**[The interim solution](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769194/the-interim-solution)**

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IT is yet another episode of ‘from power to prison’, a tragicomedy long played on Pakistan’s political stage. The plot is predictable: yet another former prime minister bites the dust. The [sentencing](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768528) and [disqualification](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769083) of Imran Khan was foretold, as it had been in the case of other former prime ministers. He, too, has been charged with corruption like his predecessors.

It is irrelevant whether one is guilty or not; the ‘monster’ has to be culled. It all seems to be going according to script. The plan is to keep Khan out of the electoral race. The recent court verdict may have served the objective but the project of dismantling the PTI is not over yet. Khan’s imprisonment does not seem to have affected his popular support base. The game is far from over. In fact, it has just begun. It is now going to be a long-drawn political and legal battle between the two antagonists.

All this has made it increasingly uncertain whether elections will be held within the stipulated time frame even as the National Assembly is dissolved and a caretaker administration takes charge. The [last-minute decision to hold elections on the basis of the latest population count](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768622) has already delayed polling beyond the 90 days as mandated by the Constitution.

There is a fear that the delay could exceed the few months needed by the Election Commission to complete the delimitation exercise. A prolonged and empowered caretaker administration backed by the security establishment seems to be very much on the cards, putting democratic transition on hold.

We may be moving towards permanent hybrid rule, with the civilians playing second fiddle.

A [series of legislation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768525/legislative-spree-so-many-laws-so-little-time) pushed through parliament in unprecedented haste just a few days before the dissolution of the National Assembly has reinforced suspicions. Most alarming is the passage of the [amendments to the Official Secrets Act bill](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768896), which provides sweeping powers to the security agencies, thus underming civil rights. Although some of the provisions were slightly diluted after strong protest in the Senate, its overall lethality has not been blunted.

Such unchecked powers for security agencies will further strengthen the extra-democratic forces. It seems to be part of the plan to silence the opposition. What the ruling coalition fails to understand is that it could also be used against them. It will certainly come back to haunt the current ruling parties. The shadow of the security establishment has already grown longer, raising concerns about the country staying on the democratic path.

We may be moving towards permanent hybrid rule, with the civilians playing second fiddle. There are already signs of the security establishment’s creeping domination, with the security leadership’s increasing role in several civilian fields, including running the economy. The ruling coalition has virtually abdicated civilian authority.

What has been happening is a sad commentary on the country’s retreating democratic process, however weak it may have been in the first place. The last 16 months is a testimony to the backward march. The PTI, which is now in the eye of the storm, is equally, if not more, to be blamed for wrecking the system with its destructive narrative.

Instead of taking the parliamentary path, the former prime minister took a confrontationist approach, seeking to bring down the entire edifice. His populist rhetoric and the public’s disenchantment with the PDM government may have won him unprecedented support among the people, but his recklessness has done huge damage to the democratic process.

He simultaneously took on his political rivals and erstwhile patrons in the security establishment. He is now paying the cost of his thoughtless populist politics. Though his popular base seems to have remained intact, the party is in disarray, with the departure of several leaders under pressure.

However, there is no sign of Khan losing support, despite the restrictions on his statements being printed or telecast. In fact, his popularity graph seems to have climbed after his imprisonment. Despite state repression and efforts to dismantle the party, the PTI is still capable of giving a tough fight to the PML-N in the electoral battleground of Punjab even in relatively free polls. Perhaps it is the fear of being swept away that has brought the PDM closer to the security establishment and that has seen the emergence of a new hybrid arrangement with another civilian partner. There is complete convergence between the two on eliminating the PTI challenge. In the process, it is democratic space that seems to be shrinking.

With the [PDM government’s departure around the corner](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769178/govt-all-set-to-bow-out-after-premier-sends-advice-for-na-dissolution), all eyes are on the composition of the caretaker administration. With the PTI, the main opposition party, out of the consultation process, it has been left to the coalition partners and a token Leader of the Opposition to nominate the interim prime minister — of course, with input from the security establishment. That would make the credentials of the interim government as a non-partisan body questionable.

With the likelihood of prolonged interim rule, there is very much a possibility of an empowered technocratic setup being installed to run the administration during perhaps the most challenging time in our recent history. Such an arrangement would mean virtual military rule.

Can such non-representative technocratic-cum-military rule stabilise the politically volatile situation? Of course not. Ruthless use of state power to suppress the opposition will only make things worse. It would then become extremely hard for anyone to control the situation.

It is a dangerous scenario that confronts a country already in the midst of a dire economic crisis and rising terrorism. Sidelining a popular leader and making and breaking political parties won’t stabilise the situation. Unfortunately, our political leadership has never leant any lesson — not even from their own history. The politics of confrontation and revenge has already led to shrinking democratic space. Delaying elections is not the solution. It is the responsibility of both the government and opposition to bring down the temperature in order to create a conducive atmosphere for free and fair elections. Regrettably, it doesn’t seem to be happening. The time for political reconciliation appears to be over. One can only hope sanity prevails.

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