**[Dead on arrival?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1815653/dead-on-arrival)**

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INSTEAD of giving a fresh start or the political stability that has been lacking since 2017, our badly rigged polls have hobbled our ability to tackle the huge problems that are threatening chaos. These problems include ever-rising inflation and the default threat; a surge in terrorism; and testy ties with three neighbours. They also include political polarisation and gridlock; a Constitution mauled by all major parties and institutions and thus institutional collapse. All this makes us, arguably, the most unstable and troubled state in South Asia.

A new inept PDM regime, lacking strong legitimacy, mandate, unity and ideas to tackle these challenges, may land dead on arrival. It will see internal and civilian-establishment tussles. It will face a PTI, revitalised after the post-May 9 setbacks by the polls results, with new legitimacy and energy to do what it does best — furious agitation.

A quick, simple review of the Form 45s of about 40 National Assembly seats can settle matters in three to four days, but establishment ploys may foil that. The PTI has uploaded its copies online and a review by credible media and civil society groups can help generate pressure for quick ECP action if its claims are found valid. The PTI may want street protest. But the brutality of the post-May 9 crackdown may mute it. Western pressure linked to a new IMF loan can force our hand too, but the PTI’s wild US conspiracy past talk may mute it. Even if a quick end in PTI’s favour doesn’t come, it will retain the upper hand with many ways to down PDM 2.0 slowly over time via a thousand cuts.

Its big numbers at the centre and in Punjab will cripple smooth legislature work. Its strong social media teams will unleash huge public pressure against all unpopular reform acts the new regime must take to meet IMF terms. Its KP set-up may withhold the cooperation needed to end terrorism. Its expatriate teams will work to poison Western minds against PDM 2.0. It will look to exploit fissures between PML-N and the establishment. In short, the PTI will use in-house, street, legal and foreign ploys deftly to cripple PDM 2.0. Against this well-oiled, superfast PTI outfit will be the slow-motion, septuagenarian PML-N dinosaurs, unable to control the narrative. It will have to last five years to give relief to people after two to three years of a tough IMF programme to win the next polls (it is unclear if it will). Thus, political stability and economic revival may remain elusive.

There is no immediate alternative to the current parties.

Even the Jamaat-i-Islami, JUI-F and GDA claim rigging, but their claims differ from the PTI ones. These parties did not face the visible pre-poll rigging that the PTI did, as confirmed even by neutral observers. Nor are they making specific rigging claims or providing initial proof of it, unlike the PTI’s Form 45 claims. Thus, such claims are as vague and wild as the PTI’s in 2013.

Beyond rigging issues, the overall mandate delivered by the elections also undermines our ability to make a fresh start under competent hands. Religious and king’s parties did poorly, but so did, unluckily, new and even older leftist parties. Thus, it was a mandate for the overtly status quo PML-N and PPP politics and the status quo PTI and MQM politics wrapped in thin populist foils. So badly have establishment forays into politics clogged the veins of our political system that the latter is unable to produce the regenerative politics needed to solve our many problems. Still, there is no immediate alternative to the current parties, and the way forward has to come from them until better parties start emerging.

Given this, Pak­istan cannot affo­­rd a second rigged regime, brought to power dubio­u­s­­ly by the establi­s­hment after 2018, and the endless political stability seen after 2018. Thus, it is critical for all stakeholders to show maturity. The initiative must come from the establishment, which must end its political meddling. The ECP must quickly and transparently retabulate the results of the contested seats. The winners must then be allowed to form governments. Politically motivated cases and verdicts must be reversed legally. All political parties must recognise the dire problems we face, which can only be tackled by competent persons who have not been involved in the extreme political polarisation we have seen since 2014.

This means that the Sharifs, Zardaris and Imran Khan must focus on running their parties and appoint competent persons from within their ranks who can work constructively with the opposition to rescue Pakistan from the edge of an abyss. Otherwise Pakistan may remain mired in self-defeating and destructive politics, insecurity and economic turmoil.

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