**Countdown to elections**

M Saeed Khalid

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The murky political and economic scenario of the last fifteen months is beginning to clear up with two major developments. First came the $3 billion stand-by agreement announced by the IMF, followed by $5 billion facilities by friendly countries.

Then came Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's statement that the PDM coalition government will relinquish office in August and be replaced by a caretaker setup to conduct nationwide elections on a date to be announced by the ECP.

So far, so good. The sceptics will in all probability come up with doubts about the date as well as the fair conduct of a massive electoral exercise. Indeed, there are issues to be resolved before the Election Commission of Pakistan can announce the dates of national and provincial polls.

One of these has been addressed by an allocation of Rs42.53 billion by the ECC to the ECP to hold fresh elections. It also looks more or less certain that the constituencies will be determined according to the previous census. The ECP is gearing up for the gigantic exercise to be carried out with the cooperation of caretaker governments at the centre and in the provinces.

The great unknown of the forthcoming polls is the participation of Imran Khan and his party. His coup de force to dissolve the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies was met with nonchalance by the PDM coalition and consequently by the caretaker governments in the two provinces. The PTI's efforts to get the judiciary's backing for early polls came to a naught and the party is now reconciled to elections on the same date. The rumour mill has been at work to raise doubts about the timing of general elections. It should be put to rest just as speculation about extending the present assemblies' terms has been brought to an end.

For its part, the government has done every bit to bar Khan's participation in the polls – even if it has dissipated energies by instituting nearly 200 cases against the former premier. A couple of solid cases would have been sufficient to enable the justices to decide whether convictions were warranted. What a massive waste of time and scarce resources where a sensible approach would have brought the desired results. If the intention was to wear out the PTI leader, it had the opposite effect with Khan delivering almost daily discourses to rub in that he remains highly popular.

Khan is also claiming that political engineering is going to keep him out of the electoral exercise. He seems to overlook that if political engineering exists, he has been among its beneficiaries. How a one-seat party was boosted to become the third political force and then enabled to form coalition governments in the centre and Punjab is a well-known chapter of our politics.

Yes, political engineering is a fact of life in the ‘security state’ that we became from the very early days. Major parties faced dissolution while their B teams were inducted in new permutations. Most of us remember how the establishment orchestrated musical chairs between the two major parties three times from the 1990s. It then proceeded to give a turn to the third option. We are also familiar with the norm whereby the party that goes out of office does not immediately return to power. That tradition could very well apply to the third major party.

Today, Punjab promises to be the big battle ground – as always. If there is no clear winner in the largest province, it will clear the way for a new coalition in Islamabad that gives greater weightage to smaller parties like the MQM, JUI and the parties from Balochistan.

The media has repeatedly mentioned Asif Zardari's push to see Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as the country's next prime minister, without seriously analyzing his prospects. It is about time the matter was given critical consideration by political observers. That, however, cannot be done in isolation from the chances of other big parties – particularly the PML-N. Even if the PPP returns to power in Sindh and secures a respectable number of seats in the National Assembly, that at best strengthens its claim to be in a coalition at the centre.

Like it or not, it brings us back to the chances of Imran Khan taking part in the coming elections. Khan has repeatedly asserted that he will either be sent to prison or prevented from contesting the election. Whether it becomes a self-fulfilling claim remains to be seen. In general, a politician lives to fight another day whereas a sportsman is more accustomed to fight till the ‘last ball’.

It appears that the government would like nothing better than to see Imran Khan disqualified from contesting elections just like it was done in Nawaz Sharif's case. The big uncertainty is about the courts actually finding him guilty in one or more of the large number of cases brought against him. Things could move at a faster pace in the days ahead.

The writer can be reached at: saeed.saeedk@gmail.com