**After the polls?**

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As Pakistan’s political rivals battle hard to rapidly and quickly win space in the run up to the country’s next elections, the clear writing on the wall seems to have been widely ignored: once elections are out of the way, the task of running a crisis stricken country will fall upon the next set of rulers who will face unprecedented odds in overseeing a return to relative normalcy.

And that’s where the challenge of tackling the country’s multiple crises will stare the next government right in its face, without a clear solution in sight in the foreseeable future.

Welcome to the reality of Pakistan anchored upon a fast faltering economy, political disarray, a security crisis, an administrative and policing system badly broken down and societal trends relentlessly shifting southwards with unpredictable consequences. Irrespective of the electoral outcome at the polls, there’s no political party to date that has presented a convincing plan to reform an increasingly complicated country to govern.

Clearly highlighting Pakistan’s very sorry trends are daily occurrences such as on the night before Eidul Fitr right in the heart of Islamabad. A brutal attack on five family members of senior National Assembly bureaucrat Shamoon Hashmi once again exposed the powerful reality of a state that remains out of tune with its very own grassroots.

The attack, ostensibly by employees of food outlets in the busy ‘Gol’ market of the supposedly upmarket sector F-7 was meant to violently seize back a table and chairs occupied by the victims. Instead, the attack vividly highlighted the sorry state of the state and its policing responsibilities even in central Islamabad.

No amount of condemnation by officials of this tragic event can ever ignore a dark side of the collapse of Pakistan’s once relatively stable administrative order. The consequences have now reached the heart of the capital with the broad mass of the public left badly exposed.

It is an outcome that has followed years of growing neglect of the state’s responsibility towards the broad spectrum of Pakistan, once considered a relatively manageable country. And without the Pakistani state asserting itself through clawing back space that it has lost, the future of a range of areas including the battered economy will likely remain near dismal.

Across the world, it is hard to imagine a success story of economic progress in a country that also remains ridden with challenges comparable to those of today’s Pakistan. Even a successful international economic bailout of a near default Pakistan will simply fail to help the country turn the corner unless backed by long overdue reforms.

In decades gone by, Pakistan has repeatedly failed to tackle calls for reforming the country’s largely dysfunctional tax collection system. The malaise surrounding the taxation structure has broadly progressed in tandem with the state’s ever weakening capacity to impose its writ. Its hardly surprising that large scale tax evasion has today become a hallmark of power and influence of those who have proudly and repeatedly defied the Pakistani state.

Meanwhile, the growing failure to impose law and order has exposed a fundamental gap in Pakistan’s economic progress. Irrespective of the incentives offered by one government after another to attract large scale new investments, investors – notably, foreign ones – will remain averse to stepping in a country with gaps in its commitment to enforce the law. And the increasingly sorry state of government provided healthcare and education should hardly be surprising as Pakistan has slipped repeatedly over time.

Faced with near insurmountable challenges, Pakistan’s way forward must be built upon meeting a two tiered set of priorities.

On the one hand, it is vital for political parties to urgently assemble a community of experts to chart out policies for the future, in case they get a chance to rule Pakistan at the federal and/or the provincial level. In the process, its possible that parties may have to accept a new community of independent minded policy makers at the center of a future ruling order, immune from pressure by key political figures and well entrenched lobbies. Such an outcome must come alongside commitments by mainstream parties to allow pressing reforms to proceed as Pakistan confronts its worst nightmare ever.

On the other hand, Pakistan’s political parties will have to retreat hard from a visibly toxic environment that has driven them to seek a proverbial ‘kill’ of their foes on a daily basis. The high political temperature of today has not only vitiated the country’s overall atmosphere in more ways than one. This very toxic political environment has also effectively blocked the prospects for painful and tough reforms that must stand at the center of rebuilding Pakistan.

For now, Pakistan’s ruling class may well refuse to change tack as they remain entrenched in Islamabad and the country’ provincial headquarters. But a delay in embracing change urgently will only spell disaster for Pakistan, as the country faces an increasingly volatile political, economic, societal and security environment.

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