**Pyrrhic victory**

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Amidst widespread allegations of electoral engineering and deprivation of the people’s mandate pursuant to the startling outcome of the elections, traditional political players jostle for the formation of a makeshift government. Fortune has been forced to favour the enthronement of an exhausted force for the fourth time in this nation’s precarious democratic history.

From their garrison in Model Town, the Sharifs were seen standing shoulder to shoulder with nascent hopes of forming a central and provincial government, where their leader delivered a message of hope and resilience to its voter base and (with slight resentment) to the people of Pakistan.

While the elder brother prematurely declared the PML-N’s victory, observers could see a hint of disappointment in the eyes of the former premier Shahbaz Sharif. The younger brother could be reflecting upon the hollow words being spouted at the cameras, as he hesitantly backed up the claims of victory through gritted teeth.

An overview of the results in Punjab would leave many scratching their heads. On the eve of February 8, 2024, multiple media outlets delivered information corroborating the claims of the remnant PTI leadership, regarding the major political upset delivered at the hands of its determined voters.

During the early hours of the morning on February 9, it all but seemed that three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif had lost from his so-called garh in NA-130, whereas defeat had been confirmed in Mansehra (NA-15). Indeed, as per a widely circulated copy of Form 47 for NA-130 exemplifies the management of affairs in the respective constituency to secure a seat for Mr Nawaz Sharif.

While the miraculous victory of Mian Sahab in his constituency might have delivered a momentary sigh of relief to Model Town, it not only signifies an endorsement of the ladla tag but also exposes the misplaced reliance of the PML-N on facilitating forces. The shocking defeats of senior PML-N leaders such as Khwaja Saad Rafique, Sheikh Rohale Asghar, Khurram Dastagir, and Rana Sanaullah along with the massive turnout of PTI voters which culminated in a whitewash across Faisalabad coupled with a tear-jerking show of defiance in Sialkot, the PML-N has been severely weakened in constituencies which were assumed to be their backyard.

Then again, the PML-N should learn their lesson from past and present elections that an unhealthy obsession to secure power through Machiavellian means requires the usual support of those who serve Aries. It must be reiterated that these forces have set the game in such a way that any government can be dismissed at the first sign of inconvenience. Should a coalition government be formed between Punjab and Sindh, those who take responsibility for the people of Pakistan may seek guidance from the words of Alexander the Great: “Remember, upon the conduct of each depends the fate of all”

On the other hand, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has emerged as a star from this electoral battle as someone who may benefit from a coalition setup. Set to possibly receive a lion’s share of cabinet positions, along with the presidency, the PPP may be able to solidify its position on a national scale, while also gaining ground across Punjab. It is well known that the incoming months carry a significant economic burden in the form of external debt servicing, along with the negotiation of a long-term IMF programme. The preceding two factors are likely to accompany tough decisions that would require action by the PML-N as the premiership and finance ministry are predicted to be retained by Nawaz and Co. This would grant Bilawal a space to polish and bolster his own image as a maturing politician, while saving the PPP from any blame for unpopular decisions that must be taken as part of the economic resuscitation of Pakistan.

While discourse surrounding the prospective formation of government is a natural component of every election cycle, the current performance of the PTI-backed independents has sent shockwaves across the board. Despite the incarceration of its senior leadership and the stripping of the party of its electoral symbol, the individuals nominated by the PTI have secured comfortable victories against the electables who are traditionally thought to be strong contenders for the legislature. Although certain urban constituencies are embroiled in disputes over results, the PTI has secured a key role in deciding the direction of national politics in the coming months. Even though mobile networks were suspended, the message broadcasted from Adiala across Pakistan was loud and clear: “Naaz itna na karain humko satane wale, aur bhi daur-e-falak hain abhi aane waley”.

On a concluding note, it must be mentioned that the polity has already witnessed the horrors of violent agitation against state institutions. For the sake of reconciliation and reorientation of an extremely polarized nation, it may be suggested that the PTI temporarily opt for compromise in the interest of keeping the boat afloat.

The sentiments of the people against orthodoxy have been fairly representative of the election results and a point has been made. Further agitation and politics of revenge would culminate in a Sisyphean ordeal and only serve to further weaken the almost collapsed notion of state unity. Therefore, an earnest request is made to Imran Khan’s PTI – call a truce for the people of Pakistan.

The writer is a lawyer.