

# Parliament - A house to serve the national interest?

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**“History is not a mansion to live in, but a school to learn”. Admittedly, the nations that do not learn from their history are doomed to plummet. The history of Pakistan has witnessed that policies have just been a means to serve the personal interests of the relevant stakeholders, not those of a nation.**

The tragic story of BECO is just a classic example of the outcomes of one of such individual centric policy decisions. BECO had established itself as an icon of excellence both nationally and internationally.

BECO based on the vision of “creating wealth for all” had not only catered to the demands of the multiple sectors of the newly born nation, but internationally was also considered as “a workshop to learn industrial entrepreneurial abilities”. Unfortunately, it was sold just as a piece of land.

The recurrence of such sad episodes that Pakistan has witnessed many by now can be avoided by adopting a comprehensive set of reforms encompassing all the pillars of governance. The parliament must be the center of policy making through legislation.

The parliamentarians’ presence and the practice of debates on the development projects and executive decisions like approving a bill should ensure transparency to serve the national interests. The Parliamentary Research Service (PRS) can play a pivotal role as a knowledge intermediary, facilitating communication between the Committee and various stakeholders by receiving, compiling, and analyzing their submissions.

Moreover, the PRS can proactively engage with key stakeholders and entities, ensuring their perspectives are solicited and are well-informed on the optimal methods of engagement. Stakeholders’ forums can be meticulously moderated to uphold equitable participation and prevent any undue influence on submissions.

Additionally, the Committee can employ various strategies to foster informed discourse and engagement. These included organizing debates between individuals holding divergent viewpoints and hosting breakfast meetings to enable policymakers from both the executive and legislative branches to interact with sector experts, thereby enhancing their comprehension of sectoral realities and requirements.

Furthermore, Members of Parliament (MPs) can also convene sessions with local communities facilitating dialogues and gathering insights from community representatives.

As representatives elected by these communities, the MPs are committed to ensuring that their constituents' perspectives are conveyed to the Committee and factored into decision-making processes.

Likewise, the role of ministries can be revisited. Ministries should be places for implementing the policy coming from the parliament, limiting the role of rent seekers in the development process. Ministries should be a hub of academia, think tanks and civil society.

Their active engagement via consultative workshops should be ensured by the ministry on implementation, evaluation and revision of policies. The ministries must also prepare reports for a documented economy. This can help in evidence-based evaluation for research and debate.

For the judiciary, the necessary amendments in procedural rules such as The Punjab Rented Premises act 2009 should be implemented, where no further appeal is allowed to the high court or apex court.

To close the case in time, the judicial authorities should fix a limit to the number of hearings. The Law Reform Bill 2005 allowing a maximum of 2 adjournments per case should be implemented. The Cost of Litigation Act 2017 be rigorously imposed throughout Pakistan, which imposes a penalty of PKR 5000 on frivolous adjournment.

The need of the hour is to convert our population into a thriving, civilized, well-informed community. PIDE's basic survey shows that we have to address the alarmingly low level of trust in the community, low participation in community activities and voluntary participation. One route could be through the local governments by reinventing their role as custodian of good cities with easy access to community centres, libraries and playgrounds. Arranging festivals, cultural events, game competitions, hobby clubs will make the communities interactive and buzzing with ideas.

These events can be organized in local schools, colleges, universities, mosques in the absence of community centers and local youth can be encouraged to volunteer for the arrangements. These events would bring the diverse cultures together, the interaction would forge connections with one another. Shared experiences during these events strengthen social bonds, build trust, and create a sense of solidarity among residents, irrespective of their backgrounds or differences. The events play a vital role in nurturing vibrant, resilient, and inclusive communities where residents feel connected, empowered, and valued. This would be the starting point for a vibrant community.

The spirit, ideology, and soul-force of this community can lead the way to development. This could be materialized by the combined efforts of all the relevant stakeholders, notably the local think tanks and civil society groups. It is worth mentioning at this juncture that Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) has taken a commendable step forward by spearheading the collaborative endeavors to formulate a comprehensive reform agenda pertaining to tax reforms, in conjunction with fellow think tanks, competent academia and esteemed experts in the field. Primarily, an apparatus

must be in place to ensure that parliamentary policy-making aligns with the broader national consensus on reforms.

To achieve this, think tanks should establish a dedicated “policy unit” tasked not only with providing policy feedback but also with overseeing parliamentary deliberations to ensure adherence to the reform agenda outlined in the ruling parties’ manifestos. The establishment of a dedicated policy unit would signify a proactive commitment to fostering a culture of evidence-based policymaking and democratic governance.

By harnessing the intellectual resources and expertise of think tanks, the unit would bridge the gaps among academic research, policy formulation, and legislative implementation. Through collaborative partnerships with policymakers, academia, civil society, and other stakeholders, the unit would facilitate the development of pragmatic, contextual policy solutions to address the evolving needs and challenges of the society.

In essence, the establishment of a policy unit within think tanks represents a proactive and forward-thinking approach to ensuring that parliamentary policy-making remains firmly rooted in the broader national consensus on reform. By serving as a vigilant watchdog, a proactive facilitator of feedback, and a catalyst for evidence-based policymaking, the policy unit would contribute to enhancing the quality, effectiveness, and legitimacy of the legislative process, ultimately advancing the collective interests and aspirations of society.

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