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**Is the HEC fiasco fixable?**

The logo of Higher Education Commission (HEC).

Today (Tuesday, June 8), the honourable chief justice of the Islamabad High Court will listen to arguments for and against the legality of the government’s recent alterations to the character of the Higher Education Commission (HEC).

Arguing against the legality will be Faisal Siddiqui, a renowned lawyer who has taken this case as his personal contribution to the country’s system of law and order and checks and balances. I happen to be petitioner number one, among a list of erudite and scholarly members of Pakistan’s civil society. In short, I and several others have sued the government for its failure to follow the law in how it is dealing with the HEC. For most, this represents a fight to the end. For me, it is a desperate act – an attempt to engage the system of law and order, and checks and balances – to try to salvage one of Prime Minister Imran Khan’s genuine areas of concern: education.

When he took oath of office in August 2018, a lot of realistic observers were certain that PM Khan would fail in a lot of areas. One slam dunk prediction was political management. This has come to fruition, much to the chagrin of PM Khan’s ardent supporters. But it isn’t surprising, for example, that the PM is forced to tolerate people like Sheikh Rashid Ahmed or Azam Swati – his two railways ministers so far, who have presided over at least eight separate railways accidents thus far in PM Khan’s turn as PM. PM Khan was never really expected to be able to do without these kinds of political characters. In short, despite the horror of each railways accident, or similarly the catastrophic mismanagement of the Civil Aviation Authority and PIA, no one that knows anything about how Pakistan works really expected any better from PM Khan in his first term. These failures may be morally unforgivable, but they are politically understandable.

PM Khan was however expected to be able to do a few things that he promised better than anyone else. And thus far, while the jury may still be out, it looks increasingly likely that PM Khan will muster enough performance out of his ragtag cabinet, and hit and miss bureaucratic assignments.

He was expected to be a champion for the poor. His work through the pandemic, and in enabling the BISP infrastructure available to the federal government to be deployed under the Ehsaas branding, with renewed vigour and rigour is a great testament to his will to help the poor. Ehsaas and BISP are far from perfect, with too many small programmes being proliferated for the liking of those that are more invested in universal unconditional cash transfers (as I am), but it is still a robust and enviable set of programmes for which both PM Khan and Sania Nishtar deserve great credit.

Closely associated with the welfare of the poor, PM Khan was expected to grow the economy in a manner that supported jobs growth and managed inflation. The fiscal crisis prompted by the ill-advised austerity programme that Dr Shamshad Akhtar launched as caretaker finance minister in the summer of 2018 left PM Khan hamstrung to begin his term. Thereafter, he and his advisers vacillated between traditional Pakistani management of the crisis (via the IMF and a banker that could manage the transition) versus a new and bold reformist agenda (via an ill-prepared and poorly supported Asad Umar). This vacillation cost Pakistan a year’s worth of reform, which actually meant an economic reform programme was dead before it was born. Deficit hawks and debt alarmists managed to convince both the military leadership and a reluctant PM Khan of the need for more band aid, when some spending while bleeding was necessary.

Today, Shaukat Tareen has done what any and all finance ministers in Pakistan need to do, sooner or later – take off the training wheels and allow for unsustainable and top-heavy growth, to help beef up the capacity of the elite to manage the next downturn. Long story short, it is increasingly likely that Pakistan’s economy will finally see expansion and some job growth over the next eighteen months. PM Khan may well eventually end up seeming like he has kept at least part of his promise on jobs and inflation.

The one area in which there was immense hope from PM Khan was in education. His initial cabinet assignments were confusing – placing Shafqat Mehmood in a ministry he did not want, and assigning fresh and inexperienced ministers like Zia Bangash in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Murad Raas in Punjab. It took Raas a few months, but he has proven to be remarkably resistant to bureaucratic manipulation. But poor Zia Bangash was left for dead in a Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cabinet that had to deal with a new and inexperienced chief minister, the competitive nature of Atif Khan and his crew, and the impact of the newly merged districts.

Shafqat Mehmood began to carve out an interest and programme for reform rooted in the Single National Curriculum, which is much maligned without due diligence by its critics, but the rest of the country’s education planning, management and delivery has been less than stellar. Covid-19 has wrought such mass havoc, that it is difficult to judge any policy space too harshly, especially one as massively impacted as education.

In all this, there was only one area of education that the government could bank on, and that qualified on three of PM Khan and the PTI’s criteria for what is good (as opposed to evil). This was the HEC. First, the HEC had in place a chairman that was widely respected, including by many, if not all, members of cabinet. Second, the HEC chairman was a reformer who was explicitly and unapologetically taking on some of the long-standing mafias that PM Khan himself often talks about as being poison for the progress of the country. And third, the HEC represents (perhaps along with NAVTTEC) the most valuable real estate in the public sector for a political party whose past, present and future is about engaging and empowering young Pakistanis.

Despite all this, how did the PM come to the decision to try to mangle and destroy the HEC, just to get rid of the chairman? It is a fair question that many of the PM’s supporters must also ask. My own view is that the PM has been misled into the dark alley of narrow private interests, in which he sees autonomy and independence of public-sector organizations and especially organizations with a regulatory role, to be a threat. Can the prime minister possibly himself be the source of such insecurity? Highly unlikely. There are actors, with partisan and malicious intent, that have misled the prime minister into a confrontational path with the HEC and its erstwhile chairperson.

This confrontation comes not at the cost of Dr Tariq Banuri’s job, nor the honour or dignity of those that would prefer to see themselves or their friends in the role of HEC chairperson instead. This confrontation comes at the expense of the well-being of Pakistan’s young women and men.

The HEC is a vital instrument of public policy for setting the agenda for learning at the post school and pre full working adult level in Pakistan. Together with NAVTECC, which has been managed very well by the team of Javed Hassan, Dr Nasir Khan, Usman Dar and Shafqat Mehmood, the HEC needs to be seen as a guarantor of the PTI and PM Khan’s promise to the young. This promise cannot be kept by old-school defenders of the pork belly, free for all spending bonanza traditional champions of higher education. It can only be kept by academics and thought leaders like Dr Tariq Banuri.

PM Khan has made a grave error of judgement in trying to remove Dr Banuri. There are ways to still fix the situation that will enable the PM to achieve real, long-term reform for higher education and for this, he and Dr Banuri should be working together, not apart – for the benefit of Pakistan’s 110 million young people under the age of 23.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.