**[Question of age](https://www.dawn.com/news/1819226/question-of-age)**

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SHEHBAZ Sharif is the [new](https://www.dawn.com/news/1818835) prime minister of Pakistan and the first one to sit in this chair for consecutive terms; he is also the second to get here after having served as chief minister of Punjab. He first headed Punjab in 1997, which was 27 years ago.

The election season is yet to end, with the approaching vote for the new president and some Senate seats. It’s perhaps safe to say, [Asif Ali Zardari](https://www.dawn.com/news/1816444) will soon be the new president of Pakistan, a position he last held over 10 years ago, though, of course, his political career began in 1990 when he won a seat in the National Assembly some 34 years ago. The new Speaker of the National Assembly, Ayaz Sadiq, is now settling down in this position for the third time, having first won a seat in 2002.

The first row of PML-N parliamentarians is just as experienced and familiar with the National Assembly. While the people who spoke from the opposition benches as the new parliament met included first-timer Barrister Gohar Ali Khan and the relatively younger Omar Ayub and Amir Dogar (these new faces have reached the front row thanks to the crackdown on the PTI, which has forced many among its senior lot to leave or get stuck in jail), they were answered by Khawaja Asif, Rana Tanveer and Ahsan Iqbal, who again trace their political careers back to the 1990s.

And now, before you wonder what I am on about, let me get to the point.

Pakistan is a young country and it is also one which is changing rapidly, due to its demography, urbanisation, economics, and much else. And this change from below is putting pressure on our politics and parties. If the tectonic plates below are moving, politics on the surface cannot, and should not, remain as it was decades ago. And for those who watch politics closely, this is obvious in the parties and movements which are winning the people’s approval. Unfortunately, however, the more established stakeholders seem either oblivious or resistant to change. Government formation at the moment is a case in point.

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How else does one interpret the decision to have the same faces which have been dominating the political landscape for the past three decades? It is worth pointing out here that the names doing the rounds as possible cabinet members also tend to be from the same crop — Ishaq Dar, Khawaja Asif, Ahsan Iqbal and Rana Sanaullah, with very few new, inspirational faces.

This is not simply an abstract argument. The [voting patterns](https://www.dawn.com/news/1814162) on Feb 8 have taken everyone by surprise as has the soaring popularity of Imran Khan and the PTI. Indeed, it is worth pointing out the upswing in support for the PTI, which became evident in the aftermath of the vote of no-confidence, was not expected to last. Both the PTI and the rest of the parties expected it to be short-lived, which is why the PTI wanted elections quickly in 2022, while the PDM wanted to delay them. The latter felt time would dampen the zeal of the PTI supporter and give them time to stabilise the economy. Both proved near impossible. And now, two years later, the party is even more [popular](https://www.dawn.com/news/1806716) than it was in April 2022.

While many factors have fed into the unprecedented victory of the PTI, one of them is just a population’s vague desire for change. Fresh faces, new ones. And yet, the older parties, confident in their [wheeling dealing](https://www.dawn.com/news/1812971), continue with their old ways and old leaders.

This is partly because of family-dominated parties. Who is going to tell them that they might not be able to attract the voter anymore? Parties have declined, their support base has shrunk and even become irrelevant, but the families remain in charge. The society beneath them is moving on while the leadership is clinging on.

The second problem here is that those who are used to a different time find it difficult to grasp and diagnose new challenges.

Take the PML-N. It is convinced its support has been affected only due to inflation and the economy. And apparently, its prescription is that the moment the economy improves under its watch, now that they have been brought to power, all will be well and the polity will go back to 2018.

This has been lent credence not just by rumours swirling around about possible cabinet members, in addition to the familiar figures who that have already staked their claim. This is also the sense one gets from the inaugural [speech](https://www.dawn.com/news/1817275) of the new chief minister of Punjab, Maryam Nawaz Sharif. A balanced and temperate speech, it was nonetheless one that was about the old-style PMLN agenda — big ticket development projects, metro bus projects, a cleanliness project which the new chief minister will supervise herself, laptops and scholarships.

But, I wondered as I heard this that if all this worked, why hadn’t the PML-N won the election against an opponent who wasn’t even allowed to contest? If the only issue was inflation, why was the PTI able to emerge as a contender in Punjab, a process which began before 2022? But it seems no one in the older parties is willing to ask this question. The party continues to work on old assumptions.

The PPP is no different. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari ran a vigorous campaign in Punjab but failed to make any headway. Was it due to his past association with the PDM government? Many think so. And now the party goes ahead and takes constitutional positions, as if the voters will be able to view this as different from being in government. And then it also nominates leaders for these positions who fit right in with the PML-N crowd, reminiscing about the times the cordless phone reached our homes.

The rumblings beneath the surface are not about to end soon. And if the stakeholders pay no attention, they might just stumble into the cracks that emerge.

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