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**A chink in the PTI armour**

One impression that emerges from Prime Minister Imran Khan’s spirited campaign for the holding of the Senate elections through open ballot is that the moral foundations of Pakistan’s politics have further eroded. And this also means that the PTI has not been able to raise – or even maintain – the quality of political behaviour, in a collective sense, during the time that it has been in power at the federal level.

What is truly amazing is that the lawmakers who are seen to be vulnerable to the vile temptation of large sums of money in exchange for their votes mostly belong to the PTI. Imran Khan has himself admitted this risk. Also interesting is the fact that he cites the example of the PTI MPAs of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa accepting bundles of currency notes in videos released recently. The timing of this revelation is itself quite revealing.

This had happened before the Senate elections held three years ago, when the PTI was in power in KP. Then, Imran Khan had taken the corrective action of removing 20 members from the party, though confessions now being made by those who are seen in the video clips have complicated issues.

One would expect the situation to have changed by now, with the PTI leadership becoming wiser in its choice of candidates for the national and provincial assemblies. A party so passionately committed to eliminating high-level corruption, and armed with an obsessive process of accountability against former rulers, would surely need to be more righteous in its political conduct.

But there are signs of the PTI feeling a bit insecure. In the latest statement by the PM on Friday, he said that the opposition was planning to ‘buy’ lawmakers from his party for the Senate elections. Addressing a tree plantation ceremony in Ghazi Barotha, he said: “A ‘mandi’ has been set up to buy politicians and rates have been set”.

This is a serious charge that has been corroborated by Attorney General of Pakistan Khalid Javed Khan. In his submission before the Supreme Court during the hearing of the presidential reference on the question of whether the condition of secret ballot also applied to Senate elections, the AGP said that people were ready with bags packed with money. Isn’t this a frightening thought, evoking images of a Hollywood crime thriller?

According to the AGP, the modus operandi had now changed and deals could be made in Dubai. Since these allegations were made in the sacred premises of the Supreme Court, it should be possible for the relevant institutions to take some necessary action. There is obvious room for the Election Commission of Pakistan to intervene and ask some questions. After all, it is the ECP’s responsibility to ensure that the elections are held in a free and fair manner.

In their campaign for open ballot for Senate elections, the PTI leaders have admonished the two main opposition parties for betraying the promise they had made in the Charter of Democracy. But this Charter was signed by Nawaz Sharif and the late Benazir Bhutto in London in May 2006 and it had many other clauses.

Besides, the present political situation precludes any collaboration between Imran Khan and the opposition on any matter whatsoever. In fact, Friday’s by-elections – and the dramatic upset in Nowshera – have raised the political temperature. Even if the projected surprises do not materialise in the Senate elections on March 3, the tempo would rise with the run-up to the opposition’s Long March on March 26.

Of the four by-elections held on Friday, the PTI’s surprising defeat in its stronghold, hometown of Defence Minister Pervez Khattak, raises questions about the internal coherence of Imran Khan’s party. At another level, it could also be seen as a straw in the wind. It is something for the opposition alliance, the Pakistan Democratic Movement, to celebrate.

As for the violence that led to two deaths by firing, accompanied by considerable disorder and charges of rigging, in Sialkot’s NA-75, we have the familiar situation in which serious doubts are raised about the credibility of an election and the conduct of the Election Commission of Pakistan and the administration. While the results were withheld on Saturday morning, this electoral dispute is bound to raise a lot of dust in the political arena.

There are reasons why Imran Khan should be worried about the unquestioned loyalty of all PTI lawmakers. His choice of candidates for the Senate, in some cases, has raised issues. The big battle, in this contest, will take place in the National Assembly where the PPP’s former prime minister Yousaf Raza Gilani is pitted against the present Minister for Finance Abdul Hafeez Shaikh. Though the PTI, with its allies, has a working majority, Abdul Hafeez Shaikh is an outsider. Ironically, he was also the finance minister of Yousaf Raza when the latter was the prime minister.

As the upset in Nowshera has underlined, the PTI has factions that do not always gel. It can be argued that Imran Khan’s anxiety for open ballot is a reflection of his lack of confidence in the allegiance of all PTI lawmakers. In one case, Imran Khan had to withdraw the PTI ticket from one candidate who was believed to have joined the party only a day before his choice was announced.

However, he brushed aside all reservations expressed about federal minister Faisal Vawda, whose membership of the National Assembly is in dispute. In many ways, Vawda personifies a certain streak of belligerence in the party that Imran Khan has sought to preserve.

Anyhow, it is sad that there has been little reference in the present discourse to the right of a lawmaker to vote according to his or her conscience. This is how the secrecy of the ballot is the basis of a democratic system. But so many other motives come into play in Pakistan. Even bags of money would not do when there are other kinds of temptations and pressures. That is one reason why the Senate elections have become such a thriller.

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