

A police force for the people

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Pakistan's police force is known for its predatory behaviour and obsequious slave-like relationship with those in power. Its role has now shrunk to performing two functions, providing security to those in powers and protecting criminals. When a provincial police force is unable to capture a few dozen 'thugs' like the 'Chotu' gang of Rajanpur, it has to turn to the country's military to do its job. Large contingents of Rangers in every province now perform functions that ought to be the primary task of the police force. The situation is so bad that the country's entire police force cannot trace a person suspected of 444 extra-judicial killings. The tragedy is that none of the above mentioned events has resulted or will result in any reforms. Those in power are completely averse to any change that will make the police independent and take away the only tool of governance that is known to them.

It may be best to acknowledge that seminars, speeches or cosmetic changes cannot rescue the police from the abyss it finds itself in today. This can happen only if we are willing to undertake major structural reforms that provide complete independence to police and disconnect it from the clutches of the politicians. Some of the salient structural and operational reforms essential for turning around the police are suggested in the following paragraphs.

Each provincial police force ought to be governed by a Provincial Police Board (PPB), created under the authority of a new Provincial Police Act (PPA). Each PPB should be headed by the Chief Minister (CM) and consist of seven prominent citizens, chosen for their standing, reputation and expertise in different fields. The PPB is proposed to be an autonomous body. It selects the provincial Police Chief, lays down policy, acts as a watchdog, makes rules and monitors performance. The Police Chief reports to the PPB. The police operates according to the PPA, has its own budget and is independent in all matters of recruitment, promotion, postings, operations, investigations, intelligence, human resource, salaries, rewards and punishments.

The police force as it exists today is simply too ill-equipped and lacks the training needed to understand or perform modern day policing functions. A reasonable number of police officers from each province ought to be sent abroad to be trained in good police training academies. They should be tasked to set up similar training facilities on their return, and to re-train the entire police force in every province. The minimal educational requirement for joining the police force ought to be a Bachelors degree.

The police often appears to act (or refuse to act), not because the law requires it to do so but because of the interests of its masters. It can neither understand the link between crime, guns and fake number plates, nor can it detect such 'petty' crimes. Some 100,000 to 200,000 cars with fake number plates openly roam about in Karachi, visible to every eighth-grade student but invisible to the police, the ACLC, the CPLC and the Excise Department of the Sindh Government. This 70 year old disease can be resolved in a matter of days by using Automatic Number Plate Recognition cameras, strategically located and linked to auto 'challans' that are sent to the offenders' home address. The same process could also be applied to all traffic violations, including those who failed to pay the road tax.

The police desperately need a massive doze of modern technology. Every police station ought to have an IT section. Basic computer handling needs to be declared an essential skill for all policemen. A database of all criminals, prisoners and those apprehended for various crimes ought to be immediately established and shared with all provinces. This should include CNICs, pictures, finger prints and iris scans. All police stations in a province should be able to check and determine the criminal background of any individual within a matter of minutes.

The new PPA should make it compulsory to register an FIR for all reported crimes and do away with the placebo of scribbling unreadable statements on '*Roznamchas*'. No citizen should be required to visit a police station to get an FIR registered. Instead, citizens should only inform the police on a National Helpline number. It is for the police to immediately reach the complainant, conduct interviews, examine the scene of the incident, take pictures, gather evidence and record an FIR. All FIRs ought to be computerised, authenticated and placed on a central database.

Only when a labourer, janitor, carpenter or '*Hari*' can call the police helpline and get an FIR registered against an industrialist or a 'wadera', should we consider that our police force has been reformed.

