[Mohammad Zubair](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mohammad-zubair)

March 11, 2021

**The Senate defeat**

The PM has taken a vote of confidence from the National Assembly with 178 members reposing confidence. Out of this total, there were 16 members, who according to the PM himself, had sold their votes in favour of Yousaf Raza Gilani during the Senate elections.

If you exclude these 16, as surely one should, the PM is heading a minority government. With more than two and a half years still to go, is it really worth heading a minority government? More than anything else, will it even be possible to effectively govern?

The PM has clearly lost the mandate of the people as reflected in the recently held by-elections. The significance of the losses is even more when one considers that the ruling party lost in all four – provinces - Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan and even in its stronghold Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Nowshera is the hometown of Defence Minister Pervez Khattak and losing a by-election from there is an extraordinary event.

On top of these electoral losses, what we witnessed in NA-75 Daska was not only unfortunate but seriously embarrassing for the ruling party. In a plan that we feel was apparently prepared at the highest level in Punjab, more than 20 presiding officers with voting bags remained untraced for more than 13 hours. This despite the best efforts by the Election Commission of Pakistan officials who reported the matter at the highest level in the Punjab government but without any success. The ECP obviously was left with no option but to declare the election null and void.

Typically, winning a by-election for the ruling party is a foregone conclusion. Not so this time. How did that happen? What was different this time?

To begin with, the PTI was never the most popular political party in the country. It’s win in the 2018 elections was more a function of manipulation rather than genuine electoral triumph. The lead-up to the 2018 elections was marred by controversies. What we witnessed in Balochistan was unprecedented even by Pakistani standards. The PML-N’s 20-plus seats in the provincial assembly were converted into almost nothing through non-democratic methods. A large number of electables in southern Punjab had to change loyalties. Similar tactics were used to change loyalties across Pakistan. Important leaders such as Danyal Aziz, Talal Chaudhry, Hanif Abbasi and others were disqualified from participating in the electoral process. Most importantly, Mian Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz were not only disqualified but arrested before the elections.

All of this was still not enough to prevent the PML-N from winning the largest number of votes and seats in the Punjab Assembly – which by many calculations matters more from the Pakistani electoral standpoint. What happened on Election Day 2018 was most shameful including the counting process and, most significantly, the failure of the RTS – the system designed to announce the results.

Even before going into this year’s by-elections, it was evident that the ruling party had lost popularity among the people. Various surveys reflected dwindling popular support for the ruling party. Among several reasons, economic conditions, especially for the poor and the middle class, were the major contributor. Pakistan has never witnessed so much poverty, unemployment and rising prices as has been seen during the last two and a half years. In addition, scams and crises such as those related to sugar, wheat, LNG, medicines, oil and others did not help the government either. The poor have ended up paying hundreds of billions more because of these scams – a direct result of corruption and incompetence.

The stage was thus set for the Senate seat from Islamabad. Normally, this would have been just another Senate election but with the entry of former PM Yousaf Raza Gilani, this was billed as a test for PM Imran Khan: does he have majority votes in the National Assembly or not? Therefore, losing this seat was not an option for the PTI. And so the party put in all efforts at its disposal to ensure victory for Finance Minister Hafeez Shaikh. Those efforts also included commitments for funds for every member of the ruling party.

But then, in a stunning result, the ruling party candidate lost the Islamabad Senate seat – sending shockwaves across the country. This was perhaps the biggest and most embarrassing loss for PM Imran Khan. Anger and frustration writ large on the faces of ministers who appeared on electronic media blaming corrupt practices by the opposition for the defeat of their candidate. PM Imran Khan blamed 16 members of his own party for the loss in the Senate election.

PM Imran Khan then went on a tirade against his political opponents, accusing them of loot and plunder during their reign and for buying votes in the recent Senate elections. If money has been used as he claims and for which he has record available, why does he not act against his own party people and for once set an example reminding people of the true spirit of the sort of state he wishes to make?

Taking action against its own 16 members would mean the PTI losing the majority of the house. Imran Khan and the PTI had claimed high moral ground when the party fired 20 MPAs in April 2018. These MPAs were involved in taking money in exchange for the Senate vote for PPP candidates (the PM claimed to have seen the videos which recently resurfaced after three years). The assemblies were in any case going to be dissolved in May 2018; so, taking action a month before the dissolution was no big deal.

Now is the real time to show high moral ground. Once these 16 MNAs are fired from the party, the PM can go for either of the two options: go for by-elections in these 16 constituencies or dissolve the assemblies and seek fresh mandate from the people. Both options are extremely risky but at least Kaptaan would surely earn respect among the people, and a name in history.

The writer is the spokesperson for Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz, and former governor Sindh.

Twitter: @Real\_MZubair