

# Social Accountability in Pakistan: Challenges, Gaps, Opportunities and the Way Forward

Fayyaz Yaseen Bhidal

**Abstract-** The present paper, besides taking stock of the struggle for the creation of a socially accountable governance system in Pakistan, briefly focuses on to the challenges, gaps, opportunities and the way forward for the success of the phenomenon. Building on the relevant literature available, it also highlights civil society organizations' work on social accountability in Pakistan and the major stakeholders that can play a role in leading this constructive transition successfully. Moreover, it shares some of the suggestions that may expedite the process towards strengthening people's voice to call for a governance structure that may initiate inclusive and participatory development while adhering to the values of transparency, decentralization, justice and social accountability.

**Index Terms-** Social Accountability, Pakistan, challenges, way forward

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the World Bank definition, Social Accountability (SAc) is the concept that revolves around the participation of citizens and civil society organizations in public decision making process (World Bank, 2005). The DFID defines it as '*The ability of the citizens, civil society and the private sector to scrutinize public institutions and governments and to hold them to account*' (DFID, 2009). It is the idea that lays foundation for good governance – one of the most desired phenomena for successive governments in Pakistan.

The 'Social Accountability' jargon is quite new for citizens and civil society in Pakistan. However, the essence that it captures, and demands that it puts forth before the governments is not new as the social scientists have long been demanding for transparency driven from citizen's access to information and fair use of country's economic and social resources through participatory governance (Ismail and Rizvi, 2000). While referring to Pakistan's acute governance crisis that remained unresolved throughout dictatorial and democratic regimes, it has been observed that the issue finds its roots in the country's legislative and administrative framework that hinders transition towards a decentralized local government system and promotes and protects the corrupt and impede the creation and promotion of institutionalization of standard governance practices (Ismail and Rizvi, 2000).

Despite having varied definitions for good governance, there has been a wider consensus among the social scientists in Pakistan that the biggest impediment on the way to achieving the phenomena is lack of 'accountability' of the public office bearers and the service providers. Perhaps that was the reason that after ousting Nawaz Sharif's elected government in a military coup in October 1999, the then Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf

tried to justify his act by promulgating the National Accountability Ordinance which culminated in creation of National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and promised accountability of all the corrupt. However, the promise could never be fulfilled and soon after its creation, NAB appeared to be another source of political victimization, validating the point that supply side accountability mechanism is always prone to be misused.

Observing examples and situations similar to those in Pakistan and in other developing countries, the international interest has grown into the concept of Social Accountability where it is the media and civil society that has started to demand transparent governments and improved service delivery (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000). Emerging as a tool that complements the process of accountability through electoral process, the SAc has ensured that the civil society can also be a decisive force in ensuring quality service delivery (DFID July 2006).

The realization that promoting social accountability in Pakistan can be a catalyst to good governance came rather late to Pakistan (WBI, 2007). However, the idea has started picking up in last few years. The credit for this realization mainly goes to international donors and the civil society organizations that took initiatives to educate masses on importance of good governance and presented with the tools that can be applied to ensure quality public service delivery. And of course to the media that highlighted the success stories and played a role in increased public confidence in its power to hold the public officials accountable.

The present research paper is relevant for three reasons. Firstly, this is an election year in Pakistan and thanks to a relatively free media; the masses in the country are looking forward to a future government that, while ensuring transparency and answerability, may overcome rampant corruption and address the inadequate accountability of state institutions. Secondly, considerate of the presently ineffective system of governance, at least in their verbal election manifestos, the political leaders have started to pledge for making government institutions responsive to the public needs to attain a good governance agenda. And finally, in the quest for inclusive growth and development and empowerment of the marginalized, there is a greater call for participatory governance among civil society groups. In these ways this paper is an endeavor to facilitate these groups in deciding how to move forward.

Building on these ideas, the first section of this paper briefly elaborates the definitions of Social Accountability and dwells on to the question as to why the societies need it. The second section of the paper takes stock of the social accountability evolution in Pakistan, and also notes the SAc exercises conducted by various national and international organizations so far. Section three highlights some of the challenges that the social accountability

initiatives face in Pakistan. Section four dwells onto the gaps or hindrances that have impeded or lessened the impact of social accountability initiatives in the country. Section five elaborates the renewed urgencies for promotion of Social Accountability in Pakistan, while section six dwells onto some of the opportunities or factors upon which the SAc initiatives in the country bank on. Finally, the seventh and last section of the paper presents with some of the suggestions for donors, CSOs and the government to deepen the SAc related developments in Pakistan.

## II. THE SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY EVOLUTION IN PAKISTAN

Although social scientists in Pakistani have been stressing for public participation in decision making process for long, but it was only in 1995 when evidence based monitoring with the help of communities was initiated first by the civil society organizations (WBI 2007). Two years' down the line, following the Asian Slump in 1997, these were the economists who demanded for good governance through public participation and monitoring for efficient utilization of public resources (Coventry and Hussein, 2010). However, the major step in this regard was taken by the then government in 2000 when it formed the National Reconstruction Bureau which led to the initiatives of launching local governments. Under this new local government system the authority and decision making capacity were delegated to the lowest tier of governments and the respective communities (WBI, 2007). These reforms, according to Sirker and Cosic (2007) were made to improve people's access to service delivery. In order to make this system quick and effective, the government also set up the National Reconstruction Information Management (NRIM) System.

This new NRIM system, however, had some inherited defaults. It lacked the scope to capture responses from all the citizens as the formal system had record of information only about those who had access to the public services and missed the ones who were the most marginalized and vulnerable and were not benefitting from the public services (WBI, 2007). Faced with this situation, the UNDP, with the help of other international donors, designed and implemented Social Audits at district levels. This was the first time when one of the SAc tools was implemented in Pakistan.

Back in 1999, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) implemented a project named 'Communication for Effective Social Service Delivery (CESSD)<sup>1</sup> in Pakistan'. The first phase of the project, implemented across North West Frontier Province (presently known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), was initiated with the help of provincial and local governments. Until 2007, the project team worked with five district governments along with some selected sub-district and village level public officials and NGOs. The goal of the project was to deliver decentralized social services through enhanced community participation. The most visible success in promoting citizens' participation for quality public service delivery was marked by CESSD through establishment of Community Citizens Boards (CCBs)<sup>2</sup>. The members of these boards were

provided with formal training for enhanced capacity to directly receive development funds and to utilize those funds for grassroots community development project. The experience shared by the Social Audits and the CESSD greatly helped in sensitizing the government officials in realizing the effectiveness of citizens' engagement for effective service delivery<sup>3</sup>. However, after 2008, the local governance system was gradually rolled back and SAc practices that had started taking roots in the society, suffered a major blow. After this, although there have been isolated initiatives on government's part where promotion of social accountability has been stressed, but they could not be scaled up.

The government's initiatives to promote social accountability in Pakistan have essentially not been rooted in community's demands. Rather, they have been mainly driven by the need and wish to please the international financial institution and donors – mainly IMF and the World Bank. On the basis of data taken from a WB funded project on Health in Sindh during 1990 to 1999, researchers (like Israr, et al., 2006) argue that good governance, characterized by transparency, accountability and citizen's participation play critical role in sustaining the donor funded projects<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps that was the reason that one after the other, the successive governments have been implementing donor funded projects while adhering to certain accountability measures.

As for promotion of accountability to achieve good governance is concerned, the researchers and social scientists find it greatly contingent upon 'external accountability' or 'vertical accountability' rather than the 'internal' or 'horizontal accountability' (Ahmed, R, 2008). However, what governments in Pakistan have been trying to promote is more of a reflection of the former than the latter. This approach led towards creating a greater room for civil society intervention. Mainly supported by external donors, lately, the CSOs have taken initiatives to influence government priorities for spending on and reforming the public service delivery.

Initiated by large donors including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the United Nations, the implementation of social accountability tools in Pakistan has also attracted donors including the Asia Foundation, DFID, USAID, Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA) and the International Budget Project. The organizations that have led the process locally, include, among others, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Community Information and Empowerment Technologies (CIET), Devolution Trust for Community Empowerment (DTCE), Mahbub-ul Haq Human Development Centre, Social Policy Development Centre, Heart file, Governance Institutes' Network International, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Omar Asghar Khan Foundation (OAKF), Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI), Shehri Organization, Hisaar Foundation, CESSD, the Consumer Network, Transparency International and the ActionAid. The social accountability tools that have been implemented by these organizations include, among others,

<sup>3</sup> CIET Pakistan and National Reconstruction Bureau 2003, 2005

<sup>4</sup> C:\Users\acer\Desktop\SAC Paper reading\Challenges to SAC\abstract.htm

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cowater.com/readProject.cfm?ID=44>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cowater.com/readProject.cfm?ID=44>

Participatory Budgeting, Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys, Monitoring of Public service delivery, Citizen Report Cards, Community Score Cards, Investigative Journalism, public commissions and citizen advisory boards.

### III. CHALLENGES TO PROMOTE SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN PAKISTAN

The challenges to promote Social Accountability in Pakistan are pretty much similar to those faced by other South Asian countries that have struggled to attain good governance through civic engagement. In identifying and highlighting the below mentioned challenges, besides the secondary literature, experience of primary research conducted by the SDPI (implementation of Citizen Report Card in Education sector of Pakistan) has also been utilized. The most prominent of these challenges are discussed in following sections:

#### i) *Government/ State's resistance to reform:*

Amid the entrenched governance system, that, at the hands of patronizing politics, has gone extremely inefficient, there is severe resistance on part of government and the state to reform<sup>5</sup>. For instance, after the promulgation of Right to Information Act through a Presidential Ordinance, the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI), an Islamabad based NGO, tried to access some information held with ministry of Law. However, time and again, its requests were turned down by the respective officials on the basis that the requested information will only open up a Pandora Box, which might lead to political unrest in the country. Access to the said information could only be made possible after the organization invoked the Ombudsman.

Similarly, when SDPI tried to implement Citizen Report Card in two of the slums in Islamabad to assess the quality of education being provided to the students in public schools of the subjected area, the respective education department tried to hinder the process by initially not allowing the school teachers to cooperate with the organization's research teams. It has been observed that the resistance on part of government agencies is mainly due to the inherent deficiencies – the concerned authorities do not want to be exposed.

#### ii) *A difficult, confusing accountability landscape:*

At the moment, for social accountability initiatives' success, it is essential for them to be politically astute<sup>6</sup>, i.e. the implementers must "test the applicability of these initiatives against complexity of prevailing conditions". "The task of promoting and achieving social accountability has to be located within the context of political action that would include civil society's role, but not limited to it."<sup>7</sup> Researchers (Coventry and Hussein, 2010) argue that "good understanding of the political economy of the sector, to align accountability interventions with the other governance developments rather than stand-alone

initiatives that are pro-poor and avoid elite capture" can be of greater help in promulgation of the SAc initiatives.

#### iii) *Disruption by powerful vested interests:*

The powerful interests that have become major stakeholders of government or public officials' corruption and wrong doings can go to any extent to hinder application of social accountability tools. In fact not only implementation of the SAc tools, they usually hinder all sort of interaction of the development organizations with their communities. In rural areas of Gujranwala and Gujrat, it happened several times when the civil society organizations were threatened to leave the areas while communities were threatened to not to welcome and cooperate with the NGO officials. Same hostile behavior have been reported by the organizations struggling to work with the communities where religious fundamentalists have hold of the local political and administrative structure.

#### iv) *Weak/ no Implementation of Right to Information Act:*

"Public's Access to Information is frequently referred to as an important pre-condition to responsive and accountable public institutions" (Coventry and Hussein, 2010). Despite after 10 years of the promulgation of Right to Information Ordinance (October 2002) and the very recently insertion of article 19-A into the Constitution, which pertains to right of access to information being the basic and fundamental rights of the citizens in Pakistan, the matching mechanism is yet to be worked out that may ensure public offices' compliance to this new part of the constitution.

The researchers' believe that a conducive environment for SAc cannot be created unless there is regular availability of reliable and relevant information. The access to information should not only be free, but also be in an easy to understand way.

#### v) *Centralization*

Pakistan emulates a centralized governance system, where instead of institutions, these are individuals (usually politicians) who wield all the power and authority and exercise them at will without a regard to the law and constitution.

#### vi) *CSOs' weak governance and accountability mechanisms*

Currently, these are the civil society organizations that are leading the initiatives to promote social accountability to fix the governance crisis in Pakistan. However, not all of these civil society organizations adhere to the standard governance and accountability systems. Many of these CSOs discourage discussions on their own transparency and accountability, which puts their credibility under question. Weak governance and accountability systems of those very proponents of social accountability organizations leave their voices less reliable before the masses and shake their trust in the idea of governance through participation.

Unless these six major challenges are overcome, the promotion of social accountability in Pakistan will not become smooth, and will always provide a chance to its opponents to disrupt the process citing these excuses.

#### vii) *Absence of an enabling Environment*

<sup>5</sup> Social Accountability Mechanism, a generic Framework

<sup>6</sup> Responsiveness and Accountability in the Health Sector, Pakistan, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Social Accountability Mechanism, a generic Framework

The enabling environment for promotion of social accountability in Pakistan is missing. By enabling environment, we mean there is absence of matching legal and regulatory frameworks, policies, an accommodating political environment and an accessible, open and receptive government. Many of the successful SAc tools implementation exercises on part of civil society organizations could not yield the desired results as due to the legal and constitutional loopholes, despite expressing their discontent from the quality of public service delivery through community score cards and citizen report cards, the citizens could not actually hold the service providers/ public officials to account.

*viii) Political and institutional capacity of the government and the civil society:*

Amid the elite capture of the political system in Pakistan, the political and institutional capacity of the government to respond to the rights and entitlements, security and social justice needs of the masses has weakened. The researchers note that social accountability initiatives can be effective and sustainable only when they are institutionalized. And the state is obliged to cooperate in broader accountability projects and it facilitates and strengthens the civic engagement into the process. Also, the civil society lacks the capacities and capabilities to convince and realize the government for its constitutional obligation to be accountable to the masses.

*ix) Absence of Performance Benchmarks*

There is hardly any public service in Pakistan that is benchmarked. Thus, the researchers and social scientists implementing social accountability tools like Citizen Report Cards and Community Score Cards serve their firsts of initiatives to set the benchmarks which are latter on used for comparisons. Against these benchmarks, gradual improvement in the public services after citizens' engagement is measured over time.

*x) Lack of social Mobilization and effective media exposure:*

Researchers believe that "citizens mobilization is vital to make local governance more inclusive and accountable" (Jha, c.et al 2009). Mobilizing the masses to account the public officials for quality public service delivery requires a lot of efforts in Pakistan. The practice here is that societies have rarely been taken on board for collective decisions, and their complaints have never been heard by the institutions unless endorsed by the local MNAs and MPAs. In such an environment, realizing the masses their power and expecting of them to stand to demand their constitutional right is not at all easy. It requires lots of social mobilization, activities that would educate them of their rights and entitlements and the state's responsibilities towards them. Media exposure can be of great help in this regard. In the SAc exercises implemented so far, CSOs have rarely used media to highlight their work. Had their work been properly highlighted, this could have served a long way in leveling the field for other similar exercises across the country and could have, somewhat, integrated the struggle for better governance through civic engagement. According to the researchers<sup>8</sup>,

citizens' mobilizations comprise of two steps; firstly, to facilitate their access to information, and secondly, to build their capacity for accountability actions.

#### IV. GAPS IN SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY EXERCISES IN PAKISTAN

The World Bank (2006) observes strong evidences that depict correlation between a country's governance system and its development performance. The World Development Report (2000-2001) sees accountability as an essential component to empowerment of the marginalized and hence the poverty reduction. Citing examples of the countries where SAc has been implemented, Ahmed (Ahmed, R, 2008) notes, "unbundling of governance components such as rule of law, voice and accountability, corruption control and state capture have indicated that a greater focus on external accountability can lead to improve governance." Ahmed also notes that the SAc initiatives can only be fruitful when they are institutionalized and when besides vertical accountability, state's internal or horizontal accountability mechanisms are also strong and transparent. In context of these statements, when we analyze the social accountability exercises in Pakistan, we find following gaps that have hindered the SAc initiatives from attaining the desired success.

*i) Required skills are missing*

"Every SAc initiative must have a detailed training strategy for both the citizens and the concerned officials who have assigned roles in the programs"<sup>9</sup>. The biggest stakeholders of the Social Accountability process usually lack the skills and resources to conduct it at their own. As the researchers describe it, "Poor people are the greatest beneficiaries of effective social accountability initiatives as they are the most reliant on government services and least equipped to hold government officials accountable" (Malena, Foster and Singh, 2004)

*ii) No donor support to build supply side capacity*

The Social Accountability agenda in Pakistan, so far, has been supported by the donors, who have mainly focused on building capacities on demand side of the equations. For these initiatives to be effective, it is imperative for the donors to finance the initiatives that build supply side capacities (public officials, politicians, policy makers etc.) as well.

*iii) Women's voice/role is usually neglected*

While building communities' capacity to account the public officials for provision and quality of public service delivery, disadvantaged groups, especially women's role and their voices are neglected by the CSOs. Being equally valuable stakeholders, their say and voice should also be considered equally important by the CSOs soliciting communities' responses.

*iv) No focus on reforms*

The SAc initiatives so far have had a case to case or sector to sector focus, not many of them struggled to sensitize the policy makers for reforms in the desired direction.

<sup>8</sup> Social Accountability Mechanisms, a generic framework

<sup>9</sup> Social Accountability Mechanisms, a generic framework

## V. RENEWED URGENCY FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan is presently suffering from a number of political and social issues for which Social Accountability holds a desired solution. For instance, amid bad governance and poor security provision, Province Balochistan is suffering from abductions for ransom, killings, absence of or poor public service delivery deteriorated law and order situation and other issues of grave nature. According to the constitution, both the federal and provincial governments are bound to provide complete security and protection to the local communities, but in reality, it is only giving excuses for its failures. Recently, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has taken suo moto notice in which it has demanded of the provincial government to step down if it cannot deliver on its responsibilities as laid down in the constitution. The social infrastructure in the province has almost collapsed, and only promoting and exercising social accountability can salvage it from further deterioration.

Mala Yousafzai's incident also marks urgency for the Social Accountability. The young girl who was targeted by the Taliban only used to exercise her right of expression through which she exhibited her love for education. Also, she condemned the violence at the hands of militants who blew up many schools in the area and threatened the girls and teachers from going to school. In this case too, the state failed to protect someone who exercised her right to express. The rise of social accountability can compel the government to ensure enough protection to the locals in the area so that this right be exercised without any fear or oppression.

In other issues of similar nature, both in Balochistan and the Khyberpakhthunkhwa, the border security forces, in the name of targeting militants and insurgents, are reportedly committing tyrannies on the local people. If the people are made aware of their right to account the public officials, they can stand to overcome such oppressions.

## VI. OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY PROMOTION IN PAKISTAN

By opportunities here we mean the complementing factors already present or have developed in Pakistan's social and political arena that, if exploited well, can be of great help in promotion of Social Accountability in the country. Among others, these opportunities include:

### *i) Revival of a responsible judiciary*

Apex judiciary, in the past few years, has emerged as protector of rights of the masses. Through exercising the right to take suo-moto notices, it has heard a number of issues where rights of the common people were compromised at the hands of public officials. It has taken notices of a number of corruption scandals highlighted by the media and ordered independent commissions to probe into them, have taken suo-moto notices of the incidents of missing persons in Balochistan and their reported killings at the hands of law and order agencies, and have heard cases against the public services providers where relief has been given to the common people. The judiciary's active and pro-poor and pro-people role has also added to the confidence of common

people into it. They now frequently resort to it without any hesitation whenever they feel government institutions are not being fair to them. Amid these acts, the judiciary is becoming a partner to the civil society in ensuring demand side accountability.

### *ii) Vibrant Media*

Present day Pakistan has a very vibrant media that thrives on aspirations of the common masses. It is developing social consciousness and actions that are essential to develop and promote social accountability. On a daily basis, it highlights the plight of people suffering at the hands of officials at public and private institutions. It also follows up with its stories unless notice is taken and the specific issues are resolved. While implementing the SAc tools, organizations like SDPI, CPDI, and Shehri Organization took media, both print and electronic, on board and shared with them their findings. Resultantly, the issues highlighted by them were not only given due space and highlight, but renowned writers picked them up further advocacy work. If systematically engaged, media can prove to be a catalyst in promotion of Social Accountability in Pakistan.

### *iii) Politically aware and charged masses*

Amid greater exposure to media, the masses in Pakistan are far more politically aware and charged to struggle for their rights. If educated and properly mobilized, they can readily own and stand behind the initiatives that ensure civic engagement in public decision making process.

### *iv) Strengthened civil society*

Civil society in Pakistan has recently witnessed great success. Lately, it has fought with and ousted a dictatorial regime, despite severe opposition from the government, it has got the judiciary restored, and has got important bills passed on women rights. Banking on media freedom, civil society has greatly added strength to its voice. If civil society is sensitized to collectively take up the idea, it can be of great help for promotion of social accountability in the country.

### *v) Receptive political parties:*

Amid free media and a vibrant and vocal civil society, political parties in Pakistan have experienced a great evolution. Now they are open and more receptive to new ideas. Marking their presence on social media as well to have a direct contact with the society, they now act faster on public demands. Taking advantage of such a situation, the civil society and media can convince them to include promotion of civic engagement in public decision making process into their political manifestos for the upcoming elections.

## VII. WAY FORWARD/ RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESS OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN PAKISTAN

Social Accountability has started to emerge in Pakistan. The World Bank (2005) observes that "the emergence of social accountability has shown that society is powerful, and it has great potential to hold the government(s) accountable." It has great support from the civil society and the (vulnerable) segments it has benefited so far. Whenever practiced "social

accountability provides a platform for the citizens and groups previously excluded from the political process, to engage in the governance process.<sup>10</sup> While the society in Pakistan is realizing the virtues of accounting public officials through civic engagement, following recommendations may be of help in pacing up this process:

- i. Public's access to regular, reliable and relevant information be ensured – for example Chief Minister of Punjab's initiative where senior bureaucrats are bound to devote half of their working hours daily to directly listen to the complaints by the people.
- ii. Legal and regulatory environment be strengthened for freedom and pluralism in access to information
- iii. Communication mechanism with the vulnerable groups – women, minorities, ultra poor, be strengthened – like in case of PEMRA, it has established a 24/7 hotline where complaints from the citizens can lodged if they notice any unethical content on the media. In the similar way, hotlines can be established by other service providers e.g. NEPRA, PTCL, WASSA etc.
- iv. Besides leading demand-led initiatives, donors should also focus on building capacity on supply side of the equation – political and institutional capacity of the government be worked upon, and there must be a synergy between the two.
- v. There must be a good understanding of 'political economy' among the SAc initiative leaders so that accountability interventions can be aligned with other governance developments
- vi. Communities' role be strengthened through overcoming the 'centralization' of power and authority
- vii. Services provided by the state should be benchmarked
- viii. Social Accountability mechanisms should be integrated within state's project and schemes at all three – planning and design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation, phases
- ix. Evidence base should be built through documentation of SAc experiences and their impact evaluations in Pakistan
- x. Besides building technical skills, donors' and implementers should also focus on building political skills of the targeted communities
- xi. The mechanism to engage with the communities and societies be diversified – i.e. the donors and implementers must come out of their comfort zones to work with non-traditional civil society groups such as trade unions, social movements including those of lawyers, and religious organizations
- xii. Social Accountability initiatives usually address entrenched values of a society, thus, they must be given greater time to work with a flexible support from the donors.

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#### AUTHORS

**First Author** – Fayyaz Yaseen is a development professional with four years of experience in non-profit sector. He earned his Master's degree in Economics and currently he is associated with Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) one of the premier think-tanks in Pakistan and South Asia. He can be reached at [fayyazsn25@gmail.com](mailto:fayyazsn25@gmail.com)