**Counting the cost of compromise**

BY FA H D H U S A I N 2021-03-06

ONE month ago, the PTI could do no wrong. A month later, it can do no right. What happened? As Prime Minister Imran Khan takes his vote of confidence today, he might want to take a moment and meditate on why he has ended up in a position where he has to prove his majority. The vote may provide symbolic relief but the ailment is more than skin deep. Here are five reasons why the PTI has frittered away its political, perceptional and populist capital in the last four weeks.

1 Open ballot issue: The PTI tried to pull a fast one by couching political expediency inside a moralistic cover. It failed. The party`s sudden focus on wanting an open ballot Senate election erupted on the political landscape without warning, and more significantly, without context. Had party elders war-gamed the reaction to their position, they would have very easily reached the following conclusions: (i) PTI was a beneficiary of the secret ballot in the Sadiq Sanjrani vote of no-confidence, and this would dilute the efficacy of its current demand. It did. (ii) Their vehement insistence on an open ballot would elicit an obvious question: `why now?` and they should have had a convincing answer.

They did not.(iii)If the party did not provide sufficient logic to counter the above question, it would struggle to take a high moral position. It did. As a result, the party`s shoddy triple attempt to ram its position down the electorate`s throat the reference to the Supreme Court, the failed attempt for a constitutional amendment, and the quasi-amateur ordinance all these combined to produce a result directly opposite of what the PTI wanted. It takes a unique talent to take a morally strong issue and reduce it to a politically shredded and optically compromised one.

2 Senate tickets issue: The party leadership decided in its wisdom to create a parliamentary board that would itself decide without asking for any applications who should get the ticl(et. The result was a mess reminiscent of the PTI`s attempt at holding elections for its party offices some years ago. The board had to cut a sorry figure when the public outcry forced it to take tickets back from various people already awarded and giving it toothers. But nothing damaged the party more than the award of a ticket to a rich man from Balochistan named Abdul Qadir. Protests erupted, the PTI took the ticket away from him, he stood as an independent, PTI members supported him, he won, and perhaps he may now join PTI. Or maybe he won`t. It matters not. What matters is that the PTPs moralistic political narrative oh, we give tickets to only clean people whereas the opposition sells theirs to the highest bidder got a massive hit. This collided head on with its mega narrative about open ballots and tied up its argument in convoluted knots. It takes a unique talent to take a politically strong issue and reduce it to a morally shredded and optically compromised one.

3 Daska issue: What happened in the DaskaNA-75 election has done more to debase the dividends of PTI`s moral narrative than anything in recent times. The PTI`s politics of the last many years, especially after the 2013 elections, was based on the sanctity of the vote; the same sanctity that, according to the PTI, was trampled by PML-N in the 2013 polls thereby depriving PTI of its true electoral numbers. For a Pakistani electorate fatigued by the burden of electoral manipulations over the decades, this was as fresh as narratives come. PTI would, Pakistanis thought, banish rigging from the system forever and make us a normal democratic society. Then Daska slammed into this fantasy lil(e a runaway train. The blatant and crude way in which the Daska election was manipulated under the direct watch of PTI`s Punjab government, was unimaginable. For a party speaking about transparency in elections, including the Senate ones, andpegging its politics on this narrative, Daska was a debacle that perforated the lofty narrative beyond recognition. It takes a unique talent to take a morally strong issue and reduce it to an optically shredded and politically compromised one.

4 Hafeez Sheikh issue: The dominos had begun to fall, but no one was willing to see it. By the time the Gilani videos emerged, PTPs moral capital was already depleting. The sharp contrast that the Gilani video should have provided to the PTPs narrative of transparency, got dulled because of PTPs own contradictions over the money factor (Qadir from Balochistan issue), and over the transparency factor (Daska issue). Hafeez Sheikh`s stunning loss was not just a defeat for the PTI on one seat, or an outcome that required the prime minister to prove his majority no, it was something much more serious, for it halted, or perhaps overturned, the perception from a month ago that PTI had cut PDM down to size and was for now the only real game in town. It takes a unique talent to take a parliamentary strong issue and reduce it to a politically shredded and optically compromised one.

5 Election Commission issue: PTI took a morally strong, contextually less strong and legally weak issue to the Supreme Court on the mode of elections. Once defeated, it hoisted the same issue on the ECP. Every blow, every reversal and every defeat forced PTI to try and dig itself out of its troubles. The unnecessary collision with the ECP based on the original flawed logic of the reference in the Supreme Court is now reducing PTI to a party that is venting its anger and frustration at a constitutional body whose basic logic has been endorsed by the highest court in the land. This is diluting the gravitas a ruling party must exude in order to manage a complex representative system held together by institutional equilibrium. It takes a unique talent to take a contextually strongissue and reduce it to a politically shredded and legally compromised one.

Can a vote of confidence bandage all these five self-inflicted wounds?  The writer is Dawn`s resident editor in Islamabad.

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