

Expectations & delivery gap

Ishrat Husain August 06, 2018

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The writer is author of *Governing the Ungovernable* and *CPEC and Pakistani Economy*.

POPULAR disenchantment and mistrust in successive governments can be ascribed to the huge gap between promises and delivery. The emergence of the PTI and Imran Khan has given rise to a new wave of expectations, at least about commitment to reform. His maiden speech emphasising improved governance and rule of law, ensuring access to basic public services to disadvantaged sections of society, alleviating poverty, promoting human development and overcoming the economic crisis has sparked much enthusiasm.

The participation of 30 million new voters who have exercised their right to vote for the first time is significant. They are young, mostly educated, largely middle class, live in urban and urbanising areas, and are well connected to the rest of the world. Their counterparts among the uneducated followed their lead. The information explosion through electronic and social media has raised consciousness about their rights as citizens and the obligations of the state. In the run-up to the elections, many candidates even in remote areas were confronted by young men about their performance. To meet these young people's expectations, 1m to 1.5m of them entering the labour force every year have to be absorbed in the economy.

Good intentions, personal rectitude and sincerity of purpose are no substitute for the tough, unpopular decisions required to put the economy on the right track so it can grow at seven to eight per cent annually in order to create these jobs. But people would be disappointed if in the short run the prices of food, petroleum and utilities are not lowered, if jobs are eliminated in loss-making public enterprises, taxes are extended to vocal classes such as traders and property owners, concessions and exemptions are phased out with existing subsidies (water, electricity and gas) targeted only at the poor, prices of agriculture commodities eg sugarcane are aligned with international markets, etc.

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Vested interests adversely affected by these measures are bound to resist them and also induce others to agitate, and sections of the media and opposition parties would launch a fierce campaign against the government, trying to show that this government is no different from the previous ones and is bringing only misery for the ordinary citizen. The party and its leadership would have to bear the brunt of this open criticism by the media, the pundits and their political opponents. But if these decisions to extricate the economy in the medium term from the stresses it is facing are reversed, altered or modified in response to this spate of criticism, then we should say goodbye to any hopes of walking back from the precipice. Our history is replete with examples where governments — incumbent as well as incoming — have rolled back sensible policy decisions to appease critics and win cheap popularity.

Once this policy of appeasement sets in, it gets the ball rolling and creates uncertainty and unpredictability among investors. To them, the government's commitment should be credible and its absence results in a slowdown in investment. In this scenario, the growth rate is bound to fall and opportunities for employment are subdued. The real test of leadership lies not in veering from the chosen path but in retaining its credibility and adhering to the decisions taken. Yes, it is the duty of the leadership to communicate openly with the people, keeping them informed, explaining the rationale for what they are doing and indicate why these tough measures were necessary to attain the goal of prosperity and better living standards for the majority. But conceding to vested interest groups, getting intimidated by the strikes and agitation by those opposed to the reforms, reverting to the status quo and listening to poor advice by sycophants around them has cost many leaders their jobs in the past.

In Pakistan, tough reforms cannot be implemented without the opposition's cooperation. The vitriol of the election campaign has vitiated the atmosphere and so much toxicity has been injected into politics during the last several years that coming together on a common platform and reaching a consensus is going to be highly onerous. Post-election agitation against alleged rigging could prove to be a big hindrance in achieving this consensus. The reality is that five years is too short a period to deliver on the promises as structural reforms go beyond the electoral cycle.

Each political party must realise it may be the ultimate beneficiary of the gains from these reforms without having to bite the bullet. In order to bring all parties together on the same platform, any semblance of political victimisation and retaliation is to be avoided. A sagacious leader has to rise above personal ego, swallow his pride and approach all the parties with open arms, requesting them to forget the past and make a new beginning. This is a Herculean task, given past record, but it is the only way we would be able to fulfil the expectations of our younger generation. Settling scores and a clash of egos would be an unmitigated disaster, for the economy requires intensive care and can be resuscitated only by the combined efforts of all parties.

The manifestos of the major parties are not very different; all of them have the same end goals. In the past, Senate and National Assembly committees that have broad-based representation, the Council of Common Interests and the National Economic Council have not been used optimally to forge a consensus. Whenever deployed for this purpose, the results have been highly fruitful, as seen by the most recent examples, the merger of Fata with KP, the Election Act and the 18th Amendment. I am sure that if economic policies are

thoroughly debated in the parliamentary committees, compromises would be made and a consensus would emerge. Even if the decision to approach the IMF is debated in parliament, it would mark a new beginning in establishing institutional checks and balances. An all-hands-on-deck approach would minimise the gap between expectations and delivery.

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