

Opinion

Sartaj Aziz: public service embodied

He was passionate about agriculture development, mitigation of rural-urban income inequality, absorption of new entrants to job market

By Ishrat Husain | January 06, 2024



Sartaj Aziz speaks during an interview in Islamabad. — AFP/File

Very few Pakistanis have made a name for their significant contributions on national and international fronts and are admired for their personal attributes. Sartaj Aziz was one of them – an active student leader during the freedom movement, a civil servant par excellence, an international mover and shaker, a politician of integrity and stature, and an academic of high calibre.

As finance minister, he was responsible for the economic reforms of 1991 which if they had been implemented consistently, zealously and uninterruptedly over time would have transformed Pakistan to the status of an upper-middle-income country by 2030. Pakistan would have retained its historical edge over India and Bangladesh and earned respect and prestige in the international community.

Mr Sartaj Aziz's emphasis on a strong well-functioning government playing the role of an enabler and facilitator and the private sector carrying out production, distribution, trade and exchange of goods and services along with active participation in international trade and attracting foreign direct investment would have led Pakistan's economy to greater heights.

He was passionate about agriculture development due to its linkages with poverty reduction, mitigation of rural-urban income inequality, contribution to domestic industrialization and services and absorption of new entrants to the job market. Not only did he play a leadership role in setting up the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) for developing countries by mobilizing the newly acquired resources of oil-exporting countries, but he was also instrumental in producing one of

the most thoughtful and practicable strategy papers on agriculture development for Pakistan.

Had we sincerely implemented the recommendations and action plan outlined in that report (which are still valid even today after four decades), our agriculture sector would not have faced the stagnation it has experienced in the last few decades. Our international trade balance on agriculture commodities and products would have been highly positive, contributing to the orderly evolution of the current account balance, obviating the need for excessive external borrowing and falling into a debt trap.

Very few people give Mr Sartaj Aziz credit for his successful stewardship of the National Water Policy of 2018 – a consensus document on a highly contentious issue in inter-provincial relations. His cool temperament, intimate knowledge of the subject, and non-intimidating power of persuasion led to the signing of the policy document by all the provincial chief ministers. He was trusted by the provinces and thus this remarkable feat was achieved.

It is another matter that this consensus was not translated into action and our water distribution inefficiencies, leakages, waste and misallocation result in losses of billions of dollars of foregone output of high-value-added commodities. We continue to remain dependent on four major crops including water-intensive sugarcane and are unprepared to meet the challenges of climate risks that are likely to produce floods, droughts, heatwaves etc.

Similarly, the country owes a great deal to Sartaj Sahib for his report on the merger and revitalization of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata), and on Gilgit-Baltistan. Many of the problems lingering from the post-merger era could have been managed reasonably well if the proposals put forward in the report were put into action. The level of dissatisfaction, heightened violence, and undesirable intrusion of outsiders would have been averted and the lives of the people inhabiting these areas and going through displacement, disturbance and disillusionment would have been much better.

Mr Sartaj Aziz's organizing abilities were recognized by his party, the PML-N, when he was elevated to the position of secretary-general. A non-family member with no political roots or backing of influential party leaders, he was brought in to fill the position on merit – a rare phenomenon in the political history of Pakistan. It is another story that his frank candour and honest appraisal of his government and leadership of certain policies cost him the coveted position of the president of Pakistan which he was promised. The dignity, grace and elegance he would have brought to that office would have been a matter of great pride for Pakistanis. Despite this, he never showed any resentment, remained loyal and steadfast to his party and did his best when he was asked to take over the foreign ministry.

On a personal note, I will always remain grateful to him for his advice, counselling and guidance to me over a long period of 50 years. I met him for the first time when he was at IDS Sussex researching the Chinese Communes – one of the pioneering studies carried out by an outsider. Since then, we remained in close contact, and he was kind enough to guide me on many occasions.

I had the pleasure of working with Sartaj Sahib directly for the first time when he held the portfolio of agriculture in General Zia's cabinet. He asked the World Bank to depute me to work with him as the chairman of the National Agriculture Commission. I learnt a lot from him during this brief stint about the political economy and power relations in the rural areas which subsequently culminated in my research study on the Elitist Economy of Pakistan.

My next encounter was in 1997 when he persuaded me to return to Pakistan and take up the position of deputy chairman of the Planning Commission; he arranged my interview with the then prime minister Mian Nawaz Sharif. In 2006-08, I was chairman of the National Commission for Government Reforms NCGR and Mr Sartaj Aziz was the only political leader of stature who read the draft report and gave extensive comments and suggestions.

Sartaj Sahib was spot on when he told me that a comprehensive package of reforms had very little chance of acceptance by politicians as well as civil servants. Our commission should have adopted an incremental approach, starting with quick wins. I heeded his advice when I presented the reforms sequentially to the cabinet of former prime minister Imran Khan.

When Sartaj Sahib became vice-chancellor of BNU Lahore while I took over IBA Karachi, we remained in constant touch as both of us came from non-academic backgrounds. I was deeply impressed by the significant build-up of the university during his tenure; today it is one of the more stellar institutions in the non-governmental sector.

For the younger generation of Pakistan, which is always yearning for role models, I would certainly recommend Sartaj Sahib as someone to emulate in letter and spirit. A man of the highest integrity, competence and knowledge, he always displayed a great deal of zeal and dedication to whatever assignment he was entrusted. Many of his colleagues found that he was not fit for politics. I would humbly disagree. We need more Sartaj Aziz to enrich our political landscape.

The writer is the author of 'Governing the ungovernable'.