

Increase in retirement age

Of the promises that Imran Khan made on election trail, two had immense vote-catching potential. If elected he would build five million housing units and provide 10 million jobs, he promised. Of human cravings the most pressing is to have a roof over the head, and that is the case not only in Pakistan but the world over as the housing sector tends to attract more investment than any other sector. But, both the commitments were too ambitious as time seems to be showing. In fact, the opposite of what he promised has begun happening. Fiercely launched anti-encroachment drive throughout the country has blown away the roofs over the heads of thousands and the accelerating industrial slowdown rendered many more jobless. Juxtaposed against this disturbing backdrop it is difficult to believe that Prime Minister Imran Khan wants the concerned departments to look into the possibility of extending the government servants' retirement age by three years. But he has done it; early last week he asked the federal finance department to give its assessment of 'repercussions of extending the age of retirement of government servants'. Not only did he want compliance of his order in as short time as two days, he also overlooked the appropriate quarters, including the Establishment Division and the Dr Ishrat Husain-headed civil service reforms committee. Since the said task was assigned to the federal finance department, the extension move seems to be more a budgetary compulsion than the concept that professional maturity comes with age. The purported justification for the move is that pensioning off the civil servants at 60 followed by new inductions is more costly than retaining the incumbents by extending their retirement age. One such place where the prime minister's expectation took no time to get realised is the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where the cabinet instantly approved the move, without giving it a second thought that three years on not only the payable pension would be a bigger burden but by blocking the due promotions and shutting door on new entrants it would have starved the provincial administration of fresh human resource equipped with the latest technology. However wisely enough, the government of Punjab has conveyed to the federal government that the issue being too critical, both administratively and politically, it would take some time to give its assessment. The federal finance ministry too was unable to decide in the short time stipulated and the matter landed with the task force on institutional reforms. The task force has decided to defer its consideration till introduction of fundamental reforms in the Civil Services.

Accepted, pensions are a huge financial burden. And it is also evident that the new minders of the national economy are for quick results of their 'competent handling'. But, as they say, hurry spoils the curry. Extending retirement age by three years means many things - it means a one-time respite of three years in the increase in pension load; a disheartened bureaucracy in the meantime because of blocked promotions; and 'what would the qualified young people do in the meantime if not given jobs for three years'. Then there is the question how to go about it. Will it be applicable to the armed forces also? If not and then why not, because the military pensions are no less heavy. Rightly then, not only has the chief secretary of KP questioned the validity of initiation of the move, the PCS Officers Association has also expressed reservations about the government decision. There is also the question as to why the Federal Finance Department raised the issue which clearly falls in the domain of Establishment Division. This is a complicated issue deserving serious consideration, for which the proper forum is the civil service reforms committee.

Editorial