

# **Pakistan: 'Bech de!' - The IMF, privatisations, public service sector and public services**

Sunday 19 May 2019, by [AKHTAR Aasim Sajjad](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2019).

MANY readers will recognise that the title of this column is borrowed from an online marketplace that is increasingly popular in Pakistan. This refrain is emblematic of the ideas that dominate our society and world, ideas that most of us endorse uncritically on a daily basis. My question is: what's the difference between the slogan 'Bech de!' and the policies that the PTI government has loyally agreed to implement at the urging of the IMF?

In particular, I want to call attention to one of the fundamental prescriptions that the IMF and other multilateral donors have consistently peddled since the 1980s when the policy regime known as neo-liberalism displaced the Keynes-inspired orthodoxies of the post-WWII period. This policy is called privatisation, and by all accounts the agreement signed with the IMF a few days ago will lead to the government selling off more and more of an already emaciated public service sector.

Note that the IMF, other donors, all manner of 'experts' and the current finance minister himself all concur that assets parked in the public sector represent a colossal waste of resources. Ordinary Pakistanis do not need to be told that many public institutions are inefficient and sometimes even oppressive, and that many of them are little more than white elephants sucking taxpayer monies.

But does this mean that it is necessary to sell public institutions into private hands? What about the altogether reasonable alternative, which is to identify the causes of poor performance and then improve the functioning of public institutions?

We put public services on the chopping block.

After all, the state is an entity to which ordinary citizens accord authority precisely because it guarantees basic needs irrespective of class, ethnicity, gender and so on. Yes, private enterprises may be willing to invest in the provision of basic services, but the evidence clearly confirms that they do not guarantee universal provision because it is generally not profitable.

Many of us lament the state and its retreat but rarely in terms of the economy. Here the state is conceptualised only in terms of its 'assets' which, when we apply the principle of 'Bech de!', fetch a one-time profit. So, for instance, PIA owns a hotel in central Manhattan that many private investors would jump at the opportunity to buy. Many other public-sector institutions can also be broken up into pieces and their 'assets' sold for profit. This is necessary, many of us believe, because we need money to keep the economy afloat.

But what about the whole principle of the state providing services to the citizenry?

Frankly, that principle went up in smoke a long time ago. Most of us ordinary Pakistanis no longer even harbour expectations of a functioning public sector. Admittedly, the state has never had a very pronounced welfare function, but there was a time not too long ago when this country's working

people, and even segments of the elite, patronised public schools/universities, public hospitals, and even shared public recreational spaces. This was because such services were provided to the larger public by the state, no matter how sparingly.

Now it is taken for granted that those of us who do not have the money or contacts will not gain access to certain services, even if it is a matter of life and death.

Today the state is talking up 'development' in historically under-serviced areas like rural Sindh, rural KP, Balochistan and erstwhile Fata but it's hard to ignore the fact that most interventions are designed to facilitate private investors looking to extract mineral resources such as coal, copper, gold and various iron ores. Roads are of course being built at breakneck pace, and such infrastructure can potentially serve the wider public interest, but the emphasis is more on creating an 'enabling environment' for the 'free market' while needs such as education, health, transport, drinking water, energy are still effectively luxuries that can only be purchased on the 'free market'.

Meanwhile, the revenues we could generate by taxing profiteers are wilfully passed up, and it is public services that we put on the chopping block instead.

The most alarming privatisations on the cards are those of the remaining hospitals and colleges that do remain in the public domain. The young doctors, nurses, teachers and other public-sector employees often on strike these days can be criticised, but at least some are calling attention to the ongoing erosion of public health and education; these hospitals and colleges are the only form of insurance that working people have in a tyrannical world ruled by private profiteers.

More of us ought to think carefully about the hegemonic power of slogans such as '*Bech de!*' and '*Khareed le!*' and start reimagining alternatives that allow us to free ourselves from the debt and arm-twisting of the IMF and the complicity of state and private elites that could not care less about people's needs.

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**P.S.**

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