**[Power and purpose](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771335/power-and-purpose)**

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GENERAL elections are expected to be held in the country sometime early next year. The months leading up to the polls will see political leaders and their parties engaged in fierce electoral competition to secure power. Winning public office will obviously be their goal. But the question is, what plan and policies will they offer voters about how they propose to address the country’s myriad challenges? What public purpose will leaders bring to governance if elected?

Never before has Pakistan faced such a wide array of overlapping challenges, all of which need to be tackled with courage, imagination, and determination if they are to be surmounted. But politics in recent years has been focused more on power struggles than on public issues. Political leaders have directed much of their energy to power tussles and efforts to subdue opponents rather than evolving and presenting any policy plans.

This has made political parties almost indistinguishable in terms of their position on issues of public concern. The usual platitudes and clichés have dominated the political discourse, with no new policy ideas generated about how to deal with the country’s problems. At other times, vacuous rhetoric has substituted for policy proposals.

The most consequential challenge is, of course, the economy which remains precariously poised. Without sustainable economic recovery, the rest will be in vain. The [stand-by agreement](https://www.dawn.com/news/1762360) with the IMF has been projected as a major step towards economic stability. But it is only a temporary reprieve and, in any case, should be anchored in a comprehensive home-grown economic plan of structural reforms which can revive economic growth.

Official sights have been set so low that averting a debt default has become the principal goal of economic policy, and is even celebrated as an achievement. Qualifying for a Fund programme is regarded as a great accomplishment even though it is a sign that the country is in dire and desperate economic straits.

Having a record 23 IMF programmes is a reflection of poor, not good economic management. Of course, financial bailouts are necessary to stay solvent but they cannot become the be-all and end-all of economic strategy. Hyper-borrowing both at home or abroad can hardly be touted as a gain for the country.

True that the outgoing coalition government announced an “economic revival plan” predicated on the creation of the [Special Investment Facilitation Council](https://www.dawn.com/news/1770727) to promote “fast track” investment by friendly GCC countries in ailing state-owned enterprises and “untapped sectors of the economy”.

Announcements were made about the sale of public assets and state-owned businesses to Gulf states in a strategy to earn dollars by privatising state assets. But hopes of investment in new sectors cannot be delinked from the country’s ongoing macroeconomic crisis and unstable economic environment.

Moreover, foreign investment — whether from Gulf countries or beyond — requires consistency and predictability of policy as well as an atmosphere of political certainty and stability. It also needs a level playing field, transparency, and reliability of judicial enforcement to give confidence to investors.

Will political leaders offer new policy ideas about how to solve the country’s problems?

As for economic revival, a serious plan has to rest on wide-ranging structural reforms that address the root causes of Pakistan’s chronic external and internal financial imbalances — a narrow tax and export base, outsized state sector, insolvent power sector, and low savings rate.

The effectiveness of economic policy and reform in turn depends on the state of governance. The political context weighs heavily on the success or failure of economic policy. The best-conceived economic initiatives will go nowhere if there is weak or poor governance. After all, Pakistan’s persistent economic crises have all been rooted in a governance crisis.

The question this raises is whether the various aspirants for power in the electoral race have thought seriously about these and other issues that are pivotal for Pakistan’s economic and political future. Do they have policy proposals to offer to indicate their government will have an aim other than wielding power? Will the election only be about who secures public office or also about what they plan to do with that power to solve the country’s problems?

These problems include the eroding capacity of the institutions of governance. This imposes obvious limits on the exercise of power and ability to execute policies. It is also responsible for the long-term decline in public confidence in government institutions, as reflected in successive opinion surveys. The state’s institutional capacity has weakened over time, and consequently, the delivery of public services has deteriorated and fallen well short of people’s expectations.

This has happened because of two main reasons: one, postponed reforms, and two, politicisation of the civil service. Governance after independence required transforming colonial-era administrative structures to those in sync with the requirements of a developing country. But lack of reforms meant the administrative system was unable to keep pace with a changing society and the complex needs of modern governance.

The protracted politicisation of the bureaucratic and police system distorted its functioning and produced several deleterious consequences — the erosion of authority, the undermining of efficiency, the de-emphasis of merit, and the draining of morale.

For these reasons, the quality of the civil service has been in secular decline. Yet, achieving economic recovery and setting Pakistan on a path of growth and investment depends critically on strengthening institutional capacity that can efficiently mobilise resources, ensure proper service delivery and create a credible business-friendly environment.

This ought to make civil service reform an urgent priority. But again, it is unclear if any political party is committed to launching such reforms. Have political leaders done any thinking on how best to transform the apparatus of governance?

Of course, the answers to these questions will come when the election campaign starts and gets into swing. Then voters will be able to judge if those in the race for power have any programme and policies to offer, which go beyond the usual tired and lazy slogans.

People expect a departure from the past and want to see a government that isn’t just interested in wielding power but acts purposefully in the public interest.

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