[**Can Imran force elections?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1687532/can-imran-force-elections)

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AS the political landscape of Pakistan sizzles with heat and tension, here is the picture it is presenting today.

1. The coalition government has decided in principle that it will not opt for early elections. A consensus has developed over the last fortnight that it makes political sense to let the assemblies complete their full five-year term, or at least as close to it as possible. This assessment is based on a number of factors, one of which is the populist wave generated by former prime minister Imran Khan ever since his ignominious ouster from power earlier this month. In the government’s calculation, pushing the elections into next year will provide them greater options to deal with the threat posed by the PTI.
2. These options to deal with the PTI include the ploy to tire him out. The logic is that it will be difficult for Khan to sustain the momentum he has generated through [three big rallies](https://www.dawn.com/news/1686378/imran-khans-rallies). Keeping the streets burning with anger is a tough task, as the former opposition knows well. The government feels the longer it can stretch the time till elections, the greater the energy and resources that Khan will have to expend in order to keep his party cadre and support base mobilised. This may also force him to take rash decisions that can backfire. The government can afford to wait. It has plenty of power to exercise and largesse to distribute. It is in an advantageous position and therefore will keep goading Khan to lash out till he tires out.
3. Time also buys the government the prospects of unearthing more stories of wrongdoings committed during the PTI reign. While the Toshakhana scandal and tales of the former first lady’s friend Farah Gujjar and her supposed millions earned through dubious means are filling the airwaves, government sources say a treasure trove of more such material will soon emerge from files in the Punjab government secretariat. The government is waiting for Hamza Shehbaz to be sworn in and the cabinet formed before such evidence is shovelled out of cupboards and computers and presented to the public, sprinkled with a generous dose of political garnishing. Some of this material will be used for undercutting the PTI narrative of honesty and clean governance while some of it that has greater evidence that can hold in court will be transformed into actual cases.
4. The government also wants to appoint the next army chief in November. It is in no mood to risk an election before that and neither does it want to let a caretaker set-up make this crucial selection. This appointment is seven months away which means that the government has enough time to stabilise the situation in order to go through with the appointment process in a routine manner. The intent is to make the process and selection as non-controversial as possible. This will of course require not just deft handling but also mature signalling that suggests that the government does not want to rock the boat at a time when the political waters are already a bit choppy.
5. Then there is the logic that more time provides more opportunity to deliver on governance in order to draw a sharp contrast with the incompetence of the PTI government. This logic says that either the government should opt for immediate elections (Khan has pre-empted this by fuelling his flawed and accuracy-challenged conspiracy narrative) or go the whole mile and let the elections take place right at the absolute end of the five-year term of these assemblies. Influential people within the government now feel that they have a better chance of improving the economic situation, handling the energy issue including load-shedding, and controlling inflation (with the hope that international oil prices go down and the global supply chain can mend itself) if they have another year and a few months with them. A cursory look at the cabinet selection shows that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif is appointing well-qualified people (instead of just loyalists) at key ministries that are linked to areas like economy, energy, power, etc.
6. Imran Khan and his colleagues realise time is not their friend. This is why they are [constantly mounting pressure](https://www.dawn.com/news/1687348/sheikh-rashid-demands-early-elections) for early elections. They believe they cannot afford to gradually heat up the situation because the government has enough options to sustain such pressure. The [march to Islamabad](https://www.dawn.com/news/1686923) is the only real threat that the PTI now wields. But the march or an ensuing dharna is no guarantee that the government will be forced to accept an early election. PTI has learnt lessons from its [first dharna](https://www.dawn.com/news/1154293) and though its leaders may not acknowledge publicly, they understand that the dharna — despite all that was going in its favour — did nothing substantive to bring the then government down.
7. In fact, two key factors that buoyed the earlier dharna will be missing from the next one, were it to happen. The first is the crucial support of the establishment. It is now well known that the first dharna had significant such support and that became a major reason why the PTI was able to sustain it for as long as it did. This time that support will not be available in that fashion.
8. The other factor was blanket media live coverage by almost all channels. This led to the dharna becoming the dominant event for the country for weeks on end and enabled Khan’s nightly speeches to be broadcast across the nation. This time, no such wide and live coverage will be available to the PTI except from one or two channels.
9. This would force the PTI to plan its action on a shortened timeline. The government knows well any type of collision does not suit its interests, but does so for the PTI. How can the government avoid it, and how can the PTI force it will become a key determinant of which way the situation heads.
10. The nation is on tenterhooks. Again.

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