

Positions tumble as cabinet sees major shake-up

ISLAMABAD: In a major development, Prime Minister Imran Khan Thursday reshuffled his federal cabinet, changing portfolios of some key members and bringing in technocrats, as his top aide Asad Umar resigned as finance minister earlier in the day.

Some ministers have been re-allocated portfolios while two others have been given no ministerial assignments hitherto following their removal as cabinet members. Neither anyone from the prime minister's otherwise strong media team nor the ruling PTI was prepared to talk on this major cabinet shake-up.

However, it was learnt from government circles that the wide-ranging cabinet reshuffle and laying off of some ministers was not final and certain other members of prime minister's team may also be facing the axe in coming weeks if not days. Some more technocrats can also make their way to the cabinet within the next few days.

Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh has been appointed as adviser to prime minister on finance, following the sudden departure of Asad Umar. The government's ace spokesman, Fawad Chaudhry, who earlier held the portfolio of information and broadcasting, has been given the slot of minister of science and technology, while Dr Firdous Ashiq Awan got the job in his place as special assistant to PM, a statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office said.

Needless to say, with Firdous Ashiq Awan made special assistant on information, the prime minister will also be taking care of the ministry in the absence of a federal minister. The re-allocation of Fawad came as a surprise for many; others say that his tiffs with the PTI veteran and Special Assistant to PM on Political Affairs Naeemul Haq and issues with the state-run TV could be the partial reason of his removal as information minister.

Similarly, Brig (R) and former IB chief Ijaz Ahmed Shah has been appointed interior minister, whereas Sheharyar Afridi, who was earlier the minister of state for interior, will now serve as minister of state for states and frontier regions. Ghulam Sarwar Khan has been removed as minister for petroleum and made aviation minister. Minister for Privatisation Muhammadmian Soomro will now cease to hold additional portfolio of aviation division.

Senator Azam Swati has been appointed minister for parliamentary affairs in place of Ijaz Shah. The statement further read that Dr Zafarullah Mirza and Nadeem Babar have been appointed special assistants to the prime minister for national health services and petroleum division, respectively.

Likewise, Amir Mehmood Kayani has been removed as minister for health and Ali Amin Gandapur is also no more minister for Kashmir affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan. Kayani, who was elected MNA from NA-61, Rawalpindi, has been laid off, mainly because of the seething drug price crisis, as medicine prices witnessed from 50 to over 200 percent rise in recent weeks. The government was finding it hard to defend the increases and looked helpless to immediately bring down prices of

medicines. There were media reports that the federal cabinet had approved the summary of drug price increases without holding discussion on it.

Gandapur has been shown the door, apparently for not being able to project Kashmir issue, particularly in the wake of Pulwama attack. Naeemul Haq, Yousaf Baig Mirza and Iftikhar Durrani are part of the PM's media team, but they did not talk on the exact reasons, leading to the ministerial shake-up and sending two of them home. There was total silence in the camp of ruling PTI as well: neither Secretary General Arshad Dad nor Information secretary Omar Sarfaraz Cheema nor Chief Organiser Saifullah Niazi were available to give their comments on the developments; text messages sent on their mobile phones also remained un-answered.

Earlier, Asad Umar resigned as finance minister and stated that tough decisions would have to be taken to overcome lingering difficulties on economic front.

The powerful circles within and outside the ruling party were not happy with the outgoing finance minister so when Prime Minister Imran Khan told him about changing his portfolio, Asad Umar took it as no confidence on his capabilities and instantly replied to the premier that he would not become part of the cabinet on any other position. The powerful were annoyed and one reason was his stern opposition and blocking subsidy for sugar. However, his close aides were arguing that "indecisiveness" also played role for showing him door at this stage.

Former finance minister Dr Hafiz A Pasha told The News that the timing of his resignation was not good omen for the economy when the IMF programme was on final stages and the government was supposed to announce very crucial budget next month. He criticised this abrupt decision and said that he should have taken decision on it after conclusion of IMF programme and announcement of next budget 2019-20.

However, Asad Umar said when the PTI took over the power after winning last general elections the economy was in worst ever shape and there were two choices either to "crush the masses" by accepting IMF demands or taking time to convince the Fund to get programme on much better conditions. He said he was not ready to crush 210 million people so he waited to get better conditions from the IMF.

"I did not have any prior knowledge about conspiracies as I was told last night that the prime minister desired to reshuffle the cabinet, but he took the decision to step down instead of accepting changed ministerial portfolio," he said, while addressing a news conference here at the FBR headquarters.

He warned that if tough decisions were delayed then the country's economy might plunge into crisis again. "The prime minister desired me to get the Ministry of Energy, but I preferred to step down. I fully believe on vision of the PM of making Naya Pakistan. It was exactly after seven years after joining the party on April 18, 2019 when he took decision to resign.

When he was asked whether he would recommend a politician or technocrat on the portfolio of finance minister, Asad Umar replied that there were pros and cons related to this choice, but he thought that this position should be given to a person who is close to the people of Pakistan.

Asad Umar made all out efforts to bring usual smile on his face but his body language and face was showing something contrary to his apparent smile. He recalled that it was April 18, 2012 when he joined the PTI when he met with Imran Khan at his sister's house in Lahore. He said he had told

Imran Khan that he would join him only for sake of Pakistan and would do whatever was good for the country. He thanked the PTI youth and volunteers of social media and said that he would continue supporting the PTI and PM Imran Khan with the hope that he would make new Pakistan under his leadership.

He said that when he took over as finance minister after winning last general elections, the economy was already lying into danger zone.

“As part of a cabinet reshuffle PM desired that I take the energy minister portfolio instead of finance. However, I have obtained his consent to not take any cabinet position. I strongly believe @ImranKhanPTI is the best hope for Pakistan and inshallah will make a naya Pakistan,” Asad Umar stated in his tweet on Thursday before holding press conference.

He said that he was not interested in power politics so he continued to work for 14 hours and whenever journalists asked about reshuffle in the cabinet and leaking of such news from cabinet colleagues, he had replied that he did not know anything about it.

He said that without tackling three deficits including budget deficit, current account and investment-savings gaps the economy could not be put on right path. He said that his decision of resignation had nothing to do with amnesty scheme.

Meanwhile, Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa had an important meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan at the Prime Minister Office (PMO).

It has been officially stated that they discussed security issues. The meeting is being viewed as significant in the backdrop of the events of the day and recent past. The sources indicated that terror activities in Balochistan also figured in the meeting where network of the foreign terrorists has been active since long and it has stepped up its nefarious activities yet again. The networks have the backing and support of Indian terror sponsoring spy outfit RAW and the security agencies had nabbed its established ringleader who was serving officer of Indian armed forces.

In a tweet, a renowned anchor of a TV channel has claimed that Dr Hafeez Shaikh has been finalised for the portfolio of finance vice Asad Umar after the meeting between Army Chief and the prime minister. General Bajwa had meeting with the prime minister third time in a month.

Mehtab Haider & Mumtaz Alvi & Saleh Zaafir