**[Destined to fail?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1819224/destined-to-fail)**

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DESTINY in social science refers to likely cause and effect links versus a pre-ordained view of fatalism. One such political link is that the quality of outcomes of a regime depends on the quality of its strategies, which depends on its team quality. I used this link to predict early in the PTI’s term that it wouldn’t do well given its team. As the PML-N arguably pursues narrow interests over merit in filling key posts, I fear the same now, more so as we are close to doom.

We face urgent economic and security issues plus social, political and external ones. The key post to tackle them is the prime minister’s. In Shehbaz Sharif, the PML-N has opted for a drab but able manager — one who is good at running local projects rather than being a strong federal leader. The last time he cut a sorry figure in managing the economy, foreign policy and security, and was a mere appendage caught between the powerful establishment and his elder brother Nawaz Sharif. The same seems likely now.

The economy posts are the next key ones — that of the finance minister but also those of industry, investment, commerce, IT and planning. Our socioeconomic musts are fourfold: stability (most urgent), productivity, equity and sustainability. The finance minister ensures economic stability. But recent finance ministers such as Ishaq Dar and Shaukat Tarin favoured the elites and undermined macro-stability. We need a finance minister with a solid education and experience in macro-economic stability who can curb fiscal and external deficits as well as ensure durable growth in tax and export revenues and jobs. This rules out Dar and also people like Hafeez Shaikh, who loyally implement IMF policies that neglect growth.

But stability alone doesn’t result in durable growth. Growth and productivity require experts in the other ministries mentioned, who can creatively identify new investment, industrial and export avenues via a strong industrial policy, as done by the Asian Tigers. The PML-N must field strong, dynamic people with vast experience. But the trends look bad. Cutting fiscal deficits would require the party to tax and/ or remove subsidies from its core elite base. Cutting external deficits and enhancing productivity would require creativity that the old guard lacks. Thus, all key economic aims appear tough to achieve.

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Ensuring equity and sustainability requires experts in ministries for social areas like climate change, poverty alleviation, health, education, population, labour and agriculture. Besides a strong industrial policy, we need strong agricultural, informal sector and labour policies as most of the poor work in these areas. The PPP has more expertise here than the PML-N, which specialises in physical projects. But even the PPP focuses on band-aids rather than root causes. It must review its cabinet decision and also appoint competent people to constitutional posts to influence policy indirectly.

The main security threats relate to the TTP, Balochistan, India and societal extremism. A role for the establishment in security policy under civilian sway can give benefits. Unlike the economy, they have some understanding here. Nawaz Sharif, even informally, can provide the impetus for peace with India given his past forays with the BJP. Peace with India is the single change that can have ripple effects in all realms — economic, social, foreign, political and security. As president, Asif Zardari with his Baloch roots, provincial set-up and reconciliation politics, can help end the Baloch stand-off. But for all this, the establishment cannot maintain total control on security policy. A set-up that won power with establishment aid will strugg­­le to wrest space from it. On the TTP and other extremists, the PML-N has a mixed record. It wanted curbs on jihadis but pursued peace with TTP

initially and its key leaders have close extremist ties.

We badly need a new and creative foreign policy that balances our ties with China and Western states. Our Constitution and institutions lie in tatters given the political tussles of recent years. But a regime with dubious legitimacy is ill-placed to fix them.

There are then huge gaps in the competence required to tackle our challenges. Where the coalition will have authority, it may lack capacity and vice versa. The good news from social science is that effects and outcomes can change if one changes the causes. Simply put, if the PML-N wants good outcomes after five years, it can make them more likely by ensuring greater competence today. Otherwise, with each passing day, the path will increase the prospects of doom and another establishment-imposed set-up will fail.

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