

## ***Book Review***

**Nadeem Ul Haque.** *Looking Back: How Pakistan Became an Asian Tiger by 2050*. Karachi, Pakistan: Kitab (Pvt.) Limited. 2017. 193 pages. Amazon Kindle edition.

“*Looking Back: How Pakistan Became an Asian Tiger by 2050*” is Nadeem Ul Haque’s latest book. The Kindle edition of the book is available from Amazon. The book, while dismissing the notion of ‘development first’, argues for ‘reforming the system first’ to make the ground conducive for sustainable development. The book, written as semi-fiction, imagines Pakistan as a developed country by year 2050. The United Nations, which sets up a commission in the year 2051 to understand Pakistan’s development model, narrates the development story.

The UN Commission tells that till the year 2020 Pakistan was a centralised elitist state, marked by high inequality and low social mobility. Grave problems like the loss of country’s eastern wing in 1971 and the Baloch issue that haunted the country till 2020, were attributed to the elitist state. Businessmen and public servants accumulated rents in this society by way of tax and tariff exemptions, subsidies, perks, plots, privileges, and bank loans that did not need to be repaid. Meritocracy was unthinkable in such a country. Finally, the elitist hold broke down and the country stood reformed. In the reformed country, the federal cabinet comprises only 15 persons, the finance ministry only manages the budget and the government expenditures remain within the budgeted amount, which are used only for the purposes approved by the parliament in advance. The ministry of economy reviews the state of markets but does not intervene in functioning of the markets. The ministry of strategy and reforms develops the country’s long term strategy, while the ministry of institutional development frames regulations.

In the Pakistan of 2050, key decisions, including electricity production and supply contracts require parliamentary approval. The judicial reforms ensure that judges retire at the age of 75, with no re-employment elsewhere. To counter the problem of inefficiency in institutions, civil and military bureaucracy is paid handsomely, but only in cash; privileges and perks such as plots and government housing are history.

Preempting questions like ‘who will do it’ and ‘how will this happen’ the book answers that no recognisable agent is behind the change. The people at the helm in the pre-reform Pakistan who facilitated the change, in fact bowed to the wishes of the electorate, implying that the electorate had turned pro-reform before the reform happened.

How people became pro-reform? The narrative on this aspect is the book’s key message, which emphasises the role of (research) networks in laying the foundation of reforms. The book tells that a quiet revolution of thought began before the reform happened. Somehow, the government funded independent research. The then limping think tanks stood up and academics formed partnerships and ‘networks’ to aid reform

through research. These locally funded 'networks' relying on bottom up approach flourished or died depending on their ability to generate ideas. These networks, which were not centrally controlled, recommended solutions that suited local culture and ground realities. After a decade or two, the parliament took these networks seriously; the policy guidelines coming from the parliament are now rooted in what the 'networks' recommend.

Using this narrative, the book seeks to tell that reforms, and hence development, will come about only if the fermentation, outlined above, happens. Reference to the emergence of human philosophy and political democracy in Greece and the fermentation contained in the Renaissance and European Enlightenment, believed to be at the root of West's development, makes the author's case convincing. The book's bottom line is that for reform and development to come about in Pakistan a 'Pakistani renaissance' is called for and world history tells that this is not impossible.

The author blames bureaucracy for much of what ails the governance and the economy in Pakistan. While this might be true for a part of Pakistan's history, for around last 30 years, politicians and the military have been in the driving seat and the bureaucracy has been coopted or tamed using the carrot of prized postings and the stick of transfers. The book emphasises that research is the starting point of reform. While this is generally true, in many cases, the flawed systems provide evidence that research is unable to progress matters further. For example, the transgender only recently started getting national ID cards in Pakistan and are being counted for the first time in the national census, which is owed to advocacy rather than research. Similarly, even without research we know that reserving sanitation tasks for non-Muslims is bad. We also know that corruption, plea bargain and using taxpayers' money to advertise achievements of the government is bad. In such cases, advocacy or public pressure may help reform.

The book pins hopes on the academia to play a larger role in the reformation. To me it seems that the academia, at best, can point a finger at what is wrong but to make reform happen, opposition of the would-be-losers will have to be overcome and for this I would bet on the social media, which is bottom-up, is not centrally controlled, and is not opinionated – the characteristics that the author yearns for, for reforms to happen.

The book is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the process of reform and hence the process of development, especially how to kick start the two.

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**Commented [T1]:** Opinion! Personal view – does it need justification?