**[Policymaking — to what end?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1831585/policymaking-to-what-end)**

[Muhammad Amir Rana](https://www.dawn.com/authors/363/muhammad-amir-rana) Published May 5, 2024

ONE critical challenge plaguing Pakistan is the tendency of its power elites to give priority to simplistic solutions to complex problems.

Thoughtful approaches presented during policymaking are often disregarded in favour of quick fixes. As economic, security, and political issues become increasingly intricate, frustration with this preference for shortcuts is mounting.

The system cannot bear the burden of the complexities it creates; neither does it have the stomach to analyse the problem at hand. Criticism is an integral part of problem-solving, but the system in the country belongs to an outdated category that does not allow for criticism and tends to discourage groups or individuals who regularly air their dissatisfaction with existing policies.

In the last few months, I have received feedback from those in the corridors of power on the op-ed articles I have written. They ask: why do I not suggest solutions to the problems that I highlight? The truth is that the power elites of this country have a history of ‘consulting’ the media on critical challenges. And the irony is that, in giving ‘solutions’ that lack depth, much of the media performs the role of a ‘jack of all trades’ while being ‘master of none’.

Meanwhile, going by the feedback received by those who write comment pieces, one can easily be deceived into thinking that the power wielders have been frustrated in their quest to find solutions and are in need of concrete recommendations.

The fact is that the power wielders’ observations emanate from a sense of superiority on their part; they believe they know the problem and its solution. Critics, in their view, are only spoilers meant to be silenced through counterarguments, if not other means, which are well known to those who are too vocal in their opinions.

Notwithstanding a surfeit of policies, the security challenge remains enormous.

For those who demand solutions from commentators, the policymaking process comprises four stages that provide a framework for understanding policy development. These stages include a) agenda building, b) policy formulation, c) policy adoption, and d) policy implementation. Each level requires critical analyses and input. ‘Close-door’ policymaking means that an influential group wants to impose a policy on the majority, without putting it up for public debate, which is not a fair approach.

Every year, Pakistan produces thousands of graduates in disciplines related to public policy, economics, and political economy. If their contribution to policy discourse is not visible, then both state and society need to introspect. Among other things, it raises questions about the quality of education in the public and private sectors and about whether the current system is able to correctly utilise human resources, when it relies on the conventional wisdom of the ‘establishment’.

Policymaking is a complex process, and, in Pakistan, analysing the role of evidence is a weak area. This capacity gap encourages the practice of groupthink among like-minded people who are unable to analyse an issue and evolve a consensus based on predetermined notions.

A related example was the discourse on the [National Security Policy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1669384) (NSP) during the PTI government’s rule, when policymakers claimed they had consulted thousands of experts during the policy formulation process. The consultation exercise was similar to the one that [Paigham-i-Pakistan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1383306), a religious decree against terrorism and extremism, had entailed.

In the case of Paigham-i-Pakistan, a few dozen religious scholars gathered in Islamabad, and within a day, these scholars had agreed on a draft; later, thousands of religious scholars endorsed it, but little was known about who they were. The first copy of Paigham-i-Pakistan, shared with the media, contained names of some people who had supposedly endorsed the religious scholars but who had actually passed away several years earlier! One may present the [National Action Plan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1720905) (NAP) as another example, created on an emergency basis within 14 hours by experts.

Nevertheless, NAP did yield some results, and Paigham-i-Pakistan demonstrated its limited usefulness. Yet, the NSP process significantly eroded parliament’s authority, bringing all aspects of governance under the security domain and accelerating the securitisation of institutions. The NSP’s influence is evident in the creation of the [Special Investment Facilitation Council](https://www.dawn.com/news/1767239), which has allowed the establishment to penetrate deep into the system.

However, not all policies had the same effect as the NSP. Several other security-related policies, including two national internal security policies and counter violent extremism policies, were developed but never reached the adoption stage. These policies, which followed a similar process to the NSP’s formulation, have not been implemented due to a lack of interest from security institutions and the government. Their implementation requires resources and, more importantly, reforms for which every institution needs to prepare. The policy documents, it seems, are just meant to be kept on record shelves.

Why does Pakistan need so many police personnel for national and internal security? Perhaps to keep busy the institutions created for that purpose, such as the [National Counter Terrorism Authority](NULL), or to show the world that the state’s responses match the security challenges. Having multiple policies on a similar issue often results in the creation of several institutions dealing with the same challenge. The police face this parallel initiative crisis. They are left with minimal resources for routine policing.

Notwithstanding a surfeit of policies, the security challenge remains enormous, and insurgency in Balochistan, religious militancy, and extremism continue to haunt the state. Although deeper reflection is required by all security institutions, the formation of the third National Internal Security Policy has begun. The past policy expired last year without being implemented. It has to be seen how different the new one will be, but with structural reforms within the security intuitions, NAP or the NISP can perform miracles.

If the purpose of the new NISP is to include political activism — presenting it as extremism — in the security orbit, political parties, civil society, and parliament should remain vigilant. They must demand an inclusive debate on the policy.

*The writer is a security analyst.*

*Published in Dawn, May 5th, 2024*