**Why Imran Khan fears Shehbaz**

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In yet another desperate move, the Imran Khan government used the Eid holidays to place Shehbaz Sharif, PMLN president and leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly, on the country’s Exit Control List (ECL). The drama picks up from when the younger Sharif was offloaded from a Doha-bound plane at the behest of the ruling PTI. No matter that the cancer patient had been granted one-time permission by the Lahore High Court (LHC) to seek treatment in London from May 8 to July 3.

The reason for not allowing Shehbaz to proceed was blamed on a technical hitch. Immigration officials maintained that their system had not been updated, meaning that the PMLN stalwart’s name still appeared on the blacklist. But given that the LHC had not scheduled a further hearing on this matter until July 5 suggests that there was no question of his name being removed at the time of departure.

Prime Minister Khan talks about rule of law. But he is the first one to object to the verdicts of Pakistan’s honourable courts when it suits him. This does a great disservice to the country. For what are the masses to think when a government simply violates court orders? The PTI now seems to be engineering a collision between Parliament and the judiciary. This is the same Imran Khan, who until recently, showed little regard for the former by barely attending parliamentary sessions; even since coming to power. This has further fuelled discord between the government and the opposition and has led the Centre to rely on presidential ordinances, instead of sitting taking the opposition into confidence and encouraging parliamentary debate. The problem with presidential ordinances is that these do not reflect any input from the opposition and, when used excessively, suggest the manoeuvrings by an undemocratic regime.

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As far as technical hitches go, we saw this during the 2018 elections when final results were announced after massive delays due to the Results Transmission System (RTS) failing to transfer the votes’ counting from polling stations to election headquarters. Back then, the glitch prompted cries of election rigging on the part of the PTI and the establishment. We saw something similar in the recent NA-249 by-election, although PM Khan did invite the opposition to sit and discuss the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) to “reclaim the credibility” of elections. This offer was rejected outright. Nevertheless, this begs the question as to what sort of set-up Pakistan is running in the 21st century?

Of course, Shehbaz Sharif poses a direct political threat to Imran Khan. During the last three years, despite the odds, PMLN has made notable gains – not only in the Punjab but also in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh, too. Whereas the PM only managed to complete three years in office by throwing both Shehbaz Sharif and Hamza Shehbaz in jail. However, the government failed to present watertight cases either before the NAB (National Accountability Bureau) court or any other honorable courts. Preventing Shehbaz from travelling abroad in this instance is pure contempt of court and the PMLN president is set to file on May 17 a contempt of court petition against the DG Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), the Interior Secretary and the government towards this end.

The biggest takeaway from the entire debacle is that the repeated claims of the government and the establishment being on the same page now ring hollow; especially after the defection of up to 60 PTI members to the Jahangir Tareen camp, which has given the estranged party leader virtual control of southern Punjab.

Enter Shehbaz Sharif, who is now the rumored favourite of the powers- that-be. This is a big worry for Imran Khan. Thus, when the latter had the PMLN president offloaded from the plane, he was not interested in flexing his muscles in front of the younger Sharif but, rather, to the establishment. The PM has good reason for concern. For after exerting tremendous pressure on the establishment – the PMLN is now maintaining a meaningful silence. There are no more blame games by Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz. No direct hits to the powers that be. Rather, father and the daughter are now on the backfoot; as is the military establishment which suggests that both sides have reached a quiet understanding. Indeed, after winning recent by-elections in different parts of the country, the PMLN once more represents an attractive prospect for the security apparatus in view of a future set-up. Thus, it is looking increasingly likely that the PMLN will win the 2023 general elections and that all cases against the elder Sharif will be dropped accordingly.

It should come as no surprise that Shehbaz Sharif is the key player in all this. After all, he has always been more comfortable compromising with the powerful military establishment than anyone else. He is also blessed with tremendous political, diplomatic and administrative capabilities. All of which Imran Khan sorely lacks.

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