

Increased Concentration of Power Leads to Disaffection

Poor governance in Pakistan has led to alienation of the people. Lack of governance is evident in many ways: from precarious law and order in the country, to serious social deficit, and poor infrastructure especially electricity shortage. 'What the people see in their daily lives is a disinterested government' and state institutions that do not perform. There is 'growing concentration of power among economic, financial, and political elites'. The resultant inequality has increased the perception of an unjust state. Pakistan's stability and prosperity depend on governance improvement.

This is stated in a report on governance in Pakistan issued today by the Institute for Policy Reforms. Entitled "Strategy not Tactics: Better Governance for Social Stability in Pakistan" the comprehensive and well-researched report covers a vast area. It deals with participation of people in decision-making, political stability, and effectiveness of state organizations. Pakistan does poorly in most governance indices. It may, in fact, be doing worse than before on some indicators. The people want better quality of service as well as rule of law and control over corruption.

Civil servants are the link between the state and the individual. A number of issues though affect their performance. Political patronage has weakened state institutions and centres of power compete for influence in the country. A political economy that favours the elite leaves limited space for inclusive development. Administration is centralized, lacking participation and with minimal accountability. Political parties are weak and the media and civil society, though emerging are not yet in a position to act as a check on executive power. At present, Pakistan's state institutions do not have the strength to become an agent of change and growth.

Analysis of the causes of weak governance shows that though civil servants are the face of the state, the responsibility for poor performance is widespread. It includes the political leadership and touches a number of other parts of the society. In some respects, military governments do better than elected governments. In the last decade, HDI improved under a military leader, which has plateaued since an elected government came to power. Similarly, participation in government has declined. In 2006, the country had over 85,000 elected officials in 6628 assemblies and councils compared to the present 1207 in seven elected bodies.

The report establishes a link between governance and quality of life indicators. Well-governed countries, in turn, have strong institutions that set the rules of conduct. Institutions become strong if the people in power place faith in them. Countries with inclusive economic policies have a high ratio of public spending to GDP, and enjoy a high quality of life. A major portion of public spending takes place at below federal levels particularly at the level of local governments. Most countries that rank high in one governance indicator do well in others because they prioritize public welfare and have strong institutions.

Pakistan has one of the lowest ratios of public spending to GDP in line with its equally low tax to GDP ratio and even more paltry contribution from direct taxes. Contrary to popular belief, number of federal workers per capita is also very low. Pakistan has two civil servants per thousand people. India and USA, both federations, have 2.6 and 8.5 workers respectively. Transparency and efficiency though must accompany increase in public spending

Governance reform faces an enigma. People in power are best placed to bring reforms. However, reforms would hurt their interests most. One way is to improve operations of government offices. Reform of government systems, increase in capacity of officials, a culture of responsiveness, and rules that limit patronage are key to improved governance. These are first and important steps to achieving results and building state effectiveness. The report gives specific recommendations for each of these areas. These are not textbook type wish lists, but practical steps for improvement. It also gives recommendations for policymaking, project management, and public private partnership. Of course, it requires that the leadership actually wants to improve governance.

Governance improvement is critical for stability of the country. It is particularly important in these unsettled times faced by Pakistan. The people of Pakistan want results in the shape of improved law and order, and better essential services. They want commitment so mere tactics will not do.