**Coalitions and divisions**

BY FA I S A L B A R I 2022-04-29

THE Pakistani polity is very polarised and divided right now. The PTI definitely has support among the masses. But so do the other parties. The PML-N has a significant support base in Punjab.

The PPP has strong support in Sindh, especially in the interior of the province. Some of the smaller parties have support in other pockets.

If there were to be an election next month, what would be the outcome? Though PTI supporters think they would be able to return their party to power with a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, there does not seem to be any evidence to support this belief. The results of by-elections tell a different tale. Even the behaviour of many sitting PTI MNAs tells a different story.

The PTI could not manage even a simple majority in the 2018 elections despite the fact that the party had a lot of `support` from powerful quarters in the pre-election period, during the elections and even post-election in `convincing` people to join the PTI. It is public knowledge that `electables` were getting calls to support the PTI. Post-election, a number of independents joined the PTI. And a number of smaller parties supported the PTI so that it could form the government at the centre.

This pattern of eliciting support for the PTI was repeated for a number of crucial votes in parliament as well.

If this support is not there in the upcoming election .and it seems that even if relations between the PTI and the establishment turn neutral, the level of support the PTI once had would be hard to regain would the PTI be able to win two-thirds of the seats across Pakistan? Would it be able to win even a simple majority? This seems quite unlikely.

Imran Khan has said a number of times that his coalition partners kept `blackmailing` him when he was in power. The coalition partners will remember this as they move forward. In politics, no bridges, except a few, ever get burnt, but still, thismight create issues for the PTI if it has to form a coalition after the next election too.

But the bigger issue for the PTI needs deeper thinking. Some MNAs have left the party and Imran Khan has said on numerous occasions that mistakes were made in the allocation of PTI tickets in the past. He has mentioned that in the next election, tickets would be mostly given to the more `ideologically committed` people and those who have been with the party for longer. In other words, the PTI does not want to give tickets to `electables`.

If this does happen, though there is a good chance of a U·.turn on this one, the PTI will have more difficulty winning seats, especially in the rural areas.

The issues of coalition, zaat, biradari and political dynasties are important in many constituencies.

Can tickets based on ideology/ party loyalty counter the influence of local politics? We have not seen such an outcome in recent times. The PTI will have to consider this carefully if it is looking for a twothirds or even a simple majority.

The timing of the elections is going to be important too. Many people in the PTI feel that Imran Khan`snarrativeabout a`conspiracy`and`imported government` have re-galvanised support for him and his party, and that an early election before this narrative runs out of steam would be good for the PTI.

On the other hand, given the inflation, unemployment, load-shedding, and so on, if elections are pushed back, and if the PML-N and the coalition government are able to stabilise things and show even modest improvement, the PTI`s narrative will take a hit and elections will become harder for it.

This is why the PTI is agitating for early elections while the other parties are hoping that the current Assembly will complete the remainder of its tenure. One can expect the PTI to continue to increase pressure for early elections. Will the government be able to manage the economy and othernational issues, as well as cope with the pressure, including that of agitation and dharnas, that the PTI is planning? This will determine when elections are announced.

So we, the people of Pakistan, are in for a turbulent few months if not more. The PTI would like an early election and will push for it. A few people have already talked about the possibility of violence by design or default. The government would like to manage things till they can show some good performance and dent the narrative of `conspiracy` and `imported government` that the PTI has been pushing. Then there is the establishment and their interests too. The appointment of the new army chief will be part of this game as well. It is not clear how it will figure, but we can be sure it will be an important factor going forward.

We also know that elections are `managed` in Pakistan. There has been evidence of that, and for all the announcements of the establishment to the contrary, we know that the next election will see interventions too. There will be favourites as well.

This will complicate things even further.

Given the expectation of a coalition government, the role of the smaller parties will continue to be important. The larger parties will have to keep the door open for seat adjustment as well as post-election give and take. This will lead to some uncertainty too.

We are in for very turbulent times. The economy can ill-afford this kind of turbulence, but there does not seem to be a way out of it. In fact, given the polarisation in the country, whether or not we have immediate elections, the continuation of high levels of uncertainty is almost a given. One can only hope that the process unfolds without violence.  The writer is a senior research fellow at the institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.