**Never a dull moment**

BY A B B A S N A S I R 2021-03-14

ROUND One to PDM; Round Two to PTI, with the bout going to neither but to the perennial winner of political contests in our land and that wasn`t surprising, as the Senate elections could not have broken away from the recent past with such ease.

Whether the members sold their souls or stamped their ballots in line with their conscience first to elect senators from the four provinces and the National Assembly and finally to fill the chairman and deputy offices, there was no ambiguity about who stamped their authority over the process.

If you watch television discussion programmes, you will have noticed a consensus among all those anchors who see themselves as more patriotic than everybody else that the PTI has a serious governance problem in Punjab and that something needs to be done about it.

Almost with one voice they echo the sentiment in the corridors of real power that Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar, `the unmitigated disaster`, has to make way for someone much more `ef ficient` in order for the PTI and its allies to halt the march to power of PML-N in the next elections.

Names keep getting mentioned such as that of PML-Q leader Chaudhry Pervez Elahi, the current Punjab speaker and former chief minister. It is argued he has what it takes to deliver governance good enough to dent the PML-N`s ostensibly formidable support base.

It would have to be conceded that when Gen Musharraf was in power, Mr Elahi ran a tight ship in the province but was his performance enough to obliterate the support for PML-N? Well, one need only look at the results of the 2008 elections in Punjab to answer that.

Even then some of these anchors in their programmes and now in-vogue Vlogs say they find it hard to understand why the prime minister does not replace Mr Buzdar. Some analysts have gone to the ludicrous extent of suggesting that the rationale for this commitment to the Punjab chief ministerhesin the spiritualsphere.

However, in the political scheme of things it is clear that Imran Khan has definite ideas on how hewants to run his party and its governments at the centre and also in the provinces. Any lieutenant who furthers this cause is welcome and someone who does not meets the fate of Pervez Khattak.

Mr Khattak`s stint as chief minister cemented the PTI`s powerbase in KP after Nawaz Sharif generously or foolishly, depending on your perspective, let PTI have a shot at government formation when it emerged as the largest single, but by no means the majority, party in the 2013 elections.

PML-N leaders in the province were straining at the leash to be allowed to cobble together a coalition but Mr Sharif said no, arguing that democraticnorms dictated the largest single party got the first shot at power. Mr Khattak was able to build support around a common programme with other parties, most notably the Jamaat-i-Islami, which was ideologically close to the PTI, and became chief minister.

By the 2018 elections, Khattak`s performance and def t political play had reduced even giants in rival parties to insignificant political figurines.

Who would have guessed the architect of PTI`s thumping success would be moved to the centre and given a largely ceremonial cabinet position? A political non-entity was named chief minister perhaps because he was seen as more compliant and amenable to directives from Islamabad. This background is just to bring you abreast with Imran Khan`s manner of doing things. Where PTI is concerned he is his own boss.

TV commentators can say what they want and echo whosoever`s view on Buzdar or the prime minister`s civil service aide Azam Khan, but Khanwon`t budge while he`s in the chief executive`s office. I am told he has also not heeded counsel to cool down things with the opposition.

Perhaps a need was felt to demonstrate to him how vulnerable he was without the support of his potent backers, and the Hafeez Shaikh debacle took place so that the prime minister could be given a reality check.

In turn, Mr Khan may have hit back by talking of fresh elections as the architects of the hybrid system, as its supporters call it, are in no position to risk its unravelling anytime soon, forcing them to apply the brakes. From personal pride to prized positions, there`s far too much at stake.

By the same token, as the PDM or mainly Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz Sharif`s aggressive narrative is being echoed by seemingly significant swathes of strategically-important central Punjab, it would appear convenient to create a diversion for the opposition away from street agitation.

And what better way than the Senate elections, amid (privately made) neutrality pledges to coax the PDM into (controlled) parliamentary politics.

Especially, when the very powerful hold most levers and can choreograph the final outcome to their heart`s desire.

When you zoom out of the Senate elections, the spycams, cancelled votes and margins, and see the situation in a broader perspective, you realise that notwithstanding the excitement of recent weeks, vital issues of constitutional rule, civilian supremacy and unbridled democracy remain unresolved.

Does the opposition leadership have the charisma and appeal to galvanise its claimed massive popular support as a force of sizable numbers on the streets of the twin cities to effect a change in the current scheme of things? One indication will come at the end of the month in the shape of the so-called long march; whatever that is, it will be reinforced in the by-elections due next month. Never a dull moment is all that can be guaranteed for now. The writer is a former editor of Dawn.

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