**[PDM rally takeaway](https://www.dawn.com/news/1596791/pdm-rally-takeaway)**

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DEPENDING on which side of the divide you were on, you either saw the Dec 13 PDM Lahore rally as a bigger disaster for the opposition than the nation’s own Dec 16, 1971, debacle, or you saw it as rivalling the Aug 14, 1947, win in the shadow of the Pakistan resolution monument.

In the zero-sum-game of our deeply polarised politics, how could the PDM rally be different? Prime Minister Imran Khan said it was a ‘flop’. His view was echoed by his subordinates such as Shibli Faraz, Shahbaz Gill, Firdous Ashiq Awan and Fayyaz Chohan, whose portfolio and cabinet status keeps changing.

The other end of opinion spectrum was represented by PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz Sharif and her camp followers such as Marriyum Aurangzeb, Ahsan Iqbal, Talal Chaudhry and a host of others enthusiastically endorsed the boss’s point of view of a historic victory.

There was a time when journalists actually went to rallies to bring you eyewitness accounts of such events and, for an old school hack like me, that is the only way to do it if you really wish to have your finger on the pulse of the crowd and events. Now most of the reporting happens off the TV screens.

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On-the-spot reporters are given a few minutes over hours-long live coverage and it is left to the anchors to pronounce verdicts. That these verdicts are mostly reached in, and aired from, the comfortable confines of their glitzy studio sets and heated offices is never questioned, as long as they reflect the narrative of the most potent player.

Till the stranglehold of the powers that be over the media is not broken, I am afraid this will remain the norm, with most of the media probably hoping to survive to tell the truth another day. In the bargain, its credibility will become ‘collateral damage’ as former spymaster Asad Durrani would say.

How many analysts on mainstream media did we watch/hear/read discussing how many supporters would be considered enough at a rally in the heart of Punjab, where the genesis of an establishment-backed hybrid system is being questioned and challenged by the opposition?

No analyst actually looked at the impact that the government restrictions may have had, for example, of the bar on anyone providing seating for the assembled PDM supporters. Architects, town planners have software that could easily have calculated whether rows of seated (against standing) supporters give the appearance of a bigger/smaller crowd in the same space.

This is for those who base their ‘analyses’ on perceived numbers, as nobody actually bothers to count them anyway. To me, any crowd that is in the thousands and not in the hundreds is a big, effective crowd, especially if its mood and tone and tenor are in sync with the leaders’.

A report or two on the inside pages of newspapers addressed this aspect and the odd (and when I say odd I do mean the exception) column from the journalist who put in the legwork and mingled with those heading from various parts of Lahore to the jalsa venue and then within the venue itself.

I would happily name the handful of fellow journalists falling in that category with great pride as they are the exceptions. But then worry that if they come under the spotlight they may face the axe in the next round of cuts in the media industry. This has happened before, so the fear is real.

You may wish to ask me about my takeaway from the PDM Lahore rally? As part of a series in 2016, BBC Urdu Service reporter Sharjil Baloch walked around Lahore with a microphone in hand and a cameraperson in tow and asked dozens of people the same question.

Where is Balochistan? What do you know about Balochistan? What do you know of the conflict there? Can you name three major cities/town of the largest province? The answers were shocking. The vast majority knew next to nothing about Balochistan. Nothing.

The Lahoris who figured in the 10-minute report did not even seem embarrassed at their lack of interest/awareness. Those interviewed included seemingly educated people and students. That provides a useful backdrop against which to see the PDM rally.

So, when BNP-M leader Akhtar Mengal took the microphone under the shadow of the Minar-i-Pakistan to address the Lahore rally and started to list the indignities suffered by the Baloch people, including enforced disappearances and kill-and-dump policies, it was a win for me.

A win because Sardar Mengal is demanding the rights of his people within the federation of Pakistan. It was a win because it was the PDM platform that enabled him to warn that the Baloch are still keeping their faith in the country but they want rights as equal citizens, to be treated on a par with other Pakistanis. No less is acceptable.

Pakhtun leader Mahmood Khan Achakzai may have wholly unnecessarily stirred up controversy with his possibly flawed reading of history, but that he asked a mainstream leader from Punjab to lead the movement for change and for equality of all provinces and ethnicities was also a win.

Despite facing an unparalleled assault on their rights, resources and freedoms, it is not without significance that many leaders of smaller provinces are willing to strive together and alongside the mainstream political parties for a new social contract.

What unfolds on the national political stage over the coming weeks is anybody’s guess. What I find brilliant is that even those who currently feel deeply aggrieved by state policies are seeking solutions within the framework of the federation. Lahore witnessed that at close quarters.

That, to me, is the win.

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