**The challenges of governance**

Kamila Hyat

Thursday, Oct 07, 2021

The detailed tweet by the former special assistant to the prime minister on power and petroleum, Tabish Gauhar, has offered a valuable insight into why the government so often struggles to function. Gauhar – who has served in an extremely senior position at K-Electric, has been associated with the troubled Abraaj Capital, and runs as chairperson his own management consultancy Oasis Energy – was brought into government nearly a year ago.

Previously, he had resigned from his post in January, citing interference in his work and stating that he was unsure about who to report to, given the number of different people who handled the energy sector and its matters in the country. Then, his resignation was declined, but it has been accepted now.

The points that Gauhar has raised in his tweet are quite important. He points out that there is a lack of consensus on energy policies within the government, which leads to confusion when it comes to making decisions. In this context, he has also pointed out that the government is reluctant to accept the role of provinces and that through centralisation – which means that a company like the Sukkur Electric Power Company (Sepco) which is based in Sukkur is managed by the federal government in Islamabad – it is almost impossible to manage power companies.

The question is: will the government which rarely takes matters to parliament and instead prefers to discuss them with a coterie of advisers, who sit together and make crucial decisions, pay attention to his advice? This behaviour is evident from the prime minister’s recent statement about possible talks with some groups of the Taliban – we’re still uncertain whether he was talking about the ‘good’ or the ‘bad’ Taliban – in an interview to a Turkish TV news channel. As the opposition has vehemently asserted, the matter needed to be discussed and debated in parliament, and all parties should have been allowed to put forward their suggestions.

If the government is not going to follow this procedure, we should ask why we have parliament at all and why we cannot just switch to some other system which allows a single person or a small number of people to rule. Maintaining parliament is an expensive exercise. The costs are justified only if people’s representatives are able to voice their opinions and be involved, whether they sit on the treasury or opposition benches, in the difficult process of running a country which faces many challenges.

It seemed obvious that Gauhar wanted to do his job to the best of his ability. To achieve this, he and his team clearly needed to act innovatively and, to some degree, independently. Without such autonomy, managing a complicated sector like energy is next to impossible. This was what the former SAPM pointed to as he resigned. Others may feel the same, but are, for now, unwilling to give up power and position.

By putting forward the challenges he faced, Gauhar has made our task of understanding the PTI government a little easier. Much of what he has said had already been mentioned before. There is a dire need to reduce the influence of external institutions like, say NAB, so that officials at all levels are able to make decisions without fear and that policy consensus can be devised over key matters while monopolies and cartels, such as those that exist in the power sector, are discouraged.

It is unfortunate that key members of the government, including those who already have experience in running the affairs of the nation, have not been able to detect these flaws and find ways to correct them. This oversight is troubling. The same problems extend to other sectors as well. We have seen confusion in various areas as well as in simple mismanagement – all of which gave rise to the term ‘U-turn’ that we so often use in our discussions and writings.

There is absolutely no harm in reversing a decision or changing a policy if required. However, doing so frequently and without prior consultation simply undermines the government and makes people believe that rulers are either not capable or not accustomed to discussing matters internally and in parliament before announcing them to the people.

It is just also crucial that parliament plays a far more significant role in managing the country’s affairs. So far, it has been overlooked several times, with the government opting for the far easier route of using ordinances to put laws into action rather than going through the more complicated process of placing them before parliament. The latter requires a relatively long process, with discussions before committees and in both houses before a bill can be passed. However, the reason the system exists is to ensure that different points are represented and all opinions are taken into account. This is done so that all involved, including the people, can better understand the pros and cons of a particular decision.

This could be done in the case of talks with the Taliban, in the case of the Single National Curriculum (SNC), in the handling of the Covid-19 crisis, and in many other matters, including the decision to promote domestic tourism in the country. Although it’s true that the decision that the government made without parliamentary debates were taken in good faith, such decisions can go wrong if there is insufficient planning and insufficient debate.

The reason parliament exists is to allow such debate to happen. At the same time, as Gauhar has pointed out, we need clarity in our policies. This clarity would also prevent the other problems he has mentioned, with journalists taking the lead in pointing out visible errors and requesting government representative to clarify contradictory statements that create confusion. Now that the PTI has completed more than three years in power, we expect it to have picked up cues, which can lead to better governance and help it determine how a particular task can be carried out.

The continued problems with NAB, for example, are extremely significant. The organisation, which was intended to manage accountability in the country and prevent corruption, has inadvertently turned the otherwise smooth working process of various organisations into a cumbersome task, which discourages many people from introducing timely reforms and uplifting the underperforming sectors. Bureaucrats and traders have already pointed this out.

Gauhar’s striking remarks on what is wrong with the government need to be taken seriously for the future so that at least the mechanisms of governance can be put on the right track, and we can move towards a system which works and serves the people who brought the PTI government to power.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail.com