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Re-thinking Government

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The most critical constraint today to the effective functioning of the government is its overextended mandate, beyond its core role and the competence of its workforce. The institutional architecture of running government is not an outcome of any 'grand' design or prioritization of government roles derived from any strategic vision. The existing structures have evolved from those inherited at Pakistan's independence in response to a number of external and internal factors: (a) the constitutional division of subjects between the Federal and provincial governments; (b) Federal and provincial legislation; (c) international economic, social and political conditions; (d) changing government priorities and ad-hoc decisions taken to address particular problems; and (e) political expediency and domestic socio-political pressures. The overall trend has been for structures to grow because it has been relatively easy for new departments, agencies and staff positions to be created or added, but once established, their continued maintenance is supported by stakeholders and system beneficiaries.

As a result, some functions have become obsolete and some rendered redundant over time. Furthermore, there is a lot of work duplication even after the 18th Amendment under which a host of functions have been hived off to the provincial governments without resulting in any shrinkage in the size of the Federal Government. Even within governments interrelated functions have been fragmented across two or more departments or autonomous bodies. Resultantly, it is difficult to differentiate the work of some ministries from that of the autonomous bodies attached to them, diffusing a number of mandates between a large number of agencies, creating inefficiency and problems of policy and implementation coherence and coordination.

However, now with budgetary constraints, competing imperatives, pallid growth and rising expectations of citizens, governments need to re-consider functions they should take upon themselves to perform, and accordingly re-engineer the institutional set-up.

This would necessarily warrant an overriding vision informing the future role of government, which would involve differentiating between a set of activities that the government should neither do nor pay for, those it should do and pay for and those it should pay for but not necessarily do itself. Such an effort can be facilitated by harnessing the whole range of instruments (such as telecommunication and internet technology) to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of services, and by partnering with a rapidly maturing private sector. This is, therefore, an opportune time to conduct an assessment of the kind of roles that the government.

Functions it should do and pay for (its sole responsibility) would include only defence, foreign policy, fiscal and monetary policy, justice, law and order and some categories of physical and social infrastructure that the market and the private sector cannot perform. The list of what the government should neither do nor pay for but in which it is currently engaged includes running retail outlets for articles of daily use/consumption, banks, airlines, steel mills, etc. Determining the set of activities that the government should pay for but not necessarily do itself is a more difficult exercise but the following example should be able to illustrate this point.

It is the moral duty of the state to ensure that the population gets free good quality elementary level education. Such an obligation translated into concrete action merely requires that the government must pay for this education. It does not mean that the government should produce or provide the service itself. In fact, there is enough evidence that if the government provides the service we will continue to have ghost schools, ghost teachers, non-merit based appointments, teachers not attending schools with no accountability of the service provider (the teacher) to the service recipient (the student and the parents) and with the latter having little, if any, recourse to those to whom the teacher is answerable for service provision.

A large part of the regulatory framework exists because of the lack of clarity on the role of government, thereby providing employment opportunities for skills that the market neither demands nor produces. In several instances, new products and instruments have become available that are better replacements and more effective mechanisms for achieving the objectives underlying the promulgation of existing laws or institutional and administrative arrangements for their enforcement. Take, for instance, the case of Grade-11 Boiler Inspectors recruited and trained to enforce a legislation that may have been relevant 80 years ago, are today expected to inspect and certify boilers manufactured by multinationals like Siemens. In an era in which the technology for manufacturing boilers has taken a leap forward, even in Pakistan, the provincial Industries Department is staffed by professionally ill-equipped boiler inspectors performing this regulatory function. This role could easily be outsourced to universities and private firms providing engineering services to be pre-qualified based on well-drafted selection criteria.

Similarly, there are provincial Building and Electricity Inspectors to ensure the safety and security of private buildings used for public purposes, for example, cinema houses. The objective can be better achieved if such buildings are comprehensively covered by private insurance companies. Through this instrument the cinema owners can be spared the frequent

visits of these government employees, who would be denied the opportunity for extortion on the basis of the regulatory functions mandated to them. Moreover, the security and safety of the public using these buildings would also be assured, since the private insurance companies would ensure the proper construction and maintenance of the property.

The need to re-invent government is also important to bring it in harmony with the demands of a modern economy and the requirements of the technological revolution being spawned by 21st century science. The demands of a globalized economy require the private sector in Pakistan to adopt internationally recognized technologies, production techniques and management practices to remain competitive with world suppliers of similar goods and services. However, whereas the government, which is supposed to facilitate the operations of the private sector, expects it to become modern in its outlook, it has yet to accept that its own skills, procedures and work processes are antiquated and outmoded.