[Maulana Fazalur Rehman’s game plan](https://nation.com.pk/08-Nov-2019/maulana-fazalur-rehman-s-game-plan%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)

Salman Masood November 08, 2019

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For years, Maulana Fazalur Rehman lived with the reputation of being just another political wheeler-dealer. In successive governments, he managed to extract substantial gains through deft and pragmatic negotiating and bargaining skills. It changed after the setback in the 2018 general elections when he found himself out of the playing field. From day one, Maulana has cried foul and blamed the Establishment of denying him, and the rest of the current opposition political parties, a level playing field. He was seething in a press conference soon after the elections and urged the rest of the opposition not to accept the results. He also called for en masse resignations. But the exhortations went in vain as other opposition politicians opposed the move.

More than a year later, Maulana has flipped the political game on its head. He has replicated the past protest campaigns of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Tahir-ul-Qadri. Maulana’s protest campaign is both political and personal. He feels grated by the constant barrage of ridicule heaped on him by Prime Minister Imran Khan. It has become a rivalry both bitter and irreconcilable. With thousands of supporters, Maulana is staying put in the federal capital. By managing to bring a seizable crowd as it meandered through several big cities of the country and galvanized the anti-government sentiment, Maulana has raised his political stature. He is now someone who can rattle the cage. He has also forced the other two opposition political parties to stand by him, if not behind him, as he spearheads the first significant political challenge to the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The PTI government has begun the negotiating process despite initially spurning such a possibility. The government was forced on the back-foot from the get-go. It was compelled to allow easy entry of the protesters in the capital. The restrictions on mainstream media have failed to dent the protest as social media continues to provide an alternative and more widespread space. The decision of not going toward the Red Zone has been a masterstroke. The government can’t use force to disperse the existing crowd, which has remained peaceful and shown no signs of embarking on a violent confrontation with the law-enforcing authorities. But the initiative rests with the Maulana. Whenever he feels cornered or conned in the ongoing negotiations, he can raise the stakes and order his supporters to start the march towards the sensitive government locations. Maulana has also recovered from the setback of PPP and PML-N, staying away from his prolonged sit-in plan.

One of the spin-offs of the current political turbulence has been the apparent relaxation towards PML-N leadership. Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz Sharif are both out of prison and ensconced in Jati Umra. There is an expectation that Asif Ali Zardari will also soon find himself at a hospital bed in place of custody of NAB.

Maulana has used political rhetoric in a clever and calibrated manner. His statements forced the ISPR to initially issue a stern counter-statement. But ISPR mellowed down its posture on Wednesday, reiterating that the army has nothing to do with politics. Part of it owes to the backchannel talks. The Chaudhrys of Gujrat, the oracles of political mediation and bargaining, have been employed to find a middle ground.

Being a political animal, who has been part of the rough and tumble of Pakistani politics for decades and strongly familiar with the ways the Establishment plays its game, Maulana must have calculated his game plan long ago. One does not expect the wily religious-politician to gamble everything on a zero-sum game.

This is why many have been left wondering. Surely, there is something deeper at play, some argue. There have been vague and sometimes not-so-vague hints. Some analysts, close to the Establishment, say the Maulana plans to use the ‘religious card’ and set the country ablaze by fanning the sentiments over the Khatam-e-Nabuwat issue. Some analysts have pointed out to rifts within the Establishment, parts of which are said to be opposed to the way all-out support has been given to the federal government. But such speculations lack any specific, tangible proofs. And, Maulana has kept his cards close to his chest. In the past few days, he has walked back from the edge whenever there was an expectation of him making that “incendiary, combustible speech.”

The maximalist demands of Maulana — resignation of the prime minister and new elections— would eventually see a climb down. The negotiations going on right now can lead to an understanding of a midterm election at best. The demand that the Establishment remains totally aloof from the election process is quite idealistic given the ground realities of the country’s political landscape. But the current political pressure can ease off the restrictions and allow more room to maneuver for some of the political entities, including Maulana, in the next political setup. Maulana can also be eyeing just at a coalition in Baluchistan and a few more seats in the upcoming Senate. It won’t be a bad bargain for a player who is essentially sitting outside the current system.

The ongoing political upheaval has left the government significantly weakened. If the Chaudhrys of Gujrat manage to broker a settlement, they will extract their own pound of flesh. It will also be a reflection of the inability and incompetence of the government’s negotiating team. The PTI government will keep bumbling and faltering if a course correction is not made and some of the ministers, who are nothing but colossal embarrassments and emblems of incompetence, not shown the door. Shedding this extra weight is essential not only for perception management but also for better governance delivery. How long will the Prime Minister Imran Khan keep delaying the inevitable?

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