**Looking at the positive**

Sania Shah January 29, 2020

Recent reports about the federal cabinet’s decision to allow recruitment in government departments have given many hope of earning a decent livelihood; these millions have been dreaming for years to get employment in government entities. The decision could go some way in mitigating the hardships of people who have seen nothing but misery since this government took power – a phenomenal rise in unemployment, skyrocketing inflation and falling living standards.

It seems that the government has realised the hardships of people in recent months, prompting Prime Minister Imran Khan to visit shelter homes, creating an impression that his government cares about the people living in abject poverty. Some time back he also instructed the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governments to make adequate arrangements for people who do not have any shelter. Provincial administrations also tried to extend help to homeless people in a bid to improve the public image of the government. The Ehsaas Programme has also earned nuch praise. Many people seem to believe that the government is mindful of rising poverty and is trying its best to tackle this issue. But critics do not seem to be impressed. They claims such projects will create more dependence.

They are also sceptical about claims that these projects are the brainchild of the PTI. For instance, the free food idea is not new in Pakistani society. For years millions of people have been fed at shrines all over the country. The free meal project that the government has launched was initiated by a Karachi-based NGO that has been doing it for over a decade. Critics of the government claim that the PTI has only renamed it. The government is also under fire for inaugurating projects launched by the PML-N, projects that had in the past been criticised by Kaptaan by asserting that nations do not progress by making roads and building motorways.

It is not essential to criticise every action of the government. If it has come up with some new and positive things, they must be appreciated. It is true that most recruitment is not done on merit, but one should not lambast government for opening job opportunities. What the PTI must ensure is transparency in the process of recruitment. It is already being alleged that politicians are receiving money for offering jobs to their constituents. Such allegations have not been levelled by the PML-N or the PPP. In fact, it is the PTI's own law-makers and allies who are hurling these allegations. Therefore, it is important that Imran Khan's government should not only investigate these allegations but must also make sincere efforts to ensure the recruitment of people on merit. If government servants are appointed after greasing somebody's palms, the first thing they would do is recover that money. In that case it is the people who suffer.

Unemployment is a serious issue that is affecting millions here. Pakistan is already burdened with more than 60 million people living below the poverty line. This abject poverty is forcing thousands of people to commit suicide every year. One of the factors contributing to extreme poverty is the inability of the government to create jobs. The PTI came into power with the promise to create millions of jobs but instead of creating such sources of livelihood it rendered hundreds and thousands of people jobless by demolishing small restaurants, road-side eateries, wedding halls, hotels and small businesses. Owing to a decline in economic growth, more than one million people have already fallen below the poverty line and, according to Dr Hafeez Pasha, another close to a million people may also fall below this line before the end of this year. The cost of doing business is rising which means exports might fall and opportunities of employment in the private sector would shrink. This leaves only the government to offer jobs to millions of people.

One wonders why the government did not make this announcement soon after coming into power. When the PTI was voted into power, more than 70,000 vacancies were already lying vacant in various federal government departments. Such opportunities were also available in provincial governments. The PTI could not have announced recruitment in Sindh but it could have definitely done it in KP and Punjab where it has its own governments while a drive to provide employment could also have been launched in Balochistan in collaboration with allies.

Such a move would have created much public confidence in the federal government which could have boasted that it has at least partially fulfilled its promise of providing jobs. Several media reports claim that these posts were sanctioned and funds were available for them. It will be a great success of the government if it manages to fill over 100,000 vacancies lying vacant in various federal entities in the next three to six months. The government should also ask the KP and Punjab governments to do the same. Such actions will prompt the PPP-led Sindh government to also announce recruitment. This could benefit millions of people who may have a sigh of relief after more than 20 months of misery.

A fair ethnic representation in government departments should also be kept in view. Smaller communities, especially the Baloch, claim their jobs in federal departments are taken away by Punjab. Similarly the Sindhis claim they were not provided jobs in cities like Karachi during the time of Gen Musharraf and that the MQM stuffed local government departments with its own loyalists. Now, people of urban areas in Sindh make similar complaints against PPP-led Sindh government, asserting the government is only providing jobs to PPP workers. If PTI-led government manages to impose a strict system of merit with due consideration to provincial quota or representation in federal government's concerns, it will morally oblige the PPP to follow the suit. But if the PTI also ends up stuffing federal concerns with its own party workers, it cannot stop the PPP and other parties from doing the same.

It is heartening that unlike the PML-N that always bans recruitment, the PTI has at least lifted this ban, creating the hope that millions of people might benefit from government service. However, mere announcement will not impress people. It is the system of recruitment that will be the real test of the party. To ensure transparency, the Federal Public Service Commission, provincial public service commissions and other relevant bodies should also play an active role in the process. Though the apex court has been avoiding taking suo-motu notice, it should intervene if the concerned regulatory authorities have not performed their duties properly. The Supreme Court must entertain complaints pointing out recruitment done against the rules and principles of merit. If this initiative is successful, it will be the first good news during the tenure of Imran Khan. This action will also help the PTI escape the criticism it has been facing since coming into power.

The writer is a freelance journalist.

Email: samiashah0605@ gmail.com