**The only way forward**

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Wednesday, Dec 21, 2022

The main reasons for the impending economic default that Pakistan faces today are our lack of focus on judicial reforms, education, science, technology, innovation and entrepreneurship.

It is a tragic reality that the World Justice Project’s (WJP) Rule of Law Index 2021 report published in October 2021 placed Pakistan at a lowly 130th out of 139 nations. The WJP Rule of Law Index is prepared by the World Justice Project (WJP) and it is based on large-scale surveys involving several hundred thousand legal practitioners and eminent citizens. The factors taken into account in the ranking process are the constraints on governments’ powers, the prevalence of corruption, open government, protection of fundamental rights, law and order and security situation, regulatory enforcement, and civil and criminal justice.

How does one go about reforming the justice system? First we must consider the magnitude of the problem at hand. At the beginning of the year 2021, there were 2.16 million cases pending before all the courts. During the year 2021, 4.06 million new cases were filed and 4.102 million cases were decided, overall including the lower courts. The Supreme Court, the five high courts and the Federal Shariat Court together had 378,216 cases pending at the beginning of 2021. They decided 229,822 cases during the year while 241,250 new cases were filed, so that the total number of pending cases grew to 389,549 cases by the end of 2021.

When one considers the situation of the Supreme Court alone, it turns out that at the start of the year 2021, there were 46,695 cases pending before it. It received 18,075 new cases during the year while 12,838 cases during the year, so that the pending number of cases grew to 51,766 by the end of the year.

What is apparent from these statistics is the urgent need to expand the number of judges as well as the courts to cope with the situation. This needs to be done with a certain timeline in mind; any case filed at the lower court level or in the higher courts must be decided within three months of its filing, and all the back log must be cleared within six months.

One can readily calculate the needs based on these requirements so that justice is delivered in a timely manner. Those judges, over 20 per cent of whose decisions are reversed by a higher court, should be removed from service as this could be either due to incompetence or corruption. Sting operations should be initiated, and the laws changed so that the severest punishment for corruption is introduced for judges, bureaucrats/government officials and politicians.

Many countries have introduced capital punishment for corruption. One of the key reasons for the success of China has been its strict action against corrupt officials. Thousands of persons are executed in China each year, with the result that mega corruption has been almost eliminated from the country.

The second major step that Pakistan must take is to transition quickly to a knowledge-based economy. Our strategy for socio-economic development must be primarily based on developing the capabilities to manufacture and export high technology goods. There are huge opportunities for growth in areas such as artificial intelligence, energy storage systems, nanomaterials, vaccines, biosimilars, and other such fields. Pakistan’s exports however are based on low value textiles and other such items, and they have therefore stagnated at around $30 billion.

To depart from this myopic approach, we need to make science and technology-based innovation the main thrust engine for development. This is the path that countries such as Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, and China have followed. With some 70 per cent of our population below the age of 30, this is the path that we too can follow. It would require a complete change in our systems of education and training so that problem solving skills can be developed, and private sector can be motivated through incentives to undertake the major part of the national R&D effort.

A national education emergency will need to be declared and funds diverted from other sectors to education and research. There are some 22 million out-of-school children, and our government schools present a sad state of desolation and deprivation. One cannot build a knowledge-based economy on such weak foundations. Our colleges too are completely neglected and need to be urgently reformed.

Public-sector universities in contrast have undergone a rapid transformation for the better during the last two decades, after the formation of the HEC in 2002, with major emphasis being on quality research. During this period, thousands of bright young men and women were sent to leading universities abroad and on their return, they have contributed significantly as university faculty members to bring a huge transformation in higher education. This remarkable progress has been applauded internationally by independent agencies such as the UN Commission on Science, Technology and Development, USAID, World Bank, British Council and others.

According to Web of Science data, Pakistan overtook India in per capita research output in 2018. The remarkable increase in citations of research undertaken in Pakistan, which is now well above the world average, reflects the emphasis placed by the HEC during my tenure as chairman of the commission on quality rather than numbers. Our higher education institutions are now well placed with fairly good PhD level manpower to establish strong linkages with industry and agriculture.

An excellent step to develop a knowledge economy has been taken with the establishment of a trend-setting new university, the Pak Austrian Fachhochschule in Haripur, Hazara, under my supervision. This is probably the first university in the world in which eight foreign universities from Austria and China will be eventually offering dual degrees, as each department is being built in collaboration with a different foreign university. This allows this university to benefit from the strengths of many top-class world institutions.

The university will provide high level technical skills in its ‘Fachhochschule’ section as well as PhD and postdoctoral training in its engineering university section, with focus on new and emerging technologies. The Technology Park in it is being established in collaboration with experts at the University of Cambridge and will focus on industrial development. Another similar university is under construction in Samrial, Sialkot under my supervision and more such foreign universities are planned in various parts of Pakistan.

The secret to our future development lies in our ability to unleash the creative potential of our youth by giving the highest priority to education, science, technology and innovation. This is only possible if we have visionary and honest leaders at the helm of national affairs.

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