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Innocent [Until] Proven Guilty! Bearing the Stigma of ‘the Corrupt’ under Accountability Trials in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study focuses on a key drawback of the public sector accountability scenario in Pakistan. It touches upon the implications faced by public sector officials due to poor implementation of accountability laws and regulations. It emphasizes the possible reasons in terms of why and how accountability outcomes produce a ‘stigma’ for persons who face trial and are not found guilty, instead of bringing in some betterment. It also discusses the wide-ranging implications of the stigma, characterized by social rejection, cultural alienation, political and economic marginalization, and loss of career development opportunity, especially in the event when such stigma is induced by ‘media trials’ of *sub judice* cases. The authors also attempt to establish how the weak, ineffective, and politically-driven accountability mechanisms in Pakistan lead the public sector in not making any progress under accountability regulations. Several institutional ‘systemic’ factors that appear to have cause-effect relationships — characterized as a ‘vicious circle’, are identified. Some conclusions are also drawn and recommendations made regarding future policy and organizations to help de-stigmatize accountability regulations.

Keywords: accountability, corruption, media trial, metaphor, Pakistan, public sector management, stigma

Introduction

Corruption is considered a failure of public institutions, where public officials having the duty to serve in an honest and impartial manner deceive their professional ethics (Whitton, 1994). The institutional culture of public administration provides protection against corruption (Theobald, 1997), and such prevention efforts support the professional integrity of public officials (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2009). In the case of Pakistan, the weaknesses of accountability mechanism make it challenging to deal with the culprit and the innocent through a single

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measure (Lughmani, [2022](#)). Such loopholes give rise to situations where the accountability process becomes a stigma for the public officials for the rest of their lives and careers. There are considerable violations of human and fundamental rights in the accountability processes in Pakistan where public sector officials become victims of a stigma before they are proved guilty (Lughmani, [2022](#)). This paper aims to explore the intricacies of these accountability processes and the factors involved in them.

This paper draws the attention of readers to how the public sector could better be understood in relation to its unique context. A good deal of difference prevails in the working of public sectors all over the world. The perception of the phenomenon of ‘corruption’ varies among different public sector stakeholders across the globe. Over the course of PhD fieldwork research, respondents viewed the drawbacks in the public sector to be broadly linked to the problems or prospects of accountability in the public sector. In terms of a methodological consequence, the concept of accountability could not be segregated from the mainstream challenging environment of public sector administration. It is impossible to carry out identification or examination of such challenges in a vacuum. Therefore, the authors find it essential to unfold the ‘systemic’ contextual realities that were unfavourable to the idea of accountability in the first place. Some secondary data explicitly supported that approach as the meaningful one to take. It was viewed to be effective only with the strong initiatives, support and commitment required from the government as an insider to the problem rather than an outsider. Furthermore, the role of the Government of Pakistan in the development of public sector and its infrastructure is seen as secondary, supportive and passive.

Research Methodology

The case study research was conducted in the public sector of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. The techniques used for data collection included unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, observations, discourse analysis, secondary data analysis and focused group meetings. These techniques provided a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and allowed for triangulation and contextualization of findings. The research population comprised of public sector officials, staff of Anti-Graft Bodies (A-GBs) and professionals from different walks of life. The respondents were selected non-randomly through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Some metaphorical images of the domain of public

accountability emerged as the initial themes during the analysis stage. Thematic analysis was employed to uncover patterns and themes within the collected data, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the research questions. Some examples from the text of semi-structured interviews by the respondents explain the flawed implementation of accountability regulations as a reason to become a stigma for public officials.

Underpinning Theoretical Frameworks for Investigating ‘Stigma’

Numerous theories offer diverse perspectives for researchers and policymakers to examine the social stigma linked to accountability issues, providing unique lenses to understand how individuals accused of corruption are perceived and treated in society. This study specifically draws upon Erving Goffman's Stigma Theory, which views stigma as a socially discrediting attribute diminishing an individual's standing in the eyes of others. Allegations of corruption, under this framework, act as a discrediting attribute, leading to the imposition of social stigma. Goffman defined stigma as a special kind of gap between virtual social identity and actual social identity:

While a stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind—in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive (...) It constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity. (Goffman [1963](#), p. 3)

In Goffman's theory of social stigma, a stigma refers to an attribute, behavior, or reputation that socially discredits an individual in a specific manner. It results in others mentally categorizing the individual into an undesirable and rejected stereotype rather than an accepted and normal one.

A ‘Stigma’ Scenario

In his book *Metaphorical Imagination: Towards a Methodology for Implicit Evidence*, Abdullah ([2016](#)) suggests how: “Building on critical social research and clear gaps in social theory, metaphorical imagination takes us to a post-disciplinary world of implicit evidence, whereupon we

involuntarily unlock ourselves from our specialist identity genres that we assumed we were tied to”.

As such, ‘stigma’ appears to be a relevant (lead) metaphor to describe how the public sector accountability is challenging in Pakistan. This metaphor is multi-faceted, hence meaningful to cover several reasons that have contributed to the existing state of accountability in the public sector. The NAB, being a lead A-GB itself, carries the ‘stigma’ of a military created institution to repress the political opponents. This notion has been affirmed by Sheikh and Khalid (2019) that governments have used the NAB as a weapon against public officials considered close to political opponents. Furthermore, in developing countries, creation of separate specialised bodies is often in response to the pressure built by donors and international organisations (Klemenčič & Stusek, 2008). John R. Heilbrunn (2004) mentioned such establishment in his write-up:

Anti-corruption commissions are especially problematic when political leaders are only responding to demands from *international donors*.... In the worst cases, the commissions become tools to repress political rivals and members of the opposition or previous governments become targets of investigation. (p. 1)

The manifestation of several factors and vested interests are followed by chronological stages of what is typified in public perception as ‘*stigma*’. As secondary and contributing metaphors, these stages are discussed as: fear, inertia, tarnished imagery, stress, social neglect, and spoiled identity. The term (social) ‘stigma’ (Lughmani, 2022) has its own specific definition in social sciences for a particular act or state having its own characteristics and indicators of ‘spoiled identity’. Social ‘stigma’ is the disapproval of, or discrimination against, a person based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to negatively distinguish them from other members of a group or society (Goffman, 1963). It is conceivably in this metaphorical context that we may consider the existing state of public sector in Pakistan as that of a ‘stigma’ of spoiled identity.

Stigma for a Public Official

Public sector faces certain issues due to the sensitivity of the nature of its work. The public officials often encounter stigma in two cases. Firstly, if the public official is working at a slow and steady pace, ‘by the book’ and observing the legal formalities, they may be perceived as inefficient or

incapable, possibly having secured their position through connections. In the second scenario, if the official is working at a fast pace, bypassing or ignoring some rules in the process while taking decisions to serve common people, he/she will be blocked by seniors, courts or Anti-Graft Bodies (A-GBs) who can take cognizance on an ‘anonymous’ complaint. This way he/she will face ‘demotion’, ‘OSD status, or even an ‘arrest’ (Lughmani, [2022](#)).

The stigma diminishes an individual's identity to a singular feature, hindering the restoration of their original identity (Khan et al., [2021](#)). The label of being ‘corrupt’ or ‘NAB *Zadda*’ sticks with a public official throughout their life. ‘Social neglect’ is another contributing metaphor as colleagues, seniors, and subordinates may distance themselves from an official who has faced investigation by NAB. The impact of this stigma extends across generations, with the individual's reputation passed down to their descendants. The moment an anti-graft body initiates an inquiry, news of the official's situation spreads rapidly within their circles, and if there is an arrest, it becomes breaking news in the media. However, any news of acquittal or exoneration receives significantly less attention. There is a notable difference in the internal and external accountability mechanisms in terms of level of stigmatisation for the public officials. Internal mechanism instills ‘*fear*’ in junior officers to make them obey orders as the senior official has an authority to ‘*spoil*’ his career through making a ‘Red Entry’ in Annual Confidential Report (ACR). The sheer frustration due to stigma of ‘*khudday line*’ (trans. from Urdu: transfer to remote or powerless position), or ‘*afsar-e-bakaar-e-khaas*’ (trans. from Urdu: Officer on Special Duty) sarcastically put: ‘*Officers in Search of Duty*’ compel officers towards opting for a voluntary retirement. The positive point is that internal accountability is not done in haste (like premature arrest) to show progress and does not have a wider publicity (like press conferences) out of official spheres saving the cost of social stigma (Lughmani, [2022](#)).

Cultural Aspects of Stigma

The ‘social fabric’ of public servants is very strong as they have a kinship and fraternity. When news of an official's arrest or investigation circulates, gossip and assumptions spread within their social circles. Here, their seniors, friends and near relatives know the exact situation but the official earns a bad name, through this process. For the majority of public officials, one of their greatest fears is the fear of being disgraced. The effect

is evident when a discussion starts then people start pointing fingers, saying things like: ‘I see, that one’.

In Pakistan, the arrest of a ‘white collar’ professional i.e., an academic or a bureaucrat is likened to a ‘death sentence’ to him/her. After getting a stigma of “*NAB Zadda*¹” (one who has been prosecuted by the NAB), the honour and standing in the society are extremely difficult to retrieve (Lughmani, [2022](#)). On the other hand, for politicians, the same symbolism may actually boost their political standing who exploit accountability stigma to their favour (Lughmani, [2022](#)).

There are both formal and informal controls for public sector working. The ‘*informal controls*’ in the public sector working include “the social control” as people perceive corruption to be a wrong practice and mention a corrupt person as ‘*Raashi*’ or ‘*banni khor*’ (trans. from Arabic and Pashto: a person who takes bribes). It is one type of stigma based on word of mouth, being part of a society. In the past, suspension was considered a significant stigma of incompetence, but today, a suspended official is sometimes viewed more positively, being referred to as a ‘*ghaazi*’ (winner returning from war) who receives a salary while at home. The current public attitude often attributes an official's suspension to disobeying an (illegal) ministerial order rather than corruption.

When a person’s arrest news is publicized on TV, their reputation is often irreparably damaged. He/she is unable to address to the whole country or defend himself in newspaper on his acquittal. People say that he might have entered into a deal with A-GB to come out. As a society we blame without any evidence that ‘*zaroor iss ne kuch kia ho gaa*’ (trans. from Urdu: he must have done some mischief).

Tarnished Public Image

Public image encompasses the image of a person in the mainstream. A public sector official enjoys two types of statuses, the official and the personal. There are some material and immaterial things included in the public image; like personal traits, competencies, official position, and behaviour. Public Image of an official makes perception about the whole department; while the image of a public sector department builds an image

¹A common Urdu language word “*NAB Zadda*” creates a stigma for the people who remain in custody of the NAB on charges of corruption.

of the entire public sector. The consequences of stigmatization are deep-seated and enduring, impacting both the individual and the group to which they belong (Khan et al., [2021](#)). As such, in reality even in notoriously corrupt departments, the ratio of corrupt officials is too low, while rest of the staff earns a bad reputation unjustly. In current era of the social media, public image is highly volatile due to digital technological means, where a single video leak can damage somebody's image (Lughmani, [2022](#)).

Public image of an official is destroyed by an arrest without evidence. For instance, the Chairman NAB was taken iron-handedly by the victims of NAB during his visit to KP Civil Secretariat. An official shared, "I worked in a war-hit area with lot of media projection. Whoever searched on Google, knew me as a bold officer and an honest administrator. Now, it shows that I am a thief who has been caught by the NAB". The Chairman NAB offered an apology publicly in that meeting ("NAB working without rules", [2019](#)). In another case, the NAB humiliated a senior public official by arresting and keeping him for several months in jail. Due to a lack of evidence, the officials have been acquitted later by the courts, but at the 'social cost' affecting their image and financial status in the society. The tarnished image cannot be repaired back like a broken mirror. As highlighted by Goffman ([1963](#)), the '*stigmata*' not only disrupt the original traits of personalities but also impede their process of healing.

The 'habitual corrupt' people are not frightened, having the clarity of mind and money to enter into plea bargain. Innocent persons, feel most deterred, as their most valuable asset i.e. respect in society is at risk of being auctioned. Public sector has become too complex having multiple accountabilities including the judicial review. Many recall the behaviour of judges with the public officials as rude and disrespectful, perceiving it is a 'dissection' of someone's image. A-GBs convict a public official in 'public eye', damaging reputation with no remedy or public apology explaining one's innocence in the matter. Instead, A-GBs go into an appeal before superior court in a routine like they have some personal grudge against the person. It is a loss of prestige and honour which shocks the entire family. Even family members start to believe the stories being narrated in media.

A-GBs claim to conduct thorough investigations to collect evidence before making arrests. However, questions arise as to why suspects are released after being kept in custody for months. The NAB claims that there is a conviction rate of seventy percent in all cases. This should also be

observed that how many of them were arrested and then released without conviction just stigmatizing an innocent person as ‘*NAB zadda*’. The suspects are shown without permission on TV after arrest based on ‘raw information’ embarrassing them in front of family, colleagues and common citizens.

‘Media Trial’ of Public Officials

In Pakistan, media is proactive whereby ongoing media trials of public officials are put up by anchorpersons, asking questions to disgrace or make fun of them. Every human has ego and there should be strong laws for media to stop this extremely painful humiliation of the officials. It is terrorizing for an official to get declared a culprit especially on live television, despite having committed no wrongdoing and having nothing proven against them.

Public image of an official gets tarnished with the ‘stigma’ of corruption and the news of arrest in the first instance. Even acquitted in absence of any solid evidence, he/she would bear the cost of image and financial status in the society. Media trial makes it a social ‘stigma’, and even the acquitted officials carry this social scar of ‘*NAB Zadda*’ for the rest of their lives. It is also against the teachings of Islam to impose baseless allegations until proven guilty. It creates harassment and fear among officials. It is in human nature and has cultural effects to tolerate some mistreatment privately but not to stand simple hooting in public. The print, social and digital media has the high potential to steer public opinion. Media becomes extremely ‘irresponsible’ when it trends without in-depth research, knowing that no damages and defamation laws are in practice.

Contemporary empirical research has demonstrated media coverage of crime as skewed and one-sided (Haney & Greene, [2004](#)). Sheikh and Khalid ([2019](#)) argue that mainstream media reports sensationalism about administrative issues. The bureaucrats expressed concern over media trial of senior officials by the A-GBs on mere complaints. (“NAB working without rules”, [2019](#)). The trial by media is definitely an undue interference in the process of justice delivery and is a contempt of court which needs to be punished (Teacher, [2013](#)). Media news coverage of white-collar crimes may disseminate such prejudiced information² which can be excluded from

²These include past criminal record, defendant's reputation, prior confessions and sensationalism.

presentation at trial³ (Daftary-Kapur et al., [2014](#); Imrich et al., [1995](#)). *ABA standards for criminal justice* ([1992](#)), and American Bar Association ([2006](#)) published standards on press coverage and attorney communications regarding criminal cases to protect a defendant's right to a fair trial. Unfortunately, rules designed to regulate journalistic conduct in Pakistan are inadequate to prevent the encroachment of civil rights (Teacher, [2013](#)).

The current rating system has led sensationalism where a media trial is rolled out based on fabrications or half-truths (Rizvi, [2012](#)) damaging the reputation and career of the accused bureaucrats overnight and irreparably (Khawar, [2019](#)). The negative reporting about the civil servants shapes stereo types in the minds of the masses (Rölle, [2017](#)). A senior bureaucrat arrested by EC in a procurement case got acquitted but was not promoted. Later, on the day of his promotion, he bought one thousand copies of different newspapers and sent to friends and villagers to share the information about his promotion. They did not know about his acquittal and were thinking that he was out only on bail.

Prejudicing the *Sub Judice* Matter

The impact of pre-trial publicity (media trial) on public opinion carried by public and on potential jurors' attitudes toward criminal defendants has been well established (Daftary-Kapur et al., [2014](#); Ruva et al., [2007](#); Steblay et al., [1999](#); Studebaker & Penrod, [1997](#)). It also includes the perceived greater culpability and lessened credibility of the defendant (Moran & Cutler, [1991](#); Steblay et al., [1999](#)) resulting in more guilty verdicts and harsher sentences in certain cases (Daftary-Kapur et al., [2014](#); Ruva et al., [2007](#); Ruva & Guenther, [2015](#)).

The ‘rating hungry’ electronic media (Khattak, [2017](#)) completely overlooks the golden principles of ‘presumption of innocence until proven guilty’ and ‘guilt beyond reasonable doubt’. In Pakistan, media starts campaign against the alleged corrupts i.e., the public officials under custody, even before filing the cases in the courts. The Honourable Supreme Court of Pakistan on November 8, 2018 has attempted to address this issue by issuing a verdict restraining media from airing public comments regarding *sub judice* matters (Malik, [2018](#)). The verdict authored by Chief Justice in a contempt case against a media anchor-person, says:

³ California Code of Evidence, Section 352

The oft-used term ‘media trial’ is a real phenomenon and cannot be allowed where the fate of *sub judice* matters is decided on public forums as not only the minds of the public are being influenced, but also potentially the minds of the judges, lawyers and investigators, which would obviously tend to prejudice the *sub judice* matter. (Malik, [2018](#))

It is viewed that “media should not discuss *sub-judice*⁴ matters including NAB cases. The politicians also take names of A-GB’s officers on media while defending themselves. It is the product of the last couple of years that graft bodies start discussing things over media. Media trial affects in negative manner as courts come under pressure knowing that case is there in the media and people might think for the court as being corrupt. Same could be explained with the following example:

Discussing a *pre-judice* matter is like an umpire while doing his job is listening to the commentator who tells about the directions of the ball. There is a possibility for the umpire to change decision. As the umpire cannot listen to the commentator in absence of any source so any wrong decision would be only under a human error. The judges watch TV, so obviously it contributes in mind setting and definitely has an effect. A public official takes decision while sitting in his office. (Lughmani, [2022](#))

There are no opportunities for the accused to have a compassionate hearing before lesser courts in situations where the higher courts are persuaded to apprehend the guilty. An illustration is the well-known "Hajj Corruption Case" that was pending in the SC and was highlighted in media. The lower court and Islamabad High Court (IHC) denied bail to the petitioner. The lower court found the accused guilty and awarded them with punishment. While reviewing the available evidence and outlining the flaws of the criminal justice system's investigation and prosecution processes during the appeal, the IHC acquitted the accused. The court did not consider negligence and carelessness as a ‘criminal breach of trust’. The impact of ‘*perceptions built-in media trials*’ was discussed in the court (Sattar, [2018](#)). A senior bureaucrat found that the ‘Judges play with the galleries’. The then

⁴It means under study or decision in a court of law and prohibited from public discussion elsewhere. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english>

Chief Justice (CJ) remarked *Firhon*⁵ while looking at the media gallery, where journalists were taking notes for the headlines or breaking news. This thing has been going on since the success of the Lawyers' Movement to restore judiciary (Lughmani [2022](#)).

A-GBs–Media Nexus

Sheikh and Khalid ([2019](#)) claim that NAB arranges media leaks against civil servants. NAB feeds (or leaks) certain information to media while the person under investigation cannot defend him/herself on the media. Even allowed, the official cannot talk to the media as he/she has to face the 'watchdog' during investigation. It remains a one-sided story where even one's family has to stay calm. The opposition moved a privilege motion in the National Assembly (NA), accusing NAB Lahore Director General (DG) of holding "media trials" and maligning the politicians and discussing *sub judice* matters on different national news channels ("Opp moves NA against NAB", [2018](#)). This exercise of 'media trial' by the A-GB was condemned by both public and legislature ("No biased comments: SC", [2018](#)). Media exaggerates in reporting and makes a mountain out of a molehill in breaking news.

One can humiliate or disgrace an officer through his sources in the media to make someone 'zero from hero'. Media do not follow any control mechanism or journalistic ethics and can print anything. Any corrigendum is not provided for fake news in the first hand, or it is placed in a small space in inner pages or corner. It may also be seen as unethical and professional corruption.

Media never probes about the 'hypes' created in the name of 'mega corruption' or asks for the logical conclusion of a single case by the A-GBs. As a result, once arrested and presented in media as a thief, even innocents get 'stigmatised' as our society looks for weaknesses. The suicide of Brig (ret'd.) Asad Munir, ex-member of the Capital Development Authority (CDA), has highlighted the case of the bureaucracy against the NAB. This is a matter of concern that the NAB officials suspend fundamental rights of an accused by maligning the image of the accused through media trial (Sattar, [2018](#)).

⁵'*Firhon*' in Urdu is a metaphor for absolutely autocratic rulers, referring to ancient Pharaoh of Egypt.

The Question of Restoring Lost Dignity

The public image is a goodwill asset of a public official as people go through competitive examinations for the respect, reputation and good name in the society. If the 'Officer's Decorum' is violated and he/she is humiliated then why a person will join in the public service. Public sector all over the world, on the whole, keeps its 'dirty' image away from the media. The victims cannot regain their lost dignity even on the exoneration (Sattar, [2018](#)).

It has become the dilemma of accountability in Pakistan that international practices are not being followed. The institute which puts that stain has to remove it as well, to eradicate the stigma and bring in some positivity. In absence of an apology or some compensation from the bureau on exoneration, the stigma of one's corruption is stuck to an official for life ("NAB working without rules", [2019](#)). This stigma is bad but the A-GBs are reluctant to make an apology because it will establish their incompetence of making arrest. As nothing is proved so they are sorry, but this sorrow will never come out, else it will become a 'confession'. Here, we can say that institutional nature is probably the same as human nature.

In order to bring in the positivity and strengthen public trust in accountability mechanisms, the media should not be involved in the very beginning. There should be a 'public apology' for arresting or involving innocents. It will send a positive impact that a good person will get appreciation while the culprit will get punished. Here people get acquitted in multiple cases; no one made a single apology ever. The arrest of a public official is published in the newspaper and broadcasted on TV. Whenever his family visits their village or communities, people there already have the knowledge creating defamation and disgrace. So, on his/her acquittal, an apology should be published and broadcasted in the same way.

Some views offer a different version of comparing this dilemma with police chalks up FIRs, whereby how many FIRs result in conviction. Now police should apologize but they do not as it will make police ineffective, rather 'toothless'. Police do apologize informally but not on paper. If they do it in writing then people will take that paper to the court and it would be considered a confession. It is human and institutional nature to conceal wrong-doings.

In Pakistan, the torts and defamation laws are not strong enough to discourage media from indulging in negative practices (Khattak, [2017](#)). The freedom of expression requires strong and effective laws on defamation and damages as deterrent measures. A London court imposed heavy fine (with a ban) on a Pakistani TV⁶ channel defaming public figures (Khattak, [2017](#)) and an Indian TV Channel spreading hate speech against Pakistan (“UK slaps £20,000 fine”, [2020](#)).

Accountability implementation should strictly observe the constitutional rights, prevailing laws, and international conventions. The concept and sense of brutality imposed in various accountability laws in the past do not propose any solution to such a ‘chronic disease’, i.e., corruption. A decent, respectable and systematic mechanism could have been followed up in the examples of international bodies having features like oversight and across-the-board accountability to replicate those systems in the Pakistani context (Lughmani et al., [2022](#)).

Discussion

Research in accountability implementation in public sector is quite challenging. One needs to reflect on the factors derived from the mainstream political-economy and sociology of the public sector in Pakistan. These contextual factors appear to be responsible for the present state of accountability regulations in Pakistan. Metaphors are helpful to understand and partly examine thoughts and interpretations in the local context. We learn how almost all of such issues could be focused under multiple perspective analysis. We chose ‘stigma’ as a lead metaphor to describe a challenging dimension of the public sector accountability in Pakistan and there are many more. This metaphor indicates the current crisis (indecisiveness in public sector) as an accountability dilemma. It is obvious that ‘*NAB Zadda*’ becomes a social stigma in Pakistan whereby the blue-eyed are sheltered, while a discriminatory behaviour is adopted against the disapproved ones. An official will face a ‘social neglect’ a contributing metaphor-based on stigma.

Interestingly, internal accountability does not create a stigma for public officials as no one outside the official sphere could possibly get to know about any such mishap. The internal stigma of being transferred to a

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/16/pakistani-media-alert-tv-channels-libel-defeat-british-court-ary>

powerless position in a remote area compels officials to give ears to some annoying orders. Such fear makes a junior officer to obey orders of the authority to save career from any untoward remarks in the ACR or from becoming an OSD. The ‘stigma’ of being corrupt is so strong that respondents kept telling others’ stories to show that no such incident had happened to them actually. Usually, they provide a reference to their friends and colleagues, and not to personal experience.

It looks unconstitutional, against human dignity, rights and moral imposition, to put handcuffs on senior officers and to share it publicly on TV. A-GBs are tarnishing the reputation and images by showing the person photographed behind the bars. The NAB continues to disgrace a person in the eyes of his children. There are thousands of people sentenced on daily basis without any coverage in news and talk shows, where both corruption and murder are crimes against the society. Brig. (retd.) Asad Munir case is an eye opener ‘stigma’, that a respectable senior officer fears facing his family and friends.

While discussing the perceived unlimited official powers, simply eliminating the accountability chapter out of the syllabus of current governance structure is not a solution. Public officials may become tools in the hands of politicians, who own most of the media channels, while forming a ‘nexus’, providing losses to the exchequer. There are situations where public officials with executive authority, playing to their ‘master’s voice’ of the political leadership, detain common citizens (political opponents) under Sections 3, 5, 7 and 16 of the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO⁷), thus seizing their liberty and stigmatizing their dignity. In the same way, while flipping the page, accountability bodies do have vast resources and authority to initiate a case under the provisions of ‘assets beyond means’ against any person (excluding armed forces and judiciary), responding to which is not at all an easy task for anyone. An unnecessary arrest being a lucrative power, brings humiliation, curtails freedom, and casts ‘scars’ forever. It is simply used to instill fear and to show progress

⁷MPO is amongst the remains of the colonial powers conferred upon the Deputy Commissioner being administrator of the district whereby the incumbent officer can order arrest of any person for a month extendable to six months under this law. The district judiciary cannot entertain any such appeal whereby only the High Court has the jurisdiction to set aside the orders under MPO.

because achieving the convictions requires hard work on part of the investigating and prosecuting institution.

The stigma of corruption in Pakistan is intricately linked to societal and economic conditions. Economic inequalities contribute to the perception of corruption as a route to personal gain, particularly among marginalized groups. Cultural norms play a role in either intensifying or mitigating the stigma based on the societal tolerance for corrupt practices. Institutional weaknesses, including flaws in law enforcement and the judicial system, foster mistrust and the potential for false accusations. The political environment and media influence further shape public perceptions, reinforcing the stigma. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing effective strategies that address the root causes within the broader social and economic context, going beyond targeting individuals accused of corruption.

This article delves into the multifaceted issue of the stigma of corruption faced by innocent public officials within accountability mechanisms. The 'stigma' scenario, explored through the lens of cultural aspects, sheds light on the tarnished public image resulting from a 'media trial.' The article highlights the inherent challenges of prejudicing *sub judice* matters and the concerning nexus between accountability bodies and the media. The poignant exploration of the question of restoring lost dignity underscores the crucial need for certain concrete measures to safeguard the reputations of those wrongfully accused and ensure a just and balanced system.

Conclusion

The top official of the country's top anti-graft body himself admits that '*Ghayion k saath Ghin bhi pis jaata hai*', implying that grinding/grilling of the innocent along with the culprits is common during the accountability process. It makes public sector accountability a dilemma. A-GBs and their prosecution wings, instead of ensuring dispensation of justice, try their best to prove charges against the suspect.

On the top of that, the body which brings in the humiliation to the public official does not offer an apology in case the wrongly arrested suspect is proved to be innocent. This is done just to save their skin or image and conceal their incompetence. Such apology, in shape of press conference or official press release, if implemented, will serve as a remedy to clear the stigma for a public official, a deterrent measure against the malpractices of

the A-GBs and misuse of authority on their part. Such actions will definitely bring in a positive impact upon the accountability efforts, in distinguishing between the culprits and the innocents.

Authors recommend strengthening legal safeguards, including procedures to prevent unjust labeling of innocent individuals as corrupt. Public awareness campaigns should emphasize the presumption of innocence, and responsible journalism is encouraged to avoid sensationalism. Transparent investigations with clear evidence before public accusations, accountability mechanisms for law enforcement, and expedited legal proceedings are crucial. Communities should be educated about the consequences of false accusations, fostering support for those wrongly accused. Training for law enforcement, judiciary, and legal professionals on accurate investigations and fair trials is essential. Mechanisms for expunging records and collaboration with international organizations for implementing best practices are also suggested.

These recommendations seek to balance anti-corruption efforts with safeguarding innocent individuals from enduring the stigma of false accusations. Successful implementation calls for a collaborative approach involving government bodies, legal institutions, media organizations, and civil society. As a current research topic, the authors propose further investigation into the stigma associated with corruption, particularly focusing on the redemption struggle of innocent public officials who have been unfairly targeted in accountability situations.

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