[**Time for a new mandate?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1715814/time-for-a-new-mandate)

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IT is yet another emphatic electoral [victory](https://www.dawn.com/news/1715434) for the PTI. The latest series of by-elections marked the rout of the ruling coalition across the country. It could not have been more humiliating. It is rightly being described as a personal triumph for former prime minister Imran Khan who won six of the seven seats he contested.

It is, indeed, an unprecedented feat that demonstrates the shifting sands of Pakistani politics. It is the PDM government’s hour of reckoning: how long can it stick to power with its fast-slipping political space and a sliding economy? With its depleted strength, the National Assembly has become redundant.

With the authority of the federal government virtually limited to the capital, the situation is fast becoming untenable. The political structure of the country is on the verge of collapse. An unwieldy and fractious coalition administration cannot deal with the multiple challenges confronting the country. Perhaps, it is time for a new mandate.

**Editorial:** [*Key takeaways from Sunday's by-polls*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1715634/imrans-victory)

Notwithstanding the defeat of the PTI candidate (the daughter of former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi) in Multan, the outcome of the by-elections was not surprising. The elections were held on the seats left vacant by the resignation of the PTI members. True, one can argue that the party has retained its own seats. But the scale of victory and the fact that Imran Khan was the sole PTI candidate in seven constituencies lends the outcome much greater political significance. The voters’ verdict could not have been more unambiguous.

What makes the situation extremely dangerous is the virtual collapse of all state institutions.

More specifically, it signifies a spectacular erosion of the PML-N’s electoral support base in its bastion in a very short period. Six months in power, the party of the Sharifs seems to have lost most of its political capital in Punjab, further weakening its capacity to govern and to deal with a myriad of challenges. The government seems to be in complete disarray.

It may not be a victory for the PTI narrative but certainly it is a vote against the PDM. It has been a devastating blow to the party that had dominated Punjab politics for the past several decades. The power struggle within the Sharif clan and its ossified politics have been a major reason for the party’s declining support base. The lacklustre election campaign run by the PML-N in Punjab denoted increasing despondency within party ranks.

No senior party leader was out in the field to campaign for the party candidates. Curiously, Maryam Nawaz chose to go to London on the eve of the critical by-elections while Hamza Shehbaz, the former Punjab chief minister, has also been conspicuous by his absence.

It seems as if the PML-N leadership was already resigned to the outcome. The party has never fully recovered from the [setback](https://www.dawn.com/news/1700283) it received in the Punjab Assembly by-elections earlier this year that cost it the provincial government. The drubbing in the latest series of by-elections in the province was foretold after that debacle.

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On the other hand, former prime minister Imran Khan has led an extremely effective campaign. He [declared](https://www.dawn.com/news/1715016) the elections a referendum against the present dispensation. It is apparent that the government’s failure and the prevailing disorder have been fully exploited by the former prime minister to galvanise his supporters. The rising cost of living and the government’s failure to stem the economic slide has turned the tide against the PDM. The disappointing performance of the Shehbaz Sharif government over the last six months has added to the public discontent.

A huge army of ministers, advisers and special assistants has exposed the unwieldiness of the motley alliance. The [return](https://www.dawn.com/news/1712399) of Ishaq Dar as the country’s ‘economic czar’ underscores the fallacy of the government’s claim of putting the economy back on the track. His voodoo economics has brought the country back to the brink of sovereign default.

Dar’s return to the pivotal position of finance minister has accentuated the divide within the main ruling party. It is clear that the government is now being run through remote control from London undermining the authority of the prime minister. That has worsened the predicament of a fledgling administration. Given this messy situation, the PDM’s rout in the by-elections is not a surprise. The coalition seems to have completely lost the plot.

It was a very shrewd move by the PTI leader to stand himself on nearly all the seats. People voted for him knowing that he was not going to sit in the National Assembly. There is no indication that the PTI will go back to the National Assembly after this emphatic victory. In fact, the latest electoral triumph has weaponised Khan’s demand for early elections. The outcome of the latest by-elections has changed the entire political landscape.

Predictably, the PTI has stepped up pressure on the PDM government after the by-elections and has threatened to storm the capital. The threat seems to be much more serious this time. The October storm is gathering strength. Can the PDM government with its shrinking legitimacy survive the opposition onslaught? With the odds stacked against it, it will be hard for the government to reverse the tide. The country is in complete chaos with the intensifying confrontation and political polarisation.

What makes the situation extremely dangerous is the virtual collapse of all state institutions. Imran Khan may now be dominating the political power game but his flawed narrative and confrontational approach remain a major obstacle in the way of moving forward and reaching a democratic political solution to take the country out of this existential crisis.

Surely fresh elections seem to be the most viable solution to ending the existing political gridlock. But for a free and fair election, it requires an agreement among the political forces on a mechanism. In the absence of an agreed framework, the elections will remain controversial, plunging the country deeper into the morass.

It is imperative that all political forces start serious negotiations on the process. Its victory in the by-elections may be a political triumph for the PTI but the party cannot expect to bring about change by storming the citadel.

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