**Trust: The essence of good governance**

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Despite the “cat being out of the bag”, civil servants have always been aware that all intelligence agencies are keeping an eye on them. In the board for promotion or for a sensitive appointment, the chairperson and member would patchily take out an unsigned report from his pocket and there goes a prospective front-runner. But it is logical that the manuscript will undergo certain implications now that it is documented and signed.
On the 2nd of June, the Establishment Division released a notification mandating special vetting to be conducted on all Public Office Holders (officers’ category) for induction, important postings/appointments, and promotions. It should not cause an uproar since it was a covert practice already in vogue, it becomes a subject of debate though. The apparent understanding is to improve decision making, and every government of the day has benefited from the feedback. The bitter reality is too hard to swallow at times.
Post 9/11, the phrase ‘with us or against us’ changed the world’s security paradigm. From job seekers for a sensitive post, to a maid looking for work in a middle-class house, a security clearance became mandatory. A tourist is stopped and thoroughly investigated at airports, creating a sense of inhospitality for the traveller. Undergoing rigorous checks was unsettling, not to any consolation that even citizens now are more under surveillance.
Checking and cross verifying is already a part of our culture and rightly so. In pre-arranged marriages, the prospective suitors are screened for eligibility. Elders discreetly meet his friends, neighbours, and even the owner of a cigarette tuck shop to get a feel of the lad’s temperament before starting the sweetening of the mouth ritual, though in years they mostly end like every other nuptiality.
Three decades ago, as I was joining the police service, my security clearance was handled in a similar manner by a head constable in my neighbourhood. He was given a grand reception by my father, ‘mithai’ lest he adds some ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ in my vetting report. During my time in Balochistan, I had the opportunity to help an undercover agent fill out my pre-clearance form. I was continuously scrutinised during subsequent promotions. To be honest, I think I managed to cover my omissions by keeping my professional actions up to par.
Initially, the screening task was performed by the Special Branch, subsequently by civilians, and later by other leading armed forces intelligence agencies. The Three ‘W’s (women, wealth, and wine) were the yardstick, though ironically very much gender biased. To assess performance and conduct, primarily human intelligence, peer reviews, annual confidential reports, and community impressions were used in the past, but are now supplemented with the technology of bugging and cross-checking call data records (CDR) of incoming and outgoing calls.
I have seen officers parked as OSD (officer on special duty), the ultimate mortification of this noble acronym, getting promoted only to revert to OSD status once more. Civilian three-stars in the past and now, deemed necessary for elevation and performance at this coveted level, many at times inadequately given ill-suited assignments not in commensurations with the level of promotion made or for optimum use of expertise.
The notification for screening by the premiere security agency has unnecessarily provoked resentment among bureaucratic circles against the spy body, though no fault of their own. Perhaps, they themselves are wondering about this novel idea. Are they free from their core job where they are already embroiled deeply—counter terrorism, counter insurgency, bordering issues, scrutiny of their own rank and files? For this additional task to be effective on the ground, perhaps a new wing and resources are needed.
Ironically, the rulers and government functionaries’ have tied their hands themselves. How would they negate or supersede a signed negative report? What would its standing be amongst other institutional grades given? Is it a sane move? What the government is up to, is not clear. On one side it is making changes in the NAB law that the onus of proof lies with the accuser. Will this yardstick apply to intelligence reports as well?
There are fears of reports being challenged in the courts of law and professional intelligence officers being dragged there as well. Will they explain how the report was formulated and using what discreet methods? This is tantamount to exposing state secrets. One wonders that while taking the decision, the government ignored the fact that henceforth, civil bureaucracy will be looking towards those who shall generate these reports instead of the government itself.
At the bureaucracy front, it has sparked a controversy, especially on social media. From what is gathered from group discussions, civil servants are demoralised. A lot of people worry this will lead them dancing to the tune of junior agency reporting officers. Another perspective is that honest officers need not to bother, nevertheless the people with grade shades would beat around field officers to get a clean chit.
The public servant is the backbone of the state’s civil machinery. As we witness declines in society and in many fields around us, this institution is not an exception. A sharp rise in the lust for money and a steep decline in moral values has been witnessed among those in authority in every department. There is a need to control the wild horse, but the move to hand over the reins to someone else to whip, is not a prudent strategy and needs to be reevaluated and pondered.
‘Caesars’ and those who call the shots are forever changing. But alas, the core principles of management and governance remain the same, like ‘old wine in a new bottle’. Regardless of the timeline, the people who run affairs tend to seek protagonists, loyalists, stereotype conformists and a class of groupthink who don’t normally disagree or dissent. However, many outstanding and hard-to-bypass individuals slip through because of their high moral integrity and professionalism.
Whatever the desire, it must be well curved out, with equity and participation of relevant stakeholders. Every policy must be transparent, meet moral and legal requirements, and follow the rules of business. The things need to be harnessed with the right parameters to boost good governance and rule of law as opposed to the rulership. Anyone who differs in opinion or is on the left is not a heretic.
Regimes need to understand that civil society and the international community of nations have views, auras, keep a close watch on events worldwide, approve or denounce actions, and grade a nation to the world index of public trust in their administrations. In a nutshell, only reason and logic, tempered with fairness, can help a national cause.
“It is a fact that, in countries where wise people are in power, their subjects do not know their rulers exist (Lao Tzu)”. “The best government is the one that governs the least”. This is accomplished by providing mass empowerment through educational programs, health projects, and poverty alleviation schemes, and by giving them a stake in decision making.
‘Good government is good politics, the essence being trust, not scepticism’.