

Crisis of Governance in Pakistan



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ESSAY

Governance refers to the responsibility of government of a state to make policies, regulate institutions, manage resources and implement laws to create desirable circumstances for the development of the nation. Governance at the state level is done by a combination of political government and bureaucratic machinery. Experts enumerate a number of elements of good governance which include inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, transparency, justice, accountability, rule of law and responsiveness. However, when it comes to Pakistan, which came into being on the 14th of August 1947, governance has always been fraught with a plethora of problems making the nation remain bogged down in the quagmire of socio-economic difficulties. The existence of massive corruption, institutional clashes, constitutional crisis, lack of accountability, and poor law and order conditions, make ample evidence of poor governance in the country. As a matter of fact, it is Pakistan's pathetic bureaucratic machinery and bad decision-making by myopic and ineligible politicians in the upper echelons of power which have compounded the dilemma of bad governance making the people languish in apocalyptic circumstances in this country.

There are several causes of this crisis of governance in Pakistan. Among these causes there are some historical reasons which are related to the circumstances in which Pakistan came into being, some political causes due to which Pakistan could not maintain its intactness and corrupt politicians took charge of the state, and the vested interests of big powers which did not let Pakistan enjoy true sovereignty and independent decision making.

When Pakistan came into being, it had to accommodate millions of maimed, wounded, bereaved, dispossessed and displaced refugees and immigrants who had bade adieu to their houses and cities in India. The bureaucratic machinery at the time of Pakistan's birth was quite unfixed with a loose network of just a small number of Hindu, Sikh, British and Muslim officials. Most of the institutions had their head-offices in India due to which they could not rise

to the occasion. The non-Muslim officials were on the lookout for an escape to the country of their own choice. Feudal-lords turned into politicians were more interested in grabbing lands than making decisions and policies to steer the country away from troubled waters. What would the bureaucratic machinery do when many of its parts were neither fixed nor working?

It is the constitution of a state from which all the institutions including the government derive their powers to govern the country. Unfortunately, Pakistan took nine years to make its first constitution. Obviously, the affairs of the state were managed on ad-hoc basis during that time. The institution building was stunted, and the nation fell prey to disharmony and disintegration. On October 7, 1958 President Sikander Mirza declared martial law dismissing the government of Feroz Khan Noon. He abrogated the constitution of 1956, describing it as "unworkable" and full of "dangerous compromises." However, he himself was deposed by General Ayub Khan who took over only after 20 days, making Sikander Mirza go into exile. The martial law caused bad governance by marginalizing some segments of society, which is anathema to the spirit of inclusiveness and consensus.

When it came into the world, Pakistan was without a capital. So, the leaders had to establish its capital overnight, and look for the outer world to establish relations with Pakistan. Pakistan had to position itself in the ongoing cold war between America and Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. One feels flabbergasted to find out how Pakistan ditched USSR in 1950 when the first prime minister of Pakistan unceremoniously cancelled his scheduled visit to USSR and accepted America's hasty invitation to wed this newborn state with the USA. Liaqat Ali Khan's state visit and alignment towards the United States became a pivot in Pakistan's foreign policy during the Cold War. Soon after the honeymoon period, the USA started handling Pakistan with its well considered carrot and stick policy. After removing the first democratically elected Prime Minister in 1977, the Chief Martial Law Administrator, General Zia ul Haq decided to fight a US proxy war against USSR in Afghanistan. In 1999, democracy again went off the rails when General Pervez Musharraf arrested Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and suspended the constitution. These military interventions led to clashes and mistrust among the executive, judiciary and legislature and also disabled bureaucracy to make good decisions.

To make the situation worse, owing to the tug-of-war between the ineligible politicians and political opportunists, corrupt bureaucrats started claiming their pound of flesh from the carcass of dead governance like hungry vultures. Thanks to pro-US heads of the state and government, the capitalist system developed its unshakeable hold on the economy of the country. This gave rise to the establishment of a Sicilian mafia comprising feudal lords, capitalists, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. These bureaucrats have established such a corrupt system in offices' hierarchy that one cannot get any work done and any complaint addressed unless the whole chain of command is greased from bottom to top. In fact, bad governance suits these corrupt bureaucrats because if all jobs are done without greasing the palms of officials in government offices, where these vultures will get their next meal from?

The crisis of bad governance has made it impossible for the people to live a decent life. As mentioned above, good governance entails inclusiveness, rule of law, justice, accountability, efficiency, responsiveness, and transparency. Bad governance, therefore, is the lack of these elements. The effects of bad governance are all around us and some are described below.

Firstly, let us take inclusiveness and participation. Pakistan started suffering from the greatest dilemma of communal conflicts and national disintegration immediately after its inception. The issue of making Urdu or Bangali as the national language was dealt in a way that deprived the Bangalis of the sense of inclusiveness. This triggered a rift between the Bangalis and feudalistic politicians of the West Pakistan. When populist leader H. S. Suhrawardy of East Pakistan was appointed prime minister of Pakistan, he suspended the constitutionally obliged National Finance Commission Programme (NFC Programme). Leaders from the West Pakistan felt that with the suspension of NFC Award Programme, Suhrawardy had tried to give more financial allocations to East-Pakistan than West Pakistan and they bitterly opposed his policies. Fast forward, Sheikh Mujeeb ur Rehman's Awami League brought the ethnic confrontation to such heights as caused dismemberment of the country only twenty four years after its inception. Even after this national tragedy, people of other provinces in the remaining part of Pakistan have always been showing their discontent for being marginalized.

Secondly, justice always remained elusive in the state of Pakistan. As discussed above, the provinces always remained complaining about injustice with them on several counts. Balochistan was not given its due share of jobs, royalty on its natural resources, and provincial autonomy. Similarly, Sindh also feels deprived of its due share in water and other resources. Its main lifeline of the economy, Karachi was taken over by the immigrants who came to Pakistan at the time of partition. They developed their hold on Karachi making Sindhis surrender a major source of economy. When a Sindhi became the prime minister, he was hanged by a court whose strings were allegedly pulled by a military dictator. The death of Sardar Akbar Bugti in a military operation made Balochis feel further disenfranchised. Even in recent times, some pushtoon sections feel marginalized. Some of these disgruntled people resorted to armed resistance against the state further aggravating the crisis of governance.

Thirdly, there is no practically effective mechanism of accountability in Pakistan. The officials of armed forces are considered holy cows and there is no precedent of their accountability. Military dictators are always absolved from the courts and corruption in all other institutions is left unchecked. Pakistan is the 120 least corrupt nation according to the 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International. Corruption Rank in Pakistan averaged 109.04 from 1995 until 2018, being 39 in 1995 and reaching an all time high of 144 in 2005 when Pakistan was ruled by military junta. National Accountability Bureau was created in 1999 but it has always been used to victimize politicians of the opposition parties rather than conducting true accountability of the sitting government.

Fourthly, regarding efficiency and effectiveness, government's ineligibility, negligence and red-tape have stymied socio-economic development of the nation. According to Human Development Report (HDR) 2019 launched by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Pakistan stands at 152nd position out of the total 189 countries. Most alarmingly, Pakistan's ranking is lower than all comparable regional countries of South Asia. According to Dr Sabina Alkire of Oxford University, on the basis of Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI) there are 75 million poor people in Pakistan out of which 40 million are alone children. Above 20 million children are out of school and overall literacy rate is barely 58 percent with more than 22 percent gender gap in male to female literacy rate.

Fifthly, government's responsiveness is frustrating. The people affected by 2005 earthquake are still waiting for the promised rehabilitation and compensation. People of Sindh living in the delta regions have been migrating due to intrusion of sea water into the Sindh River but every government has turned a deaf ear to the problems popping up due to climate change. Water is soon to become a scarce resource but no government did the needful to construct dams or take other measures. Different governments turned a blind eye to the construction of Kalabagh Dam and let the country get bogged down into the quagmire of electricity crisis. Accumulation of garbage in Karachi is another case in point and there is a never ending list of government's apathy to people's problems.

Sixthly, as far as transparency is concerned, various governments have performed very badly on this count as well. The martial law regimes gagged media to keep the people ignorant of the policies being hatched behind closed doors of government offices. Pakistan was pitted against USSR in Afghanistan without letting people know why it was inevitable. General Pervez Musharraf again embroiled Pakistan in America's dirty war in Afghanistan in 2001. However, media did not get freedom to inform the people about the inevitability of participating in this war and the use of Pakistani soil by CIA and other American agencies. Pakistan's current government is also being alleged to stifle media.

Lastly, the law of the land is "Might is right". Corrupt politicians manipulate police officers' and other bureaucrats' postings and transfers and literally take the law into their own hands. The powerful can kill the weak in broad daylight with impunity. Child molestation seems to have become a new normal. Street crimes have made life and property quite insecure. Agencies abduct people from their houses to 'purge' the state of 'rogue' elements. Sahiwal murder case and Qasur's Zainab murder case speak volumes of government's inability to provide the people security and peace of mind.

The crisis of bad governance calls for immediate measures to avert any other national tragedy. The nation being largely uneducated cannot bring a revolution on its own. Obviously, it behoves the incumbent government to salvage the nation by means of good governance. Here are a few pragmatic remedies to cure the malady.

First of all, constitutional supremacy is sine-qua-non for good governance. As Al Smith said, “All the ills of democracy can be cured with more democracy,” so democracy is the only panacea for good governance and therefore military should not be considered a threat to democracy. Also, all institutions should do the needful to bring institutional harmony and work in unison to steer the country away from murky waters.

Second, the democratic government should explicitly exhibit a will to deliver the goods. This is definitely not the right time to settle personal vendetta against the opposition. Good governance necessitates consensus for which the government should stretch a hand to the disgruntled opposition parties and take them onboard to do away with grim socio-economic challenges facing the country. The opposition leader’s proposal of signing a charter of economy should be given due consideration in the present scenario of socio-economic challenges in Pakistan.

Third, the government should ensure rule of law and across the board accountability. It is time for the incumbent government to fulfil its promise of strengthening the state institutions which should be able to bring criminals of any level to book. The government should empower the institutions and dispel the impression of using state institutions to suppress the opposition. The opposition, on their part, should make opposition to the sitting government meaningful for the sake of the people of Pakistan.

Four, media should be given due freedom because it is considered the fourth pillar of the state. Good governance is impossible if there is no free media which serves as a bridge between the government and the governed.

Last but not least, to enhance efficiency and to ensure responsiveness, civil services reforms should be done to overhaul bureaucratic machinery. There should be an effective and non-conventional system of evaluation of officials’ performance and their promotions and increments in salaries should be conditioned with specific criteria. Judiciary, as a very important pillar of the state should bring about judicial reforms to ensure provision of timely, transparent and free justice to the people.

Democracy can only be justified if it ensures good governance. People of Pakistan, who have tried three democratic governments after the last military regime, are impatiently waiting for the benefits of good governance promised by democratic governments. The incumbent government came into power with the slogan of making a “Naya Pakistan”. It still has more than three years in hand to fulfil its promise of good governance. The military has explicitly reiterated its support for the incumbent government and this ideal bonhomie between the military and civil government is expected to put the country on the road to progress and development.

(2300 words)