

Architects of our own misfortune

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On Monday the 20th June 2016, Karachi experienced yet another traumatic and heartrending incident. The son of the Chief Justice of Sindh High Court was kidnapped by 'armed' men in a white getaway car that was using 'fake' police number plates. Since it involved kidnapping the son of the Chief Justice - the Prime Minister, the Chief Minister, The IG Police and the Rangers went all out in forming committees, conducting raids, making promises, demanding results and assuring quick success. They will however take no actions to eliminate the instruments (guns and fake number plate vehicles) that are essentially used in almost every act of crime and militancy. It is indescribably painful for a father to experience the kidnapping of his son. One hopes that a small part of this pain would also trickle down to the police, the bureaucracy and the judiciary – who may well be themselves the real architects of this misery and misfortune.

In the summer of 2014, fifteen citizens of Karachi lodged a constitutional petition (D-2912) with the Sindh High Court. They pleaded that unlawful and unregistered vehicles play a vital support role in almost every act of crime and militancy. They prayed that (a) the Sindh Government which is using 4000-6000 unregistered vehicles be directed to register all its vehicles with the Excise and Taxation Department. (b) The Sindh police which has majority of its vehicles unregistered be directed to register all its vehicles with the Excise and Taxation Department. (c) The Excise and Taxation Department be directed to display the registration details of all government and police vehicles on its website, just as it displays the data of all other vehicles. (d) The Sindh Police be directed to take practical steps to eliminate the 200,000 to 300,000 vehicles that use fake, unlawful or government and police look-alike number plates in the province of Sindh.

Two years have gone by since the citizens moved the Sindh High Court. The matter came up for hearing seven times. Twice the hearing was adjourned, twice it was heard and thrice it was discharged. Ironically, it was the Chief Justice who was himself responsible for discharging the last three hearings. The matter continues to be where it always was.

On the evening of April 4, 2016, a number of TV channels began splashing the 'breaking news' of a gun attack on a vehicle at Nagan Chowrangi Karachi. While three persons lost their lives, the news acquired a special significance because of the unique characteristics of the vehicle that was attacked. It was a private vehicle, specially painted to impersonate the appearance of a police look-alike, with complete markings and monograms of the Sindh Police. Interestingly it carried no number plates and was neither listed in police inventory nor registered with the Excise and Taxation department of Sindh.

A few days ago in Peshawar, a road rage incident spiralled out of control when a teenager pulled out an M-16 assault rifle and fired at an unarmed motorcyclist, who had committed the crime of overtaking him and coming in the way of his car. The car was bearing a fake

government number plate B-5258. The same technique of using a fake police number plate (SP 0586) was also used by those who kidnapped the Chief Justice's son in Karachi. The police is too timid to challenge vehicles that bear real or fake official number plates, making it easy for criminals to routinely park at wrong places, enter prohibited locations, violate traffic laws, not pay taxes and indulge in acts of crime and militancy.

The link between fake government vehicles, weapons and terrorism has been repeatedly highlighted for the past several years. Pictures of hundreds of fake cars have been sent to the highest police officials. Surprisingly and inexplicably, the law enforcing agencies remain completely numb, apathetic and unwilling to capture and crack down on the nexus that puts together criminals, weapons and fake number plates in the same metal box at the same time.

A number of systemic organisational and mental barriers need to be addressed to seek a long term solution to this deadly disease. The Sindh Government and the Sindh Police ought to register each and every official vehicle with the E&T department. The same must also be displayed on the E&T website. An on-going institutional program be initiated to round up an estimated 200,000 vehicles that blatantly carry fraudulent number plates – many impersonating as government or police vehicles. The police ought to develop its own capacity to electronically verify the credentials of any vehicle from any location. All this can only be achieved if the Sindh police is empowered, reformed, restructured and above all, rescued from political influences.

