**Whose bus is it anyway?**

BY A R I FA N O O R 2021-12-14

THIS was a week the PML-N was so indignant about not being given izzat (respect) for kaam (work), it forgot to raise slogans for the izzat of its vote. But then, the half of the family interested in the vote was busy in private matters so perhaps the party thought the kaam may as well be given a little importance for once.

And the kaam they chose to claim was the bus project in Karachi that the PTI inaugurated this past week, with the prime minister flying in for the occasion.

But before he could get in for the photo op on Friday, the Noon leadership decided they deserved to hold the proverbial scissors first and landed in Karachi a day ahead. An altercation with the Rangers ensued and regrettably, in the scuffle that followed, Ahsan Iqbal was injured.

And much to-ing and fro-ing (ie interviews and counterviews on channels about who did how much work on the project and can claim it as truly theirs) took place over the next couple of days. Who or which party truly deserves the credit for this project is a topic for those more familiar with the city than those of us sitting in Islamabad. But it has to be said that it was a pleasanter sight for parties to be fighting over a modern urban project than who has been more harmful to the country or who can prove more useful to the establishment.

What was unpleasant, though, was the realisation that the two parties fighting over a Karachi project are not really `local stakeholders`. After all, the PML-N has never been a party with much stake in Karachi politics, and the PTI is a recent entrant, post the 2018 election. The two parties (the PPP and MQM) that have dominated the politics of Sindh were a bit distant from the inauguration spat. Their verbal sparring is usually focused on other matters. And it perhaps needs to be asked why Pakistan`s biggest city`s first transportprojectin yearsisbeingfought overby `outsiders` so to speak.If I may digress, the PML-N`s rolla rappa or pointless noise in Karachi reminded one that this is a party which has usually projected itself as one that believes in kaam and so do its voters. This vote ko izzatdo is a rather new avatar, as commentators keep pointing out. Just consider its 2013 election campaign which was led by a song Tujh se apna pe wada he mere watan, tujh se tere andheray mitain ge hum, promising the country to lift its darkness.

And in a year where electricity load-shedding was nothing short of a nightmare in Punjab, the song was making a rather pointed promise.

Indeed, the party`s focus is understandable for the PML-N which has always had to contend with political competition. When it was first `catapulted` to power in 1990, to put it politely, it faced a Punjab where the PPP was a formidable force with command over nearly 40 per cent of the vote.

The PML-N had to make space for itself, by projecting this idea of development in the shape of roads primarily, though nine years later it was ousted in a coup. When it returned in 2008, it once again faced not just the PPP but also a PML-Q which, at least then, appeared to be a formidable force because the Chaudhrys too had tried to focus on development like the Noon. The 2008 election in Punjab showed the three parties polling roughly a similar percentage of the vote.

The PML-N had to be on its toes once again, to outdo Q as well as prove that it could deliver where the PPP could not.

And by the time the PML-N went into the 2013 election, the PTI was emerging as a contender.

Indeed, commentators point out Shehbaz Sharif`s laptop scheme and Lahore metro bus project were conceived after PTI`s famous Minar-i-Pakistan jalsa in 2011. Thus, the kaam has been essential for a party always looking over its shoulder.

(Perhaps it felt it could afford to focus on the vote ki izzat in 2018 because the kaamwallah vote was now secure enough.)Indeed, among other factors, the establishment`s efforts to meddle and engineer the election in Punjab has led to political rivalry and hence a competition over who can deliver what and how successfully. After all, the PML-Q also had to play by the same rules, which were set by the PPP-PML-N conflict and now the reason Usman Buzdar is viewed as a failure (and PTPs future dismal in Punjab) is because he can`t match the image of the dynamic chief executive à laShehbaz SharifandPervezElahi.

Can one now extrapolate a bit and argue that the PPP is not seen as a party equipped to deliver because it doesn`t face such a rival on its home ground? In Sindh, most are agreed, its rule is a given because there is no alternative in the rural areas while it doesn`t really try too hard for the urban areas dominated by MQMso much so that Karachi is seen to be neglected by the provincial government for this reason. Which is why the biggest urban metropolis of the country continues to lag behind others in acquiring a bus project. And when the project is finally being inaugurated, it was partly due to a party which is being berated for having given hope to the residents of Karachi and then disappointing them once again the fear of losing out because of political competition. (And more importantly, if parties are now fighting over who can deliver in Karachi, it is because the political landscape in the city is now seen to be ripe for a political contest.) Indeed, however unseemly the bickering between the PTI and PML-N may appear, it is far better than the alliance the MQM and the PPP enjoyed for part of the 2008-2013 term where neither saw the other as a threat and were only interested in nurturing their separate support base. The absence of harsh words is not always a sign of civility sometimes it points to complacency.  The writer is a joumalist.