[Farhan Bokhari](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/farhan-bokharii)

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**Crossing the red lines?**

The Pakistani opposition’s relentless attacks have triggered a dangerous trend – the fallout from breaking the hitherto well recognized red lines.

For years, a succession of Pakistan’s elected governments and the armed forces have co-existed under a mutually accepted norm, each having defined their own space.

But since the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) effectively led by the opposition PML-N launched its latest round of anti government protests, the red lines have become blurred.

In the past week, public comments by former speaker of the National Assembly Sardar Ayaz Sadiq have evoked widespread discomfort. His reference to Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's “trembling legs” before politicians at the peak of a dangerous military standoff with India last year has broken a well recognized norm.

The matter related to discussions over the release of Indian pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman to diffuse a crisis between India and Pakistan. Seldom before following a dangerous security crisis have the stakeholders come out publicly to vent their anger.

Sadiq’s public disclosure of what may or may not have transpired behind the scenes has established a dangerous precedent for the future. Going forward, its difficult to imagine exactly how Pakistan’s future intelligence, security and foreign policy community and their leaders will feel confident in candidly briefing political leaders during times of crises, without apprehensions over real or imaginary future disclosures.

Sadiq’s claim following high-profile video speeches from London by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif have also caused a futile deviation for the opposition. At a time when Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government is yet to begin stabilizing Pakistan’s troubled economy, there’s ample scope for targeting the ruling structure on the way the country is being governed.

Instead, taking the focus away to the quality of democracy and its fruits for the people has its own pitfalls. Pakistan’s mainstream political parties have yet to embrace a democratic character internally of their own.

Except for the ruling PTI, no political party has successfully broken away from a well entrenched commitment to hereditary politics. Mariam Nawaz Sharif, the de facto leader of the PML-N has inherited the mantle from her father while Bilawal Bhutto Zardari leads the PPP by virtue of a similar inheritance.

Internally within political parties too, rising stars have edged upwards more by affiliation to the leader of the day than by virtue of a credible democratic process.

Its hardly surprising that early indications of the PDM’s push so far appear to suggest that the opposition movement has little backing from a popular groundswell. That support will emerge once the grassroots of Pakistan are ignited with ordinary people lining up to support the movement as an indication of hope for their future.

For Prime Minister Khan, the PDM’s push must mark a moment for concern notwithstanding the brave face that he has maintained in public. More than two years after arriving in Islamabad for his maiden tenure as prime minister, Khan is yet to lead Pakistan towards a qualitatively new phase of unprecedented reforms to benefit the country’s mainstream population.

His promise to create a new system of social justice is far from being delivered. Meanwhile, the promised attack on deep-rooted corruption across Pakistan has become more of a witch hunt against the government’s political opponents than a credible exercise for rebuilding the nation.

Its hardly surprising that the PTI’s opponents have found ample opportunity to target the party, in large measure due to the accumulation of its failures.

The blurred red lines in the wake of the opposition’s attacks have complicated an already complex situation to begin with. Going forward, it is in the interest of Pakistan’s politicians across the board to stabilize a potentially precarious environment, with little indication yet of returning to stability.

Attacking the armed forces on the pretext of real or imaginary charges will just not appeal to the broad spectrum of Pakistan’s population. For the country’s mainstream, the essential bread and butter issues are crying out loud and unresolved on a daily basis. And that’s what politicians across the board have a collective interest to tackle.

The writer is an Islamabad-based journalist who writes on political and economic affairs.

Email: farhanbokhari@gmail.com