**Uncertain pathways ahead**

BY FA I S A L B A R I 2020-11-13

`DEEP state`, `establishment`, `agencies` `namaaloom afraad` whatever they are called, there is little doubt military-controlled personnel and agencies do interfere in all sort of processes and spaces in Pakistan. This much is just fact.

This presence/interference has been identiñed and recorded in many instances. There have been court cases where decisions and/ or testimony of important players have talked of this interference.

These cases vary in nature, from allegations of interventions in the political process to allegations of their role in cases of abductions and enforced disappearances.

If you are trying to open a business, set up a factory, register a company, run a not-for-profit or a non-governmental organisation, you know of all the forms this presence or interference can take.

Journalists and media outlets have been talking of this presence/ interference in their area for a long time. The recent push to suppress freedom of expression in both traditional and social media has just made this awareness keener.

There is hardly any facet of life in Pakistan that does not, at one level or another, involve the presence of sections of the establishment and is not open to interventions by law, or by hook or by crook by the `deep state` This much is established.

So what Mian Nawaz Sharif has said in his speeches has not come as a surprise to anyone.

Everyone can see there is pre-election manipulation in the form of mal(ing people leave and join other parties; making them run as candidates or drop out of elections; in the allocation of tickets; in how parties are facilitated (or not) in their campaigns; in how workers of in-favour/ out-of-favour parties are treated. People know that the elections themselves are often manipulated. Interviews, testimonies, sometimes even court cases can establish this.

What has surprised people and this is the part that is harder to swallow for most is that Mr Sharif has chosen to talk about this openly. This is a change. If the interference is there (which it isquite plainly), and is so pervasive, then has he not shot himself and his party in the foot by talking about it so openly? The equilibrium we currently have seems to be that coming to power requires either implicit/ explicit support of the establishment, an explicit/ implicit agreement, or, at the very least, tacit approval. By openly talking about the issue, Mr Sharif has made the possibility of such an agreement, for himself and the PML-N, harder if not impossible. How is this a good move? An interesting thought is that Mr Sharif`s move is not to facilitate his or the PML-N`s return. In game theory terms, it is not a within-the-game move to strengthen his bargaining power or change the equilibrium. Rather, thinking that he and the party have no chance in the present dispensation, this is an attempt to change the game itself.

But changing the game is not easy. There are a number of players willing to play, ie the other parties with their many current/ potential leaders, and even the possibility of cobbling together new coalitions who the establishment can bargain with and reward with power. Why would the establishment allow the game to be changed? Historically, we have seen that a `winning` coalition is put together that is rewarded by allowing them to be the `face` of governance. This has moved across all larger mainstream parties as well as coalitions of sub-groups across these parties. The `opposition` is formed by those who could not enter the `winning` coalition. For every party that could not or did not do a `deal` at any point, there were many parties who did, and many individuals within each party willing to make deals. Sometimes, it is the attraction of power, at others the fear of persecution (NAB, etc), that elicited such `cooperation` But it has been easy to get.

Why, then, would Mr Sharif think that his open call for a change in the game and the equilibrium have any chance of success? This is an important point to consider. Elements in the establishment can use several forms of `persuasion` to offer toplayers, parties as well as individuals within parties: substantial rewards for cooperation and/ or the threat of substantial punishment for non-cooperation. These rewards and punishments are also for the most part not easy to document. How can any coalition sustain itself in such an environment? It cannot. The rewards for cooperating with or not actively opposing these elements are just too large. This has been the pattern throughout our history. Entire parties have negotiated deals, and when that has not worked or not suited the powers that be, they have picl(ed individuals from across parties and formed new parties and/ or coalitions.

All of the most prominent political players in Pakistan have been a party to and survivors of this game in the past.

The current equilibrium becomes even stronger with the weakening of key institutions of the state and governance.The bureaucracy and other state institutions appear to be vulnerable to the same tactics of reward and/ or punishment in the same ways as parties and politicians. Other pillars of a working democracy, the media and civil society, are not only very weak and dependent on the state for a number of services and revenue streams, but also have the same kind of vulnerabilities.

Given how the game is entrenched, a change in the current circumstances the current equilibrium; the incentives of the players, individuals and parties; and the weaknesses of various institutions change lool(s difficult if not impossible. This is the strength of the current framework. But a public challenge is always a nuisance and can potentially trigger sudden, unpredictable and large events. We have seen that in other countries as well. Hence, the nervousness and reaction that is being perceived. But, as long as `make him an offer he can`t refuse` is possible, and conducted in secrecy, change will be hard. The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.