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Cross-party involvement and reform in Pakistan

Despite early signs of growing cross-party cooperation, Pakistan continues to be beset by political disagreement. If evidence-based policymaking is to succeed in Pakistan, new forums will have to be developed for political debate and cooperation

Since the second half of 2014, Pakistan has seen a widening difference between the forms of governance of the two leading parties in Pakistan, PTI, the ruling party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the Parliamentary opposition, and PML-N, the ruling party in Punjab and the Federal Government. These differences stemmed from PTI's allegations of a rigged election, and the need to focus on electoral reforms and formulation of a judicial commission to assess the legitimacy of the previous elections.

The stand-off between these two parties has paralysed the government for several months, and the resultant political deadlock has cast doubt on the democratic credentials of the agitating parties both at home and abroad. Countries like Pakistan, which have been marred by cross-party politics, may need to develop multiparty cooperation to sustain reform.

As well as slow economic growth, Pakistan is struggling with terrorism and political unrest, and failure to develop policies in a cooperative manner could lead to public disenchantment with the elected government, and a greater voice for extremist elements within Pakistan.^[1] To respond to all these challenges and address these concerns, the government must rely on informed policies.

Developing cross-party cooperation

To ensure reforms are long-lasting, development and growth strategies must be formulated through a broad-based consultative process that cuts across party lines. However any meaningful country ownership firstly requires adequate space for broad participation, which in turn provides the scope for parliamentarians to represent their constituencies; and secondly the possibility for parliamentarians to garner broad cross-partisan support.^[2]

Some recent developments have presented opportunities for sustainable policy reforms. Firstly, with the continuation of the democratic process in Pakistan and the changes in federal and provincial governments following the 2013 election, there is an increased likelihood of forging consensus on policy reform. Pakistan has the same political party (PML-N) leading both the

Federal and the Punjab Governments. This arrangement has allowed the work being done by IGC Pakistan to gain significant policy traction owing to our good working relationship with PML-N leadership.

Secondly, since the last election Provincial Governments in Sindh (PPP) and KP (PTI) are not led by regional parties with centrifugal tendencies, but by those that aspire to gain electoral success across Pakistan. This has established the principle of contestability in the country's democratic framework. The elected governments at all levels are under pressure to improve economic performance if they are to have a chance of forming a national government in the next election. This is creating demand for sound policy making.

Lastly, a new leadership of young, bright, and articulate politicians has emerged since the last elections. These emerging policymakers are looking to engage in policy debate and develop a reform agenda that serves their constituencies. Political coalitions in the government and in the opposition are being engaged in these debates, to promote a better understanding of the economic challenges facing the country. The climate is therefore promising for evidence-based policy making that cuts across party lines.

Early signs of cross-party consensus

There have been examples of cross-party consensus on several important policy issues that are now paving the way for sustainable reform. The declaration of a constitutional reform package in 2010, following two years of democratically elected government, gave a clear indication that the rules of the political game were changing and Pakistan was settling down into some form of political stability. Multiparty unanimity for the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment, devolving financial and political autonomy from the centre to the provinces, and the Seventh National Finance Commission (NFC) Award (determining the distribution of resources amongst the provinces and the federation) has ensured strong and widespread ownership of these important reforms. These broad based legal reforms brought all parties together, and helped build consensus on fundamental issues of governance and fiscal federalism. The 18th Amendment greatly empowered provincial governments for the first time and the 7th NFC Award gave them the resources to be able to deliver on their new responsibilities.

The on-going security situation and heightened militant activity also pushed forward a multiparty consensus on issues of national security. An All Parties' Conference at the start of 2015 concluded with a consensus on the proposed National Plan of Action to counter terrorism in the aftermath of the deadly attack on a school in Peshawar^[3]. More recently, PTI and PML-N have also joined hands in the mission to eradicate polio in KP and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It seems as if both parties have finally realised the significance of collaborating on issues of critical concern.

When it comes to decision making on several of the key issues such as electoral reforms, economic policymaking, macro-

economic stability, and improving social service delivery, multiparty consensus can appear to disintegrate. However, even though when there does not seem to be public agreement on fundamental issues among political parties, there is often tacit understanding of learning from each other's experiences. This has been witnessed as KP and Punjab continue to learn from best practices in information technology based governance (such as using smartphones to improve accountability in social service delivery), to address problems in urban areas, to formulate economic growth strategies, and to translate them into implementable plans. Punjab, and provinces across Pakistan, are keen to replicate the anti-polio campaign conducted in KP under PTT's leadership. This model was not only praised by organisations including the UN and the Gates Foundation, but also by the Federal Ministry of Health Services & Regulations, which has acknowledged that a lot can be learnt from KP's model of polio eradication.

Forums for political cooperation in Pakistan

Against this backdrop, IGC Pakistan, in collaboration with the [Consortium for Development Policy Research](#) (CDPR) successfully organised a one-day seminar in February 2015 that brought to the same platform leaders from several political parties to engage in a discussion on important policy issues, including social service delivery and fiscal policy. The seminar positively demonstrated to donors, international organisations, as well as researchers and policymakers that cross party debates through similar forums are a sign of a strengthened democratic process in Pakistan. Cross-party dialogue and networking, as well as collective strategising about how to overcome crucial growth challenges not only allows the work done under organizations such the IGC and the CDPR to gain policy traction, but also provides opportunities to important stakeholders for supporting policymaking for long-lasting reform.

With an increasing appetite for evidence-based policymaking and learning by sharing, we can observe political maturity in Pakistan. Such forums to share ideas and learn from each other's experiences show that even imperfect elections can have a positive impact by obliging political leaders to improve governance and create opportunities for new parties and leaders to emerge. If, however, the ruling party and its parliamentary opposition use these forums along with the legislature for settling political scores, any gains through multiparty unanimity will soon be lost, as will the prospects of the country continuing to move along the democratic path.^[4] So one way of encouraging cross party policymaking is through the obvious route of getting them all together on one platform. In the context of Pakistan, however, what could really work is pushing the sharing of best practices across provinces. Organisations like the IGC can catalyse this process and provide support to evidence-based research, strengthening the link between research and policy, and disseminating knowledge to policymakers irrespective of their party affiliations.

[1] <https://www.ndi.org/pakistan>

[2] http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBI/Resources/The_Role_of_Legislatures_in_Poverty_Reduction_with_cover.pdf

[ROLE OF LEGISLATURES IN LOYALTY REDUCTION WITH COVER.pdf](#)

[\[3\] Peshawar school massacre: What we know – 17 December 2014](#)

[\[4\] Parliament's Role in Pakistan's Democratic Transition – International Crisis Group](#)