**[Governance test](https://www.dawn.com/news/1844504/governance-test)**

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THE Shehbaz Sharif government faces multiple challenges — from the opposition, its political allies and from growing public discontent with a dire economic situation as people struggle with a cost-of-living crisis and the punishing burden of taxes. It also confronts a surge in security threats. How has the government managed so far to deal with these multiple fronts? Does it have a firm grip on the political, economic and security situation?

Dealing with PTI was never going to be easy. But it was a test of the government’s political management skills to engage the opposition’s parliamentary members in a way that minimised frequent disruptions of proceedings. However, with the party continuing to be the target of coercive actions by the authorities and their leader and activists in jail, PTI lawmakers have been in no mood to cease their [protests](https://www.dawn.com/news/1839556) in parliament and outside.

Despite a fleeting pause when the prime minister offered talks to the opposition — a move that was dead on arrival in the current fraught climate — there have been unending, bitter government-opposition clashes in the National Assembly. It has involved rejection by PTI lawmakers of the budget — as “anti-people” — as well as the government’s other policy measures including its latest counterterrorism plan. Government ministers have also been lashing out at PTI in and out of the House. But neither has secured the upper hand in this confrontation. Instead, both have reached a virtual dead end in trying to prevail on the other. A tense and disorderly stalemate persists.

A ‘normalised’ [relationship](https://www.dawn.com/news/1836165) between the federal government and the PTI-run provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is especially consequential for national stability. Issues concerning allocation of financial resources from the centre, adequate power supply and postings of officials remain a bone of contention between them. They need to be resolved for a proper working relationship to be established. Smooth working relations are also necessary for the robust execution of the federal government’s counterterrorism campaign as its main theatre of operations is obviously in KP.

Governments always have more to lose from confrontational politics. Certainly, it has distracted the PML-N-led coalition from greater focus on governance. It has laid bare a style of leadership evidenced by the prime minister’s dealings with allies, in which political engagement or negotiations are left to others. This reinforces his long-standing image as someone more comfortable being an administrator rather than a political leader; more at ease with bureaucrats than with politicians who he has to negotiate with. His not-so-frequent appearances in parliament also testify to this, which discourages ministers from showing up. This once prompted the elder Sharif, president of PML-N, to say the Shehbaz government should free itself from “bureaucratic influence”.

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Lack of consultation has emerged as a major grievance with the government by its principal political ally, the PPP. Although this complaint surfaced publicly at budget time, PPP leaders say it extends to the government’s overall functioning and lack of structured and sustained consultation. It prompted PPP legislators to sharply criticise the budget and call it “directionless”. Initially, the PPP threatened to boycott the budget session. Its lawmakers only agreed to participate after assurances by senior government leaders. Even so, PPP MNAs did not pull any punches in assailing budget proposals.

The Senate Standing Committee on Finance, chaired by a PPP senator, went so far as to call the budget against the national interest and in its report to the House called for withdrawal of several proposed measures. In his speech, PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari also took aim at budget proposals. Significantly he claimed the government had not fulfilled its commitment under the PML-N-PPP agreement, forged at the time of government formation, to consult his party on the budget and related decisions.

Despite its misgivings, the PPP voted for the budget. But not before some changes to the finance bill, although this was also in response to demands by the business community. In any case, the whole episode underlined fitful management by the government of its relations with an ally without whose support it cannot survive in office. Of course, some of the PPP’s complaints reflect political posturing to bargain for more from the government, such as its power-sharing demands in the Punjab government. Nevertheless, it suggests this would remain an uneasy and unpredictable relationship, especially as the government has preferred an ad hoc approach to managing it rather than an institutionalised one.

The budget was the first major test for the Shehbaz government. It evoked criticism across the board, from political parties, business community, media and the public at large. Having to meet IMF conditionalities to qualify for a new larger Fund loan programme provided the government no choice but to take painful adjustment measures. But the budget was an example of how to reward the elite and punish everyone else.

The Pakistan Business Council had this to say: “[Sacred cows](https://www.dawn.com/news/1843122) will graze freely while the golden geese will be cooked.” Certainly, placing the burden of additional taxation on the salaried middle class marked a failure to equitably distribute the pain of adjustment, especially in view of the budget’s pro-elite measures including salary increases for civil servants. This deepened public discontent at a time of mounting economic hardship, especially as increasing disruptions in power supply worsened people’s plight at the peak of summer.

The government’s lack of a communication strategy to explain budget measures and how they would extricate the country from the economic crisis contributed to public frustration. In fact, the government’s weak communication on other counts too has denuded it of the ability to demonstrate it is running the affairs of state purposively. Its response to the deteriorating security situation came on the heels of the public [expression of concern](https://www.dawn.com/news/1841194) by a senior Chinese official visiting Pakistan. Its initial announcement of a new operation necessitated several later explanations indicating a lack of clarity.

Four months may be too short a time to judge a government’s performance but it is the initial period that sets the tone and direction — and when the moment has to be seized. So far, the government’s performance has been underwhelming. How much the prevailing dyarchical political system has contributed to this is another question.

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