**[Something’s gotta give](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832002/somethings-gotta-give)**

[Arifa Noor](https://www.dawn.com/authors/57/arifa-noor) Published May 7, 2024

IT has been almost a year since May 9. In the coming days, much will be said and written about this unfortunate day, its significance and tragedy. There will also be heated discussions about the many individuals accused — imprisoned or not — and the unrepentant PTI.

But as with much else, there will be little serious discussion on how to move forward in a meaningful way, because honesty is rarely possible in public discussions. And a candid discussion would focus on the relationship between the establishment and the PTI and how this impacts the country.

Take the PTI first. Notwithstanding the gloomy predictions about its demise and the quick departures of its stalwarts 12 months ago, the party managed to do well in the elections despite all the odds against it. But now, it seems stuck once again in old and new challenges. Even when in power, the PTI was a noisy organisation with little discipline. In these trying times, this hasn’t changed. With limited access to Imran Khan, the party appears to be a headless chicken. And, as old rivalries are maintained in time-honoured PTI tradition, new entrants such as lawyers and the older lot of politicians are also jostling with each other.

Decision-making has become even more chaotic. Dependent on when party leaders can meet Khan and who talks to the media after meeting him, the decisions at times are the famed ‘U-turns,’ while at others it seems that the entire lot is stuck at a roundabout, unable to locate any exit. Consider the choice of KP finance minister. It seems that the chief minister-designate was able to ignore Khan’s instructions because of his personal discomfort.

Or the absolute [confusion](https://www.dawn.com/news/1831785) about who was going to be the party’s choice to head the Public Accounts Committee. For weeks, there was no clarity on whether or not Sher Afzal Khan Marwat, a missile who lands as often on the PTI as it does on its rivals, would be the party’s choice or someone else. The issue was resolved with the party choosing Sheikh Waqas, according to *Dawn*, but after much drama, with little logic.

Poor decision-making has been held responsible for the party’s misfortunes rather than its run-ins with the establishment. This may not matter in the long run. What is more critical is the party’s limited choices. Its popularity is now at a point where it can no longer be denied by anyone — but it comes at a cost. Keeping in mind the mood of the electorate, the PTI will lose support if it reaches an understanding with the current set-up or the establishment. (The PML-N’s diminishing support proves this.) But neither can it sustain the stand-off.

The establishment faces just as difficult a choice as the PTI.

Consider the dynamics in KP, where the initial euphoria is giving way to criticism; Ali Amin Gandapur especially, and the party in general, are being accused by workers of being compromised. This has been particularly true of the government’s silence in the face of the disappearance of a PTI worker in recent days. Indeed, every small ‘instance’ of compromise or inaction is being seen as a sign of betrayal — such is the level of emotion.

But without developing a working relationship with the centre or the establishment, how will the party govern? For now, the party has no answers. (Similar pressures are at work in Punjab.) However, this is not just a dilemma for the PTI, but also the establishment, which historically has always engaged with popular forces after confrontation.

This happened with the PPP in the 1980s and the PML-N in the noughties. Many argue it won’t be any different this time, though of course the time frame in each of the two cases has been closer to a decade. But that was when the country wasn’t in the midst of an intractable economic crisis — a principal reason why the PTI has become the force it is.

Indeed, carrying the burden of an unpopular government as well as the economy is not all that easy for an establishment that has usually been able to lay claim to public support from regions such as Punjab. But this time around, there are no goodies to share to make up for sidelining a popular party; in fact, there is just bad news in the shape of taxes or higher bills. It appears, as the last one year indicates, that the only way to manage such a situation is to use repressive measures on ordinary people, politicians and mainstream and social media.

The problem, however, with an enforced quiet is that it has to be enforced — continuously. Even then, it cannot overcome the lack of legitimacy or support; which is why in the past the establishment has always opted for a ‘reset’ eventually. In other words, the establishment faces just as difficult a choice as the PTI.

If nothing changes, the pendulum will continue to swing in Khan’s favour. Consider that before Khan was arrested, there was chatter about how he continued in comfort at the expense of his party and its members. But then, he was arrested and the criticism died down.

Now it is worth asking what the price of easing restrictions on Khan will be. Will it be possible to control the public reaction if he is allowed out in public in the near future, even in terms of a simple court appearance? And if there is no ceasefire, how will the establishment manage public anger and expectations, especially as it prepares for the next IMF programme?

That there is realisation of this explains the constant pressure for or discussion of how the political parties need to ‘talk’. Doubting Thomases find it hard to believe this stems from the charter of democracy fandom or those who want to cheer on the establishment and the PTI together. A year on, something has to give. Reason demands this, even though it has been in short supply in Pakistan for quite some time. In the process, both the PTI and the establishment will have to pay a price.

*The writer is a journalist.*

*Published in Dawn, May 7th, 2024*