**Bilawal s choices**

BY SH AK AIB QURESH I 2020-12-30

AS Pakistan commemorates former prime minister Benazir Bhutto`s 13th death anniversary, the country remains hostage to a conflict that commenced with her father`s removal in a military coup in 1977. While Pakistan remains sharply divided over the Bhutto phenomenon, one thing that most Pakistanis agree on is that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto continue to symbolise resistance to unelected rule. Is Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, the third generation, going to remain locked in fighting this battle or are his contemporary challenges dif ferent to his mother`s? The two older martyred Bhuttos fenced with four military dictators between them but were always acutely conscious that while the Constitution might be the glue that holds Pakistan together, it is the military that guarantees Pakistan`s spatial existence in a difficult neighbourhood. In other words, both Mr Bhutto and Ms Bhutto while propagating democracy also continually took the realities of the power-equation into account to seek solutions with the military. This was obviously at variance with their avowed positions earning the wrath of their liberal allies and scorn of political competitors.

Unfortunately for the PPP, the process always ended in tears. This is actually a difficult tightrope walk which Bilawal has had to inherit.

The key difference for Bilawal is that he has started from the weakest position a Bhutto has ever been in. The PPP has continually leaked electoral power since 1993.

The propaganda barrage commenced against it by Zia is now etched in military memory.

As a result, the PPP is for the most part now viewed through a Punjabi middle-class prism of a dynastic, corrupt party given to preserving the rule of the landed feudal in Sindh. The PPP`s redistributive ethos, be it the nationalisation of the 1970s, the unleashing of massive employment programmes or the Benazir Income Support Programme, has been presented as epic leftist mismanagement of the economy. Rural poverty in Sindh and the mismanagement of Karachi have assisted this narrative.

Without Benazir Bhutto`s overarching charismatic presence to counter this narrative, Bilawal today faces difficult political choices. But where there is crisis there is opportunity. Since the PPP is not as threatening now to the military as it used to be during the older Bhutto years, Bilawal (much like Imran Khan) has a better chance of constructing a dialogue with the military.

However, to succeed, he will need to be sensidve to both the strategic and corporate military interests which the military even itself finds difficult to articulate.The key strategic military interest is an economic plan that can support the military capability that Pakistan needs on a sustainable basis. This means a more productive and competitive economy to which Karachi holds the key. However, the devil lies in the detail.

Tinkering with the political economy in Sindh can be dangerous. The price for PPP`s politics in Sindh is paid (much like the PTI and PML-N in Punjab) through a mixture of development funds and appropriation of public resources to the benefit of political cadres.

This is the system through which politicians keep both their influence and social order.

The security establishment castigates the politicians for running this unproductive system and pillories them with criminal and corruption cases but does not provide them the space to discard this system. The only way out is for it to provide the politicians the space to bring reform, improve productivity and create more social harmony without endangering public finances.

In 2014, Bilawal had decided to grab thisprogressive economic space in Sindh irrespective of the military. His change was stoutly resisted by his own political cadres who did not have the skills to function in a competitive economy. If hecan now resurrect his programme and partner with the security establishment in his management of Karachi before it throws its weight totally behind Karachi`s exit from the Sindh administrative political sphere, he would do Sindh an enormous service.

For the PPP leadership it is the dif ficulty of holding the establishment to any deal.

How do you enforce such a deal? You cannot make such understandings public or take the military to court. It is for the military to act in the national interest and provide the assurancesthe PPP needs.Irrespecdve,for Bilawal, the risk is worth taking even if instead of assurances it can be structured around mutual confidence building measures and milestones.

If Bilawal is able to deliver he might yet compete with Imran Khan for the security establishment`s support nationally (if not on price then at least on value). This might also be the only route for the PPP back into the national mainstream by getting a level playing field and for Bilawal to bring to heel the conspiratorialsecondderofthePPPleadership that is already weighing its options.  The writer is a former caretaker finance minister; Sindh.