**Hidden fractures**

BY A R I FA N 00 R 2021-03-16

AN election, be it in parliament or in a constituency, can determine the future in Pakistan. Hence, the Yousuf Raza Gilani victory on the NA Senate seat had sealed Imran Khan`s f ate in the beginning of March and Sadiq Sanjrani`s smooth sailing in the Senate chairman`s election just nine days later has put paid to the prime minister`s departure till the next clif f hanger event.

On to the next crisis for newer predictions about his departure. It could be the long march or the next by-election or an ECP order which goes against the PTI. Any of them will suf fice. For those running Pakistan, challenges are hurled faster than one can say `challenges` and each one of them can be used to predict the beginning of the end.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman`s march to Islamabad, the opposition`s decision to vote for the extension; the return of Shehbaz Sharif as Covid-19 crossed Pakistan`s borders; and the decision to impose a lockdown in March each one of them had been hailed as the sign that the `Imran Khan experiment` had run its course.

In this sense, Khan has proven to be no dif ferent from his predecessors. Both Asif Ali Zardari and Nawaz Sharif had also survived similar `challenges` constantly. Be it the long march (2009 and 2014); the Dawn leaks saga or Memogate, each time, their departure seemed imminent to many a breathless commentator.

And now, a prime minister, who is said to be the `product` of a hybrid system, who is said to have been selected and brought to power is f acing a term with as much instability and uncertainty as those before him, who were less acceptable because they were `genuine` leaders who made decisions independently.

Perhaps this is what distinguishes the current times from the Musharraf period. Despite efforts to draw parallels with 2002, the current dispensation is different, because the military is not ruling directly. And for that reason, the system is identified not with Pindi but with the man occupyingConstitution Avenue. Hence, each time there is a rumour about his departure, it is accompanied by fearthatthe set-upisunderthreat.(In 2002 three prime ministers were brought in without any fear or discussion of a curtains down.) In addition, it is argued the establishment has decided to throw its weight behind one of the other political parties, which in itself suggests that removing Imran Khan can ensure political change without power realities having been transformed.

This should provide food for thought to those who think that what we face at the moment is no dif ferent from what happened af ter 1999 or earlier.

This time around, the political dispensation is distinguishable from the establishment. Is it closer to the 1985 example? In hindsight, the `85 assembly or political set-up is seen as different and distinct from the then military dictator. What 2002 threw up in comparison was more docile.

But let`s return to the present. At the moment, despite the one-page obsession, the PTI government is distinguishable from the establishment.

Halfway through the term, this distinction has become more acute, if one pays attention to the critics.

Since the time of the maulana`s long march, there has been non-stop analysis of the friction between Khan and the establishment. They wanted the opposition to be treated more gently, but he didn`t agree; they don`t agree with his obsession with accountability; they wanted and imposed the lockdown in March 2020 while he kept resisting it till they just went over his head; they want better governance but the PTI can`t deliver; and they want a change in Punjab but he refuses to listen.

And for all these reasons, or just one of them, one of these days, they will wash their hands of him.

An easy way to unpack all this is to say that the PTI is so bad that the other side has deliberately created a distance. But another way of looking at the issue is to understand the relationship betweenan elected government and the establishment.

Conflict is inherent in the relationship. And this stands true, regardless of the individuals involved.

So, whether it is a Nawaz Sharif or an Imran Khan, and whatever their temperaments may be, and however they may have come to power, there is bound to be friction. (Perhaps 2002 was an exception and why this was so will have to be analysed by finer minds.) And this is because of the balance of power between the two positions one enjoys considerable decision-making power, afforded by the Constitution and law which he or she will exercise day after day. The other stakeholder has strong views and the capacity to make them known because of its powerful presence. And this leads to friction.

The tussle over Punjab is a case in point. As the head of the party running Punjab, Khan has made a decision about the chief executive`s position. He has the power to do so. That it is a bad choice is echoed by most of his party. But it`s a decision constantly under review, if news reports and khabars are to be believed, because of the reported unhappiness of the establishment.

And it is also why every few months, a change in Punjab becomes `news` rather than simply speculation. In a way, though far more intense, it reminds me of the constant rumbling about the absence of a foreign minister during the PML-N`s regime. It was a decision which was constantly criticised, and by nearly every quarter.

Whether or not this `conflict` will intensify and whether or not it will allow the PTI government to complete its tenure is not clear at the moment.

Even if the government completes its five years, the fault line will remain. But, it is time we stop attributing this to a personality clash; this is simply poor analysis and will not help us move the debate forward.  The writer is a joumalist.