


PM reaches across divide for advice on economy

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ISLAMABAD: As the government grapples with the question of raising additional revenue amid a sharply slowing economy, it has turned to a former PML-N senator, Haroon Akhtar Khan, for assistance in meeting what increasingly appears to be an impossible revenue target.

Word of a briefing to the prime minister by Mr Khan trickled out on the same day that news broke of departure of Shabbar Zaidi from the position of chairman of the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR).

Well-placed sources in the PM office told Dawn that Mr Khan — a younger brother of Humayun Akhtar Khan, who contested on a PTI seat from Lahore — was invited to give his thoughts on matters ranging from rising prices to slowing GDP growth.

The briefing was attended among others by Adviser to the PM on Finance Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, Adviser on Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood and Planning Minister Asad Umar. Mr Khan reportedly pointed towards policy failures as the contributory factor in the rising food inflation in the country.

When contacted for his comment on the briefing, Mr Shaikh downplayed the importance of the meeting. “A lot of meetings like this take place,” he said.

| Search begins for a new FBR chief as Shabbar Zaidi confirms intention to leave office

“He [Mr Khan] had some good ideas on the economy and is a seasoned hand on revenue matters,” he said but categorically denied talk of any changes in the portfolios. He neither confirmed nor denied that Mr Khan had been offered the portfolio of revenue adviser, which Mr Shaikh currently holds himself.

According to sources, Prime Minister Imran Khan also had a one-to-one meeting with Mr Khan. It was during this meeting that he was reportedly offered the position of revenue minister, or adviser. The sources say Mr Khan has asked for a few days to take a decision.

Mr Khan served as a revenue minister in the Nawaz Sharif government. One sticking point in the matter is whether he will remain independent and report to the prime minister or work under Mr Shaikh.

Some history haunts the decision. Soon after the appointment of Mr Shaikh as the PM’s adviser on finance, revenue and economic affairs, the government tried to allocate the portfolio of revenue to Hammad Azhar, who was supposed to become the federal revenue minister after the budget speech. That decision saw a quick reversal as the portfolio was taken back from Mr Azhar and returned to Mr Shaikh within days.

Similar tensions existed between FBR chairman Shabbar Zaidi and Mr Shaikh as the former began reporting directly to the prime minister on revenue matters. Mr Shaikh was never invited to the FBR officially, only making one visit on the first day of the new year when he was widely reported to have conveyed his dissatisfaction on the performance of the revenue board.

Meanwhile, sources in the Prime Minister’s Secretariat have confirmed that a search for a replacement for Mr Zaidi has begun.

Mr Zaidi himself has confirmed that he has asked the prime minister to begin this search, but he has yet to submit his resignation. In the event Mr Khan accepts the offer that has reportedly been made to him, he will suggest someone to fill the post.

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