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**Learning from failure?**

Prime Minister Imran Khan’s direct intervention this week to reduce the prices of a handful of essential commodities is hardly an impressive feat as his eighteen-month old government struggles to beat the odds.

What lies beneath the ongoing crisis is a mix of policy failures coupled with a continuing institutional failure that has consistently dragged down Pakistan’s outlook. Together, these failures have come to haunt the country in more ways than one.

Almost eighteen months after taking charge of Pakistan in a major upset for the country’s two established frontline political parties, Prime Minister Khan faces a host of tough challenges. Some from his party continue to place the onus of responsibility on a reckless economic management under the last government of Nawaz Sharif.

But that line has run out of its sell-by date. The crisis today is squarely the consequence of the present government’s mounting failures. Going forward, if indeed Prime Minister Khan chooses to assess the failure that has brought about the prevailing crisis, there’s much to be learnt.

Primarily, he has to accept that this is a crisis made by choices under the PTI’s tenure. Shortages of wheat – real or not – have led to an up to 50 percent price rise of this essential commodity in parts of Pakistan in a matter of months. Meanwhile, the shortage of sugar has provoked opposition-led demands seeking an inquiry on the role of some of the most infamous political bigwigs at the heart of the PTI’s ruling coterie.

Were wheat and sugar exports conveniently allowed despite a visible anticipation of demand outstripping supplies in the coming months? That pertinent question has yet to be answered in full in spite of official promises to fully investigate the root cause that led to this full blown and unfortunate saga.

A comprehensive probe must not just examine the past six months or indeed 18 months under Prime Minister Khan’s rule. Beyond just the supply and demand elements lies a failure to focus adequately on an already starved agriculture sector.

In the past year, the failure of the once thriving cotton crop alongside the under-performance of some of the key additional crops,together exposed the rot set across large parts of Pakistan’s rural heartland. A comprehensive assessment of the malaise must consider a failure to adequately support the farming community across the country. Ultimately, this failure has brought down outputs of some of the key crops and fuelled possibly the worst downturn in farm incomes in Pakistan’s history.

The malaise must also be judged in view of a failure to revamp the consistently weakening structures of the Pakistani state. Alarmingly, parts of the country have witnessed a virtual abdication of responsibility by elements of the state while other areas have witnessed a sliding authority of the ruling structure.

Reversing this trend requires a clearly defined focus on recreating institutions in a way that the state resumes its hold on key areas at the centre of vital economic activity. Primarily, this would centrally need to focus on food security across Pakistan, with the necessary tools to meet this objective all put well in place.

Meanwhile, it’s clear that the government’s ability to assess upcoming challenges remains weak and in need of a revamp. In Islamabad, the planning division – once considered the core of all policy decisions – has clearly lost its gloss. Unlike yesteryears when this once august institution centrally led the policy framework, today’s decision-making environment presents a different and a dismal picture.

A similar decay has become deeply rooted across the provinces, notably Punjab which is ruled by a PTI-led government. The current administration of this province, once considered the breadbasket of Pakistan, appears to have failed to tackle elements of agriculture and food security under its charge. For Prime Minister Khan, setting a new direction in Punjab has become more like a make it or break it battle for the future of his government.

PM Khan however faces much larger odds than simply saving Punjab’s Chief Minister Usman Buzdar. The ultimate question is just one: will the prime minister learn from his government’s mounting failures and set in place a corrective course?

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