

CONCEPTUALISING REFORM: POLITICAL ECONOMY OF INCREMENTAL PROCESSES VERSUS SUDDEN OVERHAULS

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There's extreme hunger for reform in Pakistan, the same that led the reform-promising PTI into government amidst hopes and expectations for a Naya (new) Pakistan. However, what that reform would have looked like remained indeterminate and continued to tear through the fractured politics of Pakistan during the 4-year premiership of Imran Khan who now finds himself behind bars and his party torn between the regime-leaning defectors and baffled and disquieted loyalists. Those still spellbound by the PTI chiefs unaccomplished agenda of reform suggest that their party's hardship is a cost that they had to bear to implement a stringent reform plan. But one can safely argue that this

seems more like the cost of failing to conduct the intended reforms. It would be useful to analyse the kind of reforms that were imagined in Pakistan alongside those that did eventually, in some shape or form, see the light of the day. I would also be arguing that while reforms have been superficial in some essential policy areas, in some others where reforms did well to break their iron curtain and the bureaucratic inertia to find policy expression, they were either loosely connected to a public problem or were not needed in the first place.

RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND PAKISTAN'S PUSH TOWARD REFORM

Pakistan's insatiable hunger for reform at the time of PTI coming into power can be placed within the global inclination toward right-wing populism that saw several right-wing 'reformists' rise to the highest offices. Jair Bolsonaro's crowning in Brazil and Amlo's in Mexico were two of the many examples where populists secured the top office from often being nowhere in the initial polls. Pakistan's saga in 2018 was not a whole lot different. It was seeing a right-wing surge over the decade prior to 2018, but especially after PML-N swept the polls to form government in the centre as well as the country's largest province, Punjab. The domination of the Right in Pakistan was also buoyed by the ideological push towards right-wing populism that was being experienced globally and was equally complemented by Imran's utopian ideas of wide-scale and immediate reform, populist sloganeering and a bitter opposition to the status-quo polity.

All of these indicated the elections of 2018 would turn out to be a focusing event and Pakistan would be governed a party that sees policy reform as a set of non-incremental and sudden processes implying the death of incrementalism. However, contrary to what the punctuated equilibrium theory postulates about policy changes after focusing events, the equilibrium wasn't punctuated and policy continued to be derived from agendas that went through incremental swings and motions.

REFORM POST-2018 ELECTIONS

Imran Khan was elected to the top office in the polls held on July 25th, 2018 to implement economic, political and administrative reforms, establish a polity based on the tenets of good governance and curtail corruption through increased transparency and a robust system of accountability. Good governance and reform are clichéd terms within the political, parliamentary and administrative² discourse of Pakistan. These terms sound banal to the generations that have inherited them. To the millions of young voters that elected Imran in 2018, understanding of the term 'reform' and lending a certain meaning to it was a difficult undertaking. Reform meant so many different things to different people leaving the electorate and its government confused and at times divided over what it was elected to do and what it can do given the multitude of policy issues and dearth of resources. This confusion meant that reform was only being used as a political slogan and there was little consensus on the kind of reform that the electorate wanted to see and that the government could undertake.

Many political parties around the world have promised reform, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, when populist and reformist politics assumed centre stage and took the entirety of Europe, Middle East and certain parts of Africa and South America by storm. But unfortunately, reform in its true sense seems to have eluded these regions. Similarly, in Pakistan, reform hasn't occurred in the past – and it was not able to during Imran Khan's term. The PTI reviewed the performance of some sectors of the economy after its first 90 days in office and made its observations public. In some sectors, it expressed its intention to reform but that is at best where things stood after 90 days (the time Imran wanted to use to make a Naya Pakistan). If there is one word that can be attributed to what the government achieved not just in 90 days but over its entire tenure of 03 years and 09 months, it is 'review' and not 'reform'.

A close examination of events that took place in the first 90 days of the PTI government points to the presence of total confusion with the government ranks. It struggled to conceptualise the kind of reforms that should happen, the resources that need to be allocated and the institutions that shall be made responsible. These are critical public policy questions that incoming governments usually have to confront but veritably those that are elected against promises of quick, effective and immediate reform and by virtue of these, invariably tend to set unrealistically high standards for themselves.

REFORM: IDENTIFYING OPTIMAL INITIATIVES

Reform can happen at the centre, in the provinces and in the districts. A reform plan can be formulated at the federal tier, which can then be vertically devolved to the provinces and the districts; and some level of reform can then be implemented horizontally within the federal institutions. However, many a times, politicians imagine and promise grand reform ideas that are either not achievable within the existing capacity of the institutions or find some kind of resistance from within key state institutions leaving them with only two options: either scrapping the reform idea(s) altogether or finding ways to override institutions and work their way outside the institutional architecture. This often leads them to devise parallel systems that fail to be sustainable, offend the legal or regulatory system, or create frictions with some institutions that come in their way. Their belief that they can use their power to run past legal and regulatory roadblocks and sweep self-imagined reforms across various institutional mandates and actors often results in conflicts, leading to suspension of reforms and a return to an earlier state or a state even worse than that which was present prior to the reform process.

Having established that institutions play a vital role in thwarting or passing the reform agenda, politicians who believe that institutions act conservatively by not letting positive reforms see the light of the day could then consider beginning their reform agenda by conceptualising reforms that need to be brought to the institutions. That could include ‘soft reforms’ like reforms to the internal rules, such as The Rules of Business, 1973 that govern many key institutions like the Cabinet, establishment divisions and the Ministries of Law and Finance. It could also include harder reforms, i.e. those applied to the structure of these institutions. This could also mean changes to the rules that determine the structural aspects of these institutions, although these reforms take the shape of more visible and conspicuous changes.

A big structural change is to think of how civil servants will be recruited, trained and utilised within the existing structures and how their role will evolve if the structures change. How should the civil service function within institutions and how will changes to the civil service rules manifest in changes to these institutions? Therefore, a reform that cuts across all institutions and would be important in driving change is civil service reform. Should it then be useful for politicians to start reforming the civil service before they aim to implement their ambitious reform plans that come into contact with institutional capacities, interests of actors and bureaucratic inertia? As the literature suggests, most scholars assume that this is a good starting point and have taken the liberty to assume that civil service reform is a good representative of the larger reform process.

‘SIVIL SERVICE’ REFORM

Reforms of Pakistan’s civil service resemble my ‘reform’ of the words Sivil and Cervice in the title so that they are only spelled differently but give out the same sound and perform the same function (give out the same meaning) as ‘civil’ and ‘service’. The work that the bureaucracy essentially does, the structure under which it delivers and the compensation it receives have hardly been subjected to any substantial reform. Superficial changes adopted by the government have remained unsuccessful in disturbing the incumbent order. Reforms proposed in the past were restricted to the mere renaming of the service groups or to a revision of the criteria for joining the service; therefore, one should not expect optimal efficiency levels following similar reforms in the future – these results of past initiatives are painfully visible.

If one reads into the history of Pakistan’s civil service reforms, it appears that they have been designed unimaginatively. One can also find a certain lack of diversity – so much so that virtually all reforms pursued in the past can comfortably be placed into three equally unyielding categories. Interestingly, when one reform category failed, the government applied reform to the other –

vacillating aimlessly between the three categories. This is a classic case of regression of the civil service that has tried once too many times to break out of the structures and practices of the British bureaucracy that the colonial power established, as Shashi Tharoor would put it, to support and mask its plunder of resources and extend and fortify its reign over the subcontinent. Clearly, it did not do so to serve the people – like those in contemporary western democracies are meant to.

The first category is what I call a ‘semantic reform’. This is where reform goes only as far as to propose nomenclatural adjustments to the service groups, changing the public’s idea of what each service group is mandated to do. In reality, however, the work and the structures under which they operate remain more or less the same. The District Management Group (DMG), once considered the linchpin of the service and one that has flourished to allow itself an expansive role in the functioning of the bureaucracy, was renamed the Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS). The productivity of the service, the jobs that its officers performed or the results expected to be achieved remained largely unchanged. The name-change addressed the challenges that its officers faced in securing federal and provincial postings given that the word ‘district’ that defined its primary jurisdiction was removed from its name.

The second category is a ‘dumper reform’; reform that lifts power from one bin and dumps it into another. This involves disturbance of the power equilibria and shifts power between state institutions, notably the bureaucracy, the political elite (parliament) and the military, through the adoption of certain legal and regulatory instruments that allow one institution or a group of institutions greater authority over the other/s. An instrument used frequently is the local government ordinance (LGO). The LGOs have regularly been used as a tool to define the role of the local governments, alter power sharing dynamics between the local administration and political executive and contain the bureaucracy – setting limits to the powers and authority it wields over civil administration.

¹ <https://dailytimes.com.pk/339067/review-aka-reform/>

² <https://dailytimes.com.pk/327739/ppp-party-of-masses-sacrifices-and-tragedies-ii/>

The 2001 LGO weakened the bureaucracy by empowering the district nazims (elected mayors) against the deputy commissioners (DCs). In fact, it went on to abolish the office of the DC to replace it with the toothless office of the district coordination officer (DCO) that was supposed to act under the command of the district nazim. Magistracy powers of the DC were also withdrawn which could not be completely returned even after the passage of the local government ordinance of 2013 that, ironically, sought to restore powers of the bureaucracy to improve local governance and decision-making that had suffered quite badly at the hands of the inexperienced local political representatives.

The third is a 'recruitment reform', where the hiring criterion of the human resource is changed to attract a different – maybe more relevant and efficient – set of skills and expertise in the service. A law or criminology graduate will only be allowed to sit for the Police Service entrance examination while a public policy or administration graduate would be allowed to sit for the Pakistan Administrative Service examination. While this would enhance specialisation, it would require a total rethinking of the positions that the civil service generally hires for. Most of the positions that these civil servants are hired require managerial skills regardless of the technicalities involved in the underlying service that their department provides. The big question therefore is if such reform to the civil service should be accompanied by earmarking specialised positions that civil servants should occupy and also conceptualising in advance the structural changes in institutions that will be required to create such positions to enable their onboarding and success.

IS REFORM REALLY NEEDED?

With so many civil service reform ideas floating around and even applied unsuccessfully or tabled in the past, one must question what is particularly wrong with the civil service that demands reform? This is a question that will invite several observations but none particularly convincing. Not because the proposed reforms do not exist but because there lies no evidence for them to exist. One observation is the low productivity of civil servants. But do we have productivity numbers for what civil servants produce in an hour of work, or whether their utilisation of public funds lags behind a fiscal benchmark by a certain percent? Since there is no real evidence of civil servants slacking, the basis of a civil service reform is weak and poorly founded. Another counter argument is that certain groups or departments within the service may be doing well enough to not deserve any reform applied to their structure or functioning. Do these arguments imply that reform must not take place? No, they imply that they must be carefully designed with a strong focus on what can be done given the existing state capacity and where the reform is most needed.

Lastly, one thing that reform-aspiring governments must always realise is that while many reforms they propose seek to cut down expenditures and costs, reforms have a cost of their own and implementation of an ambitious reformist plan may involve higher spending and financial outlays. Think about austerity, a reform meant to cut down fiscal deficits, which inevitably leads to massive growth opportunity costs. Pandering for reform in a state like ours that is constantly finding it hard to find its feet is natural, but many of us call for reform because it's a value-laden phrase that was popularized and lent credence by right-wing populism but also distorted and trivialised by it.

We need reform but have to imagine it outside the influence of such political currents.

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