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As Pakistan transitions from a centrally run federation to a democracy where power is far more diffused than it used to be five years ago, the tackle and task of governance exhibit gaps at multiple levels.

The first and most obvious lag between policy and its execution in Pakistan shows up in the size and heft of the dragnet against terrorism and violent extremism. The space still publicly available to a sizable group of militant outfits roils the national mainstream, but in a parallel dynamic, different levels of action against key groups has clearly begun. In countering this challenge, capacity and sequencing is clearly a regular juggle, but a major obstacle has also surfaced in official reluctance to tackle a critical mass of banned outfits in South Punjab.

What has tipped the military balance, and how long will the federal government negotiate with extremists who regularly hold the national agenda hostage without electoral support to back their demands? The landscape of state intent and action is both patchy and complex. Blowback and resistance to operational recapture of terrain in the tribal areas, particularly North Waziristan, have upped the scale and boom of terrorist audacity across Pakistan. Prior to the launch of coordinated CT operations, challenges to the writ of the government were crosshairs most often in the traditionally weak-governed spaces in Balochistan's border areas, FATA, KPK and pockets of megacity Karachi. Today attacks on soft targets in the cities, especially religious minorities or members of the Shia community, are increasingly the norm. Recurring crises in the shape of spectacular attacks on urban spaces such as the army public school in Peshawar and on Easter Sunday in a park in Lahore epitomize this trend. Kinetic operations, though, remain only one half of the problem. On the whole, political gaps such as limits on the government's capacity to build unity, credible narratives and structures continue to drag policy coherence on a national action plan to counter violent extremism.

Regional tensions add to the challenge. Despite a renewed stated resolve by an increasingly active and high profile military leadership to make no distinction between different types of militant or insurgent, the

problem mutates to paradox with ethnic and border-porosity with Afghanistan. A high degree of pressure from American and Afghan officials to follow a non-confrontational path across the border, including Pakistan's own strategic propensity to not clash with powerful tribes in Afghanistan places Islamabad in a policy bind. While chasing one set of Taliban in Pakistan has become the daily grind of the military, for instance, attempting to reconcile the Afghan Taliban to Kabul is the other. Winning one may represent an existential battle central to Pakistan's survival, but the other mission may well be both thankless as well as fruitless, despite its saliency to regional stability.

At another but equally critical level of governance, new social and structural faultlines have emerged without replacing old ones. Today, nothing in Pakistan can actually work the way it did before devolution, but there is little realization of that in an old-school federal cabinet. The management of diversity or the ability to address extended political grievance does not rank as a priority. From Balochistan's growing alienation, to Sindh's sense of victimization, or KPK's political drift away from national goals as well as exposure to conflict from Afghanistan, there is little sense that "business as usual" cannot continue to be the governance model in Islamabad. The devolution of fiscal and political power has transformed the federal equation between Islamabad and the provinces, but a Punjab-centric federal government has been unable to make the leap needed to manage big institutional transitions. Deficits in using the toolkit of modern democracy such as parliament, its committees, even cabinet and constitutional forums that resolve inter-provincial conflict and allocate resources have hobbled its capacity to govern effectively.

Dangers to the old social contract have arisen not despite, but because of democracy. The governance model needed by a huge country articulating its disparate demands needs time, leadership and evolution. Formal justice delivery remains one of the biggest holes in the system, still locked in post-colonial structures that exclude the tribal areas, while parallel religious bodies bog down human rights reform. The actual executive arm of government at all levels remains the civil service, often paralysed by sclerotic terms of engagement as well as fear of penalties from the politics of accountability and audit, which often take a partisan turn.

Despite the fact that that the public conversation in Pakistan airs a very high level of discontent with state delivery and system transparency, it is also clear that the nuts and bolts of reform repeatedly fizzle down. As public attention and political responses move from issue to issue, governance outcomes often fall to the wayside, trapped in a maze of red tape and inaction. These governance gaps run the gamut from energy debt cycles, police reform and tax mobilization, to health and education reform stalemates. Their existence increasingly reflects laterally in the government's inability to counter the radicalization of the Pakistani street or to address secular anger at elite capture of government resources.

While no silver bullet can untangle the governance gridlock in Pakistan, it is not impossible to interrupt the crisis wheel. If one fundamental shift can be enabled, others may follow in virtuous domino-chains. To make the transformation from a weak but coercive state to a strong

one, Pakistan needs to peacefully channel more public input in national security and regional policy-making than it does today. Parliament might well be the obvious starting point. For a heterogeneous state, with multiple ethnicities competing inside a sharp social pyramid for economic and political power, the only way forward is more democracy. That is the only way such diversity can be managed without conflict.

