**Finding political legitimacy**

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Tuesday, May 07, 2024

I wrote about the CAR framework last month and posited that governance has become much more challenging because ‘capability’, ‘accountability’ and ‘responsiveness’ have all become compromised.

These qualities have been made even more elusive by the changes in ground realities that have taken place, globally and locally, in how the public discourse is conducted. It doesn’t help that Pakistan has a population that keeps growing but an elite whose ego and sense of purpose keep shrinking.

Capability, accountability, and responsiveness don’t quite capture the increasingly important issue of legitimacy. Legitimacy, as a concept, has always been relevant to political governance everywhere. In Pakistan, it assumed greater urgency since the eighth of February this year, given the substantial and undeniable discontent that electoral manipulation has produced.

The legitimacy issue seems to be an increasingly burdensome albatross, undermining even the very positive and long-needed efforts being attempted in recent days. When we scan the big governance news items recently, they all seem to have this Achilles’ heel.

Change at the FBR, through the placement of two dozen officers on OSD, has been welcomed with scepticism about the intentions of the current FBR chief. Slow but meaningful progress on investments from Saudi Arabia are met with cynicism about the wider geopolitical compromises this may entail. Support for education initiatives like the Daanish schools is responded with questions about the relative cost of these efforts. The cabinet approval for hiring consultants quickly and without PPRA rules is seen as the product of conflict of interest ridden players that have found their way into the corridors of power. Every day, even those that are broadly supportive of the need for stable government, are compelled to ask questions that will invariably be seen as undermining political legitimacy.

What is the answer? It isn’t as simple as Imran Khan supporters will suggest. It is also not as complicated as the ruling establishment seems intent on making it. Banning social media, setting up a new agency to police the internet, tightening the screws on an already problematic environment of fear and intimidation when it comes to free speech – these are not answers to the challenge of legitimacy. They are all ingredients for deepening the crisis of legitimacy. The big question isn’t whether good governance can be achieved this way. It cannot. The big question is whether political legitimacy is an achievable objective for Pakistan’s rulers.

What is political legitimacy? One of the useful definitions I found was in a 2006 paper by then Princeton scholar Bruce Gilley. Having then discovered the extremely problematic evolution of Gilley’s ideas (including his support for the re-establishment of Western colonialism and his unapologetic pro-Israeli genocide slant), I eschew sharing Gilley’s definition.

Instead, perhaps the clearest description is Fabienne Peter’s: “Political legitimacy is a virtue of political institutions and of the decisions – about laws, policies, and candidates for political office – made within them”. Peter helps frame legitimacy through a Weberian, and non-normative lens, “that a political regime is legitimate means that its participants have certain beliefs or faith (‘Legitimitätsglaube’) in regard to it: “the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige”.

Another useful way to think about political legitimacy is framed in Peter Stillman’s 1974 paper, “Legitimacy is the compatibility of the results of government output with the value patterns of the relevant systems – a government is legitimate when it protects and enhances the values and norms of its citizens, when it preserves and expands their culture and when it behaves itself in foreign affairs”.

There is a substantial quantum of literature within political theory and in international development that identifies legitimacy as a vital informant of good governance, especially when dealing with ‘fragile states’ (Merilee Grindle’s “good enough” governance offers valuable perspectives in this regard). There is much less academic discourse and research around the role of political legitimacy in shaping governance from the economists’ lens.

A new paper by Imran Arif and Nabamita Dutta published in the Journal of Institutional Economics marks a pioneering effort to correct this gap. In ‘Legitimacy of government and governance’, the authors examine data from sixty-six countries and try to figure out whether political legitimacy has any systemic and discernable impact on good governance.

The authors explore several interesting themes through their research. They acknowledge for example, that good governance and political legitimacy are mutually self-reinforcing. This is not an immediately obvious point, but it has grave implications for what happens when there is low legitimacy. They also, quite usefully, acknowledge alternative hypotheses about political legitimacy that leads to better governance as potentially pre-cursoring the erosion of the rights of minorities (citing libertarian Florida economist Randall Holcombe). FWIW: the authors’ research debunks Holcombe’s ideas.

The overall conclusion of the paper is not shocking: across all 66 countries and through a battery of tests for robustness and taking into account a range of factors that could skew the findings, there is a clear, positive and statistically significant effect of political legitimacy on governance. The research also finds that the effect of legitimacy on governance is enhanced and shaped by the level of trust citizens have in public institutions.

Just how significant are the interactions between political legitimacy and governance outcomes? The research suggests that one standard deviation increase in political legitimacy leads to a one-third of a standard deviation improvement in governance. The authors helpfully put this in perspective by adding real country proxies to these changes. In essence, when you increase the political legitimacy found in Mexico to the level of the political legitimacy found in Estonia, the impact of governance is the same as advancing the quality of governance from what it is in Jordan, to what it is in Latvia or Poland.

Of course, neither the Arif and Datta paper, nor any of the serious definitions of political legitimacy anchor the idea in procedural terms alone. In short, electoral legitimacy is vital, but not a comprehensive and certainly not an exclusive element of political legitimacy. In fact, my own motivation to dig deeper this week and explore the idea of political legitimacy was to caution the ruling establishment – civilian and military about the severe limitations of what they are attempting to do, notwithstanding the series of violations of the constitution, due process and rule of law that the country has endured at a high rate for a long time (here, I deliberately avoid putting a timeline or chronology on when things went really, really bad).

Throughout the period following the vote of no-confidence, readers will recall my repeated warnings that there is no possible outcome of the general election through which Pakistan will be excised of the demons of polycrisis. The mangling of the election results are what they are, but there is no version of the day after the election that would have solved the multiple crises at hand. This does not legitimize what was done to the election results (and it should be noted that the complexity of the polycrisis may well have been reduced had the actual results been allowed to define the political outcomes in Karachi and across the country). But the wider point remains what it was prior to the election: Pakistan’s governance system is now wholly incapable of producing the “output” that Peter Stillman was talking about, that corresponds to the Weberian “beliefs or faith” that Fabienne Peter alludes to.

This spells deep trouble for Pakistan that has nothing to do with who is running the military, nor anything to do with who is prime minister. Whatever the governance compact is, and whoever is responsible for making things work, must contend with a machinery that can’t deliver, a treasury that has no money, and a populace that does not trust it. Electoral manipulation is a symptom, it is not the disease.

Tackling the problem of political legitimacy requires at least a minimal agreement on the rules of the game – something institutional economics rightly obsesses over. But the rules of the game must be anchored not in individual or group interests. They have to be anchored at least equally in the ‘beliefs or faith’ of the governed. If the ruling establishment is not able to connect government output with belief and faith, the likelihood of finding legitimacy will remain thin – and the resulting governance will remain substandard.

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