

PTI's Education Policy

By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

Recently, Imran Khan's Q&A with students in Karachi was telecast in *To the point* on the Express channel. There were some good questions and some not-so-well-left dodges. To two questions in particular, on refusing to be critical of MQM and on articulating a succession plan for PTI, Mr. Khan avoided any direct response. In the case of the latter, in fact, he digressed into the *sher* and *geedar* metaphor that Mr. Khan is so fond of. Mr. Khan has begun to avoid assigning blame to the MQM in Karachi. He always refrained from blaming the Taliban and militant groups for the deaths of countless Pakistanis. And in spite of his apology to the Baloch in his Karachi rally, he has also shied away from questioning the role of the security agencies in violating the rights of the Baloch. Whether these dubious positions make Mr. Khan a *sher* or a *geedar* is a question for another day, as the topic of this piece is to analyse Mr. Khan's remarks about PTI's education policy.

I find it curious that PTI has been in existence for 15 years and consistently it has insisted that, unlike other parties, it draws on the expertise of professionals to formulate policy. Yet when pressed for policy prescriptions, Mr. Khan gives only brief populist responses, followed by the refrain that think tanks are working on it and the full policy is soon to be unveiled. If the full policy has not been unveiled in the last 15 years, what will change in the next year or so to make this possible? Are we then to think that the core Insafians, the ones we are told are to guard PTI's ideology, were pulling blanks on PTI's education policy all these years and it is for the newcomers to work on this onerous task?

Mr. Khan appears sure of one thing. There is to be one system of education across Pakistan. But he has never clearly articulated which system this will be. Will the medium of instruction be Urdu or English? It would be unwise to do away with English and opt for Urdu as not only is professional education primarily available in English only, but English is also rapidly becoming the lingua franca of our world. Even countries like Germany, who have advanced education available in their native tongue and are particularly renowned for their engineering, are now aggressively making English classes more readily available to their population. This would leave us with the conclusion that if we are to have one system, then the medium of instruction in our schools should be English.

There is a problem with this however. How will we ensure English-speaking teachers in rural areas far removed from the cities? Often, it is difficult to find teachers in those areas who are fluent in Urdu as Urdu is only the native tongue of a fraction of our population. Nevertheless, it is still far more possible to hire teachers who are competent in Urdu than in English. A few years ago, I visited some government schools in Sheikhpura, just an hour outside Lahore. The schools were being resuscitated by a joint collaboration between the NGOs DIL and CARE. The Lahore-based women responsible for the daily management as well as the dedicated California-based Chairperson of DIL, Fiza Shah, responsible for funding oversight told me that the most difficult aspect of running schools in remote areas was finding competent teachers and training them.

Not only do we have an Urdu/English divide but we also have a Matric/GCSE divide. It will be next to impossible to find teachers for every district in Pakistan that could teach GCSE level English and equally impossible to deny those who can afford this elite education for their children. Hence the divide will remain. Mr. Khan would be wise therefore to talk about the uplift of the current education system but he is hoodwinking the people if he claims he can enforce one system of education in Pakistan.

Add to this the complication of the growing chain of madrassas which have introduced yet another system and enhanced divides among our population. Will it be possible for Mr. Khan to convince the proponents of the madrassa system to dispense with their curriculum and priorities and follow those of the state? What will he do if they refuse? In certain parts of our country, there are no alternatives other than the madrassa and in order to overcome that handicap, children must leave home and go to a big city like Peshawar, a fact that is beautifully illustrated in the touching Pushto film, *Sher Bachay* (Son of a Lion, which is also available with English subtitles). Not only is this a shame on the part of the state but the madrassa system is so entrenched and given that certain powerful militant groups are also the beneficiaries of this phenomenon, it will not be easy to challenge their hold on society.

Finally, Mr. Khan also stated that he will double the education budget if he comes to power. This is great news but doubling the education budget means cutting down on something else as there are only so many pieces of the pie. Given that we have one of the lowest allocations to education in the world and have one of the highest allocations to defence as a percentage of our budget, it would make sense if the shortfall came out of the defence allocation. But does Mr. Khan have a green light from the establishment that seems close to him to go ahead with this very welcome change? If not, what prescription does he have to double the education budget? Surely, taxes must be raised on the rich and more people added to the tax net but the effects of that will take a few years to materialise. Mr. Khan, on the other hand, claimed that he will double the education budget as soon as he comes to power. It would be good for PTI to think through these tough questions and understand that if they make very tall claims, it will be very difficult to follow through on them. It is better to be more honest and offer people realistic expectations of progress.