

Endless cycle of ‘relief’

Dr Nadeem ul Haque | September 16, 2024

In Pakistan, the word “relief” has become a staple of the political lexicon, frequently used by the government as a response to various crises. The media gives the impression that economic policy is merely the giving of relief. It seems we are a charitable state, much like medieval kingdoms.

However, what’s perplexing is the regularity with which these “crises” seem to appear, almost as if the country is perpetually on the brink of disaster. The government’s response? Announce a new round of relief measures. But is there really a crisis, or is this merely a tactic to maintain control and distract from deeper systemic issues?

The crisis-relief cycle: a manufactured reality

In many parts of the world, the concept of government “relief” is rare, often reserved for genuine emergencies such as natural disasters or significant economic downturns. Yet in Pakistan, “relief” has become a routine affair. One must wonder: why is there always a need for relief? Is it because crises are genuinely more frequent in Pakistan, or is the government manufacturing a narrative of crisis to justify its actions and maintain a grip on power?

The government often presents relief as a benevolent act, a necessary response to protect the population from hardship. However, many of these hardships are the direct result of government policies. For instance, economic mismanagement, bloated bureaucracy, and the intent to obtain

permissions and unnecessary controls create conditions for low investment and stunted businesses.

The government's obsession with relief measures is about maintaining a narrative of control, not solving problems

It is no wonder that the economy falters, leading to inflation, unemployment, and public discontent. In response, the government announces relief measures, portraying itself as the saviour of the very problems it has caused — a very medieval approach.

In most other countries, the term “relief” is not a part of daily political discourse. Governments in stable economies and well-managed states do not need to constantly offer relief because they do not create the conditions that require it. Instead, they focus on economic stability, sound fiscal management, and good governance as a background to opportunity for individual action.

The real problem: governance, not crisis

The endless cycle of crisis and relief in Pakistan points to a deeper problem: governance. The government's obsession with relief measures is less about solving problems and more about maintaining a narrative of control. By perpetuating the idea that the country is always on the verge of a crisis, the government justifies its existence and its expansive, often intrusive, role in the lives of ordinary citizens.

“Relief” is used to tighten controls and reduce “opportunity.” Instead of focusing on crisis management through relief, the government should prioritise stability through sound governance. This means implementing long-term policies that prevent crises from occurring in the first place. Stable governance also means no whimsical projects and policy changes,

as well as no arbitrary tax and expenditure changes or witch-hunts for success.

The focus should shift from offering short-term relief to addressing the root causes of economic instability and low growth. Investment never seems to grow as the business remains stunted while the government remains overly regulatory in dealing with permissions, price controls, and licenses. This ended in many countries decades ago, and we still have not deregulated it.

More importantly, our officials have a deep distrust of markets and individual action. There is a role for the government and the market. And it is not to centralise everything in the hands of gatekeeper government officials.

Policy must not change overnight without debate, and it should remain stable for decades and not at the change of every government. As much as possible, the policies must be framed as rules of the game requiring little permissions and paperwork and allowing people room to do and innovate. The current notion that “we, the government, must do everything” must be given up.

Policy must seek to provide opportunities to the people, not the government officials. Government should get out of the business of short-term management of the economy and all assets through command. Rather, give people the choice of where to live and what to do.

The centralisation approach that is ingrained in the colonial system has destroyed governance. All universities, regulatory agencies, state-owned enterprises, and even cities are controlled by civil service, which is a small group of non-professionals. All professionals — scientists, professors, engineers, and doctors — report to the same group. Such centralisation leads to slow decision-making as well as service delivery.

An example of this mismanagement is that currently, there are more than 40 universities nationwide that are missing vice-chancellors, and the

wheels of bureaucracy have been grinding for months, slowing down appointments. And we know that when the grinding has stopped, often quality is lacking. Similarly, regulatory bodies and other such organisations remain either poorly staffed or politically and bureaucratically staffed.

“Relief” should not be a tool for political gain but a last resort in genuine emergencies. And the granting of relief continuously must be seen as a governance failure.

The perpetual cycle of crisis and relief in Pakistan is a manufactured reality that serves the interests of those in power. To break this cycle, Pakistan needs to focus on stability, transparency, and genuine reform.

The goal should be a government that doesn’t need to offer relief because it has created a society where crises are rare, and when they do occur, they are managed efficiently without the need for dramatic, headline-grabbing interventions. It’s time to move beyond the illusion of crisis and relief and work towards a stable, prosperous future.

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