**The wrong priorities**

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As the government continues to work out its secretive deals with the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which was proscribed because of its acts of terrible violence in the country, and the extremist Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), it appears to have forgotten that its priorities should be different.

While there is a need to get militancy under control, giving way to the demands of such parties and groups has not worked in the past and is unlikely to work now. The TLP has, on each occasion that it has protested, got away with its actions. We cannot say for certain what the deal is, given that the PTI government seems to see no value in parliament and instead strikes out on its own, making deals the details of which are not disclosed to the people. We wonder why parliament is being retained at all – that too at enormous cost to taxpayers.

But the key issue is the extent to which these agreements and the protests and all that follows are covering up what really matters. The ludicrous package announced by the prime minister as a means to offer relief to the people who can no longer put food on their table really means nothing at all. By the time the subsidy reaches Utility Stores, much will have been whittled away – beginning at farms and mainly by middlemen before the goods are provided to the stores.

This is a factor that appears to have been ignored, and so has the advice from top economists in the country that like the income distributed under the Benazir Income Support Programme, using the Ehsaas database which already exists on NADRA, the subsidy should at the very least, have been provided by offering direct cash to the people rather than subsidising three items. At any rate, the subsidy has been offset by the dramatic rise in sugar prices. Under the previous government, one kilogramme of sugar was sold at Rs52, and now it is being sold at Rs140 in several cities and up to Rs160 in Quetta and other locations. People are unable to afford to buy this vital commodity which is widely used in most households, and the result is the growing disquiet with the government and the growing concern over how they are going to manage their monthly budget.

As far as the militancy-related question goes, Pakistan has suffered a huge deal by allowing militants to operate in the country for so long. We ask: should the soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the 2009 operation against the TTP and its allies in Swat be forgotten? Are those who remained in the area for months at risk of their own lives to be ignored? And what about the dozens of policemen killed in the line of duty at check posts, at demonstrations like the most recent one in Punjab, and at other locations by militants? Should we not be doing something to give these people back what they lost by at least penalising those who killed them?

We have not been told about the details of the deal with the TLP, and any deal with the TTP also remains mysterious. The time we heard about talks with the proscribed group was when the prime minister chose to speak about it while giving an interview to a Turkish channel.

We also need to consider the sentiments of the people. The parents of the over 100 children who lost their lives in the December 2014 APS attack in Peshawar have already condemned the deal with the TTP and pointed out that these men were the murderers of their children. These children had not gone out to fight a war or engage in any kind of similar action. They had mainly picked up their books and gone to complete another day in the classroom. The families of those who lost their lives in the Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park attack are also outraged and have been raising their voices against the recent deal.

This anger mingles with the anger over an unprecedented rise in prices of food items and the inability of the people to purchase what they need. Even those who earn a six-digit salary, say around Rs100,000, are struggling to merely deal with the costs of day-to-day living. According to those assessing the situation, many have been forced to take loans or borrow from family members in order to make their ends meet.

It is this economic situation that the government needs to give prime attention to. It appears to have no solutions. It should be asking why inflation in other countries is not as high as is the case here and why sugar cartels remain able to function despite the sugar committee report ordered by the government and the sugar commission which continues to operate. Imran Khan’s constant finger-pointing at the two political families who he says are primarily responsible makes little sense, given that most sugar in the country is produced by the two people within his own PTI and only a small amount is manufactured by the mills owned by the families he identifies so frequently.

The question is: what is needed to be done? It is quite obvious that the current government is not able to manage the situation or to move forward with all that should happen. The deal with the TLP may bring some benefit to the government in the next general elections, although analysts question how strong the party’s vote bank will be in a general election. But this will not help lower the levels of anger felt by the people who literally cannot eat.

Following an increase in the prices of petrol and notably diesel, the most used fuel in the country and the fuel that is essential for the transportation of goods, the prices of vegetables and fruit have also risen as have those of lentils and pulses. In this scenario, all those who make up the government – or perhaps the few who are actually aware of policies, given the degree of confusion that exists between ministers with some openly saying they know nothing at all – should be focusing on this and thinking of the people and their fate. After all, this is what the PTI had pledged to do when it first came to power.

Instead, it has gone out on a strange path, attempting to appease militants by striking deals with them, even as others read lessons from the past which show such deals do not work and ignoring the economic situation which has brought whole families to breaking point. This can simply not continue. Citing examples from the rest of the world – as done by the prime minister – helps or satisfies no one at all. Something more practical has to be done, and the question of how this can be managed requires the support of all political parties which should not be ignored simply because the prime minister sees their leaders as corrupt.

Refusing to shake hands with opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif is an act of childish behaviour rather than that of a mature politician in a time of crisis. And yes, we are in a time of crisis. The people cannot eat; prices continue to rise, and the out-of-control spiral shows no sign of making its way downwards once again.

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