[**The size of the fight**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1606313/the-size-of-the-fight)

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The writer is a journalist.

WE were told not to judge a book by its cover. But with time, I find it harder and harder to judge a book. I rarely know how to answer when people ask if the book I am reading is good. What is one supposed to say and why? Is a book good because it is informative or because it is an enjoyable read (sometimes the critically praised stuff is the hardest to plough through) or because it makes one think?

It’s hard to say but personally I now avoid painful reads, however important and groundbreaking they may be. And whether it is informative or not, it is essential for a book to trigger a brain cell or two.

Owen Bennett-Jones’ recent book on the Bhuttos, hence, meets with my approval. Some of his arguments or the manner in which questions are raised or answered provide much food for thought. Midway through the book, for example, the author discusses how it was never evident, while the her father was alive, that Benazir Bhutto would be Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s heir apparent but as events transpired, she was. When her father was hanged, there was little public or private evidence that he wanted BB — who may have been his favourite child — to take over and lead the party.

After all, in those days, dynastic politics was not such an accepted part of South Asian politics, as it is now. The party didn’t lack other dynamic leaders either. However, it fell to the family to fight for Bhutto’s life, no doubt but this effort included Nusrat Bhutto, BB and Murtaza Bhutto. Why did BB emerge as the heir? She was the better and more astute politician perhaps. Many of those who saw her career up close and personal would argue this.

What allows a politician to tower over others and attract voters across districts and provinces?

But there may be more to it than just ability.

She was there — in Pakistan, unlike her brother, opposing Ziaul Haq actively, unlike others in the party. This is what allowed her to become the face of the opposition to Zia, and the one to whom the more radical workers as well as constituency politicians could connect with. For the latter, Murtaza Bhutto, was not an option; till the late 1990s, his strategy of violent defiance, in Pakistan’s context, could appeal to a few.

This is more than just an academic point. As an example, it comes up again and again, in the politics of Pakistan. What allows a politician to tower over others, becoming the personality seen to attract voters across districts and provinces?

For instance, these days as everyone wrings their hands over the poor governance of the PTI; many predict the party will be wiped out in the next election. But then, what will happen in Punjab? The province has usually seen a two-party contest. The PML-Q will emerge, argue some. Others think the PPP will be the natural choice.

The trajectory of the PML-Q is interesting. The Chaudhries had five comfortable years running Punjab from 2002 to 2008 and by all accounts, Pervaiz Elahi ran the province well; he is never criticised the way Usman Buzdar and the PTI are. None of the criticism doing the rounds now existed back then. But then came the 2008 election and the Chaudhries just went back to being the Chaudhries of Gujrat. They never became a political force the way Imran Khan did, who came to be a player in Punjab without having ever ruled.

And this can’t just be put down to the khalai makhlooq.

My guess is that it was because the Chaudhries never took on the Sharifs. Once Musharraf was out of the picture, they were quite willing to return to the Noon fold but were not welcome. So they settled down to a life of wilderness, till someone else came and offered them a side role in the politics of the Punjab.

It appears docility does not a leader make — from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Benazir to Nawaz Sharif to Imran Khan, each one of them was willing to take on those (Ayub Khan, Ziaul Haq, Benazir as well as the military, and Nawaz Sharif respectively) who dominated the political scene and as a result become branded as the rival to watch and believe in.

In other words, the Chaudhries’ lack of ambition defines their stature.

And if this is projected to the future, chances are that the PTI will remain PML-N’s rival in Punjab come next elections. As long as Imran Khan is active in politics, he will continue to challenge Noon and will thus be the first choice for those who don’t want to vote for Nawaz Sharif and those who want to face off a Noon ticket holder in a constituency. Whether they succeed or not is a more complicated issue. (If the same argument is extended to Karachi, it may mean the party’s alliance with the MQM will harm it as much as its inability to deliver.)

Like the Chaudhries, the PPP will also not be the party which attracts the anti-Sharif vote. For the PPP, like the Chaudhries, is not interested in confronting the PML-N or their domination of the province.

Perhaps this is why the sight of Maryam Nawaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari jointly addressing the Dec 27 jalsa does not signal some grand hope for the future. It is simply an image which underlines that the two political parties have little reason to fear each other in politics. Their spheres of contest are completely different and neither plans to change it. The maulana, despite his interest in the PDM agenda, could not afford to be seen standing next to the PPP leadership in Larkana. He had electoral politics to consider.

However, Maryam can shower praise on BB in Larkana after having welcomed Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari to Lahore in front of a massive crowd as if he and his party are guests in the city. But back in 1986, it was Lahore’s welcome for BB that Jones argues was “street power on such a massive scale that no one could doubt her command of the PPP and her role as leader-in-waiting”. It’s the size of the fight that determines a leader.

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