**Time to govern well**

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Now that the electoral battles have been lost and won, the challenge to govern well begins. A not-so-elegant variation of James Carville’s timeless aphorism ‘It’s economy, stupid’ sounds ‘It’s governance, stupid’ in Pakistan’s context.

Too much focus on politics and its myriad variations detracts from the fundamental fact that no amount of politics would yield dividends unless the governance issue is fixed.

What Pakistan has at present is a tanking economy, a burgeoning population, a polarized polity, and an angry cohort of 58.7 million out of which 21.8 million fall in the category of NEET – not enrolled in school, training or any employment – according to the Labour Force Survey 2021.

The angry, frustrated and jobless cohort of the young population is rooting for reforms that change their daily lives, which are presently mired in hopelessness. Is there something for this social media-influenced angry segment of the population in the electoral manifestoes of the mainstream political parties?

The sad reality is that all those manifestoes – being long on promises but short on implementable programmes – bring more misery to people. The silver bullet to lessen public suffering is governance.

Governance is about rule of law and implementation of all those ideas that are highlighted while in opposition but tossed out when in government by all political parties.

Pakistan needs fundamental reforms and structural changes in its political and economic governance model. Tinkering at the margins for ephemeral changes and social media catharsis through placebo solutions will fuel further public anger.

Pakistan needs a new politico-economic variant of social contract and a dismantling of the present architecture of the political economy that primarily caters to the elite’s needs. All future economic initiatives of the newly appointed governments are likely to fail if the present extractive structure of the political economy is not changed. The time has come to say goodbye to the culture of patronage and embrace people-friendly economics.

To achieve this, the new government will have to bring the untaxed segments of the economy into the tax net, remove subsidies to influential lobbies, and withdraw exemptions to holy cows like real estate, agriculture, and the services sector.

The trader lobby will pressurize the PML-N while the agriculture lobby will urge the PPP to come to their rescue, but the tax net needs to be expanded if this country is to survive. Similarly, import substitution lobbies benefiting from government patronage may pose a challenge for authorities when it comes to altering the structure of the economy to prefer export-led industrial productivity over consumption-focused import substitution policies.

A million-dollar question is: who’s going to do it? Can the new patchwork coalition deliver in a scenario where structural changes – which not only alter the political economy but also social structure – are essential for a meaningful change?

The answer to these questions lies in fiscal discipline, industrial productivity, and social mobilization. The indicators of the above change will be the conduct of the new government at both the federal and provincial levels. Governance is nothing but the conduct of the government as per rule of law for the welfare of the people.

People have no more tolerance for hollow promises. The burden of past unfulfilled promises of providing millions of homes and jobs also hangs around their necks. It is an explosive situation where the volcanic eruption of public discontent can only be kept in check through a display of altruism, frugality and good governance by the new government.

But are our politicians across the political divide up to these heavy expectations? The answer might lie in the conduct of the new assemblies and the quality of the cabinet thrown up by them.

People would be reassured if the new government starts with the positives that soothe their frazzled nerves. These positives include a lean cabinet both at the federal and provincial levels with merit being the sole criterion in the allocation of cabinet slots.

The new assembly members should not give themselves generous pay raises in deference to the straitened economic circumstances of the country throughout the tenure of the present assemblies. This act alone will push their electorate under the weight of heavy inflation (29 per cent average in 2023) and joblessness (6.3 per cent as per the Pakistan Labour Force Survey 2021).

The most visible signs of colonial grandeur like long convoys and heavy protocols should be banned by the new prime minister and respective chief ministers. This will need some courage, but it is an idea whose time has come and could win the new beleaguered government much-needed public goodwill.

While appointing ministers, it should be ensured that technical ministries like energy, finance, industries, etc have at least one technocrat. Technical experts should be appointed in leadership positions of semi-government and state-owned independent corporations.

Development funds should not be given to MNAs and MPAs and be spent on merit through established institutional channels. No new institutions should be created, and the existing ministries and institutions should be empowered, resourced, monitored, and then held accountable.

All institutions should be incentivized to work within the assigned constitutional space without encroaching upon others’ domains. Reforms in the judiciary to ensure speedy justice at affordable costs should be ensured while introducing policies that extend the reach of the judiciary to the former Fata region.

This may seem a tall order, but a new beginning to govern well is an inescapable necessity. If politicians do not govern well, an increasingly aware and angry young population will throw them out in no time.

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