

# The Business

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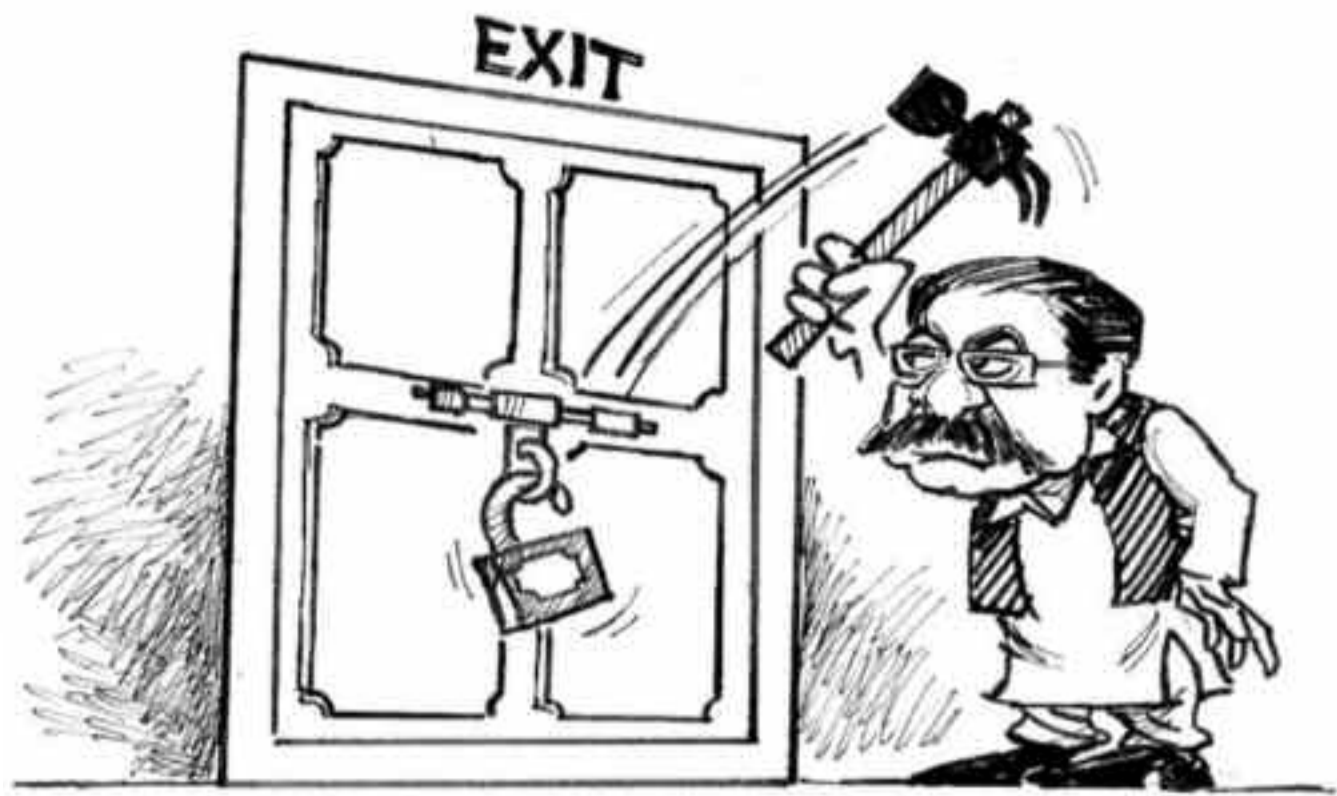
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## Delayed oath

On April 16, the Punjab Assembly elected its new chief minister. Under normal circumstances, the oath to CM-elect Hamza Shehbaz should have been administered soon after and by now he should have been running the affairs of the largest province. But as things stand, Punjab has now been without a chief executive for more than three weeks. This is despite the fact that the Lahore High Court had directed President Arif Alvi to appoint a different representative to administer the oath to CM-elect since Governor Punjab Omar Cheema refused to do so, excusing himself on account of illness. President Alvi, who finally administered oath to four members of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's cabinet on April 22 -- after having been ill for a few days -- has only responded to PM Shehbaz Sharif's summary pertaining to Hamza's oath by tweeting that it is "under consideration of the Honorable President as per the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan". It is bizarre that even after a week of the CM Punjab election, the president of the country and the governor of Punjab are unable to discharge their constitutional obligations. The excuses seem flimsy at best and it seems this is just two officials holding constitutional positions in the state toeing their party line. There has also been talk that all this is being done because the PTI is waiting for the Election Commission of Pakistan to decide on the reference against those PTI members who voted for Hamza Shehbaz in the CM Punjab election. Though their vote will still be counted, if they are de-seated under the reference, the newly formed government would be left without a majority -- therefore leading to yet another crisis. It could also be that Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi and the PTI are banking on the disqualification of these members to ask for fresh elections in Punjab. It seems the PTI and the PML-Q are not yet ready to call it a day. While political maneuverings and alliance formations may be justified, however cynically, openly shirking from one's constitutional responsibilities to settle political scores and throwing governance of the country's largest province into disarray is plain irresponsible, unparliamentary and against the spirit of democracy. It, however, is hardly surprising given the way the previous government in the centre didn't blink twice in violating the constitution. As another pressure tactic, the PTI has also given a countrywide call to protest outside the ECP offices on April 26 because the ECP has not yet decided on the future of the dissident PTI members. It is already going to be an uphill task for the new government to manage the economic mess left behind and on top of that, the country's largest province is not being allowed to run at all. It seems the only ideology Imran Khan and his party truly adhere to is authoritarianism that just can't see any way other than what the PTI's wish list decrees. They have been deflecting -- via a superbly conducted PR and propaganda campaign -- questions about their lack of performance while in government by very successfully managing to use the foreign conspiracy angle for any dissent they face. One would hope the PTI and Imran Khan realize the very dangerous repercussions their choice of politics is having on so-

## Politics and the Pakistani diaspora

ADIL ZAHOOR

Historically, 'diaspora' had a very specific meaning -- mostly ascribed to Jews and Armenians' dispersions around the world -- epitomizing the historical oppression and neglect these communities had to face in their lands.

These cases were presumed to be the paradigmatic and classical cases of diaspora communities who were presumably 'sojourning' in these new lands they now inhabited, until their homelands became liveable again. But as the dreams of homelands got deferred, either because of the continuous tumult or uncertainty in their lands, these communities built their own cultural enclaves in the lands they now inhabited, marked by a predominance of continuous homeland orientation, residential segregation, the creation of cultural and vernacular schools for the education of their children, boundary maintenance through religion, prohibition from out-marriage, resistance to assimilation to local cultures and a general aloofness and apolitical attitude towards local politics except in the areas which affected them directly.

But over the years, 'diaspora' became an all-encompassing term now used to describe labour, migrants, and expatriates living abroad -- from Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis to Filipino, Korean, Turkish communities, among others. Moreover, these diasporic communities, contrary to the classical apolitical cases of the diaspora, maintain deep social and economic ties with their homelands and actively participate in the homeland politics. Sometimes this support gets overzealous with instances of these communities supporting terrorist and even ultra-nationalist forces back home -- owing to which Benedict Anderson defined them as "long-distance nationalists".

In the last decade (especially since the post-2008 financial crisis) as populist and right-wing politicians captured political space around the globe, a huge support for these leaders came from their diasporic communities. In 2014, the BJP in India amassed huge financial contributions from Indians living abroad; in fact, according to some estimations, the biggest fraction of support for party funds, after neoliberal tycoons like Ambani, came from Indians living abroad. Moreover, the RSS, the militant and parent wing of the BJP, has a history of galvanizing Indians abroad, in a bid to popularise the Hindutva message beyond Indian borders.

Similarly, the Turkish diaspora vouches for Erdogan's authoritarian politics and his Neo-Ottomanism.

Vicktor Orban is another right-wing populist politician who is extremely popular among ethnic Hungarians living abroad. Imran Khan's popularity among the Pakistani diaspora is another example of strongmen and larger-than-life politics finding resonance among the diaspora population.

To use this popularity among the overseas Pakistanis for electoral gains, the PTI in its tenure passed a bill allowing overseas Pakistanis to vote in the elections. This is again not an anomaly as multiple other countries have either been considering or have allowed their diaspora communities to vote. For example, Canada and Greece have allowed their expats to vote, while discussions in the UK, New Zealand, India and Nepal are underway to allow the diaspora vote. The PTI was also heavily reliant on the remittances of expatriates for 'alleviating' the economic woes of the country and also for its own party funds in the 2018 elections. The most recent example was after the party's exit from power, when Imran Khan in a video message requested expatriates to fund the party for the impending election campaign.

But what is it about the Pakistani diaspora's involvement in homeland politics which makes it a corrosive endeavour? It appeared that after Imran Khan's government was ousted after a successful no-confidence vote, the Pakistani diaspora had a huge meltdown. Expatriates gathered around the world to protest against the move, espousing the PTI's narrative of deeming its exit as a conspiracy spearheaded by the US -- supported by alleged "traitors" who have dissented against the PTI -- in collusion with "corrupt" and dynastic "monsters", the PML-N and PPP.

Not surprising, but this was the most recent example of diaspora failing to understand the internal contradictions which plague Pakistani politics. The diaspora instead augmented the bandwagon of conspiracy to make sense of Imran Khan's exit, which far from a conspiracy, was just another episode of a civilian government forming a rift with the emperor.

They fail to understand that Imran Khan's ascent to power was favoured by a hybrid compromise, in which a team of electables was assembled for the PTI in the 2018 elections, which helped them marginally have a lead over other parties and form a coalition government. A continued and entrenched control by the unelected in the economy design and foreign affairs of the state was a price paid in return. As the chasm appeared in the hybrid model starting from late 2021 -- mainly due to disagreement appointments at key positions -- the former hand of patronage was pulled back, providing the then opposition the op-

portunity to mobilize the same electables against him. Imran Khan's governance, just like his populist counterparts in the world, was marked by a predominant reliance on rhetoric and a meagre focus on governance with continuous maligning of the opposition parties, a neoliberal economic vision with no clarity, extra-parliamentarism, threats of authoritarian steps to undo the 18th Amendment, misogynistic and callous statements against women and rape victims and intermittent use of the religion card to salvage the declining popularity caused due to skyrocketing inflation and debilitating economic conditions.

The inability of the Pakistani diaspora to grasp these nuances of Pakistani politics, its controlled democracy, and the ceaseless predicament of the working classes, and the religious, ethnic and gender minorities, makes it a politically regressive entity. One had hoped that those living in comfortable democracies might have developed some sense of democratic plurality and why democratic and constitutional dispensations are important for fragile democracies like Pakistan. Instead, we see that forced cultural territorialisation and the general paradoxes of diasporic conditions further the ideological contradictions of those that form the Pakistani diaspora.

The result comes out to be an extremely polarised political consciousness -- just like the urban middle/upper class -- that continues to inspire a conspiratorial and dichotomous worldview to make sense of the political realities in Pakistan. It imbines in diasporic orientalism which disparages the common Pakistani as incapable of making informed political decisions. It deems corruption as the sole malaise troubling Pakistan. It sees solutions in authoritarian/strongman autocracy with absolute engagement with other political entities. It maintains belligerence towards progressive and propele politics. And it indulges in parochial and patriarchal nationalism.

Benedict Anderson presciently summarised the contradictions of this 'long-distance nationalism' through an anecdote of a Sikh nationalist living in Toronto, who stays apolitical in Canadian political life but feels the overwhelming urge to influence homeland politics through his regressive ideas. Anderson writes "His political participation is directed towards an imagined heimat in which he does not intend to live, where he pays no taxes, where he cannot be arrested, and where he will not be brought before the courts -- and where he does not vote: in-effect a politics without accountability or responsibility".

## A troubled start

MALEEHA LODHI

As anticipated, the Shehbaz Sharif government has faced many obstacles since it assumed power. Several impediments have been placed in the way of a smooth transition by leaders of the former ruling party. There are no parallels in the country's history of similar disruptions in the transfer of power.

Imran Khan's aim is to bring the parliamentary and political system to a halt and paralyse it to force early elections. His extra-parliamentary campaign to take to the streets and hold public rallies seeks to mount pressure on the government until it relents or the establishment intervenes. The large and enthusiastic rallies he has been addressing have encouraged him to continue down this path.

Last week's meeting of the National Security Committee categorically rejected Khan's claim of a foreign conspiracy to oust him. The statement issued after the meeting said: "The NSC, after reviewing the contents of the communication, the assessments received and conclusions presented by the security agencies, concludes that there has been no foreign conspiracy." This ought to put the controversy to rest. But it is unlikely to deter Khan from pressing this narrative. He is following a Trumpian playbook to whip up emotions among supporters who seem ready to buy his claim. He is firing up his base by speeches that fuse religion with nationalism. He and his party have also mainstreamed incivility both in their political rhetoric and conduct in pursuit of their objectives. This has injected a toxic content into politics.

The mayhem created in the Punjab Assembly stands out as one of the most shocking displays of misconduct by PTI lawmakers in forcibly preventing the vote to elect the new chief minister. Not only was the deputy speaker physically assaulted, with rowdy scenes witnessed live on television, but false claims were later made about who provoked the violence. This delayed proceedings by days and voting took place only after the Lahore High Court's intervention.

The PTI governor then refused to administer the oath on the disingenuous grounds that the chief minister's election was invalid. This left the province without a government for three weeks with the LHC finally asking the president to nominate someone else to administer the oath.

This wasn't the only reason why the Sharif government got off to an unsure start. Cobbling together a coalition cabinet took longer than expected, underlining the difficulties of forging agreement among disparate parties. It left some unhappy and others bickering over portfolios. Nevertheless, a government of national unity holds the promise of providing consensual governance and strengthening the federation, given its composition and alliance between representatives of Punjab and Sindh. But it also suggests how challenging it will be to build consensus on policy. If the coalition can, however, work together on national goals this would set a new and healthy political tradition. The government has an opportunity to take actions to establish its credibility. An important way is to clearly state its purpose in office, otherwise it will be seen as an arrangement whose only aim was to oust Khan. Because of the government's short lifespan, it may only be able to deal with the urgent and not the important. But it can still offer a road map of what it hopes to accomplish in the months ahead, even if it is unable to finish work on these goals. It can distinguish itself from the previous government and also dispel scepticism about it by delivering competent governance.

Although the cabinet is a motley group, several ministers bring experience and a reputation of being capable. The prime minister himself has long been known as a 'doer' who knows how to get things done and moves with speed in ensuring the bureaucracy delivers.

The Sharif government should avoid mimicking PTI in expending its energy on assailing political opponents. Responding to Khan's allegations and moves is one thing but obsessing about them will only distract it from the task of governing. Government leaders have repeatedly said that there will be no political vendettas or persecution of opponents but they must

act on this. It would be tempting to put Khan under pressure to counter the challenge he poses but this would be counterproductive. It should be resisted for the country to break from the unseemly tradition of framing politically motivated cases against rivals.

The economy will be the make-or-break issue for the government. The situation is dire, which has urged Sharif to seek a swift resumption of the IMF programme as a top priority. The newly appointed finance minister is already in Washington hoping to quickly finalise a deal. This is necessary but not sufficient.

Of course, the first order of business is to stabilise the fragile macroeconomic situation, curb expenditure and secure funds to finance the record current account deficit and meet debt repayments. The greatest challenge is to curtail soaring inflation and not resort to more inflationary borrowing. Sharif has an opportunity in his initial days to show he can make more than a band-aid effort by measures that are a structural break from the past. These could include harmonising the convoluted sales tax structure, introducing a uniform system of import duties and cutting subsidies to loss-making state-owned enterprises.

The announcement of structural reforms to establish financial viability will show Sharif means business and can take tough decisions in the country's interest. If he can get his coalition partners to agree on a reform package that would help to define the government's purpose in power. Sharif has already told the cabinet in its first meeting that economic stability, not politics, should be the priority and solutions must be found to the country's energy crisis, rising debt and other pressing economic problems. Imposing challenges lie ahead in a deeply polarised country. The democratic system itself is imperilled by the disruptive tactics of the former ruling party, unwilling to accept its ouster from power. Imran Khan has also threatened a march on Islamabad in his campaign against the government. For the coalition trying to govern in this fraught political environment there are formidable hurdles to overcome. But all political players should recognise that if the economy tanks all else will be in vain.

## Free press

MATTHAIOS TSIMITAKIS

In January, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis survived a no-confidence vote tabled in parliament by the left-wing opposition over the government's handling of a snowstorm that paralysed the country. In a speech to parliament, Mitsotakis referred to the journalists who disclosed the Novartis corruption scandal in Greece as a "gang" who are "free to exercise character assassination" -- a term interpreted as a straightforward attempt to influence the judiciary.

Prosecutors had summoned Kostas Vaxevanis, the editor of the publication Documento, and Yianna Papadakou, a former television presenter, to Athens' Supreme Court a few days earlier. They charged the two journalists with crimes linked to their reporting about government officials, including ex-ministers, who allegedly accepted bribes from the Swiss pharmaceutical corporation Novartis in order to control the pricing of specific drugs. The accused politicians have rejected the charges, claiming they are politically motivated. This is despite the fact that the US Department of Justice in 2020 imposed a \$347m fine on Novartis, due to the case. While it did not disclose any names, the company admitted to making illegal payments to Greek providers. The anti-corruption prosecutor's probe, which began in 2016, closed the case against two Greek lawmakers in January. A second inquiry, however, is continuing in Greece, looking into an alleged frame-up involving a former minister, the corruption prosecutors who probed the Novartis case, and the two journalists. Participation in a criminal group, collaboration in wrongdoing and two counts of complicity in the misuse of authority are among the allegations levelled against the journalists. According to a new provision of the penal code approved only weeks ago, minor offences related to a "criminal group" will now result in actual prison sentences. In other words,

Papadakou and Vaxevanis, who reported extensively on the Novartis scandal, could see jail time. Such prosecution effectively could create a troubling precedent. It also raises concerns about whether whistleblower witnesses in the case against Novartis will continue to be considered credible, or whether they will be charged as well. It's worth noting that Greece was one of 17 European countries that failed to incorporate a new directive on the protection of whistleblowers in their legal systems and is now coming under pressure. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the burden by reducing journalists' rights to access information. Reporters Without Borders last year ranked Greece 70th in its global index of press freedom, five positions lower than in 2020. The country's standing has declined steadily over the previous decade, a trend that is likely to continue, judging from recent events. The government fiercely denies those accusations, stressing that pluralism is granted in the country. But democracy is safeguarded when the press is free to speak truth to power. That should not be the job of the courts to define and decide. Vera Jourova, the EU Commissioner for Values and Transparency, openly warned that "the 2022 Rule of Law Report will pay particular attention to developments pertaining to the press freedom and the safety of journalists". These concerns have become particularly worrying in the case of the murder of crime reporter Giorgos Karavaz, outside his home a year ago. Despite pressure from Greek and European journalists' associations, there has been little progress in the case and those responsible have not been brought to justice. Even conservative politicians are now raising concerns about press freedom in the country, suggesting, what many of us are afraid of, that the conservative Greek government has been seduced by the populist conservative turn of countries across Europe, and no longer strives to be part of the so-called moderate liberal conservative milieu.