

### PML-Q and the Maharaja (DAWN)

By Amir Mateen

THE absolute power that Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi enjoyed in Punjab for five years is paralleled only by that epitome of Punjab's glory, Maharaja Ranjit Singh who too was born and raised not far away from Gujrat.

Unlike his lesser counterparts in Sindh and Balochistan, Arbab Rahim and Jam Yousaf, who had to contend with perpetual coalition blues, Pervaiz Elahi relished an undisturbed reign. He may have enjoyed even more power than, say, the three PML-Q prime ministers. While they had the presidential sword dangling over their heads, Pervaiz was the omnipotent Maharaja of the Punjab.

Like Ranjit Singh, Pervaiz Elahi is clannish to the core. Nothing else matters when it comes to the Jat biradri and the larger family. It's like a joke that nearly 20 National Assembly seats out of 139 in Punjab have been given to close family members. Pervaiz Elahi is contesting on five seats (three NA seats in Chakwal, Bahawalpur, Attock) and two provincial Assembly seats). Cousin Shujaat Hussain is contesting from two National Assembly seats (Gujrat and Sialkot), younger cousin Wajahat Hussain from another constituency in Gujrat, son Moonis Elahi from two provincial seats. In Sargodha, another relative Anwer Cheema is contesting on one National Assembly seat, his daughter-in-law Tanzeela Cheema on another and son Amir Cheema on a provincial assembly seat.

The situation in Attock is even more interesting. Pervaiz Elahi's brother-in-law Major Tahir Sadiq happens to be the Nazim of Attock, which has three NA seats. Tahir Sadiq's daughter Imaan Wasim is contesting on one seat, his son-in-law from another with the third going to Mr Elahi. One can safely say that nearly one fourth of the total seats in Punjab have been given to the royal Jat biradri. This may have disturbed the centuries-old biradri fabric of Punjab, giving credence to the joke that we may be on our way to turn this country into Islamic Republic of Jattistan.

PML-Q has not declared Pervaiz Elahi as its official candidate for the post of prime minister but the party campaign is obviously geared towards this goal. His media managers have been working overtime to give him a suave, modern look where he is shown wearing branded lounge suits and gaudy ties. His pictures with diplomats are flashed in media. Effort was also made to lobby for his support where it matters --Washington.

But it should require much more than branded clothes to make a prime minister out of this Jat from Gujrat. The question remains: does he have a semblance of what it takes to bring the nation together on a range of explosive issues from terrorism, ethnic tensions and the potential threat to the federation caused by the deaths of Nawab Bugti and Benazir Bhutto?

He may not fare so well on the last count at least. His crude attempt to play the Punjab card, sponsoring ads for the security of Punjabis living in Sindh, has backfired badly. It will need more than an apology by Chaudhry Shujaat to appease the Sindhi sentiment.

The real issue is: how will PML-Q translate its prime ministerial dream into electoral reality? Preliminary forecasts show PML-Q faring not so well in smaller provinces. More importantly, its prospects in Punjab may not be as bright as some might think. A closer look at figures reveals that PML-Q may be faring far behind the PPP and PML-N.

Pervaiz Elahi's fight is not just against Nawaz Sharif and Asif Zardari.

Surprisingly, his bigger tussle is within his own party. Simply put, the party is at war with itself. There are nearly one third of Punjab's 148 national electoral seats where they have internal rift and party stalwarts are fighting against each other.

There are, broadly, four categories of this intra-party splits. In the first category, over 30 PML-Q MNAs have refused to contest on the party's ticket, many of them former cabinet members. There are those like Hina Rabbani and Farooq Azam Malik who have joined the PPP, others like Saanaullah Mastikhel, Fiaz Tamman and Sami Hassan Gillani have secured PML-N tickets and still others like Jahangir Tarin and Major Tanvir are contesting on the tickets of Pir Pigara's Functional League. There is a long list of former PML-Q MNAs, including Rashid Akbar Niwani, Farooq Amjad Mir, Chaudhary Ijaz, Tasnim Nawaz Gardezi, Akhtar Kanju and Wasi Zafar who are contesting as independent.

Another group comprises those who have been denied party tickets for personal dislikes. Amin Aslam has been denied a ticket in Attock to adjust Dr Wasim Afzal, a relative of Chaudhrys. Rana Nazir, Fazal Sumra and Malik Allah Yar have not

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been given party tickets either.

In another category, the party has put up independent candidates against PML-Q ticket-holder. Daniyal Aziz faces Pervaiz Elahi-supported independent candidate Tariq Anees in Shakargarh; Humair Rokri is backed by the Chaudhrys to bring down Dr Sher Afgan; Mohammad Leghari and brother Hassan Leghari are pitted against father Farooq Leghari and son Awais Leghari, respectively.

In yet another group PML-Q MNAs are contesting against party ticket-holder on their own. Nasruallah Dreshk, a ticket-holder on one seat, is contesting against party ticket holder Jafar Leghari on another seat. Tasnim Nawaz Gardezi is pitted against PML-Q ticket-holder Riaz Pirzada. Not to forget, there are at least four PML-Q nazims who are brazenly opposing party candidates. It's like a political circus where you never know who is fighting whom.

The inference that one can draw from these chaotic figures is that PML-Q's position in Punjab, the bastion that was supposed to bring the largest number of seats, may be precariously bad. They confront a PPP-PML-N onslaught in urban areas, while their soft belly remains the south of Punjab. Both account nearly two-thirds of Punjab seats.

In the given situation, many believe, the chances of rigging become greater. The party is largely relying on their media campaign. There is hardly a day when his news is not flashed in most mainstream newspapers, not just in Punjab but also in Islamabad. Eight years ago the Chaudhrys were among the top five NAB suspects. Now, we only know them as the architects of "Parha likha Punjab," Khushaal Pakistan.

Pervaiz Elahi's son Moonis Elahi may have enjoyed as much power as unelected Shahbaz Sharif and Asif Zardari but you will not come across a single story about his shenanigans. It is yet to be seen whether PML-Q's multi-million rupee campaign will, once again, turn the events around them.

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## Re:Maharaja of Punjab

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