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Governance initiatives

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Pakistan's problems of governance do not require as much unknown remedies as they do political will to initiate bold reforms. Unnecessary leakages, high non-development expenditure , and a low tax base have strained the government's fiscal position to the point that without immediate reforms, it will remain caught in chronic stagflation, always spending beyond its means and adding to the unbearable deficit.

While formulating the National Commission for Government Reforms, we conducted a detailed cross-section study of the governance structure and related institutions, We gathered consultants and stakeholders on a single platform to hammer out consensus in terms of trimming excesses and identifying the most suitable agenda considering our particular position. Our field studies identified areas where government presence is traditionally too-large and counter-productive and must evolve in tune with requirements.

It was found that linkages across federal, provincial and local government are weak. They need to be strengthened alongside re-organisation of these three tiers and horizontal relationships within and across them. In addition to human resource reforms in the civil service, the commission recommends resizing government departments and ministries in keeping with their respective responsibilities and abilities.

It bears noting that reform policies, especially economic reforms, invariably involve time lags between formulation and on-ground results. Initiatives suggested in the NCGR will not bring overnight results, but they will set the process of change in motion, with concrete results in four to five years. Yet there is little, if any, high level attention to the findings. That the government understands the time lags involved, but is still delaying crucial reforms even as the country is embroiled in serious economic difficulties , is indicative of the disconnect between economic and political priorites. The conflict between the elitist nature of our state in which patronage to the clients only is the main driver of our politics and the egalitarian nature of economic policies and governance in which the benefits are widely shared poses a serious roadblock in the implementation of the agenda that the NCGR has proposed.

When tackling governance problems, it must be realised that meaningful empowerment of communities through decentralization and delegation of authority, in which the local government system plays a crucial role would ,in the long run, promote greater trust, cohesion and harmony in our society and ensure access to basic public services in an efficient and equitable manner. These outcomes will not help mobilize additional resources at the local level but also improve the efficiency of resource utilization. Politicians of all persuasions should welcome these outcomes as they will provide them much needed fiscal space to carry out their agenda and relieve them of the present difficulties in the public finances of the country. Unfortunately, the present dispensation's position with regard to empowering and strengthening local governments is a step backwards, and amounts to throwing the baby out with the bath water.

There were problems with the previous system, but instead of scrapping it altogether, it should have been improved and institutions allowed to mature. Pakistan's population of 180 odd million strong is spread through communities, which must be empowered to pursue a path of development that will remove regional income disparities. They know their problems and the solutions much better than any body else. The present culture of concentrating authority in power centres has not only alienated the rural periphery, but reduced its productive potential also, and to no small extent. It is little surprise that our research found 80 districts in miserable condition, according to deprivation Index and remain almost criminally starved of their most basic needs.

The 18th amendment and the NFC award are positive steps, delegating authority and resources to the provinces. But it is of vital importance to note that development is incomplete unless extended to districts. If visible efforts are not made to route relevant authority as well as resources directly to the districts, much of the benefits of the amendment and award will fizzle out.

The resistance to such progressive change comes from stakeholders of the status quo, which disbursed resources through MPA and MNA patronage. Empowerment of the grassroots invariably reduces clout of specific assembly positions. This is, in fact, a turf war of two ideologies. If we fail to snap out of regressive models, we will never take our place among regional emerging economies that are setting the pace of growth after the international recession.

The government must also be mindful that unless seen incorporating positive changes, it has little chance of winning the next election, where the economy will be in sharp focus. Continued reliance on agriculture windfall and subsequent majority rural voter content is ill-advised, as the commodity rush is transitionary, and can collapse without warning considering the volatility in the international market.

So, the urgency of reforms cannot be stressed enough. We need a merit based system that confers benefits of economic growth widely and particularly to the backward regions of the country in place of the present patron-client based system where only a select few close to the politicians are the beneficiaries and the rest of the population is deprived of the basic services needed to survive.. We have all necessary inputs in place. All that is lacking is the vital go-ahead that reflects serious realisation at the top, that delaying governance reforms directly amounts to depriving people their fair share of development.