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**Planning with peanuts**

If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys. Not very long ago we used to say this to describe the plight of education and health spending in Pakistan.

Today, it is no more just the story of the education and health sectors as we are paying peanuts all around and we are now infatuated with the idea of creating an incompetent generation in all spheres of life.

Under an acute economic crisis of its own making, the PTI government seems to be struggling to reconcile with the idea of a new Pakistan. I beg the pardon of the readers but the truth is that we are well on the way to becoming one of the most incompetent nations on earth. Who stops us from breaking new records? Look at our ranking on the Human Development Index (HDI), Corruption Perception Index and Gender Equity Index; we are becoming what we deserve to be with current policies. It is not naked pessimism; it is the reality of our state of being as a nation today.

The other day I was arguing with a senior official of a leading social protection entity of Pakistan on its strange criterion to select professionals for technical positions on the basis of the lowest bid. You may have extraordinary talent, professional credentials and academic excellence but we have our own constraints to choose the lowest bidders, argued the senior official. Well, fair enough, you may have a defined budget but what if a well-qualified professional falls within the budget; will you still go for the lowest bidder? I questioned. The gentleman replied, ‘Yes of course we cannot hire someone on higher rates if the lowest bidders are available in the market with the minimum required qualification.’ Do you still expect better results when you exclude talent for the lowest bid? I asked. The answer was predictably simple, ‘Yes of course the money I save here will be used for the welfare of the poor’.

How would that money be going to the poor when the person you have hired lacks the required skills to design and deliver an effective social protection project? Would not that mean we are wasting the bulk of development funds due to inefficiency? Do you think it is like being penny wise, pound foolish? I bombarded the official with questions. I could notice the unrest on his face and I, therefore, decided to leave his office before our meeting turned into a moment of annoyance for both of us.

What is wrong with us? This happens when one equates development with charity, when social welfare becomes reduced to a soup kitchen initiative, when economics becomes a counting scheme of calves and chickens. This is not the end of the story though. We go on taking austerity measures by selling a few buffalos or putting some luxury vehicles on auction and then leaving the rest of the economy at the mercy of whimsical speakers who rebuke past governments. PTI leaders (not all of them though) enjoy treading the easier path of bashing past regimes rather than taking the pains of doing what they had promised to do before the elections. While the promises of Naya Pakistan are down and dusted, we still show no restraints in paying peanuts to build a better Pakistan. Incompetence is a menace only if one realizes that it is eating us from within – but when it becomes a norm, who cares then?

Incompetence is a blessing too when it takes nothing more than blaming others for our own mistakes. Every other institution today competes for incompetence and those few who are competent and who have empathy to do something to alleviate the pains of the teeming poor of this country have become square pegs. Almost a month ago, Dr Sania Nisthar faced the wrath of the incompetent; her only problem is being competent and upright. There are few more who are competent but would they survive the wrath of incompetent lot is a million dollar question today.

However it has become a bit obvious that the days of the competent lot within the ruling party are numbered. With all those anachronistic references to a golden age, the idea of a welfare state is not unfolding to the common people as a boon and Pakistan is moving towards chaos and civil strife. Nothing seems to be working and even those oft-repeated moral parables in the public sermons of Prime Minister Imran Khan are proving insufficient to pacify the rising tides of political unrest.

On the political horizon of Pakistan, there are clouds of despair and hopelessness which may engulf us all and it is unfortunate that even mainstream political parties are not playing their due role to safeguard democracy. Mainstream political parties have failed to demonstrate that in this time of despair they stand by the people of Pakistan.

The incumbent government has done exactly the opposite of its pre-election promises. It has gagged mainstream media and now there is another regulation in the making to control social media platforms to curb the constitutionally guaranteed right of self-expression. Poverty is on the rise, inflation has crossed the alarming figure of 15 percent, economic growth has gone down to 1.9 percent and 12 million people have been unemployed within a year.

There are no good signs in the foreseeable future too as the economy will continue to show a lowering growth rate of 1.3 percent during the coming two years. In the agriculture and manufacturing sectors, the growth will remain negative which means that unemployment, poverty and inflation will go up further and there will be more regressive taxation. The salaried middle class will bear the brunt of regressive taxation with shrinking opportunities for income diversification. The government does not seem to have any palpable strategy to reverse the trend of economic slowdown. Industry is not flourishing in the presence of a repressive FBR regime while the opening up of the economy under IMF conditions will worsen the business environment for local industrialists.

Government borrowing from the central bank has gone up to Rs15,000 billion in a year while external debt liabilities have reached the highest in the history of the country. The danger does not lie in borrowing; it is the use of the loan that makes the difference here. The borrowed money is not utilized to help the economy back on a growth trajectory; it is used for unproductive purposes like meeting non-development expenditures and debt serving etc.

Other than industries and the development sector, education and health services will also see further cuts in their meagre budgets during the next financial year. In particular, there will be drastic cuts in research and development funds which currently stands at 0.09 percent of GDP – one of the lowest in South Asia. In order to translate the PTI’s political rhetoric of building five million houses and creating some ten million jobs Pakistan must be able to double its GDP size and then the economy must grow at a rate of 8 percent for the next ten years. As far as planning is concerned to address these taunting problems, the government does not seem to bother much.

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