

Pakistan's strange approach to public accountability

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Pakistanis have a curious model of accountability for public officials. They can do whatever they want when they are in power, and then they are unceremoniously thrown out, replaced, imprisoned, exiled, and in one famous case executed.

Public spectacles of humiliation for rulers have always had an appeal in the popular imagination. It is a moment in which the world seems to have been turned upside down, rules of the world inverted, the powerful appearing meek and the wretched of the earth vindicated, at least momentarily.

The JIT's report has created such a frenzied spectacle in sections of the electronic and social media, with many equating the damning condemnations of the PML-N government, particularly the prime minister and his family. And one can understand where such euphoria stems from. After almost ten consecutive years of rule in Punjab, and the announcement of one spectacular project after another, there still remains little for the government to show in terms of improving the living standards for a vast majority of ordinary people. A few facts illustrate the abysmal situation.

Today, the number of Pakistanis unable to access drinking water has increased to a shocking 84 percent, with 40 percent of the population dying of waterborne, preventable diseases. The housing shortage for ordinary people has reached an almost staggering 10 million, with no social housing policy in sight. On top of that, almost four million youth are entering the job market annually, with the need to create an additional 1.5 million jobs just to keep up. The recent tragedy in Bahawalpur, where the entire region lacked a burn unit, exposed how the social infrastructure has all but crumbled outside the glittering neighbourhoods of Lahore.

On the local level, the nexus of patronage and police high-handedness has made meaningful opposition from ordinary people all but impossible. Consider the case of Ghulam Dastgir, a trade union leader who was arrested and imprisoned by an anti-terrorist court for merely siding with peasants at Dera Saigol resisting dispossession against a landlord connected with the N-league. He was acquitted by courts two days ago after five years in jail, with his health in shambles, and more importantly, after the complete ruin of the peasant movement in the area. Such poor souls, of course, cannot be judged if they lack enthusiasm for this democratic rule.

Yet, despite the obvious failures of the current regime's development policies, and their brazen misuse of authority, one cannot but feel sceptical about the current celebratory atmosphere. And the one big irritant interrupting our sense of victory is nothing but the history of accountability drives in our unfortunate land.

It is disingenuous to claim that prime ministers, or even popular leaders, have not been held accountable. Other than Liaquat Ali Khan, it is difficult to think of any significant prime ministerial figure in our history who was not dismissed over abuse of authority/corruption, and was not jailed, exiled or, in Z A Bhutto's case, hanged. If punishing prime ministers was a criterion, one could

compare Pakistan to established democracies and claim that we have more accountability for elected officials than any other country, making us one of the most pro-people systems in the world!

This would, however, be a statement that not even the most enthusiastic nationalists would like to make. For Pakistan's record of holding elected officials is intertwined with a peculiar trajectory; that of the complete impunity of unelected officials, in particular the military and the judiciary. For example, it would be quite unthinkable to look into the financial affairs of the army and merely a book written on the subject can invite a of antagonism.

Not only financial corruption, but even alleged abuses of human rights of citizens in 'far-flung' areas such as Fata and Balochistan (and previously East Pakistan) remain taboo topics that journalists, let alone courts, cannot touch. Add to that the secrecy surrounding the conduct of the war on terror, recently amplified by Raymond Davis' book, and we realise that the quest for even transparency, let alone widespread accountability, remains a distant dream.

We can now resolve this paradox. Despite repeatedly undergoing the ritual of deposing prime ministers, we cannot claim that we have moved closer to a culture of across-the-board accountability, since the deep state remains outside the ambit of any such process. The political ramifications of such accountability have been even more dubious. In a society where abuse of public authority is a norm, and industrial development is linked to cronyism, it is not hard to indict large sections of the elite (and upper middle classes) of bending the law for personal benefits.

This reality is compounded by the fact that the deep state not only enjoys impunity for itself, but also has the power to offer a clean chit to anyone among this class who chooses to function under its ambit. In the 1960s, General Ayub Khan was able to set up his own faction of the Muslim League by enticing political bigwigs with lucrative offers of patronage, all in the name of fighting corruption. General Ziaul Haq also pardoned and consequently included a number of political heavyweights in his government by offering access to government resources. Incidentally, the Sharif family was one such (Punjabi) household that obtained immense financial benefits for its closeness to the Zia regime.

The latest round of 'good governance' was of course witnessed under the Musharraf regime, where NAB was used to fulfil the unfinished task of cleaning Pakistan from the corruption of the two major parties. The process, however, turned into a farce when Musharraf needed political allies to stabilise his government. Thus, a large number of PML-N, and later PPP, members were cajoled into a pro-Musharraf coalition, with not only corruption cases against them dropped, but by also being offered high posts in the cabinet.

In all these instances, this entanglement between accountability and impunity is extended or withdrawn to different actors as part of a political calculation. It implies that rather than being an attempt to eradicate corruption, accountability in Pakistan has been, and remains, a technique of governance. It is a method through which threats, selective action and conditional pardons are put into effect. All the while, it is ensured the vigilant gaze of the media and the courts will not stray enough to include 'national institutions' in the accountability process, since past precedents for those who dared have made them wiser.

Over the past 70 years, each phase of accountability has come with proclamations suggesting that at least the process has begun and will eventually deepen. Yet, instead of a beginning, it ends up being part of a repetition, in which an even greater, well-entrenched and sacred elite continues to reproduce its own privilege. The demands for accountability, and the egalitarian impulse such demands express, can be realised only when applied across the board without exceptions for any sacred cows. For the destinies of nations cannot be changed without such principled, but

uncomfortable decisions.

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