



DECLINING TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: HOW ARE PARLIAMENTS TACKLING THIS ISSUE?

A view from Pakistan.

In recent years, a noticeable decline in public trust in state institutions has become increasingly apparent worldwide, and Pakistan is no exception to this global trend. The perception in Pakistan is that trust in public institutions, including the Judiciary, the Election Commission, Law Enforcement Agencies and other stakeholders, are diminishing. The erosion of trust in public institutions represents a significant challenge to the stability and functionality of democratic society. Consequently, addressing this issue has become a priority for Pakistani Parliamentarians, who are actively implementing various measures to restore and bolster public trust.

The decline in trust towards public institutions can lead to profound consequences. A weakened perception of legitimacy for these institutions can undermine policy execution and result in heightened public apathy or unrest. In Pakistan, a country already facing challenges of political instability and corruption, restoring trust in public institutions is of paramount importance.

Elections

One of the most contentious areas of concern in Pakistan is the electoral process. Historically, elections in the country have been marred by controversy and scepticism. Losing parties often refuse to concede defeat or congratulate the victors, perpetuating an environment of doubt and suspicion. Allegations of electoral fraud, vote manipulation and interference from both internal and external entities continue to cast a shadow over the credibility of politicians and the integrity of the electoral process. This persistent apprehension leads to widespread voter disillusionment, which threatens and undermines the core principles of democratic governance.

The Judiciary

The Judiciary, a crucial component of the state of Pakistan, faces significant challenges. It is frequently alleged that Pakistani courts occasionally operate under the doctrine of necessity, compromising or pursuing other interests. This doctrine, sanctioning extraordinary actions during crises, has been invoked repeatedly throughout Pakistan's history. It legitimises measures that might otherwise be considered unconstitutional, thereby casting doubt on the Judiciary's neutrality and independence to some extent. It is a commonly held view that within the judicial system, the elite receive swift and favorable justice, whereas the average person encounters considerable delays and hurdles when seeking justice. The sluggish progress of justice for the populace heightens sentiments of frustration and helplessness, thereby diminishing trust in the judicial system.

Political Instability

Political instability continues to be a major challenge in Pakistan, exacerbated by politicians who often engage in personal attacks and mudslinging. This type of behaviour not only derails significant policy debates but also exacerbates social divisions. Focusing on personal vendettas and character assaults detracts from the essential duties of governance and policy formulation, creating a climate of uncertainty and instability. This political deadlock impedes effective governance and undermines the public's trust in the political system.

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement agencies in Pakistan are subject to extensive criticism. The dominant perspective is that they frequently fall short of serving the public interest and instead function as tools for those in authority. Reports of police brutality, corruption and selective enforcement of laws have fostered a negative image. The lack of accountability and transparency in these institutions continues to undermine public confidence. The perception that certain agencies act with impunity and serve the interests of the elite, to the detriment of the ordinary citizen, greatly impedes the establishment of trust.

The Economy

Inflation remains a persistent and pressing concern for the citizens of Pakistan. The unchecked rise in living costs profoundly impacts citizens' daily lives, leading to widespread discontent and unrest. The inability of the government to control inflation and ensure economic stability continues to weaken public confidence in state institutions. Economic strain aggravates various social issues, leading to a sense of despair and disenfranchisement within the community.

Parliament's Responses

The shrinking of public trust in institutions presents a profound challenge with extensive consequences for Pakistan's societal, economic and political realms. In response, the Parliament of Pakistan has initiated multiple strategies to rebuild this trust. These strategies focus on legislative reforms and the implementation of oversight mechanisms, which are intended to improve transparency, accountability and the system's overall responsiveness.

The Parliament of Pakistan has introduced several reforms and initiatives aimed at improving the electoral process. Key measures include the Election Act 2017, which consolidated and reformed the laws relating to elections. In addition, the delimitation

Muhammad Mohsin Iqbal is Director General (Library & Research) at the National Assembly Secretariat at the Parliament of Pakistan.



of constituencies was updated to reflect population changes, ensuring more accurate and representative electoral districts. Efforts to combat electoral fraud included stricter campaign finance regulations and enhanced monitoring of campaign activities. These comprehensive reforms aim to foster a more transparent, inclusive and accountable electoral system in Pakistan.

Another approach under consideration involves further improving legislative oversight over the Executive and other branches of government. Parliamentary Committees play a crucial role in scrutinising government activities and holding public officials accountable. Strengthening the powers and effectiveness of these Committees is a key component of Parliament's strategy to promote a culture of accountability and transparency. This includes conducting regular audits, holding public hearings and investigating government activities and expenditures.

The inclusion of a Senator in the National Assembly Pakistan's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) marks a significant step towards strengthening the Federation's oversight procedures. This move underscores a commitment to fostering a more inclusive and representative governance structure. By integrating Members of the Senate into the PAC, the government is promoting a broader perspective in financial scrutiny and accountability. This decision not only enhances the transparency and effectiveness of the PAC but also reinforces the collaborative spirit between both Houses of Parliament. It symbolises a positive stride towards ensuring that Federal oversight mechanisms are robust, participatory and reflective of the diverse political landscape of Pakistan.

Legislative reforms target the disparities in the justice system. Optimising judicial procedures, minimising case delays and enhancing court efficiencies are crucial to ensuring that justice is accessible and swift for all citizens. The Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Act, 2023, brings several significant improvements to the judiciary system. One key enhancement is improved case management, establishing a clear process for forming panels of judges based on seniority and expertise, ensuring that cases are appropriately handled. The Act promotes enhanced fairness by providing a structured approach for cases of public importance and those involving fundamental rights, guaranteeing they receive the necessary attention and expertise. The introduction of a quick appeals process, within a 30-day filing period and a 14-day hearing schedule, ensures swift justice. It also empowers individuals with the right to choose their counsel for review applications, thereby enhancing their ability to receive competent legal representation.

In addition, the Act ensures prompt attention to urgent matters, mandating that such cases are heard within 14 days, thus providing timely relief for critical issues. By overriding conflicting laws and regulations, the Act promotes clarity and consistency, creating a more predictable legal framework. Moreover, the defined procedures and timelines enhance transparency in the Supreme Court's processes, building public trust in the Judiciary. Overall, this Act aims to make the Supreme Court more efficient, fair and transparent in handling cases. By enhancing transparency

and minimising corruption opportunities, these measures aim to rebuild the public's trust in the justice system.

Tackling the impact of covert influences on political and judicial decisions demands a comprehensive strategy. It is crucial to fortify the autonomy of the Judiciary and law enforcement bodies. Protective measures for judges and law enforcement personnel against external influences, and merit-based appointments and promotions, are imperative. Moreover, increasing the transparency of decision-making procedures and promoting a culture of integrity within these entities are vital steps.

The National Action Plan (NAP) further underscores the commitment to improving law enforcement by coordinating efforts across various agencies to tackle terrorism and extremism effectively. These reforms are complemented by increased investment in training, technology and infrastructure for law enforcement personnel, aiming to build a more professional and accountable policing system in Pakistan.

Enhancing the public's view of law enforcement agencies requires tackling corruption, brutality and biased enforcement. Achieving this involves implementing thorough reforms, which encompass improved training, more rigorous oversight and increased accountability for wrongdoing. Initiatives in community policing that promote trust and collaboration between the police and the community are crucial. Parliament's goal in developing a more professional and responsible police force is to guarantee that law enforcement agencies act in the public's best interest.

Political stability is crucial for restoring public trust in institutions. To achieve this, political leaders must avoid personal attacks and focus on substantial policy issues. Fostering a culture of constructive debate and collaboration is imperative for addressing the nation's pressing concerns. Parliament can play a key role in fostering this culture by setting standards for political discourse and encouraging dialogue and cooperation among political parties.

Addressing inflation and securing economic stability are central for rebuilding public trust. This necessitates effective economic policies that tackle the fundamental causes of inflation and foster sustainable growth. Implementing measures to boost economic opportunities, decrease unemployment and enhance living standards is vital for reinforcing public trust in the government's economic management. By focusing on economic stability and growth, Parliament can respond to a major concern of the Pakistani populace.

In summary, the erosion of public trust in Pakistan's institutions is a complex issue that demands thorough and ongoing efforts to resolve. Parliament's strategy to combat this challenge includes a mix of legislative reforms, oversight mechanisms and initiatives designed to improve transparency, accountability and system responsiveness. By confronting the root causes of mistrust and enacting measures to regain confidence, Pakistan can establish a more stable, equitable and thriving society.

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