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**PTI: Is the clock ticking?**

The Azad Jammu and Kashmir electorate seems to have stuck to its post-Musharrafian electoral tradition, handing over the orb and scepter of Muzaffarabad to the incumbent sovereign of Islamabad – barring a 12-month anomaly when the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference (AJKMC) resurfaced for bilateral breathing before diving deep into political oblivion.

On July 25, Imran Khan’s PTI successfully relegated Nawaz Sharif’s PML-N to an insignificant third spot on the victory stand in Azad Kashmir. The Nawaz League’s two-thirds majority, achieved in 2016, evaporated into thin air within 24 hours. But by confidently cantering into the power corridors of Muzaffarabad, the PTI stallion has shocked no one. In fact, political pundits would have been shocked had the PTI lost to either the PML-N or the PPP, or for that matter by a non-existent but politically possible post-election entente cordiale between the two if the duo had bagged enough numbers.

This was not to be because history shows that Azad Kashmir now behaves in a very predictable manner. The PPP returned to power at the centre in 2008 after an eleven-year hiatus. Three years later, it successfully claimed Azad Kashmir too. The PML-N retook Islamabad in the 2013 general elections and in 2016 Azad Kashmir fell into its lap as a ripened fruit. This was not unexpected. So how could the PTI be denied the obvious in 2021 after winning nationally in 2018? The party paraphernalia has since been getting in shape to run a government that would in turn be reined in from Islamabad – like always.

By winning last month, the PTI has not only achieved its electoral zenith in Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, it has set a new record by creating governments at the centre and most federating units, barring Sindh. Muzaffarabad was the last jewel waiting to be set in the governing crown, where it is comfortably ensconced now. And that is where the next phase of the party’s political journey begins. That journey could possibly be heading south.

The PTI can rightfully be credited for introducing or injecting much 'change' in the national politics. Foremost is the fact that Imran Khan has attracted millions of young new voters into electoral activity; these were constituents previously either neglected by the country’s political front-runners for decades or not sufficiently catered to. The PTI saw the opportunity to cater to this untapped reservoir of political strength. There is of course the fear that this youth might wander off if the party fails to deliver on its promises. The party’s performance so far is already being challenged by some of its ardent fans, and powerful backers. The young voters of 2018 are probably in their mid-20s and are possible affectees of the economic gloom accentuated by the persisting Covid-19 pandemic. Love for politicians, unfortunately, is an ephemeral commodity.

The ruling party has effectively dented the two-party system that was fashioned between the Benazir-powered PPP and the Nawaz-led Muslim League ever since General Ziaul Haq’s mysterious mid-air assassination in 1988. Imran Khan has patiently net-practised on the margins of the Pakistani political amphitheater after setting up his political shop in 1996. It took him around 22 years to reach the pinnacle of his sporting career, and quite strangely he wandered almost the same number of years in political wilderness before marching into Islamabad triumphantly by dethroning the Sharifs at the centre and in Punjab. His coaches and managers had worked well but his opponents had made mortal mistakes too.

A lot has been said and written about the verbal vulgarity routinely employed by the PTI’s leaders and young Turks when they speak about their political opponents. Nothing new; politicians belonging to the PML-N and the PPP have done the same for years. It is just that there were different hopes from a party that had harped on about ‘change’ for years. The party has done well to dash those hopes.

Putting aside what the PTI has been, let's ponder over what it would or could be in the next few years. The party has now become a behemoth that even Imran might not have imagined or planned. The roadrunners of Pakistani politics are too intelligent to sense when change is in the air. Imran is neither the first nor the last Pakistani politician desiring total control over the country. Some of his cabinet colleagues have already hinted at ‘conquering’ Sindh in 2023. They can be forgiven for being valetudinarian. The party is now facing a gargantuan task of running a difficult country with meager resources.

With untrustworthy claims of an improved economy, and self-flagellating admission about diplomatic loneliness, the party and its apprentices are causing more damage to their political future than their opponents – the wily foxes of Pakistani political wilderness. How can a prime minister claim an improved economy and then admit that the country is actually running on remittances? How can a hired gun on finance and economy proclaim to have salvaged a ‘derailed’ economy after telling an agrarian nation that we are now a net importer of food? He even admitted his ‘surprise’ during a government meeting that two-thirds of pulses are being imported. Facts about wheat and sugar are well known.

Winning three out of four provinces and both autonomous regions is definitely a dreamy prospect for a party that was trailing behind major, and some minor, parties only a few years ago. The coming months will show how capable the PTI’s depleted top team is in dealing with the economic, political and diplomatic challenges. With government ministers, advisers and special assistants issuing daily statements saying they are performing assigned tasks as per the prime minister’s vision, it is obvious that the PTI revolves around the person of Imran Khan. It does not need a philosopher’s imagination to guess who would take the hit if most promises made over the years remain unfulfilled.

There is uncanny unanimity among political pundits of all persuasions that 2022 would be more important than 2023 – the year of the next elections. Party insiders are already talking about an early election for they are aware of certain important developments due for the later months next year. There is hardly anything to write home about the PTI government’s performance so far, and it won’t be long before people realise whether or not any miracles are coming their way. The mantra of a 22-year-long struggle won’t be effective any longer, and the party will be judged on its performance and not on stories of others’ failures.

This is why one can say that the PTI’s journey from its electoral acme to political nadir began on July 25. The party is seen as a one-man wonder. And, while there has not been any public conversation among Khan devotees about any possible post-Imran scenarios, there are those that privately contend that it could all fizzle away without the great Khan. Would it then be safe to say that the clock has started ticking for the PTI?

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