**[Presidential indiscretion](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771678/presidential-indiscretion)**

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CURIOUSLY, it was through X (formerly Twitter) that President Arif Alvi [chose to deny](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771203/as-god-is-my-witness-president-alvi-says-he-did-not-assent-to-bills-amending-army-act-secrets-law) that he had assented to the bills amending the Official Secrets Act and the Army Act, plunging the country into yet another constitutional crisis. The two disputed bills passed by parliament earlier this month were enacted after the president was deemed to have given his consent. But his tweet two days after the notification has opened a new Pandora’s box.

While the president’s delayed denial, and that too through social media, is inexplicable, it has nevertheless rendered the validity of these Acts controversial. The entire episode has further widened the cracks within the country’s power structure, amplifying the existing chaos. The president’s statement blaming bureaucratic foul play has made the matter more complex.

It has also exposed the president’s own predicament as he desperately tries to defend his position under fire. The demand for his resignation has certainly put pressure on him, with just a few weeks left for the end of his term in the top office. Meanwhile, the debate over the validity of the enacted laws has given a new twist to the ongoing political battle. The matter is now likely to go to the Supreme Court.

But the controversy surrounding the disputed Acts that provide sweeping powers to the security agencies is certainly not going to go away whatever the outcome of the legal battle. The way the two bills were pushed through parliament, just days before the dissolution of the National Assembly ignoring the voices of dissent, has raised questions about the intention behind the move.

Many see the interim administration as just an extension of the security establishment.

It is apparent that the former ruling coalition deliberately passed the bills that provide sweeping powers to the security agencies, undermining civil rights. The latest controversy over the legal status of the enacted laws has also brought into the question the political cost of strengthening the powers of the security apparatus. The PDM coalition’s shameful capitulation will have long-term consequences for the democratic process. The draconian laws that are currently being used against its political opponent could come back to haunt it. It is a lesson of history that our political leaders conveniently ignore for short-term political gains.

While demanding the president’s resignation over the assent controversy, the PDM parties have come together to defend the black laws. Interestingly, it’s the PML-N whose leaders now — as opposed to when they were in the opposition where they were never tired of talking about civilian supremacy — are the biggest exponents of the laws strengthening the establishment’s stranglehold.

While the debate over the legality of the two Acts rages on, the authorities have [set up a special court](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771455/special-court-formed-to-hear-cipher-case-in-camera) under the amended Official Secrets Act to try PTI leaders in the cipher case. Among the accused are former prime minister Imran Khan and former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi. There are also several other PTI leaders and supporters who are likely to face trial under the Army Act.

What we are witnessing is arguably the most ruthless crackdown against a political party in recent times. Hundreds of PTI supporters are languishing in jail without trial; many of them are believed to have been held on trumped-up charges. Some PTI women supporters have been detained for over three months without being produced before a trial court and having been denied bail. All that has made a mockery of justice and the rule of law. The newly enacted amended laws enhancing the powers of the security agencies will make things worse.

All this is happening as the country prepares for elections, raising doubts about prospects of a democratic transition. What is most alarming is the intensification in crackdown on the political opposition under the military-backed interim government whose impartiality is questionable. There is a strong perception of the interim administration being just an extension of the security establishment.

Moreover, the prevailing uncertainty over the election schedule has reinforced suspicions about the country moving towards a prolonged period of interim rule with all the powers to take policy decisions. The PML-N and most other PDM parties now favour delaying elections beyond the constitutional limit of 90 days. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has already [announced](https://www.dawn.com/news/1770628) that delimitation of the constituencies as required under the new census will take at least four months to complete before poll arrangements, requiring another three months, can begin.

It may be a valid point, yet there is no clear time frame given by the ECP for the polls. There is also a strong view that there is no need for fresh delimitation of constituencies. There appears a clear division within the former ruling coalition over the matter.

What is most intriguing is the ambiguous position taken by the PML-N leadership on the poll delay. The confusion also reflects the power tussle within the Sharif family and the party’s diminishing electoral prospects in the face of PTI’s strong challenge, despite the crackdown against it and efforts to dismantle the party. In its 16 months of rule, the PML-N-led coalition has little to show by way of performance, especially on the economic front; this has further eroded its support base.

The PML-N also seems to have lost a lot of political capital because of its opportunistic alignment with the security establishment. Its spearheading of the passage of two controversial bills undermining the fundamental principles of justice and civil rights has hugely dented its so-called democratic credentials. The possibility of the party recovering some of its lost political ground is doubtful given its shortsighted policies and reluctance to change. The latest scandal triggered by the president’s denial of having approved the controversial bills has exposed the fault lines in our existing power structure.

Instead of debating the veracity or otherwise of the president’s statement, the political parties should focus on mitigating the damage done to the democratic process because of these draconian laws. The ongoing political persecution will only worsen the situation. The only way out of this predicament is to hold fair and free elections within the stipulated time frame.

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