# Bringing e-governance to Pakistan

Pakistan has yet to develop the basic infrastructure to facilitate effective implementation of e-governance what to talk about harvesting its fruits

**By Muhammad Abid Azad**

The concept of e-governance is not new for several governments around the globe. Pakistan, however—like most developing countries—is an exception. The word is new for majority of our public servants, leaving little room for astonishment if our masses show gross unawareness of any such terminology and its implications in their day-to-day affairs.
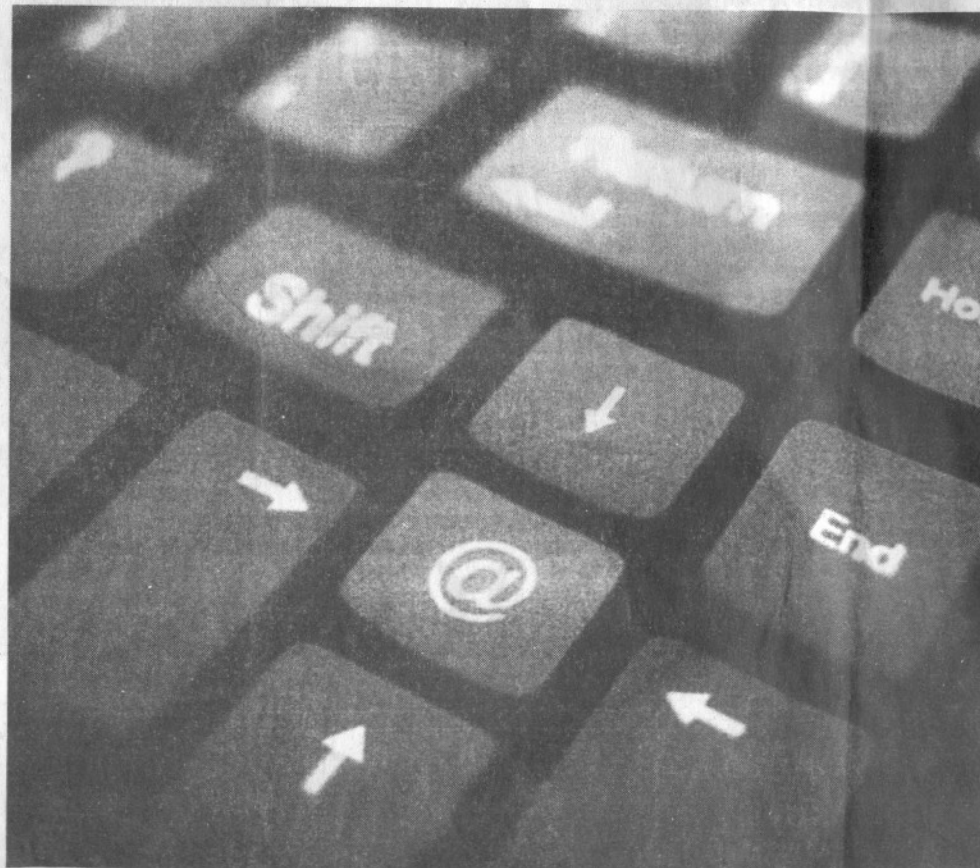
What is e-governance? It is not just delivery of goods or services ordered on the Internet. It is not just uploading web-sites for different departments and projects, or providing information through e-mails. It is not even only supplying or getting information through electronic means.

Rather, e-governance is a term of the modern age that endeavours to re-rack the existing and systematise governance patterns; style; the paradigm it works in; and its reliability and acceptability trends for people in accordance with the directions and trends of the information technology era. Its scope is very much beyond providing services and information electronically. Good governance is an all-encompassing concept, including e-governance and e-government as its components—the former overarching the latter in terms of scope, utility and results.

Electronic governance aims at bridging the citizen-state gap by empowering the common man as compared to e-government that only works as a tool of good governance and strives to provide services and information digitally. It can rightly be considered as a brainchild of good governance. It not only supports good governance but also supplements it with modern digital infrastructure and the concept of governing people according to up-to-date means.



professionals and computer training of 5,000 federal government employees;
* Kuwait supports Pan Islamic R&D Fund

Dr Rehman added that the PTCL had increased its bandwidth capacity to 265MB and was now working towards providing 100% restorability and back-up facility.

The Sindh Information Technology Board (SITB) prepared a concept paper of e-governance mega project, worth $30-35m in 2000, but that could not materialise because of public representative's poor interest and delayed releasing of the funds. In September 2002, federal Ministry of Information Technology started off a web portal under the same project, which has been providing easy access to Internet browsers to the country's federal organisations, providing public services. The government at provincial levels is also supervising the projects of employment gap analysis and providing IT training, as only 20% of our market is automated and even that only to the middle level.

The NRB and IT ministry have also agreed to compile data of

**tech**nology

will also be the gifts of an e-   existing laws relating to   small business. But this will take

This electronic take-over of the conventional methods has also brought with it newer concepts like e-business, info-society, e-centres, cyber laws, e-services, e-shops, venture funding, e-commerce, and various other relationship management issues. There is a need to carefully study and cater for these concepts while prefabricating any e-infrastructure for any country.

Since governance—good or bad—sways every citizen's life in a country and the world in general, e-governance is bound to influence every corner of our government and society. The noted areas to be affected are public and private entrepreneurs both of domestic and international scope, multi-national companies, NGOs, financial and monetary institutions, education and services sectors, social health and religious organisations, etc. Industry and agriculture are also to feel new blood circulating in their financial and operational veins. Inter-departmental co-ordination and competition at local, provincial and federal levels will also take a brand-new turn.

The dotcom revolution will also affect country's armed forces though not to its extreme extents, as novel ideas are cautiously welcomed in these premier institutions because of their difficult-to-calculate risk factors and the fear of anything penetrating that may harm national interests.

will also be the gifts of an e-administration.

Collectively the concepts of e-business, e-government, e-society, e-citizen and e-services provide an integrated network model that will prepare an "e-launching pad" for development, utilising Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) effectively.

However, a country like Pakistan is yet to develop the basic infrastructure to facilitate its effective implementation; what to talk about harvesting the fruits of e-governance. Financial constraints of the public sector coupled with poor interest and the will of those who are at the helm of affairs to modernise the country at such a huge level remain the most important hurdle in introducing e-technology in all the public and private businesses. Poor understanding of ideas like Business Process Engineering disables the government to work on the core issues and to identify the epicentre of public problems.

Private sector largely remains untapped, as public-private joint ventures have not been a successfully experimented story in Pakistan. The country's low literacy level and non-receptive culture makes the situation even more enigmatic. Absence of expertise and basic technological infrastructure discourages novel trials. Moreover, individualistic rather than collective approach in our decision-makers' attitude and practice also makes things more complicated.

The role of foreign financial institutions and investors also

existing laws relating to dissemination of information are also not supportive.

The obscurity of government transactions and actions has a direct link with at least 16 laws that restrict people's access to information. Unless these laws are repealed, the government cannot ensure transparency in its workings, argued the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists in a press release. Journalist Zafarullah Khan remarked in an article: "The governance pattern of the country has been devised to retain the colonial mindset of keeping the people in the dark by denying them their democratic right to information about the affairs, which shape their lives and destiny."

The ICTs have become an inescapable tool to set in motion a fight against poverty, increase public participation and facilitate public in education, healthcare, sanitation and water resource management. Boosting economic growth through information technology is a universally accepted phenomenon in the 21st Century.

Introducing reforms in trade, economy, privatisation process and other areas before the commencement of e-works would be much better than stepping onto the dotcom highway without renovating the dilapidated sectors. It will also change how people affiliate themselves with public bodies and the way they are influenced by new measures. They will also have to think about their needs and responsibilities,

small business. But this will take some time because apart from the MNCs and few other institutions, even most of our banks and the PIA are not fully automated.

E-government must try to activate things at the Tehsil level, as the Local Government System is closer to people as compared to any provincial or federal level administration.

Under the Local Government System (Devolution Plan 2000) the lifeline concept that may provide a base and working mechanism for e-governance in Pakistan is the National Reconstruction Information Management System (NARIMS). The NARIMS' objectives, described and defined by the National Reconstruction Bureau (NRB), are as follows:

* Financial management
* Planning and development
* Administration
* Evaluation
* Performance incentives

The NARIMS' aims at developing a powerful information management system for collecting, storing, retrieving, transforming, editing and displaying spatial data for all purposes involved. By developing such system the NARIMS will be able to facilitate the district, provincial and federal governments thus bringing new hopes of betterment for the masses ultimately.

Since e-governance is beyond the scope of e-government, the NARIMS will, nonetheless, only be able to cap only one of the financial leakage as the

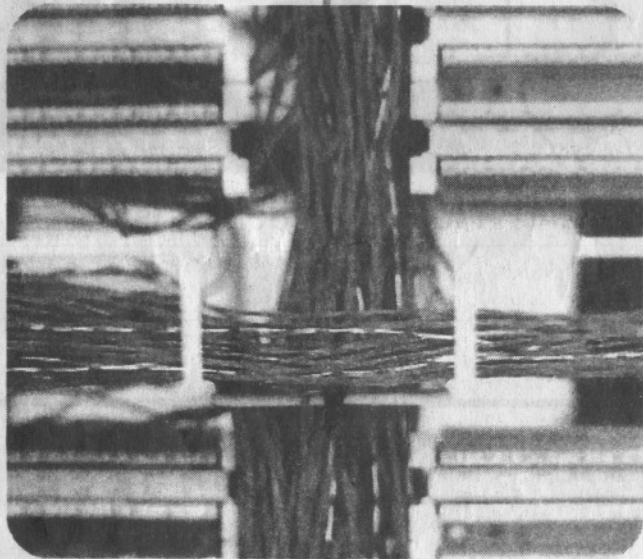and even that only to the middle level.

The NRB and IT ministry have also agreed to compile data of district governments through a newly developed software that will be used by policymakers for the improvement of education, health and other local facilities in each district.

Everywhere in the world, especially in Asia, Africa and South America, governments are using the ICTs in furthering and enhancing sustainable development. Pakistan, being at no place in this regard, also needs to put the ICTs at the heart of all of its advancement programmes and strategies. These technologies can also catapult country's progress in economic, social and political spheres by dragging society from traditional methods of growth and development to an era of information through computers.

The government should speedily implement e-commerce as the world trade will be very fast and countries lacking a digital culture in an info society will be thrown out of the rings in a couple of years or so. Presently, focus appears to be only on doing business electronically while the scheme of e-governance largely remains an alien term to both the private and public sectors; unintelligible to the former, and unimplemented and unexplored for the latter. The purpose of implementing e-governance is to enhance good governance, which is generally characterised by participation, transparency and accountability.

What are the future prospects of an e-revolution in Pakistan, its

The Local Government System (LGS) is also to witness the outcomes of e-governance as the system aims at tackling public grievances through effective means of governance and increasing rank and file's involvement in making decisions by devolving power at the lowest tiers. Automated income tax system, police stations, healthcare units, educational institutions, municipality offices, detention centres, jails and checkpoints etc

...institutions and investors also needs to be studied carefully as most of them tend to focus on quality assurance and business processes. They also want early and sure results. E-governance, on the other hand, is a long-time enterprise that may take decades to stretch its legs in a developing country like Pakistan where the actual growth rate hardly witnesses any increase in years. Because of current political instability and a wave of terrorist attacks in the country, these institutions will show their maximum reluctance to fund the financial needs of such gigantic projects.

Lack of IT culture and proper policy framework discourage those striving their start in e-concepts and undertakings. Absence of comprehensive laws governing cyber security, Internet and digital signatures is another handicap in the evolution of e-businesses in Pakistan. According to a study, one IT professional can generate on average $30,000 worth of exports per year. In order to have an export of over $1bn, we need to have about 35,000 IT professionals fruitfully employed in Pakistan, which presently appears to be impossible because more than 80% of our market is still waiting to be automated. While the

their needs and responsibilities, and will be in a better position to participate in policymaking.

The optimists hold the opinion that by using e-tools the country will be able to enhance revenue generation, come out of its debt trap, enhance employment opportunities and ensure good governance. They say that the country will be able to compete in the international market also, as the WTO's open-market competition is fast approaching.

Other positives foreseen after the true execution of e-governments are transparency in all state transactions, agreements, ministries and their efficiency and productivity. A U-turn in the flow of information among all the government units; in reports, amendments and budgetary methods and documentation procedures will also be witnessed.

Now people have more access to all kinds of information and services through web-sites, as there were a few hundred thousand pages on the Internet a decade ago which has grown to about more than 2.5bn publicly accessible web pages and 7.3m new ones being added every day.

E-commerce will also eliminate the concept of middlemen from the business thus increasing profit and helping in the growth of large as well as

...to tap only one of the financial leakage as the organisation is not only new but also lacks prerequisite expertise. The NARIMS' success even in its initial targets will help reduce the digital divide in Pakistan where a large number of population is poor, having no access to computer systems. The NARIMS is yet to justify its existence since it has not yet achieved anything significant.

Good governance was among the seven-point agenda announced by President General Pervez Musharraf when he took power in 1999, and e-governance is the best tool, presently, to help governance methodologies. Following are some of the government achievements, outlined by Chairman Higher Secondary Education Commission Dr Attaur Rehman, in the field of IT during the previous years:

* Expansion of Internet access to 724 cities;
* Project approved for setting up of Balochistan University of IT;
* PakNet Launches High Speed Wireless Internet Service;
* Egypt and Pakistan sign agreement to enhance co-operation in science and technology;
* The CIIT completes Java training of 1,049

What are the future prospects of an e-revolution in Pakistan, its people, society, culture and it core values? What will it bring for public problems and eradication of a termite-like-corruption? Will it reduce the existing class differences or accelerate the process of 'rich becoming richer and poor getting poorer'? And where will it take Pakistan in the international business market—elevating its place or doomed to financial failures and more inequalities? What will happen to justice, democracy and morality? These are some of the questions that the policymakers and implementers need to answer or at least think for before claiming to have taken the country in an e-world.

"Retrieval of data from a portal (web-site) is neither e-commerce nor e-government," remarks one IT expert. We need e-mania but with a lot of caution and intelligence, as most of the communication systems and channels are operated by West-based firms, and it is always precarious to use these devices for the transmission of information of national interest.