**Political see-saw**

BY N I A Z M U R T A Z A 2021-03-09

WE have been witnessing a political seesaw in the country for months now. After its failed no-confidence move against Senate chairman Sadiq Sanjrani and the long march in 2019, the opposition appeared to be out of ideas and energy to dislodge the PTI government which seemed set to complete its term.

The PDM regained its momentum in late 2020 with its public meetings and Nawaz Sharif`s dramatic taking of sensitive names in the backdrop of the PTI`s weak performance. The momentum lasted a few weeks only. Its failure to gather a huge crowd in its Lahore bastion led pundits to see it as over. Its decision to participate in byand Senate elections strengthened this view.

But such are the tortuous see-saws of our politics that these two very decisions revived the momentum.

The PTI`s bypoll losses and the clumsy rigging attempt in Daska, likely done sans the active support of those forces that excel in doing so, put the government on the back foot. Its retreat was further cemented by its desperate attempts to end secret voting in Senate polls. The final straw to break the camel`s back was the humiliating defeat of Finance Minister Hafeez Sheikh in the Senate polls to his former boss Yousuf Raza Gilani. This was a double blow. It scrambled its plans to continue with Sheikh at a time when it is talking to the IMF.

More critically, it raised the issue of whether Prime Minister Imran Khan still has a majority. The PTI tried to answer this question via a vote of confidence. But that came with a blemish given the use of Article 91 (7) which required the president to say he thinks (his own) prime minister lacks a majority. The vote also doesn`t change the fact that Khan has faced questions about his majority. It has sapped his moral and political standing. He will remain in power but powerless to take major initiatives.

But neither is it smooth sailing for the PDM. Its suddenly softer tone towards key institutions raises suspicion as do its lack of clarity on future plans. Its moral standing too took a big hit from the release of the video showing Gilani`s son inducing PTI legislators, giving rise to comments that this could yet lead to the elder Gilani`s disqualification. Matters could also swing in the PTI`s favour if it wins the Senate chair`s elections. Sadiq Sanjrani`s nomination followed a meeting of Pakistan`s `troika` Ironically, the PTI can only win by using the same tacky tactics that it accuses the PDM of using in Gilani`s win. But it is unlikely that the PTI will talk of high principles and open voting in this election.Thus, the PDM may yet find that despite gaining momentum from the byand Senate elections, as after its public meetings, it still falls short of its aim of dislodging the PTI if the establishment clings on to the latter despite its poor performance and precarious National Assembly position. This support reveals the artificial foundation on which the see-saw moves.

We have a political see-saw not because there are two evenly balanced political forces in contest. We have it because despite being weak, the PTI is widely seen as being propped up by those who appear to be undermining the public mandate. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the main constituency whose interests the PTI is still serving well today is a section of the establishment.

Much of the critique of the alleged corrupt practices on the part of the PDM for Gilani`s seat and the PTI in Dasl(a and the Sanjrani no-confidence move earlier has bemoaned the low morality of the PDM and PTI. It is a fair critique. But even thoughwe must take immediate strict measures against such practices, expecting them to end soon is unrealistic. These problems will only gradually reduce over the long run.

However, main-stream media misses the more critical lens through which we must view such incidents. That goes beyond the morality of politicians and focuses on establishment politics and how any event affects its ironclad grip on politics. It is the more critical lens as this causes much more damage to public welfare than politicians` intrigues.

So viewed from the lens of morality both the practices adopted by the PTI in the Sanjrani no-confidence move and by the PDM on the Islamabad seat were bad. But viewed from the other lens, the former was worse as it increased the establishment`s hold. Thus, the real issue is not whether the see-saw tilts towards the PDM or PTI. It is whether it tilts towards establishment or civilian sway. Viewing the matter morally, one would choose neither the PDM nor PTI as a voter. But viewing it from the other lens, one would express sympathy, as an analyst, for the PDM aims of civilian sway and fair polls even if its commitment to theseidealsis less than perfect.m The writer heads INSPIRING Pakistan, a progressive policy unit.

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