**The accountability promise**

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When one reflects on the state of accountability and recovery of looted public money in Pakistan, there seems to be a gap between rhetoric and reality. In the past fourteen months, the ruling party’s much touted claim to being the toughest on accountability swung into action but without really affecting its own men in power.

Last year, what many wanted to know is whether Prime Minister Imran Khan’s accountability drive would go beyond beyond merely symbolic crackdowns on corruption and start paying attention to improving efficiency. While the recovery of looted money turned into a wild goose chase, the government introduced a new NAB Ordinance, somewhat providing a clean chit to some of those facing NAB investigations/inquiries. The rhetoric on amending the accountability laws has remained a high priority, without improving institutional efficiency.

The corruption crusade against top opposition leaders has been unrelenting. Some of those caught in the cross-hairs of said crusade are: ex premier Nawaz Sharif, leader of opposition Shahbaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz, Hamza Shahbaz Sharif, ex premier Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Ishaq Dar, Khawaja Saad Rafique, ex president Asif Ali Zardari, Khurshid Shah and PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. However, cases against PM Khan and his associates have not moved ahead. Headlines on corruption stories flew but no progress was made in accountability cases involving other institutions.

Corruption has proved a tough nut to crack for Prime Minister Imran Khan, and by frittering away valuable time and resources the government has failed to figure out the problem and left ‘Naya Pakistan’ on shaky foundations. Khan seems more interested in using the corruption issue as a platform to settle old political scores, and persists in the delusion that corruption and accountability are to be pursued only outside the regime he heads. Although Khan continued to enjoy considerable public traction on the issue of rooting out corruption, the NAB ordinance issued by the PTI government was seen by some as an 'NRO Plus'. Like previous regimes, corruption and accountability appear to be dog-whistles for carrying out political vendettas.

Given the direction the country was moving in, many believed that even making legitimate money in Pakistan would become close to an unlawful act. But these fears have yet to materialize. The government faces a litmus test in the months ahead, especially after the prime minister has himself been raising the stakes with claims that over $11 billion in ill-gotten wealth is stashed in the foreign accounts of Pakistanis. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Accountability Shehzad Akbar, the man tasked by PM Khan to recover the supposedly looted money of Pakistan, has yet to perform miracles, except a doubtful deal linked to a big businessman which has been sealed by the federal cabinet.

One would support a credible accountability process if it were not used for political ends and applied equally to all political parties and institutions. With this aim, the new NAB ordinance will go to parliament this month. However, so far the efforts of the government have not been result oriented, creating much sound and fury rather than delivering anything concrete. The reason for the failure was obvious in the first place; the law enforcement and investigation agencies lack the means to detect and apprehend white collar criminals – and this was perhaps a key reason why many of those accused who were arrested by NAB later got out on bail. Many claim that the government is too dependent on other powerful elements, which is likely to create more sociopolitical and economic problems rather than improve anything.

After the trailblazing trial of the Sharifs in the Panama Papers case, investigations revealed multiple fraudulent accounts containing billions of rupees, springing unbelievable surprises for Asif Zardari and Faryal Talpur, who got bail before they could stand trial. Accordingly, questions arose over the lethal power of NAB after the introduction of the new NAB ordinance. One wonders what will become the fate of key cases involving businessmen and government officials as the new law provides relief to the latter.

The top corruption watchdog is currently dealing with some 6,012 corruption cases involving public money worth Rs1,256 billion which is equal to almost one fourth of our annual budget. NAB has filed some 800 corruption references in accountability courts in the past four years but only 171 (19 percent) references were decided in its favour. This raises serious questions over NAB’s performance as the body struggles to adhere to the tried and tested model of anti-corruption spelled out by the UNCAC (United Nations Convention Against Corruption).

Many critics also question the role of the Public Accounts Committee in parliament and in the provincial legislatures after the auditor general of Pakistan pointed out irregularities amounting to Rs8.2 trillion and Rs1.1 trillion in the federal and provincial government accounts respectively. As the campaign to eradicate the corruption epidemic has run into significant obstacles, Pakistan has struggled to cope with pressure from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to implement effective legislation and avoid ending up on its blacklist.

The government charged Shahzad Akbar with the herculean task of filing cases abroad to retrieve ill-gotten money. Many continue to question if the government will be able to successfully deal with hundreds of such cases and recover some $300 billion stashed abroad. It's a difficult task, if not an impossible one, and will require years to see through; and experts say that the government should avoid making idealistic claims on this important issue. Concerning our domestic laws the recovery of ill-gotten money through provision of section 25(b) of NAO 1999 (plea bargain) may increase and the government will most likely opt for another amnesty scheme for those who have hidden their assets abroad in 2020.

Empowering institutions coping with mega scams, however, will require effective government, great resolve and accountability legislation driven by an evolving political consensus. As the system has become almost dysfunctional with all types of initiatives doing the rounds, the government has to empower institutions heads and decision-makers to deal with high-profile inquiries. NAB Chairman Justice (r) Javed Iqbal and Mirza Shahzad Akbar will continue to remain in focus since the people of Pakistan have pinned their hopes on the PTI's promises to recover ill-gotten wealth of politicians and others from foreign banks.

Moving forward, Premier Khan should ditch the politics of confrontation and seek to heal old wounds. Let corruption be tackled by the institutions. Politics requires consistency and a consensual approach. That’s the need of the hour, not chasing shadows or building castles in the air.

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