**[Political dilemmas](https://www.dawn.com/news/1596986/political-dilemmas)**

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THE evolving political situation in the country confronts both the government and opposition with difficult dilemmas. The decisions that followed the [PDM’s Lahore rally](https://www.dawn.com/news/1595548/my-narrative-is-the-same-as-quaid-i-azams-says-nawaz-at-pdms-lahore-power-show) and the atmosphere its combative campaign has created can be consequential in the days to come. The confrontation between the government and opposition continues to polarise the country and reinforce a fraught environment. Both sides have ruled out any dialogue and remain at loggerheads with each other. The opposition’s tough rhetoric has been matched by the government’s aggressive verbal response.

As widely anticipated, the opposition gave the prime minister a [deadline](https://www.dawn.com/news/1595740) — Jan 31 — to either step down or face a march on the capital. While it avoided setting any dates for both the threatened resignations from parliamentary membership and the ‘long march’, the opposition pledged to continue mounting pressure on the government. Meanwhile, opposition legislators have been asked to submit resignations from the assemblies to their parties.

Despite the unity signalled by the opposition’s Lahore Declaration, there are conflicting views among its leaders about when and how to escalate pressure on the government. This is not surprising for a disparate alliance cobbled together for varying motives. Nevertheless, differences among hardliners and those who prefer a more measured approach pose a challenge for the PDM. Can it maintain a unified strategy going forward? Some constituent parties are not too convinced that the resignation card — which PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari calls the nuclear option — should be played too soon. After all, the PPP would have the most to lose — control of the Sindh government — if it went ahead with resignations without any guarantee that this action would lead to fresh elections.

Sustaining a unified approach on strategy and tactics in what will likely be a long haul and also ensure its public campaign doesn’t run out of steam will test the PDM in the months ahead. Whether its plans for political activities in the coming weeks will help to maintain the opposition’s momentum is yet to be seen.

Uncertainty lies ahead for both sides with no assurance that their strategies will deliver the outcome they want.

The opposition will also confront other dilemmas. It must know that even if it is able to forge an agreed strategy and act as a cohesive coalition, there is hardly any surety that it will achieve its principal objective of forcing the Imran Khan government from power. The country’s past history of ‘long marches’ and their outcomes is before them. As also is the reality that the decisive factor remains the establishment’s position. Marches on the capital do not ipso facto trigger the fall of any government.

As for mass resignations from legislatures, even if this comes to pass, again there is no certainty that it would compel the government to call new elections. Government spokesmen have repeatedly said they will defeat the opposition plan by holding by-elections to seats that are surrendered even if that means they are held in phases and not all at once — a difficult logistical exercise in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, opposition brinkmanship is by no means a strategy that will yield the result its leaders hope for.

None of this means the government doesn’t also face dilemmas. The threat of agitation and resignations does present a challenge that the government will need to manage in a way that averts any political upheaval that can snowball into a crisis. Also, the negative impact of political turbulence on the economy can be significant, especially at a time when economic hardship — some but not all driven by the pandemic — has been causing rising public discontent with the government. Already, the limits of the government’s administrative abilities have been laid bare by the food price spiral and the LNG issue.

On resignations, the government’s stance may be too complacent as it minimises the risk that this could lead to turmoil that Islamabad may be ill-equipped to handle. Denialism is no strategy. In fact, the government’s response in the face of opposition pressure so far lacks clarity. Instead, multiple pressers by its spokespersons have shown that the government has come under pressure from the opposition’s actions.

The government has also stirred a controversy by its proposal for voting in the Senate election to take place by a show of hands and not secret ballot. This will likely need a constitutional amendment even though the government believes otherwise and is seeking the Supreme Court’s advisory opinion in this regard. The government has also announced its intention to hold the Senate election a month ahead of schedule, authority for which rests with the Election Commission. Predictably, these announcements have evoked criticism from PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz as well as PPP and other PDM leaders.

The government’s biggest dilemmas may be of its own making. With the opposition aiming to make Punjab the political battleground, it is inexplicable why the PTI leadership continues with a lacklustre and weak provincial government that has shown little ability to handle the opposition’s assault. Its stultifying management of the province has already contributed to the party losing significant political ground there. Again, denialism — the pretence that the arrangement is delivering — is magnifying the government’s challenge. Indeed, competent governance in Punjab would go a long way to strengthen the PTI government’s hands at the centre as well as manage the opposition — a fact acknowledged privately by senior party members. But the leadership’s disconnect with reality on this count is only adding another dimension to the government’s challenges and hobbling its response to the PDM.

What lies ahead for both sides is uncertainty and no assurance that their respective strategies will deliver the outcome they want. For both the path ahead is fraught with difficulty. Meanwhile, the country will continue to bear the brunt of the intensifying confrontation between the government and the opposition. Some voices from both sides want to keep the door open for dialogue, but for now these are all but drowned out by the no-talks posture of their leaderships. This means that prospects for political stability remain clouded in unpredictability, leaving the country once again on the edge of a preventable crisis.

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