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**The corruption narrative**

In the last two and a half years Pakistan has degenerated on a scale that is both massive and unprecedented. The failure is on every front – economy, foreign policy, governance, media freedom, civil liberties, and most significantly corruption. This article is exclusively devoted to how this government has fared on the corruption narrative.

The corruption performance of the present government has to be seen based on the following criteria: the narrative built up over several years leading up to the 2018 elections; the party’s commitment to end corruption within 90 days; the actual performance since the party has taken over the federal and provincial governments; it’s performance during 2013-2018 when it was ruling in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; and how the world looks at Pakistan in terms of the corruption index – best reflected by Transparency International.

As an opposition leader, Imran Khan has been in the forefront against corruption and accused the leadership of other political parties mainly the PML-N and the PPP of corruption. According to Imran, corruption meant anything involving kickbacks, commission, misuse of public office, conflict of interest, attracting independent winning candidates to gain support for forming government, giving development funds to MNAs / MPAs etc. This was before the elections. We see a completely different Imran Khan as PM. Gone are the principles advocated so strongly for all those years before the elections.

Independent candidates were lured to join the PTI after the 2018 elections, accommodated to ensure the PTI could form the government. Bitter enemies of the past were welcomed as coalition partners; this included the PML-Q and the MQM. Of course, Imran Khan justified all of this with his own strange logic.

Conflicts of interest have been completely ignored by the PM. This despite serious scams such as sugar, wheat, medicines, petrol, LNG and others where federal ministers have taken suspect decisions – but the PM has been indifferent to all the accusations.

Justifying failure is one thing but defending corruption is worrisome. The recent Transparency International report, according to which Pakistan has further slipped in the corruption index, is a poor reflection of the party’s inability to control corrupt practices. During the period 2013-2018, Pakistan consistently improved its ranking and ended the last year of its term at 117. This improvement over five years was remarkable considering massive development spending and phenomenal growth – aspects that would generally lead to increase in corruption. The improvement meant better controls, improved checks and balances and broad-based decision-making.

Like all other areas, the PTI came to power without any homework to control corruption. There was no understanding about the issues involved that leads to corrupt practices nor understanding of the public sector institutions. That explains why the party leader repeatedly committed to eliminate corruption within 90 days. It should not therefore come as a surprise that after almost 900 days, Pakistan is more corrupt than it was when the new government was formed in August 2018. It’s inability to acknowledge the latest transparency report is even more concerning.

The corruption narrative was built around simple assumptions and therefore the search for solutions lacked any concrete planning. The assumptions used were basic and simplistic. For example, according to the PM, Pakistan was losing Rs12 billion every single day as a result of corruption. This was apparently due to corrupt rulers; and the entire amount would be saved once the PTI came to power. On an annual basis, this comes to approximately Rs4000 billion.

Further, according to the PTI leadership, the country was losing $10 billion per annum through money laundering. In their calculations, this would be saved since corrupt rulers would no longer be there. The amount would then be added to SBP reserves.

Finally, and most importantly, the PTI supposed that $200 billion of looted money was parked outside Pakistan. And that this would be brought back as soon as the PTI came to power.

Of course, none of the above has come true and there are no signs it will in the near future either. After two and a half years, the PM has even stopped talking about the above assumptions.

During the period 2013-2018, the PTI was in power in KP. In line with its electoral commitments, it established an Ehtesab Commission, promising to eliminate corruption in the province. As soon as the commission started to look into the corrupt practices of provincial ministers, the commission was disbanded and no further effort was made after that. The message was clear from the party leadership – the corruption narrative is only used as a political tool to whip up political support and show its opponents as corrupt.

After the failed experiment in KP, it should have been clear that the party is not interested in eliminating corruption. Pakistan’s corruption index went up after the party completed its first year in power at the federal level. It downplayed the results, blaming the previous government for the 2019 results. This year again, after Transparency International released its results, some PTI leaders again tried to give a spin but it seems it has backfired and the party is struggling to contain the negative fallout.

PM Imran Khan still has time on his side to show that his government will work seriously to curb the menace of corruption. The PM can show his seriousness by initiating the following actions: allow the FIA to conduct an investigation into the BRT mega scam; come clean on the foreign funding case without any further delay and ensure complete transparency; take immediate action against ministers and others in the government responsible for mega scams such as sugar, wheat, medicines, LNG. After all, the people of the country had to pay hundreds of billions because of this; and direct NAB to complete investigations of cases involving PTI officials including the PM’s helicopter scandal.

The above actions will surely satisfy everyone that the PM is indeed interested in eliminating corruption. This will also send a clear signal to those in higher positions that no one is above board and will not be spared – no matter what.

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