**Solution in search of a problem**

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In 2021, the PTI government embarked on an effort to cut down the authority of the chairman of the HEC of the time. On paper, the effort looked like it was driven by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT), when it was in fact being pushed by the Prime Minister Office (PMO).

In the PMO, it was one member of a certain task force pushing one amendment to the HEC ordinance after another. The ham-handedness and haphazard manner in which these amendments were being designed can be gauged by their number – two last year alone, with attempts of a third not materializing because it was overtaken by greater political events early this year.

As the end of the year nears, efforts to push through that third amendment have been revived. The common thread that runs through them all is the seizure of authority from the HEC by MoFEPT. The current iteration begins by revoking the HEC chairperson’s status of federal minister and reduces their tenure down from four to three years, with no possibility of reappointment or extension. The revocation of status in particular smacks of petty, personal motives.

Crucially, it reduces the size of the commission’s membership by removing the secretary S&T / IT, four nominees of the provincial governments, and reducing the external members from ten to only six. It eliminates provincial representation in the commission and reduces its quorum requirement from nine to only five members. The manner of their appointment has also been changed to enable holding up appointments and giving the MoFEPT control over the process. It also adds a clause that would allow removal of chairperson and members on account of “unsatisfactory performance,” a catch-all that can be applied to anyone in public office at any time.

The justification given by the MoFEPT for all these changes is that this will “empower” the HEC. What it will really do is restructure the commission membership to give greater control over its proceedings and hang the sword of Damocles over the chairperson’s head; the chair will be put under greater pressure to stay in the good graces of the MoFEPT – the very antithesis of empowerment. A second justification that has been given is that it will “strengthen HEC’s role viz-a-viz provincial HECs”. It is unlikely that provincial HECs will support the federal ministry’s power grab of higher education matters.

Where do relevant parties with a stake in changes in the HEC stand? The man in the PM Office who was pulling a lot of the strings earlier is gone. He was made to pack after the vote of no-confidence, as was PM Imran Khan himself. The minister leading the MoFEPT is also gone.

When the first two amendments were being pushed in 2021 and challenged in court, Dr Ahsan Iqbal and Senator Dr Musadik Masood Malik were among opposition members that attended the hearings and openly expressed their opposition to said amendments. A few days ago, I had the opportunity to ask Dr Ahsan Iqbal, now minister for planning, development and reforms, for his position on the amendment in the works. He still supports the repeal of the amendments pushed through under the PTI and restoration of the HEC Ordinance, 2002 to its original form.

To no one’s surprise, senior officials at the HEC are not supporting the new amendment either, terming it a power grab. They can see themselves wasting more time at the MoFEPT, seeking approvals and slowing down the pace of work at the HEC.

What about university vice-chancellors (VCs)? I spoke to a few of them and learned that news of the amendment has been lost in the daily deluge of office correspondence. Some paperwork regarding it came across their desks, but none are aware of its contents. None are supportive of it after being given a brief summary of what’s in it. In fact, their reaction was almost identical: ‘they might as well close down the HEC altogether’. In a recent conference of the Association of Private Sector Universities of Pakistan (APSUP), the rectors in attendance rejected all recent amendments to the HEC Ordinance 2002, terming them detrimental to the future of higher education in Pakistan. In another meeting of VCs of public and private universities, held on December 12, all VCs and rectors showed serious reservations on proposed amendments and demanded that the government should instead strengthen the autonomous role of the HEC.

The amendment currently in the works will effectively make the HEC into a ‘Department of Higher Education’ attached with the MoFEPT. Its stature would be little different than that of the National Vocational & Technical Training Commission (NAVTTC) (and other departments). The parallels between the HEC and NAVTTC will not end there. NAVTTC’s chairman is a figurehead with only an advisory role. Real power lies with the executive director of NAVTTC. The MoFEPT has already given itself the authority to appoint the HEC’s executive director. It looks like the HEC’s fate is headed the same way.

The MoFEPT has made it its mission to rein in the HEC chairperson’s autonomy, bring them to heel and make them kiss the ring.

If this perspective sounds too dramatic, know that it is shared by every observer I spoke to who is in the know and wishes to remain anonymous. If this entire episode strikes you as incredibly petty, especially coming at the cost of permanently damaging an institution, we are in agreement. This amendment is only the latest attempt to put the HEC in a position subordinate to the ministry. How a ministry that lacks the capacity to run a little over 400 public schools in a single city can possibly improve the state of higher education by appropriating more authority to itself is beyond me.

I have often been critical of the job the HEC does because it suffers from mission creep. Everything remotely related to higher education is laid at its feet. For example, incredibly, the new amendment gives the HEC the job of establishing endowment funds for universities. Clearly, that is the job of university leadership (VCs), not that of a higher-ed regulator. The HEC ought to maintain a crisp focus on its primary role as a standard setting and regulatory body and do it well. However, hobbling it with these amendments will only make its job more difficult.

One thing should be absolutely clear: no one is in favour of this series of amendments to the HEC ordinance, except the people pushing them. The justifications given for them are bogus. This is not even a solution in search of a problem.

The proposed amendment has already been reviewed by the Cabinet Committee for Disposal of Legislative Cases (CCLC) which has essentially given it a nod. It will now be placed before the cabinet at its next meeting.

It is important that well-wishers of this government apprise the PM about this amendment and how it will tarnish this government’s higher education credentials. Instead of being recognized as the ones who put on the brakes and reversed the damage done to the HEC under the PTI government, it will be the one that shepherded its agenda to its conclusion and put the last nail in the HEC’s coffin. The PM Office should distance itself from this matter, rein in these attempts and even reverse the remnants of earlier amendments.

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