**Dangerous stand-off**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2020-12-02

FIRST there was a clampdown and then a retreat. The panicky response to the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) rally in Multan this week illustrates the growing chaos within the PTI administration. With an increasingly aggressive opposition alliance on a collision course with the government, the latter`s options are becoming narrower. The deadly second Covid-19 wave does not seem to have any mitigating effect on the vicious power game. The stand-off has taken a more dangerous turn.

Af ter the showdown in Multan, the battleground is now shifting to Lahore, the PML-N`s political stronghold that may bring an unyielding prime minister under greater pressure. But there is much more at stake than just the question of the Imran Khan government`s survival. The ongoing political confrontation is taking the country to a dead end with neither an obstinate prime minister nor a strident opposition alliance realising the consequences.

It has been almost three months since the launching of the PDM`s anti-government campaign. The public rallies in various parts of the country may have created some stir but not enough to shake the government. But the situation could change with the shifting of the venue to central Punjab.

While it was relatively easier for the administration to contain the opposition`s show of power in Multan it could be a different scenario in Lahore.

With an extremely unpopular and incompetent provincial leadership at the helm, things could get out of control. It would also be a test of the opposition`s political power in the country`s biggest province.

The PDM has set a January deadline for the storming of the capital. But what happens in between will be most critical. The worsening pandemic situation has already slowed down the opposition`s momentum. The spike in coronavirus cases could heighten the pressure on the PDM to change its strategy. The alliance is already facing criticism for endangering public lives for its own political interests. The government`s callous approach to fighting the infection cannot be used as a justification for the opposition`s recklessness.Notwithstanding the aggressive rhetoric, there is some thinking in the opposition ranks that it may not be easy to bring down the government, however incompetent it may be, through public rallies. There has not been any such example in the country`s recent political history.

A sustained mass movement could paralyse the government but cannot force it out of power. The two-pronged attack against the government as well as the security establishment has made things more complex for the opposition. While attacking the military leadership some opposition leaders now want the establishment to act against the civilian government. That makes their claim of fighting for civilian supremacy questionable.

In the midst of the heightening political tensions, there have been some voices of reason too.

Shehbaz Sharif, the jailed opposition leader, has once again called for a national dialogue to take the country out of the current political crisis. `If we are to improve conditions of the country then all political forces will have to engage themselves in a national dialogue,` he was quoted as saying during his release on parole for his mother`s funeral.

His statement underscored the clash of narratives within the PML-N leadership. Interestingly, the comments came weeks af ter his niece Maryam Nawaz had signalled her party`s willingness to open a dialogue with the security establishment provided the government of Imran Khan was ousted.

It is not the first time the opposition leaders have called for a national dialogue among political forces to end the current political stalemate. But it is the prime minister`s arrogance that has remained the main obstacle in the way of any political reconciliation that could allow the democratic process to work.

Imran Khan has rejected all such suggestions, and instead, is accusing the opposition of seeking an NRO. His so-called crusade against corruption has turned into a witch-hunt against his political rivals. His illusion of unstinted support from the security establishment has further hardened his stance towards the opposition and he has refused to take a more rational approach in order tostrengthen the democratic process in the country.

There is no sign yet of him coming down from his high horse despite the worsening political crisis that has made parliament almost redundant. His inability to deal with the serious challenges faced by the country has further eroded his government`s credibility. The worsening public health crisis caused by the coronavirus and the economic contraction require political stability and a national consensus in order to deal with these serious challenges.

Support from the security establishment can only help prop up the government but will be of no use to the prime minister in countering the opposition`s onslaught. There is still a window of opportunity to salvage the situation if he is willing to listen to some sane voices in the opposition and within his government.

It is not just an issue of dealing with the current political crisis; it also involves removing the distortion in the power structure that has been the main cause of perpetual political instability in the country. Pakistan needs some fundamental reforms in its political system for a sustainable democratic process.

There is a need for some serious thinking among the political forces on many of the critical problems faced by the country. Removal of the government through undemocratic means will only provide space to non-democratic forces to act. Surely the main responsibility lies with the government, but the opposition also needs to look at things beyond power games.

The most important point in any dialogue between political forces should be to reform the electoral process in order to make it more credible.

Lack of fairness and transparency render the whole electoral process questionable. How can a system work when people don`t have any faith in the electoral process? No democracy can function in such circumstances. A dialogue between political forces is the only way out of the present political stand-of f.  The writer is an author and journalist.

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