

# Honing the 100-day agenda

Dr. Sania Nishtar

Perceived as an effort aimed at planning strategically the Prime Minister's 100 day agenda is a step in the right direction. The points articulated therein are substantively valid if implemented in their true spirit. Their contents however, are a mix of long term aspirational goals, preferred policy choices, strategic administrative measures and a few immediate executive orders.

Ideally the hundred day agenda should sift and separate the *aspirational vision* from the *steps needed to implement the vision* and subsequently cascade the latter into tangible processes that the government can pragmatically initialize within the stipulated period. It is hoped that the government will engage in such a strategic planning exercise to hone the agenda further and it is with the intent of contributing to this exercise that a neutral viewpoint is offered.

**The NEWS International**  
**Sunday, April 06, 2008**

INTERNATIONAL  
**THE NEWS**

---

Honing the 100-day agenda

4/6/2008  
Perceived as an effort aimed at planning strategically the prime minister's 100 days agenda is a step in the right direction. The points articulated therein are substantively valid if implemented in their true spirit. Their contents, however, are a mix of long-term aspirational goals, preferred policy choices, strategic administrative measures and a few immediate executive orders.

Ideally, the hundred days agenda should sift and separate the aspirational vision from the steps needed to implement the vision and subsequently cascade the latter into tangible processes that the government can pragmatically initialize within the stipulated period. It is hoped that the government will engage in such a strategic planning exercise to hone the agenda further and it is with the intent of contributing to this exercise that a neutral viewpoint is offered.

To begin with, the overarching context of the agenda should be brought to bear; this clearly flags three imperatives: instituting mechanisms, so that individual and group interests become subservient to state interest; strengthening institutional integrity; and making governance effective to enable the government to achieve broader goals within the sustainable development, macroeconomic and security realms.

First, in relation to upholding state interest, the agenda's commitment to a free media and restoring trade and student union activities is welcome. This can enable strengthening the societal political culture and reinforcing democratic linkages between the government and the society, which are getting increasingly tenuous. However, in doing so, the government should formulate procedural values so as to build safeguards against vested interest groups.

Secondly, measures within the 100 days to foster institutional integrity and legitimacy of state institutions are important; while some measures are being taken, others that safeguard against abuse of power, patronage, monopolization, collusion and arbitrariness are needed. A conflict of interest and disclosure policy, specific measures of public oversight and legislative scrutiny or whistle-blower protection laws for individuals in high-risk environments would be symbolically significant in the 100 days and can be built further upon later.

Thirdly, making governance effective on the whole needs a set of measures to strengthen and reconfigure structures of the state and instruments of governance; these are beyond the scope of the present comment, but within that remit, relevant to the hundred days agenda are some caveats. The agenda's preference for setting Commissions in many areas should be carefully reviewed. Commissions can be given specific roles over a time frame for exploratory and analytical purposes or on a more ongoing basis they can be mandated in a watchdog role. It is assumed that the envisaged Truth and Reconciliation Commission falls within the rubric of the latter and may be a good idea. However, commissions setup to "deliver on an egalitarian premise" in the social sector areas, can duplicate the work of ministries and departments and take the focus and resources away from the much needed attention to why ministries and departments fail to perform in the first place. For example, the fundamental reason why successive governments have failed to deliver in health and education is because of the interplay of market dynamics in both areas, the solution to

To begin with, the overarching context of the agenda should be brought to bear; this clearly flags three imperatives: instituting mechanisms so that individual and group interests become subservient to state interest; strengthening institutional integrity; and making governance effective to enable the government to achieve broader goals within the sustainable development, macroeconomic and security realms.

First, in relation to upholding state interest, the agenda's commitment to a free media and restoring trade and student union activities is welcome. This can enable strengthening the societal political culture and reinforcing democratic linkages between the government and the society, which are getting increasingly tenuous. However in doing so, the government should formulate procedural values so as to build safeguards against vested interest groups.

Secondly, measures within the 100 days to foster institutional integrity and legitimacy of state institutions are important; while some measures are being taken, others that safeguard against abuse of power, patronage, monopolization, collusion and arbitrariness are needed. A *conflict of interest* and *disclosure policy*, *specific measures of public oversight* and *legislative scrutiny* or *whistle blower protection laws* for individuals in high risk environments would be symbolically significant in the 100 days and can be built further upon, later.

Thirdly, making governance effective on the whole needs a set of measures to strengthen and reconfigure structures of the state and instruments of governance; these are beyond the scope of the present comment, but within that remit, relevant to the hundred day agenda are some caveats. The agenda's preference for setting Commissions in many areas should be carefully reviewed. Commissions can be given specific roles over a time frame for exploratory and analytical purposes or on a more ongoing basis they can be mandated in a watchdog role. It is assumed that the envisaged Truth and Reconciliation Commission falls within the rubric of the latter and

may be a good idea. However, commissions setup to ‘deliver on an egalitarian premise’ in the social sector areas, can duplicate the work of ministries and departments and take the focus and resources away from the much needed attention to why ministries and departments fail to perform in the first place. For example, the fundamental reason why successive governments have failed to deliver in health and education is because of the interplay of market dynamics in both areas, the solution to which lies in splitting financing and provision functions and leveraging markets to deliver social goods; this necessitates revamping line ministries from policy, regulatory and operational standpoints; setting up parallel institutional structures will be of limited value in that regard.

Similarly, relevant to governance is the new government’s executive order that makes PEMRA subservient to the Ministry of Information. The discussion on the suitability of that approach from a technical standpoint is not the intent of the comment here but the fundamentals that underlie that from a broader governance perspective are. Separating ‘policy making and normative functions’ of state agencies – a mandate of ministries – from ‘regulatory and operational functions’ and housing the latter in autonomous agencies on the premise that this obviates conflict of interest is a fundamental policy stance that is being pursued as a broader governance goal to support the neo-liberal agenda Pakistan has been pursuing. The decision to go back on that has implications for international commitments and compliance with conditionalities for development assistance and is something that necessitates a careful look into.

Also of relevance to governance is the issue of provincial autonomy and abolition of the Concurrent List. This radical, but needed measure would have to be taken step-wise. Rather than capping the one year time frame, it would be more feasible to outline the steps needed for successful implementation after a careful review of capacities in respective provinces and taking inter-provincial differences into account. Of course the Concurrent Legislative List cannot be abolished completely; the agenda itself is evidence of that and the reference to a *uniform curriculum in education* is a case in point. Other examples include Pakistan’s obligations under WHO’s International Health Regulations, where a strong federal role is needed. In addition economic coordination, standard setting, monitoring and evaluation will also have to be centrally coordinated for many sectors under the Concurrent List.

The agenda also reiterates a commitment to full employment. It must be appreciated however that as a goal, this has been impossible to achieve even in the most affluent nations. The revival of Pakistan’s stalling economy is the most logical measure to improve employment rates. However in the event of the government being committed to pursuing this as *the* compelling objective, innovative options will have to be developed. Lessons from the economic revival and employment spur in the aftermath of World War II and after the Great Depression of 1939 are instructive in this regard, where public works schemes boosted employment as well as built much of the infrastructure in the United States we see today. Pakistan will be constrained in its ability to go that route with infrastructure being funded by the public sector because of the recent and impending cuts in PSDP; but there is a novel opportunity to leverage the existing institutions in Pakistan created to harness the potential within private sector investment for infrastructure development. The existing law, policy, task forces, standard provisions, the risk management framework, the Infrastructure Project Development Facility already developed and mechanisms of viability gap funding need to be capitalized for this purpose. While striving to boost employment, lessons from mass political inductions in state controlled autonomous agencies in the past are also instructive as facilitating employment without regard to institutional sustainability can be damaging. Clearly the envisaged employment commission must not pursue that stance.

The Prime Minister’s austerity measures are symbolically welcome as they aim at saving precious public resource; this must however be matched with efforts to plug much larger pilferages and leakages from the state system. The 100 point agenda does refer to curbing corruption and has abolished the controversial NAB; however an anticorruption reform has to carefully balance mechanisms of public redressal, oversight, accountability, investigation and prosecution. It would be important for the new government to present an *impartial and incorruptible* anti-corruption model within the 100 days.

Finally, the new government must consider the inclusion of another item in the 100 day list; it is critical that they present their position on the devolution initiative; however in doing so they need to be mindful of the fact that principles of decentralizing and local self governance can assist with egalitarian outcomes and the provision of

basic public goods – values that the coalition manifestos are grounded in. The 100 day plan must also be evaluated at the end of the period in a participatory style with relevant inputs; on a positive note, this will enable the government to analyze not just the feasibility of their policy agenda but also the chinks in their own armor.

*The author is the founder and president of the thinktank, Heartfile. E mail: [sania@heartfile.org](mailto:sania@heartfile.org)*