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**Bowled out in Daska**

During the past two-and-a-half years that it has been in power, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has dropped catches and bowled no-balls. But now it has been clean bowled in Daska. And this must have a lot of bearing on the quality of Imran Khan’s leadership and its promise to cleanse the grubby stable of Pakistan’s politics.

Because the momentous decision of the Election Commission of Pakistan to void the by-election in NA-75 and to order a re-polling in the entire constituency on March 18 has come in the midst of considerable political turmoil, not enough attention is being paid to what Daska really means in the wider context of the evolution of democracy in Pakistan.

Our attention at this time is confusingly divided. The Senate elections are to be held on Wednesday, with a conspiratorial build-up. It could be a grim, cloak-and-dagger affair. But there is a major surprise on this front, too. All Senate candidates from Punjab were elected unopposed on Thursday. This means that there will be no polling for the 11 Senate seats from Punjab on March 3.

How has this happened, given all that hullabaloo about the likelihood of the lawmakers selling their votes in the event of a secret ballot? Where has this bloodless and amiable settlement between overly belligerent political adversaries come from? Observers give credit for this to Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi of the PML-Q, who is also the speaker of the Punjab Assembly. In a neat division, five seats have gone to the PTI, five to the PML-N and one to the PML-Q.

However, the decisive battle is to be fought in the National Assembly where Finance Minister Hafeez Shaikh is pitted against former prime minister Yousaf Raza Gilani. On paper, of course, the PTI and its allies have a majority in the House. But the opposition is banking on defections from the ruling alliance. There certainly is a good measure of disaffection within the PTI and Hafeez Shaikh is potentially not a good candidate.

A shock victory of the opposition in Islamabad would instantly upset the political applecart and the stage would be set for a vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan. Even otherwise, the month of March promises hectic political activity and after the Senate elections, the opposition will begin to mobilise support for its Long March that is scheduled to begin on March 26. Besides, the Daska re-election on March 18, depending on the outcome of the PTI’s appeal against the Election Commission ruling in the Supreme Court of Pakistan, is bound to generate a lot of heat.

Meanwhile, after-shocks of the Election Commission’s action on the Daska by-election of February 19 will continue to be felt. Here is an event that must weigh heavily on the PTI’s conscience. We have witnessed the sorry spectacle of a party so boastful of its sense of justice and integrity actually falling from grace.

Essentially, the short order read out by Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja said that the by-election had not been conducted honestly, justly, fairly and in a transparent manner. Since the PTI governs Punjab, it will be held accountable for the purported act of rigging. The mainstream media had shown a lot of footage on the day of the polling to substantiate this charge.

In addition to firing incidents and the death of two persons, there was this mysterious disappearance of around 20 presiding officers for several hours and suspected tampering with the results. It was mainly on this basis that the five-member bench of the ECP accepted the plea of the PML-N candidate and ordered a fresh polling. Action was also announced against senior serving officers of administration and the police posted in the constituency.

A hint of this exceptional verdict was available in the Election Commission’s press release issued the day after the February 19 polling, when both parties were claiming victory. It was really an unusual statement that made public the disappearance of the presiding officers, with polling bags. The ECP, while putting on hold the announcement of unofficial results, had expressed the fear that the results had been compromised.

A more surprising revelation was that the CEC tried to contact the inspector general of police, the commissioner and the deputy commissioner to report the missing officers but failed to do so.

That the PTI would apparently be caught red-handed in this attempt to steal a by-election is truly a tragedy because it betrays the confidence of a very large number of citizens of this country who had reposed their trust in the leadership of Imran Khan. There can still be an argument that Imran Khan himself was not a part of this stratagem but he must own the deeds of his party. Moreover, there is no hint of any damage control on his part and he approved of the challenge against the Election Commission ruling.

We must honestly recognise the role that Imran Khan has played in Pakistan’s politics. He did, for a long time, personify the dream for a new Pakistan. One landmark was his rally at the Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore on October 30, 2011. It embodied a national awakening not so much at the mass but at the middle-class level.

Take it as a measure of Pakistan’s electoral politics that Imran’s party did not do so well in 2013 and its victory in 2018 was tainted with the induction of ‘electables’ and the support of powerful elements. Yet, the dream survived in many hearts and even the PTI’s dismal performance in power did not entirely extinguish the flame.

Now, with the moral debacle that has taken place in the fog of Daska, one could write the obituary of a particular political ideal. It would not matter much if Imran Khan survives the assault that is being mounted by the combined opposition, and completes his tenure – or even wins another term. He is no longer the hope that he once was.

At the same time, politics in Pakistan is embarked on another journey. There is a battle of narratives that is to be won or lost by those who still cherish hope in Pakistan’s future.

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