**The game is on**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-03-03

IT will be a secret ballot at the Senate elections.

The Supreme Court decision is unambiguous. Yet it has not ended the controversy. It`s hard for the PTI government to swallow more embarrassment after the NA-75 by-election fiasco.

The rejection of yet another presidential reference by the apex court has dealt a serious political blow to Prime Minister Imran Khan. It`s not a good omen for the government in the run-up to a critical battle for the control of the upper house of parliament.

While no surprise is expected regarding the provinces, the entire focus is now on the contest for the Islamabad seat. It`s the most critical test indeed for a fledgling ruling coalition with a pumped-up opposition alliance trying to snatch a surprise victory. The wheeling and dealing is in full swing to win over disgruntled members of the opposing camps.

The prime minister who is rarely seen in parliament has now camped out in his chamber to do some damage control. The Daska by-election debacle and the setback in the Supreme Court on the presidential reference pertaining to changing the secret-balloting rule in the polls has demoralised the treasury benches. Secret balloting now makes it easier for those ready to switch sides.

While the contest for the Islamabad seat is the focal point, the elections for provincial representations is not likely to produce any major upset.

Interestingly, in the midst of their intense hostility, the PTI and PML-N reached a deal that got all candidates from Punjab elected unopposed.

Each party got seats in proportion to its strength in the legislative assembly. This kind of arrangement, and that too between two bitter rivals, is a rare feat in Pakistan`s electoral history. It is said to be the result of a backchannel effort by Pervaiz Elahi, speaker of the Punjab Assembly and leader of the PML-Q which is a partner of the PTI in the coalition at the centre and in the province.

Curiously, the deal took place at the height of the Daska by-election controversy that had renderedthe political atmosphere in the province more toxic. The arrangement has certainly saved both parties from any possible embarrassment in the election.

It may have come as a great relief particularly to the PTI leadership in the province where it is facing brewing discontent in party ranks. But for the PML-N, too, the arrangement has worked well, allowing the party leadership to focus on the main battle for the capital seat. However, it is the PML-Q with less than a dozen seats in the provincial assembly that has emerged as the main arbiter of power in Punjab. A weak local PTI leadership unable to maintain unity in the ranks has given a politically savvy former chief minister a much greater bargaining position.

The PML-Q holds the balance of power atleastin Punjab where the PTI-led coalition has a razor-thin majority. It`s apparent that Imran Khan`s `wonder boy` Chief Minister Usman Buzdar has failed to counter the opposition challenge. The NA-75 election has further exposed the fault lines of the Buzdar-led administration in Punjab.

While the deal in the Senate election may have come as a breather for the chief minister, it has worsened his leadership challenge. Although the prime minister still has full faith in his handpicked chief minister, there seems to be a greater urgency for him to deal with the leadership crisis in Pakistan`s most critical province in the post-Senate election scenario. There has long been talk about the Pervaiz Elahi option but it will be hard for the PTI to hand over the province to its smaller coalition partner.

There have also been efforts to reach a similar arrangement among the rival parties in KP and Balochistan to elect their Senate representatives to avoid horse-trading. It may be too late now but any agreement in that regard would help set a new precedent.

But it is in Sindh where the outcome could go haywire given the disarray in the PTI-led opposition bloc and the ruling PPP`s aggressive campaignto woo disgruntled opposition members. It would not be surprising if the PPP gets some extra seats.

While the PTI, which is the largest opposition group in the provincial legislature, seems divided over controversial ticket allocation, there is no seat arrangement among the combined opposition including the MQM and the Grand Democratic Alliance. The absence of a joint strategy on the part of the combined opposition gives the PPP a great advantage.

Given its existing numerical strength in the National Assembly there should not have been any problem for the PTI-led ruling coalition to win the Islamabad seat. But the anxiety in the ruling party`s ranks is quite puzzling.

The Supreme Court`s decision on the eve of the Senate election has cost the PTI heavily. The constant rhetoric about buying and selling of votes in the Senate election may have also been a factor in fuelling discomfort in the party ranks. It denotes the leadership`s lack of f aith in its members.

In comparison, the opposition PDM appears much more confident despite the fact that it is lacking in numbers. It is also a psychological war that the two sides are engaged in. More interesting is the opposition`s upbeat mood over the perception of the establishment`s neutrality in these elections.

There is also a feeling in the PDM leadership that half the battle is won with the establishment distancing itself from the PTI government.

Maryam Nawaz`s recent statement that there may not be any need for a long march after the Senate elections is quite intriguing.

The contest is between a former prime minister and the finance minister. Surely the stakes for the PTI are much higher; the defeat of a key member of the cabinet could prove far more consequential for the government. But it is equally important for the PDM to win the contest to keep itself united. The writer is an author and journalist.

zhussain100@yahoo.com Twitter: @hidhussain