**Evaluation performance**

BY A H M E D B I L A L M E H B O O B 2020-12-26

TWO extraordinary things happened on Dec 22 in the context of chasing elusive good governance in Pakistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan presided over a special ceremony at the Prime Minister`s Office (PMO) to sign performance agreements with members of his federal cabinet for the year 2020-21.

Given the high degree of emphasis which Imran Khan, his party and the scores of government spokespersons place on media events, one may excuse sceptical observers who look at the ceremony from the publicity angle alone and may not see anything substantive coming out of it.

But despite the ample room for scepticism, one can give credit to the researchers and administrators at the PMO who worked for the past several months to formulate targets, deadlines and indicators of progress for each or some of the 43-odd divisions organised under 33 federal ministries. It would have been impossible to come even this far and, more importantly, agree on the scheme of measuring performance with each minister without the strong support of the prime minister.

Although the idea of signing performance agreements with ministers was discussed during the previous government and then minister for planning Ahsan Iqbal spearheaded the effort, the project was dropped halfway after some powerful ministers convinced then prime minister Nawaz Sharif that the result could be embarrassing for the government.

This government has at least moved beyond the planning stage and made the ministers` accountability plan public.

This may be a great initiative but the prime minister and his spokespersons had been announcing several such initiatives to monitor ministers` performance in the past two years without any subsequent substantive outcome. If any real benefit is to be expected this time, some urgent steps need to be taken.

The most important step which the PMO should take is to make the performance agreements signed with each minister public and preferably upload them on the PMO website. Making this information public will not only engage the citizens in the campaign for good governance, it will also create greaterincentive for ministers to be vigilant and active. The transparency will enhance public trust in the performance assessment exercise and people will be assured that targets, once set, are not manipulated to make ministers` performance look good.

Second, there should be a proper system in place to periodically monitor the progress, scientifically quantify it and let people know about it. The PMO had done a wonderful job of tracking the progress of Imran Khan`s first 100 days programme and there is no reason why the same can`t be done in the case of ministries` performance assessment. It is important that the PMO is adequately staffed to do this job. A dedicated unit may need to be created for this purpose, if not already established.

We have a history of creating excellent frameworks but these are not properly followe d up and the results are hardly shared with the public. One prominent and relevant example is that of the `Federal Medium-Term Budget Estimates for Service Delivery` or the `Green Book` which is being compiled by the Finance Division for the last 10 years and has recently been renamed as `PerformanceBased Budget` under the Public Finance Management Act, 2019. This excellent document, which is shared with parliament every year at the time of presenting the budget, provides the performance indicators and targets of some 78 federal entities including all the ministries, their divisions and several autonomous entities such as National Assembly, Senate and Election Commission.

Sadly, the targets and their achievement or nonachievement have hardly ever been discussed in parliament or any other public forum with the result that the huge work that goes into the production of the over 300-page document has almost gone to waste. If the federal government is really serious about holding ministers accountable for their performance or lack of it, it doesn`t need to reinvent the wheel and produce new agreements. Individual sections covering each entity in the `PerformanceBased Budget can be easily modified to form a robust basis for evaluation of each ministry.

Another example is that of the PTFs election manifesto, 2018. Imran Khan had personally launchedhis party`s manifesto, a more detailed version of the 100-days programme, with a lot of fanfare just before the general election. Sadly, unlike the 100days programme, there is no regular public monitoring of the progress on various items of the manifesto.

If the government is unwilling or unable to upload an `Imranmeter` on the pattern of `Obamameter` giving the progress on the PTI`s election promises on a regular and scientific basis, the party itself should arrange to do this.

Another key requirement for the success of performance agreements signed with the ministers is the development of a dynamic online platform so that progress on realising the agreed targets may be projected on an almost real-time basis.

While fulfilling these requirements will significantly contribute towards making the performance assessment exercise meaningful, the prime minister`s admission about the lack of homework before coming to power and the resulting chaotic performance during the first two years of his government needs more serious introspection not only by the PTI and its leadership but by all political parties that will field candidates for the next federal or provincial governments.

Unless political parties, especially those which are serious contenders for power, constitute shadow cabinets on the pattern of British political parties and make them real, functional and effective entities, it is very difficult to imagine how political parties will be able to prepare themselves for the governance challenge. This practice is critical not only for those parties which have not been in power before, it is important also for experienced parties to keep their governance plans up to date. It is understandable that political parties have internal rivalries and powerful lobbies which make the formation of shadow cabinets a challenging exercise but there is no escaping from the serious preparation to run as complex a state as Pakistan.

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