**[Why we fail](https://www.dawn.com/news/1814628/why-we-fail)**

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FEB 8 has come and gone. The post-poll rigging and smoky backroom deals will carry on for some time. The frenzied wheeling and dealing will then give way to the new (read: old) status quo. Or maybe there will be even more chaos because a viable power-sharing agreement cannot be fomented. And then someone in a uniform, or a suitable proxy, will save us in the name of national security.

Indeed, the more things change, the more they stay the same. As one of its last gifts, the so-called caretaker government has approved a 45 per cent hike in gas prices to assure the IMF that working people will continue to be sacrificed.

Then again, it is reductive to say that nothing has changed. Much has been said about the ‘rebellion’ against the establishment by mostly young voters who ostensibly don’t have very much hope in systemic change but are certainly wise enough to disrupt the powers that be and the so-called ‘greater national interest’.

But this will not stop our self-proclaimed guardians from doing what they do, and our mainstream politicians will generally comply. Supporters of the PML-N, PPP, PTI or the other (smaller) usual suspects can decry their opponents’ nominees for prime, chief or other ministerial/ governor slots till kingdom come without troubling the establishment-centric order one bit. No one in this cynical game of thrones occupies any moral high ground.

This time, there is no shared vision of the future.

It is certainly important to acknowledge that the PTI, and particularly its rank-and-file workers, have suffered the wrath of the state’s coercive apparatus. And it is the largely young supporters of the PTI that have turned against the establishment overlords who, till two years ago, happily patronised Imran Khan and his (then loyal) lieutenants.

They are right when they say their mandate is being stolen — both by the Election Commission and the buying of ‘independents’. They are entitled to protest against this blatant injustice. But this has all happened before, and it will continue to happen in the future unless something changes in the way the majority of ordinary Pakistanis — including tech-savvy young people — think about and then do politics.

Diehard PTI supporters of Imran Khan — and those ‘democrats’ and ‘progressives’ who align themselves with the Sharifs, Bhuttos or any of Pakistan’s other entrenched political families — must recognise that none of these ‘big men’ (and the handful of women in the power game) will ever be in the vanguard of an anti-establishment struggle, a task that can only be accomplished by the mass of this country’s people, if meaningfully organised.

Among other things, it is essential to stop treating the peripheries like they are inconsequential. Many of the pitched online battles that have followed Feb 8 have largely invisibilised the rigging and subsequent protests in Balochistan, or the murderous attack on Mohsin Dawar and his party comrades in Waziristan. Why should we be surprised, then, that young popular leaders like Manzoor Pashteen and Mahrang Baloch reject parliamentary politics as a manipulated farce that offers no prospect of change?

What if the increasingly large number of young people in mainland Pakistan who ostensibly went out to vote against the establishment made common cause with those who mobilise again state repression and exploitation of resources in the ethnic peripheries? What if it became understood that cutting these elements down to political size means an economic programme to secure basic needs for working people while uniting against IMF-imposed austerity and domestic (land and other) mafias? What if those who are now asking for big powers like the US, Gulf kingdoms or China to take note of the rigging recognised that the establishment will win if foreign policy remains limited to extracting geostrategic rents from the highest bidders?

This is the stuff of ideological politics, and we are admittedly not living through a conjuncture in which substantive ideas inform political debate and alignments. Which is why this election is not like 1970. Yes, it can be argued that many people came out to cast their votes to reject the militarised state apparatus in both cases. But 54 years ago, the working people and youth of this country (including erstwhile East Pakistan) also rejected class and ethnic domination, and chose socialism.

This time, there is no shared vision of the future that animates otherwise politicised young people. Hollow identity politics which equates democracy with an oppressed ethnic group or gender taking individual office misses the forest for the trees. We need to truly decolonise the state and socialise the means of production. Without such a vision politics will be little more than sensation, we will continue to fail, and future generations will pay.

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