

## A tragedy in waiting

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22 weeks into 2018, the US has already experienced 23 school shootings, averaging a little over one school shooting per week. While the children in the US have shown great courage and conviction in raising their voice, the government, on the contrary, has shown little interest in tightening its gun control laws.

When it comes to guns, gun controls and gun-related deaths, there is little difference in the attitudes of the US and the Pakistani governments. For once they are on the same page. Volumes of speeches, statements, clichés, plans and promises are delivered with passionate oratory after each school shooting or mass killing. Little is however done to eliminate or control weapons – the killing machines that initiate all violence.

The pattern of violence in Pakistan is far more complex. It has thousands of private militias patronised by a political and feudal class. It has scores of 'lashkars' (of the likes of 'Chotoo' gang of Rajanpur) that are often more powerful than the provincial police. It has ideologically inspired hoodlums such as those who blocked Islamabad in February 2018. It has religiously charged mobsters such as those who destroyed the Ahmadi places of worship in Sialkot or those who killed hundreds of 'Hazaras' in Quetta. Needless to say that it also has the heavily armed barbaric groups such as TTP who did not blink twice when it came to killing 132 innocent school children.

Considering that Pakistan is faced with a complex multi-dimensional threat of gun-related violence, how does the state pro-actively prepare itself to protect its citizens and its children from catastrophic occurrences. Sadly, many of the actions taken by the state suggest measures that would multiply instead of reducing the existing level of violence. As an example, the Sindh Government in an explosive act of generosity, only a few days before the expiry of its term, decided to amend the Arms Act by removing the restriction of a citizen possessing more than four guns. So the people in Sindh are now free to possess as many weapons as they wish. A huge incentive towards creating yet more forbidden 'lashkars' and private armies in the province.

In December 2017 the Federal Government announced two schemes to regulate (read propagate) gun licenses. It lifted the restriction on obtaining gun licenses for non-prohibited weapons. It also declared that all 'prohibited bore' gun licenses would be cancelled after 31 January 2018. The owners were required to either downgrade or surrender their 'prohibited bore' weapons and receive Rs.50,000 compensation for each surrendered weapon. Interestingly there was no mention of those who possessed unlicensed weapons – thus not addressing the largest and the most sinister aspect of the problem.

It is a well known fact that the gun licenses in Pakistan are issued entirely on the basis of an individual's status, power, party, influence or wealth. There are no tests, trainings or back-ground checks conducted. By its own admission, almost half of all gun license records held by government are either fake or missing. In the absence of any reliable data, the government was hugely embarrassed when the deadline of 31 January 2018 passed without a single individual downgrading or surrendering any prohibited bore weapon. The government conveniently decided to look the other way – and never broached the subject again.

Pakistan could learn from the experience of several nations like Australia, Japan, Norway and the United Kingdom – who have successfully reduced or eliminated the possession of weapons. This was done by passing harsh gun control laws, introducing generous buy-back schemes and an even-handed implementation. Pakistan on the contrary faces an unenviable dilemma when it comes to controlling 20 million guns in the hands of its civilian population. Pakistan's ruling political elite is the biggest hurdle in creating any gun control laws. A semi-functional bureaucracy and a completely politicised police take away any remaining chances for implementing even those laws that currently reside on papers.

It may therefore be reasonable to assume that we have created the right recipe for an impending disaster. While one must pray and hope for peace and safety, the state cannot act like an ostrich and refuse to take cognisance of the writing on the wall. The people of Pakistan have been made to stand next to an angry volcano of violence that may erupt any time, inflicting tragic loss of lives. The time to demand a complete ban on all weapons is now.