[**Democracy in retreat**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1746827/democracy-in-retreat)

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THE confrontation between the government and the Supreme Court has plunged the country into a more dangerous and unpredictable phase of the escalating political crisis. As widely expected, the SC [ordered](https://www.dawn.com/news/1745845) elections to the Punjab Assembly to be held on May 14, declaring unconstitutional and illegal the Election Commission’s decision to postpone the polls to October. It also instructed the government to provide funds to the ECP and assure security for the provincial poll. The SC judgement upheld the Constitution even if the procedure it adopted provoked controversy and criticism. The legal community generally welcomed the verdict while expressing dismay over the internal divisions exposed in the process.

The ECP [moved to execute the SC order](https://www.dawn.com/news/1746161) by issuing an election schedule. But the ruling coalition ‘rejected’ the verdict and vowed not to implement it. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif struck a defiant note in the National Assembly calling the judgement a “murder of justice”. The law minister warned it would worsen the political and constitutional crisis. PML-N called on the chief justice to resign. So did its alliance partner, PPP. Heads of the ruling coalition declared the apex court’s decision would be “resisted” in all forums including parliament. The assembly then adopted a resolution against the SC’s ruling and urged the prime minister not to comply with it. It also asserted that provincial and general elections should be held at the same time.

Since the [Punjab and KP assemblies were dissolved](https://www.dawn.com/news/1732237) by the opposition in January the PDM government did all it could and deployed every alibi to avoid giving a date for elections. The ECP [fixed Oct 8](https://www.dawn.com/news/1743591) as the date for the polls, which was then challenged in the apex court. Even before the ruling, Sharif and his ministers went on the offensive to subject the chief justice to pressure and insist on a full court bench to hear PTI’s petition.

With the government’s declaration of non-compliance with the Supreme Court’s decision, the two are set on a collision course. This compounds the political chaos in the country and the already fraught situation created by institutional clashes — between the executive and presidency, between the SC and ECP and now both the executive and legislature at loggerheads with the judiciary. All this is a consequence of the fierce power struggle between the PML-N-led coalition and Imran Khan. Their confrontation has turned these institutions into political battlegrounds. Political disputes have assumed the form of legal battles. Issues, including the election date, that should have been resolved by dialogue and mutual accommodation between political leaders, landed in courts, placing them under unprecedented pressure. And when courts gave their rulings one or the other side accused them of bias and partisanship.

A more dangerous and unpredictable phase of the escalating political crisis is unfolding.

What does all of this mean for Pakistan’s democracy? The political deadlock and breakdown of politics — when political disputes are no longer resolved by political means — have left democracy in a dysfunctional state. Democracy requires give and take, compromise and consensus to make it work. But when polarisation and searing divides make this elusive if not impossible, democracy is undermined. Toxic politics and extreme intolerance has created an environment inimical to democracy and is eroding any semblance of a democratic culture.

With PTI’s [unwise decision](https://www.dawn.com/news/1684501) for its lawmakers to resign from the National Assembly, parliament’s lower house is opposition-less and has become dysfunctional as a result. Moreover, the ruling coalition has hardly used it for legislation in the public interest. Instead, it has become a vehicle for the government in its political war, and is now being used against the judiciary. The resolution rejecting the SC verdict and aggressive speeches denouncing it in the assembly is testimony of this. All this has denuded parliament of its real role in a democracy.

The essence of democracy lies in strong institutions whose independence and decisions are respected by all political actors. But today, with state institutions in the vortex of the raging political conflict they are increasingly riven by internal divisions (Supreme Court) with their decisions being contested. How differences among judges of the apex court play out may have lasting implications for its credibility. As for the ECP, which stepped beyond its mandate and committed a constitutional transgression, its role has made it the object of public controversy. If these institutions serve as the infrastructure of democracy, their erosion and lack of cohesion, for one reason or another, leaves democracy weakened. Polarisation and political turmoil are taking their toll on the country’s institutions and exposing them to the risk of breakdown. The government’s intent now to undermine the SC’s authority and legitimacy by its virulent attacks, refusal to abide by its decision and mobilise its supporters among the legal fraternity, will only undermine the rule of law, which is the bedrock of democracy. Equally, defiance of the law and Constitution will push the country on the road to disorder and chaos, and eventually entail a political cost for the PDM parties.

This conduct, the unremitting political maelstrom as well as stand-off between the pillars of state pose a rising threat to Pakistan’s fragile democracy. The unmistakable signal it sends to the people who are struggling with a cost-of-living crisis in a deteriorating economic environment is that the political leadership is concerned more with power than public purpose. What is in progress is ferocious intra-elite competition that has little if anything to do with public needs or the public welfare.

A bigger crisis with unpredictable consequences seems inevitable with the PDM government refusing to implement the Supreme Court decision. This is unprecedented in the country’s history. Growing public disquiet over the situation is reflected in an opinion poll conducted by the consultancy firm, IRIS communications. This finds over 70 per cent of respondents feel the country is going in the wrong direction. Meanwhile, Imran Khan has [warned](https://www.dawn.com/news/1746877/pti-issues-scathing-white-paper-on-pdms-rule) his supporters will take to the streets if the government doesn’t comply with the judicial order. This promises more unrest and instability ahead with greater damage to democracy. It also risks reducing democracy to a mere shell shorn of substance.

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