**Crisis of public trust**

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Effective governance is a key factor for establishing public trust for any political democratic dispensation and governments ensure it through effective delivery systems.

In Pakistan, we have witnessed erosion of public trust in government institutions because in the last few decades successive governments have failed to fulfil promises of establishing a transparent, accountable, responsive, equitable and rule-based governance system. The unaddressed erosion of public trust in the governance system could lead to a weakening of the very foundations of our state. The World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators rank Pakistan’s institutional quality “near [the] bottom among 200 countries”; there is distrust, uncertainty and lack of confidence in our policymaking and implementation institutions.

Our poor economic performance and inability to build an equitable governance system has resulted in widening the wealth gap between different segments of society, creating a lot of resentment against such deprivation. The youth of today is losing hope and trust in the state and we are witnessing an exodus of not only skilled human capital but also regular persons for greener pastures. Scandals (like the recent wheat scandal) in the public sector are common and lead to huge losses to the public exchequer, and taxpayer money is either wasted or siphoned off by the cronies of the political elite with the help of the bureaucratic machinery without holding anyone accountable, something that disappoints the people.

Governance is all about processes, systems, structures, rules and institutions and defines how decisions are made, power is exercised and resources allocated. The law of the land makes public functionaries responsible to ensure that public funds are utilized legally, transparently and that value for money is achieved through attainment of national objectives.

When critical public service institutions such as the judiciary, ministries, regulatory bodies and line departments at the federal and provincial levels are unable to play an effective role in maintaining rule of law and ensuring effective delivery of services, then trust level depletes. Public trust plays a crucial role in creating synergy in the system, and promoting cooperation among different stakeholders and development in the country. The biggest socio-economic challenges of Pakistan cannot be addressed in the absence of a robust governance system, which would establish trust in our public institutions, and minimize chances of political volatility. The effectiveness of our public institutions depends on the trust that citizens and businesses repose in them.

The effectiveness of the governance system hinges on its capacity to ensure provision of goods and services to the people. When we apply this touchstone in the context of Pakistan, it shows that our systems have consistently failed to deliver. A good governance system is bound to ensure transparency, accountability, effectiveness, equity, participation and responsiveness, which are pivotal for economic development, social justice and human well-being. Unfortunately, in Pakistan poor service delivery has played a significant role in governance failure, as the public sector continues to struggle to provide effective and efficient services thereby creating a trust deficit in government institutions.

Our poor economic and human indicators in sectors like finance, trade, energy, health, education, water and sanitation, transport, law and order and general administration portray a dismal picture of the performance of our implementing agencies and entities. The failures of our institutional governance and poor delivery system have created not only a sense of disillusionment and mistrust among the citizens, but also promoted a culture of corruption and nepotism which has weakened public institutions.

Effective institutional arrangements could become instrumental in augmenting public trust in state functioning because citizens trust public institutions when they deliver services that improve their lives. In Pakistan, maintaining public trust has been a major challenge for successive governments. The situation exacerbated due to political instability, weak rule of law and accountability, mismanagement of public resources, corruption and cronyism, poor delivery systems, lack of reforms in the public sector, lack of transparency in public decision-making and unmet expectations.

Trust is essential for governance; it is therefore necessary for governments to build it among the public. Successful implementation of policies is directly linked to the level of trust citizens repose in their governments. Citizen compliance with government policies is “either assumed or, alternately, achieved via coercion by law and enforcement”. In Pakistan we have recently seen the failure of the FBR’s trader registration campaign, which was based more on a coercive approach without extensive consultation with the key stakeholder.

It would be easy for a trustworthy government to implement its policies. This is possible when the public institutions command the trust of people on the basis of their efficient and effective delivery of services. If we want voluntary compliance with government policies and development initiatives then public trust in government and state will have to be reestablished by strengthening governance systems to ensure delivery of services in every sector of the economy. Public trust will be established when people see that their money is well spent on public goods and services. It is only then that they would be willing to pay their taxes.

On the other hand, waste, plunder and siphoning off of public funds with help from a corrupt mafia and public functionaries demotivates people from paying taxes to the state. There is a positive correlation between high confidence in the government and voluntary compliance with government decisions and policies.

Our experience has made us aware of the inadequacy of the current governance style and institutional constraints to deliver effectively. To address the issue of the trust deficit, there is a need to bring qualitative changes in our governance structures at the federal, provincial and local levels through a robust reform agenda to make them lean and smart. The emergence of destructive technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are rapidly changing the working processes and governance approach of the public sector. This transformational wave is posing not only new challenges to the government and the public functionaries but also rendering the stereotypical working approaches redundant.

Our systems have to be responsive to the needs of the time while eliminating inefficiencies, distortions and wastage of resources. In terms of building trust in the state, the paramount driver is respect for rule of law along with ensuring effective policymaking and its implementation. Governance at ministerial and departmental levels shall have to be more transparent, responsive, equitable, and corruption-free with an inclusive approach for better delivery systems.

The operational inefficiencies need to be done away with by simplifying the procedural and regulatory regime with the help of automation. Public servants need to acquire new skills and competencies to deliver effectively. Public trust is critical to expanding state capacity in the long run and to tackling challenges such as revamping of the economy, climate change and law and order.

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