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**A tale of incompetence**

Just a few weeks back, it all looked great for the ruling party – or so they thought. The opposition, on the other hand – mainly the PML-N – looked down and out. It was a triumphant moment for the party in power. The euphoria was best reflected by that now infamous Faisal Vawda incident in Kashif Abbasi’s show. The celebrations, however, were short-lived.

Since then, the PTI looks like it’s out of breath. From Peshawar to Lahore to Quetta, and not forgetting Islamabad, the government is losing on all fronts. Its ministers are making serious allegations against their own leadership. Its allies are accusing the PTI leadership of lack of delivery as well as of corruption.

The media has been consistently exposing the government for its poor handling of just about everything. So much so that the PM had to make a passionate appeal asking people not to watch TV talk shows or read newspapers – the easiest solution for all our problems.

We all knew about the incompetence and the economic mismanagement. For the last 17 months, we have seen it all: unprecedented price hikes, especially of essential items; higher gas and electricity tariffs; massive increase in taxes; significantly higher interest rates; faltering growth; massive job losses; negative industrial and agricultural growth etc. More concerning have been the serious governance issues led by Usman Buzdar in Punjab and Mahmood Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The wheat crisis was as embarrassing as it could get. As the crisis unfolded and prices went over the roof, the facts started coming out. In the second half of last year, the government decided to export six lakh tons of wheat. Just a few months later, the same government team realised there is massive supply constraints and we must import wheat. So the ECC has now decided to import three lakh tons of wheat.

In between these two events, we saw unprecedented price hikes and supply constraints. Considering the price increase of Rs20 per kg during the crisis period, and on the basis of average consumption, Pakistanis ended up paying an extra amount of Rs40 billion in the last one month (average consumption is 2.2 million tons per month multiplied by Rs20).

Who pocketed that extra Rs40 billion? This is the question that needs explanation. If there was no shortage, as the food minister claims, then why the supply constraint that led to phenomenal price increases? And why the decision to import when there is no shortage? If indeed there was shortage , then why was the decision not taken much earlier? All this again leads to the basic question regarding the wisdom to export in the first place.

When the crises reached its peak, Jehangir Tareen, who has no official position, announced that Pakistan will import three lakh tons of wheat. Such a decision is the exclusive domain of the ECC which had not met by that time and the summary by the relevant ministry had not even been presented. And the nation was being informed by Mr Jehangir Tareen that the decision had been made to import wheat. Sure enough, two days later, the ECC – of which Jehangir Tareen is not a member – approved the decision (which had already been announced by Tareen).

Even before the wheat crisis could be completely resolved, yet another crisis was hitting us – this time sugar. Suddenly, sugar prices started to reach unprecedented levels. And it seemed like another scam; yet another case of conflict of interest. With around 42 percent stakes in the sugar industry, there were justified speculations that members from the ruling circle had benefitted from the abnormal price increases. And yet the PM was pointing fingers at the sugar mafia and opposition leaders for this latest scam.

What decisions were taken at the government level that led to price increases? With a Rs20 per kg increase in sugar prices and with an average consumption of four lakh tonnes, the Pakistani public paid an extra amount of Rs8 billion during the month. Who pocketed that Rs8 billion?

The government faced more embarrassment when there was a mini revolt within the ruling party in KP. Rather than addressing the serious allegations of corruption and poor governance, the PM fired the three important ministers who had accused the province’s CM and termed him Usman Buzdar Plus. Interestingly two of the ministers, Atif Khan and Shaharam Tarakai were considered very close to the PM; yet the dismissal at the first instance.

Despite repeated interventions by the PM and his team in Islamabad, Punjab continues to represent extreme level of incompetence, poor governance and corruption. There has been simmering anger within the ruling party while the government’s allies have accused the CM of incompetence and some even of corruption. But the PM as usual believes that the situation can become normal by changing IGs and other senior bureaucrats. This formula hasn’t worked in the last 17 months and it will not work now or in the future. On the contrary, the situation has significantly deteriorated over the last year or so.

But nothing has been more embarrassing than the latest report of Transparency International. Notwithstanding the clarification by the local leadership of Transparency, the fact remains that Pakistan slipped three places from 117 to 120 during the term of the current government. In simple words, corruption has increased since Imran Khan took over as PM in August 2018. Accusing opponents is easy. Talking of corruption and blaming the opposition is simple. But controlling corruption or taking concrete steps seems to be beyond the capacity of this government. As the economic situation further deteriorates, the level of corruption can go further up during 2020.

The entire country has been affected by the above scams, poor governance, high inflation and deteriorating economic conditions. Even some federal ministers have been embarrassed by the prevailing situation. But instead of acknowledging the gravity of the situation and showing the determination to fix things, the prime minister has accused the opposition political parties and mafias for the present mess.

According to the PM, he knows who the mafias are. If he knows, why is he reluctant to take action against those mafias? Is the PM telling the nation that he is helpless against the mafias?

The writer is former governor Sindh and former minister for privatisation.