

The figurehead prime minister

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HOW the mighty have fallen! Just as we were all being told that it is too soon to expect results, that the whole thing of turning the country around and breaking decades of bad governance and undoing systemic problems from the roots upwards, we woke up one day to learn that it is certainly not too soon for the great leader to expect results.

Never mind Asad Umar's departure for a moment. It is Imran Khan who has been done for here. Less than a year into his term, and he has already become the closest thing to a lame duck without actually being one. It's hard to tell who his own people are anymore.

Everybody has their theory on why Umar was fired, and so unceremoniously at that. He was delaying the IMF agreement, the economy had ground to a halt and the business community was up in arms, he didn't communicate properly and was arrogant, he stopped the flow of funds to powerful lobbies, and so on. My favourite is the theory that says the opposition did it. Yes, the opposition succeeded in persuading the markets that Umar was not up to the job, and that success led to him getting the axe.

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Never mind what the immediate trigger for the decision may have been. Fact is, he was lost from the very beginning. Look at the mini budgets for evidence. What started off as revenue-generating exercises quickly turned into packages of tax breaks for business, industry and speculators as the billionaires and trade and industry associations thronged to the corridors of Q Block with their representations. When they found no quarter, they went straight to the prime minister. Word in the business community was that if you don't get what you want in Q Block, then find a way to get to the prime minister, flatter him and reinforce his self-perception as a 'saviour' who has brought about transformative change in how the government functions. Then present your requirement as the panacea he has been searching for, the silver bullet that will turn the economy around.

Take a look, for example, at how the drug companies have played this government so thoroughly to raise prices of essential medicines by almost 300pc in some cases, and how the government has struggled to regain the initiative by talking tough and announcing crackdowns, all to little avail. That cat is out of the bag now — good luck putting it back in.

Look at how the exchange companies have played the government, or the stockbrokers who got long sought-after tax breaks for themselves in the second mini budget. Or look at the auto sector that got key documentation measures against non-filers withdrawn to boost their sagging sales, or at what the property

sector is about to get into with the forthcoming amnesty scheme in which benami properties will be allowed to be whitened. One after another parade of racketeers has taken its pound of flesh by selling a story to this government, and the government has got little to nothing in return.

This was not Umar's doing, but it was certainly on his watch and his beat. The key question in his mind all along was 'who's got my back?' He got his answer. Now Khan needs to ask himself the same question.

Fact is, in this government, nobody has anybody's back. It is everyone for themselves. The capriciousness with which Asad Umar was discarded by Khan made that very clear. Nobody is now in a position to antagonise any powerful, vested interest in the country. Nobody can afford tabdeeli in an environment like this.

One thing is certain, with the arrival of Hafeez Shaikh, the stalwart of the oldest of the old Pakistan. He is no change-maker. He is comfortable in the company of powerful men, and talks proudly about how he commands their confidence, from generals and presidents to Arab sheikhs and Wall Street billionaires. The one constituency entirely missing from his radar — not even on his map — are the people, particularly the poor.

Asad Umar warned while departing that his replacement would have to make "tough choices". He said he was reluctant to take steps that would "make mincemeat out of the people" and saw merit in waiting, searching for alternative ways to improve the situation before taking the plunge into the necessary adjustment. He knew the forthcoming adjustment would bring steep political costs, as well as untold misery for millions of people. Inflation, unemployment, hunger and malnutrition and the general intensification of the struggle to survive are all coming our way, and this gave him pause to reflect, to hesitate.

Hafeez Shaikh has no such compunctions. He will do the needful without batting an eyelid, just like he did from 2010 till 2013. He took a severe beating for it back then, more than Umar can even imagine (at one point, even his own cabinet colleagues turned on him), but it mattered naught to him. He has no political skin in the game and knows which constituencies need to be kept satisfied to keep his boat afloat. And those constituencies don't sit in parliament.

The cost of the adjustment will now be borne solely by Imran Khan, and given who he is surrounded by today, there will be fewer and fewer people willing to defend him and his government's choices as he wades deeper into the waters of the adjustment ahead. And he will be largely powerless to call it off or blunt its edge.

Asad Umar is not the only one who has been lost all along. As time passes, the prime minister too is increasingly wearing the look of a lost soul. When was the last time you heard a good idea come out of his mouth, one that gave you confidence in his abilities? Think hard. By the time this ends, he might well be reduced to a figurehead prime minister, or perhaps worse.

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