**Does PDM have an N option?**

BY A B BA S N A S I R 2020-12-13

AGAINST the backdrop of the PDM`s planned show of force in Lahore today, there are questions galore about where the opposition campaign is heading and whether it has any chance of forcing a change in the thinking of the government and, more significantly, its backers.

The various coalescing partners may be pulling the alliance in dif ferent directions but what is clear so f ar is that there is broad agreement among them that the status quo is unacceptable and a change needs to be effected. The only disagreement may be on the best way to do that.

So far the PML-N has made clear that talking to the PTI backers merely to find a way back into power with no change in the rules of the game is pointless. The PML-N and in particular the Sharif f ather and daughter duo, who seem unambiguously in charge of the party now, want more.

Lahore MNA and a senior party leader Saad Rafique who, it is widely believed, opposes a confrontation with the military leadership, articulated the state of play perfectly when he said that the locking up of Shahbaz Sharif was tantamount to locking out any possibility of rapprochement.

Nawaz Sharif has openly talked of the need for a new social contract where all major state institutions agree to play their constitutionally defined roles and stay well within the parameters set by the document which ought to be sacrosanct.

Since the Constitution was written nearly 50 years ago that has not happened. How will the PDM, or the PML-N on its own, force such a dramatic change in Pakistan and ensure that superpowerful state institutions give up the power they have wielded for much of the country`s life? It is fine to hold public meetings and have jalsas endlessly; in the next phase, even if the Covid-19 spike forces a slight delay from January to February, a `long march` to Islamabad and somewhere in between, or after that march, mass opposition resignations from parliament.

But surely even this, to the discerning analyst, will fall way short of achieving the major objective. Legal experts have weighed in on the impact of possible mass resignations and say that the electoral collegefor the March Senate elections will stay intact.

Not just this. Let`s consider what is never going to happen and assume for a moment that the PPP agrees to jettison the Sindh Assembly and the chief minister advises its dissolution. I asked a senior lawyer if that could be the nuclear option to stop the Senate election. His response: an emphatic no.

In any case, the opposition may argue that the moral underpinning of a Senate election will be severely impaired and the exercise discredited with some 40 per cent plus of the electoral college disappearing but those advocating this step mustalso undertake a reality check.

And the reality is that save for a couple of elections in the country`s history, all others have witnessed varying degrees of intervention to undermine the popular will of the people. The politicians left holding the short end of the stick may have protested but they were alone.

Powerful state institutions such as the military and the judiciary seemed unconcerned and the people who were cheated out of their choice each time somehow did not share the outrage of the affected political parties with the exception of Awami League supporters in 1971.

What makes the PDM and particularly Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz Sharif think they have an ace up their sleeve to defy history and force a meaningful change? Do they have a nuclear option somewhere in their arsenal that nobody is aware of? Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was not just ousted from power but also killed; Muhammad Khan Junejo was ousted from of fice and was never allowed nearit again; Benazir Bhutto was ousted twice and killed as she made a third attempt to return to Prime Minister House.

The Sharifs were ousted twice in the 1990s and banished f rom the country all without much ado. It took all of Benazir Bhutto`s political craft and a changed global environment to enable the Sharifs to stage a comeback. Only to be ousted again quite brazenly af ter their f alling out with the military.

The one major difference from the past is that this time round the Sharifs believe their message of defiance, their call for civilian supremacy and their demand that all state institutions perform their constitutionally defined role, and no more, is finding traction among their supporters.

Most of the electronic media may now have been `persuaded` to follow the narrative of, what its key media supporters call, the hybrid regime. But there remain a few islands of independent news and current af f airs. And then there is social media which is accessible 24/7 by one and all.

The changed demographics mean that each political party has a big share of enthusiastic youthful supporters, the PML-N being no exception.

There can be no denying that Maryam Nawaz Sharif has demonstrated considerable appeal among this demographic. Many among her supporters appear angry and prepared to act.

And the bulk of her support base is in Punjab, where the bulk of the military is recruited from.

This factor is important to consider when we see how dissidence is treated in the rest of the country.

It will remain a million-dollar question if that model can be replicated in Punjab.

To someone like me who does not have a fly on the wall in party meetings and the leaders` consultations, what appears to be the only decisive factor when the crunch comes is this youthful support base in Punjab spilling out into the streets.

That, to me, is potentially the nuclear option. All else will preserve the status quo in whatever form or shape. The writer is a former editor o f D aw n.

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