**[Let the games begin](https://www.dawn.com/news/1797193/let-the-games-begin)**

[Arifa Noor](https://www.dawn.com/authors/57/arifa-noor) Published December 12, 2023 Updated 2 days ago

ELECTIONS and the desired results (the musbat or positive kind) are absorbing all the oxygen in town. Every discussion in the capital (and its neighbouring areas) begins and ends with the possibility of elections and what they will bring, or be allowed to bring). But then Islamabad (aur us ke muzafaat) is known for missing the woods for the trees, for reasons too lengthy to be discussed here.

Pakistan faces three separate but linked crises: political, economic and security.

Political: The election cycle comes under the first crisis. Ceaseless political uncertainty has kept civilian governments from focusing on urgent governance issues.

It doesn’t seem the coming elections will allow this crisis to be addressed anytime soon because everyone is convinced the results will produce a government more dependent on machinations than the people’s will. The past five years or more have shown the inability of such governments to function, let alone address long-standing economic problems.

Coupled with this is the problem that is the PTI. Regardless of who wins the election, parties, leaders and others will face the issue of when to ease the pressure on the party and its leadership and workers.

Before the election or later, what will follow is not easy to assess. With a worsening economic situation, lack of consensus among stakeholders, and public support for the PTI can create an uncomfortable or explosive situation.

Imran Khan, if released, may also begin protests, as did the PDM once Nawaz Sharif was in London. Will the next government be such a large coalition that Khan and his rump PTI will find no takers in case they have the space to protest? Or will it continue to be under so much pressure that it will not risk it? However, the latter will throw up challenges for those in power.

Pakistan faces three separate but linked crises: political, economic and security.

Last but not least, the previous coalition government found it difficult to resist its partners’ costly demands. How will they be any different this time? If a single majority government is thrown up, what will stop the rest from joining hands with the PTI?

Economic: The political situation is compounded by economic crises, which are far from over despite what the caretakers may be claiming. While, on the face of it, administrative measures have stabilised the economy and made the current IMF programme flow smoothly, the long-term Extended Fund Facility to be negotiated next will entail a difficult reform agenda.

Some even say that it will be near impossible to complete. The next government (whether or not it comes through a rigged election) will find it difficult to implement reforms because expenses will have to be reduced. This will bring socioeconomic pain and the possibility of social unrest. Whoever is in power will have to deal with this decision and its ramifications. No one is prepared for it, including the PML-N.

Consider past record. If the PTI baulked at these decisions, PDM proved no braver. The assumptions that the caretaker set-up would move on this front have also proved incorrect.

The much-lauded privatisation process seems to be moving slowly on PIA; the rest lags behind including the fate of the Discos. In other words, as our political stakeholders have been looking left and right for quite some time, the long-awaited reform of state-owned enterprises and the power sector are stuck at the same crossroads.

It is hard to date the moment but our economic strategy has been revolving around the hope of an extraordinary injection of funds — expats, exports, foreign investment — without even stepping foot on the long and painful road to reform. That this process will be expedited with a new government is nothing more than the triumph of hope over experience.

This brings us to the hushed whispers about an election delay. However, the problem is that short of direct intervention with the time-bound endorsement from the judiciary, there will be little clarity about a new set-up and its longevity.

By now, it should be clear that if the political situation and economic fragility are the chicken-and-egg problem, political uncertainty is adding to economic instability. Random extensions — because of weather or security — in legally questionable set-ups will prove as useless as fragile elected governments.

In case, there is someone reading this and assuming an intervention will lead to a happy ending, let me add, without the miracle of rents flowing in from the world — which is what Zia and Musharraf enjoyed — the perceived legitimacy or stability of earlier non-elected eras will be impossible to recreate.

Security: Last but not least is the deteriorating security situation, especially in Balochistan and KP. At the moment, it seems we have no broad-based plan to deal with either of the two provinces. The former requires a political process and dialogue which is not even on the table; we are bent upon continuing policies which have turned the insurgency in Balochistan into the longest one since independence.

KP is in the midst of a second reincarnation of terrorism and there are distinct changes this time around but those in charge seem to be viewing it through the lens of the noughties.

There is little acknowledgement of the changing enemy, the environment or the observation that resource crunch and the public mood are conundrums we have no answer to. But more important, those who should be focusing on the security challenge may have their hands full with non-military affairs. In this one point, it is rather reminiscent of 2007.

In case readers are wondering what the point of this spiel is, I am just about to explain: there are no easy solutions and the rollercoaster ride we are on, is still descending, perhaps in a way scarier than ever before. Second, while the election will provide no easy solution, any delay will complicate matters further.

After all, the paralysis of decision-making is directly linked to the unfortunate relationship between elected governments and unseen power centres. In short, ‘successful’ elections will be the beginning of a new chapter and not the happy ending many are counting on.

*The writer is a journalist.*

*Published in Dawn, December 12th, 2023*