[Senator Lt-gen](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/senator-lt-gen)

February 16, 2021

**President in the house**

Abdul Qayyum

As per Article 50 of the constitution of the Islamic republic of Pakistan, the president is an essential part of parliament and may, as per Article 56 of the constitution, address either house or both houses assembled together at the commencement of the first session after election and at the commencement of the first session every year.

Thereafter, time is allocated for discussion in both houses of parliament on matters referred to in the address of the president. This, more often than not, proves to be an exercise in futility because of the poor standard of speeches due to average calibre as well as lack of proper briefing by the sitting prime ministers. As per the conditions laid down in the constitution for the eligibility of a presidential candidate, s/he has to be minimum of 45 years of age and should meet the eligibility criteria to become a member of parliament but may not necessarily be a parliamentarian. So the field is always open for the most talented, worldly wise and suitable candidate for the highest office in the country.

However, political parties have always preferred to elect personally loyal, mediocre persons as presidents, with the least potential to out-shine the sitting prime minister – and ever ready to sign on the dotted lines whenever desired. Such heads of the state in the past, barring a few, had neither the capacity to make a meaningful contribution in statecraft nor the guts to come out with an unbiased objective assessment about government performance while addressing the joint sessions of parliament. Members would usually listen to written speeches fed to the president by the PM Secretariat, normally devoid of objectivity and containing mainly undeserving praises of the government.

It is also pertinent to note that, as per Article 46 of the constitution, the prime minister is bound to keep the president informed about all matters of domestic and foreign policies and all legislative proposals which the federal government intends to bring before parliament. I really doubt if any of our prime ministers ever visited the President House to meet this constitutional requirement.

The recent address by current President Arif Alvi to the joint session was also very traditional and left much to be desired. It was full of praises for the government while turning a blind eye towards the major grey areas and fault-lines which need immediate attention. The address lacked an in-depth analysis of the performance of the government in the past one year. It gave no direction or guidelines as to how to tackle the prevailing serious governance challenges, domestic political issues, macro economic instability and the stagnant foreign policy.

Article 41 of the constitution says that the president of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan will be the symbol of unity for the country. This notwithstanding, the president did not say a single word about the prevailing acute political polarisation in the country which involves personal attacks, and has totally severed even the working relationship between leaders of the house and the opposition. PM Imran Khan has been reported as saying that he would even consider it an insult if opposition members praised him for any of his achievements – which unfortunately are hardly any in any case.

Such pungent political environments can bring the entire state edifice to a grinding halt, encouraging non-political forces to fill the vacuum which will be disastrous for the country. The president praised the government for the agreement with the IMF, fight against the coronavirus, Ehsaas programme, online education, reduction in current account deficit and construction of shelters for the homeless, with passing reference to Kashmir and Afghanistan

The president ignored the fact that online education has proved to be an utter failure here. He also did not bring out that 22.8 million children are out of school even today and 32 percent drop out before even clearing their matriculation exams. In this competition we are only ahead of Nigeria in the entire world. We are spending only 2.6 percent of GDP on education. Literacy rates are at extreme variance in different parts of the country. While in Islamabad we have a 98 percent literacy rate, in the former tribal belt it is only 9.5 percent.

Over 40 percent of primary schools in the rural areas have neither electricity nor clean drinking water. Forty-nine percent schools are without toilets. Only 12 percent of the education budget is allocated for higher education, while ideally it should be about 33 percent. Similarly, the president did not refer to the shrinking size of our economy, which reduced from $315 billion to $264 billion. He also didn’t refer to the alarming increase in fiscal deficit which has touched the alarming figure of 8.9 percent of our GDP. He even forgot to allude to our worsening corruption records as recently mentioned by Transparency International. Or the rampant unemployment, ever-increasing inflation, selective accountability, dismal progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and slow paddling of CPEC projects.

Pakistan can only progress if, in addition to the judiciary and the executive, parliament is also made potent and strong. That includes the office of the president who is an essential part of parliament.

The writer is chairman Senate Standing Committee on Defence Production.