**Looking for poll clues**

Asha’ar Rehman

Saturday, Jul 22, 2023

Pakistan needs to fast start throwing up signs to convince everyone around that a general election in the country is imminent. Right now, things are moving rather slowly, despite whatever muted assurances have been issued and whatever steps have been taken towards the polls being held. Strictly speaking given the background of how the exercise has been conducted in the past, it seems quite a lot has to be done before enacting the finale that ensures the presence of a ‘worthy’ government in Islamabad.

On all previous occasions where a government was unable to complete its term and a fresh election was necessary, we all knew that the party just ousted from power stood little chance in the coming election. There is little to suggest that this time we are going to be served a different fare. The clues indicate a continuation of the trend and those who are insistent upon taking into account something as irrelevant in similar times as public sentiment do that at peril to their credibility.

It is easy to presume here as to which individual is most unlikely to succeed at the polling booth the next time around. But this said, the combination of factors that go into this defeat at the hustings for the party out of power is taking too long. There are cases that need to be decided. There are allies and colleagues who are not being separated from the undesirable fast enough – at least the process of dismantling is not fast enough to starkly indicate that an election is just round the corner.

The emergence of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa faction is an example. Not only did it take so long for the group that respectfully calls itself ‘parliamentarians’ to announce its arrival as an alternative to the PTI, the faction had a rather ignominious beginning courtesy the lack of too many prominent faces with it.

Ideally, the parliamentarians could have stepped up to centre-stage soon after the May 9 disaster. First, it was reported that Pervez Khattak, the gentleman most capable of creating such a group from within the corrupted body of the PTI, was to come up with his creation after Eidul Azha. The veteran patchwork specialist took rather too many days after Eid to come up with his invention. For now, Muharram means that most politics will remain low-key during the month.

The advent of the holy month in itself should have been enough of a reason for the main election cast to hasten the pace of their activity. Did you see the actors betraying any such urgency? From a distance, rummaging through the muddle of information, there seemed a purposeful effort towards giving shape to a plausible buildup to the crowning of a new acceptable ruler.

Mian Nawaz Sharif is being tipped to return as the king but then again a whole plethora of legal and political issues need to be settled before power can be restored to him. Again, the crucial question is: if he is to return as prime minister, at this rate, how long will it take for the system to remove these impediments?

This is a moot point in the discussion about the possible timing of the general election in Pakistan. Suppose it is but a continuation of the old and we know who is going to lose and who will most likely be crowned, lethargic work towards the formula ending at this stage could lead to adventurous, mindless slogging later to acquire results. That could discredit this entire project, familiarly entitled establishing democracy on firm foundations in the country.

It does not quite suit the theme when veteran analysts dub the smallest steps towards generating pre-election euphoria at this time as premature. This just creates further doubt about whatever commitment has been expressed about possible elections in September or October. For it to be a more meaningful promise, at least the politicians considered clean for the new electoral contest must be allowed to face off or join shoulders in accordance with their disposition.

The polls must be held as early as possible and it is important that all rituals are followed. Slogans must not remain suppressed for too long and loyalties must be flaunted to build up momentum. People must be seen to be participating in a usual buildup and not betray symptoms of disinterest. This is essential for the rescue project to succeed in its objective of delivering a better Pakistan.

The writer is a senior journalist.