

Forum for complaint

IT is a problem of two parts: the ability of the citizenry to lodge complaints, and the government's ability to address the latter. On Sunday, Prime Minister Imran Khan unveiled the Pakistan Citizens' Portal, a primarily online system to lodge complaints against government departments and public officials. The key feature of the PCP is that the complaints system will be monitored by the Prime Minister's Office; Mr Khan has vowed to himself regularly oversee the resolution of the public's complaints. To the extent that the portal will make it easier for the public to lodge complaints and that complainants will have to reveal their identities to reduce frivolous and malicious complaints, the PCP could be a step in the right direction. But a great deal will depend on the implementation of the system.

Indeed, the specifics of the PCP may be new and updated for a more connected age, but the idea of a prime ministerial portal for public complaints has been attempted several times before, whether as a call-in programme on television or some similar scheme. The effectiveness of those previous schemes was perhaps more in the public relations domain than actual problem-solving. Perhaps the PTI government and Mr Khan have a better road map than their predecessors — the PCP is based on a scheme introduced in KP by the PTI during the last government's term there — but there are essential questions regarding scale and efficacy. Even if it is accepted that it will not micromanage the complaints redressal system and Mr Khan is seeking simply to gather aggregate data that will expose the worst performing of government departments, the PMO is unlikely to have the infrastructure to deal with the flow of complaints and analyse them in a meaningful manner. There are also legitimate questions that can be raised about the federal government interfering in the work of provincial governments.

Where the prime minister can, and perhaps should be, given the benefit of the doubt is that, a first-time holder of elected high office, Mr Khan is keen to try new schemes to connect his office to the citizenry as a way of not falling victim to the insulation from public concerns that the PMO can impose. However, it is surely time for the federal government to unveil its substantive policies and reforms agenda that the PTI has promised. At the moment, the complaints that will pour into the PCP will necessarily be about generic inefficiencies and corruption — the government's absence of reforms or a substantive policy agenda so far means that the PCP will be unable to record complaints about the PTI's own policy aims. Finally, the prime minister's time is finite — it should be used to guide the policy direction of the government rather than focus on issues that can be better handled at other tiers of government.

Editorial