**[High-risk game](https://www.dawn.com/news/1847182/high-risk-game)**

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IF the Shehbaz Sharif government goes ahead with the decision to [ban Imran Khan’s PTI](https://www.dawn.com/news/1845974), it could plunge the country into renewed turmoil, even chaos. This, at a time when the country needs political calm and stability to fix the economy. The decision announced just days after the [staff-level agreement with the IMF](https://www.dawn.com/news/1845536) for a larger, longer-duration loan programme suggests that the government either doesn’t understand the nexus between economic and political stability or chooses to overlook it in a state of panic.

The panic was obviously triggered by [PTI’s legal victory](https://www.dawn.com/news/1845359) in the Supreme Court; by the verdict that the party was entitled to its share of reserved seats in the national and provincial assemblies. In overturning the Election Commission and Peshawar High Court’s decisions, the apex court said PTI is a political party despite having lost its election symbol. This dealt a huge blow to the ruling coalition. With PTI poised to emerge as the single largest party in the National Assembly, and the government losing its two-thirds majority, the ruling party went into panic.

PML-N leaders assailed the court judgement in unseemly language, intensifying tensions with the judiciary. They didn’t see the disconnect between attacking the court and, at the same time, approaching it for a review of its judgement and, later, on the ban issue. The Supreme Court has the final say on banning a party under the Constitution.

The ruling party seemed to fear that the SC verdict would also open up a Pandora’s box calling into question the election to the Senate and president, as the electoral college that elected them was constituted on legally flawed grounds in light of the expected redistribution of seats. Perhaps PML-N’s fears were accentuated by the prospect of the courts, which acquitted Khan in a number of key cases, eventually moving to order his release from prison, where he has been incarcerated for the past year. That may explain why PML-N spokesmen also declared the intention to initiate ‘high treason’ proceedings against Khan.

The country needs political calm to stabilise the economy, not escalation of tensions.

The government’s announcement about banning PTI evoked widespread condemnation by many political leaders, the media, lawyers and human rights groups. The grounds cited by government spokesmen were flimsy, involving charges that the judiciary had already thrown out. Legal experts were near unanimous in saying it would be next to impossible for the court to uphold such a controversial and legally dubious decision should a reference be made to it. Meanwhile the government moved the Supreme Court for a review of the reserved seats verdict.

These developments have escalated political tensions and left the country in a state of dangerous flux. Even if the government retreats from its decision in view of the intensely adverse reaction, it shows how insecure it is feeling, as well as its intolerant mindset. It has also laid bare the fact that the government has little support from across the political spectrum, although the PPP is going along with the decision while demurring on taking a clear public position.

After the Supreme Court verdict, wisdom and political prudence demanded an effort by the government to hold a dialogue with the opposition to forge some kind of understanding on the way forward, especially in view of the economic challenge. PTI also had to show similar responsibility. Instead, the government wants to eliminate it from the political arena. If Pakistan’s past is any guide, it shows that outlawing political parties has never worked as they either live to fight another day or resurface under a new name. But history is a poor teacher in Pakistan, where political leaders keep repeating the same mistakes.

There are signs the government may be [backtracking on the ban](https://www.dawn.com/news/1846148), as it has been saying any final decision will be taken after consultations with political allies. PML-N leaders say they will first try to build a consensus, while the defence minister described the ban announcement as premature. But if the government decides to go ahead, it will run several risks. The most obvious is the legal one, given the strong possibility that the Supreme Court will not endorse such a ban. Considering it just recognised PTI as a political party, it is hardly likely to judge it to be acting in a manner prejudicial to the “sovereignty and integrity of Pakistan”.

The political risk is also high. Banning a national party, expected to be the biggest in parliament, will inevitably provoke turmoil, deepen polarisation, and force PTI towards agitation. The coalition government will be shorn of any democratic credentials as well as its legitimacy. The action will be opposed by political parties, civil society and the media, with international criticism likely to grow. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has described the intention to ban PTI as a “blow to democratic norms”. In fact, the government has already lost much credibility by its announcement and incurred a political cost even before doing anything. Words always have consequences.

Then there is the economic risk. Implementing a tough IMF programme will be much more daunting in an environment marked by political confrontation, turbulence and uncertainty. Indeed, measures that entail economic hardship for people across the board require the widest possible political consensus for their effective implementation. Efforts to revive the economy and build investor confidence will be seriously threatened by the escalation of political tensions. An ailing economy can hardly be healed in fraught political conditions. International rating agencies have been quick to issue warnings in this regard. The latest Fitch report cautions that Pakistan’s economic recovery can be derailed by the ongoing political turmoil.

For all these reasons, the government’s plan to ban PTI is a serious misreading of what it can gain by doing so. The high-risk gamble also misreads the mood in the country. People are both weary and wary of more political conflict and confrontation that further vitiates the political atmosphere. Any such move will put at grave risk both the country’s political and economic stability as well as endanger Pakistan’s fragile democracy. Amid warnings of a constitutional breakdown, the government should desist from going down this path.

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