**[Quo vadis?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1814086/quo-vadis)**

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THE initial reaction was shock as independents affiliated with the PTI emerged as the dominant force in the next parliament. It was, after all, widely presumed to be preordained that the PML-N would emerge as the clear winner on Feb 8. It clearly did not, which is gratifying. What is unclear is whether even the PML-N’s runner-up status is earned or manipulated. The PTI is challenging the results in several constituencies where the voting pattern is alleged to have been altered after polling day — and the delayed result anno­u­ncements appear to back that narrative.

On the other hand, the question arises whether the powers that be are as incompetent in rigging elections as they are in ensuring security, as demonstrated by the election eve attacks in Balochistan and KP.

Another possibility is selective manipulation, whereby particular seats were targeted to ensure the incarcerated PTI leader Imran Khan’s ‘independent’ acolytes fell substantially short of a simple majority, but won enough seats to facilitate plausible deniability about rigging while also denying the PML-N the chance of forming a government on its own.

In a country where actual conspiracies frequently compete with even more bizarre conspiracy theories, the least likely option in terms of public acceptance is that the establishment decided to let the voters have their say. Be that as it may, it is unlikely that the PTI’s claims of a stolen landslide will be judicially endorsed. Nor is there any evident possibility of Khan’s return to power. But the same dream has also been shattered for Nawaz Sharif, whose party trails the independents by a substantial margin, and the rumoured plan of ushering Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari into the prime ministerial slot always seemed outlandish.

The future is unwritten after an intriguing election.

What lies ahead is anyone’s guess. Some kind of clarity about the shape of the coalition to come — there is no other option — might emerge before the end of the month. A PDM 2.0 might be the least unlikely prospect, although who might be at its helm, or whether the PTI will dominate the opposition, remains unclear. A hung assembly naturally suits the purposes of those who have exercised behind-the-scenes power since 1988 — somewhat less directly (but nonetheless decisively) than in the preceding 11 years.

What the future holds so far remains shrouded in the smog of uncertainty. The foreign press, taken aback by the outcome, has been pushing the narrative of a vote against the establishment, while underplaying the latter’s role in the 2018 election result. Several reports, including in Pakistan, have attributed the unexpected result to an unprecedented turnout. But there is no evidence of that yet. Both official and independent sources say that it was even lower than in 2018. That did not prevent The Intercept’s Ryan Grim from proclaiming that a “historic turnout … is swamping the military’s effort to rig the election”.

The ill-informed likes of Grim also see Khan as some kind of democrat nonpareil, ignoring his military-backed initiation and pride in being on the same page as the security establishment. Other Western outlets have repeated the turnout claim, and suggested various solutions. Advice — local or extraneous — that the army ought to keep out of politics has made sense for almost half a century. That hasn’t come to pass, and although the US cannot be exonerated in this context, the fault lies in ourselves, and not exclusively in the stars-and-stripes.

America’s nuisance value has steadily multiplied for eight decades, and on all too many occasions Islamabad has latched onto Washington of its own volition, often with deleterious consequences. It does not naturally follow, though, that the cipher saga was instrumental in Khan’s displacement; not least because the process of relieving him of responsibilities he had failed to fulfil had already been in motion before the message from a relatively low-grade State Department operative reached Pakistan, suggesting that the US would be glad to see the back of the prime minister, who had badly mistimed his 2022 visit to Moscow.

Far more significant is what the next coalition, with or without PTI participation, might have in store for a tanking economy — which neither the Imran Khan administration nor its successors managed to do anything about. Even worse, none of the main party platforms in 2024 offered policies that might point to a solution beyond absurd castles in the air, such as the PPP’s populist promise of doubling everyone’s income.

Notwithstanding last week’s delayed elections, and the unexpected result that has enthused many within and outside the country who really ought to know better, any hope that a distinctly better future — desperately needed — lies ahead would be premature. Not for the first time, I sincerely hope my scepticism is misplaced.

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