Public Policy Dynamics in Democracies*

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Public policy making has been described as fuzzy walking and the science of muddling through. Despite advances in the approaches to design, implementation and monitoring, the quality of public policies have not inspired much confidence – in fact, most countries admittedly face a serious problem of "trust deficit" in the governments and their institutions. Some studies, both from the US and Europe, indicate increasing failures in public policy though their classification and profile needs further understanding. Illustratively, a study by Matt Andrews, https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/files/bsc/files/public_policy_failure_cidwp344.pdf Center for International Development, Harvard University, 2018 measures the rate of failure – both by levels of satisfaction as well as risk-to-development. The study of 416 World Bank projects that are indeed in the realm of more diligent public policy management reveals that only 34% have fully met the satisfaction levels while 10.5 % were out-right failures. The risk to development outcomes were worse with 51% accounting for high and significant risk. Extrapolating this in respect of purely government initiatives, it is probable that fewer public policies actually meet their goals satisfactorily. The few case studies of successful public policy initiatives, show-cased as exemplary, paradoxically sit over a grave-yard of failures.

There are seven notable issues that contribute to policy failures in democracies in my reckoning. First, going by anecdotal evidence, policy initiatives are increasing in frequency amidst decreasing availability of resources. The reasons are possibly the rise of competitive populism among political leaders and the rising expectations from people in the new-media age.

Second, while the specialists need greater time for iterative design, validation and implementation, political expediency demands conceiving and announcing policy initiatives speedily than their iterative, inclusive design and implementation – this sows the seeds for wrong designs and inadequate structures and resources.

Third, in democracies where political leaders announce their "manifesto", the contents are not necessarily subjected to public policy rigour but nonetheless are serious public policy intents. If the policy intent in the manifesto is deeply flawed leaving little scope for correction or optimisation, the policy design and its implementation would also be flawed.

Fourth, the ownership of a public policy initiative and resource allocations to it varies with political incumbency. Probably in two ways: a) the bundling of such initiatives during the early part or towards the end of the tenure of the leadership and b) depletion in ownership and commitment to Public Policy initiatives of previous leadership even if from the same party – thus inducing a political risk of aborting initiatives mid-way. The risk is aggravated in

countries where the civil service and other major institutions are less independent by design, have become weak or have been captured by the political system.

Fifth, while public policy design implies a definition of the problem and a design that addresses that issue with explicitly articulated goals and sequences, political leadership may have collateral or even hidden objectives than what is apparent – thus some major infra projects may have divergent objectives between the officially stated and the politically hidden. Pursuit of the hidden objectives could turn-out to be the critical risk-factor for the policy. Contrarily, there are exceptional cases where the hidden / political objectives may give the tail-wind to a policy initiative – illustratively, those social interventions that provide for political brand-building.

Sixth, most public policy initiatives would have commonalities with the past in terms of work carried in the same realm or structures and resources already in that space. Further, there may be similar or overlapping policy initiatives at sub-national level (State, municipal, provincial). Thus, there may be possibilities of rationalisation, integration and optimisation. However, political leadership at all levels may be more interested in posturing and packaging projects and schemes for political advantage than optimisation and collaboration. Hence much wasteful repetition, overlapping and repackaging is noticeable.

Seventh, monitoring and evaluation of public policy initiatives being unavailable till audited after much time gap, citizens find it difficult to hold governments accountable. Accountability is derived only through the supreme auditing institutions, whose processes and outputs are long drawn and often lost in the maze of reports and parliamentary priorities – with only the exceptional ones making the grade for critical reporting in the press or for questioning in the parliament.

Given the notable drawbacks in public policy management, some fresh approaches have been attempted in recent years, beginning perhaps with the USA and the UK, to make policy initiatives more people centred, system oriented and less wasteful – these leverage on newer technologies and behavioural economics. The central strategy units, nudge units, brain trusts and other think-tanks attached to Centres of Governments have indeed been innovative and promising. However, there are some indications now that these are being overtaken in many countries by internal inconsistencies, impatient leadership and political expediency with only the odd ones making it to the show-case. That indeed puts not only public policy but the quality of democracy in jeopardy.

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