**[Premier problem in Punjab](https://www.dawn.com/news/1613559/premier-problem-in-punjab)**

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THE PTI is bleeding in Punjab.

At a time when the opposition alliance PDM is dissolving in its own acidity, the ruling party is struggling to bottle up the volcanic lava of discontent bubbling dangerously inside its own government in the country’s largest province.

In the aftermath of Yousuf Raza Gilani’s surprise victory over finance minister Hafeez Sheikh for the Senate’s Islamabad seat, an important development took place behind very large and very closed doors. It so happened that six of the most powerful federal ministers received an invitation for a meeting. In that meeting, some very powerful people told these six ministers that the situation in Punjab was almost beyond redemption. They were told to convey to their boss — the premier — that Punjab needed a new chief executive. It was a message couched in no terms that would dilute its efficacy.

According to sources who have knowledge of this meeting, the six ministers trooped back to their premier and conveyed the message in as clear terms as they deemed possible. It was a tense moment that reflected the gravity of the situation. PDM was already sensing a kill in Punjab while PTI itself was groaning under the weight of its own atrocious governance in the province. Now all kinds of allies had also begun to glower at the party leadership for its inability to stop the internal political haemorrhaging in the province.

Buzdar is here till this complex situation can unravel to produce a convenient solution.

This was the time, about 10 days back, when news of the Punjab chief minister’s replacement had quietly begun to do the rounds. Someone somewhere had sensed what was going on and this sense had gently splashed into the domain of whispers. But then these whispers evaporated into political ether as quickly as they had materialised through conspiratorial condensation.

The ministers were expected to inform these powerful people about the outcome of the message delivery. Some of them had opined in the meeting that the outcome would be positive but there was at least one minister who had said the desired change in Punjab would not happen.

He was right. But the story does not end here.

First, some context. Ever since the premier’s surprise choice of a little-known local politician as chief minister of Punjab, there have been numerous times that Usman Buzdar’s political demise was predicted. Each time that he survived, he did so for a slightly different set of reasons. Such reasons, too, evolve with the times. In an ironic twist, each anti-Buzdar ‘wave’ entrenched him even further into the job, not because he got better at it, but due to the ever-increasing complexity of his removal.

It is easy to see why he should be replaced, but more difficult to comprehend why he hasn’t.

This is where the premier comes in. People in his inner circle say he has to grapple with issues surrounding Punjab that are not uni-dimensional in nature. The premier is well informed of what is happening — and not happening — in Punjab. He has multiple sources through which he gets his information and he is fully clued-up about problems, even the tricky ones that pinpoint where corruption is taking place in Punjab and who is doing it. “I don’t know why the premier continues to back Buzdar after all the mess that is taking place in Punjab,” says a PTI leader who has had a very long association with the premier. But then he hastens to add: “The premier can see the bigger picture that I cannot, so he must have his reasons.”

The premier continues to hold these reasons close to his heart. This has injected an element of uncertainty into the situation because even his close advisers and ministers have to resort to guesswork about why the premier is not doing anything to stop the bleeding in Punjab.

Sources in the ruling party say that the premier has to balance the risks between retaining Buzdar and absorbing the damage that will accrue, versus finding his replacement and risking an internal strife that may tear apart the party in Punjab. These are weighty risks and the premier is said to have weighed them repeatedly. A similar thing happened after the meeting of the six federal ministers with powerful people.

Only a handful of people are aware of these developments because of the sensitivity of the issue. Insiders with access to these developments quietly confide what took place after the meeting behind very large and very closed doors. When the ministers conveyed the message to the premier he asked what any premier would have asked: “Who do I replace him with?”

In turn, a few names were discussed. But with each name, the premier had a sound reason why it was a bad choice. He had obviously given these names a lot of thought. Plus, he had information that only premiers have. Each and every name was shot down. The sense was that he was open to discussing the issue but no one seemed to have a solution. As per the understanding, this was reported back to the powerful people with the consent of the premier.

There were many other details that add flesh to the bones of this story. But the conclusion remains the same: Buzdar is here till this complex situation can unravel to produce a convenient solution — and an equally convenient name.

PML-N, PPP, the establishment — all have a deep interest in the office that Usman Buzdar defiantly occupies. All kinds of names, numbers and combinations have been floated to somehow produce a solution. Some prefer Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, others someone from inside the PTI, while still others have whispered the possibility of a ‘non-Sharif family’ candidate if that makes it more digestible to powerful quarters. As yet, none has been able to cut this Gordian’s knot.

The premier has a problem in Punjab. It could open up dangerous fault lines. But with every stakeholder cancelling the other one out, Buzdar still appears the last man standing. For now.

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*Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2021*