In its most generic form, the process of governance entails enactment of laws and norms to rule an organized society within the given territorial bounds. In order to ensure the smooth functioning of the everyday life, it is essential to ensure the safety, security, health and economic well-being of the individuals. Consequently, certain institutions, government bodies, boards, cells, offices and structures are promulgated and smooth functionality ensues. These governance structures are sustained and regulated at highest level and must work in the greater interest of the country ensuring beneficial, secure and healthy environment for the subjects of the state.

The theory of governance also posits that two contending institutions cannot work under the same government, one of them must go. This means that no ‘sensible’ government can promote an agenda using one of its organs and try defeating its purpose with another organ. This is not only contrary to the commonsense but is also unnecessary financial and social burden on national exchequer. Another aspect of efficient governance is that multiple committees and boards could be formed from time to time, and when the desired results are achieved, such bodies are conveniently dissolved. The center of gravity of governance and ensuing policies, however, remains general public, and meeting the very basic human needs.

Like many other sectors, public health has remained a neglected domain and the plight of government hospitals is a loud testimony to this. Devolution of power to provinces through 18th amendment added fuel to the fire and many vital issues receded to obscurity. Showing the images of brain of an under-developed child due to malnutrition, during one of his initial addresses Prime Minister Imran Khan displayed his interest in public health through safe and healthy nutrition. Lot is still left to be desired.

Relevant to the issue of public health is a classic display of perplexing governance through two of the government sub-departments in Pakistan, working against each other’s interest. Pakistan Tobacco Board at the Ministry of Commerce and Tobacco Control Cell at Ministry of National Health Services Regulation and Coordination are the prime examples of paradoxical governance. Tobacco Board was established in 1968 for the “promotion of cultivation, manufacture and export of tobacco and tobacco products, marketing, fixation of prices and other information”. The message from the chairman clearly states that “We take measures in the interest of tobacco industry”. The government of Pakistan is fostering a department, which is clearly working in the interest of tobacco industry. This industry, in turn is producing tobacco products and putting the health burden of billions of rupees annually, back on the shoulders of same government. The process is being facilitated by the Tobacco Board.

Government’s step son, Tobacco Control Cell, was established 40 years down the road, in 2007 to resist the unchecked spread of tobacco and its products. Its main aim is to accelerate the “tobacco control activities in Pakistan through multifaceted efforts starting from planning, resource mobilization, institutional strengthening, and public private partnership and monitoring”. After the devolution of Ministry of Health, the Tobacco Control Cell was placed under the ministry. One of these departments is working to promote tobacco, tobacco products and its exports, while another department is busy is promulgating the laws which limit smoking spaces, limit tobacco advertisement, ensure adequate Graphic Health Warnings on the packings and promote excessive pricing and taxation.

Tobacco Board/Ministry of Commerce Rule 24 of SRO 1111(I)/2016 of 21 November 2016, allows the promotional sign boards to be placed outside their businesses, which is in clear contrast to the ban on
all types of tobacco promotion and sale, notified by Ministry of Health notification F.13-5/2003HE dated 25 Oct 2003. Similarly tobacco has been defined by the Tobacco Board Ordnance of 1968 as a ‘commodity which is made from the leaves of the plant “nicotiana tabaccum” or “nicotiana rustica” and is commonly known as tobacco and includes adjacent tender stalks or green tobacco but does not include tobacco waste’. Relatively and more importantly, Pakistan is a signatory to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) since 2004 and also needs to have a user friendly rather than a producer friendly definition of tobacco as desired by the treaty. FCTC Article 1(f) defines tobacco as “any product entirely or partly made of the leaf of tobacco as a raw material which is manufactured to be used for smoking, sucking, chewing or snuffing”. This definition is absent from all Tobacco Control laws.

Tobacco Control Cell research claims that 160,100 Pakistanis die of tobacco related diseases annually. In simple terms this means tobacco industry is directly responsible for effecting the life and health of thousands of families annually. The indirect costs include aspects such as loss of work hours due to disease, worker replacement cost and most of all health burden cost on hospitals and organizations. Tobacco Board on the other hand claims a job promotion of 50,000 to 60,000 farmers and another almost 100,000 tobacco traders. Unfortunately the total combined claim is less than those who die every year. Tobacco Board also claims to have earned Rs. 1233.86 Million, which in today’s term mean little more than $ 8 Million in an economy of almost $ 315 Billion (incidentally all the figures provided on Tobacco Board website are in Pakistani Rupees to make them look bigger!).

There is a plethora of studies and empirical evidence available against the use of tobacco and its impact on economy of health, Pakistani policy circles still remain in state of denial. Public health is one of the major areas needing special attention, and within that the role and burden of tobacco on the public health. With Imran Khan’s premiership the focus of governance has shifted considerably from the top-centric approach to grass root level. The policies of this government have primarily focused on helping the downtrodden and marginalized – masses. From building affordable housing to health cards and from job creation to general safety and security, the emphasis of this government has considerably shifted to a common person. It would be a sensible idea to reevaluate the presence of contending offices within same government and reconsider the paradoxical plausibility and presence of both. This could have far reaching effect on national health, national economy and national health economy. Thankfully enough the tobacco farmers are not growing tobacco on unfathomable spans of land, the 46000 Hectares of land could better be utilized for other cash crops such as cotton or rice etc. Certainly this is the matter of national priorities and in face of big tobacco industrial influence, such healthy transition is not discussed and is far from planning. Pakistan could probably learn a lesson or two from Bhutan, not a distant neighbour, who pride a nation which is “tobacco free”.

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