**Performance review**

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Bringing in an era of good governance was one key component of the PTI election manifesto. After coming to power, PM Khan recruited two stalwarts in their field – Shehzad Arbab and Dr Ishrat Husain – to develop a package of institutional reforms in order to ensure delivery of public services to all in a transparent, efficient and accountable manner.

The team came out with a performance management system document, which was formally launched by Prime Minister Imran Khan on September 23, 2021.

The document – which sounds rather ambitious – has a total of 1,090 initiatives and targets for all ministries, 426 to be completed by 2022; 488 by 2023 and 176 running initiatives.

Under this arrangement, all ministries have prepared work plans with quarterly targets to be achieved by the end of the government’s tenure. The agreement is novel in a way that an accountability contract has been signed when they are already three years into the job – but better delayed than none.

Like the previous initiative this one too is plagued with certain risks which need to be carefully spelled out and a risk mitigation strategy be developed in all seriousness.

The key risks to this contract are: sustainability of political will or, for that matter, the system; a culture of nepotism, corruption; and conflicting yet high priority demands like the foreign affairs scenario, security dynamics and the socio- economic context.

With the forthcoming local bodies elections, it would be a challenge to incorporate local governments in this apparatus, since they require a whole new performance management and review system.

Above all, there is the chronic resistance from forces of status quo that have always survived through hobnobbing with the government for their own ends. Ironically, these systematic leeches survive all reforms, all governments; are the biggest beneficiaries of the system – and yet live unscathed.

Taking a highly optimistic view, let’s assume that this set of reforms takes roots and is implemented efficiently. Would that address inherited ills? The PM still needs to go further to transform the public delivery and accountability system in a more scientific and holistic manner. There is ample empirical evidence that suggests a possible trickle-down of this mechanism for a more results-focussed overhaul.

The next feasible step would be to design similar performance benchmarks with quantifiable indicators between ministers and secretaries at the federal level with a similar mechanism of review and internal audit systems. Going further, this should also be extended to the provinces where the chief ministers sign “tailor-made context specific performance targets” and benchmarks with the provincial cabinet. Ministers and secretaries can agree, sign and review the performance standards in the same manner.

This would reach its pinnacle once this modus operandi reaches the district level and below. A performance contract with new benchmarks between DCs and their organisational hierarchy, going down to the lowest echelon of the management functions would yield the real fruit.

It is imperative that not only are quarterly reviews held but stringent accountability measures too are enacted for lapses at all levels, be it warning, letter of displeasure, transfer or sacking.

The carrot part of the agreement should also be enshrined to boost the motivation of best performers and to cultivate a culture of healthy competition.

Taking a more corporate sector view, at each stage of the review the capacity and requirements of the incumbents should be assessed and need-based capacity building facilities enshrined in the system. Simple letters of appreciation for best performers, which I once tried in the polio eradication programme, can do wonders.

In a civilised culture, the biggest accountability of public office holders is by the public at large – and to keep the public informed, salient decisions from the quarterly, annual reviews or accountability measures taken need to be made public.

Our ministers have hardly any formal training/ induction programme. It would be beneficial if there is a system for organised formal induction, and refresher training is conducted for ministers and parliamentarians in the realm of public policy, management, communication, governance, constitutional and subject matters. An informed, well-groomed and capable minister would do more justice to his/ her responsibilities and can be held equally accountable for omission or commissions.

Above that, in any egalitarian democratic dispensation the biggest performance contract is between the prime minister and the public – the social contract. The PM-public social contract based on his/her election manifesto is the raison detre for his/ her elevation to power. By virtue of that, the public has every right to assess and hold the government accountable.

Social media hype and sycophantic ego massages have always blinded rulers, and Pakistan’s political history is replete with such examples; instead a transparent, frequent and open discourse can best guide the government.

Periodic public discourse with a cross section of society is one option that can work as a reality check for the PM.

Once across-the-board accountability is institutionalised, is frequent, transparent and visible, performance is bound to improve.

The ultimate litmus test is how all this addresses the fundamental problems of our society – poverty, high inflation, basic minimum needs, unemployment, the trust deficit and un-equitable social justice.

This will decide the fate of the rulers – be it elections in 2022, 2023 or the final day of judgement.

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