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**Targeting institutions?**

This month’s hugely controversial move by Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government to practically scrap the autonomy of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) must trigger a far louder alarm bell than the simple matter of concern over tightening curbs around yet another institution. At the heart of this move lies not just the issue of removing Dr Tariq Banuri, a widely respected professional, as chairman of the HEC after his four year tenure was abruptly cut short by half.

The blatant attack on the HEC spells disaster for the future of Pakistan’s institutions, including many already weakened by years of neglect and similar targeting to solidify the official squeeze around their functioning. In the past two decades, the HEC achieved respect for playing a leading role in overseeing improvement in standards of higher education within Pakistan, while championing support for young scholars heading overseas to acquire advanced academic degrees. But now with questions over its independence, it's hard to tell exactly how far the HEC will retain a similar lead role in future.

The HEC saga comes as a timely reminder of Pakistan’s sorry past. For years, successive governments have sought to tighten their grip around different institutional frameworks, in the hope of establishing tighter controls leading to more desirable outcomes for the ruling structure. Yet, in the final analysis the reverse has happened. With targeted institutions having lost their autonomy, their performance has suffered in a range of areas.

It is therefore hardly surprising that key official functions, ranging from internal security to those at the center of revenue related matters, all continue to underperform in Pakistan today. In each case, there’s evidence of how the independence and autonomy of institutions in each area was deliberately eroded over time, as one overzealous regime after another intervened to take charge of their functioning.

Meanwhile on a related trend, past regimes have also overseen the erosion of the once ably performing civil service, to bring its work under greater control of the ruling structure in Islamabad. For years, the civil service stood at the center of driving key institutions.

But the decision to unravel the once clearly laid down bureaucratic structure in the name of devolution under former president Pervez Musharraf’s government has only led to what can best be characterized as disastrous consequences. With Pakistan’s once reasonably well performing civil service left in disarray, the ability of the Pakistani state to meet popular expectations has only suffered.

With the institutional structure in disarray, its hard to imagine exactly how Pakistan’s ruling class expects to improve the country’s performance in key areas, notably the economy which remains in disarray. For Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government, turning around Pakistan’s economic performance remains the proverbial ‘make it or break it’ factor that will dictate their political future.

Going forward, Pakistan’s economic future remains as much hooked to the right policy mix as it remains tied to the ability of key institutions to meet targeted objectives. This has become all the more essential as Pakistan remains locked in a low economic growth environment, while under pressure to improve tax collection and meet promises made to the IMF that has signed up to lend $6 billion to Pakistan.

But with lingering questions over the performance of the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), Pakistan’s main tax collection agency, the country’s ability to meet the official tax collection target remains in doubt. The FBR easily stands out among Pakistan’s institutions that have frequently been targeted under successive governments, often to meet the whims of one decision maker after another. Such interventions have eroded the independence of the FBR and in the process undermined its ability to perform its primary duty.

Going forward, Pakistan’s institutional crisis has spelt disaster for the country’s stability in more ways than one. In the past week, another aspect of this crisis came to light as the ‘Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan’ or TLP was locked in a face-off with the government in Islamabad.

Notwithstanding the official claim of the matter eventually set to be resolved, the reported kidnapping of eleven policemen in Lahore by TLP activists raised a compelling question. Has Pakistan’s institutional crisis weakened key institutions to the extent that government functionaries, including the police, are now set to be targeted by non-state groups ?

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