**The trust crisis**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2020-12-14

ONE of the key political issues in the global debate today is the steady erosion of people`s trust in governments across the world. More than evident in the pre-pandemic era this came into sharper relief after Covid-19 struck. The issue of trust was in the spotlight when handling of the coronavirus crisis was assessed and it was found that where people had greater trust in their government, they listened to health advisories and complied with restrictions. This enabled authorities to manage the crisis better. The reverse held true in countries where trust was low, which compromised the government`s ability to tackle the disease.

This has not been a function of the type of political system of a country. Instead, it has been a reflection of people`s confidence in how competent their leaders have been in responding to the challenge.

Positive perceptions helped build trust in governments.

But why has trust been declining in governments which today is accepted as a global phenomenon? A review of the literature on this books and knowledgeable essays reveals that multiple factors and their interplay may be responsible. The more plausible among those identified are the sheer scale and complexity of governance today, rising and unmet expectations, growing disconnect between political elites and the public, governments becoming too remote from citizens, economic performance becoming the touchstone of people`s evaluation of competence, conduct of leaders, and the information revolution that has empowered people in ways that are truly unprecedented.

With a world moving at hyper speed, governments struggle to keep pace and are seen to act and deliver much too slowly. The short-term approach usually adopted by political leaders often overrides acting in the public interest in the long term. Many political leaders operate with mental maps of the past and do an unedif ying job of understanding and responding to people`s sentiments and grievances.

All these factors undermine trust between rulers and the ruled.

There is little doubt that a more informed citizenry with access to multiple channels of information is more empowered and has several platformsavailable to make their voices heard. This empowerment also produces higher expectations which morphs into popular discontent whengovernments are unable to deliver and address public demands.

Therefore, technology has much to do in being a driver of mounting expectations.

The trust debate is hardly new even if its context has been changing. Reports that track global risks published annually by the World Economic Forum (WEF) have been highlighting this phenomenon for over a decade now. One of its reports, in assessing trust, called attention to a `legitimacy deficit` which referred to a sense that `we might nearly be better off without rulers`. The report observed this trend across the world in countries in very different stages of development.

Harvard scholar Joseph Nye, writing in one of WEF`s Global Outlook Reports, stressed the need for democracies to adjust to the long-term decline of trust in elected governments and the new challenges of the information age. This decline has been confirmed by several surveys. For example, a report last year found only 45 per cent of citizens in OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries trusted their government.

Scholars such as Nye tackled this rising trust deficit mostly from a Western perspective. A book that comes to mind in this regard is The Fourth Revolution published some years back but still relevant for its insights. Its authors, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, argued that the West must address what they called the `7 deadly sins` which seemed to lie behind falling confidence. They include overlapping areas of responsibility in oversized governments, surrender of too much power to special interests and politicalparalysis and gridlock.

More recently, well-known scholar Francis Fukiyama wrote about the crisis of trust in the US and again, his observations have wider applicability. He argued that trust is built on two foundations.

One, `citizens must believe that their government has the expertise, technical knowledge, capacity, and impartiality to make the best available judgments` which of course speaks to government competence. The second foundation is `trust in the top end of the hierarchy`, in leaders and whetherthey inspire public confidence in knowing what they are doing and acting in the public interest.

A recently published book, Democracy and Globalisation: Anger, Fear and Hope by Josep M.

Colomer and Ashley L. Beale, examines the issue from a fresh angle. Its authors explore the causes of what they see as the current crisis of democracy and why trust in governments and satisfaction with the way democracies work has been declining. They see more democracy across the world but less governance. They attribute much of the rising public disaffection to unfulElled expectations and aspirations. Disruptions caused by technological change and globalisation have undermined the effectiveness of governments to deliver the policies needed for sustained economic growth. What they call the Great Disruption has produced anger and fear.

`People hurt by social and economic changes and lack of public delivery get angry and react against the rulers and the rules when their expectations are not met.

Whether practicable or not, the authors` recipe for effective governance is `democracy at multiple levels` with `reallocation of power at local, national, continental and global levels with innovative combinations of direct democracy, representative government and rule by experts`.

A key factor that emerges in the discussion of trust is the negative impact of political polarisation prevailing in countries in both East and West on the public`s view of leaders and governments.

This has rightly been seen to cause waning public confidence in political institutions and those in charge of them. This should strike a familiar note in Pakistan and is directly relevant to the present state of play in the country. With political polarisation reaching a record level and the government and opposition locked in unremitting confrontation this cannot but affect the public`s opinion of their leaders especially at a time when their focus should be on the challenges facing the country. The lesson from the ongoing power struggle is that both sides can end up losing the trust of the people they seek to serve.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN