

PM Khan woos bureaucracy, promises to protect it from political pressure

Prime Minister Imran Khan on Friday addressed civil servants in Islamabad, asking them to support the government through a “down cycle” over the next two years and to support its “out-of-the-box” policy reforms.

The prime minister, in his address, highlighted various challenges that the nation was facing.

“We don’t have money to run our country; the majority of the population is young and looking for jobs; and the loans we took, instead of creating wealth so that we could repay them, have created projects that are running losses.”

He also discussed statistics on out-of-school children, malnourished children, high mortality of women in labour, and infant deaths due to waterborne diseases.

“I’m surprise that there hasn’t been outrage over this before.”

“We need to get out of this debt trap and we need to change ourselves and our nation,” he told the civil servants.

“If you look at history, nations make it through challenges when the people and the government become one. The army is also more effective when the nation is behind it,” he said.

He added that the government must assume responsibility for the people and the people themselves must own the government as their own.

“Nothing is impossible; but for that, people need to change,” he said.

“Maybe God has created this crisis because he wants us to change. We will change when we start thinking, before spending a single rupee, of the children who are out of school,” the prime minister said.

“Look at Singapore: they have exports of \$303 billion but we have exports of \$20bn. They have a knowledge economy [...] We have so many universities here that feature in the top 500 in the world.”

“We as leaders need to understand and ask ourselves; this money that I am spending on myself, can I spend it on the people of Pakistan? I ask this of all our leadership and our executive committee here. And I hope that you, the executive arm of this country, whatever policies we make [will help us implement them]. Unless you implement them, we cannot be successful.”

“Accountability is our cornerstone and without it we cannot progress. Corruption is our biggest issue. It isn’t just the looted money that is a problem, but the destruction of institutions in the process that is a great issue.”

“If Imran Khan wants to loot money, he will have to ruin the National Accountability Bureau and post his men in [senior positions] everywhere. Otherwise I’ll get caught. If there is transparency in the west, it isn’t because they are more honest: it is because their institutions are strong and they are afraid of getting caught.”

“Accountability is important for the country. I received some complaints about the bureaucracy and I spoke to the chairman NAB. I said: ‘If you do investigate any bureaucrat, do not humiliate him, do it subtly’,” PM Khan said.

“If the bureaucrat ‘takes chances’ and doesn’t do the work, however many policies we make – we’re taking risks and thinking out-of-the-box here [...] we won’t be successful.”

“People ‘take chances’, they make mistakes. I’ve made a lot of mistakes myself. It isn’t a bad thing. But you must differentiate between that and stealing money.”

“I give you my assurance that if you have committed any mistakes, I will stand with you and ensure that there is no undue pressure on you.”

“Whatever your political affiliation, whether you like Imran Khan and PTI or not, this doesn’t concern me. I am only concerned with your performance. If you perform for my country, we will stand with you and help you.”

PM Khan also complained about the “degeneration” of the civil services over time due to political interference.

“I want our bureaucracy to be at the same level as it was [in the 60s],” he said. Giving the example of his party’s reform of Khyber Pakthunkhwa’s police force, he said it was done because it was “isolated from political pressure. We didn’t allow any interference. It was very difficult because our political class is used to this. We bore the pressure, there was a lot of pressure from our MPs. They would tell us ‘We can’t win the election this way’,” he said.

“We trained them, did selection on the basis of merit. And they are now a model police force that we hope to replicate in Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan.”

“We want our bureaucracy to be the same way – promoting people on the basis of merit, isolated from political pressure [...] When your performance is built on merit, you rise to the top on your own.”

“I assure you that we will protect our bureaucracy from political pressure,” he vowed.

He also added that “quick postings and transfers are the most disruptive for governments”.

PM Khan also addressed issues with the salary structure of civil servants.

“In 1935, I was reading that a commissioner with his salary could buy 70 tolas of gold. My father, who was a government engineer in the 1970s, could buy a car with one month’s salary.”

“Because bureaucrats had good remuneration, there was no temptation. The living wage is not enough for you to survive on your salaries,” he said.

“I ask you to bear this difficult time, it won’t last long. Countries have cycles. No country goes straight to the top. You must look at it as a down cycle. But there is great potential in Pakistan. If we fix the governance structure, there is so much potential in this country.”

“Overseas Pakistanis – you can’t imagine how much money they have – that money doesn’t come here because of a lack of faith in governance. We will have so much money for the salaried class that you will be able to give your children quality private education.”

“I was reading about the Singapore model – they would give their civil servants the best salaries so that they wouldn’t have any temptation to make money in other ways. I recognise that this is a difficult time, inflation is high, and your salaries don’t match your qualifications. But if you decide to make it through the next two years – you can write it down, that if we fix our governance in these two years – there will be so much money [to go around] in this country.”

“Debt will go down, employment will increase, and Pakistan will be attractive in the world as an investment and tourist destination.”

“We will work with full force. I will isolate you from political pressure and will not allow you to be humiliated

during the process of accountability. I only want that you support this ambitious reforms programme fully. It is not for me, it is for our children.”