**The government`s emerging traits**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-04-12

OVER halfway through its tenure the PTI government`s early proclivities seem to be hardening into traits that increasingly characterise its whimsical style of decision-making. At times these have landed its leadership in embarrassing situations while on other occasions it has obliged the government to make U-turns on pronouncements it has been hardpressed to explain.

Recent developments have laid bare the first such proclivity announcing a decision without sufficient thought or consultation and then reversing it.

The case in point was the newly appointed finance minister`s pronouncement that Pakistan will be resuming trade with India by importing cotton and sugar. The decision was apparently approved by Prime Minister Imran Khan as he holds the commerce portfolio. This was also indicated by a leaked summary to the cabinet signed by him. In less than 24 hours the decision was revoked by the cabinet. It was followed by reiteration of Pakistan`s position that trade with India was not possible until Delhi reversed its Aug 5, 2019 action in occupied Kashmir.

Apparently, the backlash after the initial announcement as well as opposition in the cabinet compelled the government to backtrack.

What this episode revealed was a governance style in which important decisions are taken without forethought, consultation or assessment of implications and whether they are consistent with previously stated positions. In this case there were farreaching foreign policy implications which were overlool(ed as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was obviously not consulted at any stage. It was not the first time a decision with foreign policy consequences was taken without adequate thought and institutional advice. An earlier, well-known example was when the government announced the PM would attend a summit called by Malaysia along with Turkey which it later went back on in response to strong Saudi objections. As widely noted at the time this episode entailed foreign policy costs. In statements made on a range of other issues U-turns have been even more common.

A second habit that has evolved into a trait is to frequently change senior ministers and officials in arevolving door approach to team members. The decision to remove Hafeez Sheikh and replace him with Hammad Azhar meant appointing a third finance minister in as many years. Apart from the unseemly manner in which this was done a hallmark of this government only two weeks earlier Sheikh had been asked by the PM to stay on when he offered to resign following his defeat in the Senate election.

The PM had consistently been praising his own government`s economic policies as well as Sheikh`s performance until public criticism mounted over rising prices. This suggested that Sheikh may have been made a scapegoat to defuse such criticism.

This was only the latest example of the government`s penchant for frequently changing key ministers and top officials. The present interior minister is the third to have been appointe d. The new chairman of the Federal Board of Revenue is the fifth to be installed while the Board of Investment has had four different chairmen during this government`s tenure.

This approach has been mirrored in even more pronounced terms in Punjab. The chief minister has constantly shuf fled officials; the present chief secretary is the fourth, the IGP the sixth and commissioner, Lahore division, is also the sixth in his administration. At the centre, the interior secretary has been changed five times and the commerce secretary is the fourth to serve under this government.

Frequent bureaucratic changes signify a whimsical way of governing and often reflect knee-jerk reactions to the criticism of the day. Changing the finance minister and top economic functionaries every so often may also be a reflection of a vain search for quick solutions to vexed issues that require policy continuity and patience to address.

PTI insiders say the PM`s view of a top team member has much to do with who has his ear and what he may be whispering about him/her.

A third aspect of the government is its increasing lack of confidence in institutions despite its leaders` frequent claims of strengthening institutions. This is illustrate d by the way its ministers lashed out against the Election Commission of Pakistan after the FebruaryDaskaby-electionandlosingtheIslamabad seat in the Senate. The PM himself made ECP thetarget of criticism. The government may be following a well-established tradition of political leaders attacking institutions when they don`t play ball, but that doesn`t minimise the significance of its conduct on this score. For its part, the ECP reminded the government that it was a constitutional and independent body that acted according to the law and `if constitutional institutions continue to be ridiculed in this way it is tantamount to their (government`s) weakness and not ECP`s` Another example of the same phenomenon is the recent removal of the head of the Higher Education Commission. The chairperson`s tenured post was for four years whereas the incumbent had served only two. The government reduced its duration to two years by ordinance in order to force the chairman out overnight. Again, it showed disregard for an institution, that too in the education sector. There was widespread criticism of this assault on HEC`s autonomy. It also prompted a strong rebuke from respected philanthropist, entrepreneur and moving spirit behind HEC`s creation, Syed Babar Ali, who in a letter to the concerned minister, wrote that education should not be destroyed in this manner and HEC should be `protected from such machinations`.

The government`s fourth characteristic is to treat publicity and projection as a substitute for policy.

The constant meetings the PM holds with his media spokespersons is one indication. Another is the daily pressers by spokespersons who have little of substance to convey other than hyperbolic claims about government performance. This underlines the leadership`s reliance on rhetoric to show it is governing effectively rather than let policy measures speak for themselves. When exaggerated narratives clash with lack of policy delivery it is the government`s credibility that is undermined.

These traits disadvantage the PTI government in dealing with the country`s multiple challenges. Its ability to seriously address them depends on how far it can shake off habits that frequently mire it in selfcreated difficulties. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.