**[The caretaker project](https://www.dawn.com/news/1770426/the-caretaker-project)**

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THE long suspense over the appointment of the interim prime minister finally ended with the [nomination](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769894) of a dark horse. The choice took even members of the ruling coalition by surprise. The name of Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar for the top post is said to have been proposed by the outgoing leader of the opposition and agreed to by the former prime minister.

But the matter is not as simple as we are made to believe. The way the name of the senator from Balochistan popped up from nowhere leaves nothing to the imagination. Given Kakar’s political affiliation and patronage, it is not hard to guess whose choice he is. The elevation of a protégé to the helm signals the country’s transition from hybrid rule to a virtual praetorian takeover with a civilian façade.

There is not even a pretence of neutrality with the launch of ‘Project Kakar’. It also raises questions about elections being held on time. Even if they are held, the fairness of the polls will remain in doubt under a pliant interim arrangement. The lengthening shadow of the security establishment renders prospects of a democratic transition uncertain. There is an element of truth to BNP leader [Akhtar Mengal’s criticism](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769927), in response to Kakar’s nomination, that politicians turn to the establishment even for those challenges they should resolve politically.

My first introduction to Kakar came during a seminar on Balochistan in Quetta in early 2017. He was one of the organisers of the conference. What drew my attention was the comments he made on my talk at one of the sessions. He vehemently disputed my assertion on missing persons. “Why do you only talk about missing persons?” he asked, in front of the military top brass sitting in the front row. This apparent defence of the security agencies may not have been without purpose; he was soon appointed spokesman for the then chief minister. Meanwhile, he had also set up an NGO called Voice of Balochistan.

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He entered the political limelight following his key role in the formation of the Balochistan Awami Party in 2018. The role of the security establishment in the creation of the king’s party is not a secret. The same year, he became a senator. His political ascent in such a short period was quite remarkable. He projected the establishment’s point of view on national and international policy issues from public forums and channels. Nonetheless, his affability and articulation won him many friends among Islamabad’s political circles. This may have been an added factor in his nomination.

But the entire episode of selection of interim prime minister manifests the feebleness of our political leadership that abdicated its remit so meekly. The [series of legislation enacted by the ruling coalition](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768525) has not only empowered the caretaker government whose constitutional responsibility was limited to supervising elections, but also provided sweeping powers to the security agencies strengthening the establishment’s stranglehold.

In fact, in the last 16 months we have experienced a hybrid-plus rule. The [inclusion](https://www.dawn.com/news/1761072) of the army leadership in a supra body spearheading the country’s economic and investment policies has enhanced the military’s political role and put the security establishment in the driving seat.

Instead of selecting a non-partisan person to head the interim administration with the consensus of political parties, it seems that the former government has accepted the nominee of a security institution. The former ruling alliance has helped create a situation that will soon come back to haunt it.

Akhtar Mengal in a letter to the PML-N chief cautioned that “Legislation contrary to human rights will probably be used against you in the future, [we know] because we, the residents of Balochistan, have not been considered human beings since day one.” But his warning went unheeded by the PDM leadership.

Surprisingly, the PTI also tacitly [approved](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769870) Kakar’s nomination, perhaps assuming that it would isolate the PDM, while not realising that the security establishment’s expanding power would not help ease pressure on the party. Such politics of expediency and short-sightedness are nothing new in our political culture.

Interestingly, with only a few voices of protest from some Baloch political leaders, there has not been any serious objection to the selection of an establishment nominee for the critical job. The argument that Kakar’s appointment may help ease Baloch alienation hardly holds water given the scepticism expressed by some Baloch leaders. There are many Baloch leaders with much stronger credentials who could have been chosen for the job.

Now with an interim arrangement in place, the main challenge is not to allow the electoral process to be delayed under any pretext. True, there is already some debate that elections cannot be held before February next year because of the delimitation of constituencies required under the new population census. That may be a genuine reason for a delay of a few months. But going beyond that will have huge consequences for the country’s stability. It is not only important to hold elections within a stipulated time frame but also to ensure a democratic transition through fair polls. Given the prevailing political tension and polarisation, the challenges before the Election Commission of Pakistan are enormous.

It is imperative that the ECP give an election time frame soon to end the existing uncertainty. Indeed, the next few months will be a test for the interim government as the country confronts multiple issues. The new laws have empowered the interim administration to take decisions on important issues, particularly those related to the economy. But that power should not be used to perpetuate its rule beyond the time frame provided in the Constitution.

It is also imperative for the caretakers to bring down the political temperature in the country. The persecution of PTI supporters must be stopped and those arrested without charge released to create a conducive atmosphere for the elections. A country facing existential threats cannot afford to go through experiments that lead to the derailment of the democratic process.

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