

The new high treason

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Accountability in Pakistan is not a new endeavour. Successive governments, whether democratic or military, have initiated accountability programmes, ostensibly to fight corruption and promote transparency.

However, time and again, these efforts have been allowed to lose their facade of impartiality, rapidly degrading into a blatant series of political manoeuvrings and vendetta.

This ongoing cycle, like a dangerous game of musical chairs, has inflicted irreparable damage upon state institutions, rendering governance virtually impossible. Consequently, Pakistan's standing has now plummeted to the lowest levels in almost all international indices of governance and socioeconomic indicators, placing it among states that are on the verge of collapse.

During each attempt at accountability, it quickly became apparent that political opponents or those who did not fall in line with those in power could get incarcerated for even the mildest infractions. There have been a few high-profile cases where it was clear that the crime was fabricated to victimize the opponents. On the other hand, numerous examples emerged of favoured individuals escaping punishment for serious, and even heinous, acts of corruption and other crimes.

These repeated failures in impartiality have led to a process that loses momentum almost immediately. Often this has occurred because the very individuals leading the accountability effort were themselves tainted by allegations of corruption, abuse of power and other forms of bad governance.

This gravely unprincipled attitude towards accountability has weakened institutions and eroded public trust. Because the process was so rigged, it blurred the distinction between guilty and innocent. Consequently, the principle of 'the benefit of the doubt' has largely been exploited by genuine, hardened offenders, and some serious culprits have escaped justice. This has further undermined governance – making incidences of violation of merit more intense. It has infused the sense in society that acts of favouritism and nepotism are a normal phenomenon. Corruption and bad governance, thus,

have become ingrained in the system.

Successive generations of politicians and officers have embraced the notion that self-enrichment and cronyism are the order of the day, and everything goes unpunished in this country. As a result, the collapse of institutions accelerated. A critical look at almost every institution in Pakistan reveals serious issues.

Addressing this crisis requires an immediate overhaul of the current accountability paradigm. Across-the-board, multi-level accountability, free from political bias, is essential. Impartial accountability institutions must be established at both the federal and provincial levels, ensuring that justice is served without partisan prejudice.

These new or reformed accountability institutions should have built-in

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mechanisms for internal transparency and procedures to automatically weed out corrupt people from their ranks. These institutions should be equipped with highly undisputed processes of investigation and prosecution. Only then will they be able to impartially hold wrongdoers accountable, ensuring that no one is above the law.

Another important thing is that this time the process should be made comprehensive by reforming and redesigning the provincial anti-corruption establishments as well. These institutions should be put in strong coordination with the central government's accountability apparatus. The colonial era procedures for provincial anti-corruption authorities to seek permission from government before proceeding against corrupt officials should be done away with, as this power has almost always been abused.

Generally, the alleged misuse of the federal government's accountability ap-

paratus receives much more limelight than the similar, and often more serious, manipulations of the anti-corruption establishments in the provinces by successive provincial governments.

The consequences of continued inaction are nothing short of catastrophic. A country plagued by institutional decay cannot function effectively, especially in a highly interconnected world that demands transparency. In the face of systemic corruption, social unrest and disintegration become increasingly likely.

The stakes are so high that what once was seen as mere incompetence now borders on high treason. The choice is clear: either institutions reform themselves or the nation risks an 'implosion'.

Policymakers will have to work extra hard to pick the bits to restore them into working institutions. The immediate job is to halt the country's institutional decline and then reverse the course and put the country on the path to recovery. But as the decline was slow – even though it accelerated in the last decade or so – the reversal will be much slower and will require immense patience and consistency.

Corrective steps taken at the institutional level now will begin to have their effect felt at minimum after a couple of years. But immediate targeted changes, like removing corrupt officials – many of them were appointed under dubious circumstances without due process – from their positions, will quickly yield positive effects.

The path to progress requires collective commitment to fairness, transparency, and the supremacy of law. By moving beyond political vendettas, Pakistan can march towards a future where corruption is not tolerated, institutions are robust, and justice prevails.

In an era of next-generation warfare, where battles without flames are waged on geostrategic and economic frontlines, 'bad governance' can be justifiably called the 'new high treason'. The choice is ours, and the stakes are high, but the path is clear for those driven by patriotism.

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