

Finance bill comes under sharp criticism in Senate

The Upper House of the Parliament on Monday once again saw strong criticism from opposition on the proposed federal budget while some members of the treasury benches demanded the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government reverse proposed heavy taxes on the salaried class and other sectors in the Finance Bill 2019. But to the relief of the treasury benches, the Senate session presided over by Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani did not witness any major clash between the government and opposition sides even though the opposition senators described the draft Finance Bill 2019 as "a document of dictation from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)".

Senator Chaudhary Tanvir Khan from Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) strongly condemned the imposition of taxes on salaried class in the draft Finance Bill 2019. He said the price of petrol, when Nawaz Sharif became Prime Minister in July 2013, was Rs 103 per litre which was Rs 88 per litre when PML-N government completed its five-year term whereas the price of petrol in PTI government is Rs 113 per litre. "Likewise, diesel was at the rate of Rs 108 per litre when we came into power and Rs 88 per litre at the end of our term, which is now Rs 127.56. Where are 5,000,000 homes this government was to construct? Ten months have passed and we have not seen even a single constructed house."

Tanvir also criticised 18.8 per cent increase in the non-development budget of Prime Minister's Office while demanding an increase in the defence budget to meet external and internal challenges.

Independent Senator Asad Ali Khan Junejo, too, criticised the government for rising inflation. "When foreign experts would prepare budget on the directions of IMF in disregard to the ground realities while ignoring the problems of Pakistani public, the result would be this kind of budget the federal government has presented recently," he added.

Junejo said the PTI government lacked a team of experts who could prepare a budget keeping in view the prevailing circumstances and challenges in order to facilitate people. "Had people like Hammad Azhar (Minister of State for Revenue) been involved in budget making, the results would have been different and there would be a balance (in the budget) between the current challenges being faced and the wishes of the people of Pakistan because Hammad Azhar belongs to this soil and he knows that he has to live here unlike those (foreign) experts who have nothing to do with Pakistan."

He condemned cuts in health, education and defence budgets and demanded that these measures be reversed in the new federal budget.

Senator Sikandar Mandhro from Pakistan People's Party (PPP) referred to John Perkins' book "Confessions of an Economic Hit Man" to say that Pakistan has fallen prey to "economic hit man," which he said, is the IMF. "After three years, the PTI government would realise that it was not a bailout but a "sale out" package that the IMF offered to it."

He added, "The government has time till June 30 midnight to reverse the coercive measures in the budget."

Senator Atteeq Sheikh from Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) said the causes of inflation need to be determined and proposals to reduce inflation need to be incorporated in the new federal budget. He said "a flood of inflation" would hit the people of Pakistan in the days to come due to increase in transport fares, urging Leader of the House in Senate Shibli Faraz and federal ministers to use their offices to tackle this situation to provide maximum relief to public.

"Factories have been closed in Faisalabad, a city that is Pakistan's industrial lifeline. Industry needs to be revived by offering proper incentives to stakeholders. Taxes and documented economy are important but equally important are the measures aimed at public facilitation," he said.

Senator Mushtaq Ahmed from Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) said, "This budget is of the IMF, by the IMF and for the IMF."

The senator said the PTI government admitted in its Economic Survey for fiscal year 2018-19 that basic economic targets during its 10 months into power were not met. According to the Economic Survey, the government's target was to achieve 4.9 per cent industrial growth in fiscal year 2018-19 but it ended up achieving only 1.4 per cent whereas the government aimed to keep inflation at not more than 6 per cent but it exceeded 9 per cent in the outgoing fiscal year, Mushtaq said.

"Rupee rate per dollar is touching Rs 160, petrol is Rs 113 per litre and this government claims that it belongs to the people of Pakistan. Not a single step has been taken in this budget to facilitate people," he said, adding that Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) lacks the capability, expertise and will to achieve the target of Rs 5,550 billion as envisaged in the draft Finance Bill 2019.

The senator said that the proposal to introduce amnesty scheme, which, according to him, would serve as a "lifeline for looters and plunders," be abolished from the proposed federal budget. The Senate will meet again today (Tuesday) at 4:30pm.

SARDAR SIKANDER SHAHEEN