

The Business

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FBR failure

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has admitted that the Federal Board of Revenue couldn't recover Rs 3,000 billion due to ongoing cases in courts where businesses have obtained stay orders. The issue of getting stay orders by businesses against tax liabilities and other areas (such as against the orders of Competition Commission of Pakistan) is not new. However, there are two sides to every coin. There are several incidents where FBR is probably exaggerating the claims or has made tax demand in excess of the legally due amount. That the procedure laid down by the FBR for taxpayers who wish to contest their demand of tax is extremely cumbersome and unfairly skewed in favour of the taxation machinery itself. Consider: the taxpayer is required to file an appeal before the appellate authority of the FBR itself, i.e., the Commissioner Appeals. These officers are employees of the tax department and shuffle between the execution/collection and appellate positions within the FBR. Their career path is within the FBR and they are usually hesitant to provide relief to the taxpayer unless there is something grossly wrong with the tax demand.

Therefore, this first stage or forum of redress is a mere procedural exercise as far as the taxpayer is concerned. The next stage is an appeal before the appellate tribunal and thereafter the high court. The predilection of the tax officers to seize bank accounts of taxpayers and recover the tax demand compels the taxpayer to move a high court with a view to insulating himself against taxmen's handedness. The career trajectory of FBR officials obviously depends on their performance, which is largely measured by the tax demand he or she has created as part of a certain tax collection target in order to ensure positive ACRs (Annual Confidential Reports) about themselves. Even the officers carrying out the task of 'Audit', too, face immense pressure as they are often 'required' to create additional demand over and above the demand created in assessment. The issue is of delays in courts is due to two broad reasons. First, the large number of cases due to unreasonable tax imposition. Second, this creates a huge backlog that the judiciary is unable to cope with because of the limited number of judges. The answer therefore lies in finding a pragmatic modus operandi that would obviate the need for the taxpayers to rush for seeking indulgence of the courts and for that to happen FBR would have to refrain from its high-handed tactics such as attaching a taxpayer's account. The element of undue stays would be there as well. There exists rampant tax evasion besides under-reporting of income or over-statement of expenditures. Taxpayers are known to have more bank accounts than those they have declared in their tax returns.

Season of political realignments

MALEEHA LODHI

What does the recent flurry of political activity signify? A new and more intense phase of political manoeuvring? Stepped up efforts by political parties to mobilise support to strengthen their position in the country's shifting politics, but with an eye on elections down the road? The opposition testing the waters for a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan? Posturing by smaller parties and groups to enhance their leverage in an uncertain political environment?



It seems to be all of the above. For his part, Prime Minister Khan appears under pressure. This is indicated by his statements and decision to launch a public campaign by addressing rallies across the country, kicking off the first one in Mandi Bahauddin. The PM's bitter attacks on the opposition suggest he is feeling vulnerable even though he emphatically denies any panic in his party. His anger however is palpable when he accuses opposition leaders of banding together to oust him by a no-confidence vote aimed at evading accountability. This was evidenced most recently at the Mandi Bahauddin awami jalsa. Meanwhile, cabinet ministers have scrambled to deny, rather defensively, that any no-confidence move could succeed.

The latest spasm of political activity has been triggered by PML-N leaders reaching out to PPP and others. In the meeting between PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari

they agreed to explore the possibility of a no-trust move against the government in the National Assembly. The PDM then announced it would work towards this goal. Sharif's call on Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain ostensibly to inquire about his health but also meet Pervaiz Elahi showed the opposition on an outreach course with long-time rivals. Engagement with government allies was not limited to PML-Q, which holds the balance of power in Punjab. Sharif also met MQM leaders. Contact is also reported with the powerful Jahangir Khan Tareen (JKT) group which has enough MNAs to play a decisive role in the evolving situation.

Efforts to explore whether politics can be realigned to support the opposition's aims are still in an initial, probing stage. Unless the opposition is sure about the required numbers it will obviously not proceed with its no-confidence move — an uphill task in any case. It has yet to determine the time frame for the move. It also has obstacles to overcome, including forging a unified approach among disparate parties with competing interests, agree on strategy and on what comes after, if the motion succeeds. It has to reckon with the country's history in which a vote of no-confidence has always failed. Failure, after all, will be a big blow to the opposition. What opposition parties are also testing is whether the establishment will be neutral because they see this as a make-or-break factor for success or failure. Opposition activity has nonetheless pushed politics into an unpredictable phase with the political

temperature rising by the day. By combining plans for a long march with the threat of a no-confidence motion the opposition wants to generate maximum pressure. Whether or not this move materialises, talk about it has raised the stakes and pushed both the government and opposition into campaign mode. The government's efforts are focused on keeping its ranks united and coalition partners on its side. It apparently plans to induct more ministers in the cabinet from allied parties. The opposition is trying to woo PTI allies, independent MNAs or those belonging to the JKT group.

With an eye on elections, whether held earlier or at their due time next year, the government and opposition are also seeking to rally public support beyond their constituencies. In this endeavour, both sides are burdened by tired rhetoric and need to recast their narrative to appeal more widely. The ruling party's narrative now sounds like a broken record. It continues to be defined by the 'all opponents are chors and corrupt' mantra and the promise to put them behind bars. That puts the entire accent on demonising the opposition rather than setting out what the government has done in its three years and its plans for the future. The prime minister's speech at Multan earlier this month at the launch of the health card illustrates this. Rather than make this initiative the dominant — and only — theme, he dwelt on assailing the opposition. This stance overlooks the fact that PTI's accountability narrative has run its course and people want to know how the ruling party will address the issues that agitate them especially economic worries. The PTI government claims it has taken many initiatives aimed to benefit the underprivileged. It

should be making these its principal plank. Instead, a bevy of PTI spokesmen constantly surface on TV to accuse opposition leaders of 'plunder'.

If the governing party needs to craft a fresh narrative so does the opposition. The leaders of a motley group of opposition parties keep defining their narrative by what they oppose rather than what they stand for or have to offer as policy alternatives. In mimicking the ruling party by punctuating their rhetoric with charges of corruption against the government, opposition leaders are hardly raising the public debate. Far better for them to engage ministers in policy debates and lay out solutions to national problems. How would they manage the economy, for example, in such a challenging environment?

The focus by both sides on simply attacking the other has contributed to a form of issue-less politics, where instead of the country's challenges being discussed, politics is reduced to deriding opponents. Both government and opposition have a responsibility to raise the level of discourse, and to articulate people's concerns and how they propose to address them. With multiple challenges facing the country — inflation, income erosion and unemployment being top public priorities — and new security threats emerging, solutions to these, among others, should be dominant in party platforms.

But if the narratives of both sides remain unchanged it will strengthen the public impression that politics is just a power struggle between them, disconnected from issues that affect them and the country's future. And that the politics of the no-confidence move only serves the opposition's interests and not the public's.

KHALID BHATTI

Revival of student unions

Sindh has become the first province in the country to restore student unions. The Sindh Assembly has unanimously passed the historic legislation to revive student unions in both state-run and private higher education institutions in the province. The Sindh government has taken a bold and important step towards restoring student unions; elections will be held in a few months. It is encouraging to see that the PPP has finally delivered on its promise to restore student unions.

The progressive bill is likely to strengthen democracy at the grassroots level and revive the culture of dialogue and tolerance in the country. It is hoped other provinces will also follow in the footsteps of Sindh and revive student unions. The Sindh Students Union Bill 2019 defines the student union as "a body or association of students of any educational institution by whatever name called for promoting the general interests of its members as students for academic, disciplinary, extra-curricular or other matters related to the affairs of the students in the educational institutions."

Students should be able to form the student union in their respective institution with

seven to 11 students through elections every year. The union will have representation in an institution's syndicate, senate, and anti-harassment committee. The bill clearly states the purpose of student unions in the following words, "the students' union shall work for maintaining social and academic welfare of the students; ensure the rights and interests of all students are suitably represented and protected; oppose and bring to light any discrimination or injustice that obstructs the social and academic life of students; and ensure democratic and inclusive atmosphere for healthy debate that respects others' opinions."

It also made it clear that no student can use or keep weapons on campus, adding that education institutions will decide the rules and regulations related to the union two months after the passing of the bill. After a long wait of 38 years, a democratic government has lifted the ban on student unions, which was imposed by a military dictator in 1984. This was not the first attempt to revive student unions. In 1989, the then PPP government led by the late Benazir Bhutto lifted the ban on

student unions. The Punjab government, led by then chief minister of Punjab Nawaz Sharif, held student union elections in the province.

In 1993, the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SBP) imposed a blanket ban on political activities on campuses. This order was used as an excuse to deny students their democratic right to elect their representatives on campuses, depriving them of an important forum to raise their voice and concerns on fees, education policies and academic issues. In the absence of student unions, the authorities established an authoritarian atmosphere on campuses and adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards dissent.

It is fair to assume that vice chancellors (VCs) of public-sector universities and owners of private universities will oppose the idea of student unions. It is likely that they will create hurdles in the implementation of this law. The Sindh government is also likely to face some legal challenges in the implementation of this bill in the courts.

It will be necessary for the Sindh government to show determination and consistency

to implement the bill in letter and spirit against all sorts of pressures and hurdles. There is no denying that student politics must get rid of violence and the gun culture that seeped into it since 1979. Political parties must discourage their student wings from using violent means to achieve political objectives. Previously, instead of rectifying problems with the functioning of elected unions, powerful quarters used violence as an excuse to continue this ban.

The ruling class, which sees the rise of student politics as a threat to their interests and 'elitist' politics, is afraid of student politics. Young leaders and activists bring new ideas, thoughts and energy to political parties. Political leaders and activists who were members of student unions know how to put pressure on different political parties to accommodate them. They challenge the old layers of leadership; this is what most leaders don't want. It is generally believed that politics is the domain of feudals, capitalists, former civil and military bureaucrats and influential rich families, and people from the middle and working classes should not in-

dulge in politics. We also have to accept the fact that there are conflicting views regarding student politics and unions. Some people consider student politics as the only way for young people from the middle, lower-middle and working classes to enter mainstream politics. Student politics provides an opportunity to young people without financial stability, family connections and patronage to emerge on the political front. It introduces them to different political ideologies and ideas, which increases their understanding of political, social and economic issues and their solutions.

They learn a culture of tolerance and democratic debate. But for some, student unions are a waste of time, energy and talent. Such people believe that student politics spoils students so they should just concentrate on their studies to get their degrees. They argue that student politics encourage violence and intolerance. But historical facts negate this assertion. In its essence, politics is not lies or deceit; it is not about flexing financial muscle or using dirty tactics to gain power. These traits belong to the power politics of the elite who use them to hide the failure of their policies and governance and the country's socio-economic system. Politics is a way for the oppressed, deprived and exploited classes to change their socio-economic conditions and

ZOHA WASEEM

Crime control

KARACHI'S senior police leadership was recently reshuffled following concerns about rising street crimes. The move comes in a bid to compel Sindh's security administration to control this pattern of offending.

Street crime is a broad category that refers to multiple crimes, such as house robberies, pickpocketing, drug trade, etc. It can extend both to public and private spaces. Some of these crimes are born out of opportunity, others out of necessity. Each crime type requires context-specific responses, though they may be analysed collectively. Citizens wonder why the 2013 Karachi operation failed to curb this form of criminality. This is because dismantling terrorist groups, militant wings, or armed gangs can temporarily reduce specific types of violent crimes (although recent attacks may call these successes into question). However, street crime is a different challenge linked to broader socioeconomic issues. Indeed, some street criminals have previously been connected to groups engaging in religious or political militancy, but the latter's decline is unlikely to disrupt the former. Policing, performed through public or private forces, is a limited response to street crime. At most, we can deploy more resources to certain areas, for hotspot policing, deterrence, or intelligence-collection. Such securitised responses may reduce crime in selected areas, but they cannot stop people from offending. Security deployment is a form of target hardening which is reactive, not preventive. It can also lead to punitive and populist penal policies.

Prevention requires targeting structural problems in a society, such as income inequality, unemployment, class-based discrimination, and a lack of political representation and empowerment of the working class. This is only possible when all stakeholders come together and have their needs heard and addressed, especially grassroots organisations fighting for the basic rights of the most marginalised — their right to housing, water, work, protest. Our sociopolitical structures and ruling elite do not have the appetite for this; they offer short-sighted, reductive and classist crime-control solutions, such as criminalising beggars and shunting them from affluent residential areas. This risks further marginalising entire communities most vulnerable to violent crime.

They also romanticise the zero-tolerance policing styles of the 1990s, as seen in New York City when crime rates were brought down. They forget to mention that this could not have been possible without other significant changes taking place in political, judicial and infrastructural spheres, and in healthcare, to improve urban life. We must also consider that where there are structural problems in a society (such as economic disparity), and there are institutional problems within the police (such as underpaid officers), you will have a natural collusion between police officers and criminals. Karachi is no exception. Street cops rely on maintaining relations with local criminals (which is not always prohibited by the higher

ups), because they cannot get their needs met by their menial salaries alone. If most officers are underpaid, they will strategically consider means of supplementing their income. Such collusion may also help recruit potential informants. In other words, where there are criminals, there will also be the police; expecting a neat divide in this relationship ignores the messiness of policing Pakistan's streets. While I hesitate to compare policing in developed and developing contexts, a relevant observation can be made from recent events surrounding the unceremonious ouster of London's police commissioner. Touted for following a 'policing by consent' model, the Met Police has suffered repeated allegations of institutional racism, sexism, corruption and a misogynistic police culture. While the commissioner's departure is celebrated, analysts caution that the chief's removal is unlikely to address deep-rooted structural problems in the police.

Similarly, leadership changes within Pakistani police forces are often cosmetic and superficial responses. These manoeuvres enable police administration to show that something is being done, while still leaving the force open to criticism and blame when crime escalates, and insecurity intensifies. The brunt of this blame is directed at lower-ranked officers whose complex existence is uncritically problematised as 'thana culture'.

In short, street crimes and similar offences cannot be addressed by security administrators alone. These are not 'crises' to be 'policed', but symptoms of deep-rooted grievances, both within and outside the institution of the police. To therefore frame this as a 'policing' problem or a security challenge, necessitating a so-called 'war on street crime', diverts