[**Civil war?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1754482/civil-war)

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PAKISTAN’S polity is fractured. Politicians are not willing to unlock horns; the economy is slipping down a steep slope; and terrorist forces are resurging. Some analysts view this situation as essentially a political crisis which will resolve by itself.

Others, less optimistic, find Pakistan in the midst of a ‘polycrisis’, with political unrest, an economic downturn and security threats pushing Pakistan towards chaos. Then there are the realists, who are concerned that Pakistan’s present civil strife might morph into a civil war.

A [recent editorial](https://www.dawn.com/news/1753072) in this paper also rang the alarm bell: “…the nation seems to be flirting dangerously with civil war. It is tearing itself apart under the weight of its own contradictions.”

Where exactly is Pakistan headed, and is there light at the end of the tunnel? The country is in the throes of a growing civil strife with its public places becoming a venue for regular protests, confrontation and rioting.

Social unrest is unleashing civil disorder, disobedience and disruptive strikes. If this continues unchecked, the country could well descend into a catastrophic civil war.

It would be folly to think that whatever has happened in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Sudan or Rwanda cannot happen here. Each case is different, but the common thread is an acute culture of intolerance, nurtured over time, eventually breaking down the political and social fabric.

The other feature common to these countries is the sustained political instability, with neither the ruling regime nor the opposition willing to accept a compromise. With no spirit of ‘live and let live’, the resultant chaos has been exacerbated by external forces.

The political fallout has always been borne by the people.

Take Sudan, whose 46 million people have suffered for decades from political instability and military interventions. Recently, the country witnessed a fratricidal power struggle between the military leadership of the regular army and a paramilitary force. As the situation spiralled towards chaos, hidden foreign hands exacerbated the civil war. The ultimate losers were the people of Sudan.

The civil unrest in Syria, which started in March 2011, when the Assad regime ruthlessly suppressed protesters, quickly descended into civil war and an armed conflict that involved a complex web of domestic and foreign elements. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians were killed and millions displaced.

Twelve years down the line, President Bashar al-Assad has regained control of much of Syria, but the once beautiful country has been destroyed. The most telling story is that of the Rwandan civil war, in which the Hutus and Tutsis failed to find peaceful coexistence. It ended in a genocide that left 800,000 people dead in 100 days in 1994.

We must not forget that every time our country has gone through a political and constitutional crisis, the consequences have been borne by the people. In 1971, the political leaders of the time failed to respect the results of a democratic election while military ruler Yahya Khan engaged in a reckless military operation.

The result was the inglorious, bloodyseparation of Pakistan’s eastern wing. Can our political and military leadership learn a lesson from that painful chapter of our history?

Can the leading lights of our political leadership muster enough courage and will to sit at the table and resolve their issues? If they don’t, the situation might spin out of control the way it did in the aforementioned examples, with everyone losing and no one winning.

The government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif wants the National Assembly to complete its five-year term, while former prime minister Imran Khan wants immediate elections. A compromise on a date for elections should not be this difficult, as May and October are only a few months apart.

The political leadership should also agree on a new social compact and rules of conduct, giving significance to the following: the military establishment has announced its intent to remain apolitical, and it must not be dragged into politics; the decisions of the Supreme Court should be respected by all; the Election Commission must not be made controversial; and social media must not be used with impunity to malign every state institution.

In this charged environment, the advice rendered by the Dawn editorial and echoed by many other independent analysts makes perfect sense: free and fair elections conducted to the satisfaction of all major parties.

The political leadership must agree on a compromise date for elections. There is no shame in reaching a compromise or conceding ground for the larger good. A compromise may not please every party, but it certainly will elicit a sigh of relief from the people of Pakistan who are losing faith and confidence in this system of governance.

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