

Reforming institutions of governance

By Dr Ishrat Husain

As most of the major political parties have decided to contest the forthcoming general elections, the democratic discourse should now shift to the identification of national priorities.

There may be differences of opinions on the nature of these priorities but one of the most important priorities for any incoming government that cuts across all sectors, regions and segments of the population, would be to address the issue of governance deficit. Lack of good governance is the bane of most of the problems faced by ordinary citizens.

It is now clearly established empirically not only in Pakistan but across the developing world that the benefits of economic policies, however sound or benign they may be, cannot be dispersed widely unless the institutions intermediating these policies are strong, efficient and effective. One of the reasons for widening income and regional inequalities is indeed the poor governance structure of the institutions delivering the public goods to the citizens. Privilege, patronage and influence for a few have rationed access to these institutions depriving at least 40 million of the poor (who do not have the access) from the benefits of rapid growth achieved in the last five years.

The manifestos of the major political parties do recognize the importance of good governance. However, a better understanding and grasp of the reasons for poor governance is essential for our politicians if they wish to translate their electoral mandate into an advantage for the majority of the population. The inaction on issues that promote collective welfare and too much preoccupation with appeasing individual interests of selected few characterize our current governance system and that is why it is largely dysfunctional. Favouritism, nepotism, bribery for buying jobs and obtaining contracts, protecting the criminals and offenders and injustice and oppression upon the poor have become the main driver of governance. Political interventions are largely aimed at maximising individual welfare of a few at the expense of the collective welfare of the community.

In addition to the usual distrust of the politicians, the recent advent of information and communications revolution has raised the expectations of even the poor and illiterate segments of population living in the remote rural areas. The beaming of TV channels in rural areas has made them more aware of the miserable life they lead relative to the glittering and dazzling lives of the urban high society. They therefore use the only instrument they have at their disposal i.e. their electoral vote to display their resentment, anger and despair by throwing out the incumbent party in power. The pattern of alternating fortunes of the major political parties at each general election has taken firm root in South Asia.

Published in DAWN – Business; January 07, 2008

Political sensitisation in our part of the world has become acute in the recent years due to emergence of the middle class and growing urbanisation. As the New York Times rightly pointed out that President Pervez Musharaf became a victim of his own success of last eight years. The middle class who was the beneficiary of economic growth and is most vocal and articulate was also most vehement in the protests in the post -March 9 and post -November 3 periods. The stranglehold of the feudal lords, tribal chiefs and biradris that characterised the rural constituencies is becoming weaker day by day. One would suspect that the ratio of urban population in 2008 would be 40 per cent up from 33 per cent a decade ago. This growing urban middle class forms the backbone of a sound democratic dispensation that enshrines the principles of good governance such as rule of law, equality before law, observing laws and regulations by everyone, non-discrimination in the application of law and rules and redress against excesses.

In light of these developments, the politicians have to sharpen their tools of trade and change their techniques if they wish to achieve success in the future elections. Is the popular perception about the political class as revealed by the world wide survey carried out by Transparency International amenable to change and can the politicians be led towards a path of good governance? It is in their own larger political interest to focus on the principles and values that maximise collective welfare of their constituents and thus strengthen the social fabric of this highly polarised, divided and dissatisfied nation.

The narrow minded politics of self- enrichment and patronage may work in the short-term but it sure is unsustainable over an extended period of time. Not only the economic consequences of decisions based on pure considerations of personal or party loyalty, partisanship and kinship are disastrous but the political consequences are equally damaging. I will illustrate this proposition with the help of two practical examples.

Imagine that an MPA of the ruling party gets a District Police Officer (DPO) of his choice posted to the district. This officer being indebted to the MNA will carry out his job in a partisan manner while the post requires complete neutrality, impartiality and confidence and co-operation by all. The DPO is bound to become controversial and ineffective in his own district and will not be able to exercise the writ of the state as he is perceived to be biased and partial. The paradox is that when there is a breakdown in law and order situation in the district the ruling party gets the blame for the ineptness and ineffectiveness of the police but the beneficiary has been only one single person i.e the MPA belonging to that party. If this pattern is repeated throughout the whole country do you think that the political party in power will ever get elected to office under such large scale deteriorating law and order conditions? The narrow selfish interests of individual MNAs or MPAs would actually cost the party unpopularity and the vote of the electorate whose lives and property are adversely affected by poor law enforcement. The piercing eyes of a vigilant media will put the government of the day in embarrassing situation.

Let us take another example. A number of politicians want their favourites or sifarishies to be given jobs in public sector. Against each post advertised there are at least 100 candidates who will all bring the pressure on the local politician for appointment. But only one out of these 100 will be selected against the post. The families of other 99 candidates will be annoyed with the politician as he failed to oblige them. This may eventually cost him votes of some of the families of the unsuccessful candidates. But if he had allowed the process of selection to be based on merit, the most suitable candidate would be selected. His political stature will remain unaffected and there will be no compromise with the quality of governance as the right man has been selected for the right job. The signaling effect on the prospective candidates will be positive – work hard and equip yourself - rather than rely on political connections for getting the job. The boys and girls from poor families who do not have any connections but are meritorious will benefit and help their families in lifting out of poverty.

It is a pity that most of our legislators devote enormous time and energies in moving around the government corridors seeking favours to oblige a few individual constituents rather than contribute to policy and legislative work, development work and oversight of the executive branch that can make a tremendous difference in the lives of our people. We should remind them that the principles of good governance would not only help them politically but also improve the lot of the common man. All of us pay lip service and make rhetorical statements on the plight of the poor. But when the push comes to shove, it is the poor who get side tracked and marginalised by public institutions. It is time that we make fewer statements and do more to reform our institutions of governance.

The National Commission for Government Reform (NCGR) has prepared detailed proposals aimed at introducing these good governance policies and practices. No doubt they will be resisted by the vested interests who wish to maintain the status quo. But it is an opportunity for all responsible political parties to review, examine and adopt those reforms which make sense to them.

The governance reforms should not be considered as a technocratic exercise as it is essentially a political exercise that takes into account the existing power relationships in which the polity is rooted. The balancing of diverse interests of the various stakeholders involves many politically tough choices which cannot be made by the technocrats.

Any incoming political party that considers and adopts these reforms within the first 100 days of its coming to power is most likely to benefit enormously at the time of the next electoral cycle by reaping some of the dividends of good governance that will become visible by 2012. That party will earn the gratitude of the nation for initiating the process of setting our institutions of governance right.