[**Playing the odds**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1430671/playing-the-odds)

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THIRD consecutive elected government, second democratic transition, we finally seem to have continual democracy in form, though not yet in substance.

Pointing towards uneven playing fields, the timing of court cases and election-day irregularities, many are vehement that in this case, form is not a prelude to substance, in fact it corrodes it. Others demand more than circumstantial evidence, dismissing protestations as the old guard fighting against its own irrelevance. It leaves us without consensus on whether there is a masquerading martial regime or not, whether the judiciary is an invested player or not, whether elections were fair or not, etc.

One way out is to look for patterns. Those would explain the cynicism around the discourse on corruption. Or the pattern of the establishment nurturing or patronising leaders but eliminating them once they get too independent or ambitious enough to challenge their patrons, whether Z.A. Bhutto, the MQM, Akbar Bugti, Nawaz Sharif or jihadis of various hues. It is not too hard to predict who may come next if the allocated portion of autonomy is exceeded. Patterns can also cut through prominent differences to identify commonalities, for instance suggesting that the PTM’s aggravation with the army in Fata and Swat is anti-incumbency anger, which kicks in more often than not in KP. Armies generally wouldn’t have a clue about dealing with anti-incumbent mobilisation, but then, armies generally wouldn’t have it aimed at them because they wouldn’t be governing.

It gets murky when patterns conflict with each other. For instance, one set shows that space for dissent is shrinking. Informal testimonies against the intelligence apparatus are legion. Right up till elections, reporters across the country were lamenting unparalleled degrees of censorship, heads of university departments complaining about constant monitoring, human rights NGOs decrying close surveillance and harassment, police officers bemoaning unprecedented levels of micromanagement, even cable operators and newspaper hawkers saying they had instructions. Meanwhile, forced disappearances remain unaddressed, impunity remains unchecked.

But another pattern across the arc of history suggests this may be untenable. For one, it indicates that a much greater effort is required for the same outcomes. Next, differentiating power from violence shows they are inversely related. I first saw this while working on women’s rights issues, that violence was an attempt at reasserting control once it started slipping away. Whether honour killing or domestic abuse, it was once the victim had stopped complying that use of force was required. Later I read political theory explaining that when those who rule lose the power of consensus, they are no longer leading, only dominating. Hannah Arendt writes that when consensus breaks down, violence and repression is likely so that “Every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence.”

Mainstream parties have collaborated or accommodated or given in because the military held the ultimate political termination weapon, the coup. Given democratic transitions, as the possibility of this gradually recedes, it may embolden politicians. The attacks will still come, but there is a difference between being vigilant against unseen attacks and between having a huge sword dangle above the throne, tip pointing down, held up by a single hair from a horse’s tail. In this scenario, democratising institutions that could serve as proxies becomes part of the larger political interest. Unless continually prevented, form and substance would tend towards convergence.

Additionally, a rising middle class, whatever its other inclinations may be, is creating new investments in elected representation as it begins to have the numbers to make itself count. In a departure from previous questions of whether we are ready, educated or mature enough for democracy (in form), there is a gradually consolidating consensus that it’s the only game in town. Being ‘pro-establishment’ is now a political slur. If institutions fail to adapt to such social and economic changes, it will result in political decay.

Is privileging either pattern a confirmation bias or can these patterns coexist? Laws of the universe currently seem to allow for the latter where general relativity explains mega-scale planets, stars and galaxies, and quantum mechanics explains the smallest-scale subatomic particles that make the universe. Both seem equally valid yet incompatible with each other. Or should we like physicists seek a grand unification theory? Or, to posit Gramsci, is this just pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will?

There are too many ifs and buts to call it. The establishment could still attempt to seal emerging fissures, such as by clamping down on social media and bringing in firewall technologies or investing further in more ‘new wave’ politicians or burning the house down by encouraging TLP types. Or it could recalibrate.

The battle for civilian supremacy will necessarily be long drawn with sacrificial goats, frequent losses and incremental gains, with more payback from strategies than heroes, heroics and romanticism. Take the example of renowned resistance leader Rosa Parks, known as the mother of the American civil rights movement, the tired seamstress who by refusing to vacate a bus seat, and getting arrested, in 1955 catalysed the surge against racial segregation.

What the packaged story doesn’t tell you is that many others had done the same before, including another black woman earlier that year. Organisers of the bus boycott decided not to build her into a symbol because she was unmarried and pregnant so would cost them the support of the church. The NAACP organisers ‘auditioned icons’ till they found the right one. Then there were hundreds of car pool volunteers, lawyers clubbing petitions and representatives lobbying other states, the critical mass without which flashpoints cannot be flashpoints.

To return to another overused quote by Gramsci, “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born.” Till these tectonic contradictions play out, let us hope and pray that at the surface level the ruling party delivers on the important human development and administrative reform promised in the prime minister’s speech.

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