**[Vitals of a level playing field](https://www.dawn.com/news/1767588/vitals-of-a-level-playing-field)**

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PERHAPS, the PML-N knows something we don’t but its confidence does not seem to be ebbing; with two weeks to go before the National Assembly is dissolved, its government is paving the way for a [‘neutral’ caretaker administration](https://www.dawn.com/news/1767513/pm-shehbaz-opposes-ishaq-dar-as-interim-prime-minister) tasked with presiding over free and fair elections.

Just look at the government’s approval of long term projects such as the trillion-rupee nuclear power plant at Chashma and the raft of legislation being stamped by parliament without even a perfunctory examination.

Some pieces of legislation thus approved have drawn the ire of rights activists and the odd parliamentarian still hanging on desperately to a vision; the reality is no more than a tattered fabric of a democratic order. But the government seems not to care, such is the level of its self-belief.

Given the state of the economy and record inflation, and in the absence of credible and recent opinion polls conveying the mood of the masses, the PML-N’s confidence can’t be rooted, to any significant extent, in its perception of popular support. There have to be other factors.

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Since his removal from office in 2017, Nawaz Sharif, [ousted as prime minister](https://www.dawn.com/news/1390816) via a judicial order on pretty tenuous grounds by the Supreme Court and then wrongfully imprisoned — if the sentencing judge’s video admission is correct — has called for a ‘level playing field’ for democracy to function and for the country to be steered out of the crisis it is in today.

Mr Sharif has repeatedly called on those responsible for paving the path to power for Imran Khan to ‘undo the damage they have caused’ and make sure they redeem themselves by undoing the injustice done to him and his party. He did not shy away from naming key figures he held responsible.

Even though Nawaz Sharif was allowed out of prison on medical grounds and [permitted to travel to the UK](https://www.dawn.com/news/1517603) in November 2019 for treatment, his calls for a ‘level playing field’ fell on deaf ears for nearly two years. All that was to change in October 2021.

This was when the first signs of differences emerged between the then prime minister and the army chief who was seen by many as his benefactor.

The famed ‘same page’, the term used by Imran Khan himself to describe the harmony that existed between the two, was torn apart.

And, like Humpty Dumpty after his great fall, could not be put together again.

On the face of things, the cause of the falling out was the civilian prime minister’s ‘interference’ in the military’s transfers and posting system, which it guards against zealously, when he tried to retain his ISI chief who the army chief wanted to rotate out to a corps command.

Imran Khan was to justify his reluctance to agree to this change by citing the ISI chief’s Afghanistan expertise. He said that with the exodus of the US-led forces from the Western neighbour, the collapse of the pro-West regime and the rout of its forces in the face of the Taliban march on Kabul, his intel team’s expertise was badly needed.

The reality was a little different, and it started to trickle out in the dozens of interviews he gave to the media during his tense stand-off with the then army chief and after his ouster from office in a parliamentary vote of no-confidence (VoNC), ordered by the Supreme Court after he tried unconstitutional means of averting it.

Mr Khan openly admitted that the intelligence agency, under Lt Gen Faiz Hameed, did sterling work in wielding the whip that held his weak coalition together and that he couldn’t even have mustered the numbers needed to pass the budget without the agency’s help. He also wanted the intel team more deeply involved in the persecution of his political opponents cloaked in an anti-corruption role.

Although he denied he had any such intentions, his harmonious relations with the intel chief that straddled work-related areas as well the spiritual sphere (with both reportedly looking to similar sources for guidance and inspiration) suggested that the officer would be his first choice when the chief Gen Qamar Bajwa [retired](https://www.dawn.com/news/1722654) after completing his extended, second tenure in November 2022.

The chief was shrewd enough to know what was happening and though the prime minister relented and a new intel head was brought in to replace the latter’s favourite, it did not stop the chief from quietly supporting the VoNC though the establishment said it would be ‘neutral’.

It is clear he was playing both sides in order to possibly secure yet another extension. He is understood to have pressured the Shehbaz Sharif government no end for this. But despite a tense few weeks, when speculation abounded about the fate of the PML-N-led coalition, Nawaz Sharif is said to have held his ground and told his younger brother to steady his nerves and name the senior most three-star as the chief.

Loss of power and receding hopes of a return angered Imran Khan no end. He also received poor counsel from some people around him and a bunch of YouTubers abroad, among them some ex-army captains/majors, with little handle on reality and no inside knowledge.

They made him believe he enjoyed such support within that he was untouchable and any tough sanction against him like his arrest and/ conviction would trigger an uprising within. He only needed to provide leadership to the ‘revolution’.

He believed them. What followed in recent weeks each of us is familiar with.

The fallout made the task easy for anyone inclined to ensuring a ‘level playing field’ for the next election, ie, in the golfer’s lexicon providing the same handicap to the PML-N as PTI had for the 2018 elections. Little wonder the party appears confident and so many of us are filled with a sense of déjà vu.

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