**[The second chance](https://www.dawn.com/news/1809713/the-second-chance)**

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A DECADE ago, in the course of election day in 2013, I, along with colleagues visited a polling station in Rawalpindi. Established in a government school, the venue was filled with people, papers and the hum of conversations.

At one point, a colleague, who kept a close eye on politics in the city, had a quiet exchange with a man there; and later said that the man was a PPP worker who was now coordinating with the teams of PTI people. “Many of them are helping PTI in this election,” he said, because their own party’s candidates were in too weak a position to make a difference.

This was the year Imran Khan’s party was able to make inroads into Rawalpindi, a PML-N stronghold, by winning seats in the district.

Over the next five years, many of the PPP’s leaders, supporters and workers followed the same route. As their own party seemed to take no interest in Punjab, those associated with it flew the coop and landed in the nest of the PTI. One of the reasons for this was obviously the old tradition of *dharras* in Punjab; as those in the PPP were the ones who belonged to dharras opposing the PML-N-associated dharras, they had no choice but to join the PTI.

A second reason was that PPP supporters could not stomach the idea of voting for the PML-N and hence chose the PTI. This has also been used to explain the leanings of [Sanam Javed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1795112), the incarcerated PTI supporter who is implicated in May 9 cases. Her father was a PPP supporter and this, it is argued, had made the family so averse to the PML-N, that her decision to support the PTI was inevitable.

The assumption that PPP voters will never opt for the PML-N is not entirely correct.

Perhaps this is the same reasoning which Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari is using as he [appeals to PTI voters](https://www.dawn.com/news/1807563) to join hands with him and defeat the PML-N. In speech after speech, he points out that the coming election is a race between only two parties, the PPP and PML-N. And how the voters shouldn’t waste their vote or allow the PML-N to win.

While he takes occasional digs at the PTI, he saves his harshest criticism for PML-N and Nawaz Sharif. For instance, he never forgets to remind the people that someone is going to be imposed on the populace as the prime minister for the fourth time. However, he is careful not to raise the spectre of someone else from the same family becoming the prime minister for the second time.

On the surface, it seems as if the PPP chairman is reverting to the old PPP tradition of being a serious claimant in Punjab by challenging the PML-N. But there are two factors which have to be taken into account.

One, the new PPP narrative suits everyone. After all, both the PPP and PML-N want to return to a time when the two parties faced each other in Punjab, without a third player to share the stage with. This return to the past has been discussed by the parties more than once. For this election, it seems possible, not just because of the situation on the ground but also because of the decision by the Supreme Court; since then, most commentators and media outlets also seem to consider all PTI candidates as independent candidates.

However, the people, or rather the voters, don’t necessarily follow the same logic.

First, this assumption that PPP voters will never opt for the PML-N is not entirely correct. The transition that took place in Punjab after 1990 means that more than a few PPP voters did switch to the PML-N. In fact, by 2008, the parties were both close enough that Nawaz Sharif was able to speak of Benazir Bhutto’s assassination and of avenging it while campaigning.

Second, the [close working relationship](https://www.dawn.com/news/1678856) between the PPP and PML-N until about six months ago means the voters will take time to accept the war of words between the two parties. While this Punch and Judy show is what consumes television screens, the voters have yet to buy it.

This is why other than BBZ’s own race in Lahore, few think the PPP can offer any serious contest in any constituency in central Punjab. South Punjab is a different ballgame where electables have joined the PPP and can make a difference. Take, for instance, Multan, where the PPP is one of two top contenders on more than one seat.

Indeed, for the people to believe in the PPP’s new avatar as a serious challenger to the PML-N, the PPP will have to stay the course. A short election campaign is not going to cut it.

Unfortunately, there are far too many rumours or conjectures about how there will be yet another PDM-like coalition government after the election, which if it happens, will once again weaken the PPP’s credentials as a party that can be the counterweight to the PML-N in Punjab.

For if BBZ once again allows his party to become a part of the PML-N-led cabinet, his party will be back. And it will be harder still to be the face of the opposition to PML-N in Punjab as long as the PTI exists as a party (outside of the legal realm) and faces the brunt of the state’s wrath.

In other words, the resurrection of the PPP of the 1980s and the 1990s requires the party and its young leader to spend some time in the opposition, which it seems is needed to win over the people. It is not enough to be young and to claim to symbolise change on the basis of age.

In a country where perceptions have hardened about parties which have governed and continue to govern, words in themselves may not prove enough. And for Punjab, he will have to prove his opposition to the PML-N is not limited to election speeches.

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*To find your constituency and location of your polling booth, SMS your NIC number (no spaces) to 8300. Once you know your constituency, visit the ECP website* [*here*](https://ecp.gov.pk/general-elections-2024) *for candidates.*