**A Fatal Blow to High Education**

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The Provincial Cabinet of Ministers, in its meeting of 30 December, decided to reconstitute the ‘Search Committee’ for appointment of the Vice-Chancellors of the seven public universities. The earlier search committee headed by a former Vice-Chancellor and a Ph.D. holder and comprising three former Vice Chancellors and two former senior bureaucrats have been dismissed.

The new search committee would be headed by Dr. Asim, Chairman of Higher Education Commission of Sindh, and would include two provincial secretaries and two academicians to be recommended by the chairman of the committee for the Chief Minister’s approval. The decision portends ominous consequences for whatever standard of education we have been left within public universities.

Though the standard of education in Sindh has been in steep decline for the past many decades, the three consecutive terms of PPP rule in the province have turned the entire system from primary to university levels into a farce. There is chaos in the management of public schools and the recruitment, promotion, and transfers of teachers, and the appointment of District Education Officers, Chairmen of Boards, and the Vice-Chancellors of the Universities. This vital department has sunk into a whirlpool of unionism, maladministration, corruption, and corrupt practices.

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Education has been a provincial subject since the adoption of the 1973 Constitution. The Federal Government had nominal responsibility in terms of Higher Education Commission, Equivalence of academic testimonials from foreign schools and universities, distribution of foreign scholarships, oversight of higher education abroad on scholarship or government’s expenses, and the supervision of the appointment of Vice-Chancellors in public universities through Governors. This ‘check and balance’ system, which the framers of the Constitution had preserved, worked satisfactorily for many decades.

The adoption of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in April 2010 doing away with the concurrent list, gave more legislative and administrative powers to the federating units. However, these powers were to be exercised prudently to serve the interests of the people of the provinces. Pursuant with the expanded scale of provincial autonomy, the Government of Sindh (GoS) withdrew, by legislation, the powers of the appointment of Vice-Chancellors of the public universities from the Governor and tasked the Chief Minister with this responsibility soon after the long tenure of the MQM’s Governor Ishratul Ibad in November 2016. The PPP, in all probability, showed patience for so many years for political considerations.

The contention is not that the erstwhile Governors were of high academic credentials and strong protagonists of merit. Also, no one disputes the legislative privilege of the Sindh Assembly to legislate on the transfer of powers for the appointment of Vice-Chancellors to the Chief Minister. The contention is how these powers have been exercised by the Chief Minister. Have these powers helped arrest the declining standard of education in the province? Has this shift of powers enhanced the ranking of our universities within the country or brought any semblance of improvement in higher education? If the reply is negative, then we have to find out where the actual reasons for this abject failure do lie.

There is no dearth of qualified persons in the province. We have people of high academic qualifications and intellectual caliber. The fault lies in the system of selection and the priorities of the ruling clique. What we have painfully observed is that the appointment of Vice-Chancellors has been driven by considerations and preferences other than the observance of merit and fair play. As is our wont, the rulers prefer loyalty, sycophancy, and toadyism to academic, intellectual, and administrative competence. What we face today in education are the ugly consequences of this feudal mindset.

The standard practice, rules, and regulations covering the appointment, tenure, and extension of Vice-Chancellors, principles, headmasters, and administrative educational officers have since constantly remained on the anvil for successive modifications to serve the self-perpetuating patron-client political system introduced by the ruling party. The tolerance of corruption and corrupt practices and the blatant favoritism within the universities and the educational administrative offices have driven the proverbial last nail into the coffin of education in our dear land.

The conscious sons and daughters of Sindh are wary of the non-serious approach of the Government of Sindh towards a vitally important subject. The first committee was in place for years and could not complete its search of competent and deserving candidates for appointment as Vice-Chancellors of seven public universities along with their Directors of Finance, Chairmen of Boards, etc. It was not the fault of the committee. Its work was constantly undermined by political preferences and priorities of the top leadership and the continued patronage of incumbents for extensions by powerful provincial secretaries.

Witnessing the dismal failure of the first search committee, the cabinet should have appointed a more effective committee under a known academic expert and a Ph.D. holder of immaculate reputation with a timeline to finalize the search and recommendation of competent hands for appointment of Vice-Chancellors of all the seven Universities along with their Directors of Finance and chairmen of the Boards. Instead, the committee has been placed under a political and controversial person facing a NAB reference in a corruption scam of over Rs.400billion.

Dr. Asim has nothing to do with the higher education. He is known for his friendship with former President Asif Ali Zardari. The decision of his appointment to this powerful position must have come from him.

This malevolent decision of the provincial administration would further precipitate the collapse of education in the province. Many of the outgoing Vice-Chancellors have been booked by the provincial Anti-Corruption Establishment or National Accountability Bureau for financial corruption and abuse of power. It is generally acknowledged that the vice chancellorship of a university is considered one of the lucrative positions in the province in terms of funds, oily administrative positions for friends and relatives, and recruitment of teaching and administrative staff.

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