**[Early exits](https://www.dawn.com/news/1827757/early-exits)**

[Dr Niaz Murtaza](https://www.dawn.com/authors/385/dr-niaz-murtaza) Published April 16, 2024 Updated 2 days ago

AS the fractious new government fails to get a grip on matters, many already see its early demise, just a month after it was imposed via allegedly rigged polls. Early ends for civilian regimes and long innings for non-civilian ones is our norm, more so for rigged regimes/ assemblies.

Four out of five largely legitimate Houses (1946, 1970, 1988, 2008 and 2013) completed their term though none of their seven prime ministers did so. But six out of eight rigged parliamentary-era assemblies and the nine prime ministers from them fell early and so did the four prime ministers from the two Houses completing their term (2002 and 2018). The reasons for early removals (except in 1977 when Bhutto called early polls and in 2012 when chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry axed Yousuf Raza Gilani) were fallouts with the establishment. If the current dispensation falls early, it would not be unusual.

Past early exits varied much in their exact form (removal of just the prime minister, the ruling party or the Assembly itself) and modalities (martial law, no-trust vote, presidential dismissals or resignation under duress). So did the reasons for the fallout, ranging from minor policy or personality clashes to attempts by civilian prime ministers to clip the establishment’s wings. Those axed on policy clashes often returned quickly, for example, the PPP and PML-N in the 1990s. Those daring to dream about clipping hallowed wings had very ugly fallouts and were banished for long.

Bhutto was hanged and his daughter came to power only briefly after more than a decade. Nawaz Sharif in 1999 was banished for several years. The MQM’s Altaf Hussain, though not a national leader, had an ugly fallout in 2016. Imran Khan’s fallout was perhaps the ugliest. Thus, a deeper analysis is needed to analyse the likely longevity of this wobbly, sorry-looking current set-up and the likely shape of an early end. We may even see a break from the past where both the prime minister and Assembly complete term or fall without an establishment hand in their collapse.

Policy clashes are the biggest Achilles heel of the government.

One unlikely way to this last option could be if election tribunals magically resolve the Form 45 saga in the PTI’s favour. But the PML-N coalition’s ranks have been contrived to reach a two-thirds majority and the number of election petitions filed by the PTI may be insufficient to reduce it to a minority. Street agitation may be a second way, especially if legal options to keep Imran Khan in jail run out, given the weak verdicts against him, and if a new judicial independence streak emerges in wake of the letter by six Islamabad High Court judges. This would put us in uncharted territory where a party having experienced an ugly fallout returns to power quickly against the establishment’s wishes. Finally, the PPP and PTI may attempt to strike an alliance. But neither may want to be the junior partner. The PTI may not even want the PPP as junior partner and the PPP may not risk doing so without the approval of non-political elements.

Would this make an establishment-led early removal of the government the likeliest scenario? Given the PML-N’s earlier fallouts, it cannot be ruled out. The potential for policy clashes is vast even with a pliant Shehbaz Sharif as prime minister. He has few powers as persons widely perceived to be pro-establishment are running key ministries and Nawaz Sharif’s loyalists like Ishaq Dar run other important areas and his daughter runs Punjab. Thus, policy clashes between Nawaz Sharif and those seen as establishment protégés are the biggest Achilles heel of this regime.

The establishment had policy clashes with the PTI, but still wai­ted over three ye­­ars before allowing an in-house change. Earlier, prime ministers and even assemblies were removed even before two years. Easy ways to implement the removal and put in place an acceptable alternative set-up were present. While easy options to replace the prime minister from within the PML-N may not be possible, non-political circles may look to other options.

The binding constraint would be finding an alternative set-up which is more pliant and competent. The PTI would be neither and PPP not the latter. This may force the establishment to tag along with the PML-N despite policy clashes. The PML-N’s hands are tied too given its contrived win.

Thus, the fear of Imran Khan’s return may force some give and take. Also, the PML-N is too weak to try to clip hallowed wings. Perhaps an uneasy cohabitation may persist for at least two to three years until one side is strong enough to jettison the other.

*The writer is a political economist with a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley.*

**murtazaniaz@yahoo.com**

**X:** [**@NiazMurtaza2**](https://twitter.com/NiazMurtaza2)

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