**[People must be heard](https://nation.com.pk/01-Dec-2020/people-must-be-heard" \t "_new)**

Dr Farid A Malik December 01, 2020

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Noise is an essential ingredient of democracy as it was conceived in the Bazaar or marketplace of Athens around 430 BC. Since then, it has come a long way. Direct democracy was much more effective than the present representative model. Once the voices of the people are muffled, the democratic order loses direction. Despite the fact that Pakistan became a constitutional democracy on August 14, 1973 with the passage of the unanimous constitution, the masses continue to be ignored. After the elections in June 2018, in which a popular leader came into power, the change has been painfully slow. The common man continues to suffer.

Through their system of ‘Cantons’, only Switzerland has been able to exercise direct democracy through people’s participation at all levels of authority. The country has no standing Army and one of the most stable economies of the world. The participative approach has worked well for the land-locked country that has multiple ethnicities (Swiss, German, French and Italian). A few years back, I had the chance of meeting a caretaker Chief Minister (CM) of Punjab. I suggested various mechanisms for people’s inputs and participation but was shocked to hear his viewpoint when he said that nothing can be done if people get involved. Such a negative approach has never worked in the past and never will in the future either.

I rate Hanif Ramay very highly in this position as he worked for public interest, was open minded, highly educated and a real political activist who had solid democratic credentials. He had no personal interests like the Sharifs or the Chaudhrys. Being an artist, he built arts councils all over the province. As a tribute to his legacy, his funeral prayers were offered at the Lahore Arts Council. Whenever I visit the DHA Graveyard where he is buried, I offer Surah Fateha for this great son of Lahore.

In Lahore a new trend has been set. Not only do public office holders and the bureaucracy ignore the public, they have secret hideouts as well called camp offices. There was a time that the CM, his entire cabinet and all secretaries including the Chief Secretary (CS) were located in the Civil Secretariat. The entry was unrestricted; now they are spread all over the city. Getting appointments is difficult and most letters remain un-replied. Even normal office hours are not kept, what to talk of dedicated public time slots. A change of mindset is needed for which professionals have to be inducted to steer the entire administrative machinery of the country. There seems to be a lack of clarity about the functioning of the public-bureaucratic offices like the PM and CM secretariats. There was a time when the public wings of both these offices were very effective in redressing grievances but there is more rhetoric now then on real relief. The online complaints and the much  publicized portal needs to be independently evaluated as there are a lot of dissatisfied customers.

The channels of communication have been disrupted beyond repair. Due to lack of customer orientation there has been an overall decline in all spheres of the state. Only a few institutions remain functional, the rest have become a burden on the nation’s exchequer. It is time to give direction to these misdirected efforts.

As a starting point all multiple offices should be shut down. Office and public contact hours should be strictly followed. The public contact offices like PM and CM Secretariats should have special wings with ‘Citizen’s Desks’ for redressal of complaints. All letters should be acknowledged and then replied within stipulated time. The Information Commissions and Ombudsman Offices should be made more functional and widely advertised for public assistance. At one time the Bagh Barun Mochi Darwaza (Garden Outside Mochi Gate) was the Hyde Park Speaker’s Corner of Pakistan which should be restored. Habib Jalib launched his campaign against the first dictator at this very location. The Press Club at Shimla Pahari was once widely used. but now it is not affordable and out of reach of the common man so most gatherings take place outside on the road where traffic is blocked. People need platforms to be heard and then responded to which have been missing in the last four decades of misrule.