**PDM`s infighting**

BY A R I FA N O O R 2021-03-30

THE internecine war of words inside the PDM has intensified. Even though the initial ilzaam tarashi (allegations) between Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari didn`t last long, the PPP`s decision to go it alone on the issue of the leader of the opposition in the Senate seems to have led to a fresh round over the weekend. And unlike the earlier indirect tu-tu main-main, or mutual recrimination, this time around the gloves have come off.

The friction had begun, as previously, with the issue of resignations. Let`s recap quickly some recent key events.

After having delayed the decision around December, the PML-N and the JUI-F were once again clamouring to upend the government through resignations when the Senate election for the chairman didn`t go the planned way. But for obvious reasons, the PPP was far from interested.

The issue came to a head when Asif Zardari`s speech at a PDM meeting was leaked to the media the leaks were far from kind about Nawaz Sharif.

It is important to remember that similar remarks about why Nawaz Sharif was not returning to Pakistan were also made in the December meeting of the party`s central executive committee, according to media reports, but the party refused to confirm or deny them. All of them insisted that the discussions during a party meeting were confidential. However, this time around, the party did not hesitate to own up to the leaked reports. The difference is significant. Apparently, the speech by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari didn`t go down well either, though little has been said about it publicly.

Nonetheless, the spat it provoked was stopped before it went too far.

But even so, behind the scenes, the tussle over the Senate leader of the opposition had begun.

Having lost the Senate chairman position, the PPP now wanted the leader of the opposition in the forum despite having agreed to the PML-N filling it, assuming that Yousuf Raza Gilani`s winning streak would continue.The PPP found a ready excuse in the candidate the Noonies chose because of his choice of clients to defend.

But the Noon was no longer in the mood to be generous; they saw no reason to undo the allocations made earlier and soon the private spat became public. In between, it is said the PPP`s effort to call and speak to the Noonies in London didn`t go too well and the former went its own way, winning over government support to secure the leader of the opposition.

Since that decisive Senate action, tensions have spiked and many have written the PDM`s obituary.

But it is worth noting that despite the rising tensions, the senior politicians of the party Asif Ali Zardari and Nawaz Sharif have not been heard from. Could this be deliberate? Is it possible that they still feel there is reason enough to distance themselves from the back and forth between their heirs because there may be some moment when they will have to play nice? After all, both parties gain by keeping the PDM alive, with all its components. If the PPP quits, it would simply lend credence to the voices that accuse the alliance partners of only being those who have been left out in the cold and hence are kicking up a fuss. Without the PPP, it will be hard for Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Nawaz Sharif to dispel this impression that they have become inquilabi (revolutionary) only because they were deprived of power. And/or that this was simply a war led by the PML-N for Punjab.

Also, there is the niggling issue of the resignations it may be easy to make an announcement that everyone will quit the assemblies but it`s hard to ensure the entire party follows suit. (The PTI learnt this the hard way in 2014 with far fewer seats.) Had the PPP not pulled away when it did, there is a chance the PML-N would have had to concede this isn`t a feasible option. But with the PPP obviously in no mood to bid farewell, the Nooniescan claim the moral high ground and say they gave up on the idea for the greater good.

On the other hand, the PPP also needs the opposition parties. It can`t afford to appease the PTI and the establishment to the extent of aligning with them publicly; while it may have a government in Sindh to protect, it also faces the pressure of accountability, and in order to manage both, a tight juggling act is required. The PPP is not out of the accountability woods, yet. And to ensure it is not engulfed by the process, the best bet is to be part of the opposition alliance, which is big enough and national enough to keep the government and NAB under pressure.

In other words, there is still much to be gained by both the PML-N and the PPP putting their differences aside and keeping the PDM intact; let`s see if they can pull this of f.

Postscript: Despite all the gloating over the coup pulled off by the PPP, it seems the party has paid a heavier price for this fiasco. It is now widely believed the PPP has squandered many a principle for the sake of power from the reports about which party was buying votes during the Senate election to the recent gossip about why the PPP had ditched the PDM.

All parties make politically expedient choices.

Consider the PTI`s allies in power or the PML-N`s quick decision to agree to a `selection` of senators in Punjab with the very forces it insists it is fighting against. However, the PPP seems to have thrown caution to the wind when it comes to the pretence that politics includes a dash (or more) of ethics. Its decision-making seems devoid of this `hypocrisy`.

Is this because its politics is completely amoral or because of Asif Zardari`s image or something else? A little bit of introspection may be needed to explain why it is now seen as the party which is always willing to sacrifice principle at the altar of expediency.  The writer is a joumalist.