[**Winds of change**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1658547/winds-of-change)

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SINCE coming to power more than three years ago, the PTI government has staggered from crisis to crisis. But now, it’s fighting for its survival. With the winds of change blowing, its allies have raised their stakes. Last week, the government was [twice defeated](https://www.dawn.com/news/1657066) in the National Assembly in voting on some bills and a joint session of parliament was [called off at the last moment](https://www.dawn.com/news/1657279).

This is certainly not unusual in Pakistani politics. Yet the panic in the government’s ranks makes things extremely ominous. The crack in the hybrid arrangement appears to have shaken the civilian leadership. The opposition too has upped the ante hoping for a complete break-up. It’s not likely to happen. But the prime minister is now left to fight his battle alone. The back-room support that remained critical for his government’s survival may not be forthcoming.

Fighting on multiple fronts is never easy for any government. It is, however, much tougher for the PTI administration that has not been able to find its moorings even more than halfway through its term. It has remained as rudderless as ever. The extreme dependence on the security establishment may have helped keep it afloat. But with the lifeboat removed, it has been left to swim in choppy waters. The strains are evident.

**Read**: [*The PTI govt has a majority, so where did the numbers go?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1657307)

With its mass support base eroding, the government is now facing a much stronger challenge from a combined opposition in parliament. The move to get a controversial electoral reform bill passed by a joint session of parliament will be the biggest test for the government to prove its majority. The bill relates to the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and voting rights for overseas Pakistanis.

It will be hard for the government on its own to keep the coalition working.

After failing to develop a consensus on some important legislation the government has decided to go solo on the issue. In fact, there has not been any serious effort by the government to take all stakeholders on board. The objections of the opposition parties appear valid as EVMs haven’t been tested here and their reliability is questionable. It may also not be technically possible to arrange for voting by expat Pakistanis spread all over the world to cast their votes for candidates in their respective parliamentary constituencies.

It is not only the opposition parties; the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) too has expressed its reservations on both issues. Some coalition partners were also not convinced by the bill. Fearing the PTI would not get the required numbers, the Speaker postponed the session. The government [claims that all allies are now on board](https://www.dawn.com/news/1658352/govt-calls-parliaments-joint-sitting-tomorrow) but there is still no confirmation from the MQM and PML-Q that their reservations have been addressed. The [expected joint session](https://www.dawn.com/news/1658593/govt-upbeat-about-getting-bills-passed-thru-joint-sitting-of-parliament-today) on Wednesday will be critical. The opposition has already announced it will jointly challenge the government on the bill.

One can understand the desperation of the government to get the bill passed. There are strong political reasons for the prime minister’s persistence regarding the reform bill. While the EVMs have become more a matter of prestige for the prime minister, voting rights for overseas Pakistanis are considered critical for the PTI to win the next elections. There is an assumption that the expat vote could swing the result in the PTI’s favour. But the process, with all its technical complications, could make the elections controversial.

How important the bill is for the government is manifested in the prime minister [declaring its passage a ‘jihad’.](https://www.dawn.com/news/1657197) But that did not help him galvanise support from coalition partners. The government may make a second attempt today to get the bill passed. It will certainly not be easy without the establishment’s help.

It would be a major political setback for a tottering administration if it fails to get the bill through. But it will not be the end of the matter. The bill could further aggravate the government’s stand-off with the ECP that has already become very ugly. This is reflected in the PTI government’s contempt for state institutions. Bypassing parliament, the government is now increasingly relying on presidential ordinances to make changes in the laws.

With the security establishment now stepping back, the government’s capacity to manage things has been reduced significantly. The [dispute](https://www.dawn.com/news/1653379) over the appointment of the ISI chief may have been resolved. But there are some more serious matters, particularly the issue of governance in Punjab, that remain a major cause of tension between them.

Over the years, the prime minister has been seen as dependent on the intelligence chief to deliver on even minor matters. But the change of guard in the agency is likely to alter the dynamics. It’s evident that the security establishment is not willing to take on the responsibility of managing a fragile coalition.

It’s not a secret that almost all the parties in the coalition look towards the establishment before making their political moves. The growing dissent in the alliance may not have been engineered; there is no effort on the part of the establishment to manage them either. Surely there is no likelihood of the coalition coming apart but it will be hard for the government on its own to keep it working.

**Read**: [*PML-Q, MQM say concerns addressed*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1658527/pml-q-mqm-say-concerns-addressed?preview)

It’s not surprising to see the prime minister playing a more active role in dealing with allies and the dissent within party ranks. Surely winning the parliamentary battle is important but the major challenge for the government is growing public discontent over uncontrollable inflation, the worsening economic situation and the collapse of governance.

Instead of focusing on these more pressing issues, the government is engaged in futile battles with the opposition and state institutions. While the crisis of governance has deepened, the prime minister appears more concerned about what he perceives as ‘decadent morality’. He has now established a new authority to monitor the so-called moral values in society. The prime minister also wants the new authority to see whether the media is working within the parameters of religion. Perhaps he feels that by encouraging religiosity he can regain his public support base. He still fails to sense the winds of change.

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