**Capability, stability and purpose**

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The February 8, 2024 general election represents an opportunity for the country’s military and civilian leaders to change course and set Pakistanis on a better path. To do this, we need to understand what it means when we say the “government is broken”.

How governments make and execute decisions can broadly be categorized in three ways. First, governments can react to things. Reactive government behaviour can be very useful when dealing with sudden or unexpected events, but there are also downsides to government action that is reactive.

Second, governments can plan and budget for things beforehand. Planned government behaviour is the one we most commonly and normatively associate with government – we believe that this is how governments SHOULD function – through proper planning and execution. That they rarely do is a function of the modern architecture of news, information, and opinion – and the urgency of the need to ‘react’.

Third, governments can design or curate the space for things to happen in. Government by curation or by design can produce very many great outcomes, but it can also portend dangerous and toxic scenarios. A lot of government by design and by curation is inadvertent, and negative. It is rare for governments to knowingly sow the seeds for good outcomes and succeed – largely because the incentives to disrupt the curation process are vast and varied and it is hard for countries to choose a path and stay true to them.

In summary, the three means of government are: reactive, planned and designed or curated. All three ways that the government does things exist together and are often overlapping with each other. Governments need to be able to react to events effectively, they need to be able to plan and budget their activities beforehand, and they need to be able to design or curate conditions in which citizens can live their best lives. These are all ways of ‘doing government’ that are necessary.

For each of these ways of doing things, there are conditions. For governments to be reactive they need to have a minimum level of capability. For example, if Pakistan is attacked by another country, it needs to have the capability to respond to the attack in a manner that repels the attack, deters further attacks and engenders a sense of confidence and security amongst Pakistani citizens.

This is a good example because it is largely what took place on February 26, 2019 when India launched an assault on Pakistan at Balakot. The reactive capability of the government – to mobilize the Pakistan Air Force and bring down an invading aircraft, to deploy diplomatic resources to engage key partners and international actors, and to convene the political and military leadership and national discourse quickly to allow for the grand gesture of releasing the downed Indian pilot back to the Indian authorities: these are all examples of state capability.

For governments to plan and budget effectively, they need to have a minimum level of stability, which includes a degree of confidence about tenure and some certitude about rule of law. For example, if Pakistan has to pay off a major bond payment that is becoming mature soon, it needs to have a treasury that behaves in accordance with this major national obligation.

This has been a struggle for Pakistan in the last few years. Political leaders have prioritized short-term survival and gamesmanship above national obligations. We saw this play out twice in the last two years. Last year, with how Nawaz Sharif got rid of Miftah Ismail and replaced him with Ishaq Dar in the midst of a severe economic crisis (and at great cost to the economy) and prior to that with how Imran Khan introduced a petroleum subsidy in violation of the government’s agreement with the IMF on such subsidies, resulting in the IMF’s refusal to release loan tranches on time and exacerbating the impact of the post-Ukraine global inflationary crisis on Pakistanis.

For governments to design or curate any aspect of a country – be it social, economic, or political – they need to have a sense of purpose, or a vision of where the country should be heading. Ideally, a sense of purpose or vision should be anchored in a value proposition. Many countries routinely fail the smell test on their own values, but successful countries are always able to draw a straight line between that success and the core values and sense of purpose that drives it.

For example, if Pakistan is serious about fixing the gender gap – be it in education, or health, or financial services, or technology, or even the scourge of domestic violence – this kind of grand objective requires an anchoring in purpose, values and vision. Sadly, the consistently poor indicators for Pakistani girls and women, including extremely low female labour force participation rates and the world’s widest gender gap in mobile ownership and in access to formal banking channels, are indicative of the absence of the purpose, values and vision that would enable governments to successfully curate or design solutions to the Pakistani gender gap.

Now, it is important to understand what the election on February 8, 2024 can achieve, and what it cannot – in light of how governments do things (reactive, planned and designed or curated) and what it takes to do those things (capability, stability, vision and sense of purpose).

An imperfect election is not new for Pakistan and the country has gone through less-than-robust electoral processes before. In that way, the primary challenge after February 8, 2024 may not necessarily be the legitimacy of the resulting ruling coalition. But no matter what happens, we know that no election – even one in which all the baggage of the last two years is addressed and all leaders including Imran Khan are allowed to campaign freely – will produce a government that has the three things that all governments need so as to do things.

Even the most free, fair and credible election in history will not suddenly produce capability where none exists, it will not produce stability when so much of what fuels instability remains unresolved and it will not produce a vision or sense of purpose when the competing groups in the election are driven only by the lust for being in power.

To solve this, the national conversation in the run-up to the election needs to be very different. Pakistan may be able to endure yet more botched and rigged elections, but it cannot endure a government that lacks capability to react to events, lacks the stability to budget and plan public policy, and lacks the sense of purpose or vision to design and curate better outcomes.

Above all else, the post February 8, 2024 Pakistan will require money to stay solvent. Election debates need to reflect this as a key metric for the preparation of various contenders for high office. It was never adequate or sufficient for Pakistanis to applaud acknowledgments of a national crisis, but it is now completely unacceptable for us to judge politicians kindly merely for saying what everyone knows. Politicians – even unfairly elected ones – need to do better and articulate plans for where the money will come from.

Politicians also need to articulate exactly what they mean by reform and how they plan to ‘do’ reform. This word has become largely meaningless for many right-thinking Pakistanis that are sick of being governed by individuals, groups, organizations and parties that keep pretending to enact large-scale change and keep succumbing to the allure of inertia – or the way things are and must remain. If there is no disruption of the status quo, there will be no change.

Finally, politicians need to offer the electorate a sense of national purpose and a vision that is able to excite the median Pakistani – this is the 23-year-old young woman and young man that is either already or will in the next decade be living in a Pakistani city. The almost three-decade long journey of Imran Khan is paused – it is not over yet. Those that purport to be more responsible, to know better, and to be more capable must convince Pakistanis that this is so. Without articulating a coherent sense of national purpose and a vision for what Pakistan should be, they will fail.

No matter what happens on February 8, 2024, the incoming government will take over a broken system of government – lacking capability and dealing with a sea of instability and the threat of a shortened tenure. The least that politicians in the running can do is to offer a vision and clear sense of purpose that connects, even if marginally, with the people of Pakistan.

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