[Mohammad Zubair](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mohammad-zubair)

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**The accountability circus**

Hamza Shahbaz is finally out of jail and a free man after spending more than 20 months in jail. His release showcases the continuation of the accountability farce in full display since the present government came into power. While several leaders of the PML-N have been arrested and incarcerated, the Sharif family has faced the brunt of the present witch-hunt.

Even before Election 2018, Mian Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz were arrested on trumped-up charges and sent to jail. Remember both were in London with Begum Kulsoom Nawaz who was on the death bed when the conviction was announced. Yet both decided to return home and face the jail sentences.

This was not the end of the persecution of the Sharif family and indeed of the PML-N leadership. Within a month of Imran Khan becoming the PM, Mian Shahbaz Sharif was also arrested. The possible thinking must have been that by arresting the most prominent members of the Sharif family, the PM would have smooth sailing in governance matters. But the fact is that performance and good governance is a function of competence, quality delivery and a quality team and can’t be achieved by arresting key opposition members. Unfortunately, the current setup has none of these attributes – no competence, no quality team and therefore no quality delivery.

Frustrated with the poor performance, Imran Khan focussed his attention on his political opponents, especially the leadership of the PML-N. People were made to believe that these arrests would not only result in convictions but that billions of dollars would also be recovered as so-called looted wealth. Not a penny has been recovered nor a single conviction so far – except for Mian Nawaz Sharif in a dubious case which even the government and its accountability institution NAB would like to forget. Unfortunately, the judgment still stands despite the misconduct charges regarding the judge.

Despite several judgements given by the superior judiciary recently, the scam of accountability continues unabated. Judgments in cases such as Saad Rafique and his brother, Mian Shahbaz Sharif and several others have seriously called into question the credibility of the entire accountability process. Yet the government and NAB remain unmoved and undeterred by the criticism not just of the judiciary but the media and civil society as well. The Supreme Court has even mentioned NAB in the context of ‘political engineering’ directed only towards the political opposition. Such a statement would embarrass any government but not so this one.

The release of Hamza Shahbaz is not the end of the engineering process. His arrest could no longer be justified under any pretext since the interpretation of law was stretched as much as possible. There are others who await their release from detention – most notably Mian Shahbaz Sharif. This is not the first time he has been arrested by the present government. He was first arrested in September 2018 and released by the orders of the Supreme Court which observed that they could not even find what crime had been committed and for what he had been arrested. Such blatant violation of justice has never been seen in a democratic dispensation.

Several other leaders continue to face the farce of the accountability process. Khawaja Asif, a close aide of Mian Nawaz Sharif, is presently in jail for an unknown crime. When there is no specific charge which can be used to arrest any political leader, then the black law of ‘assets beyond means’ is used to arrest any leader. Since August 2018, we have seen the prosecution failing to even file the references or start the trial. The intent in Khawaja Asif’s case as well as all others involving the political opposition is to harass and silence dissenting voices. Such tactics have never worked before and will not succeed in the future either.

Rana Sanaullah’s arrest was another brutal example of how the present government has tried to silence those who have stood up bravely and raised their voice against injustice and in support of democratic values. He was arrested around July 2019 in a brazen narcotics case. The minister in charge, Sheharyar Afridi, announced with passion, fanfare and conviction that Rana Sanaullah was not just carrying drugs in his jeep but that he was also involved in the drug trade. Rana Sanaullah was kept in prison in most inhumane conditions and released after six months. Meanwhile, Sheheryar Afridi has moved out from the ministry since then; and it's all quiet as though nothing ever happened. So much for the much-trumpeted accountability process.

No one in the opposition or the independent media opposes the accountability process but only fair and across-the-board accountability can ensure a corruption-free Pakistan. Unfortunately, this has not been the case during the last two and half years. This one-sided accountability has not only affected the credibility of the entire process but has also led to a negative investment climate and severely damaged our democratic values.

A multi-party system with a vibrant opposition is the essence of any democracy but if the objective is to silence the political opposition, then it will invariably lead to the possibility of a one-party state. That is totally against what our constitution envisages and what the founding fathers wanted Pakistan to be: a multi-party functional democracy with both the government and the opposition having important roles to play.

Meanwhile, corruption has been going up since this government took over in August 2018. And this is according to Transparency International. Between 2013 and 2018, the corruption index consistently went down. This positive trend has seen a reversal with the PTI government coming into power. So much for all the talk about eliminating corruption.

The writer is the spokesperson for Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz, and former governor Sindh.

Twitter: @Real\_MZubair