**By an election alone**

Asha’ar Rehman

Saturday, Mar 04, 2023

The media told them they were playing with fire by delaying a resort to the people for settling their dispute with a very popular political rival. They did not budge from their position, instead clinging on even more tightly to power.

Now the apex court judges have ruled that elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, two provinces where assemblies stand dissolved, must be held within the constitutionally prescribed time period. Even now, the knowledgeable say that, while there is no doubt that the Shahbaz Sharif-led setup ‘should allow’ the polls go through, an election any time soon appears ‘highly unlikely’.

The situation in the country, which is hard to compare with crises anywhere else in the world, must leave Pakistanis wondering: If this doesn’t convince the incumbents – the self-professed democrats – to seek a fresh sanction from the people’s jury, what will?

It was sad that the court had to arbitrate the affair. It reminded the pro-democracy sections in the country, and rightly so, of interventions of the past. The faces had changed, it was argued, but the basic routine where politicians were undermined as a useless bunch with a claim to power remained the same. If they had been capable, these so-called popular leaders involved in politics could have shown the acumen to settle their matters among themselves.

There were sporadic against-the-grain attempts at projecting politicians at large, and often some among them more specifically, as victims. They were played against each other, being prevented from setting a common goal which bound them together even when they competed with each other for power. You can go on pointing out instances where the poor old politicians, whichever party they might have belonged to, acted as the fall guy while their masters ran away with the spoils delivered by a corrupted system. But maybe this is not the time to go back to this particular refrain that sought to cleanse the most maligned souls on the land of some of the dirt habitually heaped on them. The moment calls for anybody with a claim to guide political advancement of the people to see reason and concede.

Conceded the rulers already have. They have successfully managed to cast themselves in the role of a defensive, evasive group with evidence that supports the perception that they are afraid of one man. The impression has strengthened over time. It can be easily claimed by tapping into available tools of mapping public opinion that the anti-Imran Khan parties from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through Punjab down to Sindh were better placed to go to the people in an election then than now. In the face of all kinds of explanations to the contrary, no one in their right mind should take evidence provided by incidents such as the recent PTI victory in a southern Punjab constituency lightly.

I know that the exercise in self-appeasement is once again on churning out some of the most believable and unbelievable stories by the experts who must flatter the glitterati in power to the hilt and down the precipice tight until the moment where they hear the thud. Don’t know if it will be of any use given the history of rulers who couldn’t have survived without building these false images of their standing in public at critical moments in history. Conveyed the message they must be however. These may not be the best of times for them to appear before the people’s court but far worse conditions may be awaiting them if they chose to persist with the current stretch of governance.

The spectacular turnaround which the hodgepodge government and its sympathizers have long been waiting for has eluded as the people of this country come under hardships never experienced before. If anything, the spark – if any – had to come via the economics genius who had served the Sharifs well once. Now that he has failed, it seems highly unlikely that anything done by the government in any area will be able to release Pakistanis from the distress caused by concerns of everyday living or even provide them some limited respite. Further delay in realizing that election offered the only way to let go of the pent-up emotion. The tension is killing and it is open to imagination what the pressures let loose on the masses of unfortunate Pakistanis who are paying such a heavy price for the state's policies can lead to.

Already there is no dearth amongst us of those who are not just surprised but appalled why the extremely trying conditions in the land of the pure are not leading to the ‘victims’ not taking things in ‘their hands’. The violent scenarios so frequently built by the merchants of gloom who unfortunately enjoy so much credibility in public demand urgent preventive measures. There is never a more apt prevention in a democracy other than an election which vindicates a people. No politician should ever be afraid of offering themselves for this most basic act of public scrutiny.

The writer is a senior journalist.