[**A perfect storm**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1689273/a-perfect-storm)

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THERE are two dominant trends — closely interlinked and overlapping — which will determine the shape and path ahead for Pakistan over the next several months, perhaps the next couple of years. The first and most obvious is the precarious state and nature of Pakistan’s economy; the second pertains to the hostile and confrontational politics-in-opposition of Imran Khan.

To start with, perhaps the current government needs to clarify whether the economy is being run by a former finance minister sitting in London or by the current one. Their narratives, usually at odds with each other, add confusion to an increasingly non-existent economic reform programme, undermining confidence.

**Editorial:** [*Lost at sea*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1688933/lost-at-sea)

Weeks after taking office, the coalition government has no plan, perhaps not even a clue, at a time when the global economy is being hit hard by war, supply chain disruptions, and an impending economic crisis, leading to rising inflation, currencies and interest rates, globally. The government needs a clear plan, beyond blaming the previous government, of what it hopes to achieve. It was always aware of how bad the economy was, and this was one of its main rallying cries. If it does not have the courage to set things straight, it should not have embarked on its present adventure.

The economic slide, while clearly a manifestation of mismanagement by the previous government, in addition to its inability to undertake structural reforms, has become worse over the last few weeks. Even positive expectations and hope about what the current government could achieve are swiftly fading. The brief breath of fresh air is evaporating, and the real stench of failure and a dying economy is becoming manifest.

**Editorial:** [*Monday's PSX meltdown shows confidence in govt's ability to fix economy is evaporating*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1689114/editorial-mondays-psx-meltdown-shows-confidence-in-govts-ability-to-fix-economy-is-evaporating)

Sadly, the IMF, with its stringent conditions, continues to be this government’s only hope, dominating and determining economic policy. Yet, the condit­i­o­ns required to get a tiny loan from the IMF on ex­­p­e­ctations that other donors will follow, will add to a huge inflationary spiral to the already persistent 13 per cent-plus inflation rate. A [weaker rupee](https://www.dawn.com/news/1689128/dollar-crosses-rs190-to-create-new-all-time-high), growing imports, expanding and unmanageable current acco­unt and fiscal deficits, all create a perfect storm on which IMF conditions to remove petroleum subsidies will add much fuel to an already incendiary situation.

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This government’s biggest problem and Achilles heel is that it does not know how long it will be in power, and the uncertainty in its tenure will undermine all initiatives. After an election, no matter how fragile the economy, every incoming government expects that it has some years ahead and has opportunities to either wait and see or experiment with possible solutions. This government has no such cushion or luxury.

While it is easy to label him as one, Imran Khan is no fascist, and for anyone to call him that is a lazy and an incompetent understanding of the notion of fascism and its features. He is merely a right-wing populist authoritarian leader, similar to many male leaders across the globe currently and in the recent past. There is little doubt that he is hugely popular and can [draw large crowds](https://www.dawn.com/news/1689128/dollar-crosses-rs190-to-create-new-all-time-high) wherever he goes, no matter what he says. He also has a large public presence across the media. Yet there are a number of flaws in his understanding of what such a following and what such populist support imply.

This is not 2014 and he is no longer an unknown, untested, bankable, political leader. Moreover, he no longer has the formidable support of Maulana Tahirul Qadri, without whom his [dharna](https://www.dawn.com/news/1154293) would have fizzled out much earlier than the 124 days it lasted. He is also not considered Mr Clean any longer, as increasingly he is forced to [defend](https://www.dawn.com/news/1687745) individuals close to him and his wife. In addition, many of his former close allies have abandoned him and have many a tale to tell. Perhaps most importantly, his backers and handlers who helped him and put him in power are angry that he has admitted how some senior generals became his ‘eyes and ears’, naming one in particular.

**Read:** [*Popularity and elections*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1687882)

While his support in key circles may have waned, a key perspective missing in Imran Khan’s political understanding is that the popularity of one individual, no matter how exaggerated, is insufficient to win elections in a parliamentary system. A hundred and seventy seats need to be won, and allies, collaborators, opportunists and electable associates are required in each constituency, no matter how popular the leader may be. Constituency politics is critical here and every seat counts as much as any other. Authoritarian populism works best under a presidential system, but a few electoral party machineries can deliver similar results. While a number of such populist leaders have such parties functioning at the constituency level, the PTI is not one of them. Popularity is an important, though insufficient, criterion to win parliamentary elections, something Imran Khan needs to understand quickly.

With the economy and oppositional politics perfectly entwined, with consequences for both, the upper hand, for now, rests with the incumbent government. No matter how many hundred thousand appear on Imran Khan’s call later this month, they will soon disperse. A power show, is after all just that — a show of support and strength, but not necessarily of winnable seats. The government in office has the ability to play a long hand and out-manoeuvre the belligerent leader of the opposition. The advantage which the government has needs to reveal itself when it meets the IMF next week, albeit at high short-term cost.

All indications suggest that this government intends to stay in office at least till November, when the important decision about the COAS will be made. This is the arena where Pakistan’s gravest and most persistent failures of political economy repeat themselves, whether manifest through manipulation in the 2018 elections, or now, by supposedly turning neutral. The current and growing political contradictions within the ruling elite underline the fact that old structures, institutions and arrangements are no longer workable, and that only a radical and people-centred restructuring can provide an alternative future for Pakistan.

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