**Back to governance**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-01-25

DESPITE sporadic agitational activity by the opposition, Prime Minister Imran Khan has enough political space to consider acting on a number of fronts to repurpose his government. His government has a window of opportunity to take initiatives and focus on governance rather than the opposition. This will also demonstrate that it has gone past the phase of its unifocal preoccupation with the opposition.  
  
While PDM has continued efforts to mount politicalpressure it has been unable toforce a crisis to challenge the PTI government or warrant its fulltime attention. This means the government has the chance to get down to serious business and set, as well as, elaborate its agenda for the year ahead.  
  
Among the steps it might consider are: 1) engage more actively at the leadership level in managing the pandemic and laying out the vaccination plan; 2) recast the cabinet and its team in Punjab; 3) reach out to the business community to encourage investment and boost productivity and growth; 4) plan for comprehensive civil service reform; 5) undertake a wide-ranging review of foreign policy.  
  
Although the Covid-19 situation is not as alarming as it is in other countries, including in the neighbourhood, this is no reason to be sanguine about the future. Especially so because examples from elsewhere show that cases surge when complacency or fatigue sets in, or when new variants enter the country. A hands-on approach by the leadership is needed in a number of areas: robust public messaging (virtually absent now), increased testing, as well as ensuring SOP compliance by businesses/ markets/ educational institutions.  
  
Above all, the government must ensure that procurement of vaccines is swiftly done. It is already behind the curve on this count.There is little clarity about which vaccines will be secured given the global challenge of unequal access with richer countries monopolising initial supplies. Yet to be explained is how vaccines will be rolled out across the country. The Pakistan Medical Association has also asked for clarification and criticised the government for lack of plans to vaccinate people. The prime minister should himself lay out the national vaccination plan as this is obviously the only way toexit from the pandemic.  
  
Mid-term is also an appropriate time for the government to reconfigure its team. The prime minister has frequently voiced dissatisfaction with the working of several ministries. But this has rarely been followed by corrective action. Shuffling a minister or two doesn`t inject new vigour into a team that looks jaded and is tellingly short on competence. A lean and effective team that has political gravitas will in fact help steer the party to the next election. The cabinet needs to inspire public confidence by showing an ability to deliver, not just engage in political invective against opponents.  
  
The leadership in Punjab remains the government`s weakest point and has shown little capacity todevelopthepoliticalandgoverningskillsneeded to run the country`s largest province. Consequently, PTI has lost political ground here and is increasingly out of sync with its own urban middle-class constituency which feels under-represented by the provincialleadership.  
  
The macroeconomic challenge has been managed reasonably well in the face of economic blows delivered by the pandemic. But this is a necessary, not sufficient, condition for economic recovery. A key microeconomic policy step would be to ease the cost of doing business by tackling the regulatory burden that is impeding productivity and efficiency, and hindering investment and growth so essential to deal with debt liabilities. The government should reach out to the business community to evolve a longer-term strategy to promote productivity, trade and investment. Rather than convene large meetings it should engage with specific industry groups and determine how to encourage investment. Without a significant increase in investment, economic growth, forecast at less than one per cent in the current fiscal year, will not take off even when the pandemic is under control. With debt building up this will constrain the government`s ability to address rising unemployment.  
  
The government should move decisively, after necessary consultation with stakeholders, to implement institutional reform to make the civil service fit for purpose and people-friendly. The recent official announcement that `reforms` have been approved bythe prime minister entail proposed changes which barely go beyond efficiency and discipline rules and conversion of existing promotion policy into promotion rules. They fall way short of comprehensive civil service reform. Piecemeal changes can in fact cause confusion and be counterproductive.  
  
The elements of comprehensive reform are well known: depoliticisation to ensure merit in postings and transfers, fundamental changes in training and recruitment to promote understanding of the complex nature of modern governance and encourage specialisation and technological know-how, reverse falling standards, incentivise performance, set out measurable deliverables, strictly implement rotation policy, weed out poor performers by severance packages and consider only the most competent for the highest grades. Regulatory agencies including Nepra, Ogra and Pemra also need to be restructured along modern lines.  
  
Another key policy area that merits immediate attention is Pakistan`s external engagements. A wide-ranging foreign policy review is necessary to adjust to sweeping changes taking place in the world and in our region. At a time when the global environment and geopolitical shifts offer both challenges and opportunities it is essential that our foreign policy goals are placed in this wider context and diplomatic initiatives framed to leverage or respond to them. Often relations with specific countries are dealt with in silos and tend to be reactive and ad hoc rather than strategically thought through. That is a why a broad review is important.  
  
The government has not undertaken such a review since it assumed power. Occasional briefings to the prime minister on key relationships are obviously not the same thing as for him to preside over a review of the whole gamut of foreign policy with inputs from Pakistan`s Missions across the world.  
  
By moving on these multiple fronts in a coherent and consensual manner the government may be able to dispel the widespread public impression that it is only muddling through and has a single-issue fixationthe opposition. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.