

Democracy and governance – upstream determinants

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With the conclusion of presidential elections, the power configuration within the state has been defined. 'Majority rule' or 'a few ruling with the consent of many', described by the Greeks centuries ago, as a characteristic feature of democracy has been established within Pakistan and constitutional stipulations as articulated in Part III of the Constitution with reference to its Chapters on the President and Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament) have been adhered to. At this stage, let us be reminded that while democracy, as understood conventionally is a necessary condition for a good government, it is certainly not a sufficient condition. This comment is intended to objectively draw attention to other characteristics that need to be woven into the equation in order to enable democratically elected governments to successfully navigate the ship of the state.

Democracy is not just about 'majority rule'; it is an amalgamation of many attributes. First, it is a set of institutional arrangements or constitutional devices; by this measure, Pakistan has achieved a democratic milestone. However, there are other institutional democratic practices and doctrines of government, which merit close attention. Under parliamentary democracy and the Constitution of Pakistan (Part III, Chapter 3), government is meant to be exercised by delegation to the executive but it is also meant to be subject to ongoing review, checks and balances by the Parliament. In this regard, constitutional restraints upon the elected government assume great importance. It is in the interest of the government to consciously inculcate objective checks and balances in its institutional norms as majority rule without checks is likely to be abused, as has been witnessed in the

past.

Secondly, democracy is also about individual behavior; practices of openness and collective deliberations, consensus-building, participation and evidence-based decision-making are attributes of individual behavior highly valued in public offices and ones that must be well institutionalized. The third and most important feature is a set of democratic values. Democracy as a value is closely related to liberty, equality, freedom and rights. Governments need to be democratic not just in institutional but also in a social sense with attention to individual liberties, human rights, equitable economic progress and social justice.

It is relevant to note here that many attributes of democracy are deeply interlinked with principles of good governance. It is only when decision makers conform their behaviors with values common to both – fairness, transparency and accountability – that it becomes possible to achieve intended outcomes. It is here that a critical gap exists; in order to elaborate on that, an explanation is offered. In matters of the state, deliberations and practical interplay usually occurs at two levels – at the level of input and output. Exceptions notwithstanding, at the level of input, there are power struggles, disputes and individual and institutional rivalries characterizing politics and a preoccupation to get into public roles. At the level of output, on the other hand, the dismal economic and social state is a constant focus of attention. There is something in between these two, which often does not merit the attention it deserves. The critical link is governance. Allow me to draw an analogy to help illustrate this point. Brick and mortar and expensive fittings as an input, with the expectation that hot and cold running water will be delivered in a washroom as an output, can only be achieved if functioning pipes are in place. The functioning pipes of the state are its institutional fabric of governance and systems of which institutional democratic behavior is a part. Just as there is no hot or cold water when pipes get

choked, similarly when governance and institutions are ineffective, state institutions cannot deliver, regardless of who is at the helm of power and irrespective of the nobility of intentions.

If a review of Cabinet and ministerial decisions over the last 61 years is conducted, there will be no dearth of standalone schemes, programs, packages and relief measures for the social sector, infrastructure building, economic revival, etc.; problems with effective deployment and targeting have always been ubiquitous and for the simple reason that principles good governance and desired institutional democratic behavior have not been adhered to in their true spirit.

There is irrefutable evidence in support of good governance as being essential to foster the environment for economic growth and being central to improving the lives of people. It is well established that good governance contributes to higher per capita incomes and higher standards of living, better health status, lower infant mortality rates, higher literacy, and poverty eradication in populations. 'Governance' and not just the 'formation of a Government' should therefore become the reference point and a defining thematic priority in organizing the affairs of the state in Pakistan.

It must be recognized here that good governance is all about fairness, transparency and accountability in policy formulation and its implementation. Many a times those at the helm of affairs violate these principles – often inadvertently. When authority is misused, procedures are circumvented, laws are manipulated, nepotism and cronyism is furthered, state capture by vested interest groups is silently enabled, when a blind eye is turned to regulatory collusion or administrative malpractices, or when political patronage becomes the norm, key principles of governance and democratic values are violated. With every action, the state's institutional fabric is weakened.

If governance is every public actor's responsibility as is outlined above, why then the reference to 'upstream determinants' in the title of this opinion? This is for the simple reason that the choked pipes of governance can only be opened through plumbing upstream; if the principles of neutrality, transparency, fairness and objectivity are fostered in the affairs of state at the highest level, their importance will automatically cascade to governance at lower levels; without this, it simply will not be the case. It is opportune particularly today to flag this as a priority.

So what can be the plausible next steps if there was a committed champion within the system? The first would be to take stock of where we stand objectively, dispassionately and apolitically. The author in an opinion in these columns entitled 'Governance Empirics' on August 3 stressed on the use of validated instruments to assess governance and concluded by recommending that the government convene an independent task force to ascertain current challenges and subsequently set benchmarks for their own performance.

The second critical imperative would be to mainstream transparency promoting reform. The writer in another opinion in these columns on March 18, 2008 outlined a set of four measures centered on i) reviving the national anti corruption strategy; ii) bridging gaps in institutional mechanisms relevant to anticorruption reform with reference to mechanisms of public redressal, oversight and investigative work; iii) institutionalizing integrity promoting measures in the public sector; and iv) mainstreaming implicit transparency building measures with reference to the use of technology and competitiveness as entry points. These and other analyses on the subject can be reviewed for implementation in a phased approach. Thirdly, reform of key institutions of governance, should be a priority building further on the many initiatives of the past 61 years.

The cost of inattention to reform at this level can be

enormous given the country's precarious economic, social and security considerations, which are compounded by a number of factors. Our unique pattern of conflict, violence and terrorism; our national milieu, which is rapidly getting divided on ethnic, religious, sociopolitical and foreign policy grounds; the vulnerability of our populations to exploitation and the ongoing and impending food and energy crises exacerbated by global factors, are to mention a few. Reform will be slow and painful and will require sustained commitment to be successful. Although this is not a case of quick visible political wins, good governance and holistic democracy has to be at the heart of the affairs of the state; without that we are in for very rough weather.

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