

Institute for Policy Reforms

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Are manifestos meaningful documents

The Institute for Policy Reforms today released a comprehensive study on the extent to which political parties deliver on the promises made in their manifestos. The study reviewed 2013 manifestos of the three political parties, PML N, PPP, and PTI, that formed governments at the federal and provincial levels. Researchers at IPR tabulated manifesto promises and juxtaposed them against actual performance.

Political parties release their manifestos with much fanfare. Yet, in contrast to the celebration that accompanies their launch, the study finds actual performance to fall far short. In five years, each of the three political parties delivered about one-quarter of what they had promised in 2013.

While it claims to have especial expertise for economic management, PML N in fact achieved 20% of its macroeconomic manifesto promises. PPP is traditionally committed to social sector development and poverty alleviation. The party achieved 20% and 33% respectively of its targets in education and health in Sindh. All parties seem to have stumbled, as by 2016 national literacy and enrollment rates dropped in Pakistan. The situation is not much different for other sectors. Soft and physical infrastructure development mostly were well behind needs, except for prestige projects. Promises to reduce cost of doing business did not materialize. During the five years, Pakistan's rank dropped in the World Bank's Doing Business Report and stayed low in UNDP's HDI Index. Both are key ingredients of economic development.

Some highlight achievements include increase in power generation by the PML N government, though it did not address power policy and governance weaknesses. Similarly, PPP handed over land to over 4,000 landless peasants and made good on its promise for labour rights. PTI progressed with tree plantation and in health services.

These gains, however, fall far short of what the parties had proposed. That should come as no surprise. "Our research shows that the manifestos mostly seem forgotten once elections are over. If the parties were serious, manifesto ideas must translate to policies, programmes, and projects soon after assumption of power". It is not clear also if parties were realistic in setting targets. There is no effort to relate manifesto ideals to available financial and institutional resources.

On the surface, each manifesto is a thoughtful and comprehensive document. Yet there are niggles. For example, there is no information in any manifesto about how they identify the country's needs. Resultantly, they read as prescriptive musings of wise party officials who know best what is good for the people.

The manifestos also do not have an overarching strategy nor is there an effort to prioritize. Given resource constraints, it is unlikely that any government can deliver on the whole menu of proposals that each manifesto contains. A strategy helps decision makers prioritize and sequence. It also manages citizen expectations and guides voting decisions. At present, all manifestos offer a cafeteria of choices with something to suit each taste.

The study also found instances where one part of the manifesto does not agree with another. For example, the manifestos promise major new services for the people and yet proposed reduction in current expenditure. Most manifestos have sections on job creation. Yet reliability of government data on labour is often questioned. Nor do governments announce how many jobs were created each year. Manifestos also profess many kinds of governance reforms such as civil service, police, and land reforms, without considering if there is political appetite for them within their party. All manifestos committed also to a devolved local government. It is no secret that very little was done in any of these areas and in the case of local government, some parties did the opposite of what their manifestos said.

There are questions also about some of the priorities. None of the parties had a substantial programme to enable the large reserve of youth who have not received any education in the country, to take part meaningfully in economic activities.

Also, none of the parties made sufficient effort to make their manifesto a peoples' document by engaging with communities and NGOs to design social sector or urban development programmes.