**Time to tone down**

BY A S H A `A R R E H M A N 2020-11-20

AMONG the other gifts it may bring to the Imran Khan camp, the victory in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) could help PTI overcome some of the anxiety so evident in the recent statements of its members right up to the prime minister. The PTI government needed this break in momentum.

The prime minister and his spokespersons were manoeuvred into entering a frenzied pitch by opposition leaders. A couple of opposition leaders found GB, where their parties discovered their political fortunes in recent years, to be a happy campaign ground, even if everyone knew that the scope of electoral success was limited.

Of these two, Maryam Nawaz persists with her campaign. Considering the difference in approach, she is more likely to feel the urge of launching a public protest movement in the coming days than fellow fortune-seeker and some-time ally Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari.

But as she takes up the difficult task of building up sentiments for the next stage of protest, perhaps a march on Islamabad, it was quite noticeable how Prime Minister Imran Khan was in Faisalabad and attempting some necessary adjustments to his speech. This was perhaps partly because he and his chosen chief minister of Punjab haven`t been heard talking in and about Pakistan`s third largest city.

Let us hope this was also due to a realisation that Pakistanis were looking to their prime minister to give them something other than the `I will not give them NRO` line.

In Faisalabad on Wednesday, both Imran Khan and Chief Minister Usman Buzdar offered the press headlines which didn`t have the government baying for the opposition`s blood. This was a relief after the cacophony in the name of political interaction in recent weeks.

There was repetition in the prime minister`s address. There were contentious points, such as his reported support for high court benches in all divisions, which could well have been a result of a simplistic parallel drawn between grassroots administration and the dispensation ofjustice at the local level.

Itcouldbe argued thatthe PTIhas takentoolongto build strategies for creating wealth and jobs, and Mr Khan`s `revelations` about the merits of an empowered local government run by a mayor who has authority cause little excitement now. Yet it was good that an effort seemed to have been made to not provide the opposition leaders the satisfaction of believing that the prime minister had them on his mind that winter day.

This was a departure from prime ministerial statements given at a time of tense exchanges just before the GB poll. The tone of what the prime minister said and the accompanying gestures suggested that the opposition leaders were succeeding in theiraim: putting him under pressure and extracting from him lines he had no business being associated with.

That the prime minister was giving out so many interviews to his television friends was telltale enough. It corroborated `impressions` that the set-up in Islamabad was on the verge of making some drastic adjustments, if not undertaking a total rearrangement. Each time he said he won`t give an NRO, and each time someone from the PML-N replied `who is asking for an NRO?`, suppressed giggles could be heard in the crowd.

Pakistanis are sufficiently informed to know that it wasn`t the opposition politicians that his message was directed at. They know that his message was addressed at the same powerful people a prime minister before him blamed for throwing him out, lamenting`mujhey kyun nikala` In this particular case of tensions after the launch of the Pakistan Democratic Movement protest a few weeks ago, as the two refrains picked up, the focus was more on the indiscreet approach adopted by thekyun nikala` side le d by Nawaz Sharif. Everyone was just too preoccupied in counting the risks of this new narrative` for the PML-N in the context of its relations with the establishment as also other political forces such as the PPP. This was very normal.

The truth is that the government had its own moments to betray the unease brewing inside. The clues to insecurity were reflected not least in the additional insights and perspectives Mr Khan probably felt compelled to share. Whatever these candid new paragraphs introduced in the conversation were intended to do, not all of them appeared to reinforce the image of a sincere, straightforward man with a knack for explaining and executing tough jobs in simple words.

As he strives to present a frank, relaxed picture of serious issues in everyday terms one remark about the Lahore city police chief in particular raised questions of whether he was being too casual. Not just that, since the matter concerned something personal, there was an understandable attempt at using the incident for political point-scoring.

At another point when tensions between the government and opposition was at the peak, Mr Khan was credited with coming up with a new definition of corruption as he discussed Chief Minister Buzdar.

The definition didn`t quite match the synonyms given by countries where these notions were invented and from where we all have got our terminology and inspirations.

Imran Khan also allowed himself the luxury of a confession during the same uncertain phase, which he could have avoided. He admitted that he cannot prove that Nawaz Sharif is a ghaddar (traitor) even though he knew for a fact that Mr Sharif was one.

This was an odd ending to a strain if you begin with where Mr Khan declared he was going to concentrate on the law to punish wrongdoers. It was also a vindication of those who say political battles are best fought in political arenas.

Maybe, just maybe, Faisalabad is going to be the start of a phase where NRO headlines are going to be less frequent.  The writer is Dawn`s resident editor in Lahore.