**Calibrating your chaos**

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VIOLENCE during elections is as unfortunate as it is predictable. Friday`s by-election was no different. In an atmosphere as charged as ours, the real surprise would have been an absence of chaos.

Chaos, however, is also political tool.

Survey the landscape. The PDM campaign that kicked off in September last year, wanted to generate heat on the street and get crowds to become a tsunami against the PTI government. They wanted to calibrate their chaos. The PDM`s promised long march on March 26 aims to galvanise tens of thousands of their supporters to converge on Islamabad in a massive show of force. Their objective is to pressure the government into a muscular response so thatthe situadongets outofhand andperhapsproduces some unintended consequences. The government will need to calibrate its force in order to avoid chaos; the opposition will want to calibrate its chaos so it does not spiral out of its control.

The Senate elections have generated their own sense of chaos. The ruling party wants to upset the PDM`s plans by forcing through an open ballot that will favour its numbers. The opposition wants to create chaos for the ruling coalition by leveraging grievances from the treasury benches into votes for themselves leading to an upset at the ballot box. By fielding Yousuf Raza Gilani for the Senate from Islamabad, the PDM has also attempted to create calibrated chaos within the ruling coalition and its thin majority in the National Assembly. An upset win by Gilani meaning that more people in the National Assembly voted for the opposition than the government would generate chaos in terms of numbers and possible calls for a no confidence vote against the prime minister.

The road to the Senate elections is also littered with chaos. The election schedule has been announced, nomination papers have been submitted, applications have been vetted, candidates have been rejected and accepted, a few candidates have already been declared elected unopposed and yet no one knows whether the election will be held via secret or open ballot. The hearing in the Supreme Court produces a steady stream of projections, predictions and premonitions on a daily basis even though the institution responsible for organis-ing and holding the elections, the ECP, has stated categorically that the mode of voting must remain secret balloting. Legal chaos calibrated as it is continues to rain. And reign.

In almost all these cases, chaos is a by-product of some strategy that is aimed at attaining objectives without paying the price of uncontrolled chaos.

Here`s the thing though: whenever the calibration of chaos produces favourable results for the calibrator, it generates a greater incentive to calibrate it to a higher level in order to achieve higher outcomes linked to higher goals.

Case in point: parliament. It has been marked by chaos since the day it came into existence after the 2018 elections. Chaos on the first day was the opposi-tion`s way of saying the treasury benches were a product of a flawed election. Chaos unsettled Prime Minister Imran Khan on this inaugural day when he wanted to deliver his maiden speech. The PTI responded with counter-chaos. Up and up went both sides on the escalatory ladder as chaos appeared to work for both in terms of their narrow political objectives. Two and a half years later, parliament is quasidysfunctional. Friday`s chaotic proceedings in the National Assembly reinforced this dismal reality.

The climb up the escalatory ladder of chaos is testing the calibrators` ability to calibrate within a spectrum that can produce the desired results. The court verdict on the Senate elections will sow chaos in one side. It will aim to respond. The actual Senate election may generate further chaos as a result, thereby forcing the side that falls victim to this chaos to generate a higher level of chaos in the next round of contest. Friday`s by-election and the violence have already triggered chaos that invariably comes with a loss of life within a larger politicalevent. This willincentivise both sides to counter the other side`s attempt for a higher calibrated chaos.

If the reservoir of chaos begins to accumulate from the by-election violence, to fresh accusations of rigging, to the court verdict, to the Senate elections then this accumulated chaos could have a snowball effect on the March 26 long march. The higher the level of chaos, the lower the ability of stakeholderstocalibrateit-thismaybealessonto remember when thousands come marching and thousands brace themselves to manage them.

The PDM`s long march carries the potential of escalating the chaos level because of the dynamics of the event combined with the motivation of the opposition to somehow unsettle the government.

Chaos will suit the opposition. In its attempt to calibrate it, the opposition leaders will gradually crank up elements that fuel chaos. But they would want to manage the calibration so that they can adjust it according to the situation.

The government would not want chaos. But at some point it may be forced to generate controlled chaos in order to quell the opposition`s calibrated chaos. It will be a delicate situation.

But what after then? If the opposition cannot weaken the government through calibrated chaos from the long march, it may be forced to generate chaos on other platforms like parliament. If the government cannot weaken the opposition through the controlled use of official chaos, it too may want to experiment with other forms of calibrated chaos that keeps the opposition in chaos for the next two years.

And yet there is a danger, as manifested in Friday`s violence. It takes a moment to uncalibrate all plans to calibrate chaos. The likelihood of such moments popping up become greater when chaos begins to accumulate over a period of time without any way of scaling it down. One wrong move, one bad decision, one faulty judgement, and chaos can spiral out of the calibrators` hands and take on a life of its own.

Chaos is a dangerous political tool to wield.  The writer is Dawn`s resident editor in Islamabad.

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