Politics of Food
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An essential prerequisite to achieving food security is making sure that food is available. Although many developing countries produce enough food to feed their people, macro-policies and political interests determine people’s access to food. Food insecurity, therefore, is often linked to matters of political power.

Pakistan is paradigmatic for the dreadful relationship between food insecurity and politics. Almost half of the population in Pakistan is considered to be food insecure and lives in multidimensional poverty. This year’s Global Hunger Index reported that 22 per cent of the population is undernourished and that 45 per cent of children under five exhibit stunted growth, placing the hunger situation at a «serious» level. Food production, however, is not the problem. The agricultural sector plays a major role in the Pakistani economy, sustaining the livelihoods of 42 per cent of the population. It produces Pakistan’s major export commodities such as cotton, rice and fruits. In 2015, Pakistan was the world’s eighth largest producer of wheat and fourth largest producer of milk; yet, the percentage of the population experiencing food insecurity is increasing.

The main reason for this is that the socio-economic access to food and the hygiene of foodstuffs are on a sharp decline in Pakistan.

Although numerous programs by various political governments have been adopted to fight food insecurity, they have had very little effect on the living conditions of the Pakistani people. Either the programs have been too ambitious, trying to simultaneously overcome food- and poverty-related problems on different levels, or they were never concretely implemented. Often the political will of the government was lacking because other issues were of greater importance to stay in power. The fate of the then promising Zero Hunger Program (ZHP) shows how noble objectives are sacrificed at the altar of political power-plays, disappointing people's hope to end hunger.

A program with eager goals under bad political circumstances

In 2012, Prime Minister Gillani announced that he wanted to implement a major ZHP which was explicitly dedicated to fight food insecurity. The program comprised numerous measures such as mid-day school initiatives, conditional cash and food transfers to the most vulnerable households, stimulus programs to expand farm outputs and market access, and the rationalization of market prices of food commodities. It also designed special nutritious diets for breast-feeding mothers, pregnant women, and children under five. Furthermore, it intended to establish a National Food Security Council equipped with high executive powers to assist in preparing a national food security strategy.

These eager goals had the potential to make the ZHP a flagship food security program in Pakistan; however, the successful implementation of such programs generally depends on the political circumstances. In this case, shortly after presenting the program to the public, Prime Minister Gillani was removed by the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Even though the subsequent
Prime Minister was also from the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and shared sympathy for the ZHP, other issues were more pressing at the time. In the end, the high fiscal deficit of Pakistan made the allocation of funds to the ZHP in the 2012 to 2013 fiscal year impossible.

When the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) emerged as the majority party in the elections that followed in May 2013, the public debt level had become so crucial that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was called in for help. In order to convince the IMF of the need for further financial aid, the government sold old wine in new skins to the IMF. It presented the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), a former program of the PPP from 2008, as a flagship social safety net that needed funding. Compared to the ZHP, the BISP envisages not only hunger and food problems, but also other socio-economic issues. For example, it tries to increase the living conditions of the poor through cash grants to women-headed households below a certain poverty threshold. Due to the broader approach to food insecurity, the BISP was viewed as a higher political asset than the ZHP and the PML-N therefore decided to apply with this program at the IMF. In a nutshell, establishing a social safety net to make a stronger case for external financial facility became the national political priority.

Is food insecurity no political issue in Pakistan?

Despite the fact that half of the population in Pakistan is food insecure, decision makers in the Federal Ministry of National Food Security and Research (a rebranding of the former Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock (MINFAL)) always insisted that food insecurity was not an issue. Most of these decision makers quote the recent bumper crop of wheat and rice as evidence that Pakistan is not a food insecure country. To their understanding, hunger is merely a production issue that is to be addressed through increased output. This is true to a certain extent, but an increase in production is a means, not an end in itself to solving food insecurity. They ignore the fact that physically available food does not automatically guarantee food security.

Even though the public knows that too little is being done politically to change the...
food situation in Pakistan, unlike with other issues, no real resistance has emerged from the people. It is not that Pakistanis do not exercise their democratic right to demonstrate. In fact, protests as a mean of political expression are quite common. In the past, there have been protests against power outages in different parts of Pakistan, protests against the law and order situation, and protests against the lack of water supply in different parts of Karachi. Interestingly, however, public protests against hunger and food insecurity are very rare. The general elections also showed that the PPP could not make any political capital out of this issue. Voters were simply not attracted by the party’s anti-hunger programs. Instead, Pakistan’s public attributes a greater importance to issues like poverty, corruption, the power crisis, illiteracy and extremism. Thus, PML-N’s promise to end power outages was one of the main reasons for its victory in the election.\(^3\)

This is an indication that people in Pakistan do not trust politics anymore to effectively fight hunger and instead focus on other issues. The failure of the ZHP was just more proof that relying on the government to fight hunger was fruitless. As a consequence, instead of demanding food commodities, people demand uninterrupted electricity, employment and educational opportunities in order to sustain their livelihoods and to earn enough to meet their food requirements on their own.

In fact, the Pakistani people are still sensitive about food insecurity and hunger; they are quite aware of the factors that would enhance their access to food. However, the many disappointments that resulted from fruitless hunger programs have led to a shift in responsibility. Today, the population trusts civil society more than public institutions to alleviate hunger. The needs of chronically food insecure people are largely met by domestic philanthropy, charity, and food distributions at local shrines. These forms of support create a bridge between the food haves and have-nots. As long as hunger programs like the ZHP do not come into fruition, this bridge is essential for social peace in Pakistan.\(^3\)

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Afghan Appetizer
Crispy pakoras with a fresh dip
serves 4 | vegetarian

For the pakoras:
350 g seasonal vegetables
250 g chickpea flour
1/2 tsp. turmeric powder
1/2 tsp. chili powder
1 tsp. garam masala
1 l vegetable oil for deep-frying
280 ml water
salt

For the mint-coriander dip:
1 bunch mint
1/2 bunch coriander
2 garlic cloves
1/2 tsp. chili powder
50 g yogurt, 10 % fat
Salt

Pakoras:
Cut vegetables into bite-sized chunks.
In a bowl, mix the chickpea flour together with the spices and add 280 ml water, stirring throughout. Heat up 1 l of vegetable oil in a pan. The oil has the perfect temperature when a little piece of batter immediately starts to deep-fry on contact.
Cover the vegetable chunks in the chickpea batter and deep-fry them for about 4 - 5 minutes or until golden brown.

Mint-coriander dip:
Coarsely chop the mint and coriander and place in a kitchen blender. Add peeled garlic and the chili powder and finely blend together into a fine mixture. Now add the yogurt and blend again until the mass is creamy. Season with salt.
Serve the mint-coriander dip together with the pakoras.