**[Inside the new Assembly](https://www.dawn.com/news/1427088/inside-the-new-assembly)**

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IT is a [mixed house of old lineage and fresh entrants](https://www.dawn.com/news/1426865/transition-raises-hopes-but-doubts-abound) in the game. On Monday, the front row of the treasury benches of the newly installed National Assembly illustrated the shifting power dynamics. It is more representative of the federation than the Punjab-dominated huddle witnessed under the erstwhile PML-N rule. With Imran Khan and Shah Mehmood Qureshi sat Akhtar Mengal, Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui and Asad Qaisar. It has more than optics value and symbolism; it manifests a new power coalition.

With the numbers game over, Imran Khan is now fully in the saddle, though still dependent on disparate groups to run the government. Old and new faces now adorn the treasury benches promising to build a ‘naya Pakistan’. The prime minister in waiting looked poised and visibly burdened. He certainly seemed to have mellowed with the sense of the coming responsibilities. The pledge of turning over a new leaf and changing the country’s destiny is indeed overwhelming.

The presence of a large number of turncoats from other parties has made the task more arduous. Khan thought it was necessary to accept them in order to win the elections. It did work, finally getting him to the pinnacle of power after 22 years of resolute struggle. But there are also highly dynamic and committed men and women now in the house, forming a strong base for the PTI to bring about change.

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Khan’s victory speech last month sounded conciliatory and the vitriol against his rivals that marked his previous speeches during the election campaign was missing. One has to wait and see whether he would be able to maintain this composure while dealing with a potentially hostile and formidable opposition. It is never easy to run a government without an absolute majority in parliament giving it very little space for implementing a reform agenda. Yet, coalition rule also makes the government more inclusive.

Across the aisle on the opposition benches, Shahbaz Sharif led the truncated former ruling party. His colleagues are all a chip off the old block with few stalwarts having jumped ship before the polls. Some renegades are back on the treasury benches of course, under the new banner of ‘naya Pakistan’. But does it matter in Pakistani politics?

Interestingly, the PML-N benches appeared subdued under the uncharismatic and lacklustre guardianship of Shahbaz Sharif. There was a creepy silence regarding the fate of the imprisoned leader Nawaz Sharif who was brought to a trial court in an armoured prison van on the day. The humiliating spectacle just miles away did not seem to bother the new PML-N leadership and lawmakers. It is questionable whether Shahbaz Sharif who has been eulogised for his administrative skills as chief minister of Punjab can provide the kind of leadership that the party needs in such testing times.

His leadership skills were badly exposed during the election campaign. His woes have exacerbated with some signs of cracks in the party torn between the two different narratives espoused by the older and the younger Sharif. The leadership has gone to the other branch of the family, but Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam continue to cast their shadow on the party from prison. Although the PML-N remains a formidable political force in Punjab, the party as has happened in the past, finds it extremely difficult to maintain unity in the face of a crisis. It is not known for its resilience.

There was, however, more zing in the ranks of the PPP, another major opposition party, and with good reason. The party has returned to the Assembly with a larger number of seats. More exciting was Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari making his debut in parliament. The scion of Pakistan’s once most powerful political dynasty made his mark in the election campaign trying to lift the party from the abyss.

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari may not have the charisma and political acumen of his illustrious mother and grandfather yet, but he has shown a degree of maturity missing in many of our leaders. But living under the shadow of his crafty father, Asif Zardari, it may not be that easy for him to take full charge. The former president is back in the National Assembly after decades and will certainly be in the driving seat when it comes to the PPP’s policy matters.

The paradox of the party is evident with the return of old faces and a very dynamic group of female members, some of them elected on general seats. The PPP is part of a grand opposition alliance, but there is no probability of its going too far.

It is evident that the PPP has far greater stakes in the new order than any other opposition group, with the party maintaining its stranglehold in Sindh. The increase in the number of seats in the National Assembly has given the party greater space for political manoeuvring, and master wheeler-dealer Zardari’s return to the house has given the PPP some more clout.

Conspicuous by his absence was the once ubiquitous Maulana Fazlur Rehman who has suffered the worst humiliation of his political career. He lost on both seats with his party having been routed in its stronghold by the PTI wave. It was seen as a personal victory for Imran Khan who had relentlessly campaigned against the JUI-F chief. More disgrace came when he had to move out of his residence in the ministers’ enclave that he had occupied for years as chairman of the Kashmir committee.

Enraged by his defeat, he blamed the ‘establishment’ for the debacle. He suffered further embarrassment when his allies slammed him for his anti-establishment speech at a protest march. He has almost disappeared from the political scene since then. Missing also has been veteran parliamentarian Mahmood Khan Achakzai. He has also accused the intelligence agencies for the defeat. His absence will be felt hugely by the opposition.

Notwithstanding the controversy over alleged rigging, the democratic transition has been a big stride forward. Despite some flaws in our democratic political system, there is hope for change even if the dream of ‘naya Pakistan’ is not fully accomplished.

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