

Editorial

NAB's shame

THE chairman of the National Accountability Bureau, retired Justice Javed Iqbal, has moved with unseemly speed after it emerged that top industry leaders had complained to the army chief about the bureau's high-handedness.

Within days, he took to the airwaves to announce that NAB would not be taking up certain cases involving businesses, particularly if they were linked to tax evasion or loan default, and that he would let the bodies responsible for dealing with these issues proceed on the matter instead.

Read: NAB won't probe tax evasion, bank default cases

Mr Iqbal also expressed alarm upon learning that industry leaders had complained about his bureau to the army chief; he sought to create an impression that only one individual did so. However, reports from those who were at the meeting are clear that almost all those who attended strongly criticised NAB for operating far beyond its mandate, and certainly its capabilities.

The chairman's response betrays a certain panic.

This is not for the first time that the accountability bureau has been publicly assailed for its lack of capacity and overweening ambition to be the arbiter in all matters, including those that it has no business with.

But now that the army chief has been brought into the picture, the NAB chairman has moved suddenly and offered certain carve-outs in his field of operation, saying those under him would not deal with those cases.

Recently, two separate regulatory bodies — Nepra and the SECP — openly said that their operations were being adversely impacted by NAB whose officials are often accused of having a very limited understanding of the complex nature of the deals they want to investigate. Mr Iqbal seems to have been impervious to this observation that is indicative of his bureau's overreach.

The NAB chairman's announcement that the bureau would refrain from pursuing cases involving businessmen has cast doubt on his own mandate. He is supposed to, and has repeatedly said that he does, operate only as per the law. So, how does the law allow him to revise his responsibilities — which is effectively what he intends to do?

In the aftermath of his remarks, all other actions taken by the bureau will look even more like a witch-hunt, because the only people left to go after now — which NAB has already been doing quite assiduously — are bureaucrats and the opposition politicians, while the chairman appears to be calling the shots himself.

With so many of NAB's actions — including arrests on charges that have yet to be substantiated — already controversial, it would have been much better had Mr Iqbal decided to work towards establishing NAB's credentials as an independent and fair accountability body that is capable of investigating suspected corruption across the board in a professional manner.

Instead, NAB's reputation stands thoroughly compromised, and its claims of conducting a robust accountability drive sound hollow.