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## Restoring Integrity in Pakistan's Statistical System: Reforming the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics

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The government's review of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) presents a critical chance to rebuild trust in Pakistan's official data. While the finance minister has shown interest in addressing the agency's challenges, the Ministry of Planning, under whose jurisdiction the PBS currently operates, should take the lead in driving necessary reforms. This initiative is timely and vital for restoring professionalism and independence in the bureau responsible for vital economic and social statistics.

Concerns about the PBS's credibility have been mounting for years. During the recent budget debate, opposition leaders highlighted the politicization of the agency. However, the root of the problem lies in a 2019 decision by the previous government that placed the PBS under the Ministry of Planning. This move effectively stripped the bureau of its autonomy, which it had enjoyed under the Statistics Act of 2011. That Act established a framework where the PBS was led by a chief statistician and governed by a council chaired by the finance minister, protecting it from day-to-day political interference.

The 2019 administrative change blurred the line between producers and users of official statistics, subjecting the PBS to political pressures. The Ministry of Planning now serves as both financier and main consumer of PBS data, increasing the risk that statistics could be manipulated to support government policy narratives rather than reflecting economic realities. This loss of independence has eroded public confidence in figures ranging from GDP growth to agricultural production.

Reform must begin by reversing this structural change and restoring the full authority of the 2011 Statistics Act. The deeper challenge is overcoming the discomfort governments often feel toward independent statisticians who may publish inconvenient facts. Although the current Minister of Planning brings personal integrity to the role, legal and institutional safeguards remain essential. Without these, statisticians may face pressure to present data in a favorable light, undermining trust.

The chief statistician should be empowered to resist political influence, secure adequate funding, and coordinate statistical activities across all government bodies. Reporting directly to the president would help shield the bureau from ministerial interference. The PBS should also formally take over data coordination currently handled informally by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), particularly in line with the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Data Dissemination Standards.

Adopting the IMF's Special Data Dissemination Standards (SDDS) is crucial. These global benchmarks promote transparency, methodological rigor, and equal data access—principles essential for reliable statistics. Countries with similar economic challenges, such as Sri Lanka and Mauritius, have committed to these standards, which can also lead to financial benefits like lower borrowing costs. Pakistan must follow suit to signal that its statistics are credible and professionally managed.

While some have proposed using artificial intelligence (AI) to improve PBS data, technology cannot replace institutional integrity. Effective reform requires rebuilding the legal and organizational foundations first. Restoring PBS's independence and strengthening its legal framework will do far more to enhance trust than any high-tech fix.

In conclusion, the government's review of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics is a welcome first step, but true reform demands decisive action. Returning the PBS to autonomous status, reinforcing its legal protections, and aligning it with international standards will restore confidence in Pakistan's official statistics and support economic stability. This is not just a technical issue; it is a fundamental necessity for Pakistan's future growth and credibility.