**[Political merry-go-round](https://www.dawn.com/news/1833418/political-merry-go-round)**

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THERE has been far too much discussion on [May 9](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832279) in the past week, making the issue as repetitive as our talk show discussions. But then, I do claim to write on politics so it is perhaps fair to bore the readers as much as the poor viewers compelled to watch television talk shows.

So here goes.

The week, in a way, did begin with the [press conference](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832048) of the DG ISPR in which he made it clear that the trials of the ‘perpetrators’ of May 9 were essential, while also adding that the PTI had to apologise for its role and change its behaviour.

Parts of this message were picked up by key members of the government as well. For example, Khawaja Asif, the defence minister, spoke of the trials reaching their logical conclusion, while the prime minister also promised a similar commitment.

However, the DG, as well as some members of the cabinet, mentioned dialogue with the PTI and its importance. The former pointed out that a dialogue can only take place among political forces as it was “not appropriate for the military to be involved”, according to a story in this paper. Since then, Rana Sanaullah has spoken of a grand dialogue, as did Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari who emphasised the need for parties to [talk to each other](https://www.dawn.com/news/1827534).

The past year has turned matters into a confrontation between the state and the people.

It would require courage far more than I possess to comment on the DG ISPR’s statement but little bravery is required to dissect whatever the politicians are uttering. So here goes.

While it seems the statements emanating from the ‘government’ side were harsh (as was the [reaction](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832070) from the PTI), they were also not very clear. To promise strict accountability, along with occasional hints about a crackdown on the PTI, and then asking the party to also talk to its political opponents in the larger context is a bit of a mixed message.

For instance, had a similar message come last year in the aftermath of May 9, the PTI would perhaps have responded with eagerness. But after a year-long crackdown, which the party survived (it also contested and [won](https://www.dawn.com/news/1812970) an election) this offer may be a case of too little, too late.

And this is not simply because of its stubborn leader; there are two other factors to consider here: the party’s workers are now in an aggressive mood but also the broad-based nature of the crackdown in KP and Punjab means that beyond power politics, the past year has turned matters into a confrontation between the state and the people.

It is a point hard to explain or argue over and over again for it’s simply earned me the title of being a PTI apologist in the past year or so. But this old thought comes to mind when I come across Wusutullah Khan’s sound bite: he narrates what the rickshaw wallah said to him as he travelled to the airport after attending the Asma Jahangir Conference in Lahore.

The clip is easy to find online for those who have mastered the art of using VPN. Hence, there is little need to narrate his experience; suffice it to say that in the past six months, at least two other visitors to Lahore who hired cars or cabs recounted the same story. Or take the kind of reception Mahrang Baloch got at the conference. It wasn’t just about the ovation that she received when she spoke but also the dozens who kept coming up to her to get pictures taken with her. There is a sense of shared experience when a young Lahori man comes up to this Baloch woman and speaks of his sister who is a huge fan of Mahrang.

It is this gap that needs to be bridged, especially in the wake of a controversial election and the formation of a government seen to enjoy little legitimacy. And by this I mean the gap between the ordinary people, who have suffered due to a year-long crackdown on a party, and the state.

Has the process already begun? Will it help if some of the incarcerated are released? Or for the trials to be expedited? Or would it mean the PTI has to be given some relief, despite ‘May 9’? This is for the big brains running this government. A journalist is a journalist because it is easy to point out the problems without getting into the nitty-gritty of policymaking.

This may prove necessary because it is not enough to get the PTI into parliament and talking to other parties without also appeasing public opinion — if the people continue to be angry, they might just dump the PTI and find more radical options.

This is not simply an abstract suggestion from a bleeding-heart liberal — another label increasingly being thrown my way. Though as an aside, it is well worth pointing out a confrontational situation between the people and the state is not going to allow for a coherent and effective response to the militancy problem, which is not simply festering but growing.

The economy needs work, lots of work in the form of ‘reform’. But these reforms, despite what most suggest, are not technical decisions. They are inherently political. And among other factors, no unpopular government that is staring down a popular opposition is going to own difficult decisions such as taxing the traders or [privatising SOEs](https://www.dawn.com/news/1824841). For both will carry the risk of further alienating yet another section of society. This may prove as true of the government as the establishment. And the latter will also have to consider the implications of similarly ‘difficult’ decisions such as a tax on real estate.

Mere talks in themselves will not prove enough. There will have to be concrete actions along the way too if some of the more difficult decisions are to be owned and carried out. And for this, it is not enough for the parties to cooperate in parliament; if it was, the extension given to Gen Qamar Bajwa would not be an orphan today.

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