**Lost moral high ground**

BY A B B A S N A S I R 2021-02-21

VERY few political parties have claimed the moral high ground for themselves to the extent the PTI has over the years so it is mind-boggling how it chose to squander that for one extra National Assembly seat. Yes, just one more seat.

For a political party and government, which has spent the better part of two weeks arguing in the Supreme Court that the sanctity of the ballot and the integrity of the process was above everything else; and that `corrupt practices` should not be condoned in the Senate elections, this was inexplicable.

Yes, above all else. I say this as the honourable attorney general, who normally enjoys a good reputation as a lawyer, has appeared to suggest that the court should hold that there is no requirement for a constitutional amendment to dispense with secret balloting for the Senate elections.

The integrity of the process was paramount, was the government`s view.

Therefore, what happene d in NA-75 was shocking.

By the time you read this you will have heard the gory details, watched the endless videos made on smartphones with even the faces and identities in the public domain of some of those who chose, or were coerced, to try and steal an election.

Elections are always highly charged affairs but rarely has the Election Commission of Pakistan issued the kind of damning statement it did while withholding the result. The ECP said it got very little response and assistance from the administration in tracking some 20 presiding officers who allegedly went missing overnight. It also said the integrity of the results they presented is questionable.

With this desperate attempt, where the chief of the prime minister`s Tiger Force was heading the campaign after having resigned from his SAPM role temporarily, one assumes, the PTI seems to have shot itself in the foot. The party has given no hint there is any realisation of this.

It didn`t opt for damage control, for example, by supporting a re-election at least in the polling stations where the presiding officers disappeared `in the fog`, were incommunicado for the whole night, and re-emerged with, by some accounts, results which seemed to dramatically defy the turnout trend in the nearly 350 other polling stations. Itsministers remained defiant.

Kudos to the ECP for standing its ground and stopping this travesty dead in its tracks, despite having to work through a reticent, even if not blatantly partisan, administration.

Do you think it was quite absurd for a comfortably ensconced government to be seen to play what appeared to be such high-stal(es poker particularly because the incumbents have everything to lose and the opposition next to nothing? Or was there method to this madness? Well, who knows? Let`s consider some facts. After doing very little for two and a half years to forge aconsensus for a `show of hands` for the Senate elections, with less than three months to go for the exercise, the PTI suddenly sprang into action last year.

In late December, the president sent a reference to the highest judicial forum in the country, seeking the Supreme Court`s opinion on whether a show of hands could be introduced for the elections to the upper house of parliament without a constitutional amendment, in effect bypassing Article 226.

This, many legal experts say, was unwise as the judiciary was being asked to handle a political hot potato. Having done this, the government didn`t even wait for the court to take up the issue and tried to move a constitutional amendment in the National Assembly.

This was doomed to fail as the government has a thin majority and nowhere near the two-thirds required. When the opposition blocked the move, the same day the Assembly was prorogued and a presidential ordinance issued amending the election rules and calling for a show of hands, contingent, of course on the court`s `opinion` Bizarrely, the ruling party did not ask for any suchchange when its senators were elected in 2018 nor did it make the demand during the election of the Senate chairman and neither when the no-confidence move against the chairman was defeated, despite the opposition enjoying a majority in the house.

So, why now? Well after a fairly unimpressive performance in office and abysmal delivery against its election manifesto, it must have started to feel the heat of the formation of the opposition alliance PDM last September and its campaign targeting the party in power and its alleged backers.

Not just this, the narrative of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif hammered home by his daughter and PML-N leader-in-waiting Maryam Nawaz also started to gain traction in the strategically crucial central Punjab belt. The anger witnessed during Friday`s by-elections was one manifestation where people stayed on the streets to ensure their mandate was not subject to an assault.

Thus, a template that may have been used in the past could not be now.

While the PML-N and JUI-F components of the PDM were insistent on their planned movement via popular mobilisation and the eventual long march, their PPP partner has convinced them to also look at the option of change within the framework of the existing assemblies.

This will obviously mean a no-confidence move at some point. The government enjoys a majority of about 20 MNAs. So it should not be anxious at all.

But it is. The first test of its strength would have to come in the margin of victory of its Senate candidates from Islamabad.

The ruling party`s desire for a show of hands is aimed at ensuring that its members and coalition partners remain loyal to it. It fears some of them will be `bought over` while some others may vote based on the government`s dismal performance.

I still feel these fears are unfounded. The advantage is always with the incumbent. I am sure Daska did not enjoy the prime minister`s sanction. He needs to put his foot down before more damage is done to him and his party.  The writer is a former editor of Dawn.

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