**The challenge of governance**

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Tuesday, Mar 12, 2024

Governance and politics in Pakistan are bound in a dialectic of principal contradiction wherein the demands of politics and governance come into direct conflict due to the nature of politics.

Intent for governance is not enough as the capacity to govern and political will are needed to pull Pakistan’s economy and politics out of the state of long-standing distrust.

The notion of ‘principal contradiction’, put forward by Chinese politician Mao Zedong, can well explain the dilemma of politics and governance in Pakistan. As per the concept of principal contradiction, the dialectical relationship between the two opposing aspects inherent in any concept leads to a meaningful change. There are interesting parallels between Mao’s notion of contradiction and Pakistan’s governance woes.

Some of these contradictions, according to Pakistan’s eminent historian Ayesha Jalal, include theological-secular, unitary-federal, civil-military, and overdeveloped state-weak polity.

Unfortunately for Pakistan, these contradictions, instead of yielding the desired change, have always led to long periods of stasis. With governance challenges galore and a plethora of people’s demands, it would be interesting to see if the new coalition government can resolve the principal contradictions inherent in the demands of politics and imperatives of governance.

One of the contradictions visible is the extractive nature of political demands by the electorate and its damaging impact. In simple words, we have a Westminster polity, wherein prime ministers and chief ministers are routinely subjected to illegal and unreasonable demands that conflict with the requirements of good governance.

Take the example of Balochistan where in the past the practice has been to get into the legislature to extract rents for oneself and one’s allies, leading to the bizarre sight of all members of the Balochistan Assembly joining the provincial cabinet. While politics in the province demands extraction and patronage, good governance demands merit and equity.

The failure of the political leadership to resolve the contradiction between their selfish interests and the demands of the deserving segment of the population leads towards the misappropriation of funds through collusion with favourite contractors.

The resultant lack of development makes Balochistan the least developed province of the country. Anger arising out of public deprivation is cleverly deflected towards the state, exacerbating the narrative of federal apathy with hate.

At the federal level, the issue of dwindling federal share from the divisible pool as per the NFC may pose serious problems; federal liabilities include debt servicing, defence expenditure, and government administration including pays and pensions. How that contradiction is resolved in the face of increasing provincial demands, like the enhanced NFC share of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the national pie after the merger of the former Fata region, would be the test of the government’s political capability in managing these contradictions.

The biggest bulwark to good governance would be the failure to bring the loyal segment of the electorate for the PML-N like traders and big business owners into the tax net. The government would have to resolve the principal contradiction in the interests of traders and the state in favour of the state showing the desired resolve.

Similarly, the elusive services sector that has gotten used to tax evasion would have to be brought into the tax net. The much-needed FBR reforms and the inertia of tax bureaucracy create another contradiction worthy of the government’s urgent attention.

The imperative of the right choice for the cabinet slots, especially in technical ministries, would definitely clash with the patronage-driven needs of political loyalists, especially among legislators. If this contradiction is not resolved in favour of the state through strict adherence to merit the mounting debt, export stagnation, energy price spike, and prevalent stagflation would run the country down the morass of insolvency.

The contradiction in digital connectivity and the need for content moderation and data localization would hamstring the IT revolution leaving the investors, especially international ISPs, in a quandary, whether to invest or not in such a risky business environment.

Then there is the nexus between crime and politics. This nexus thrives on weak governance leaving ungoverned spaces where terrorism and crime exist cheek by jowl. The ecosystem of crime in the shape of smuggling, tax evasion, drug trafficking and gun running benefits multiple stakeholders who would leave no stone unturned while opposing all government initiatives to enforce rule of law. To resolve this conflict and to break the crime-politics nexus, there is a requirement for bipartisan political consensus that eludes the new government.

The governance needs of the restive erstwhile Fata come in conflict with the worldview of major political actors in KP – the JUI, PTI, and PTM. While the political reforms and merger of newly merged districts (NMDs) are anathema to the JUI, some parties vehemently oppose the strong players in the region.

These contradictions are being exploited by terrorist groups like the TTP. In the absence of political ownership to fight against terrorism and end the ecosystem of crime and illegal activities, the stabilization of the restive NMDs would remain a pipe dream.

The government also needs to resolve the contradiction inherent in anti-smuggling measures and the slowing down of the once-bustling trade market for the locals. Without an alternative livelihood model, the conflict between rule of law and livelihood provision would remain unresolved.

Civil-military relations also demand urgent treatment. The resolution of this conflict according to eminent US scholar Rebecca Schiff entails a concordance between the interests of people, the political elite and the military of a country.

While so far this concordance is elusive, economic development and human security appear to be the only leavens that bind all three stakeholders in a mutually beneficial relationship.

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