**For a smooth transition**

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The system installed in 2018 is now falling apart due to its inherent contradictions, with its embarrassed architects choosing to take refuge behind ‘neutrality’ – essentially a constitutional imperative – and temporarily sit on the sidelines.

The conservative, populist, and authoritarian government of Prime Minister Imran Khan has undoubtedly miserably failed to deliver on its sham promises and has pushed the country into a quagmire of the worst economic and governance crises due to its amateur and contradictory policies and ideological confusion.

The current system had come in via a vindictive and destructive course that demolished the political opposition and media freedom, marginalised parliament, and introduced sham accountability and an abusive political culture to vitiate the socio-political environment. Almost doubling the country’s debt and liabilities, the current setup has failed to set the economy and governance on the right track. Under its patronage, various mafias and big cartels plundered the people; and inflation and unemployment broke all previous records. Failing to check religious extremism and curb terrorism, Imran Khan thoughtlessly isolated Pakistan and deactivated CPEC. His hollow brinkmanship has pushed Pakistan to the edge of disaster both internally and externally.

A hard-pressed parliamentary opposition couldn’t wait for more time for the natural culmination of the disastrous end of the hybrid regime. Capitalising on the internal erosion of the current setup, erosion of support among coalition partners, PTI legislators, the public at large, and a tussle about the transitional phase of change of guards, the opposition moved a vote of no-confidence against the prime minister. Both the PDM and PPP closed ranks for an in-house change, which is their constitutional prerogative.

Although the shift of the PTI government’s coalition partners to the opposition benches may be a legitimate parliamentary tradition, any kind of horse-trading on both sides of the aisle is entirely impermissible. However, on the call of their conscience, dissidents are free to resign from their parties and quit the seats they won on the ticket of a certain party. Under the constitution, though, they cannot be restrained from voting or forbidden from participating in any session of parliament. The speaker of the National Assembly thus must follow the constitution and facilitate the participation of all the NA members, including any MNA currently incarcerated, and transparently allow the no-confidence motion to a legitimate conclusion.

Given the lack of democratic culture and the rising political confrontation, all such efforts that can derail the democratic parliamentary process must be avoided and censured. Horse-trading, resort to violence, and confrontation on the streets of the federal capital must be condemned and avoided by the adversaries. Both the PTI and the PDM must call off their public rallies in the capital. It is unfortunate that the ruling Trumpists in the country seem to be contemplating a Capitol Hill like situation; this must be preempted. The only way to frustrate the authoritarian designs of derailing an otherwise troubled civilian transition is to ensure that the parliamentary process of democratic change takes place smoothly.

Constitutional imperatives and best parliamentary conventions must be followed regardless of the success or defeat of the vote of no-confidence. Whether the no-confidence motion passes or fails, the treasury benches must engage the opposition for a meaningful and productive dialogue on the following issues: first, since a recourse to a fresh mandate by the people has become necessary, a joint parliamentary session must set a date for early general elections during the current year. Second, there has to be consensus on electoral reforms. Third, iron-clad measures are needed to prevent rigging or political engineering of the elections. Fourth, all efforts must be made to strengthen the Election Commission of Pakistan. Fifth, a code of political and electoral ethics needs to be adopted; and lastly media freedom and independence of the judiciary must be fiercely protected.

It is also time to ask the parties of the PDM, the PML-N and JUI-F in particular, and the PPP and the ANP, where they stand on a number of issues. These include questions on the duration of this transitional period, which must not be more than five months. Early election must be held before November 2022. Where do these parties stand on electoral reforms for free and fair elections, and on a stronger ECP? Importantly,how committed are the opposition parties to removing all curbs on the media and ensuring freedom of expression?

The opposition parties also need to clarify their stance on legislation on and implementation of the 26-point Charter of Demands issued by the PDM APC and the 12-point Charter of Pakistan issued by the PDM, alongwith the Charter of Democracy, and restructuring of civil-military relations according to the constitution. Devolution of power from provinces to authoritative local governments, a political settlement and mutual ceasefire regarding the Baloch insurgency and guaranteeing fundamental human rights as enshrined in UN declarations, covenants and resolutions are also matters the PDM parties and the PPP/ANP need to be clear on.

Further, one would like the opposition to state their commitment to ending the immunity of state institutions as well as the recovery of all missing persons, revisiting economic, security and foreign policies to suit the working people of Pakistan and our youth, and a people-centred sustainable and inclusive development. The opposition parties must remember that Pakistan needs urgent and comprehensive relief for the poor and fixed income groups, minimum wage in proportion to inflation and the depreciation of the rupee, reactivation of CPEC, and normalisation of relations with all neighbours and peace in the region and the world.

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