[Mosharraf Zaidi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mosharraf-zaidi)

March 30, 2021

**The Fiasco at the HEC**

Former HEC chairman Dr Tariq Banuri.

One of the most commendable decisions Prime Minister Imran Khan made upon taking office was to eschew haste in trying to reverse everything his predecessors had done. Among the beneficiaries of this wisdom was the higher education reform agenda.

Five years earlier, the PML-N government had chosen the zero-reform path, opting to essentially do nothing that would upset the wide array of special interests that dominate public sector universities around the country. This meant that the Higher Education Commission (HEC) was left to the devices of the academic bureaucracy that has come to dominate that organization.

At the very end of the PML-N term in 2018, the process for the selection of a new chairman for the HEC came to its conclusion. In part, out of realization of the missed opportunity for reform, and in part due to a degree of relative confidence in the selection process, a high number of very highly qualified candidates applied for the role. At the end, Dr Tariq Banuri was chosen to be chairperson of the HEC.

Originally a member of Central Superior Services, Dr Banuri received his PhD from Harvard University. He worked in a variety of international organizations and think tanks. He founded the Sustainable Development Policy Institute in the early 1990s, and later was a member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Dr Banuri’s last assignment at the United Nations was as Director of the Division for Sustainable Development. For the last decade or so, he had been a professor at the University of Utah. When he came to the HEC in 2018, he did so hesitantly, having already achieved the pinnacle of every mountain he has climbed in his illustrious career.

Dr Atta ur Rehman, former HEC chair under whom its bureaucracy was originally hired, and Dr Banuri represent two distinct philosophies in terms of their vision for higher education. Dr Atta believes that more graduates, more universities and more funding for universities are essential to the future of Pakistan. Dr Banuri believes that graduates that can’t write a coherent paragraph, universities that can’t maintain quality in the classroom, and unlimited funding without accountability are just as bad as less graduates, less universities and limited funding. Since becoming HEC chairman, he has worked to convert the potential of Pakistan’s universities, from degree awarding bodies to institutions of learning. This is an uphill task, to say the least.

The government’s hasty and unfortunate approach in seeking to move on from Tariq Banuri cannot soil the reputation of his decades long struggle for a better country and a better world. But it has exposed how much more difficult it is to engage in actual reform, than it is to talk about it. The fiasco at the HEC is not the only one that plagues Pakistan, but it offers instructive insights into the reality of the word reform, and the challenges faced by actual reformers.

In every field, the status quo exists because it generates rents or benefits to people that would otherwise not be able to have those benefits accruing to them. So, for example, the reason PIA is so bad at being an airline is because it is full of people that have no business running an airline. Those people are the most important stakeholders in the ‘reform’ of PIA. This includes pilots and flight crew, but also includes flight engineers, and ground staff. It also includes cooks and gardeners and airport check in staff and baggage handlers.

Together, this ecosystem of individuals, sub groups and groups make up what we might call ‘The Resistance’. Now, remember, unlike you (a newspaper reader), or me (an oped writer), The Resistance isn’t just engaging in the conversation about PIA for fits and giggles. For The Resistance, PIA reform is an issue of life and death. When reformers talk about PIA’s world-beating employee to aircraft ratio, what they are actually saying is: fire some people. Those ‘some people’ are The Resistance. They won’t give up their jobs as easily as the newspaper reader will put down the paper, or the oped writer will find another topic to write about. No, ma’am. The Resistance is going to fight for its jobs. To the death.

Higher education is a lot more serious than PIA. PIA is a few airplanes. Higher education is dozens of massive public sector universities, dozens of private universities, and millions of students. And of course, teachers. Thousands upon thousands of teachers.

Are Pakistan’s university teachers any good? Just like PIA has some good pilots and perhaps even a few high-performance cabin crew, there are also some good university teachers in Pakistan. But the ratio of bad to good is overwhelming. In PIA, this means a totally broken, broke and irredeemable airline. In higher education, this means broken, broke and irredeemable universities. Dozens of them. A failed PIA will make Pakistan less attractive to investors, less competitive and less accessible. But a failed higher education sector? A failed higher education sector may make Pakistan less of state and less of society.

Have an honest conversation with any employer and they will tell you: the graduates of the Pakistani system of education are not competitive, do not have saleable cognitive or non-cognitive skills, and cannot innovate or operate outside the box.

Dr Banuri’s agenda as a reformer has been singular and unmistakable: fix the quality of teaching and assessments, so that graduates of Pakistani universities exit the system with skills that make them employable.

To enact reform, one must necessarily upset people. In higher education, three generations of mediocrity and incompetence needs to be shaken up, stirred, beaten down and taken out the back, never to be seen again. There is only one way to approach this reform. With a clear head, and clear eyes. That was the path Dr Banuri had embarked on in his nearly two and a half years as HEC chairperson. Reforms enact a heavy price on bearers of the status quo. The old guard fights back. It does not want its privilege to be challenged.

Free giveaways of scholarships were replaced with rigour. The result was less scholarships. Free grants for supposed centers of excellence were replaced with questions about delivery and performance. The result was silence. Free jobs for life were being challenged with questions about teaching and publications, and with questions about the quality of those publications. The result was an insurrection. That insurrection has successfully supplanted due process with a sad and demeaning campaign of vilification. Few things can sully the good name of world-renowned champions like Dr Banuri. But the whole world is watching what Pakistan does to its talent: young and old.

It starves its young of high-quality education, and it punishes its old with vilification. In doing so, it rewards the mediocre and meek, and sustains its place as an economically challenged, third world country that cannot piece together a single narrative of sustained and coherent excellence. In any field.

From vaccine production and uptake, to international financial system subservience, to the acceptance of hegemonic thugs, to its shockingly low rates of learning from primary school through university – the roots of Pakistan’s misfortunes are of its own making. At the heart of each is The Resistance. Resolutely fighting to keep things the way they are.

Years from now, Prime Minister Imran Khan will be remembered for many good things. But he will also be remembered for how he stood firmly with The Resistance. Resistance to change. Resistance to reform. Resistance to accountability. Tehreek-e-Insaf? Saying the full name of his own party out loud must feel like a cruel joke, even to a man as full of certitude and as full of self-belief as PM Khan is. What a crying shame. Not so much for Dr Banuri, but for the millions of students left poorer with his departure.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.