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THE consolidation of democratic polity in Pakistan in the last few years has raised a legitimate and interesting question. Who sets public policy in Pakistan and how is it formulated?

Under the Constitution, the responsibility of policymaking rests solely with the executive branch, with further division among the federal, provincial and local governments.

Under the 18th Amendment, the concurrent list has been abolished and most of its powers transferred from the centre to the provincial governments. The provincial government can further delegate authority, powers and resources under its control to the local governments.

The recent legislations on local government are highly restrictive as far as the power of the lower tier of government is concerned except in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The 2001 Local Government Ordinance that lapsed in 2010 was an attempt aimed at the substantive devolution of powers.

So who initiates the process of policymaking? In theory, an elected government has a manifesto on the basis of which it is voted to power. The ruling party and its leadership should in principle decide the priorities enshrined in the manifesto and then the timing, sequencing and phasing of different policies.

Ideally, the government in Pakistan would then ask the concerned ministries to prepare a draft document that takes stock of the existing situation, diagnoses the problems, analyses the various options, outlines the preferred option, costs out its financial implications and spells out the action plan along with milestones and deadlines.

(In many countries, China, for example, each ministry has a research institute which helps in compiling data, carrying out analysis and preparing background material.)

This draft policy document would then be circulated among various stakeholders for their views, comments and suggestions — some countries also hold public consultations on critical policy documents.

Once the stakeholders’ views are incorporated, the revised draft would be circulated among the concerned ministries and provincial governments for their views. The draft, once again updated, would then be presented to the ruling party whose think tank or leadership would evaluate whether the policy document conforms to the promises made to the electorate or not.

In some cases, modifications can be made if the deviations are significant. In other cases, they would be endorsed and sent to the ministry in charge to steer it through the process.

The ministry concerned would then forward the draft to the Economic Coordination Committee or the full cabinet for deliberations and approval. The ECC or cabinet will either approve, modify or send back the draft with observations to the ministry.

Once the policy is approved it may be necessary in some circumstances to back it with some legislative instruments that are prepared by the law ministry and steered though the relevant committees of the National Assembly and the Senate and finally before the floor of the houses.

Smart governments in Pakistan would bring the policies to parliament even when no legislation is required for soliciting the views of the opposition parties to ensure a consensus that paves the way for the policy’s implementation without friction and continuity.

Conversely, myopic governments, in the arrogant belief that they enjoy absolute majority, might ignore this step, later discovering to their chagrin that the policy is being resisted or opposed or obstacles are being created in its way.

Both the policy and its accompanying legislation once approved by the legislature would then be entrusted with the ministry in charge for execution with specified timelines and milestones. Progress would then be periodically reviewed and monitored either by the prime minister, the cabinet or the ECC.

How much does policymaking in Pakistan deviate from the ideal process described above?

— First, the stakeholder consultation is either superficial or the views of the stakeholders, if found at variance with those of the formulators, do not find any place in the revised documents. The motions of consultation having been fulfilled, it does not matter whether substantive changes have been taken cognisance of or not.

— Second, the inter-ministerial consultation is more confrontational than collaborative in nature. Ministers feel personally offended if their policy documents are criticised by other ministers.

The critique may not be an attempt to put down or denigrate one personally but a genuine desire to strengthen and improve the document that is the collective responsibility of the entire cabinet and not the minister in charge alone. But personal vendettas and suspicions mar this process in Pakistan.

— Third, very little attention is given to implementation modalities and the constraints that may arise during the implementation phase. Dispute-resolution mechanisms are non-existent and the diffusion of responsibility and lack of clarity make accountability for results difficult.

Hence the biggest risk in Pakistan is the performance gap as very sound policy documents have remained buried in the dust.

— Fourth, the monitoring mechanism is not only weak and sporadic, but highly lopsided. Some slick players with the gift of the gab can make impressive PowerPoint presentations and mesmerise the audience. They create the impression that things are going well while the facts are to the contrary.

Others who are not so well versed in this art are rebuked and taken to task although their achievements may be worthwhile. Prime ministers and cabinet ministers are always pressed for time and the outcomes of such meetings are perfunctory with a lot of platitudes and generalisations. The underlying problems remain unaddressed.

Implementation therefore remains off track as interest shifts to another urgent policy or some other pressing problem.

— Fifth, the capacity of the ministries and provincial departments in preparing policy papers is limited. They do not have the necessary expertise or competence in the subject to come up with evidence-based options. The use of systematic data is normally shunned.

— And finally, the communication strategy of explaining the rationale and disseminating the policy widely is almost non-existent in most cases. As the success of the policy depends upon people outside the government their understanding and support are absolutely crucial.

The writer is a former governor of the State Bank of Pakistan.