**[Is PDM imperilled?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1589207/is-pdm-imperilled)**

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HICCUPS are integral to political alliances because while coalescing parties agree to a common minimum programme, they are also keen to maintain their distinct identities.

If there is no deviation from the agreed principles, the alliance stays intact. Equally, the maturity of leaders will often dictate the fate of such groupings, as parties continue to propagate their individual policies on issues that can create misunderstandings and cause heartburn within the alliance.

While the latest interview of PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari was viewed with alarm by pro-democracy commentators, the PML-N reaction to it poured cold water on suggestions that his remarks represented emerging cracks in the PDM.

No point in my recounting in detail what the young PPP leader said in his nearly eight minutes interview to BBC Urdu’s Farhat Javed as that is in the public domain. Significantly, he said he was “shocked” when PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif took the names of the army chief and ISI chief, saying they were the two individuals who orchestrated his ouster from office, his sentencing and a sham election.

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Acknowledging that it was Nawaz Sharif’s right to say what he deemed fit, he explained he was taken aback since the multiparty conference (MPC), the precursor to the PDM, agreed to target the ‘establishment’ and not individuals by name. “But he is three times prime minister. If he has said something he must have said that on the basis of evidence,” Mr Bhutto-Zardari added.

The PPP leader also made clear that he could not tell Mr Sharif what to say and what not to just as the latter does not tell him what to say. He was quick to dispel the impression his words could harm the PDM, reminding the interviewer the alliance was formed at his MPC initiative.

The interview was always going to be analysed and gone through with a fine toothcomb. And, before any mainstream Pakistani media could pick it up, a debate started on social media. Some commentators were seeing the PPP leader’s comments as a reversal of his stance, even a ‘sellout’; others were defending it with the fervour, and in a tone and tenor, normally associated with PTI supporters.

The PML-N’s top spokesman Muhammad Zubair responded calmly to the interview and said the PPP leader was not saying anything different to the PML-N leader in substance. A number of senior PPP leaders took to the media to also claim too much was being made of the interview without cause.

Later, a TV channel quoted Maryam Nawaz saying her party found nothing objectionable in Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari’s words. This would calm the waters further, disappointing the top (media-facing) guns of the governing PTI who had taken to the air rather prematurely with obituaries of the PDM.

There is great bonhomie between the young leaders of the PPP and PML-N as has been evidenced a number of times in recent months, most significantly, when Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari talked to the media last month after the dawn raid on Ms Maryam Nawaz’s hotel room in Karachi and the arrest of her husband.

But this does not mean that the various different priorities can’t or won’t pull them in different directions. The question really is whether these issues will potentially pull them apart and make them go their separate ways or whether the alliance will brave all this.

The most fundamental difference between the two is that while the PML-N, at least for now, does not appear prepared to settle on anything less than a new social contract, the PPP has long given up on Benazir Bhutto’s demand for the same and is now content with striving for a little more political space and breathing room.

Thus, the two coalescing partners have goals that are fundamentally different. However, both have signed the MPC declaration and thus agreed to the 26 points contained in the document. And till that agreement is honoured the alliance is not really imperilled, speed bumps notwithstanding.

The PPP has a lot to gain from being in the alliance since its goals, it feels, are more ‘realistic’ as they are based on accommodation and not confrontation. It will make sense for the largely Sindh-based party to remain a part of the PDM, and gain from any concessions extended due to the pressure mounted by the alliance.

For its part, the PML-N possibly understands that having a party of the PPP’s size and influence as it controls a province, gives the alliance credibility and a broadbased representative status. But I doubt the former has any false notions about the relationship.

The PML-N must understand that having upped the ante as the father-daughter duo has done, would, at some point, lead to a confrontation with the government and its military backers. It must also be aware that the PPP policy in such an event will be guided by Asif Zardari’s ‘pragmatism’ and not his son’s ‘principles’.

Therefore, success in that case would hinge mainly on how motivated the PML-N cadres in Punjab are and how willing they are to go the distance in order to force a change as per their leaders’ narrative. The leadership believes the response of the rank and file has been phenomenal. And that the cadres across the length and breadth of Punjab, inspired by Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz’s belligerence, are raring to go. Party policy is now firmly in the hands of the hawks; the doves have been banished.

In the emerging scenario, the most vital support will come from the JUI-F and its hardcore supporters. Maulana Fazlur Rehman has so far showed no signs of budging from his position of total support to the PML-N. The maulana appears angry and prepared to go to any length to support the PML-N leaders.

Given this, I doubt the PPP leader’s interview or his reticence (if there is any evidence of that at all) to go full blast will either damage the PDM or alter the alliance’s course in the main battleground of Punjab; it will be no more than a minor hiccup, if that.

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