



Amnesty deadline

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WITH the deadline to avail the amnesty scheme only days away, pressure is mounting on the government to grant an extension keeping in mind the many complications that have marked the scheme's progress. One thing that the calls for this extension clearly show is that there is broad and active interest in benefiting from it, since those with tax-evaded wealth abroad are now facing the prospect of automatic sharing of data set to begin on Sept 1. Those asking for an extension point to the fact that the scheme was announced very late in the government's term, so its implementation was left to an interim administration. After that, it was marred by delays in converting the ordinance into an act of parliament, followed by the wait for the Supreme Court's nod. Then there was the month of fasting during which the pace of work slowed down, and the Eid holidays also took up valuable time. Thus far the government has been resisting the pressure and insisting that there will be no extension. Their argument is that being an interim government they lack the mandate to take such a decision.

The government's desire to exercise a limited mandate is laudable. Granting an extension will require a new presidential ordinance since the date is written into the law. Though such an ordinance can be issued overnight, a debate is required on whether this action under an interim setup would constitute a policy shift or just an administrative modification. Demanding extensions is an ingrained part of our culture and must be phased out. Even now, there is ample time for people to come forward and begin the process. The scheme thus far has managed to elicit substantial interest, and announcing a decision to extend the deadline at this point risks breaking much of the momentum driving it. There is also an argument to be made that the recoveries made under the scheme should be booked in the current fiscal year, which ends on June 30, and extending the deadline throws off the fiscal numbers for this year. But having acknowledged all this, it is still important for the government to not paint itself into a corner. Closer to the deadline, if the scheme appears to be productive, and more interest remains, the option to announce an extension should be retained for the sake of pragmatism. Until then, people should operate on the assumption that the deadline stands.

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