**[Art of storming Islamabad](https://www.dawn.com/news/1596615/art-of-storming-islamabad)**

[Fahd Husain](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8675/fahd-husain)Updated 19 Dec 2020

NET practice done, now comes the Test match.

Six weeks separate the opposition alliance Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) from its planned long march to Islamabad. What was once considered a symbolic event aimed at creating political noise is today an organisational and logistical mega project requiring quasi-military precision and planning. So when PDM embarks on its long march, it will need to have figured out to the last detail the following key aspects of the event.

1. Numbers: What is the minimum number of people needed for the long march and dharna to have an impact? In the 1990s, similar marches undertaken by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif had small numbers but those did not matter because these events were more like jalsas in motion that had no specific declared outcomes other than generating heat and forcing the establishment to referee out the conflict. When Imran Khan and Tahir-ul-Qadri marched into Islamabad in 2014, they had a few thousand people with them. However, the attrition rate was heavy and by the end of the dharna Imran Khan would be making speeches to an audience of a few dozen. Then Khadim Rizvi of TLP showed through his two dharnas that numbers did not matter if the outcome was to create chaos. PDM will need to decide if it is banking on numbers to inflict pressure or other factors.

Dharna, like war, should be an extension of diplomacy. This is why PDM leaders will need to draw up possible exit strategies before they embark on a march.

1. Location: This is the other key factor. PTI/PAT crowds camped out on Kashmir (now Srinagar) highway and Aabpara. Their presence choked off this vicinity but did not have a direct impact on life in all other areas of the capital. Then they broke through the barricades into the Red Zone and squatted in and around D-Chowk. This gave them direct access to parliament, Supreme Court, PM House, *PTV* and the secretariat but it left the city to function fairly normally. The location created problems for people going to these buildings, and it provided a good TV backdrop for Khan and Qadri’s speeches, but after the initial attacks on *PTV* and PM House, the crowds sat around and waited for the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif to resign. He inconvenienced them by not obliging. Khadim Rizvi with his few thousand men opted for Faizabad and choked off most entrances to the capital thereby having a debilitating effect on daily life. Maulana Fazlur Rehman camped his men last October in an open area seven kilometres from the Red Zone. The location provided him little strategic advantage. PDM’s choice of the location will be a clear reflection of the outcome it is looking for. Sunday Bazaar ground like the maulana? Red Zone like Imran Khan? Or Faizabad like Khadim Rizvi?
2. Logistics: Imran Khan and Qadri had their containers as did Maulana Fazlur Rehman. Khadim Rizvi lived in his tent. All stayed on location for the bulk of the time, except for the maulana. PDM will have a dozen leaders leading the march. Will they plan for a dozen containers? That might get a bit unwieldy. Or will some prefer to stay the night at home or the parliamentary lodges and return for the day? Wouldn’t that look insensitive and politically wrong? Who will stay in the container and on what basis will this be decided?

In an event fuelled by the power of symbolism and optics under the constant glare of cameras and lights, the PDM leadership will need to think deep, hard and pragmatically about the abode of their leaders in the rough and tumble of the charged march. February is cold in Islamabad. Food, shelter and toilets are key. Maulana’s supporters might brave the hazards but others will find it very difficult to survive — night after night — in such conditions. Logistics supply line will therefore need to be put in place and shelter from the cold ensured. Easier said than done. Then of course, the most important thing: funding. Who will contribute how much money and how will it be managed and spent will be a key determinant of organisational success — or failure.

1. Violence: If the PDM long marchers come to Islamabad and sit, they may sit, and sit, and sit. Or they may want to huff and puff to blow the PTI house away. If the aim is to create chaos so the running of the state becomes untenable, then PDM will need to engineer a collision. For this reason exactly, the government would want to avoid it. Imran-Qadri duo engineered violence by attacking *PTV* and PM House. Rizvi managed a clash by refusing to un-choke the capital and inviting a police operation. Maulana never opted for violence and his men camped safely inside a perimeter. A key component of their long march plan therefore will need to be war-gamed in advance: how to engineer controlled violence, when to do it and how to be perceived as the victim and not the aggressor. More importantly, how to sustain a certain level of chaos instead of making it a one-off event.
2. Exit strategy: Dharna, like war, should be an extension of diplomacy. This is why PDM leaders will need to draw up possible exit strategies before they embark on a march. Imran and Qadri did not have one as a result of which the dharna was cutting a sorry figure in the last days. The APS tragedy provided Imran an exit strategy otherwise he would have had to pack up and leave under a cloud. PDM can learn from his mistake and draw up various scenarios with each exit strategy providing for a ready-made narrative that weaves itself into a declaration of victory.

Six weeks is enough time for PDM strategists to draw up their battle plans with the precision of military commanders. Hordes may make for good visuals but rarely win battles against well-organised and clear-headed adversaries.

Storming Islamabad has become a delicate art.

*The writer is Dawn’s resident editor in Islamabad.*

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

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