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**PDM and the Senate**

Following the defeat of the PTI in the by-elections, there has been another shock for the ruling alliance: the PDM’s joint nominee Yousaf Raza Gilani defeated Hafeez Shaikh in the most coveted Senate seat of Islamabad on March 3.

The defeat has symbolic significance more than anything else because Imran Khan himself was invested in ensuring the victory of Hafeez Shaikh. The PDM has declared that its victory is a political verdict of no confidence against Imran Khan. The result was a bit of surprise for the ruling party. It was widely believed that Shaikh’s victory was almost certain because of his association with international lenders in addition to the fact that he had the PM’s support. Hafeez Shaikh’s failure to secure enough votes to make it to the Senate suggests that the political equation is being redrawn in Pakistan.

On the other hand, Yousaf Raza Gilani could secure nine additional votes to the total PDM’s strength of 160. How on earth could this be possible without defection of MNAs from the ruling alliance and without the infamous horse trading? But then there was more to it too; one could sense the gradual thawing of frozen relations between the PDM and the power corridors – some political reciprocity to diffuse the rising conflict between the PDM leadership and the power wielders of the state.

The Supreme Court’s ruling on the secret ballot, the Election Commission’s decision to defer the election transparency plea by the PTI and in-fighting within the PTI contributed to the defeat of Hafeez Shaikh. There are those who speculate that the political script of an in-house change within the PTI government has been written. However, it will be too early to suggest such an in-house change given that the ruling PTI and its political allies still hold a majority in the upper house. Soon after the declaration of the results of the Senate elections PDM leaders and their supporters took to mainstream media and social media platforms to celebrate Gilani’s victory as the beginning of the end of the PTI government.

If we follow the events of the last one week, they are quite instructive in that they suggest that the PTI has started to lose its political moorings and the unconditional support of its benefactors. The opinion of the Supreme Court against the president’s reference on open ballot and the subsequent denial of the ECP to deviate from the conventional way of holding elections weakened the PTI position. The story does not end here. Gilani’s victory is not merely an outcome of smart politics carried out by the PDM.

With all hue and cry over effective democracy, the sanctity of the vote, across-the-board accountability and civil supremacy, the PDM seems to be content with a negotiated political package in parliament. The political impression created by the PDM at its formative phase of being a well-knit alliance poised to wage an all-out war against the power wielders for the larger space of expression has gradually lost its essence. For many within the PDM alliance, the narrative of Nawaz Sharif was a bit unsettling and too radical for their reconciliatory agenda.

The most pronounced reservations against the political tirade articulated by Nawaz Sharif during his public speeches in PDM rallies came from Bilawal Bhutto. The PPP opted to tread the path of political reconciliation, which is more like Zardari’s way of doing politics rather than following Bilawal’s instincts of bashing the ruling party and sometimes even its benefactors. Conspiracy theorists say that there was a larger scheme behind the unleashing of Bilawal to target Imran Khan exclusively with occasional reference to his benefactors. If one had to believe the schema was so well crafted it could not be anyone other than Zardari.

During the last one week, the political landscape of the country has changed significantly in that Zardari has emerged as the real mover and shaker of PDM. In our expedient political system, Zardari has demonstrated that he is still the most sought-after politician when it comes to redrawing the power equation for the perceived larger good of the state. His vacillated moves may have dismayed many of his comrades in the PDM but the political mileage of his strategy has proven to be far-reaching in terms of taking the PDM to the next level of smart politics.

Dictated by realpolitik, it took hardly a few months for Zardari to read the political mood and to redirect the PDM’s political strategy from street agitation to a parliamentary course of political engagement with the regime and its benefactors. The PPP has a much larger stake than the PML-N if the political crisis spirals out of manageable proportions because of the PDM’s political adventurism. The political chaos favors the PML-N because: a) it will validate the narrative of Nawaz Sharif of going beyond the parliamentary means of rapprochement with the power corridors; and b) it can catapult the PML-N into power with a better deal than being a lame duck of democracy.

If a political crisis leads to the current government being toppled, it will be seen as a victory of the PML-N – placing it on higher moral grounds to negotiate a formidable deal in the new power equation. This simply means that the PPP will be out of the game and it may even lose in Sindh if the situation arises for a fresh election after the dissolution of the current political setup. Retaining power in Sindh is an absolute necessity for a fast-shrinking PPP. It cannot afford to go for an all-out war against the power wielders and lose its last power bastion. The PPP did not want to rock the boat for an obscure political goal where they could stand to gain nothing. However, the fight is not over yet. Well thought-out as it may seem, the so-called parliamentary way of resistance has its own problems rooted in the political history of Pakistan.

The 1990s was the decade of parliamentary ways of gaining political power for the most part but it could not create strong democratic institutions in the country. The decade of the 1990s ended up with a gloomy dawn and foggy future for democracy in the country when an elected prime minister was removed unceremoniously. Are we moving towards a 1990s political situation? Well, it would really be hard to believe that Pakistan can afford any reversion to its chequered political past.

The only way Pakistan can start afresh as an inclusive polity is to reset the political button of genuine transition to move into a stable and functioning democracy. That would require multidimensional institutional reforms and political commitment to build a well-governed, transparent and inclusive system of democratic expression. That is of course a much larger political project than striking deals for short-term electoral gains and for that Pakistan needs visionary leadership not political traders.

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