**A Foreign Office Embroiled in Politics?**

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At a time when Pakistan is facing multiple foreign policy challenges such as Afghanistan, situation in Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IOJK), tenuous relations with the United States and FATF, amongst others, one would expect the Foreign Office to be single-mindedly focused on strategising the best course of action. But unfortunately, the institution seems to be embroiled in intense intra-institutional politics, which is not helping the cause of evolving the most measured policy responses to the grave issues being faced.

First and foremost, is the musical chairs going on for the next foreign secretary. This issue should not be even there right now, in the first place, since the incumbent – having done slightly over two years at the post – still has a year of service left and could very well serve his remaining time to complete a three-year tenure. But as per the Foreign Office grapevine, Foreign Secretary Sohail Mahmood is desperately striving for a foreign posting of his choice.

Even if he is nominated tomorrow, it would take him three to four months to join whatever embassy he can manage, leaving him with a tenure in that country for just nine months. People close to Mahmood claim that he wants to go to Beijing, and for that very reason is lobbying for the incumbent envoy, Ambassador Moin ul Haque, to replace him. If this happens, it would jeopardise the national interest in more than one way. Firstly, Haque has been in Beijing for about a year. Before him Ambassador Naghmana Hashmi served there for nine months, having been unwisely posted there close to her retirement.

In case Mahmood is sent to Beijing, for a possible nine-month tenure, it would mean that three consecutive ambassadors would have been sent to China for only around a year each. This is not just a diplomatic affront for the host country, but also depicts a most unprofessional way of conducting diplomacy, that too the most consequential relationship for the country, a diplomatic travesty indeed.

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Sadly, gone are the days when people in the top echelons of bureaucracy had a certain grace and self-respect, not to put their personal interests before the national interests. Nowadays, it is just a cut throat competition to maximise personal interests.

What are the other possibilities for the top job in the Foreign Office? Ambassador to Italy, Jauhar Saleem, who is a batch mate of Sohail Mahmood, as the most senior and the most well-rounded candidate could have been an automatic choice but for the fact that Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, reportedly, wants a pliant foreign secretary and Ambassador Saleem is known for a strong personality and straight talk. In fact, it is widely believed in the Foreign Office that his posting to Italy, last year, after four and a half years as Ambassador to Germany was part of a well-calibrated manipulation to block his path to the top position.

Ambassador Raza Bashir Tarar, the recently returned envoy from Canada, has equally good experience of administration, bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. He could be a possibility, especially since he is already working with the foreign minister as his office’s head. Ambassador Asad Majeed Khan, though the junior most of the probable contenders, boasts the valuable experience of having been envoy in Washington DC and, thus, could be the dark horse.

The other issue preoccupying many of the Additional Secretary/Director-General level officers in Foreign Office is the ambassadorial posting plan which has been finalised after months of intense politicking. The plan includes mostly less or moderately important missions in Africa); other than Oman and South Korea, which as per reports, are being assigned to Imran Chaudhry and Nabeel Munir respectively. Turkey was to be included in the plan and became the most hotly contested station with Additional Secretaries Faisal Niaz Tirmzi and Ali Javed, and Ambassador to Prague, Khalid Jamali vying for it. But the battle royale got so impassioned that the station was dropped from the plan altogether by the foreign secretary in a rare intervention. Some claim, however, that Foreign Secretary Sohail Mahmood is keeping Ankara as a back-up for himself in case the Beijing plan doesn’t work out.

Much of the damaging politics at the top echelons of Foreign Office can be prevented by ensuring that a foreign secretary, once appointed, completes full three-year term and does not qualify for an irregular golden handshake ambassadorial posting abroad. Because this becomes a one-point agenda for the foreign secretaries occupying all their attention to the detriment of national interests.

As for ambassadorial posting plans, if the 2015 policy, which has been sanctified by the Islamabad High Court (IHC) as well, is followed in letter and spirit, the posting of ambassadors would cease to be an out all-out war to get one’s favourite station by hook or crook.

Only supremacy of merit could ensure that the Foreign Office is run by the most capable and committed, with a focus on challenges faced by the country, rather than on maximising personal gains.

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