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A tale of two tracks

By Ishrat Husain

THE recent impressive performance of Pakistan's armed forces against a formidable adversary, enjoying favorable distribution of conventional forces, a 10-times larger economy, six times in population, a leading global exporter of IT and IT-enabled services, having huge forex reserves of over \$600 billion, has made the nation proud.

The question that needs to be answered is: How come the performance of our military (1971 being an exception) has been so consistently superior compared to our civilian institutions? Why is the gap between these two parallel tracks — military and civil — widening and why have there been no synergies between the two?

Foreign observers have noted that it was not superior equipment, missiles, satellites, radar, drones etc placed at our disposal by China but the high standards of training, exemplary professionalism, commendable utilisation and timely integration of all equipment and use of real-time digital data and cyberspace control that led to Pakistan's superior outcome.

The story around our nuclear capability is similar. Pakistan established the Atomic Energy Commission in the 1960s and trained a large number of talented young men at the best universities abroad. Upon their return they made the commission a highly professional organisation which played a major role in the development of nuclear capability. PAEC was given full autonomy

and all leadership appointments were made on merit. The development of KRL and other ancillary facilities was fully supported by every government irrespective of its political orientation. They were provided full autonomy and financial resources enabling them to achieve the assigned goals. More recently SPD and defence production are traversing the same path.

The contrasting picture of our military and civilian institutions brings forth that it is the combination of human capital formation, mastery of technology, sense of the leadership's commitment that is the major explanatory factor. How did the military acquire this superior position in the institutional architecture of the country? In the earlier decades, the civil services were in the forefront of nation-building as well as economic development efforts. They attracted the best talent and enjoyed high standards of competence, integrity and commitment to resolve the problems faced by citizens. The armed forces, on the other hand, recruited mostly mediocre individuals with limited education and exposure.

Over succeeding decades, the civil services, however, abandoned the principles of selection on merit, rigorous training, promotion based on performance and regular weeding out of those who did not perform. Meanwhile the military adopted and continued to follow these principles. They transformed mediocre individuals into first-rate human resources while the civil services in the years since the 1990s turned first-rate talent either into cynics or self-serving individuals.

The sloth, inertia and catering to the parochial interests of the ruling parties rather than serving the populace have made the civil services quite unresponsive and inefficient. A 2016 nationwide public opinion survey conducted by independent think tank PILDAT showed that the armed forces had the top approval rating of 76 per

cent while government officers, ie civil servants and the police, were at the bottom with approval ratings of 29 and 25pc.

In technology we had excellent institutions such as Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research under the leadership of Dr Salimuzzman Siddiqui, way ahead of its Indian counterpart, the Cotton Research Institute, West Pakistan Agriculture Institutes that brought about breakthroughs in cotton and the Green Revolution. Our scientific and research institutions and universities are today not producing the kind of expertise that can address the problems facing the country. Partly it is a lack of financial allocation for research and development (R&D) and partly it is the governance issue that has led to the present dysfunctional state of our institutions.

Leadership crisis is so obvious that it needs no elaboration. A country which has had 16 prime ministers in the last 25 years cannot boast of having a committed leader for an extended period of time.

What are the priority actions that can set the civilian institutions back on track? First and foremost is the implementation of civil service and institutional reforms. A detailed reform package covering induction and recruitment, training and development, career progression, performance management, compensation and benefits, severance and retirement, induction of technical experts in the ministries and departments, opening up senior executive positions to all cadres, non-cadre, ex-cadre officers without any reservations, reorganisation of the federal government has been developed after wide consultation. These recommendations have to be implemented expeditiously as the resistance is quite fierce.

Second, administrative and financial powers have to be devolved from the provinces to directly elected local governments. The present law in Punjab where the bureaucracy rather than elected

representatives has been given primacy is a retrogressive step and needs to be reversed. Third, increased investment in R&D in science and technology providing the research institutes and universities specific goals and holding them accountable for results, but given full autonomy. Researchers should compete for grants focused on socioeconomic problems of Pakistan through a competitive process and encouraged to commercialise their own patents and inventions.

Fourth, accelerate the use of technology in agriculture by using satellites, sensors, drones, digital devices etc with the help of relevant military experts. Fifth, introduce STEM subjects right from the school level and give choices to students, after nine years of compulsory schooling, to opt either for higher education or for demand-driven technical and vocational training based on their aptitude. Fifth, the overseas scholarship programmes should be aimed at PhDs in science, emerging technologies, engineering subjects at top global universities and the returnees absorbed in our universities and research institutes with seed money for setting up their own labs or equipment. Sixth, most critical is that popularly elected governments should be allowed to complete their full term without any political engineering.

The writer is the author of Development Pathways: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh 1947-2022.