

DAWN

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CCP ordinance

THE government has promised to re-promulgate the Competition Ordinance 2007 which, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist on Saturday. Nobody knows how much time the re-promulgation of the anti-trust law and the resurrection of the Competition Commission of Pakistan formed under it will take. It can happen only when the National Assembly is prorogued. No ordinance can be issued when either house of parliament is in session. So the country may remain without an anti-trust law for some days at least. In the meanwhile, crooked businessmen have been given a clear field to form cartels to fleece hapless consumers. After all, how can they be blamed for violating a law that doesn't exist? Their anti-competitive actions will not be liable to the CCP's scrutiny even after the ordinance's re-promulgation.

Big business has been lobbying against the CCP ever since it replaced the milder Monopoly Control Authority. The objective of this effort was to get the ordinance watered down to make it ineffective even if it wasn't totally repealed. The effort has

borne fruit — partially, though. The Competition Bill passed by the National Assembly has given businesses affected by CCP decisions the right to appeal before high courts. That will only delay implementation of CCP actions against cartels. What changes the Senate standing committee on finance is going to suggest we don't know as yet. The presence on the committee of senators associated with big business and the delay it has caused in the passage of the bill into law, however, gives us reasons to be concerned about the nature of changes they may want to introduce.

Before the senators further dilute the bill, and the authority of the CCP, they must understand that such an attempt will cost the economy heavily. Transparency International Pakistan too sounded this warning when it said, and rightly so, that the absence of a strong anti-trust law will damage the country's image, obstruct foreign investment and delay international financing for crucial projects. On top of that consumers will be left at the mercy of big business. But will they? We will know soon.
