**Education to-do for the interim**

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As I write these words, the transfer of power from the PTI governments in Punjab and the centre is in turmoil and the country has been pushed into a constitutional crisis. In its run-up, the PTI government has provided suspense, intrigue, drama – everything but grace.

Before a caretaker government comes in and op-ed pages everywhere are inundated by predictions, prognostications, and recipes for the next general elections, I would like to squeeze in a to-do list of immediate action items for the education sector for the transition government.

While I continue to hope that the transfer of power will be constitutional and peaceful, the new government’s tenure will be transient. Regardless of whether it will comprise elected members of parliament or be an apolitical caretaker government, its mandate is not strong enough to permit deep reforms in most sectors. For this reason, my to-do list is restricted to items that can be implemented quickly, in the short term. I have divided it into three sections:

The first is a ‘Go’-list – programmes and initiatives that should be continued as-is or be accelerated. First among these is the MoFEPT’s remedial learning programme to address learning losses and resulting learning poverty – the inability of a 10-year-old to read simple text. Pakistan is 75-79 percent learning poor (‘A Loss Foretold’, The News, Oct 31, 2021). This programme is in its early design and implementation phase and should be launched as soon as possible, even at the cost of putting the regular coursework on hold for primary school goers.

Second, the MoFEPT is also in the early design phase of a programme to fix the OOSC problem at the level of the ICT and demonstrate it as a model for the rest of the country. It should be accelerated and bureaucrats leading the initiative should be allowed to stay on to see through its design and roll-out to make sure it does not fall through the cracks during transition.

The second section is my ‘Hold’-list – programmes that should be reviewed and / or tweaked. First on the Hold-list is the P-15 project designed to help 15 universities become state-of-the-art institutions. This project can prove to be useful and become a relatively inexpensive vehicle to upgrade several universities provided it is thoughtfully designed. However, given what I know about the project design, I believe that not to be the case at the moment which is why I put the P-15 project among those where the government should carefully consider design and delivery before it moves forward with large spending.

Second on the Hold-list is the expansion of the Kamyab Jawan Program Expansion. The National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC) recently submitted a PC-1 that expands the cost of training one million young people from the earlier proposed Rs45 billion to Rs60 billion over the next three years. For reference, the NAVTTC was able to spend only Rs5 billion over the last three years. I am convinced of the need for skills training programmes.

However, like I have stated on several previous occasions (‘Not skilled to work’, The News, Mar 7, 2022), we must not look at spending but at outcomes as a measure of program success, but no such data has been collected and analyzed yet. This spending increase is poorly motivated and seems to be providing little more than a boast come election time. Even without considering outcomes, when asked the joint secretary MoFEPT, Waseem Ajmal, showed serious reservations about the design of the PC-1, the NAVTTC’s ability to spend such a huge sum and wants to see a third-party evaluation done of the past three years of Kamyab Jawan program to understand whether program beneficiaries were able to find/ create gainful employment. That data, like some of NAVTTC’s existing data, should be made public to show value for money spent before committing more funds.

Third on the Hold-list is a shake-up of the Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) leadership if new development projects, such as remedial education and the STEAM programme (‘STEAM-powered schools’, The News, Oct 19, 2021), are to be successful. The FDE is responsible for managing all schools in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) but has become one of the most archaic directorates affiliated with the MoFEPT. The FDE is currently also recruiting more than 600 teachers to address its longstanding staffing shortfall. However, this process should be suspended until the FDE comes up with a revised, robust teacher recruitment, training, and placement policy for permanent and contract appointees, lest they become a liability.

When contacted, the joint secretary (MoFEPT) Waseem Ajmal agreed and added: “Teacher recruitment has a major impact on the quality of education. The way they are recruited has in fact impacted education governance badly – whether they should be on contract or permanent, what kind of certification they should carry, locals from the same city or elsewhere, merit based or flexible, etc. There are several policy questions around this. The new government should address this afresh.”

The third and last part is my ‘Stop’-list – programmes on which the government should slam the brakes immediately. First, at the top of my Stop-list, the interim government must put an immediate stop to the Single National Curriculum (SNC) in its current form beyond distribution of new books for the new academic year. The thuggery by which it is being foisted upon private schools in Punjab must stop. If the SNC is only half as effective as its architects would have us believe, schools will adopt it willingly.

When asked, Joint Secretary (MoFEPT), Waseem Ajmal, who has been instrumental in this entire exercise over the past one year, agreed that the SNC’s implementation ought to be halted until a new government can assume office. Regular revisions of public-school curricula and associated learning materials must be made a regular, technical exercise of educators and taken out of the hands of politicians and ideologues. Post-18th Amendment, provinces may volunteer but cannot be compelled to take their lead from the centre. The transition or caretaker government may consider carrying out an assessment of Phase-I of the SNC.

The National Curriculum Council (NCC) may also be directed to focus on its principal mandate – develop learning outcomes and aligned teacher training programs and associated materials and get out of the business of developing/ procuring textbooks, which is the purview of the National Book Foundation and the private sector anyway.

Second is the establishment of new universities. At a time when so many public universities are barely able to cover their operating expenditures, there should be a strict moratorium on the establishment of new universities, especially pie-in-the-sky and vanity projects by people that have a track record of leaving a trail of white elephants.

Finally, the caretaker government needs to clean the house at the HEC. The commission members were stacked to enable an individual in the Prime Minister’s Office to control it by remote diktat. To reverse the HEC’s politicization, membership of the commission should be dissolved. Commission members should be selected through an open and transparent process. The current chair should complete his tenure (May 2022). No new chair should be appointed by the caretaker government – this should be left to the next elected government. Until then, to ensure continued operations, the current chair’s tenure may be extended for three months, as is the prerogative of the PM. The new executive director should be selected after the new chair and commission members are in place.

I want to emphasize this point because reliable sources at the MoFEPT confided that as recently as April 1, amid the present political turmoil, the PMO was still trying to initiate (through the MoFEPT) a summary to remove the current chair of the HEC and appoint a new one. I was told that senior leaders at the ministry advised the minister against this, and the minister communicated the same to the PMO. These continued attempts to meddle, despite the Islamabad High Court’s identification of the conflict of interest at play and its directions to quit interfering in matters at the HEC in its recent long verdict, should be seen as a big red flag by the caretaker PM and the public. There is no longer an excuse for anyone to get hoodwinked.

In conclusion, I would like to note that it is interesting that now that political pressures have been (temporarily) lifted, at least some in the bureaucracy are being sensible. This opportunity should not be wasted, and any well-intentioned interim government should make sure it does not step on the toes of the next popularly elected government. I also hope for a halt over political and controversial projects until a validation exercise is carried out that allows the new government to decide based on facts. The avoidable uncertainty and rocky transition of power is unfortunate. No one with their head and heart in the right place wants this turmoil, but these are the cards we have been dealt.

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