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**Aid for politics**

The United States Congress recently passed the omnibus spending bill for fiscal year 2021. An omnibus spending bill is a type of bill in the US that combines many smaller appropriation bills into one larger single bill that can be passed with only one vote in each House.

With roughly $1.4 trillion fiscal year 2021 appropriations, omnibus advances House Democrats’ soft-power maneuvering with substantial increase in non-defense spending alongside small increments in defense-related programmes. As a standard part of the congressional landscape, the Act comes with additional $900 billion for the Covid-19 relief package. This was further followed by another budget House resolution that will pave the way for the passage of President Biden’s sweeping $1.9 trillion pandemic relief.

Of the funds appropriated under the Appropriation Act, amongst other support to Pakistan, development assistance includes over $15 million for democracy programmes and $10 million for gender-related programmes. Other funds shall be made available “to significantly increase recruitment, training, and retention of women in judiciary, police and other security forces, and to train judicial and security personnel to prevent and address gender-based violence, human trafficking and other practices that disproportionately harm women and girls.”

While the impact of development aid and foreign assistance is debatable, the funding priorities for democracy and gender make an interesting mix for debate. At a time when global economic activity remains at bare minimum, national health downfalls, and donors fatigue the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2021 seems to add life to development assistance from a clinical distance.

Aid assistance for democracy is mostly smaller in number compared to traditional aid assistance packages targeted at economic uplift or social development sectors such as access to healthcare, educational priorities or agricultural reforms. One may probe the exceptionalist nature of aid supported political programmes designed in a disconnect from desired socioeconomic outcomes. In other instances, efforts to include political perspective and goals into traditional areas of development are faced with speculation and cynicism.

Largely, aid has frequently missed to grapple with the social complexities of the recipient countries, overlooking the inherent political nature of development change through incentives, structures and actions. This leads to a number of problems such as misinterpreting the cause of development problems; failure to identify, troubleshoot and generate local impetus for social interests and change; solutions comprehended from the outside with lack of domestic viewpoint and buy-in resulting in a failure to generate locally driven process of change; aid agencies bypassing local state institutions; and failing to strengthen domestic institutional capacity to carry out development once aid programmes terminate – resulting in the persistent inability of the state to cope.

Given Pakistan’s democratic landscape, political institutions, autonomy and mobility of economic resources, cultural normativity and agency for gender-specific promotions and rights protection is organized and managed within a predominant androcentric environment. Despite legislative achievements made in the last decade, civil society as well as electoral watchdogs identify continued patriarchal institutions as an impediment to women political representation and effectiveness. Gender biases classified in terms of value system, discourse, practice, perpetuated elite-capture and largely dynastic political party culture reduces women’s meritocratic consideration and substantive representation.

Since the return of democratic and parliamentary politics to Pakistan in 2008, inroads carved over the decade to institutionalize gender mainstreaming remain dependent on outright misogynist party leaderships. Other women machineries mostly remain dependent on international funding to build and amplify social movements and challenge the status quo.

Central to the discourse on women in politics is their dependence on male counterparts-cum-power-brokers resulting in patron-client networks. Few, if any, experts would dispute that this also influences gender-biased andocentric voters’ prejudice to elect women candidates due to masculine-driven gender regime in place.

In Pakistan’s political landscape, politics remains a subjective value where systemic progress is difficult to agree on, let alone measure. Development experts fear that ever so often, aid enterprise is a cover for geopolitical power configuration, resulting in failed governance reforms.

Given Pakistan’s local power topology, integration of economic and political conception into development seems an uphill task. However, in an era of ‘priority overload’, fundamental institutional adjustments are key for any meaningful change to begin. Aid interventions can achieve the desired positive results when locally driven and owned at the micro level.

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