**Good Governance for Dummies**

How Gilani needs to get tough.

By Ishrat Husain | From the Feb. 21‚ 2011‚ issue

President Asif Ali Zardari administered oath of office to a 22-person federal cabinet last Friday. Almost three years in, his party’s government says this has been done to address concerns about “good governance.” This is a good start, but there are other things that he and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani can and should do.

First, we need to progress toward democratic governance. The Election Commission of Pakistan must be neutral and empowered. Political parties must run cleanly and democratically: they must hold regular intra-party elections, submit their audited accounts and statements of assets of members, and adhere strictly to election rules, including spending limits. Electronic polling can help make elections transparent and accurate. Legislators must be schooled about the procedures of the assemblies. Parliamentary committees should be supported by a staff of experts who can bring meaning and depth to discussions. And key appointments to state institutions should be heard and endorsed by a Senate committee.

Second, we need police reforms. For the ordinary citizen, it is the police force which represents the face of the state. And it’s an ugly face. Police in Pakistan is synonymous with oppression, extortion, highhandedness. The force is plagued by stories of false cases being filed, patronage of criminal activities, contrived encounters where the accused are slain, and torture. The Police Order, 2002, was a promising start, but it was swept aside after the elections that year. The prosecution capacity of the state is weak, often venal, and shoddy. Witnesses can often go missing or get gunned down. Prisons have no set of rules. Those who can afford to keep the warden happy get preferential treatment. It is also not rare to hear of convicts making a clean escape from prison. In short, the state of our police service, prisons, investigation and prosecution capacities, and administration of justice is a scandal. Pakistan is stuck with antiquated Raj-era laws. Recent initiatives by the National Judicial (Policy Making) Committee, which is chaired by the chief justice, to reform the lower judiciary and ensure speedy disposal of cases are commendable, but the jury is still out on whether these will succeed. We need expeditious delivery of justice to improve citizen confidence and save costs.

Third, we’ve got to trim the fat. Following the 18th Amendment and the new formula for divvying up tax revenues, the federal government has to be scaled down from 48 divisions to 23. Studies show that at least half of the government-owned corporations, autonomous bodies and departments can be wound up, merged, liquidated, privatized or transferred to the provincial governments. Fewer hierarchical tiers, delegation of highly centralized decision-making and introduction of e-government would save costs and recurrent expenditure. Some organizations such as the State Bank of Pakistan have made intelligent use of IT tools and improved their efficiency. Measures to computerize records and processes are badly needed. Besides bringing transparency and efficiency, taking away discretionary powers from lower-level state officers would reduce speed-money requirements.

Of course, none of the above prescriptions would be meaningful unless each is accompanied by clean staffing: finding the right man (or woman) for the job. The military and even the National Highway and Motorway Police are great illustrations of how merit works wonders for institutional success and performance. Pakistan’s civil service had been meritocratic until 1958, when Gen. Ayub Khan took over the country and made political loyalty the yardstick for bureaucratic placements and promotions. As Shahbaz Sharif’s first stint as chief minister of the Punjab, and Naimatullah Khan and Mustafa Kamal’s terms as Karachi’s mayor attest, good governance also makes for good politics.

We must also not allow the desire to corner power turn into a wholesale rejection of an entire system. Devolution of power to elected city and district governments was a step in the right direction, the return of the magistracy system is not. Demographic changes and rapid urbanization leave us no choice but to have well-functioning local governments in place.

Nurturing democratic governance, strengthening law and order and the justice system, restructuring government for efficiency, hiring on merit, deploying e-government and decentralizing power are the surest ways of creating and strengthening civilian institutions. This alone will shut the door on military rule, when citizens are satisfied with the power structure of the state and get their grievances addressed in a fair and timely manner. When this happens, security and economic growth will not be far behind.

HUSAIN *wwas chairman of the National Commission for Government Reforms.*

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