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**Uprooting corruption**

Pakistan was on the brink of becoming a failed state when Prime Minister Imran Khan took over. The courts had been compromised; the bureaucracy too has been similarly corrupted, making it very difficult for the present government to implement projects of national importance.

NAB and other agencies had cronies appointed as heads so that they could assist in the huge billion dollars scams that were under way. “Dollar Girls” were used to smuggle vast amount of national funds abroad. Boats loaded with dollars were used to transfer national wealth to foreign shores. The names of household servants and office clerks were freely used to open fake bank accounts through which billions of rupees were smuggled across and money laundering was freely done in collaboration with corrupt bankers.

Huge loans were taken for power projects as well as for other scam schemes with massive kick-backs, and the country was drowned in debt. India, as well as our other foreign masters provided full support as a nuclear Pakistan moved swiftly towards becoming a failed state without a bullet being fired.

This situation was not very different from when President Musharraf had taken over power in October 1999. On both occasions, the country had been ravaged by corrupt politicians who had looted and plundered at will. There was a ray of hope when President Musharraf took over power and the country made rapid strides towards progress during 1999 to 2007. Alas, Musharraf was tricked by foreign powers into agreeing to the National Reconciliation Ordinance. With the return of corrupt leadership, the country was again brought to the brink of failure.

In all these times, our repeated saviour has been our military that has not only countered our foreign threats, fought valiantly against Indian imposed terroristic acts but also come to the rescue of the civil administration when the country was on the brink of failure.

Fortunately, there was a change of government in 2018, and the PTI took over. With a clean and committed prime minister and an honest and determined army chief, a partial breakthrough was achieved. However, the evil of corruption has penetrated too deeply into the system and the present government faces an uphill task to cleanse a system that has been steeped in corrupt practices for almost 4 decades. To cleanse the system, major surgery is needed.

NAB, in collaboration with our agencies, should undertake sting operations, and trials should be done through military courts, not civil courts, as mega corruption is directly linked to terrorism.

The current huge increases in our food prices are also directly caused by past corruption. The rupee value against the dollar was artificially kept up to conceal the level of corruption and the sad state of the economy. This had partly controlled price inflation. Once the real value of the rupee was restored to about Rs165, the steep fall resulted in significant price increases. Hoarding by businessmen and supported by corrupt feudal politicians has further compounded the problem and resulted in artificial increases in prices of wheat, sugar and other commodities, which is then being used as a weapon by the opposition parties against the present leadership.

So, what is the way forward? A major change needs to be made in the system of governance if democracy is to survive in Pakistan. The first step needed is to change the constitution so that a presidential system of democracy is introduced. The freely elected president can then select his own team of technocrats as federal ministers from the most competent persons available. The role of parliamentarians should be confined to law-making and to oversight of government policies. They should not be eligible to become federal or provincial ministers or ministers of state. This will curb corruption as it will remove the desire of corrupt feudal landlords to ‘invest’ hundreds of millions to get elected, in order to plunder billions later.

Parliamentarians should also have at least Masters degrees or equivalent, as their prime role would be law making, and they must have a minimum level of education to perform this task. Contestants for parliamentary positions should also be independently screened for integrity and competence before being allowed to contest national elections. Similar screening should be carried out for the president and other key persons in the government and heads of key national institutions. Genuine land reforms should be introduced, as was done in India, and later in Bangladesh that laid the foundations of genuine democracies. Funds and power should be transferred to local bodies so that genuine democracy can function.

In Bangladesh, it was the Supreme Court that abolished the feudal system and paved the way for democracy. The Supreme Court of Pakistan in consultation with the present civil and military leadership needs to take suo-motu notice of our system of governance before it is too late. A referendum should be held and a presidential system of democracy then introduced.

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