



E-GOVERNANCE IN PAKISTAN: A REALITY CHECK

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



National Security Advisor Lt General (Retd) Nasser Khan Janjua recently said that “Pakistan needed to ... develop an e-governance council for policy formulation according to globally acceptable parameters.”¹ The establishment of an advance governmental organization like “e-governance council” is an exceptionally significant and seriously desired initiative. But before reaching any conclusion on this issue, it is important to understand the basic concept of e-governance. Furthermore, it also calls for a comprehensive analysis of whether the state and the nation of Pakistan have achieved a required level of advancement for such setup?

E-governance is a most recent trend in the realm of governance processes across the globe. Its proper implementation can bring SMART (Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent) governance.² The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines e-governance as “the public sector’s use of information and communication technologies (ICT) with the aim of improving information and service delivery, encouraging citizen participation in the decision-making”³ which greatly depends on e-readiness. According to Richard Heeks, e-readiness of a country can be determined through answering the following questions⁴:

¹ Parvez Jabri, “Pakistan to develop e-governance council for policy formulation,” *Business Recorder*, February 13, 2018.

² C.S.R. Prabhu, *E-Governance: Concepts and Case Studies* (New Delhi: PHI Learning Pvt. Ltd., 2013): ix.

³ Toshio Obi, *E-governance: A Global Perspective on a New Paradigm* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2007): 27.

⁴ Richard Heeks, “Understanding e-Governance for Development,” *The i-Government Working Paper Series* 11, no.3 (2001): 17-18.

1. Is the Data Systems Infrastructure Ready?
2. Is the Legal Infrastructure Ready?
3. Is the Institutional Infrastructure Ready?
4. Is the Human Infrastructure Ready?
5. Is the Technological Infrastructure Ready?
6. Is the Leadership and Strategic Thinking Ready?"

The first step towards e-governance in Pakistan would be a transition from manual to electronic data management systems. It involves the high quality digitalization of all required quantity of governmental records and work processes. Significant progress has been achieved by National Database & Registration Authority (NADRA) Pakistan and Directorate General of Immigration & Passports. The Punjab and Kyber Pakhtunkhwa governments also introduced radical IT reforms in the sectors of health, law and order, especially the digitalization of "Thana System."

The second step is the legal infrastructure which includes establishment of specialized courts, formulation and enactment of laws and regulations for e-crimes and e-security in accordance with the international standards. In 2002, Pakistan successfully enacted the Electronic Transactions Ordinance based on "International Consensus Principals on Electronic Authentication." It was a major leap ahead in the field of e-governance and made the electronic signatures, fillings and transactions e.g. tax returns, cheques, banking instructions, payments, employment applications, court documents, custom documents, fee payments, academic transcripts and complaints legally acceptable.⁵ Government of Pakistan passed "Prevention of Electronic Crime Act (PECA) in 2016 and under its Section 44, special courts headed by the judges trained in cyber forensics will be established. After one and half year of enactment, no initiative is being taken by the government in this respect.⁶

Advancement of e-governance heavily relies on institutional setup including responsible agency to act as a means for facilitation. So, the Electronic Certification Accreditation Council (ECAC) was set up under ETO in 2004. Although Pakistan is developing at a rapid pace, but the fact is that as a developing country, Pakistan does not have required ICT infrastructure for e-governance. There are also "mindset gaps" involving overall resistance to change, data sharing and customer-orientation in

⁵ Justice (R) Khalil-ur-Rehman Khan, "Cyber Laws in Pakistan," *International Judicial Conference, Supreme Court of Pakistan*, accessed February 19, 2018, <http://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/ijc/articles/10/1.pdf>.

⁶ "Forensic Lab, Special Court Projects to tackle cyber crime hang fire," *Dawn*, February 19, 2018.

public sector. Pakistan requires a group of “e-champions” with the strategic vision of e-governance without which this whole initiative will become insignificant. The role of this group should be to put the e-governance on the top of national agenda, minimize the operational barriers and make it happen through channelizing all the resources into right direction.