**Cornered tiger or lame duck?**

BY A B B A S N A S I R 2021-03-07

T HE `cornered tiger`, Prime Minister Imran Khan, has won the vote of a majority of the house for a resolution reposing confidence in him, capping a tumultuous week, but the question being asked is if he`d been lamed in the fight to save himself or has he retained the agility to pounce on his opponents? After the Senate debacle on Wednesday, Imran Khan`s supporters took to social media to remind everyone that in 1992 his team was also facing an early exit from the World Cup but, after his `cornered tigers` speech, fought back and lifted cricket`s most prized trophy.

The neutral umpires rushed to Prime Minister House and footage/photos of their meeting were released the day after Yousuf Raza Gilani reduced the government majority in the National Assembly to a minority to humble the sitting finance minister for whom the prime minister had personally lobbied.

Later on Thursday, seemingly bolstered by the big two`s support, the prime minister made a televised address lambasting the Election Commission and rallying his supporters. Some of his remarks also seemed to have been directed at the establishment.

The prime minister may have been reacting to media reports as also the statements about the neutrality of the umpires by an array of opposition leaders including Maryam Nawaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. Some commentators saw `visible signs` of this neutrality, others said those were no more than crumbs.

On Wednesday, former president Zardari appeared downbeat answering reporters` questions in parliament during voting when asked about the fate of the government by saying: `Woh nahi chahte hukoomat jay` (They don`t want the government to go).

Perhaps, he thought his carefully crafted plan survived the election eve release of a surreptitiously shot, damning video (later attributed to a PTI `sting`) where Ali Haider Gilani was seen telling PTI MNAs how to`waste their vote`if they could not vote secretly.

But the reported phone calls by the usual suspects to MNAs telling them who to vote for may have upende d his chess moves. In the end, according to Mr Zardari himself, all that did was to narrow the margin of Mr Gilani`s win from the anticipated 20 to five.

Interestingly, even Mr Khan put the number of PTI turncoats who helped the former prime minister winat 15-16. A treasury bench member told me: `The intervention by our powerful friends came in the last two days which, I think, was a case of leaving it too late.

The stage for the dramatic week was set on Monday when the Supreme Court, after hearing a number of opinions, particularly learned Attorney General Khalid Jawed Khan`s for some two weeks, gave its `opinion` on the presidential reference whether a show of hands could be employed.

The Supreme Court said the Senate elections would be held through a secret ballot as mandated by the Constitution under Article 226. However, thecourt acknowledged the concerns of the attorney general regarding the need for `corruption-free` Senate elections. It directed the Election Commission of Pakistan to ensure transparency and try to make the `secret` ballot `traceable`.

The opinion made public two days before the Senate elections seemed to set the stage for the dramatic developments of the following six days starting with the PDM dark horse Yousuf Raza Gilani edging past the prime minister`s pick, Finance Minister Hafeez Shaikh.

It was in the aftermath of that defeat that the prime minister decided to seek a vote of confidence and predictably won it with ease. So, where do we go next? Clearly, the next indication will be the Senate chairman`s election due next week where opposition enjoys a 53-47 advantage.

Let`s see if the history of the last vote of no-confidence against the Senate chairman repeats itself, when the opposition had a much bigger majority in April 2019 and still lost or, if on this occasion, the opposition remains unified and asserts its six-vote advantage.In other words, will a majority of members vote uncorrupted by outside influences monetary or otherwise in line with their party policy, or `as per their conscience` as the current information minister, Shibli Faraz, had lauded the opposition turncoats the last time.

The middleto long-term state of play will really be dictated by a number of discussions that will inevitably be taking place in the coming weel(s both in the top echelons of the opposition and the establishment.

And though they will be taking part separately, they will have a bearing on each other.

The opposition has now to decide its future course beyond its public mobilisation and long march. It will have to discuss whether fresh elections should follow in case it can topple the government as the PML-N wants or if it wants a consensus government to steer matters till the next election as said to be the PPP`s preference.

Equally, as many analysts are attributing whatever little `neutrality` they have witnessed to the pressure created by Maryam`s and Nawaz Sharif`s changed narrative particularly in central Punjab, will the changing ground reality also encourage a new thinking in the establishment on its hybrid experiment? We have no answers at this stage but will be watching for indications of policy change. One hint would be if the opposition leaders stop their naming and shaming policy. Why wouldn`t they if assured of meaningfulneutrality? All this is also assuming Imran Khan has not been chastened by the past week`s experience. He may sound defiant but may well have been humbled enough to focus on delivery, governance and move away from rule via cronies.

He has earned a reprieve in parliament. Is he capable of reciprocating by taking parliament along, of listening to elected representatives who have to face angry, dispossessed constituents and not sycophants who only excel at one job? His two speeches since the Senate setback suggest he has not changed. If that is indeed the case, then last Wednesday`s developments may have lit a fuse that will fast make its way to its destination. The writer is a former editor of Dawn.

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