**Fighting corruption**

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Transparency International-Pakistan’s National Corruption Perception Survey 2021 identified the police (41.4 percent) and the judiciary (17.4 percent) as the ‘most corruption institutions’ in Pakistan but both fall outside of the government’s anti-corruption drive – which, 85.9 percent (of the respondents) declared ‘unsatisfactory’.

The PTI came into government promising to rid the country of corruption, which cheats the nation out of development, prosperity and scarce resources. Midway through its term in office, the PTI has almost failed to assess the nature, magnitude and dynamics of corruption competently.

The present situation is not what ordinary people would expect from an anti-corruption drive. If the anti-corruption strategy is not reconsidered, the PTI’s defining political narrative and initiative may flop at the next polls.

NAB’s 2002 National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) is an informative starting point. It notes the prevalence of corruption and the high levels of social legitimacy that it has acquired, which can, in some measure, be addressed through a public awareness campaign to promote values and attitudes that reject corruption as morally reprehensible and as an illegal act that costs society dearly and is liable for punishment.

It also acknowledges the limitation of NAB’s criminal justice investigation-prosecution or enforcement approach for combating corruption effectively and, therefore, calls for a ‘whole-of-government’ approach that involves strengthening public administration integrity systems. Like the previous governments, the PTI government has simply ignored NAB’s advice and relied predominantly on the criminal justice approach that places the burden and responsibility for battling corruption on NAB’s shoulders.

Given the magnitude of corruption affecting the state and society, it is an unrealistic strategy and unfair on NAB, and it certainly does not deliver the results society needs.

Transparency International Pakistan’s report provides evidence that the government needs to reevaluate its anti-corruption campaign and ensure that all sections of the state and society are actively involved in efforts to eradicate corruption.

The NACS identifies various departments and organisations that may be engaged to prevent and combat corruption more effectively. These include the assemblies, political system, public accountability bodies, judiciary, private sector, media, civil society, et al. All these entities need to be made part of the anti-corruption drive by strengthening their integrity mandates, processes and procedures, enforcement, punishments and reporting. The NACS has done much of hard thinking and sets out necessary actions for implementing a whole-of-government effort to confront corruption.

In 2014, Dr Arif Alvi, who was then an MNA, was a member of the advisory team that supported Transparency International-Pakistan to conduct the comprehensive evaluation of institutions responsible for integrity. The survey, titled ‘National Integrity System, Country Report 2014’, studied “the robustness and effectiveness of a country’s institutions in preventing and fighting corruption. A well-functioning national integrity system is an effective safeguard against corruption, abuse of power, and misappropriation”.

It made recommendations on strengthening Pakistan’s integrity framework and systems, adopting a whole of state and society approach that has largely been ignored.

Given the PTI’s electoral narrative and campaigning, it may be that PTI’s focus on ‘grand’ or ‘mega’ corruption may have led it to have a NAB-led anti-corruption drive, but, as a consequence, the PTI has suffered a political cost of letting wider corruption seen to be tolerated. Grand or mega corruption does hurt the economy and must be curbed, but it is – what the NACS calls – ‘petty’ or ‘middling’ corruption that directly impacts an ordinary person’s living conditions.

It is this middling corruption such as bribes and the consequent poor governance that s/he experiences, which makes his or her inflation pains even worse. It is an ordinary person’s ‘corruption reality’ and ‘corruption burden’ that has also been highlighted by Transparency International’s recent report. It is corruption arising from local public administration and governance such as thana, katcheri, patwari etc that falls outside of NAB’s purview.

This petty or middling corruption is a massive, deep ‘black hole’ that directly hits an ordinary person’s wellbeing and must be plugged by strengthening integrity systems across the system of public administration and governance.

The government needs to address various causes of corruption identified by different reports. For example, delays or inaction as causes of corruption may be tackled through performance standards such as strict timelines for each task, monitoring and reporting against time. Where such timelines are not observed without demonstrating sufficient justification, such conduct may be penalised as maladministration, inefficiency or misconduct.

The judiciary also needs to improve its performance by monitoring and reporting time invested (or wasted) in each case. The government needs to reduce this black hole so that an ordinary person can begin to experience improved governance where everyone reaps the benefits of anti-corruption efforts.

A meaningful anti-corruption effort requires a whole of state-society commitment, where integrity is valued across the state and society and translates into public welfare gains for all.

Given the many reports that specifically deal with Pakistan’s anti-corruption efforts and how to strengthen them, it is simply inexplicable how the PTI is ignoring much of the advice. Despite NAB admitting the limitations of its criminal justice/enforcement approach and calling for a whole of government effort, the PTI government continues to rely on NAB to combat one category of corruption – grand/mega corruption.

This strategy fails to appreciate how ordinary people perceive and experience corruption, which is equally debilitating as grand corruption. There is a dire need to reduce the ‘corruption burden’ from ordinary people’s lives, which daily threatens their person, property, livelihoods and opportunities, and make them partners in the anti-corruption drive.

Without much homework, the government could have launched a more comprehensive anti-corruption drive, but it simply failed to do so, which is costing the PTI dearly in terms of its credibility and, combined with the exacerbating effects on inflation pressures, will cost it politically in the next elections.

Perhaps, our president, Dr Arif Alvi, can revisit his old notes and advise the government on the way forward for a more effective anti-corruption strategy that focuses on reducing the corruption burden on the people that inflation and maladministration have compounded into a horrible misery. We can only hope the government will listen to this advice.

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