**[Caretaker by any other name](https://www.dawn.com/news/1820941/caretaker-by-any-other-name)**

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NOW that the people have voted and been outwitted, a new parliament is in place, and a new [president](https://www.dawn.com/news/1820647) and [prime minister](https://www.dawn.com/news/1818835) have reached Constitution Avenue. All of last week, the focus was on the federal cabinet; names were being whispered knowingly all over Islamabad, as once the names of female actors would be when a new Yash Chopra film was in the offing. Will it be her, or her?

But, as the Urdu expression ‘waqt kam hai aur muqaabla sakht’ (denoting a race against time) goes, the prime minister hit the ground running. Days before finalising his cabinet, he was holding meetings on the economy and the way forward — which his government never figured out in the previous tenure.

It was in these sessions that the first hints were dropped with reference to who he was planning to take along. Consider the visuals of the first meeting on the economy he held, which were released to the media. Everyone but Ishaq Dar was present; and no one could miss how the footage had more close-ups of Atta Tarrar, the new PML-N MNA from Lahore, than anyone else, lending credence to conjecture about him being the new information minister. And, for once, the press got it right!

Before the heated discussions lost their intensity came the picture of the PM meeting the caretaker foreign affairs minister and Ishaq Dar. The visual more or less confirmed that the finance wizard of the party had been sent to the foreign affairs ministry, where it was rumoured he would have Tariq Fatemi and Jalil Abbas Jilani to babysit, or rather guide, him — though neither of the two retired diplomats had made it by Monday afternoon, when the cabinet took oath. It was a perfect example of a picture being worth a thousand words.

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In his place, at the finance ministry, we are to see a banker from HBL, [Mohammad Aurangzeb](https://www.dawn.com/news/1820907/finance-czar-commits-to-continuing-caretakers-policies). Though the gentleman is new to the world of politics and the people, the entry of a technocrat at Q block was as open a secret as the fact that despite the ‘mulk ko Nawaz do’ slogan, it was Shehbaz who would get to occupy the PM House. The experienced party, which knew how to run it all, is now importing finance ministers as did the PPP and PTI. It is a sign of the new times, in which democracy has given way to a version of hybridity, be it [2.0](https://www.dawn.com/news/1815907) or pro max.

But all this news about the comings and goings of familiar and known Noonie faces did not pique as much interest as the news about the ‘caretakers’ being retained. These temporary takers of the government chairs stuck around for far longer than they should have and were far too fond of publicity and the sound of their voices than neutral beings should be. And, just as we thought we were rid of them, they are back.

Though only one name had made it to Monday’s ceremony, the rumours about others have not died down entirely. From Shamshad Akhtar to Jalil Abbas Jilani and even Ejaz Gauhar, all of them have proven indispensable to Pakistan’s progress, or so thinks PML-N (or someone else). Why else would their names continue to be discussed?

Nonetheless, the biggest story is the retention of the former chief minister of Punjab. He had already confirmed in a news story that he would be elected to the Senate — without having joined a party — and bring ‘Mohsin speed’ to the centre. As [Maryam Nawaz](NULL), the new chief minister of Punjab, is doing a fairly decent job of surprise visits to hospitals, schools and bakeries, one can only assume Naqvi’s speed is closely linked to the alacrity of the Punjab Police during his tenure.

After all, why else would his name be doing the rounds for interior? And it also confirms the speed at which the state is planning to rule or deal with the PTI and others. This is no moment for democracy where elected governments will now put in place different policies. Beyond Punjab, after all, the PPP’s choice for chief minister Balochistan also indicates that this is no 2008 moment. The caretakers and their approach continue to be the preferred choice and the preference is the un-healing touch.

In other words, all these hopes of how Shehbaz Sharif will reach out or how Zardari will bring a soothing touch to the polity appear misplaced. They may not have the power to do much more than enjoy the protocol and official residences. There is little space for their personal touch or preferences in the hybrid regime.

And, if someone still has any doubts, one simply needs to compare the present moment with the early days of 2008. In his first address after being elected as prime minister, [Yousuf Raza Gilani](https://www.dawn.com/news/1818804) announced ending the house arrest of the then judiciary, which had been Pervez Musharraf’s decision. It signalled a clean break with Musharraf’s policies.

But at present, Shehbaz Sharif has been prime minister for days and has said little to indicate any break with the past. There has not even been a passing mention of the inexplicable [ban](https://www.dawn.com/news/1815469) on X, or the issue of arrested journalists — [Asad Toor](https://www.dawn.com/news/1817498) and Imran Riaz — or even the women prisoners of PTI. The PPP is no different. The crackdown in Punjab on the protest of the PTI — whether or not it was greenlit by the new provincial government — is simply a continuation of old policies, even if there is an elected lot that will bear the responsibility.

Civil liberties are no-go areas for most political players at the moment. Or, for that matter, any such issue which made the caretaker period contentious. By focusing on the economy, the new government is simply assuring those in control that those in power will continue to pretend that this is no moment of change.

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