



# DEPOLITICISATION OF INSTITUTIONS:

## The Way Forward

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The initiation of this debate is spurred by the widely held despondency that domestic institutions of governance have become dysfunctional and in a state of disrepair. It is argued that such an outcome is partly attributable to the secular decline in competence, work ethics, fairness and integrity of those serving in them, but more so to direct and seemingly habitual interference by politicians in the operations and execution of the functions of these entities: starting with non-merit appointments to key positions. The political process of our national politics raises expectations on the exercise of privileges that come with office, to influence policies and processes in favour of the party in power and family and friends.

This factor is supplemented by, in some cases, like the Election Commission of Pakistan and the Judiciary, as well as the shenanigans of the 'Establishment'. Hence, the growing demand for the (re)distribution of functions and mandates to entities to the exclusion of politics.

My support for the proposition, while nuanced, is guided and persuaded by the general experience of the manner and conditions in which institutions are allowed some decision making functions.

We have witnessed over time that the personalisation of power, by weakening institutions, has become the norm, the dominant ethos. This has resulted in patronage being managed by individuals in an ad-hoc manner through the use of non-institutionalised mechanisms for conducting transactions or by manipulating processes. And this system has become deeply embedded in the wider political structure, compromising integrity, independence, neutrality and competence.

The lack of societal resistance to this depressing development is partly owing to the lacklustre rate and pattern of economic growth, which has been unable to create adequate opportunities to absorb the increase in the labour force. With no dynamic independent process of growth creating openings, and an entrenched culture of patronage, seeking public sector employment through the power of patronage exercised by those in authority was, and continues to be, the most attractive route to progress. And the general experience provides evidence on the State and those manning the associated institutions as all-powerful paternal entities, underpinning whirlwind career promotions based on affiliations or malfeasance rather than merit, talent and hard work. Not surprisingly such a system looks for, and can, with ease, find those willing to play the part expected by their benefactors.

Having recorded these misgivings, I move forward. In my judgement interpreting this distinction between politicization and depoliticization of institutions as binary is misplaced. A rather narrow view of the concept of the term. It fails to recognise the complexity of the relationship between political economy challenges and the purported structure to protect institutions from societal and political pressures and associated transaction costs. And that the alteration in governance affiliations and linkages is in substance only a difference of degree.

The configuration and composition of institutions should ostensibly be driven by the objective of insulating them from political pressures, by moderating, if not reducing, the direct control of politicians whose electoral considerations make their foresight and prudence short-term from a public policy standpoint. Their depoliticization is a methodical and rational form for institutions, an appropriately balanced and technically coherent solution to a particular set of problems.

The day to day management of operations in formulating policies, decisions on tools and instruments for the accomplishment of these actions and organisational arrangements, needs to be depoliticised. The governance architecture and with it the amphitheatre for taking decisions, and exercising powers using non-political, analytical and transparency factors, needs to be modified to check the role of the political process managed by the parliament and the political leadership running government. This objective is to be achieved through legally protected structures that take away the solution of some issues from the direct mode of governance exercised by the elected political leadership.

I regard as mistaken concerns of political strains from the burgeoning demand for delegation of decision making powers to agencies outside formal political institutions, beyond the control of elected representatives who are directly accountable to the electorate, and who regard themselves as merely ratifying these decisions.

The fears that decision making authority under depoliticisation would result in loss of accountability to, and control of, the elected representatives and thereby to the people, is unfounded. It is simply not possible to completely depoliticise institutions. They should be accountable and responsive to the political process, ideally the parliament, which empowered them under a governing legislation. It is politicians/parliament who should, and do so even today through institution specific governing statutory frameworks, decide which functions and responsibilities to be depoliticized and the instruments and institutional arrangements for exercising these powers. Visions, priorities, incentive regimes and associated structures should lie squarely in the political domain.

The frightening pace of technological changes, rising social tensions and political discords and heightened expectations of a citizenry, better informed by a hyper active social media seeking direct policy and affiliated managerial interventions to address transient developments and challenges, requires the assembling of appropriate structures and associated systems with greater capability to adapt and respond to these tests. This arrangement can be achieved through a framework for a principal-agent relationship, covered by appropriate legislation and a formal procedure, with the agent having administrative and financial freedom to perform its functions and responsibilities for policy areas under a set of broad parameters and rules based depoliticised, predictable governance.

Our experience has been that the elected representatives in power prefer to place in key posts individuals who are malleable and expected to respond affirmatively to diktats, even when the institutions are protected through appropriate legislation, suggesting that independence is the state of the mind of those appointed in these positions of responsibility. Therefore, ideally, the parliament should approve the criteria for appointments and nominations on these bases, the scope of functions

to be performed, areas to be delegated for policy formulation, the administrative and financial powers, parameters for performance evaluation and internal institutional mechanisms, rules, regulations and processes for decision making and implementation.

Furthermore, we should consider ratification by parliament of the appointments of heads of institutions empowered in areas regarded as critical to the smooth delivery of state functions, as a process to ensure that these agencies are manned by individuals with credibility for capability and impartiality and public trust to withstand political pressures. Admittedly, there could be legitimate apprehensions of having to make unsavoury compromises with the opposition in parliament-it could be seeking favours in return for endorsing the candidates.

Modern governance is rather complex. There are a variety of considerations and influences, including those of external factors like globalization and multilateral institutions as key stakeholders in these matters. Our politicians are not adequately equipped of the requisites of evolving knowledge in the area mandated to them as ministers. They also face difficulties in managing the functional overload. They are confronted by challenging demands for actions beyond domestic borders by global agencies espousing a wide range of narratives (e.g. SDGs, controls over emissions, etc.) whose blessings drive the choice of the institutional architecture and choice of policies and institutions for availability of funding. For the satisfactory accomplishment of these responsibilities they can be supported by fabricating codified institutional structures and systems for inducting expertise in advisory, rather than decision making, positions.

And to enable these institutions to deliver on their mandates their capacity, effectiveness and credibility in implementing policies should be augmented, as an answer to the difficulties in executing policies employing the tools available to the political process.

Similarly, to assist the deliberations of parliamentary committees on different subjects a system can be put in place for formalizing the inputs of relevant experts. This arrangement will enable these committees to carry out their responsibilities of oversight and accountability of concomitant institutions by obtaining regular reports and getting relevant officials of the entity to testify on the progress attained in achieving the stated goals and objectives.

In my opinion, the above referred proposals can provide the acceptable way forward for establishing rules based governance structures that will be guided, overseen and held accountable by the elected representatives of the people. No other arrangement will be able to secure moral legitimacy, beyond its legal feature.

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