**Shifting politics**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-03-01

IT is a measure of the volatility of Pakistani politics that the momentum can suddenly shift between rival political forces. Recent developments have helped to revive the political fortunes of the opposition alliance while the PTI government`s credibility has been shaken and it has been put on the defensive. This however may be transient as dynamics can shift again to advantage the government if it makes the gains it is expecting in the upcoming Senate election and secures control of the upper house. The unopposed election of its Senate candidates from Punjab is an early indication.

But for now, the outcome of several by-elections has given a fillip to the opposition with the government showing visible signs of nervousness. Just a few weel(s ago PDM seemed to run out of steam, raising questions about whether it could evolve a unified response to mount pressure on the government. Differences between the alliance`s two major parties on how to proceed even generated doubts about PDM`s future.

This receded into the background as by-elections to several provincial and National Assembly seats approached, with PML-N and PPP focusing their political energies to winning seats they held before.

That they managed to do. Given that by-elections usually swing in the government`s favour, PML-N`s victory in the Nowshera seat previously held by PTI marked a significant setback for the ruling party.

Violence and controversy over ballot fraud in the Siallcot NA by-election delivered a bigger blow to the government`s credibility. PTI leaders claimed to have won in NA-75. But the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) refused to announce the result and casting doubt on election returns from several polling stations ordered an inquiry.

Then, in another setback to the government, it nullified the result, declaring that the poll had not been held in a `fair and transparent` manner and announced re-election in the entire constituency.

The government`s decision to challenge this was not only ill-advised but also exposed its lack of self-confidence.

Another blow for the government was ECP`s decision to ask for the suspension and transfer of severaldistrict officials and police officers. Observing that chaos spread throughout the constituency, it also summoned the Punjab chief secretary and IGP to explain their dereliction of duty on election day.

This was no less than an indictment of the Punjab government. In fact, the entire by-election process exposed the political frailties of both the ruling party and the Punjab government the latter long regarded even by party members as PTFs greatest vulnerability. Weak administrations in both Punjab and KP contributed to the disaster in Daska and the unedifying electoral outcome for PTI.

In KP, infighting in the ruling party played a key part in its Nowshera defeat which prompted the leadership to remove a provincial minister deemed to have supported the PML-N candidate. When the prime minister later visited Peshawar to rally his party`s lawmakers for the Senate election, 20 PTI MPs absented themselves from the meeting for unexplained reasons.

Mismanagement of the NA-75 by-election can be attributed in most part to an ineffective Punjab leadership that has been unable to govern. Its inability to deal with the run-up to the poll and its chaotic aftermath laid bare its utter lack of competence.

Worse, administrative involvement in ballot irregularities which prompted ECP`s action lost the party its moral high ground.

The political fault lines in the ruling party go beyond this and should be a source of worry for its leadership -as well as cause for correction.

Political management has not emerged as a strong suit of a party which lacl(s political heavyweights with the experience and political acumen to manage an organisation of disparate elements and deal effectively with a motley group of allies, being a coalition government. A political void has also been created by the absence of Jahangir Khan Tareen, who was tasked with party affairs and showed the kind of political savvy, experience and approachability that significantly strengthened PTI.

Continuing infighting and publicly expressed discontent are testimony to ineffective management of party affairs. This has also been evidenced in the ticketing process for the Senate election. Candidates kept getting shuffled, causing considerable disgrun-tlement in the party, which also resulted from tickets being awarded to those dubbed as `parachuters`.

Lack of party discipline is an electoral liability as exemplified by the Nowshera loss and may also be tested in the upcoming Senate poll.

Rifts have been evident in the party`s Balochistan wing over tickets. The party`s parliamentary leader in the provincial assembly, Yar Mohammed Rind, publicly complained about the prime minister`s lack of consultation on election matters, pointing out that his province did not have any representation in the party`s parliamentary board.

In the past, reliance on the establishment to help `manage`l(eyparliamentaryinitiativesandunhappy allies created a disincentive for the leadership to learn and hone the political skills needed for party management. Whether the establishment has now begun to disengage from such activities remains to be determined. What PTI leaders need to acknowledge is that governance is an intensely political task especially in a parliamentary democracy and needs sustained political engagement for the party to function as a cohesive entity and for coalition partners to remain content. If top PTI leaders spend more time engaging with their own parliamentarians than berating the opposition it would strengthen the party and its political base.

Beyond PTPs fault lines the bigger and more consequential question concerns the credibility of elections in the future. The country is already haunted by a history of elections that have seen widespread irregularities, voter manipulation and ballot fraud or been challenged by the losing party that has claimed rigging. How then can the integrity of elections be assured in the future so that its results are accepted by all? This is a vexed question with no easy answers in an environment where political leaders see rivals as enemies, not competitors. This inhibits the collaboration needed between them for electoral reform and to accept and play by the rules of the game. But if election outcomes continue to be challenged or marred by voter fraud the very legitimacy of the democratic system will be put at risk. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.