

Failure to implement approved reforms frustrated Ishrat Hussain

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By Ansar Abbasi - July 31, 2021

ISLAMABAD: A frustrated Dr Ishrat Hussain is parting ways with the government because his significant work on reforms, despite having been approved by the cabinet, faces implementation challenges because of a lack of political will among those enjoying executive authority.

Although, he did not cite any such reason for his departure in what was shared with the media, informed sources say that the government's chief reformer was upset that although he had produced a comprehensive set of reforms after a detailed consultative process and got it approved from the cabinet, the implementation of the reforms remained elusive.

Sources say that Hussain had spoken to the prime minister a number of times to address the issue of the bureaucracy's politicization, particularly in Punjab, as it had seriously hurt performance and service delivery. However, the situation remained unchanged.

The politicization of the civil bureaucracy continues apace and in the case of Punjab has gone from bad to worse and reached such a level that officers are changed frequently without any respect to tenure. As against the normal tenure of three years, officers in Punjab are changed in weeks and months.

Hussain's task force had also introduced and got approved the restructuring and reform scheme of the top 10 loss-making state-owned enterprises such as PIA, the Railways, Pakistan Steel Mills and other key institutions such as the FBR, Auditor General, SECP and others. However, in most of the cases, the line ministries are dilly-dallying over the implementation of these reforms. Therefore, what the Hussain-led task force produced has remained restricted to government files only.

The reforms agenda was primarily meant to improve the performance of the civil bureaucracy and enhance the service delivery of the government. However, like many in the government, Hussain remained concerned about the role of NAB and its hounding and harassing of the civil bureaucracy. A number of times, sources said, Hussain took up the matter of NAB in cabinet meetings and sought the clipping of its unchecked powers that were being misused and used to hound the bureaucracy. Because of the element of fear, the civil servant simply stopped taking important decisions.

On Friday, Dr Ishrat Husain issued to mediapersons the following statement regarding his resignation: "Some of you have been phoning me and others sending me text and WhatsApp messages seeking my views on the news regarding my resignation. In view of our long-standing relationship and my respect for you, I thought I would share this note with you.

2. I wish to confirm that I have submitted my resignation as Adviser to the Prime Minister and requested him to relieve me of my responsibilities with effect from September 1, 2021.

3. The prime minister has been extremely kind to me, has reposed his trust and shown respect in his dealings with me. I took up this assignment because I believe in his mission and vision i.e improving the governance structure of this country with the aim of bringing about an efficient and equitable economy free from the clutches of elite capture and helping the poor get out of poverty trap.

4. During the last three years I was able to design and obtain the approval of the cabinet on the following set of reforms.

i. Reorganize the federal government and ease the burden on the exchequer by reducing the number of organizational entities from 441 to 307.

ii. Restructure and Reform top 10 loss-making state-owned enterprises such as PIA, Railways, Pakistan Steel Mills and key institutions of governance such as FBR, Auditor General, SECP.

iii. Public Finance Management Law under which the powers of the Ministry of Finance have been delegated to the line ministries and introduction of e-office suite in the federal ministries to improve efficiency and transparency.

iv. Civil Service Reforms such as performance agreements between the prime minister and the ministers and a new Performance Management System, systematic training of ex-cadre officers, induction of technical expertise in the federal ministries, specialized streams within the secretariat, reducing the hierarchical tiers, new promotion policy, directory retirement rules.

v. An open, transparent selection process for appointment of CEOs/MDs of public sector organizations based purely on merit. Sixty two such appointments have been made under this process and several overseas Pakistanis have been selected.

5. A Cabinet Committee on Institutional Reforms (CCIR) has been established to review and monitor the implementation of these reforms.

6. I had joined the government with the understanding that I would serve for three years and would seek retirement once I attain the age of 80. Having reached that age and completed three years, I have requested the prime minister to relieve me of my official responsibilities with effect from September 1, 2021. You must realize that I have rendered 57 years of continuous public service including 15 in the civil service, 21 in the World Bank, six in the State Bank, two as Chairman, NCGR, eight in the IBA and three in the present government. It is time for me to call it a day and to lead a less stressful life and spend more time with my grandchildren and pursue my other interests.

However, I am available in my non-official capacity to be of assistance in economic, social, cultural, social welfare activities in the public private academia/research and philanthropic sectors. My abiding commitment to serve the country, which has made me what I am today, remains unabated 7. I am writing this note to avoid any speculation or misinformation in this matter. Best regards Ishrat”