



WEBINAR - BRIEF

Grand National Dialogue for Reforms

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Synopsis | PIDE's Grand National [Intellectual] Dialogue [for Reforms]

PIDE recently organized a 'Grand National Dialogue' with a diverse group of intellectuals, as it firmly believes that public discourse is essential to democracy and progress. Whereas, progress necessitates continuous reform. However, reform must be informed by research and intellect, in order to harness positive change in real sense.

In Pakistan, calls for such dialogues have most often been followed by politicians gathering together outside the parliament in All-Parties Conferences (APCs) to discuss the maintainability of the status quo rather than the reform and progress.

Why Grand National Dialogue?

PIDE came up with an idea to hold a Grand National Dialogue (GND), spanning over five days, with over 20 leading intellectuals from diverse backgrounds. PIDE hopes that the ideas thrown up here will be heard across the country, including power corridors and policy making domains, through different channels of communication; driving democracy to further improvement.

Consensus

Everyone wants more democracy not less. We need real representation not mere selecting rulers. There must be more debate on what democracy means and how we can make it more meaningful.

➤ Civil-Military binary - a distraction?

The civil-military binary is just a small component of an overall rusty system. Though, the misguided debate over this issue presents it as the pivot of all the imbroglio the country is faced with. This serves as a distraction from a meaningful discourse for reforms. More and better democracy with better representation, open and more competitive elections, widely distributed power to local



governments and professional public service delivery will serve the development of the country and the development of civil-military relations. In other words, if civilian government set up worked as intended, interference by security agencies will be inherently minimized.

PIDE's Grand National Dialogue (GND) - Key Takeaways

1. Democracy can be improved.

- Pakistani democracy is still in its embryonic state
- Thorough debate is essential on how this democracy is conceived, constructed, implemented and improved
- Questions were raised during PIDE's GND on whether repeat elections alone will suffice or whether the system needs fundamental set of comprehensive reforms
- Letting the system run without wide-ranging reforms means a long wait for positive change with greater possibilities of some misrule
- Few argued that no country can afford such a long wait; it's time to kick start
- Some argued that without reform, there would be no change as the current system prevents fresh entry and reinforces rule of the 'electables'



2. Perhaps the most important issue on which there was an absolute consensus was that without local government, democracy remains fundamentally incomplete.

3. The term 'electables' implies a rotten borough or families in control of a Constituency. There is a need for constituency and electoral reforms to ensure that elections represent genuine choice. There was a lot of concern on elections which seem to be cornered by 'electables'.

- It seems certain political families control many important constituencies
- There are no campaign finance limits to be observed, institutionally limiting entry of those who are not affluent
- Many, especially the young participants, indicated that the current system is listed against them getting elected

4. There was a lot of concern for the continued institutional clash: the executive, the judiciary as well as the establishment, transgressing into each other's territories.

- Parliament seems to matter only for gaining power. It plays little role in national debate, policy making and legislation. Even the executive prefers ordinances
- Once the cabinet is set up, parliament serves little role. Even as the institutional clash increases or national issues such as terrorism occur, politicians prefer APCs to an open parliamentary debate. Parliament, therefore, cannot play a mediating or a conflict resolution role

5. Political parties, organization, membership and representation was also of great concern

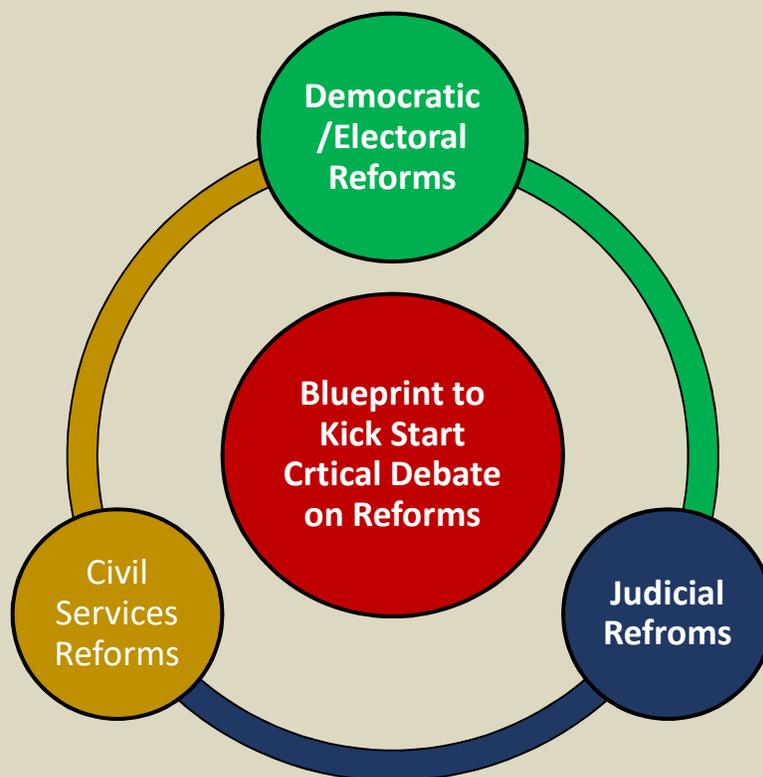
- Party leadership seems to be in hands of families with no intra-party democracy
- Questions were raised on small parties with very limited votes and parliamentary presence
- Democracy in Pakistan is an elite nexus i.e., economic power translates into political power
- Many argued that meaningful change in the structure requires time and patience. Meanwhile, we should ensure continuation of the electoral process

Institutions Must Adapt to Democracy

Institutional change in a captured state has become very difficult. A lot of thought and research is required to feed the debate with a receptive political class to make this reform happen. The colonial system that we inherited: stands midway to the road to reforms and feeds the system's dysfunctionalities, were set up for centralized colonial extraction and are inimical to democracy, are not compatible with local government and are also not conducive to commerce and economic growth.

However, necessary reforms to make the system work takes time, dedication, research and continuous implementation. In an age of global change, reform must be seen to be a continuous ongoing activity.

PIDE Grand National Dialogue



PIDE GND's Blueprint for Fundamental Democratic Reforms

1. For complete democracy, local governments must be mainstreamed in the constitution. To make this system work, there has to be a lot of thought and research on the following.

- In framing local government laws, care must be taken to ensure that the system is not captured by the factions, the 'electables' or their families
- For the local government system to succeed, the centralized colonial civil service structure will need to be reformed, so that the local bureaucracy has the capacity and the resources to run the local government
- Resource sharing rules that ensure local government independence and delivery capacity need to be clear



2. Like other countries we need more and continuous elections, not once every five years to determine how the country is governed at every level. This creates an incentive for executive overreach, which in turn engenders a response from other institutions, leading to the regular breakdowns we often witness. For this our panelists recommended the following:

- Senate elections should be direct
- Local governments' elections should be held with a 4-year term
- Terms of national and provincial assemblies should be reduced to 3 or 4 years and their elections should be held separately, so that some provincial or local election is held every year. More frequency of elections at various levels as well as across levels is needed
- There is a need to think beyond the "first past the post" system that is now in place, where most majority governments get only 30% of the vote. Clearly there is a need to investigate a hybrid system that require proportional, tanked choice and runoffs to ensure better understanding the population's 'general will'

3. Political party reform is also very central to developing a vibrant democracy. Currently, the party personality cults stand for no reform but only for arbitrary claims on government resources.

- Parties must show a minimum membership in each province to be listed on the ballot.
- Parties must have annual elections for leadership in an open convention where ideas and manifestoes should be openly discussed.
- Parties that get less than 10% vote in the previous election should post a deposit to be on the ballot. The bond would be that they get 10% votes

4. Several speakers addressed the imbalance in size of provinces which skews executive incentives in administration. Many reiterated the political proposition that has also been made by several political parties to split our current provinces to small size roughly equal in terms of population provinces. This of course requires considerable analysis of the constitution, other administrative arrangements as well as finances.

5. The importance of term limits was clearly emphasized. Everyone felt that 2 terms in parliament or any position was enough.

6. The idea of provincial constitutions was also put forward in order to provide institutional protection to provincial level reforms and policies.

7. Upon questions, the qualifications of elected representatives and ministers were also discussed. Many felt that prior work experience was important and should be mandated.

8. There was a strong feeling that due process had eroded in every area of governance and any reform must try to structure a due process in line with contemporary times.

- Legislation must be clearly well researched and should be openly presented to the public for debate in a form of a white paper. After this all legislation must happen through an open debate in parliament
- Law through ordinances must be placed under certain limits if democracy sit to work
- Similarly, cabinet must also establish a process where its non-security related agenda and discussion minutes should be shared with the public

REFORM IS A MUST

1. Social media and civilian activism can be instrumental in creating pressure groups. Therefore, in Pakistan social media platforms can be used to engage masses and keep hammering the issues, to bring them on agenda for reforms
2. Intelligentsia needs to generate dialogue for and about reforms and has to take strong positions. Additionally, there is a need to enhance communication between intelligentsia and policymakers.
3. Media needs to focus on core issues like local governments, administrative divisions and police reforms, instead of discussing political rivalries and trivialities.
4. Reform can be facilitated through educating the masses using various media platforms, so as not to cause panic and avoid misinformation-based fear mongering.

PIDE's GND Proposes Redesigning Civil Services

To sustain and develop democracy, the civil service has to be redesigned to be a custodian of and to complement democracy. This will require a lot more discussion and debate that PIDE is trying to create.

- There should be regular performance reviews of departments and the civil service.
- Provincial and Federal cadre should be separated
- Service delivery should be improved through specialization
- The current high degree of centralization is hurting the country

PIDE'S GND Recommendations for Judicial Reforms

Pakistan needs an urgent adoption of legal and judicial reforms which includes:

- Clearing the backlog of court cases
- Reforms are needed in lower courts
- Police Force approach has to be swapped by the modern concept of Police Service
- Local courts should be responsible for dealing with majority of cases with High courts as court of last appeal, leaving the Supreme Court only for deeper constitutional issues of national level interests
- There was a consensus on the need of law to eliminate the ease of obtaining a continuance in litigation to stretch out a dispute
- There was also a consensus on the need to curtail frivolous litigation and the use of courts for gaming transactions and administration
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PIDE's Grand National Dialogue (GND) provided a forum to intellectuals to talk about reforms. It ended by conceding that the future lies not in upending the system but in reform to improve and make it better.

We urge the media, our political leaders, and all other segments of our society to listen to these powerful voices of our intelligentsia.

This is a continuing dialogue; many more sessions are coming soon.

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