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**Winners and losers**

It may be an oxymoron but the defeat of Finance Minister Hafeez Shaikh at the hands of former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has come as an ‘anticipated upset’.

It is an upset because the government commanded a majority in the National Assembly, which made up the electoral college for the Shaikh-Gilani one-on-one Senate contest. At the same time, developments during recent weeks had indicated that the opposition might clinch the coveted seat from the capital.

In parliamentary democracy, the ruling party’s defeat in the popularly elected chamber in a vote, especially when it is so hotly contested, is an unmistakable sign that either it has lost the majority or is in danger of doing so. The prime minister did the right thing by immediately seeking, and then winning, a vote of confidence from the house.

The government survives but it’s tenuously placed. In a hung parliament, the ruling party is always on shaky ground and the reversal of fortune is always looming. Now when almost all the opposition parties are combined one on thing – that the prime minister must go – the ruling party would find it extremely arduous to fend off the challenge from the other side of the house.

During the Senate election in question, Gilani bagged 169 votes, which are nine more than the combined opposition’s strength in the National Assembly. No doubt, some members from the ruling coalition defected and voted for the former prime minister. But why did they do that? Since the polling was conducted through a secret ballot, we may never be able to know with certainty the identity and motives of the members who resorted to cross-voting. However, there are three possible explanations:

One, those members were men or women of conscience and were convinced that Gilani was the better candidate of the two. The PPP and other opposition parties would have us believe that ‘conscientious’ voting undergirded their candidate’s victory. It may be argued that Gilani is a veteran politician, who has to his credit serving a term in jail on political grounds during a dictatorial regime, and who as prime minister preferred disqualification to ratting on his leader. Shaikh, on the other hand is an ‘outsider’, a technocrat, whose core competence consists in enjoying the goodwill of multilateral institutions of economic governance, and who has the knack of making it to the top office of an economic ministry from time to time.

Alternatively, the defecting parliamentarians could have been blinded by the glitter of money, allegedly offered by the opposition, and decided to sell their candidate a pup. This is the stance of the government. Thus, gluttony rather than conscience may have made some PTI members defect.

A third explanation is that these members are neither frightfully greedy nor particularly conscientious, but were simply aggrieved. They had some long-standing grievances against their government, especially the prime minister, which were never redressed. The election in question provided them an opportunity to register their grievances and make their presence felt. Such a stance is only human. History, as well as fiction, is replete with examples, where the unfair attitude of the leadership stampedes an otherwise loyal comrade into selling him or her down the river at the most crucial moments. As they say, never take loyalty for granted.

Whatever the reason, in the run-up to the Senate elections, the government had all along been smelling a rat. It went to the Supreme Court and had a presidential ordinance promulgated in a bid to have the Senators elected through an open ballot. But since secret ballot for Senate polls is a constitutional requirement, its efforts came a cropper. What is important – and a cause for grave concern for the PTI – is that the government suspected that some of its lawmakers were likely to vote for the rival candidate but was unable to prevent them from doing so.

This isn’t the first occasion that Senate polls are shrouded in controversy. Such spectacle is seen every three years when a half of the senators retire and are replaced by new members. In principle, each party should get the number of seats proportionate to the number of its seats in a provincial legislature or the National Assembly, as the case may be – neither more nor less. But in politics, as in life, principles don’t always prevail. There is often an element of uncertainty and surprise. If one party plays by the rules, this doesn’t mean that its rivals will also necessarily do so. Nor is it necessary that a party which went by the book yesterday will do so tomorrow as well.

Although the element of uncertainty can probably never be eliminated, it can for sure be minimized by putting in place effective safeguards. Predictability is what laws and institutions are all about. The credibility of the Senate elections can be shored up by replacing the secret ballot with an open ballot. However, this will entail an amendment to the constitution, which will require either a consensus between the ruling party and the opposition or a government with a two-thirds majority in each house of parliament, which is rare.

Consensus building on matters of national interest has been lacking in the current parliament. The government alleges that in the name of consensus building, the opposition parties want it to bail out their top leaders of corruption charges, which is a red line it can’t go over.

Every election has both winners and losers. After the recent Senate elections, the PTI has emerged as the single largest party in the upper chamber – though still falling well-short of securing a majority in the house. However, the defeat of Hafeez Shaikh is the sting in the tail of the ruling party’s victory. It isn’t just a matter of numbers, as Shaikh’s victory, had it come through, wouldn’t have given the PTI a majority in the Senate.

Be that as it may, in a highly polarized political environment in which the opposition has set out to bring the government down, the scales seem to have suddenly tipped against the ruling party. Since the 2018 national elections, it is the opposition’s first major victory over the PTI. It also shows that the opposition if united can put the government in a spot. In case the opposition wins the upcoming election for Senate chairperson – with Gilani as the likely candidate – the government will further be jolted.

Seen from another perspective, the opposition’s unity amid the allegations that some PTI parliamentarians were bribed to vote for Gilani is a victory for Prime Minister Imran Khan’s familiar narrative. Has corruption in high places not been the leitmotif of his politics? Has he not been asserting over the past two decades that “crooked” politicians always join hands to protect their interests?

Khan can now point towards Gilani’s victory while pointing an accusing finger at the top leadership of the PPP and the PML-N – which he actually did during his address to the nation immediately after the Senate elections – in support of his narrative. In case he’s ousted through a no-confidence motion or otherwise, he can proudly claim that he sacrificed the office of the prime minister but didn’t compromise with “corrupt” politicians. What can be a greater moral victory for a politician?

For now, however, the PPP is the biggest winner of the Senate elections. This is, again, not because of numbers, but the context in which Gilani, a PPP stalwart, defeated Shaikh. Zardari has once again shown that, while he may be incapable of leading a popular political movement or is too wise to insist on unnecessary resistance, he’s a peerless deal-maker and an astute political strategist.

Among the frontline opposition leaders, it was Zardari who had insisted on the need to contest Senate elections instead of resigning from the assemblies en masse. It’s wiser to work with the system than to buck it.

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