**Can the PDM survive?**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-03-24

IT is more than just a war of words between the two major allies that marks the widening cleavage in the motley opposition coalition. The differences on strategy between the PPP and PML-N appear to be unbridgeable. It may not yet have sounded the death knell of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) but the fragmentation process is very much in evidence. While the edifice may still survive it is not likely to pose any serious political challenge to the existing hybrid rule.

Since its formation some six months ago, the PDM has remained divided over its narrative. It has been an alignment of expediency from the outset.

Although it was able to shake a rudderless PTI government with some impressive rallies across the country, differences over strategy and objectives blunted its impact.

Nawaz Sharif`s and his daughter Maryam Nawaz`s relentless attack on the military leadership and their insistence on bringing down the entire system remained a contentious issue with the PPP that favours a more nuanced approach in order to not derail the political process. The PPP managed to prevail upon the alliance partners to stay within the ambit of electoral politics and also use parliamentary fora to fight the PTI government.

Being the only party in the alliance running a provincial government, it is not in the interest of the PPP to pull out of the system. Some other factors such as its f ailure to build enough public pressure to undermine the authority of the PTI government has also forced the PDM to review its strategy.

Despite its reservations, the PML-N agreed to participate in by-elections and the Senate polls.

The planned long march for January was postponed. The decision not to leave the electoral process paid off as the PDM parties regained their seats. This boosted their morale and put the government in a defensive position.

Yousuf Raza Gilani`s victory in the Senate election on the capital`s seat dealt a serious political blow to the rulers and reinforced the PPP`s argument that the government could be defeated within the system. It has been insisting on moving a vote of no-confidence against the PTI government in Punjab that is hanging onto a razor-thin majority.The thinking was that some defection from the treasury benches could help topple a highly unpopular and ineffective Buzdar government.

But the PML-N, which is still the largest single party in the Punjab provincial assembly, has not been interested in such a move. The prime minister`s move to get the vote of confidence from the National Assembly and the setback in the Senate chairman election has revived the debate in the PDM about the security establishment`s role.

While the PPP appears convinced about the establishment`s neutrality in the Senate elections, the PML-N believes otherwise. It`s not surprising that there has been a marked escalation in Nawaz Sharif`s and Maryam Nawaz`s attacks on the military leadership. In his address to the party leadership council, the former prime minister warned the generals of reprisal and accused them of threatening his daughter.

There is certainly no indication of the establishment pulling back from its support for Prime Minister Imran Khan`s government but the degree of its involvement in electoral manipulation remains a contentious matter. The Senate elections produced a predictable outcome with the only exception of a surprise victory for the PDM candidate on the capital seat.

For the Senate chairman election, it was the rejection of seven votes that led to the triumph of the PTI-supported candidate. The PPP has challenged the decision in court. However, it was the deputy chairman election that confirmed some opposition members switching sides. Does that indicate the establishment`s involvement in the matter? Perhaps,butonecannotbe sure.

Losing the Senate election for chairman, despite a clear majority in the house, came as a major setback for the PDM and once again tilted the balance in f avour of the PTI-led coalition. That also brought the divide between the PML-N and PPP over the PDM`s strategy to fight the government to the fore.

The lid was blown off during last week`s PDM leadership meeting. The PML-N along with JUI-F wanted to go for the jugular by resigning from the assemblies followed by the storming of the capital. These two parties would no more accept thePPP`s argument for not abandoning the parliamentary course. For the PPP, resignation from the assemblies would create an uncertain political situation that could lead to extra-constitutional intervention.

Losing the Sindh government could put the PPP at a political disadvantage. Besides, the party whose national political influence over the years has been reduced to Sindh province is not willing to take on the security establishment. Asif Zardari was extremely candid while addressing the PDM leadership council last week when he declared that his party was not in a position to directly take on the powerful establishment.

He shrewdly linked his party`s resignation from the assemblies to Nawaz Sharif`s returning home to lead the struggle against the government. That led to harsh exchanges between the PPP and PML-N, bringing out the old demons of distrust between the two erstwhile political rivals. It has virtually ended the brief period of bonhomie between the two pardes. The noodgates of accusadons and counteraccusations have now been opened and involve the new generation of leaders representing the two powerful political dynasties.

It has become increasingly ugly with Maryam Nawaz labelling the PPP leader of being supported by the establishment. Bilawal BhuttoZardari responded by reminding her of the establishment`s role in propping up Sharif in the past.

The political immaturity of the two pretenders is quite apparent.

This may still not mark the parting of the ways but there is still doubt that the two parties with their differing agendas can stay together in the alliance. The PML-N says the PDM will go ahead with its decision to resign from the assemblies with or without the PPP. That may lead to the complete fragmentation of the alliance. It may be good news for the PTI but will that save it from breaking under the burden of its own blunders and incompetence?  The writer is an author and journalist.

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