

REGULATION AND POLICY SPACE



Imperial Democracy

By Dr. Nadeem ul Haque

“We find two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt ends -- the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality dominate and plunder it.” ~ Friedrich Engels

Typically, ‘elected’ dynastic governments start to unravel by their third year thanks to a combination of incompetence and greed. It is then that the rumour of a technocratic setup starts and politicians start to fan it.

Recently, government officials came out with statements to the effect that the constitution does not allow for a technocratic setup and that there is no room for technocrats in Pakistan. The issue of technocrats really needs careful analysis here.

Why is there a demand for technocracy? People repeatedly see that elected governments are not delivering governance and good public service. Instead they slip into whimsical, ‘kitchen cabinet’ government style—where an inner circle of the unelected starts to take arbitrary decisions. The prime minister wants to run the country in imperial fashion and ministers close to him act like imperial lords by passing all laws. Rumours of corruption grow large. Dynastic ambitions reveal themselves in children being thrown into decision-making more readily than any heir apparent in medieval days.

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Democratic leaders are not known for their great appointments. Cronyism prevails as they seek to bring all institutions – even universities, hospitals and projects –under the control of the executive and his favourites. Losses and failures in public service don’t mean anything to the prime minister; what matters is power and control of the purse. Of course, this breeds rumours of misuse of funds.

Cabinets and parliaments, key institutions from which democratic leaders derive power, are weakened deliberately to strengthen the prime minister. Decisions are non-transparently made by prime minister and his people. All procedure is bypassed and most information on key issues is not revealed. Even lesser ministers and allies of the prime minister are isolated and ineffective, with no power or access.

Officials, heads of agencies and regulatory bodies are treated as court employees and shuffled at will. The power to transfer a colonial legacy is used liberally to ensure central control of the prime minister. The government becomes merely official pronouncements of every whim of the imperial prime minister.

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By the third year of democratic rule the costs of this misrule start to show up. People are restless. Public services are not showing improvement despite claims by the government. The economy, patched up by aid, sputters along but the gains are not palpable. The opposition, seeing the increasing power of the executive, seeks to dislodge him through street agitation. With parliament incapacitated prime minister, they seek to mobilise mobs.

Some look for a non-democratic takeover. Furthermore, they look to technical solutions to the mess that has been made. Indeed, the army does promise this in every coup. And yes some part of the solution has to be technical.

True, dictators did make an effort to find professionals in the past. But was it mere rhetoric? It seems to me that they merely drew upon those that had cultivated them. No active search was conducted. This is obvious if you look at those selected – a few well-known writers of columns, oily bankers, businessman and retired bureaucrats. Hard to make a case of active professional team-building.

Even this romance with a seemingly technocratic governance lasts two to three years. Later, dictators become political and succumb to the charms of the ‘fair-weather’ politicians.

In reality, the invisible bureaucrat – the powerful mafia in control – has run all systems through both martial law and democracy even when occasionally a few technocrats are allowed into the periphery.

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People elect representatives to frame laws and influence policy in line with mandates obtained in elections. Representatives have no right to rule whimsically, signing foreign deals at will, initiating projects as they like, spending public money without check, and gifting state land and contracts to favourites.

Consider how a corporation is run. Shareholders elect a board of directors to oversee the running of the company. The board hires the best professional managers to execute approved policies. Policies seldom come from the boards; only directions and suggestions. Mostly, management and staff present well-

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researched proposals for board consideration and approval.

Elected parliamentarians and cabinets are governing bodies like board members. Their role is oversight and decision-making, not running the government. Cabinets and parliaments review reports and policy proposals arising from agencies. Ministries merely monitor and develop reports on public service provision and occasionally propose required policy changes. Service provision and regulatory agencies lie beyond both politics and ministries in their daily working. Policies guide them. Agencies should not be controlled through arbitrary personnel changes and transfers.

Such checks and balances and specialised roles lie at the heart of good governance. And our imperial democracies run into trouble because of this refusal to accept these principles of good governance.

Continuous attacks on professionals must be understood as a means to preserve the status quo of arbitrary rule. The spectre of martial law assisted by technocrats is raised merely to preserve an imperial executive and democracy.

As I have argued in my book, 'Looking Back: How Pakistan Became an Asian tiger in 2050', fine tuning democracy to accept these checks and balances, and assign technical governance and policymaking a proper role will truly allow Pakistan to achieve the development we covet.

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