**Perfect gridlock**

Murtaza Solangi

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Pakistan gives a look of a perfect gridlock today. The 11-month-old coalition government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the PTI led by sacked prime minister Imran Khan continue to pull in the opposite directions, tearing apart all state institutions and leaving no middle ground.

The usual arbiters, the judiciary and the establishment, burdened by follies of their own past, are not able to mediate, put the fire out or suggest any solutions. The media too has become a victim of this extreme polarization, many of them wearing the slants of the warring camps. It feels like two fast trains, with failed brakes, speeding from opposite directions on the same track. Will there be a collision or will something happen at the last minute to avoid the collision?

It is clear that the remnants of Project Imran are very much there in the system, despite the formal announcement of the abortion of the project. The controversial decision of the Supreme Court on the interpretation of Article 63A of the constitution created a snowball effect leading to the dismantling of the nascent Hamza Shehbaz government and the election of Pervez Elahi as the chief minister of Punjab.

The controversial decision, termed as a rewriting of the constitution by many legal experts, paved the way for Imran Khan to force both the chief ministers of Punjab as well as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as a pressure lever to force Islamabad to go for early elections.

With the IMF agreement still not inked, inflation touching the skies, interest rate at one of the highest levels ever, the economy slowing down, and unemployment and poverty skyrocketing, the coalition parties are undecided on how to go about early provincial elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

More than the early polls, they are worried about the fact that if the PTI sweeps these two provinces – with 80 per cent of the electorate – the governments that will be formed there will be there for five years. Which would mean that, come October, they will have all the tools available at their disposal to rig the National Assembly elections in their favour, making it impossible for the Election Commission to hold free and fair elections as guaranteed under Article 218 of the constitution.

Imran Khan has tried to influence and engage the security establishment all the while maligning it almost on a daily basis. His recent outburst blaming key security officials for his murder conspiracy and extending an olive branch to the army chief at the same time will not have gone well. Meanwhile, he is to appear in dozens of court cases at different tiers of the court system involving civil and criminal matters. Imran is successfully using his alleged murder plot to avoid the judicial process and avoid a conviction so as to make himself available for the next elections.

Despite having enough legal, constitutional, economic and security reasons to delay the provincial elections in Punjab and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Islamabad government as well as the ECP have not advocated the case for holding all elections in October across Pakistan either in the courts or the courts of public opinion forcefully. The Islamabad government today is looking and acting like sleepwalkers, slowly walking towards elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in a zombie-like state.

It is crystal clear that amid an economic meltdown of biblical proportions, insurgency rising across Pakistan, the provincial elections and their results will act like a catalyst to ignite further political instability, affecting the upcoming National Assembly elections in October as well. This is a perfect gridlock created by decades-long flawed policies of the state and the miserable failure of Project Imran that was nurtured over more than a decade.

Regardless of who wins in the elections scheduled for the next month, the results will not be accepted by the losing party. The same goes for the elections due in October this year. No matter who wins the National Assembly elections, the results won’t be acceptable to the losing side.

It is not clear now if Imran Khan will successfully escape the long arm of the law before the next National Assembly elections or not but it is crystal clear that even if the PTI secures a landslide victory, given its strained relations with the establishment, the economic meltdown, rising insurgency, bad rapport with both media and civil society, and ruptured relations with key countries during its government, there is a perfect lethal cocktail that will make it impossible for them to survive. It will only ensure continued political instability, detrimental to the very existence of Pakistan.

In this perfect gridlock, there are no shortcuts. The only way forward is truth and reconciliation by all stakeholders to sit down, admit past follies, agree to new rules of the game and ensure political stability.

The writer is a journalist. He tweets @murtazasolangi and can be reached at: murtazasolangi@gmail.com