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Center for Research & Security Studies

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Pakistan's Begging-Bowl Expeditions & Welcoming Ship-size Cabinet

Just look at Islamabad's priorities: Rs 60 million per minister per year; Rs 144 per Pakistani per year for health; and Rs 145 per Pakistani per year for education.

For the past few months, Pakistan has been on an extended begging expedition. Travelling 11,089 km to New York to beg. Travelling 2,749 km to Riyadh to beg. And, travelling 2,091 km to Abu Dhabi to beg.

While all this begging is going on, 40 new cabinet members have taken oath. The government already spends Rs 600 billion a

year more than its income and now, we have 40 new ministers. The government already incurs a loss of Rs 2 billion a day — every day of the year — but the strength of our federal cabinet now stands at 55. Don't forget that we also have a dozen ambassadors-at-large, advisers and others with the status of a minister.

How much does a minister cost? Well, there's the salary and then there are allowances, financial benefits, rights, privileges and concessions. There are 'Equipment Allowances', travelling expenses for the minister and his family, cost of transporting personal servants, cost of transporting house-hold effects, sumptuary allowances, a furnished residence, travelling allowances for touring in Pakistan, Business Class air fare for minister and his wife, travelling allowances for tours abroad, First Class air fare, unlimited medical allowances and reimbursements, police escorts, fuel expenses, security, personal staff, office staff, utilities, entertainment allowances, entitlements of staff and telephone allowances.

Amazingly, the Auditor General of Pakistan got hold of a medical bill submitted by a JUI-F male MNA that sought reimbursement for a pregnancy test. A federal minister for health, for instance, was found using a Toyota Land Cruiser from the National Institute of Health, a five-door Prado from the Expanded Program for Immunization, a double cabin 4X4 from the Global Alliance for Vaccine & Immunization and a Suzuki car from the PIMS (July 2005 to June 2007).

To be certain, only some of the above allowances, privileges and concessions are regulated under 'The Members of Parliament (Salaries and Allowances) (Amendment) Act, 2005 (Act No V of 2005)'. To be sure, most of what is spent by a minister, his family and his relatives is extracted out of a whole host of projects that are under the administrative control of the respective minister's ministry (that's where Prados, double cabins and Land Cruisers come from).

Based on the current strength of the federal cabinet, all the ambassadors-at-large, advisers and others with the status of a minister, their accumulated spending in the following 12 months will not be less than Rs 5 billion; Rs 5 billion that we must beg and then spend. That translates into an average of Rs 60 million per minister per year.

The poorest of all countries, the richest of all ministers.

Just look at Islamabad's priorities: Rs 60 million per minister per year; Rs 144 per Pakistani per year for health; and Rs 145 per Pakistani per year for education. What's the solution? Monetize all allowances, financial benefits, rights, privileges and concessions.

Intriguingly, this was only the second cabinet expansion. There are certainly going to be more. Remember, all these ministers and individuals with the rank of a minister are for the Islamabad Capital Territory, which is 1,165 square km and of which the Islamabad city covers an area of 906 square km (or 350 square miles). In Lahore, the government of Punjab runs 80 departments and 29 autonomous bodies. The government of the NWFP has 53 ministers and the government of Sindh has 41. The last time we checked, Balochistan, the poorest of all our provinces, had 41 ministers.