both the ruling coalition and establishment, making polls a risky affair for the government. The beast, it seems, has to be culled first. But that may not be easy for a weak state to do.

There has been some speculation that the former prime minister and some other defiant PTI leaders might be tried for sedition by the military, as a consequence of the May 9 attacks on security installations, which involved PTI supporters. In the past, there have been instances of elected leaders being convicted in dubious trials, but in civilian courts, with one former prime minister even executed on trumped-up charges.

A conviction may bar him from electoral politics, but a populist leader cannot be banished from the political scene notwithstanding his own blunders and attempts to destroy the entire democratic process. It is a lesson of history that our political leaders have never even tried to learn.

It’s not just his domestic popular base but also his vast support amongst the influential Pakistani expatriate community in the West that strengthens his position, even while being pitted against powerful quarters at home. Trying him could aggravate an already combustible political environment for a country in the throes of an economic meltdown and an extremely alarming internal security situation.

It will be hard for a motley ruling coalition and the powers that be to deal with the fallout of the ongoing political confrontation that has divided the country, pushing it towards civil strife. But there seems to be no realisation of the gravity of the situation, with elements outside the political domain clearly resorting to political engineering while political parties rejoice at the dismantling of their nemesis.

Some among them are trying to woo electable deserters, hoping to enhance their electoral prospects if and when elections are held. There is also a move to create a king’s party to undercut the positions of the mainstream parties. The old game of chess is on as the political parties gear up for the electoral battle. The entire political maze seems to have transformed with the virtual disintegration of the PTI.

It is battleground Punjab that has been at the centre of the ongoing power struggle. While the PML-N is hopeful of regaining its control over its bastion, the PPP is trying to increase its electoral prospects in south Punjab, courting the electables who are, true to the spirit of political opportunism, abandoning the PTI ship as they sense the shifting sands of power.

Most dynastic politicians may have their own vote bank but they always look towards the establishment to ensure their returns in the polls. It will also be interesting to see the impact of the PTI electoral support base in the outcome of the elections. It will certainly need an extra effort to secure the seats.

But the moot point is whether elections will actually be held within the stipulated timeframe or whether we are going to see a caretaker set-up ruling for an extended period of time. It will all depend on how the situation develops in the next few weeks. Khan’s disqualification from holding public office seems imminent, but a more important question is how the government and establishment deal with its political fallout.

Perhaps more important is the question of preventing an economic meltdown in the interim period. The spectre of a default is staring us in the face, notwithstanding the finance minister’s flawed sense of optimism. Political instability has worsened the economic situation. To deal with these existentialist challenges, the country needs to bring down political temperatures. Unfortunately, all the doors for reconciliation seem to have been closed.

Indeed, the PTI chief’s combative attitude has been largely responsible for the stand-off, but now the government has toughened its position on the possibility of dialogue. In this atmosphere of confrontation, holding fair and free elections becomes increasingly challenging. But delaying the elections is not the solution. Any move to extend the term of the current National Assembly or instal a long-term, non-representative caretaker administration can lead to a new constitutional crisis. Surely, the doors for political dialogue must not be shut even in the worst situation.

The events of the past one year have already dealt a huge blow to democracy, and any further derailment of the process will be disastrous for the country’s unity and development. A non-representative system can never bring long-term political and economic stability. A government with a popular mandate is the only solution.

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