[**A national agenda**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1661469/a-national-agenda)

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AS tensions rise within ruling circles, particularly along civil-military lines, a recalibration of power appears to be in the offing. Its roots go beyond powerful individuals or even institutions; they are to be found in deeper structural factors.

The PTI came to power in 2018 with a razor-thin majority allegedly with support from various powerful sections. At the core of its electoral support base was an emerging urban, white-collar middle class that wanted a seat at the table. It abhorred dynastic politics, perceived corruption and the lifestyles of the ruling industrial and feudal elites. It saw the illiterate segments voting for them even for a ‘plate of biryani’.

The dominant sentiment in this constituency was echoed by the judiciary, military, bureaucracy and the media. Despite their combined strength, traditional elites in the form of electables, financiers and special interest groups had to be incorporated in the ruling coalition. Although this boosted the latter’s strength, it also sowed the seeds of internal division that paralysed policymaking and have now come to haunt the PTI.

Take the economy. Due to persisting elite capture by monopolistic players, state policy continues to favour cartels in key industries. It incentivises investments in unproductive and capital-intensive sectors such as real estate and the stock market. The tax burden remains disproportionately high for the middle and working classes through indirect taxation.

The rulers have been unable to translate rhetoric into prudent policy.

The combined result of our fiscal woes has been a shrinking GDP and per capita income, loss of jobs and hyperinflation. Rise in the global oil and commodity prices and the economic effects of Covid-19 have exacerbated economic hardship.

The ruling party has been unable to translate its political rhetoric into prudent policies that could have served its core support base and helped it maintain its popularity. This may be a result of inexperience, lack of unde­r­standing and preparation, various compromises made and/or excessive reliance on unelected institutions for its political survival.

In any case, the current state of affairs renders the political field wide open. The question is, which political party is better able to knit together a programme that captures the imagination of society, as well as institutions affected by these sentiments? Given the unique dynamics of Pakistan’s political economy, some recommendations could help build an acceptable political programme.

First is the goal of transitioning from the politics of patronage to the politics of service delivery. The urban middle class’s real discontent arises from a colonial state structure that allows the feudal/industrial elites to build sociopolitical capital by using state contracts, jobs and apparatus (thana, katcheri, patwari etc). This results in elites misusing state institutions, accruing rents from and getting cuts in development projects and creating voting blocs for electoral success.

Population growth, urbanisation, the spreading influence of the electronic and social media etc have already made patronage-based politics unsustainable. Thus a political party that emphasises and practises effective and efficient service delivery will be better placed to succeed. This involves delivering high quality health, education, sanitation, water and justice services and regulating the market to ensure the same for fuel/utilities, transportation, communications, food etc.

Second, while an ongoing policy shift emphasises regional connectivity, greater focus must be on prioritising productive sectors of the economy, particularly SMEs, which must be supported as the main engine of economic growth.

Lastly, the success of countries such as Portugal in resolving issues of balance of payment and the bu­­d­get deficit through pro-growth fiscal policies, and a similar approach across Eur­ope and North Ame­r­ica during the Covid-19 pandemic, has initiated a rethink of traditional austerity measures prescribed by the IMF. The US has embarked on a trillion-dollar investment plan for infrastructure development to stimulate economic growth. Pakistan must evolve its thinking along these lines.

Unelected institutions must step back, leaving open the political field for genuine competition, and forge common ground with the political class on policy direction. They must play their role by containing the violent non-state actors and contributing towards political stability and regional peace for this prescription to work. This also requires respect for human rights, particularly freedom of thought and speech, the curtailment of extremism and adopting inclusive and democratic decision-making.

Only such a common minimum agenda can help Pakistan come out of troubled waters. It requires letting go of egos and overcoming divisions in order to develop clarity on the way forward.

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