

Attempts to roll back 18th Amendment will harm country: Rabbani

KARACHI: Senator Raza Rabbani has said any move aimed at withdrawing the provincial autonomy as guaranteed in the 18th Amendment to the Constitution will cause very serious consequences on the federation.

“The Constitution is an organic document and 18th Amendment is not the last word itself. If you have the numbers in parliament and you think it needs to be improved further, you must do it, but anything about its rollback or withdrawing autonomy given to the provinces through it, such a move will cause very, very serious consequences for the country,” said the former Senate chairman.

He was the key speaker at a programme — 18th Amendment: applause and criticism — held here on Saturday.

He said the geo-political environment and internal fissures were so grave that “we are not in a position to take such decisions”.

Says the historic legislation has ended the decades-old Punjab bashing

He said a new clause (3A) in the Constitution was inserted while getting the 18th Amendment passed, which ensured that a new National Finance Commission (NFC) award could not be lesser than the one it preceded.

“This was done with a deliberate intent,” he said, adding that the provinces’ share in the NFC award was 56 per cent in the past, which was drastically reduced to 46pc during retired General Pervez Musharraf’s regime.

“You may go through the history of the NFC... you would find it was awarded only during the democratic governments with delays and interruptions,” he said.

He said today the problem remained same. The federation and other state institutions felt that their pie was getting reduced, which was why they were making delays in announcing the new NFC award.

“Now, they call for circumventing it [provincial share] by whatever reasons. They have begun it by asking the provinces to surrender three per cent of their share for Fata which has recently been merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.”

He said he had no qualms against such a decision had it been referred to the Council of Common Interest for a decision. A more appropriate forum was the NFC Commission which represented all federating units and the Centre, he added.

He said India always announced a similar award much before the expiry of their existing ones.

Mr Rabbani said that a complete devolution of education and health sectors to provinces had brought huge pressures from various quarters.

Regarding curricula, he said from grade nine and upwards the question of East Pakistan’s separation was dealt with in a single paragraph.

“There is a chapter in a textbook in which a chapter spells out advantages and disadvantages of dictatorship and democracy. It gives 11 advantages of dictatorship and eight for democratic

order. These books glorify jihad and wars we had fought against India. All this reflects a certain mindset.

“In Punjab, they want to teach Bhagat Singh who fought against the British imperialism. We have been cut away from our history and culture,” he said.

Sen Rabbani said the 18th Amendment had enhanced provincial harmony and ended the decades-old Punjab bashing. He said the provincial autonomy given in the Constitution was useful in most respects as it subdued the sense of deprivation among smaller provinces.

“Had we not given the provincial autonomy through the 18th Amendment, then those who were sitting atop mountains would have told Baloch lawmakers who sat with us that ‘look you have got nothing’.”

He rubbished the claims made from certain quarters that the 18th Amendment was passed in haste and without proper preparedness, saying the committee for the amendment comprised of 27 members representing every political party in parliament. It met for nine months and went by the Constitution “para by para and article by article”, he added.

He said the committee received 988 proposals from various quarters and went through each one. Every party gave its suggestions, which were duly looked into. And finally, the historic dossier was unanimously passed, he said.

“Someone said this amendment was gravely against Pakistan; while another said 18th Amendment is much dangerous than Mujib’s six points. And there are people too who still feel it is too little and too late.”

He said Pakistan’s civil-military bureaucracy had decided after the death of the Quaid-i-Azam that lever of power should not go away from their grip. He conceded politicians collaborated with them while the judiciary was also part of the same sequence.

Sen Rabbani said 18th Amendment was a fruit of a long struggle that spawned from the smaller provinces’ sense of deprivation. He said even the foundation of Pakistan started with the demand for provincial autonomy and four out of Quaid’s 14 points catered to the provincial autonomy.

He said civilians were not the only corrupt and there should be across-the-board accountability and everyone should face one law and one court.

He said he had already proposed for a federal accountability commission, in which representation to politicians, civil-military bureaucracy and judiciary was given.

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