

The Business

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Afghan women affairs

While ordering gender segregation at private colleges and schools, Afghan education ministry notification has directed all female students, teachers and other staff to wear abaya and niqab and gloves to conceal hands. Most women have been stopped from going to work. In a recent decree — ironically, issued from the place that previously housed ministry of women's affairs — the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has banned women from travelling long distances without chaperoned by a close male relative. Public transport owners have been ordered to refuse rides to women not wearing the purported Islamic coverings. Posters have also gone up in downtown Kabul featuring burqas to show how women are required to be draped head to toe with only a net placed near the eyes to peer out. These impositions have caused a general sense of despair among women, leading many to stage protest demonstrations in Kabul against such coercive measures. Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, had declared in the very first news conference following their takeover of Kabul that women's rights would be respected within the framework of Islamic law — their version of it, of course. Their policy towards women and professed claims is a contradiction in terms as the following unimpeachable examples illustrate.

The one tradition that has remained unchanged, and unchangeable, from the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) is that of the dress code for the performance of Hajj and/or Umrah. Women cover their bodies with a white or black cloth, ihram, and their heads with abaya or hijab, but faces and hands are open. Also, there is no segregation; men and women perform the obligatory rites walking side-by-side. There can be no greater source of guidance than this. For, it shows women moved around without covering their faces or hands during the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). His wife Hazrat Khadija (RA), a role model, was a businesswoman.

Women were free to participate in different walks of life, and own and control property — a right women in Europe gained only in the late 18th century. The restrictions they are trying to enforce on Afghan women are extraneous to Islam, and come from regressive local customs and practices prevalent in some parts of the country, especially in south-western Afghanistan from where the Taliban rose to extend their influence and gain power in Kabul. The real purpose is to control women. Rather than serving the cause of an egalitarian faith, their policy directives and edicts bring a bad name to it.

Taking the HEC back to the future

DR AYESHA RAZZAQUE

On Tuesday, January 18, Chief Justice Athar Minallah and Justice Aamer Farooq of the Islamabad High Court issued a verdict in favour of the petition by Mosharraf Zaidi and others challenging the removal of Dr Tariq Banuri from the position of chairman, Higher Education Commission (HEC), by a cabinet notification on March 26 of last year. The short-order verdict declares the notification unlawful, thus restoring Dr Banuri as chairman.

Dr Tariq Banuri was removed by first amending the HEC Ordinance to reduce the tenure of its chair from four to two years, and then applying that amendment retroactively to the sitting chairman, who had been appointed in May 2018 and was due to serve until May 2022.

The full verdict has not been made public, yet which leaves two important open questions that will hopefully be answered in the full judgment: First, will the full judgment extend Dr Banuri's tenure by about 10 months to compensate for the time spent out of office in litigation or will his appointment expire in May 2022? Second, will the judgment let the 2021 amendment to the Higher Education Commission Ordinance, that reduced the chairman's tenure, stand, or reverse it like it reversed the notification of removal?

Whatever the answers to the above questions, a lot of people are waiting with great anticipation. After 10 months of legal sparring, 10 wasted months that could have been used to enact much needed higher education reform, we are back where we left off in March last year. The court has spoken, and moving forward, if whatever remains of the returning chairman's tenure is not to be squandered in dysfunction as well, the petitioners and the government will both have to show some grace, pick up where they left off in March to go back to the business of working towards the betterment of higher education. So far, the government has done well by not creating any unnecessary conflict. I am counting on other writers to dissect these

developments in the coming days, covering legal and political angles and what is being said through the capital's political-bureaucratic grapevine. While fascinating, it takes attention away from educational issues, so I am bringing up (once again) priority issues that should be focused on. Here is a list of agenda items that I recommend should at least be initiated in this government's remaining term:

First, focus on improving transparency in higher education, quality and employability of university graduates and stop pumping quantity. Put an end to the pursuit of quantity — growing the number of BA/BS and MA/MS graduates. Instead, pay attention to producing better BA/BS graduates. For a start, make universities improve their bachelor's programmes to match not some far-away MIT, Stanford or Ivy League college, but catch up with Pakistan's best universities, like LUMS, NUST IBA and Aga Khan, that are able to produce skilled, thinking, entrepreneurial graduates. Emphasise raising the quality of BA/BS programmes instead of launching more MA/MS programmes. A graduate from a good BA/BS programme is more employable than a mediocre MA/MS graduate.

Second, cement the separation of the legacy two-year programmes from four-year BA/BSc programmes and their reclassification as associate bachelor's programs. The Pakistani nomenclature that puts both two- and four-year programmes in the same basket of bachelor's degrees is an aberration in global academia and invites additional scrutiny of credentials of every Pakistani that goes abroad for work. Two-year associate bachelor's programmes are needed because not every student is able to make the time or financial commitment for a four-year programme. For these students (reformed) two-year programmes that teach employable skills will be preferred over remaining unskilled and unemployable high-school graduates.

Third, operationalise the long talked about tiered classification of universities into Tier-I (research universities offering

everything up to PhD programs), Tier-II (universities focused on four-year BA/BS programmes) and Tier-III (community colleges for two-year associate bachelors and vocational programmes) institutions, as laid out in the HEC's Vision 2025. All higher education institutes are not the same, and to measure their performance by the same one yardstick of 'research output', papers published betrays a lack of understanding of ground realities. Continuing to judge all higher education institutions by one metric is perhaps the single most significant factor that has contributed to the mess in higher education today.

Fourth, develop a policy for online / distance / virtual education that many universities have been asking for. This will require input from vice-chancellors and requires on the HEC's Policy on Virtual Education. The last two years have given every educational institution — from pre-schools all the way to grad schools — experience with online learning, varying from mixed to bad. There is no need to dive into online learning head-first for all kinds of programs. For a start, online learning can be piloted for short certificate and associate bachelor's programmes that do not have lab or equipment requirements beyond what a student may be reasonably expected to have available — for example, a computer with internet connection. Then, establish that online programmes deliver learning equivalent to traditional in-person / on-campus programmes before demanding broad equivalence between the two. Pay special attention to ensure that assessments for online programs are just as credible (free of plagiarism, cheating) as assessments conducted in on campus programmes.

Fifth, improve quality and raise standards of higher education by developing an effective retention policy for manpower (tenure track faculty), often developed at great national expense (paid in precious foreign exchange), beyond the contractually obligated five-year bond period. Below average talent cannot produce top-level graduates. Stem the hemorrhaging of the best talent among faculty. Sixth, the HEC's rank-

ing of Pakistani universities is misleading and has to go. Any ranking that places all universities on a single scale is problematic for two reasons: one, there is great diversity in the kinds of HEIs in Pakistan. It is neither objectively possible nor useful to force this variety of higher education institutions on a single linear scale. And, two, all rankings that reduce the many features and characteristics of universities to a single number do so by assigning weights to input factors which are subjective and arbitrary.

(Prospective) students and their guardians are primary customers of information about universities. Many of the statistics that go into computing the HEC's rankings are easily obtainable but are largely irrelevant and of little to individual students. Instead, the HEC could serve the public better by publishing relevant raw data that goes into students' decision-making while selecting universities for admissions. Data items like graduation rates (of each program), employment rates (after six months, two years), salary surveys (by programme), cost, type of institution, etc.

My favorite example is the US Department of Education's 'College Scorecard' website which publishes raw data in easily searchable / filterable form and lets students sift through universities and colleges to find the one that best fits their personal circumstances. Many universities also participate in US News' Common Data Set (CDS) initiative, under which universities publish detailed statistics about their student body and programmes in the shape of a standardized form annually. The HEC could make universities submitting data to its Higher Education Data Repository (HEDR) a routine requirement. All that the political wrangling of the last 10 months accomplished was dysfunction in higher education. We saw news of universities unable to pay their faculty members, vice-chancellors getting axed, while universities with questionable sustainability continued to pop up, plagiarism cases kept making headlines, and the exodus of faculty from Pakistani academia continued.

Is the NFC Award sustainable?

BY FARRUKH SALEEM

How should revenues be distributed between the Federation and the Provinces? Consideration number 1: We need a financially functional federal system. Consideration number 2: We need a resource distribution formula that is fair, equitable and, most importantly, sustainable. Consideration number 3: The resource distribution mechanism must be dynamic. Consideration number 4: The resource distribution procedure must be flexible.

Under Article 160 of the Constitution, "Within six months of the commencing day and thereafter at intervals not exceeding five years, the President shall constitute a National Finance Commission consisting of the Minister of Finance of the Federal Government, the Ministers of Finance of the Provincial Governments, and such other persons as may be appointed by the President after consultation with Governors of the Provinces."

The National Finance Commission Awards have a rather checkered history. In 1974, the 1st NFC Award under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was conclusive. In 1979, the 2nd and the 3rd NFC Awards under Zia-ul-Haq remained inconclusive. In 1991, the 4th NFC Award under Nawaz Sharif was conclusive. In 1995, the 5th NFC Award remained inconclusive. In 2002, the 6th NFC Award under Pervez Musharraf was inconclusive.

On 18 March 2010, the 7th NFC

Award under Yousaf Raza Gillani was announced under which "the share of Provinces in vertical distribution has been increased from 49% to 56% during 2010-11 and 57.5% during the remaining years of the Award. The traditional population based criteria for horizontal distribution of resources amongst the Provinces has been changed to Multiple-Criteria Formula. According to this criteria 82% distribution was made on population, 10.3% on poverty and backwardness, 5% revenue collection/generation, and 2.7% on inverse population density (IPD)." Punjab's percentage of share on the basis of the 7th NFC Award is 51.74%, Sindh 24.55%, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 14.62% and Baluchistan 9.09%.

The 8th NFC Award under Nawaz Sharif also remained inconclusive. The 9th National Finance Commission also failed to conclude. The maiden meeting of the 10th National Finance Commission is scheduled to take place in February. Is the NFC Award sustainable? Budget 2021-22 estimates 'FBR Collection' of Rs5.8 trillion of which Rs3.3 trillion is to be paid out to the provinces under the NFC Award. The Federation is thus left with Rs2.5 trillion. Budget 2021-22 expects 'Non-Tax Revenue' of Rs2 trillion leaving the Federation with a total of Rs4.5 trillion. Of the Rs4.5 trillion left with the Federation, the Federation has to pay Rs3 trillion in 'debt servicing' and Rs1.4 trillion for 'defense'. After 'debt servicing'

and 'defense' the Federation is left with next-to-nothing. The Federation must therefore borrow to cover the Public Sector Development Program (PSDP) Rs900 billion; borrow to cover Pensions of Rs480 billion; borrow to cover Running of the Civil Government of Rs479 billion; borrow to cover Subsidies of Rs682 billion and borrow even more to cover Grants of Rs1.2 trillion.

To be certain, the Rs3 trillion in 'debt service payments' are made on debt taken by the State of Pakistan, not just Islamabad. Yes, the Rs1.4 trillion for 'defense' is to defend the State of Pakistan, not just Islamabad. Then there's the multi-billion dollar Covid-19 vaccine procurement and other unforeseen natural calamities like floods, locust attack and earthquakes. Clearly, the resource distribution formula under the 7th NFC Award is neither fair nor sustainable. The 18th Amendment made the Award rather inflexible-and that has resulted in a financially non-functional federal system. The need of the hour is to revisit the entire resource distribution mechanism, including the formula. To be sure, the Provinces currently have no incentive to revisit. The need of the hour is to incentivize the Provinces to assist the Federation in revenue generation rather than just laying back and collecting trillions under the NFC Award. A revisit is a must. A consensus-based revisit will be ideal-but a revisit for a sustainable NFC Award is the only way out of this financial quagmire.

National socioeconomic registry

DR SANIA NISHTAR

Last week, we officially concluded door-to-door data collection for Ehsaas' National Socioeconomic Survey. This extensive data collection exercise has enabled the building of the new Ehsaas Socioeconomic Registry, which includes information on 34.41 million families on a set of variables and proxy indicators (household status, education, disability, assets, agriculture, health) to assess household socioeconomic status and poverty level.

The registry is unique and important for four reasons. First, because the survey is not just Pakistan's but also South Asia's first digital door-to-door 'census-like' survey. The registry which has been built as a result of this survey was a massive undertaking. To conduct this exercise, in addition to contracting out, indigenous capacity had to be built which entailed training, hardware procurement, software development, human resource hiring, management of several complex executions in tandem and engagement with provincial governments.

Surveys conducted in the past were fraught with challenges, owing to their being paper based. Without inherent controls they became controversial. In Ehsaas' survey, multiple digital safeguards and checks were built-in to hedge against abuse. Data collection was done through the Computer Assisted Personnel Interviewing Approach; this was enabled by many Apps, including a Discrepancy Resolution App. To hedge against errors and abuse, a six-tier system was developed. Processes were automated end to end. Houses were digitally listed, so enumerators actually had to go on site and couldn't fill a form sitting in a 'hujra' to curry favours. The form had inherent logical checks when it was filled in an online mode and a layer of supervisory oversight when filled offline. Third party validations followed after a 'survey batch' was cleared. Then came the process of data validation for some of the demographic variables, and finally data profiling was done against wealth proxies, using the CNIC as the peg, before eligible lists are prepared.

The second reason why Ehsaas' National Socioeconomic Registry is important is because it will enable the federal government to move towards a new paradigm of giving subsidies -- moving away from untargeted to targeted subsidies. The newly launched Ehsaas Rashan Riayat, which is a programme to deliver targeted subsidies is also drawing on these data. Third, rather than being a static registry, the 2021

Ehsaas Registry is designed to evolve into a dynamic adaptive and shock response registry by March 2022. Through its features of on-demand registration, it will allow people to apply for programs when they are in need. This adaptive aspect of Ehsaas' social protection operations will significantly improve resilience to shocks and will allow it to provide assistance during times of disaster. In order to enable the Ehsaas Registry to transition to the "adaptive/dynamic mode", 500 Ehsaas registration centers have already been established in each tehsil of the country. Currently, the registration centers are updating missing information/updating existing information.

In the fourth place, the registry is a critical foundation of the data management mechanism established under the One Window Ehsaas architecture. Data sharing and data access services will be enabled through the Cognitive API Architecture approach. Ehsaas implementing organisations and provinces will be able to access data through APIs for free. Data sharing for the Ehsaas Rashan Riayat Program has already been enabled through this approach. Previously the 2010 BISP data was siloed; even provincial social protection agencies had to do extensive paperwork to access data and there were significant costs involved. Agencies connecting to the Ehsaas database through APIs will also be required to share back data -- and in this way, the 2021 Ehsaas National Socio-economic Registry will be significantly enriched, over time. This approach will also enable transparency. By punching in the CNIC of an individual, an agency will be able to see what individual benefits the family is entitled to. Previously, there was no system to identify the kind of support a family was getting from the government system. Hence, some families with connections were getting multiple and others that were more deserving were often left out and there was no way one agency could know that a family requesting for support was receiving support from another agency. So, government social protection agencies were working in silos. Now, data integration has enabled each agency to share data but also view what benefits a family is getting.

The data-driven capacity of the government through Ehsaas' National Socioeconomic Registry will enable effective targeting of social prediction benefits to the poorest segments of society, not just under the Ehsaas umbrella but will also power other social protection and welfare initiatives undertaken in the country by federal