

Reforms: a history of the future?

By Mosharraf Zaidi - September 11, 2018

Amidst all the noise surrounding cheese imports and crowd-sourcing for vital national security infrastructure, there was news of two new committees established under the chairpersonship of Dr Ishrat Husain, who is the adviser for institutional reforms and austerity, and effectively the full federal minister for reforms.

Many have long anticipated the opportunity for Pakistan to undertake real reforms. Among them, the most important group is PTI voters and supporters. The effectiveness with which the word reform is used by Prime Minister Imran Khan, and the seriousness with which the government's efforts for reform are taken, is above all other considerations, an issue of the credibility of PM Khan's credentials as a reformist. For this reason, his choice of Dr Husain as the point-person for reforms makes eminent sense.

Dr Husain has served the government of Pakistan as a CSP civil servant, worked for two decades in the World Bank in senior positions across Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East, and been the governor of the State Bank of Pakistan. He was also the chairperson of the National Commission Government Reforms (NCGR) from 2006 to 2008 and has published several books assessing the poor conditions of Pakistanis and the dysfunction of government. Perhaps most importantly, Dr Husain has extensive interface and experience with the international community. He understands not only the imperatives and complexities of Pakistan's internal governance, but also the intimate dynamic and interplay between those dynamics and the international community.

In a political environment that seems to increasingly favour calling Pakistan's lenders and donors names whilst it seeks their support, Dr Husain represents a calm and assured voice that will speak for Pakistani autonomy within the context of the compromises necessary to ensure that ordinary Pakistanis are not punished for the bravado of those with an exceptional disconnect from reality.

Dr Husain will chair two committees – a committee on civil service reform and another on public expenditure. A lot has already been said about the incredibly rich endowment of retired and serving CSP/DMG/PAS officers on these committees – but this is par for the course. No individual or entity ever hands over beneficial powers without a fight. If ordinary Pakistanis are going to wrest control of public funds from the appropriative control of the elite bureaucracy in this country, it will take a serious and committed engagement with members of this very bureaucracy.

Since Dr Husain is personally invested in the public administration and civil service reforms conversation since 2006, when he was entrusted with the responsibility for the NCGR, there is little use in detailing how dramatically the world has changed since 2008, when the NCGR recommendations were made. The most important aspect of those changes was in 2010 with the 18th Amendment and the

accompanying seventh National Finance Commission. The NCGR's recommendations are largely not only outdated, but also incongruent with the needs of a post-devolution administrative and political infrastructure. Members of the civil-service committee will be keenly aware of this, and will not fall into the trap of depending on the NCGR recommendations as a baseline for their deliberations.

Perhaps what will be more useful for the civil service reforms committee will be to soberly examine the responsibility resting on their shoulders in the context of how this responsibility was handled when it was placed on others' shoulders. It would surprise no one that there is rarely a new government in Pakistani history that does not invest in an exercise to try to gain some control over a runaway culture of administrative inefficiency, ineffectiveness and dysfunction. What may surprise many of us, however, is just how frequently such exercises have been undertaken. Let's take the one decade prior to the formation of the NCGR and look at similar efforts.

In January 1995, then PM Benazir Bhutto established the National Commission to Suggest Measures to Improve the Efficiency of the Federal Government of Pakistan, under the chairpersonship of Hamid Nasir Chattha. The Chatta Commission made its final recommendations in October 1996 which included, among others, the elimination of the position of additional secretary, and the establishment of key performance indicators (KPIs) for ministries and divisions. Suffice it to say, two decades later, additional secretaries still do not need to worry about KPIs.

Less than four weeks after the Chatta Commission offered its final recommendations, in November 1996, the Committee on Reduction of Non-Development Expenditure was established by the caretaker government of PM Malik Meraj Khalid. It submitted its final report in December 1996. The report was a collection of words such as abolition, reduction, liquidation, privatisation, and merger. The sole purpose was to reduce the number of departments, divisions and ministries.

Less than three months later, in February 1997, then prime minister Nawaz Sharif established the Report of the Committee on Downsizing of the Federal Government. Chaired by Dr Hafiz A Pasha, the committee sought to do exactly what the Malik Meraj committee had sought to do, with the explicit aim of reducing the current expenditure of the government by reducing the number of ministries, divisions, departments, and crucially, employees of the federal government. Its final report in April 1997 helped the government identify which parts of the federal secretariat could be spliced away with the least pain.

The same government concurrently realised that it could not work with only DMG officers at its disposal and thus established the MP scale through which professional expertise could be introduced into key government functions. This is the sole example of a reform that has survived every attempted manner of undermining and fight-back by the status-quo forces within the system. Tellingly, the MP scale was not the product of a committee or commission. It was established through a notification by the Finance Division, Regulation Wing, on August 18, 1998 vide No F-3(7)-R4/98.

Having created a firestorm of resistance within the federal government, the Pasha Committee's recommendations were revisited by another commission, this time established in August 1997, and chaired by Syed Fakhar Imam (at that time of the PML). The Commission on Administrative Restructuring on Re-engineering of the Federal Government Organizations submitted final recommendations in February

1999. The Fakhar Imam Commission determined the degree of downsizing necessary through the establishment of a surplus pool of federal employees.

The October 1999 coup did not reduce the appetite for administrative and civil service reform, and in August 2000, General Musharraf established the Committee on Restructuring and Rightsizing of the Federal Ministries/Divisions under the chairpersonship of Dr Shahid Amjad Chaudhry. Its final report was submitted in April 2001. It did what the Hamid Nasir Chatta, Malik Meraj Khalid, Hafeez Pasha and Fakhar Imam committees and commissions had done: recommending another variation of downsizing of the federal government.

From 2000 to 2005 there were several other similar efforts. The tenth pay and pensions committee of 2001 under Mueen Afzal, the 2001 Tanwir Naqvi devolution plan, and the 2002 civil service reform plan proposed by the National Reconstruction Bureau (rejected by the Zafarullah Jamali cabinet in 2003), all sought to fix Pakistan's system of administrative governance, sometimes calling it reform, other times calling it downsizing, but always focusing on efficiency and effectiveness.

As the twin committees under Dr Husain's able leadership take up the mantle of administrative and civil service reforms, the lessons from both Dr Husain's own leadership of the NCGR as well as the accumulated wisdom from over two decades of similar committees must not be ignored. Pakistan's most powerful status-quo force is the bureaucracy. If it is not willing to work towards the same goals as reformers, efforts for improvement will fail. But concurrently, if reformers do not have the gumption to take on obstacles and blockers of reform, they should not even attempt to repeat the cycle of our history with institutional reform.

Whatever happens, the members of these committees must recognise that they are not pioneering such efforts, but really facing the burden of a history of consistent and intergenerational failure. They must be supported in their efforts by all citizens that support reform. One wishes both committees, and Dr Husain, the best of luck!

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