[**Political chessboard**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1668793/political-chessboard)

[Dr Niaz Murtaza](https://www.dawn.com/authors/385/dr-niaz-murtaza)Published January 11, 2022 - Updated a day ago

The writer is a political economist with a PhD from UC Berkeley.

AS the Titanic was sinking, its captain had the ship’s band play on to fool the passengers into thinking all was well. With the PTI’s ship rapidly hitting multiple political icebergs, including [high inflation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1667073), [embarrassing results](https://www.dawn.com/news/1664915) in KP’s local government polls and [suspicious findings](https://www.dawn.com/news/1667665) in the foreign funding case, its mandarins too continue to desperately create the illusion that all is well.

People are groaning under the weight of inflation, but Imran told his cabinet recently to tell the people there is no inflation. While inflation and unemployment exact their toll on a hapless nation, he insists our main problems are sex and corruption. Despite the shellacking in KP local polls, he says he is the best political brand. The flames emerging from distortions of our culture and religion threaten society via incidents like the Sialkot lynching, but he says western culture and Bollywood are destroying us. A Rehmatul-lil-Aalameen Authority was [created](https://www.dawn.com/news/1651217) in a record two months. But the task of fixing existing institutions remains pending after three years.

So we have the sorry spectacle of a regime totally out of sync with the pulse of the nation, playing its own tune much like the band on the Titanic as it went down or Nero as Rome burnt. On the metric of being out of step with national realities and spinning lies to hide them, I don’t recall a worst regime since Yahya’s.

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Clearly, all is not well with either PTI’s own prospects or Pakistan’s trajectory under its rule. To begin with PTI, many senior analysts claiming to have inside news have started penning its obituary and place its longevity at a few months. I have no inside news. Yet such prognosis seems premature to me. Clearly, there are tensions across the twin cities since the [notification fiasco](https://www.dawn.com/news/1653379), the likes of which would normally sound the death knell for our civilian regimes. The selector-cum-coach-cum-umpire has the clear ability to fire the captain. It just has to ask key PTI allies, more loyal to it than PTI, to abandon the sinking ship. Not only is it not doing that, it is seemingly keeping them from doing so themselves.

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So the issue seems to be more willingness than ability. The forces known to snuff out foes ruthlessly and quickly are reluctant and hesitant to plunge the knife into the body of a regime they had so expectantly, laboriously and lovingly created but which has given more pain than gain. This reflects the lack of viable options.

There is the messy option of trying to prop up new leadership from within the PTI to allow the government to complete its term. But the numbers may not be easy to orchestrate and maintain for 18 months. Even with a weak figure like Junejo with much less popular support than Imran, Zia could not arrange that and had to dissolve the assembly. A PML-N-led regime to complete the term suits neither PML-N nor Pindi. Snap elections bring the spectre of a massive PML-N win in Punjab and given the KP local polls results, a JUI-F win in that province.

There is also the additional prospect of having to deal with a wounded and mercurial Imran using all his energies to try and destroy the system out of spite. Thus, the game of chess has seemingly reached the phase of stalemate rather than checkmate. On the other hand, there is the fast deteriorating situation economically, politically, externally and security-wise weighing on Pindi. So the stalemate may yet break.

The situation starkly reflects the massive cost of this failed political experiment. In most major aspects in the economic, political, social, security and external realms, we are worse off than in 2018. This reversal is especially costly for a state lagging behind almost all its neighbours — who themselves have mediocre outcomes vis-à-vis East Asian states — and that faces far bigger existential problems in the coming decades than perhaps any other state.

Yet there is no indication any lessons have been learnt by those responsible for setting up numerous failed political experiments in our history. Shockingly, there is even talk of another extension regarding the mother of all positions. Not only this, major political actors now seem reconciled to playing by the rules of the puppet masters. Gone are the grandiose claims about civilian supremacy even from the most hawkish wings of the PML-N. Thus once this round of chess ends, the next game may also be played by the same rigged rules. This means without political legitimacy we will lag even further behind our neighbour and come even closer to facing multiple existential threats in the coming years.

Meanwhile, how long will PTI’s sinking Titanic remain afloat is hard to say. But history shows that when the Titanic sank, its captain and the band that desperately tried to create the illusion of normalcy sank with it along with most lower-tier passengers.

*The writer is a political economist with a PhD from UC Berkeley.*

[**murtazaniaz@yahoo.com**](http://mailto:murtazaniaz@yahoo.com)

**Twitter:** [**@NiazMurtaza2**](https://twitter.com/niazmurtaza2)

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