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**Coalitions and payoffs**

Why are the other constituents of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) making such a song and dance about the PPP’s reluctance to quit from the national and provincial assemblies?

At the end of the day, the end of politics is to seek or preserve power, and political choices are right or wrong in as much as they help advance this objective. Denuded of its sartorial elegance, all politics is at bottom realpolitik.

Unity is strength and an alliance or a coalition collectively carries more weight than each of its individual components left to themselves. In fact, this perceived strength is the main motive behind coalition formation. But why do coalitions often fall apart or otherwise fail to hit the bull’s eye?

All coalitions are undergirded by two fundamental conditions. The first is a sense of mutual dependence; otherwise there’s no need to set up an alliance. Interdependence implies that each member of the coalition has some resources – tangible or intangible – deemed important by the rest. In a political context, the resources may take the form of votes in the legislature, wealth, the power to mobilize a segment of society, or proximity to some significant groups. The unwillingness of any member to share its resources with the others may cause the coalition to wilt, crumble and finally collapse.

The second condition is the willingness to surrender part of the decision-making power from individual members to the alliance. This is with regard to both the strategies set by the coalition and the means to be employed to achieve them. Decisions made with consensus ensure that everyone is on board and will back them. The flip side is that one member can block decision-making by vetoing the views of the rest and thus rock the boat of the coalition.

At all events, for consensus-based decision-making, it’s necessary to put the interests of the coalition above the individual preferences of the members. But this is easier said than done. As every member is driven to maximizing its payoffs, its optimal or dominant strategy may not be in kilter with that of the coalition. In the absence of consensus, decision-making will come to a halt, resulting in an impasse.

Hence, coalitions are characterized by both cooperation and competition; the latter often leads to conflicts. Partners join hands to achieve the common objectives of the alliance. At the same time, each member seeking to maximize its payoffs may find it expedient to rat on the others.

On the basis of the degree of mutual dependence, coalitions may be classified as symmetrical and asymmetrical. In a symmetrical coalition, all the members are approximately equal in strength or resources; so the voice of the alliance is that of all the members.

In case of an asymmetrical coalition, one or more members – called the lead partners – are stronger or more resourceful than the others. The lead partners, provided they themselves reach an agreement, are able to prevail upon the other members in such a way that their will becomes the will of the entire coalition. The junior partners on their part realize that since on their own they are incapable of preserving or changing the status quo, they need to make a virtue of necessity by aligning their choices with those of the lead members.

Very often an asymmetrical coalition becomes a springboard for advancing the divergent preferences of the lead members. In that event, cooperation gives way to conflict and the lead members indulge in strategic behaviour, behaving as if they were adversaries and making moves to offset the advantage of their adversary.

The parties that make up the PDM have two lead members: the PPP and the PML-N. This makes the PDM an asymmetrical coalition. Then there are smaller parties of which the JUI-F is the most prominent. All those parties had cried foul when the results of the 2018 elections were announced. However, the parties differed on the optimal future strategy. The smaller parties insisted on adopting the more aggressive course of boycotting the new assemblies and taking to the streets to protest the alleged rigging. Both the lead parties, however, preferred to join the assemblies and demanded the constitution of a parliamentary panel to probe the charges that the elections were stolen. There were some good reasons behind those decisions. Not surprisingly, the lead parties had their way and the smaller partners acquiesced in their decision. In the end, all opposition parties acted rationally by choosing the strategy that they deemed was the best in the circumstances.

The PPP-PML-N collaboration, however, soon broke down. They failed to bring a joint candidate for the office of prime minister, and later for that of the president as well. Having failed to bring a consensus candidate for either office, the opposition was predictably trounced in both the elections.

When Maulana Fazlur Rehman staged an ‘Azadi March’ in Islamabad in late 2019 with the avowed purpose of dislodging the government, neither of the lead opposition parties had supported him – or had stabbed him in the back, as many would argue – and the sit-in predictably fizzled out. This clearly shows that at least as late as the end of 2019, the ouster of the government through street power was not the dominant strategy for either the PPP or the PML-N. Lately, both parties have shifted gears. However, whereas the PML-N insists on quitting the assemblies – which has been the stance of the smaller opposition parties from the word go – the PPP thinks exercising this ‘nuclear’ option will be premature.

What has caused both the lead opposition parties to agree on a long march to pull the government down, which represents a departure from their earlier stance? Or why do they have discordant positions on resigning from the assemblies? Before trying to answer these questions, let’s glance at the long march-cum-resignation strategy.

The basic idea is that in the event that the opposition parties quit, the assemblies will become unrepresentative and lose their legitimacy. The long march will put the squeeze on the decision-makers, forcing them to bend to the opposition’s demand for fresh and impartial elections. In case, however, a lead opposition party continues sitting in the assemblies, the legitimacy argument will lose steam. Besides, there’s no guarantee that the party which doesn’t resign from the assemblies will go the whole hog in the proposed long march, as it hasn’t burnt its boats.

As deception is the basis of a successful war and political leaders by and large like to play close to their chest, the answers to both the questions can at best be conjecture.

First, take the PML-N. Since July 2017 when former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was disqualified, the party appears to have fallen between two stools: whether to buck the system or work with it. By deciding to sit in the assemblies and later not supporting the JUI-F Azadi March, the PML-N sent out the message that it preferred to work with the system, provided its concerns were taken into account. However, probably that strategy didn’t come off. Forcing snap elections now seems to be the PML-N’s optimal strategy, as it reckons that it will return as the single largest party in that event. The worst outcome for the party will be to resign from the assemblies without being able to force early elections. Since the PML-N doesn’t have a government in any province, it can afford to take this risk.

However, snap elections are not the PPP’s dominant strategy. In case fresh elections are held in, say, next six months, the maximum payoff for the party is not likely to be much better than what it has at present – about 40 seats in the National Assembly and the opportunity to form the government in Sindh. The worst outcome for the PPP will be to lose its government in Sindh, without forcing snap elections.

This doesn’t seem to be a risk worth taking. So, the dominant strategy for the party is to oppose the decision to quit the assemblies and try to bring an in-house change in a way that will bring it to power. Even if it fails to do so, its Sindh government will remain intact. Hence, resigning from the assemblies is more likely to minimize than maximize the payoffs for the PPP.

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