

Quicker than the eye

VIEW



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It is not inconceivable that Pakistan should become an Asian Tiger in the IMF and World Bank books without a change in the circumstances of its lesser citizens — the poor and the worker. By the time there is a possibility of change in their circumstances, the Tigers turn jackals

Dr. Pali 26/07/04
FEDERAL FINANCE MINISTER Shaukat Aziz, who is also the prime minister-designate, says the country has come a long way in the last five years. The fact that we are not only no longer knocking at doors, a begging bowl in hand, but have also started paying back ahead of time our long term loans, is proof of this. Poverty has declined by 4.2 per cent. Per capita income has increased. The foreign exchange reserves have surpassed \$12.5 billion.

In one of his columns, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi had advised the radio meteorologist to move the blinds on the window behind his chair before going ahead with the forecast that the weather was likely to remain dry over the next 24 hours. It might be raining. This is exactly what the common man in Pakistan, the poor and the worker, is saying today. If everything has happened the way the finance minister says it has and is happening the way the finance minister says it is, should it not also show in the way the common man lives. The difference he has noticed most is that the wheat flour now costs Rs 14 a kilogram. Habib Jalib had once cried for the same flour:

*No one breaks the silence;
Even as atta sells twenty rupees a maund!*

Some people believe that the reason the federal finance minister has been designated prime minister is that he has shown the ability to pay long term foreign loans ahead of time. In the process, they say, the wheat flour price has risen to Rs 14 per kilo. But this is a belief shared only by the people who lack access to facts.

The fact could be that the changes in the economic skies take time descending to the ground. One can see from the earth many stars shining bright in the sky that have disappeared millions of years ago. We cannot, on the other hand, see innumerable stars that exist because light from those has yet to reach the earth. That is the reason the poet warned:

*The stars are not what they appear to be
Like practiced wizards they deceive the eye*

A fact supplied by the federal finance minister is that poverty has declined by 4.2 per cent. What we see however is 7.7 million citizens of Pakistan joining those living under the poverty line. The number and pace of suicide attempts to escape the torture of unemployment has increased. Intolerance resulting from a lack of opportunities has resulted in increasing violent crime. Crime against property, too, has increased. Crime statistics have advanced. The real reason has already been explained: the fruit of economic progress takes time reaching the people. It is not unconceivable therefore that Pakistan — like the pre-1997 Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan and Singapore that performed as Asian Tigers in the globalisation circus — should become an Asian Tiger in the IMF and World Bank books without a change in the circumstances of its lesser citizens — the poor and the worker. By the time there is a possibility of change in their circumstances, the conditions may change to the post-1997 scene with Tigers turning jackals.

We are also told one must sometimes drive in the reverse gear to allow building enough momentum to negotiate a steep ascent. The strategy has apparently been at work under Sartaj Aziz as well as Shaukat Aziz. It could go on for a little longer.

Another fact — and it is an undeniable fact — is that changes in the poverty fraction are directly related to political economy. Economic advance divorced from social advance often proves a retreat. While the economy is making great progresses in official books and ministerial statements poverty keeps increasing. The rich keep exceeding what they had once perceived as limits while the poor sink below the poverty line. The fact is established by the United Nations report according to which Pakistan's human development ranking based on social indicators has come down from 136th in 1998 to 149th in 2004.

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