**Squandered opportunity**

B Y M A L E E H A L O D H I 2023-05-08

LAST week`s talks between the coalition government and the opposition took place in an atmosphere unfortunately vitiated by the exchange of inflammatory rhetoric between the two sides. PML-N leaders set a more belligerent tone this time, with Defence Minister Khawaja Asif calling the talks an `exercise in futility`, while Javed Latif declared that negotiations with `a terrorist party` were impossible. This prompted PTI leaders to question the government`s seriousness to engage in result-oriented talks. Moreover, government actions, notably the police raid on former Punjab chief minister Pervez Elahi`s Lahore residence, made the political atmosphere more tense and hardly propitious for negotiations.

Nevertheless, at one point in the governmentopposition parleys it seemed some headway was made when the two sides agreed national and provincial elections should be held on the same day.

This resulted from a show of flexibility by Imran Khan`s PTI, whose negotiators led by Shah Mahmood Qureshi, also agreed to neutral caretaker administrations to oversee the polls. They went further, offering to help the government, which lacks a two-thirds parliamentary majority, to secure a one-time constitutional cover to shift the election date beyond the constitutionally stipulated 90-day period through an amendment.

But the talks broke down on lack of agreement on a common date for elections. Government representatives didn`t budge from their position of holding elections after parliament completed its full term in August, which meant not before October. The PTI side proposed dissolving the Sindh and Balochistan assemblies in May for elections to be fixed for some time in mid-July. This was rejected by the government. Thus the `final` round of talks ended inconclusively with no indication that negotiations will resume.

Considering the government only has four months left in its term, offering to hold elections, say a month or two earlier, could have forged a national consensus to end the political deadlock, ease political tensions and create a peaceful pathway to the polls. But the ruling coalition squan-dered this opportunity by not opting for this course. Its obduracy on the election date is only explicable by its desire to delay the polls as long as possible out of fear that the electoral outcome will not be in its favour. What kind of difference a few months will make to the political fortunes of coalition parties is beyond comprehension. If anything, time has been working against them, with PML-N steadily losing political ground. Failure to reach an agreement means confrontation between the government and opposition will intensify with the risk of greater political turmoil ahead. Khan had warned that in the absence of an accord his party will go back to the Supreme Court and he will direct his followers to agitate in the streets. PTI then submitted a letter to the apex court informing it that `a solution within the Constitution` could not be achieved in talks with the government. It also asked the court to implement `in letter and spirit` its earlier order to hold elections in Punjab on May 14. For its part, the SC `clarified` that its order remained `unchanged`.

One of the reasons cited by representatives of the ruling coalition for not conceding on the election date is that the government has a trade policy to announce and a budget to present. Whether or not this was an excuse there is no getting away from the fact that the government`s political distractions, tardy decisions and mismanagement have left the economy teetering on the brink of a breakdown. The bailout deal with the IMF remains elusive for several reasons. The last stick.

ing points include the Fund`s insistence that Pakistan fully fund the external financing gap for the remaining part of this fiscal year. The gap is estimated to be around $3 billion after $2bn was apparently committed by Saudi Arabia and $1bn by UAE. Before concluding the agreement, the Fund also wants to evaluate the budget plans prepared by the government, with whom it has an obvious trust deficit.

The IMF deal has been delayed since November. This delay is continuing to impose a heavy cost on the economy. This is reflected in depleting foreign exchange reserves, tumbling exports and the virtual collapse of business confi-dence. The economy is, in fact, precariously poised with the fall in exports, decline in overseas remittances, inflation at a 60-year high and the rupee losing record value against the dollar.

Further delay in the Fund programme could plunge the precarious economy into a graver crisis. If anything, the dire economic situation makes elections necessary sooner rather than later, so that a government with a fresh mandate can deal with Pakistan`s worst economic crisis on a sustainable basis and not by band-aid measures.

This is especially so as the coalition government, instead of steering the shipwrecked economy to safer shores, seems to be expending more time and energy on political battles and power tussles. It has now declared war on the Supreme Court. Ruling coalition ministers have been lashing out against court orders, exploiting divisions among its judges and characterising their confrontation with the SC as one designed to assert parliament`s supremacy. At times their aggressive statements seem to suggest they are deliberately provoking the court to take action against them. This conduct seems aimed at discrediting the court to justify the government`s defiance of its order to hold provincial elections in Punjab. Meanwhile, the Election Commission has filed a petition for a review of the court`s order on the Punjab polls claiming the SC exceeded its constitutional jurisdiction in fixing a date, which it lacked the authority to do. These clashes between state institutions have left the governance system in disarray and on the verge of collapse.

There may still be a slim chance for government-opposition talks to be revived. Otherwise, the ruling coalition`s desire to cling to power as long as it can and delay elections will keep the country in a state of limbo and only kick the can down the road. Far from ending the ongoing political crisis, it will set the stage for an even bigger one later with more profound consequences for the country`s economic and political stability. m T he writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.