

DAWN OPINION
BY
MALEEHA LODHI

INDEPENDENT FOREIGN POLICY?



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THE question whether Pakistan has ever had an 'independent' foreign policy has assumed an intensely partisan nature. In a polarised environment, it is important to consider some facts to set the record straight.

The historical record testifies that over the decades, successive governments acted to protect Pakistan's core interests and defied external pressure to adopt policies contrary to our national interests. Continuity and consistency have been the hallmark of the country's foreign policy through civilian and military governments alike.

The most outstanding example of 'independence' in Pakistan's foreign policy is how the country acquired a nuclear capability in the face of Western opposition and unprecedented pressure. It saw the strategic imperative of possessing a nuclear deterrent once India detonated a nuclear device in 1974. This despite Western efforts to stop Pakistan after India's nuclear explosion. The aim, given its conventional asymmetry with a hostile India, was to restore strategic equilibrium by securing the means to deter aggression. The traumatic experience of the breakup of Pakistan in 1971 had taught the lesson that the country could depend only on itself for its security.

The quest for a nuclear capability was encapsulated in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's much cited remark that if India built the bomb, "we will eat grass, even go hungry, but we will get one of our own". It was a challenging journey with innumerable obstacles along the way. The objective could not have been achieved if successive governments comprising different political parties had not ALL pursued this regardless of the costs.

Over several decades, strenuous efforts were undertaken to develop a strategic capability and an operational deterrent with a credible delivery system.

Pakistan was a close ally of the US in the 1980s, the decade when the nuclear programme was at a critical stage. It was working with Washington in the joint struggle to roll back the Russian

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occupation of Afghanistan. In 1990, the US invoked the infamous Pressler Amendment to impose unilateral sanctions on Pakistan on the nuclear issue. This was preceded by US warnings that unless Pakistan changed course, military and economic sanctions would follow. Pakistan resisted the pressure and protested against the discriminatory US policy. It braved sanctions, censure and technology denial — and an unfair embargo on military equipment and aircraft it had paid for — because its national security was paramount and non-negotiable. From being America's 'most allied ally', Pakistan became its 'most sanctioned friend'. The more pressure mounted on Islamabad, the greater was the determination to stay firm and accelerate the programme. No government caved into coercive pressure — an unequivocal display of 'independence' in our foreign policy.

Pressure from the West continued. Pakistan was asked to sign the CTBT, agree to a one-time inspection of nuclear facilities in return for release of its military equipment, sign up for negotiations

Successive governments defied external pressure to protect Pakistan's core interests.

to proceed in the UN Conference on Disarmament for a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty and curb its missile development. As I was closely involved in talks on these issues, serving twice as Pakistan's ambassador to the US, I was witness to the number of times Pakistan said no to all of the above to pursue an 'independent' policy.

When India conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, the Clinton administration offered incentives (and disincentives) if Pakistan desisted from testing. Prime minister Nawaz Sharif went ahead regardless. Pakistan became a declared nuclear power.

The history of this remarkable achievement — involving multiple governments and the pivotal role of the country's scientists — is narrated by Feroze Khan in his insightful book, *Eating Grass*. It should be read by those who fallaciously argue that Pakistan's foreign policy has never been independent.

Those unacquainted with history would find another example instructive. This concerns Pakistan's evolving ties with China during the Cold War. Pakistan was then a member of Western military alliances, Seato and Cento; it had also signed a defence agreement with Washington in 1959. But none of this prevented Pakistan from pursuing an independent line to forge relations with Beijing. It was the first Muslim state and among the world's first countries to recognise PRC. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Pakistan significantly strengthened ties with Beijing in the midst of America's efforts to isolate China.

As former foreign secretary Abdul Sattar wrote in his book, US warnings were cast aside that it would review ties with Pakistan if it built relations with China. Declassified documents show such threats were rejected — until 1971, when the US switched course and used Pakistan as a conduit for Henry Kissinger's historic trip to Beijing, that paved the way for rapprochement with China.

Recent illustrations of Pakistan standing up to sustained pressure are found in the uneasy Pakistan-US relationship during the 20-year war in Afghanistan, a war Islamabad counselled Washington not to wage in early exchanges following 9/11. Islamabad cautioned the US that a military solution would be elusive. It advised kinetic action against Al Qaeda to be “short and surgical” and to draw a distinction between Al Qaeda and the

Taliban so that a diplomatic path could be found to eventually engage the Taliban in talks for a political settlement.

Washington did not heed this advice (but came to this conclusion almost 20 years later). Even as Pakistan came under pressure to ‘do more’, it never shied away from urging a negotiated end to the war.

Since Pakistan kept a channel of communication open to the Taliban, which eventually helped to bring them to the negotiating table in Doha, it was accused of playing a ‘double game’. But Islamabad was acting on its own interests as it did not have the luxury of retreating to the other end of the world. In shutting down the Nato supply route to Afghanistan in 2011 for seven months to protest against the killing of Pakistani soldiers in a Nato air raid, Pakistan again took a stand on principle.

Examples abound of how Pakistan adopted an independent line when its interests dictated. Those ignorant of this denigrate the country when they say Pakistan only did what foreign powers wanted. Recalling these examples may sound like a statement of the obvious, but it is necessary when an alternate reality is being created by peddling a narrative based on untruth.

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PAKISTAN'S NEW FAULT LINES



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PAKISTAN'S enduring political fault lines are well known. But newer ones have emerged to make the political environment more challenging if not combustible.

Key among the more long-standing fault lines are ceaseless government-opposition confrontations and the country's persisting structural economic problems, which the lack of political consensus has left unresolved. These have been consequential for the country and have undermined both the evolution of democracy as well as economic and political stability. They continue to be perpetuated by tediously recurring conduct and policies.

New fault lines may resemble long prevailing ones but are distinct in many ways. The most obvious is the political polarisation that today characterises the country. There are few if any precedents of this even though divisive politics is not new. This polarisation has divided people, society and families as never before along intensely partisan lines. The brand of populist politics practised by PTI, with its either-with-us-or-against-us stance, has drawn rigid political battle lines especially with its leaders now casting all its opponents as venal, unpatriotic and pawns of foreign powers. Its narrative of being ousted from office by a foreign conspiracy finds ready believers among its base of angry urban youth who are willing to discard facts. This narrative also helps to delegitimise opponents in the eyes of its followers. The xenophobic nationalism purveyed by its leaders is sowing further division in the country.

Polarisation and the narrative defining its contours has meant that politics has assumed the form of ferocious political warfare in which opponents have to be eliminated from the political scene in a terminal conflict and not competed with, much less accommodated. This take-no-prisoners approach has erased any middle or meeting ground and ruled out any possibility of bridging the divide. Extreme partisanship is making the working of the political system near impossible.

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True that democracies elsewhere are also floundering in the face of intolerant populist forces polarising their societies. But that only testifies to how democratic systems are being challenged because of weak commitment to democratic norms by demagogues, rising intolerance and lack of restraint in politics. In fact, democracy is rendered dysfunctional when denuded of the essential ingredients to make it work — tolerance, consensus and accommodating the interests and views of 'others'. The danger Pakistan faces today is of democratic backsliding.

An aspect of the country's polarised politics is how this has injected a toxic quality into political conversation and debased what passes for debate. The language and political narratives deployed by party leaders increasingly flout the basic norms of civility.

Politics has, of course, never been polite in Pakistan. The 1990s, for example, saw a good deal of political name-calling, character assassination, and accusations of disloyalty to the

**Weaponisation of politics has
spawned a culture of norm-breaking
conduct.**

country, with top leaders frequently dubbed as 'security risks'. But the political culture today has sunk to even lower depths of incivility.

Provocative rhetoric and statements that routinely fail the truth test are made with abandon and with no regard for the consequences. The no-holds-barred vilification of opponents has also meant insults have become a principal political weapon. The weaponisation of politics has spawned a culture permeated by incendiary allegations and norm-breaking behaviour. The political fabric is now in danger of being perverted on a more lasting basis.

There is no doubt that social media has amplified the country's polarisation and reinforced this political fault line. Again, this is part of a broader worldwide trend. Demagogues and their followers elsewhere have vigorously used digital platforms for political gain by purveying misleading information to manipulate opinion. Here

the social media has become a new arena or war zone for a political battle aimed mostly at maligning opponents and disseminating sensational 'revelations' about them.

Recent weeks have seen malicious campaigns by supporters of the former ruling party not only against leaders of the coalition government but also against the country's military and judicial authorities. Accusations of no less than treachery have been made against almost anyone who doesn't support this party.

Anonymity on digital platforms gives party activists deniability and frees their trolls from fear of any retribution. That encourages them to continue efforts to create an 'alternate reality' by spreading false information. The 'foreign conspiracy/imported government' narrative, for example, has been trending on Twitter for weeks even though it doesn't rest on a shred of evidence.

Apart from influencing gullible minds, social media's magnifying power generates paranoia by such messages and promotes a hollow form of nationalism in this post-truth environment. By playing off and reinforcing polarisation, messages spread through digital channels that call out others as traitors, are not just deeply offensive but also corrosive of the political system.

This brings up another new political fault line. Defiance of institutions be it the judiciary, parliament or the Election Commission, when they do not deliver decisions that suit a

particular political party, encourages disrespect for them, breeds cynicism and widens divisions in society. This is now happening on a scale rarely witnessed before.

Supreme Court judges have been the target of criticism by PTI leaders who have also demanded the resignation of the chief election commissioner. This has translated among the party's supporters into a blanket rejection of these institutions and refusal to accept their decisions. The most damaging consequence of this is that it rules out resolution of political disputes through institutional means.

Unwillingness to play by the rules is hugely destabilising for the political system. It can also sow public disorder and lead to a chaotic situation that poses a danger to the democratic system itself. This, sadly, is where the current political situation may be headed today.

We have seen in other parts of the world, including our neighbourhood, populist demagogues show contempt for their nation's constitution and its institutions and upend democratic norms. The question is whether Pakistan's fragile democracy can survive such assaults at a time when social cohesion itself is at risk from old and new fault lines.

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CHALLENGING TIMES



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THERE is a long history of Pakistan's state institutions being criticised and challenged by different political parties and actors. This is unsurprising for a country that has seen repeated military interventions in politics and controversial judicial decisions invoking the doctrine of necessity. But now when both the judiciary and military are acting according to the Constitution, they continue to face criticism.

Today this criticism comes almost entirely from the former ruling party that wants both institutions to act in its support. When it finds that this is not happening and judicial verdicts are not to its liking its leaders intensify their critique to mount pressure on them to act otherwise.

This prompted a statement by the Inter-Services Public Relations warning against dragging the army into politics. It took strong exception to "unlawful and unethical practices" and efforts to involve the military leadership in the "political discourse" by "direct" or "insinuated references".

The higher judiciary too reacted to the criticism. During a hearing last week, Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial said it didn't behove someone to make insinuations just because a certain judgement did not please him. He said the Constitution unites the federation and the apex court being the defender of the Constitution would continue doing that despite any criticism.

In similar vein, the chief justice of the Islamabad High Court, Athar Minallah, asked PTI's counsel to seek instructions from his party leaders whether they had any confidence in the judiciary. He said from statements made by the petitioner and his party leadership it seemed they had doubts about the IHC's impartiality and independence.

Criticism by PTI leaders is not a random act of verbal excess committed out of pique and anger. It is a deliberate political tactic whose aim is to raise maximum public pressure to put both the judiciary and the military establishment on the defensive so that

they accede to their demands or, in the case of the courts or Election Commission, rubber stamp the party's desires.

This is politics by intimidation involving as it does criticism directed at state institutions at big public rallies to chants of approval by the crowd. In fact, inferences by the PTI leadership that these institutions may have colluded in the 'foreign conspiracy' to oust its government has the effect of denigrating these institutions. Imran Khan has also demanded that the chief election commissioner should resign and accused him of partisanship. He has been mocking sections of the media and often accused those criticising him of doing it at foreign behest.

The question is whether the former prime minister and his loyal base realise the consequences of pursuing this political strategy, which is assuming a particularly offensive form in social media and messaging on other digital channels by PTI activists. Defiance of

The country's history of disputed and divisive elections can cast a shadow on future polls.

court orders and constitutionally prescribed procedures by PTI holdovers occupying high public offices shows that both in words and deeds there is reluctance to play by the rules and in accordance with the Constitution. This goes beyond a challenge to democratic norms. It is a challenge to the democratic system.

When a significant section of the country is encouraged to deride and mistrust institutions that puts the entire political system at risk. Wittingly or unwittingly, this conduct is putting the party on a destructive path where not just faith in institutions is being undermined but institutions themselves are being delegitimised in the eyes of its supporters, primed now to reject anything at variance with their leaders' whims. This has serious implications for the constitutional and institutional framework in an intensely polarised country. It is further weakening what distinguished lawyer Salman Akram Raja calls the long-standing tenuous relationship of the urban middle class with constitutionalism.

This has a direct bearing on the general election that is widely seen as a panacea for the current political turmoil and the government-opposition confrontation that has all but paralysed the political system and is rendering it dysfunctional. Immediate elections are, of course, PTI's principal demand.

Many independent observers also regard elections as the only way to resolve the country's growing political crisis. But the key question raised by the ongoing attack on institutions, including the Election Commission, is whether the electoral outcome, whatever it turns out to be, will be accepted by the losing side. If a party and its leaders cannot accept a parliamentary outcome in which its loss of majority led to its ouster; if it cannot accept a judicial outcome, which revived the National Assembly it had dissolved, what is the guarantee that it will accept an election result in which it is rejected by voters?

There are many precedents of disputed elections. In fact, almost every election outcome has been disputed. In the 2013 elections, when Khan's PTI lost to PML-N, he alleged vote rigging and called the polls the "biggest fraud" in Pakistan's history. He demanded investigation into the alleged fraud, launched protests and held a

prolonged sit-in for over four months in Islamabad. The roles were reversed in 2018 when Khan won the election. Both PML-N and PPP claimed the people's mandate had been stolen and ballot rigging deprived the PTI government of legitimacy. In the 1990s, PML-N and PPP took turns to cry foul and accuse the other of winning by unfair means.

It is not just this history of disputed and divisive elections that casts a shadow on future polls. The country's unprecedented polarisation makes even the process leading up to elections highly contentious and uncertain. Consensus on composition of the interim government, which has to be established under the Constitution, will pose the first major challenge. Agreement on the code of conduct and rules of the road will present a greater challenge, especially if PTI continues to voice lack of confidence in the Election Commission. The most consequential question is whether all political contenders will accept the election result so that a way can be found to end the country's predicament.

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THE URGENT AND IMPORTANT



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WHILE much of the focus of political leaders remains on the daily hurly-burly of politics, it is the fate of the economy that will determine the country's future. A precarious economy needs to be swiftly stabilised before it plunges into an uncontrollable crisis. This urges the need for responsible economic management and efforts to calm down the volatile state of confrontational politics. Unsettled politics is feeding into the deteriorating economic situation. But the delay in taking necessary economic measures is exacting a bigger cost. Uncertainty about elections is also making markets edgy.

Both the urgent — averting a financial crisis — and the important — ensuring a degree of political calm — have to be simultaneously tackled as they are interlinked. This challenge has to be met in a domestic setting of sharp polarisation and in a worsening global economic environment. The PML-N-led coalition government has declared its intention to continue in office until the National Assembly completes its full term in August 2023. But this is easier said than done. The 'unity' government has a razor-thin majority. It depends for its survival on a diverse group of parties, who have to be kept in line by constantly meeting their demands. A majority so slim that a few members can tilt the balance will oblige Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to perpetually look over his shoulder to his allies. This in turn could distract him from governance. It also makes taking and implementing tough economic measures difficult as that will require building consensus among coalition partners, despite their assurances of support for such action. And this when Imran Khan is mounting pressure for early elections. He has already threatened a 'long march' on Islamabad and a sit-in if his demand for elections is not met.

Meanwhile, Punjab has been thrown into greater disarray by the Supreme Court ruling on Article 63-A of the Constitution that votes of dissident lawmakers cannot be counted if cast in violation of their party position. The Election Commission followed with the

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decision to de-seat the defecting legislators who had voted for Hamza Shehbaz as chief minister. This has upended Hamza's government and may usher in a period of instability.

PTI has already moved the Lahore High Court for his removal. Although Hamza has refused to step down, a fresh election of the chief minister is likely. PML-N and the PML-Q/PTI alliance are again locked in fierce competition for chief ministership. When a fresh election is called, if neither side is able to demonstrate a majority after two rounds of voting, the provincial assembly will stand dissolved. Even if PML-N is able to squeak through in a run-off election, it would be a fragile government. With the country's largest province and political heartland mired in uncertainty, this has implications for the stability of the federal government. Already Punjab has been in a state of paralysis for close to two months.

Political courage and policy actions are needed to avert an economic crisis.

More consequential is the precarious state of the economy. Virtually all macroeconomic indicators point to significant worsening of the economy: rising budget deficit, record current account deficit, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, soaring double-digit inflation, mounting debt, growing losses in state-owned enterprises, heavy government borrowing from the central bank and commercial banks, declining investment, and a deeply ailing energy sector that continues to stretch government resources and impose the burden of loadshedding on the public. Meanwhile, the fuel subsidy the previous government announced in its closing days is costing the exchequer over \$600 million a month.

It is the country's perilous external position and balance-of-payments crisis that has pushed the economy to the brink. The current account deficit in the ongoing fiscal year is at a record high of \$15 billion. Pakistan's immediate financing requirements this fiscal year are about \$5bn — \$3bn for the current account gap and \$2bn for debt repayments due by June 30. Financing needs next year are estimated to be around \$21bn to meet just debt obligations.

Foreign exchange reserves are now down to \$10bn, which cover just six weeks of imports. As the reserve cushion has depleted so has confidence. This has put more pressure on the balance of payments and sent the rupee into freefall. Its value has sunk to a historic low against the dollar, depreciating by almost 20 per cent in just the past six months. Last week the rupee crossed a psychological barrier by trading at Rs200 to a dollar. This adds significantly to Pakistan's debt.

Meanwhile, negotiations between the government and the IMF are underway in Doha on resumption of the suspended loan programme. Its revival is necessary for the country to access urgently needed funds not just from the IMF but also other multilateral institutions and bilateral donors. For example, the rollover of a Chinese loan awaits finalisation of the Fund programme. So does Saudi financing. The IMF's prior condition for resuming the programme is for the government to withdraw the fuel and electricity subsidy. While talks continue, Finance Minister Miftah Ismail is reported to have conveyed to the Fund team "the government's commitment to undertake reforms envisaged under

the programme and to complete the structural benchmarks". He is expected to join the talks in Qatar this week to try to finalise the package. Why bailout negotiations are taking place in a third country is however beyond comprehension.



If and when the IMF deal is done the government will have to take the tough economic steps it has promised, ensure compliance and also manage their political fallout. Although the prime minister apparently has the support of all coalition partners for this, it will require deft political handling in the face of the anticipated public backlash. Imran Khan will be more than ready to exploit this situation. So political will to stay the course on economic adjustment will be needed. The situation demands courage, wisdom and skill on the part of leadership to deal with the unprecedented economic and political challenges. Otherwise, it is the people of Pakistan who will have to pay the price for policy inaction.

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VOTES AND MANDATES



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MAY 25 presented a sorry spectacle of street clashes and a government-opposition showdown that plunged the capital into chaos. Between Imran Khan's long march and the government's use of force, the day's disturbing events left people in a state of deep apprehension about the future. It remained unclear whether the political storm had run its course or its headwinds would continue to shake the country.

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Sooner or later, elections will have to be called. This raises the question of whether this will resolve the ongoing political crisis and pave the way for much-needed stability. To be sure, the road ahead is a challenging one. Agreement on a code of conduct and acceptance of election rules will be far from easy. PTI's demand to replace the chief election commissioner, who holds a constitutional post, is already a worrisome sign of what lies ahead. In an intensely polarised environment, with emotions running high, it is hard to see how consensus will be forged on the political rules of the road. Will all contestants also believe the playing field will be level for them?

Looking ahead, there are other more compelling factors to consider. Will the election results be accepted by all political actors? And assuming — a big assumption — they reluctantly do, what would happen after a likely bitter and bruising electoral battle? This is an important question because the political rhetoric of major parties does not hold out the prospect of stable governance in which a minimum working relationship is established between political rivals. Yet the nature of election outcomes in the past, the country's diversity and the federal character of the polity should give our political leaders and their followers reason to pause and think. Because this demands an approach of managing the democratic system and running the country on the basis of political accommodation, compromise and tolerance of the 'other.'

If we look at election outcomes in the past two decades, two key aspects stand out. One, no party has been able to secure an overall parliamentary majority, and two, the regionalised nature of

the result. In the last four elections — in 2018, 2013, 2008 and 2002 no party won an outright majority. The winning party had to cobble coalitions to form the government. Thus, a fractured vote and hung parliaments have been the norm, not the exception.

Also significant for the case for consensual governance is the size of the popular vote for the party that won in these elections. It is more useful to assess a party's actual electoral support by looking beyond the distribution of seats. In the 2018 election, PTI got around 31 per cent of the popular vote. In 2013, PML-N polled 32pc of votes cast. In 2008, PPP secured 31pc. In 2002, PML-Q polled 23pc. This shows that in Pakistan's first-past-the-post system, the party that has been able to emerge as the single largest and win enough seats to form a government with allies has done so with less than a third of the popular vote. And this is of the votes cast, not the total number of eligible voters. Turnout in these elections has ranged between 53pc (2013), 51pc (2018), 44pc (2008) and 41pc (2002). The large non-voting electorate indicates

If politics and economics continue to collide, a bleak future awaits the country.

that significant political ground is not occupied by any party. That puts the mandate of the winner into real perspective.

The other feature of post-2002 elections is the regionalised nature of the result, which left different provinces with governments of varying political complexions. In 2018, PTI formed the government in KP, the PPP won Sindh, and in Punjab, seats were divided between PTI and PML-N but the former secured control of the province with allies, helped by the establishment. In 2013, the PML-N ran the centre and Punjab, but PTI formed the KP government and PPP the government in Sindh. In 2008, PPP won the national election, while the four provincial polls were won by different parties, PML-N in Punjab, ANP in KP, PPP in Sindh, and a PML-Q-led alliance in Balochistan.

What does all this mean? What lessons does this have for the country's post-election future? First of all, there is little indication

that Pakistan's era of coalition governments is about to end. If the next election follows the same pattern as in the past, then regardless of who prevails, the winning party will likely poll a minority of the popular vote. Therefore, the notion that the winning party is the 'sole representative' of the people and that no one else represents the country has to be discarded. It has to be replaced by the acknowledgment that its mandate is qualified, as other parties also have significant electoral support and must be accommodated and included in the working of the political system. It also means that the ruling party should practise humility in its ambitions and in its conduct. The view that it can wield 'absolute' power and govern unilaterally is mistaken. With the support base of under a third of the popular vote, a 'winner-takes-all' attitude leads to inherently unstable, exclusionary governance.

The country's federal reality also creates the imperative to work together — not just tolerate opposition-led provincial governments but for the centre to cooperate with them for the public good. In all likelihood, the next election will also produce a regionalised outcome. Thus, the need to adopt a consensual approach for stable

and mutually beneficial centre-province relations that breaks from the unedifying past of strains in the federation.

The fragile state of the economy creates the most compelling reason for political rivals to work together on a common minimum basis. Governments have been reluctant to take tough decisions to address the economy's structural weaknesses in large part for fear of political consequences and of the opposition exploiting that to orchestrate a public backlash and provoke discontent. Today, an economy again in the critical ward creates an imperative for post-election agreement among political leaders on remedial policy actions to heal it. All political actors need to think as much about the country's economic future as their own partisan interests. Without economic stability, everything else will be in vain. If politics and economics continue to collide, the country's future will be anything but bright.



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COST OF CONFRONTATION



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PEOPLE can be forgiven for thinking or hoping that the political confrontation between Imran Khan's PTI and the coalition government is beginning to ease. There is in fact no sign of that. If anything, rhetoric by both sides suggests that tensions might intensify beyond the war of words that has followed Khan's unsuccessful and ill-advised 'long march'.

He himself abandoned the march when fewer than expected supporters showed up at Islamabad's 'D-Chowk' and were unable to brave strong-arm action taken by the police including the use of tear gas. While the former prime minister blamed the government's use of force to thwart his march, he conceded his party was not well prepared for the effort, aimed at mounting pressure for early elections. Giving varying explanations at different times, he also said the 'Azadi march' ended prematurely as he feared violence because some of his supporters were armed.

This unifying episode has not, however, deterred him or his followers from planning another march, which Khan says will involve 'millions' descending on the capital if elections are not immediately called. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's chief minister Mahmood Khan went further, threatening to pitch the provincial police force against the centre if the march is obstructed. This prompted a swift response from the federal cabinet which announced any future march will be stopped by "full force". The interior minister warned of more arrests.

Whether or not Islamabad will see another showdown any time soon Khan believes that protest demonstrations and show of street power are the way to coerce the government to announce elections as well as mount pressure on the judiciary and establishment. He keeps addressing the Supreme Court and the establishment directly with his demands. He probably feels that if he relents on these pressure tactics, his goal of early polls will be elusive. He may also be calculating that this keeps his support base in a state of

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mobilisation, which helps to demonstrate his political power and ensure his followers stay active and charged.

The government for its part, may be thinking that forcefully confronting Khan will dissipate his political strength. A strategy of attrition is expected to exhaust his supporters and drain their energies, especially if they face more setbacks like the one experienced in the abortive march on Islamabad. Arrests and FIRs against PTI leaders and activists is part of this strategy. So are efforts to discredit its leadership by charges of malfeasance and corruption against those close to Khan. Press conferences by the official spokesperson focus more on such accusations than setting out the government's agenda or explaining what the 'unity coalition' is doing.

Both sides seem to have calculated that continuing the confrontation is in their political interest and pays dividends. But there are reasons for them to consider whether their strategies instead entail costs for them. Will playing havoc with public order

An unstable political environment is detrimental to efforts to heal an ailing economy.

enable PTI to force early elections? Should the party leadership's energies not be focused on actual preparations for elections if so desperately wants? After all, large rallies do not automatically translate into votes. Nor can ground work for elections be undertaken overnight.

In Pakistan's constituency-based, first-past-the-post electoral system, party organisation, raising funds, assessment of local politics, identification of 'electables' and the right ticketing decisions are the key to success. All this involves time and effort. Amassing people for protest rallies without doing the hard work of crafting a comprehensive constituency-wise election strategy does not take a party very far. Khan must also know that PTI is bereft this time of a party organiser of the skill and experience of Jahangir Khan Tareen, who was credited with PTI's winning strategy in

2018. All the more reason for him to consider how to compensate for that and direct his party colleagues' energy early to this task.

Spending all his political capital on confrontational politics takes his party away from the kind of organisational work needed for effective electioneering down the road. He could also have played an important role if he had stayed on in the National Assembly. But he and his MNAs chose not to, more out of pique than any strategy, even though there was intense disagreement on this in the party.

Although responsibility for the confrontation rests squarely with the PTI and its disruptive politics that is roiling the country, the government's interest should be to calm down the fraught and volatile environment rather than reinforce the inflammatory situation created by Khan. Countering Khan's challenge is one thing but to be preoccupied with it and adopt a narrative dominated by him is counterproductive. This approach distracts the coalition leadership from governance. The unity government after all needs to demonstrate why it wanted power ahead of scheduled elections and show it can deliver. If the public sees the government overwhelmingly engaged in politicking and countering Khan, it will generate cynicism and encourage people to think that all coalition members were interested in was securing power.

In a recent CNN interview, Finance Minister Miftah Ismail said the government would have gone for elections but for the troubled economy as the government's first duty is to fix that. If that be the case then economic policy should be the predominant focus of the government's attention and energy.



Prospects of an IMF deal and access to urgently needed financing may have improved by the recently announced fuel price increases, but the government needs to take far more measures to restore economic stability. The more intense the government-opposition confrontation the harder it is to do that and ensure compliance with policy measures in an unsettled environment.

The greatest cost to the country of the present political confrontation is that it creates an unstable and unpredictable environment detrimental to efforts to heal an ailing economy. A failing economy cannot be in anyone's interest. But whether or not the government and opposition accept that the political costs of their strategies outweigh their presumed advantages, the country will continue to bear the cost of unending confrontation.

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THE 'EXTERNAL' VOTE



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VOTING by expatriate Pakistanis has been a hot topic of discussion in parliament, judiciary and the media. There is no disagreement on voting by our diaspora. Their right to vote is provided by law. Although the recent amendment of the election law was returned by the president to parliament for review, overseas Pakistanis' right to vote was never in question.

A joint parliamentary session subsequently adopted the amendment bill. Earlier, while hearing a petition challenging this, the chief justice of the Islamabad High Court said amendments to the 2017 Election Act did not deprive expat Pakistanis of the vote. The petition was withdrawn.

The key questions in this regard are who is eligible to vote, how should the ballot be cast and what should be the time frame for implementation. A well-researched article published in Dawn's magazine of Feb 27 examines the likely political impact of overseas voting and reaches the striking conclusion that it would be a "game changer" that could even determine the outcome of general elections.

Over 120 countries and territories today allow what is called external voting. But there are vast differences in the way this is implemented, how votes are cast and criteria for those entitled to vote, including length of stay away from their country of origin. Some countries use citizens' intent to return to their home country as eligibility for them to vote.

Few countries, however, have introduced electronic means for external voting. In South Asia, India allows NRIs to vote but only those who retain the country's passport, are not citizens of another country, and physically present on polling day in their respective constituency. Registration of overseas Indians remains low and only 25,000 are estimated to have travelled back to vote in the last general election. Remote voting by postal ballot is now under consideration. Bangladesh and Nepal are still working on arrangements for voting by their diasporas. Sri Lankan expats abroad don't have voting rights yet.

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The Election Commission of Pakistan was charged by the 2017 Act with enabling overseas Pakistanis to vote. Those entitled to vote are holders of a NICOP card (national identity card for overseas Pakistanis) even if they are dual nationals. Some argue that voting rights should be confined to those who haven't acquired citizenship of other countries, (several states do this), because they have sworn allegiance to another country and may have 'divided loyalties'. They also do not have to face the consequences of their vote. But the issue here seems to be settled.

There are 8.6 million NICOP holders on the electoral rolls (as of June 2021). According to the ECP, 6.7m are in the Gulf/ Middle East, just under a million in UK and Europe, about 290,000 in the US, 180,000 in Canada and 401,870 in other countries. Of these 5m are on Punjab's voter lists; 2.2m in KP; 1m in Sindh; 142,325 in Balochistan and 97,744 in Islamabad.

The ECP was enjoined by the 2017 law to conduct pilot projects in by-elections to "ascertain the efficacy, secrecy, security and financial feasibility" of such voting. Assisted by NADRA, it did that in 2018 for 35 national and provincial constituencies, which had 631,909 overseas voters. Being the first exercise of its kind

Political consensus is essential for the legitimacy of the system that is eventually adopted.

only 7,461 expats registered online and just 6,233 voted via the internet. This suggests political parties didn't show much interest at that time.

In its report of this experience ECP's Internet Voting Task Force identified several flaws and challenges that needed to be addressed before the system could become operational for general elections. It recommended a gradual approach starting with elections to non-political bodies and then local polls and by-elections, to enable people to understand the system and allow administrators to test, review and improve it. Significantly it noted that "some of the world's most technologically advanced countries have either rolled back online voting or have deliberately chosen not to deploy it."

While the ECP, which has done impressive work, is exploring an appropriate mechanism for external voting, the case for and against online voting by overseas Pakistanis is worth considering. Among its oft-cited advantages are that it offers easy accessibility to a dispersed diaspora, makes for faster counting, simplifies vote management and saves both time and money. Technology however is a double-edged sword. The argument against internet voting is that it is inconsistent with core principles of voting — secrecy and security. Nor does it fully comply with requirements for election integrity. Secrecy of the ballot and voter anonymity are fundamental principles in democracies which internet voting doesn't meet. The voter verification process too has loopholes.

Election security is a worldwide concern and raises vexed questions about the threat of cyberattacks and data breaches including by hostile states and hackers. This can even compromise national security giving foreign powers' ingress into elections. Clone or fake sites can mislead voters and create chaos. How would the uninitiated in an unregulated digital space avoid such minefields?

As the majority of overseas Pakistani voters reside in the Gulf and mostly comprise labour it raises the question of whether they would be familiar with the internet to work this system. If they are

unable to, the voting method will lack inclusiveness and disenfranchise a large number of expats. It would risk others casting the vote for them, which could open it to manipulation and undermine the election's integrity. All these problems have to be solved if this mode is adopted. Voters both at home and abroad need to have trust and confidence in the system. Without that it will always be subject to controversy. Already Pakistan has an unedifying history of disputed elections and losing parties refusing to accept results.

This calls for careful evaluation and a step-by-step approach in which the ECP determines and then recommends the most secure and effective voting method and timeline for implementation, ensuring no group of expats is disenfranchised. It is examining various voting mechanisms — postal, internet, electronic, embassy in-person. It will have to run pilot tests to ascertain which one is feasible. But it will be up to parliament to approve what the ECP recommends. Political consensus will be essential for the legitimacy of any system.

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IS PAKISTAN UNGOVERNABLE?



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IS the country becoming ungovernable? Several factors seem to point in that direction. Governance problems have mounted in the first instance due to political discontinuities that have punctuated Pakistan's turbulent history. But today, the challenge of governability is more imposing because of a number of other factors in addition to long-standing ones.

The current political polarisation is the obvious new factor. It is unprecedented despite Pakistan's long tradition of divisive politics. Never before have people, society and families been so divided by their partisan preferences as they are today and resistant to accepting any view other than their own. The uncompromising stance of the former ruling party has sharpened this polarisation. It has eliminated any middle ground and made political accommodation near impossible.

The confrontation between PTI and the Rest has produced a situation in which parliament has been left without an opposition and the laws it has adopted bereft of wider consensus. As differences appear unbridgeable, finding political solutions to disputes is ruled out. With PTI intent on paralysing the system until it gets its way on early elections, its conduct has created an unsettled environment, making governing more difficult. This is also testing the democratic system.

This situation is casting a shadow on state institutions which are increasingly the target of partisan attacks in the raging political battle. Whether it is the establishment, judiciary or Election Commission, if their stance or decisions are seen as favourable to a political party, praise is showered on them. If the opposite happens, they are criticised for being biased.

Imran Khan keeps questioning the ECP and judiciary's impartiality, with PTI trolls often assailing these institutions on social media. His criticism of the establishment, including accusations that it did nothing to stop the 'foreign conspiracy' against his government, is a pressure tactic to force it to change course.

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Similarly, Khan has rejected repeated clarifications by the military spokesman that there is no evidence to support his claims of a foreign conspiracy. The consequence of this stance is to sow mistrust in state institutions among his fan-like supporters, even beyond his base. This is breeding cynicism and widening divisions in society. Whether or not PTI's leadership understands the deleterious effects of mirroring state institutions in controversy it compounds the challenge of governance. Rejection or defiance of the judiciary or ECP's decisions means undermining a rules-based framework. Trust in institutions is the bedrock of democracy and the governance system, integral to the ability to execute policies.

In a political landscape where there is lack of a civil discourse, the exchange of bitter accusations holds sway rather than sober debate on national issues. Discussion of public policy is substituted by fact-free efforts to demonise political rivals. This distracts the government from governing and the opposition from focusing on

**The confluence of polarised politics
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issues. When the political conversation is only about how venal the other side is national problems are neither seriously discussed nor solutions offered to them.

What has made governance more problematic is erosion in the state's institutional capacity over the years and the resultant deterioration in delivery of public services, which increasingly fails to meet people's expectations. Weakening of the instruments of governance has meant that even the most well-devised policy becomes harder to implement. Postponed reforms, piecemeal tinkering and lack of efforts to depoliticise the civil service have weakened the government machinery over time. It has undermined public confidence in government institutions and made governance more onerous.

The most important and recurring factor driving the country towards becoming ungovernable are dysfunctional economic policies that have long been pursued. Almost every government

since the mid-1980s acted in a fiscally irresponsible way and left the economy in worse shape for its successor to deal with.

Structural economic problems were left to fester, confronting the country every so often with a financial crisis that became a chronic threat to stability. For the past four decades, failure to mobilise enough domestic resources along with low levels of savings and investment, meant successive governments ran huge deficits in national expenditure and on the country's external account. These twin deficits — budget and balance of payments — were financed by printing more currency notes and the inflow of funds from abroad through borrowing and remittances from overseas Pakistanis.

Reliance on domestic and foreign borrowing and bailouts landed Pakistan in a classic debt trap where more had to be borrowed to pay off old debt. It also left the country living from one IMF tranche to another. Moreover, bank borrowing at home served as an immensely regressive measure because it meant forced transfer of savings to the government from people least able to bear the burden of inflation, the most pernicious tax on the poor.

Economic management that relied on borrowing allowed the country's ruling elite to avoid and postpone much-needed structural reforms, including serious tax reform, that could have placed the economy on a viable path. It also explains public unwillingness to comply with policy measures imposed on them by an inequitable system.

This kind of economic management was reinforced by successive governments — civil and military. A rentier ruling elite

created a rentier economy. That is why the structural sources of the country's chronic financial imbalances have remained unaddressed: a narrow and inequitable tax regime, the energy sector's circular debt, bankrupt public-sector enterprises, a broken public finance management system, an overvalued exchange rate, heavy regulatory burden and a narrow export base.

The chickens have now come home to roost. The country is in the throes of another financial crisis, foreign exchange reserves have depleted, inflation is at an all-time high, power shortages are placing an unbearable burden on people, and an IMF bailout is being sought to avert default.

It is true that the Covid-19 pandemic and global economic factors have exacerbated Pakistan's economic plight. Soaring international oil prices are further fuelling the balance-of-payments crisis and inflation while global shortages of LNG are compounding the country's power crisis today. Nevertheless, a weak economy with little resilience to cushion such shocks is the result of poor economic management by reform-averse ruling elites concerned more with preserving their own power than promoting the public interest. The confluence of polarised politics and economic turmoil is now pushing Pakistan into the danger zone of becoming ungovernable.

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ELECTORATE'S YOUTH BULGE



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but they have to turn up at the ballot
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