**Is education a priority?**

BY FA I S A L B A R I 2022-01-21

THE chairperson of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), Dr Tariq Banuri, was removed through an ordinance in March 2021. He felt wronged and went to court. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) agreed and restored Dr Banuri to his position on Jan 18. Dr Banuri was appointed in 2018 and his tenure ends in May 2022.

Even today it is not clear why the government felt it was so important to remove Dr Banuri before his tenure was up. And to bring an ordinance to ensure his removal was clearly an overkill. But let us leave the merits or demerits of that move aside.

The detailed judgement of the IHC is still awaited.

When it becomes available, we will know why this was not a good move on the government`s part.

But my focus is different. For almost a whole year, the HEC, the apex body in higher education, was without a permanent chairperson. The commission did have a few meetings and a number of decisions were taken but there was no leadership; urgent issues were decided but important ones were shelved and not looked at. And a year was basically lost.

When Dr Banuri was removed, there were quite a few people who had voiced their concerns that it should not have been handled in this way. Dr Banuri, kudos to his bravery, was right in seeking justice and the high courts of Sindh and Islamabad were right in giving a stay order against the appointment of another permanent chairperson.

But then, the proceedings of the court took almost a year before the decision came through. And for that period, there was a complete lack of leadership in higher education.

After the last budget cycle in June 2021, various provinces announced the creation of many new universities. In Punjab alone, it was announced that a number of `colleges` were being upgraded to create new universities. Many of these colleges are in districts and towns that do not have other univer-sities. Where this expansion is good news for many students, it is a major change nonetheless and requires careful planning especially when the federal and provincial governments have been going through tough budgetary times. So, on the whole, financial allocations for higher education were not raised and new universities continue to be created.

Strong leadership at the HEC was needed to steer the higher education sector. But it was during this period that the government decided to make the funder and regulator of higher education rudderless.

Since higher education funding has not seen a significant increase over the last few years, many older public-sector universities and established schools have also been in financial trouble over the last few years. The financial woes of the University of Balochistan as well as the University of Peshawar have even been in the news many times. We need some deep thinking to figure out how public-sector universities are going to be funded in Pakistan, whether university employees are government employees, who should bear pension liabilities for retiring staff and faculty, and how research and teaching activities are to be funded. Should higher education be subsidised or not? If not, given that the majority of Pakistani households cannot afford to pay the full cost of higher education, how is the goal of increasing access going to be achieved by the government? If higher education is to be subsidised, who will pay for it as the government seems to be unwilling and unable to commit to the needed funding levels.

All of these issues were part of the agenda for the HEC prior to the removal of Dr Banuri. All of these and many other issues, related to the quality of teaching and learning, research, undergraduate programme quality, the quality of doctoral programmes in Pakistan, employability of PhD degree holders, etc were on the agenda and policies werebeing worked on in that direction. But all of this work stopped when Dr Banuri was removed in the way that he was. Did the government want to just stop HEC from working? If higher education was or is a priority, could the government not have found a way to work with him for a better way forward? There might have been people who were not comfortable with what Dr Banuri was trying to accomplish and there might have been interper.

sonal issues as well, but for a government to cripple the highest policymaking body in a certain area in order to deal with the issue is very poor policy choice. If nothing else, I hope this is one lesson the government learns from this episode. Though I have a feeling that I am being too optimistic.

Realistically, the IHC judgement is unlikely to be the end of the story. After the full judgement becomes available the government is likely to appeal the decision at the Supreme Court where hearings could take some time and many more months of relative uncertainty may continue. Even if there is no appeal, will those who brought in the ordinances that resulted in the removal of Dr Banuri be able to work with him now? Dr Banuri has only a few months before his tenure ends; will he be able to make a start again on the issues he wanted to address? Whichever way one looks at it, the loss to higher education, because of what the government has done over the last year, is going to be significant.

The government does not tire of letting us know that education is a priority sector for it. But its actions, especially in higher education, have totally negated the claim. Higher education will continue to pay the price for individual ambitions and perniciousness for years to come. m The writer is a senior research fellow at the institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.