**All hail the omnipotent**

[Babar Sattar](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/babar-sattar)

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While in the last two weeks the PTI government has fallen prey to its own rhetoric and produced some humour, it is firmly in the saddle for two reasons. One, the opposition stands divided and the only thing it seems to agree on is that it won’t agree on anything soon. And two, the military is firmly in Prime Minister Imran Khan’s corner. The manner in which the GHQ received IK is how an elected PM ought to be received by generals who report to him. But we have seen nothing of the sort in recent history.

For those who see the civ-mil discord as the fault-line responsible for disruption of democracy and molestation of our constitution, this is great news. Let’s hope the bonhomie continues and isn’t just a ceremonial feature of this particular initiation. Whatever the history leading up to the emergence of this PTI government, and the role unelected institutions are alleged to have played, elected and unelected arms of the executive being on ‘the same page’ provides IK a brand new opportunity to end the civ-mil mistrust and imbalance.

The example set by General Bajwa in receiving IK has set a new precedent. It will be cited every time a new PM arrives at the GHQ for a briefing. Over the years we have heard stories of pettiness in civ-mil interactions (eg an army chief not wearing his cap so as to avoid saluting BB when she was elected PM). There have been elaborate commentaries on the body language of army chiefs in interactions with PMs, the presence or absence of the stick or who walks ahead during a tour. Will such silliness and the bravado that accompanies it end now?

IK deserved to be treated with utmost decorum not because he is liked by the khakis but because he is the PM. That our military high command chose to establish through its mannerism that it abides by the constitutional principle of civilian control of the military is commendable. Given his popularity within the brass, IK has a unique opportunity to fix our civ-mil imbalance by institutionalising the mode of interaction with khakis so that service chiefs are regarded as valued advisers of the government as opposed to competitors an elected PM duels with for turf.

The second reason for the decrease in political noise (which might or might not be a subset of the first) is that an opposition flaunted as ‘the largest we have seen’ is turning out to be the most disjointed. It is incredible that the PPP after having been written off completely prior to Election 2018 has managed to bounce back from oblivion and make itself most relevant in post-election politics. One can take a high moral tone to denounce the PPP for being Machiavellian. But can one chide the party for missing a move despite the hand it has been dealt?

Let’s assume for a minute that the PPP has come to the PTI’s rescue (by refusing to support the PML-N in its effort to form government in Punjab or in the election to the office of PM or president) because it has struck a deal with our omnipotent establishment so that Mr Zardari has it easy during investigations against him. Even if that is the case, hasn’t the PPP’s delivery been immaculate for a party whose obituaries were being written? It has placed itself in the centre of the national discourse and emerged as the determinant of the presidential election.

Who would have thought the PPP would end up checkmating the PML-N in the Senate elections (and steal seats from the PTI too)? But it did. Going into Election 2018, the PPP was a distant third with no demand for party tickets in Punjab. Probably the most surprising aspect of the election campaigning (tied with how sloppy and out of depth Shahbaz Sharif was seen to be) was Bilawal’s mature and poised campaign. During the speeches in the new National Assembly, BBZ outshined all others (including IK) by a margin, strengthening the suspicion that he might be cast in BB’s mould.

What does the PPP bring to the table? It has a leader who has time on his side, appeal for jiyalas and is demonstrating maturity beyond his years. He has liabilities too: his father being the foremost. But sooner or later AAZ will walk into the horizon. And for now in our world of politics, driven by real politik (the PTI’s alliance with the PML-Q and the MQM being examples), AAZ is playing his cards well. Despite its declining vote bank and nothing to show for itself in terms of governance, the PPP continues to own Sindh without any challenger on the horizon.

It is the most potent force in the Senate (and one wouldn’t be surprised if it is able to negotiate back the position of chairman Senate). If AAZ had been asked to render the PML-N irrelevant post-Election 2018, it has been a job well done. Aitzaz Ahsan is as lettered and appealing a candidate for the office of president as can be – but one that the PML-N is loath to consider, given his outbursts against Sharifs. If he were acceptable to the PML-N, he wouldn’t be the PPP’s candidate. (Remember the PML-N’s proposal to nominate Raza Rabbani as chairman Senate?)

But in nominating a candidate who in most ways is more appealing than the PTI’s candidate, who will blame AAZ for helping the PTI out? And in comparing AA with the Maulana, can anyone say with a straight face that the PML-N fielded the better candidate? So Arif Alvi will be elected president in a non-election. The PPP will be celebrated for nominating a president Pakistan can be proud of. And the PML-N will be blamed for lack of ability to rally support for someone who could garner the support and respect of a joint opposition.

The leadership question seems all but settled for the PML-N too. SS might be a super administrator, but lacks the magnetism, appeal and ability to take and stick by difficult positions – qualities that set popular leaders apart. With Nawaz Sharif and Maryam in jail, SS’s performance during the campaign was as unremarkable as his persona and presence in the National Assembly post-election. To reacquire vitality, competitiveness, relevance and the hunger to win, the PML-N will look towards Maryam and not the younger Sharif.

The mantle of the anti-establishment party has passed from the PPP to the PML-N. The PPP is content with keeping its patronage channels alive in Sindh, while allowing BBZ the space to win over folks in the rest of Pakistan (which might happen as and when AAZ fades away). With the PTI firmly in the saddle and the PPP happy to play the intermediary, out of the line of direct fire, the party that needs to re-imagine itself and find its feet in Naya Pakistan is the PML-N. Where the PML-N goes from here rests almost entirely on what becomes of NS and Maryam’s court cases.

If you were an interested bystander observing Pakistani politics, what lessons would you draw from the last five years? The PML-N emerged victorious in 2013 but thought it could challenge the power status-quo. One dharna, an almost-dharna, a Panama and a few court cases later, its leader and expected successor are in jail and it has lost control of Punjab and the centre. The MQM, which once controlled urban Sindh and could bring Pakistan’s commercial hub to a halt, has been cut down to size. Why? Because its leader thought he could cross a line and get away with it.

The PTI, which had won around three dozen seats in 2013, not only managed to win Election 2018 and form government in the centre but also in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Its PM got a hero’s welcome at the GHQ that no PM has experienced in decades. The PML-Q, that has no pull outside a small nook in Punjab, but has always known which side of its bread is to be buttered, has managed to remain relevant and secure the speaker’s office in Punjab.

So if you were AAZ – with baggage and the urge to survive, and to see your son be received at the GHQ with fanfare at some point – what would you do?

The writer is a lawyer based in Islamabad.

Email: sattar@post.harvard.edu