

OPPORTUNITIES, NOT "RELIEF"!



Durre Nayab

"Government needs to provide 'relief' to the people" — it is a refrain that we hear so very often on Pakistan's media, from the opposition and public in general. Taking a break from this notion, that almost equates government with a body expected to provide 'relief', Dr Nadeem Ul Haque promotes the idea that a good government is one that creates opportunities for its people to prosper, and not just one that provides relief. Dr Haque pushes the idea that opportunities, and not relief or taxation should be the cornerstone of policy, underscoring the importance of reducing regulatory burdens, simplifying taxation, and fostering an environment conducive to growth and prosperity.

Pakistan's government has long operated in a state of crisis mode. Economic policy is often driven by immediate needs—fiscal deficits, debt rollovers, and bailout packages from international financial institutions—rather than strategic, long-term planning. Dr Haque criticises this approach, noting that Pakistan is "always in critical times," with no real contemplation of the past or the future. This lack of foresight has led to repeated cycles of debt accumulation, with little regard for how these debts will be serviced or what long-term benefits the borrowed funds could generate¹. This approach, he frequently argues, has led to stifling opportunities for growth, including that of the country and its citizens.

The government often presents 'relief' as a generous act, one that is to make lives easy for the people. In reality, many of these hardships are the consequence of government policies. Over regulation, size of the government and bureaucracy², and unnecessary controls lead to an environment of low growth and investment, and resultantly scarce opportunities for the people. As Dr Haque in his recent column in Dawn state, "The government's obsession with relief measures is about maintaining a narrative of control, not solving problems"³

Opportunity creation is essential for sustained economic progress, as evidenced by the experiences of both developed and developing nations. Dr. Haque stresses the importance of opportunity-driven policies and argues that growth cannot occur in environments stifled by overregulation and excessive taxation. The most successful economies are those that have created conditions where businesses can thrive with minimal interference from the government.

In Pakistan, fostering opportunities for businesses is key to unlocking the country's economic potential. Dr. Haque has long argued that the government's role should be to create a conducive environment for economic activity by simplifying the tax system and reducing bureaucratic hurdles.

I had the privilege of co-authoring the paper presented as the Presidential Address of the 35th AGM and Conference of the Pakistan Society of Development Economists (PSDE), titled "Opportunity to Excel: Now and the Future"⁴. The paper talked about availability of opportunities to people, both economic and other, to pick from in order to have a productive and satisfying life. With its 60 percent population aged under 30 years, presence of opportunities become even more imperative. In an age of AI, robotics, 3D technology, automation, biotechnology and human augmentation, life is changing at an unprecedented pace. Do Pakistanis, especially the youth, have the opportunities to keep up with the rest of the world and excel in the future?

Dr. Haque gives a call for policy reform. His writings stress that Pakistan's future economic prosperity hinges on a critical shift in policy. The government must prioritise economic opportunity over taxation and regulation. By simplifying the tax code, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, and fostering an environment where businesses can grow, Pakistan can create opportunities for its people and achieve inclusive economic growth. He calls for a growth-driven policy framework, one that empowers businesses to create wealth and opportunities. By focusing on opportunity rather than taxation, Pakistan can unlock its full economic potential and achieve the kind of progress that has long been elusive under its current policy paradigm.

Countries, and its people, do not progress on the basis of 'relief'. It is the creation and availability of opportunities that make growth, a sustainable one, possible. To reverse the current trend being experienced by Pakistan, Dr. Haque premises that the country must adopt a policy framework that prioritizes opportunity creation, simplifies taxation, and reduces the regulatory burden on businesses. In doing so, the country can finally break the cycle of crisis management and move toward a more prosperous, sustainable future.

