**[The Kakar formula](https://www.dawn.com/news/1774161/the-kakar-formula)**

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THE countdown has begun, already — on how long the caretaker set-up can last, and what will replace it, if elections are not called. The first question was always going to be asked, for no one had any doubts that the caretakers would be around for longer than three months. However, few had predicted the rapidity with which the second question would pop up.

Indeed, the pressure on journalists and commentary in general notwithstanding, it is still safe to say the caretaker set-up has not filled many with hope and promise, for the present or future. The [oath-taking](https://www.dawn.com/news/1770625) of the prime minister and the cabinet was about as celebratory as the birth of the second child to the royal family; there is wee relief but at the back of the mind is a feeling of foreboding of what the spare’s efforts to find meaning in life will bring to the family. Margaret, Andrew and now Harry — they all followed the same course.

In our case, the caretakers may be well-meaning men and women, but none of them bring technocratic repute to ease the worry of the rich, nor do they bring the charisma of a popular leader who can promise better times to a people crushed by inflation. And neither do they enjoy the kind of authority that, say, Musharraf did, which allowed him to promise reform.

As a result, the continuing [rumours](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772815) of delayed elections and the caretaker set-up being in power for some time are now filling people with dread. Even part of the business community, which had pinned its hopes on a technocratic and apolitical caretaker set-up, is now trying to figure out what faraway dream basket they can drop their eggs in.

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To be fair, the caretakers were dealt a Titanic though they appear equipped to sail a paper boat. Consider their short track record, thus far.

They began their stint by encouraging — or perhaps asking for — media attention, lending further credence to concerns of a lengthy stay. (When was the last time a caretaker prime minister made so many [public appearances](https://www.dawn.com/news/1766999) or gave so many speeches on live television?) As a result, the mistakes were made in the full glare of TV channels.

Consider the biggest one, so far. When the electricity bills crisis came, they swung into action. A briefing of the energy secretary was held with journalists, which didn’t achieve much. This was followed by a [publicised emergency meeting](https://www.dawn.com/news/1772496) in a bid to figure out short-term relief. The meeting stretched over days and then ended with a [vague message](https://www.dawn.com/news/1773268) that a solution was being found. That is still awaited, although there are few indications anyone is now pinning any hopes on it.

In between has come a flurry of statements which ended up causing so much confusion that they needed clarifications. There was the finance minister who apparently said she was wondering why she had taken on this impossible job and the prime minister who [commented](https://www.dawn.com/news/1773575) about the magnitude of the *bijli* protests. And third was the storm in the teacup about the prime minister’s [visit to Kenya](https://www.dawn.com/news/1773566).

While the rest of the clarifications are only of interest to hacks, it is the electricity issue which has led to the perception of the new set-up being uninspiring as well as clueless as those who came before. For those who had pinned their hopes on the caretaker set-up, it was in reality a belief that those behind the scenes would have a plan, which would be executed once those who are simply here for a bit of caretaking were in position. But this ‘plan’ remained far more invisible than those who are babysitting the caretakers.

Consequently, the run on the rupee continued, while the people took to the streets to protest against their bills. The dreaded implosion seemed to have finally reached the steep slope.

No wonder then that by the end of the weekend, came tweets galore about the [meeting](https://www.dawn.com/news/1774148/what-plans-did-army-chief-share-with-businessmen) between the ‘seniorist’ military official and the business community. That all is well has to be said again, shows the realisation of providing assurance and those who have to provide the assurance.

The assurances provided, according to these tweets, were rather reassuring. As was the deadline, again provided in the same message: within six months all would be fixed — from [smuggling](https://www.dawn.com/news/1774028/sugar-hits-new-highs-as-former-allies-pass-buck-on-smuggling) to the tax base to corruption, which we had always assumed the PTI was so silly to focus on. Even the [game-changing investment](https://www.dawn.com/news/1774021/pm-kakar-says-saudi-arabia-to-invest-25bn-in-pakistan-over-next-5-years) from friendly countries will arrive within months. Some of the promises brought a sense of déjà vu, reminding me of the many weight-loss diets I had embarked on and abandoned.

But as hope wins over experience, let’s not be entirely sceptical.

However, there remain a couple of niggling questions. One was mentioned in the beginning of the piece. How easy will it be to keep providing assurances from behind, especially if those officially taking care do not improve their game? For if the economic deterioration continues, would this caretaking façade not be dumped, as others have been, for a more direct fixing effort? Or will public opinion and scepticism simply be ignored? It is a question which is being asked with rapidity.

The second question, I tentatively ask: isn’t this our third hybrid effort? After all, the PTI and Imran Khan were the first to be ‘selected’ and they proved inadequate.

So inadequate that the ‘change’ was replaced by the experienced; Shehbaz Sharif and his Punjab speed were given the chance and he, one has to admit, was far better at keeping everyone happy, from the coalition members to the powerful ones. So much so that the PDM government was christened Hybrid 2.0. But on the economy, he was only successful in making Imran Khan more popular. Has anyone in the PML-N heard the story of the Trojan horse?

So now there has been yet another selection. Third time’s a charm, though some are being far too literal and want to know if it’s the fourth or the fifth.

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