

REFORM: WHAT, WHY AND FOR WHOM?

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Pakistan was made with a commitment to democracy and development but soon after independence, its founding generation succumbed to greed and political expediency to accommodate the Mullah and make religion central to politics. The following generation (Midnight's Children) constituted the ignorant, self-centred and hedonistic cult of the of our political parties that has wilfully destroyed all institutions and all semblance of dignity in pursuit of power and wealth.

A new generation of Pakistanis is inheriting this mess — ruins of institutions, values, discipline, trust, as well as limited incentives for thought and learning. Yet it is heartening to see a renaissance of good writing, music and the arts rearing its head in Pakistan. There is hope emerging like an unsteady baby. Will they inherit the ego, thoughtlessness, wilfulness as well as greed of their parent's generation? Only time will tell.

Reform episodes such as Musharraf's Local Government Act of 2001 and 2010's 18th Amendment to the Constitution were vitiated by the status quo. Reform will take hold when people see clear benefits in maintaining it. Distant reform with no clear benefits for the people does not endure. For this reason, local government has

been strangled over time, while the 18th Amendment remains under attack.

But we need to ask ourselves why, with centuries of global reform experience, we have failed for 70 years. Moreover, is there a demand for reform? If so, what sort? Imran Khan rode on the back of the youth to develop a 'New Pakistan' but was persistently stuck with vendetta, perhaps because there is no demand for reform or a coherent debate outlining a vision for reform. (As an aside, most Pakistani thinking and debate remains focused on speculation on foreign policy and parroting aid prescriptions)

All governments whether democratic or not have sought a mandate through infrastructure projects — roads, metros and 'building things' such as stadiums. The Ayub development paradigm (based on Mahbub ul Haq's model), in which progress was measured as projects involving expenditure and hardware, persists to this day. Even talk of education and healthcare does not go beyond building more schools and universities continue to train graduates only for them to be a part of the brain drain.

The demand is for more ‘development expenditures’ and not reform. Development is seen as tacking on hardware to our inherited colonial state. This colonial state, designed for extraction, has been kept alive to allow the game of ‘winner extract all’, i.e. the winning political party can victimise its opponents to capture extraction gains for a guaranteed five year period, despite the Constitution stipulating five years as the outer limit rather than a term. Development expenditures add more to extraction. Reform would mean a dismantling of the extractive state to create space for restructuring toward genuine development.

In the ‘80s, the world moved on from the ‘development as hardware’ paradigm. Experience showed that productivity, enterprise, and innovation (PEI) are at the heart of the development endeavour. It was further discovered that PEI happens in an enlightenment state, where checks and balances are in place and there is a process of informed policymaking through learning and experimentation.

To develop such a state, reform would require a re-imagining of the state from developing and implementing policy to the legal and judicial system that manages rights and transactions. This is a huge and thoughtful agenda which requires building systems of learning everywhere in public policy and avoiding the easy and certain agendas that the Pakistani power elites love to parrot. The overarching ‘purpose’ has to be a clear modernisation of the way the country functions and the way we live. Why? Because development requires it!

Can such a change take place? Who will drive it? Difficult questions to answer. And I will not pretend to fully know the answers. It is clear that the colonial extractive state (CES) has strong foundations. By design, its functionaries benefit from it while vested interest born of extraction are not likely to bite the hand that feeds it. In the post-colonial period, international development partners have arisen to push money to the status quo.

It is obvious that the CES will not easily change and has no ability to reinvent itself. We have seen 70 years of demand on various aspects of the change required such as reforms in civil service, local government, police, education, health, and public enterprises – but the CES distorts or defeats these interventions to preserve extraction.

By design the CES seeks central control of cities and markets to inhibit entrepreneurship and private enterprise. Even the provision of education is limited to what serves its interest and no more. It will resist efforts to liberalise or decentralise. Current development efforts based on ‘projects’ and ‘programs’ whilst keeping the CES intact only strengthen its ability for extraction and centralisation.

Development, though measured by global indicators (e.g., growth rate, the number of educated, mortality and other health measures, etc.), is an aggregation of local solutions to local problems through a variety of research and innovation initiatives at the city level, in markets and in universities. CES must, therefore, be dismantled to allow a learning and decentralised state to be developed.

Only when public intellectuals begin to see the importance of the modernisation of the state (and dismantling CES) for development will the constituency for change come into being. That is when detailed vision and plans may become available for a change leader to take advantage of. We have probably missed the opportunity presented by a well-intentioned leader like Imran Khan because no such discourse was available.

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