**[Approaching a dead end](https://www.dawn.com/news/1596046/approaching-a-dead-end)**

[Zahid Hussain](https://www.dawn.com/authors/966/zahid-hussain)Updated 16 Dec 2020

FRENCH writer Georges Bernanos once said: “The worst, the most corrupting of lies are problems poorly stated.” His observation applies well to the ongoing war of words between the government and the opposition alliance. Rationality seems to have been completely lost in the cacophony of political one-upmanship that has intensified in the aftermath of the power show put up by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) in Lahore on Sunday.

While the opposition leaders have declared the event “historic”, the prime minister called it a “pathetic” show of power. Both are overstatements. The jalsa in the opposition’s heartland may not be a game changer but has not been a failure either.

The zing was certainly missing in the speeches of the leaders and there was no clarity on the future line of action. The divergence of views among the allies was all too obvious. Yet the challenges for a rudderless dispensation are no less serious. The face-off is continuing, with neither side willing to take a step back.

Now the PDM has given a Jan 31 [deadline](https://www.dawn.com/news/1595740) for the government to resign or else prepare for the storming of the capital. Such threats are not rare in our political history. How can one forget the current prime minister’s similar ultimatum to the Nawaz Sharif government in 2014? The months-long siege in Islamabad failed to bring down the rulers, and parliament rallied behind the Sharif government.

What is the purpose of a dialogue with no discussion on the flawed accountability process?

In an ironic twist of fate, the same forces that came to the rescue of the elected government then are now arrayed against Prime Minister Imran Khan, threatening to bring him down. There appears no possibility of the alliance succeeding in what Khan had failed to achieve. The siege of the capital is planned for the end of January next year at the peak of winter, making things more daunting for the PDM. But it will also not be easy for the government to deal with the situation.

A major challenge for this motley alliance is to sustain the momentum of the campaign for a very long period of time and build enough public pressure on the government to bend. There is no evidence yet of this happening. There is no indication of the swelling of anti-government sentiments that could bring the masses out on the street in large numbers, presenting a serious threat to a government that apparently still has the full backing of the powerful security establishment. The [power show in Lahore](https://www.dawn.com/news/1595548/my-narrative-is-the-same-as-quaid-i-azams-says-nawaz-at-pdms-lahore-power-show) does not give much boost to the opposition’s mass mobilisation campaign.

Meanwhile, the PDM has failed to reach an agreement on resigning from parliament and the provincial legislative assemblies. The gap that divides the allied parties on the issue seems to have become wider.

The PPP, which has the greatest stakes in the system, is clearly not in favour of burning its boats. Losing the Sindh government will leave the party with virtually no political clout. It has no significant political foothold in any other province. Veteran PPP leader Aitzaz Ahsan was right in pointing out that the resignation of the opposition lawmakers would be a fatal mistake that would only strengthen the government’s position. With the Senate election coming closer, any such move would leave the field wide open for the PTI to gain full control of the upper house. That surely limits the PDM’s options.

There is a visible hardening of opposition leaders’ tone on negotiations with the government. The PDM leaders have slammed the door on any dialogue with the prime minister. It may just be a posture but given the unyielding attitude of the PTI government there seems to be no possibility of breaking the stalemate on the dialogue issue. Imran Khan is sticking to his mantra of no ‘NRO’ for opposition leaders facing corruption charges.

One wonders what this really means. No dialogue can be productive without discussion on contentious issues. The so-called accountability process that is victimising the opposition leaders has been a major cause of the current political crisis. It is the PTI government that has made the whole process of accountability questionable. This ‘accountability’ is being used as a weapon against the opposition.

This politics of victimisation has brought the opposition together. What is the purpose of a dialogue with no discussion on the flawed accountability process? Almost all the top opposition leaders are now facing corruption cases and have been detained for months without even being formally charged. Imran Khan has made the whole legal system controversial by his questionable crusade against corruption.

Other important issues also need to be discussed in order to end the current political stalemate and salvage the democratic process in the country. Reform of the electoral process to make the latter more credible is essential for the smooth working of the democratic system.

Suppression of democratic rights and growing restrictions on media freedom have raised fears that the country is moving towards authoritarianism. The increasing role of the security agencies in politics has also been a serious cause of concern. This hybrid rule is detrimental to the smooth functioning of democratic institutions. The ongoing political stand-off could suck the security establishment more deeply into the political power game.

The prime minister’s stubbornness and arrogance are surely the major reason for the current impasse that could prove to be his government’s undoing. Since coming to power two and half years ago, the PTI government has nothing much to show for its performance in any field of governance.

Instead of focusing on governance and developing a broad consensus on key domestic and external issues, the prime minister has engaged in a constant battle with the opposition. His remark that the Lahore rally had [buried the opposition](https://www.dawn.com/news/1595832/pm-says-pdms-anti-govt-drive-buried-in-lahore) only exposes his political short-sightedness.

It’s not the size of the rally that matters. What he doesn’t realise is that the continuing political confrontation could lead to his downfall. By shutting the door on dialogue, he has weakened not only his government but also the entire system. Politics is the art of the possible provided the prime minister understands that and take steps to defuse the situation.

*The writer is an author and journalist.*

[**zhussain100@yahoo.com**](http://mailto:zhussain100@yahoo.com)

**Twitter:** [**@hidhussain**](https://twitter.com/hidhussain)

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