Independence Day – an ode to governance

Dr. Sania Nishtar

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Let’s recognize that most of the crises that we face today are outcomes of weaknesses in governance. Let’s also acknowledge that it is not just those in the corridors of power but also those outside of it who can shape and improve governance.

Here it is important to review the context in which the word governance is being used here. Governance operates in organizations of any size, from governments at several levels, businesses, NGOs, partnerships, or any other purposeful activity. It can influence the effectiveness of various processes and systems, including decision-making, goal-setting, and resource allocation.

政府部门 motto is to align the interests of those who are part of the government with the interests of the public. This alignment is crucial for effective governance and for promoting the well-being of all citizens. Good governance ensures that policies are implemented in a fair and transparent manner, and that resources are used efficiently and effectively.

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It is well established that good governance is critical for achieving socioeconomic development and poverty reduction; in addition, effective and transparent governance within public sector institutions can also shape business ethics and corporate governance, which can enable businesses and the private sector to play a more effective role in national development by providing a level playing field and building safeguards against capture by vested interest groups. Good public sector governance can additionally shape democratic ethos and ensure representative governments on the one hand and bring objectivity and impartiality to global governance and decision making on the other; the latter in particular is needed for peaceful and meaningful co-existence in a unipolar world – a consideration particularly relevant for Pakistan.

The primary responsibility of every government and state agency therefore is to conform its operations with desirable governance characteristics to ensure that governance is participatory, consensus-oriented, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. Every crisis observed in the country today can be attributed to a violation of one or the other of these eight attributes.

Every government starts off underscoring the need to reform governance and strengthen institutions; that lack of institutional robustness is a national predicament, has become a sine-qua-non of political rhetoric in Pakistan. However, we need to understand what it actually means to actualize this commitment in terms of setting directions, day-to-day decision making, and implementing decisions. Two attributes are critical in this respect. The first attribute includes transparency, consensus building and participation in decision making in order to avoid capture by vested interest groups whereas the second attribute relates to accountability of all the actors in public institutions at the political, performance and financial levels to ensure that oversight and regulatory functions are not exploited by the powerful and the elite.

In order to ensure institutionalization of these attributes, reform of governance is needed not just in the executive arm of the state as is conventionally envisaged, but the two other pillars of the state in addition to the political system. The government needs to build on efforts in the pipeline, initiatives of the establishment division, work of reform commissions and consolidate development partner efforts to reengineer business processes of the state, reform civil structures and move towards the desired functional separation of policy making, regulation and implementation functions of the government, which is critical to bringing transparency in public sector processes.

To wrap up recommendations on governance assuming that the onus of responsibility lies solely on governments would be simplistic. There are many actors in governance. The role of the media, lobbyists, political parties, NGOs and businesses in governance is well recognized; in Pakistan’s situation particularly in the local government realms, landlords, land mafias, religious groups and other factions also shape the societal political culture and hence influence governance. Part of this population occasionally engages in an ‘advocacy mode’ in relation to the affairs of the state as was witnessed during the recent judicial crisis. However in general, outside of the corridors of power, citizens generally do not take into account the impact of their actions or inaction on the state’s institutional fabric and quality of governance. The reality is quite otherwise. The role of citizens, communities and the private sector in impacting public sector governance becomes evident when tax payers collude with tax administration, when the private sector colludes with regulators in allocation of subsidies, licenses, quotas and price ceilings, when commercial interests bypass procedures in order to increase market shares and when the business community seeks to modify policy stipulations through statutory regulatory or executive orders to suit their interests. When contractors and suppliers are in cahoots with public sector procuring agencies, in the event of private suppliers not meeting expected standards, or in cases of state commodities getting diverted and pilfered with private sector accomplices, the role of the actors outside of the government in shaping governance is additionally evident. We often do not recognize that a seemingly innocuous ‘sifarish’ can strengthen the culture of patronage, that the occasional trivial bribe we pay would help strengthen administrative rent seeking, that the payment we make to get a free service would conflict with the principles of delivery of public good and mis-target state services or that a seemingly insignificant unethical financial practice would have negative consequence for the economy.

Let us recognize therefore, that most of the crises that we face today are the outcomes of weaknesses in governance. Let us also acknowledge that it is not just those in the corridors of powers but also those outside of it that can help shape and improve governance. Let the Independence Day, observed two days ago lend impetus to a
resolve to address what really needs to be improved in order to address the crises that we continue to face on many fronts. Each of has to go beyond our comfort zones and over-the-tea-cup-living-room discussions of poor governance to play a small part, with the realization that collectively this would have a major impact.

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