**Time for an election**

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The polycrisis in Pakistan rages on. Urgent questions agitate the condition of the Pakistani. A sovereign default may not be imminent, but an existential economic crisis has raged for months, perhaps years – depending on who is measuring what. How long before economic difficulties cause major social unrest in Pakistan?

The dissolution of the Punjab Assembly means that an already frayed federal compact could be tested more severely than at any stage since the 7th NFC Award and the 18th Amendment. How much dissonance between provinces and across the federation can the existing system bear before subnational narratives and movements emerge as key variables in governance?

The terrorism of the TTP has surged in recent weeks. Can the country continue to send its soldiers and police personnel in harm’s way without a coherent, politically feasible counter terrorism strategy in place?

Significant chunks of post disaster reconstruction remain pending from the 2005 earthquake and the 2010 floods. Will the reconstruction of the damage caused by the climate change induced superfloods of 2022 follow a different trajectory?

Afghanistan is relatively stable after nearly four decades, but short periods of stability there have always produced long periods of instability. Will the Taliban be able to sustain their control over Afghanistan’s territory in a manner that eventually leads to the end of terrorist sanctuaries in that country?

Saudi Arabia is changing rapidly, and for the better. Does the millennial leadership of Pakistan’s most vital strategic partner have the appetite to continue dealing with the dysfunction of the dinosaurs of the Pakistani military and civilian elite?

China has responded to the domestic pressures that the strict Covid-19 lockdown in there had generated by opening up to travel. Suddenly there is hope that economic growth forecasts could be revised upward. Will a once-again growing China revert to the pre-pandemic laissez faire infrastructure financing binge in countries like Pakistan?

There isn’t an obvious right or wrong answer to any of these questions. Many of the determinants of these questions lie outside the jurisdiction of Pakistan or Pakistanis. Yet there is one thing common to them all. They are substantial questions. Can a weak and internally contradictory government, scared of its own shadow, try answer such questions? Not even a little bit.

Pakistan has been aching for a free and fair election since 2018. The only way the country has any chance at tackling these questions is by conducting a truly free and fair election. Only a government with a fresh mandate – even if such a mandate is conjured up through a coalition – can attempt to tackle these challenges. Absent the public’s renewed confidence through an election, there is no version of Pakistan that will work.

Of course, an election and a new mandate, even a thumping majority, do not guarantee that the resulting government will be able to tackle these questions capably. But they will be able to tackle them the way they want, the way the Pakistani wants. Since 2018, the decision of the military leadership to install a government of its own liking in Islamabad has meant that elected civilian leaders have neither the full agency to sink or swim on their own, nor the liability to be answerable for their decisions.

Imran Khan’s popularity after losing the vote of no-confidence in 2022 is not easily explicable or replicable, but it is not entirely drawn from his charisma nor the appeal of Khan’s lies about a global anti-Khan conspiracy. It is also not hinged on the anti-military tone that Khan adopted after being dumped by his once-upon-a-time patrons. What does explain some of Khan’s appeal since 2022 is that he very clearly aligned all his weaknesses with the military leadership and all his strengths as his own.

It seems unlikely that the PML-N or PPP can pull off such sophisticated and effective political messaging in the weeks and months to come – but there should no doubt about their attempts to do so in the not-too-distant future. Both PDM members will attempt to distance themselves from the cool shade of the military’s bosom under which they currently reside. This is a manoeuvre both parties have honed over decades, and one that Khan has masterfully taken from under their noses.

The military may have gotten too used to having all power in Pakistan flow to it and through it. Things that feel good are easy to catch and hard to quit. Claims of the military being neutral or having dissociated from politics were clearly greatly exaggerated.

All of these factors make an early and immediate general election even more imperative. No one in Pakistan should be more keen for a free, fair and credible general election than the military – so it can rid itself of the stench of the post 2016 era and the ‘mistakes’ of 2018, 2022 and everything before, during and after. But as ever there are vultures and parasites lined up from here to eternity, ready to argue against the most obvious way forward for the country. Three of the arguments merit dismantling, early and often.

The first and most frequent argument against an immediate election is the one used by many that are understandably convinced that absent a PTI victory, Imran Khan will refuse to accept the outcome of any election. This is true and has been proven in 2013. But what happened in 2014 was more important. Khan camped out, kind of, at D Chowk – and he huffed and puffed as is his wont, but he could not blow this house down. An electorally legitimate Nawaz Sharif survived the triple threat of Tahirul Qadri, Imran Khan and the invisible hand of Pakistani politics. Winners aren’t whiners. Hold a free and fair election. The loser won’t have the capacity to destabilize or undermine a real winner – just like 2014. Besides, if Khan is not going to accept anything but a victory, then holding an election in October 2023 or holding it in April 2023 will make no difference. Hold the election. As soon as possible.

The second argument against an immediate announcement of elections is that the country and its economy aren’t stable enough for an election. But this was true a year ago, and the economy has gotten worse since then. Yes, Shaukat Tarin lined the Finance Division with landmines, but Ishaq Dar is doing the same. The economy cannot recover without difficult decisions that require the electorate’s mandate. The desperate retired uncles arguing otherwise as they salivate at the prospects of an unelected cabal of technocrats taking over Pakistan should sit down (and retire). The military is in no position to underwrite another Shahid Javed Burki or Moeen Qureshi episode. It doesn’t have the political capital to do so.

Finally, the third argument is that yet another batch of electoral reforms or a new electoral framework is required before the election is held. This one is especially wild. A political system in which name calling is the principal currency and jail threat terms are the only numbers being negotiated between adversaries, where opposing parties cannot agree to even sit together in parliament, will somehow renegotiate electoral reforms that were already agreed in 2017-2018? It isn’t going to happen. The only real electoral reform that matters is an absence of the military and deep state from the electoral paraphernalia.

An election will not assure reform, and it will not automatically lend stability to Pakistan. Another term for Imran Khan, the PML-N, or the PPP will most likely lead to continued incompetence in key areas of public life. But the absence of an election is a certain pathway to the same incompetence. More importantly, without an election, both the Khan and anti-Khan wings of Pakistani politics will continue to quite rightly lay blame for the current mess, not on their incompetence or lack of courage to take good decisions, but on the architects of this mess.

A true and meaningful step away from the Pakistan of 2016-2022 is not the ability of newspaper columnists to finally name General Qamar Javed Bajwa as the architect of this mess, this catastrophic national condition of 2023. A true and meaningful step away from that Pakistan is a free, fair and credible election – without compromise, unsullied by military intervention and fully shouldered by this country’s politicians.

It is time.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.