

Controlling lawless vehicles

On 4th April 2016 a gun attack on a Police Mobile Van killed 3 persons in Karachi. The vehicle had all the trappings, flashing lights, markings and monograms of the Sindh Police - except that it was fake and a lookalike photocopy of the original. This unlawful vehicle had been operating for many years without registration, unknown, to both police and the motor vehicle registration department. While the police and the government look the other way, scores of such fake police vehicles, involved in crime and extortion, operate in the province of Sindh.

In June 2016, son of the Chief Justice of Sindh was abducted by kidnappers using a vehicle with a fake government number plate. It is a well established fact that most criminals rely on stolen or fake number plated vehicles to commit crimes. Spread over four years, an in-depth study of government vehicles, conducted by citizens Nazim Haji and Naeem Sadiq reveals some astonishing facts. It shows that 17 % of all government vehicles (approximately 3700 cars) plying on the roads are unregistered vehicles. They are neither included in the Excise & Taxation (E&T) department's computer records nor reflected on the E&T website. A fact further confirmed by obtaining vehicle records from E&T under the 'Right to Information' law.

The study further revealed that 13 % government vehicles had a discrepancy between the actual vehicle specifications and those mentioned in the E&T records e.g. a Toyota Corolla listed as Suzuki Alto or vice versa. Approximately 2800 government vehicles suffer from such data related errors - largely due to officials making multiple sets of the official number plates and using them on their private cars.

The study revealed that there were an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 private cars in Sindh that have adopted a second identity by impersonating as government cars. This fraudulent act is committed when a privately registered car uses a green background number plate that has Govt. of Sindh or Govt. of Pakistan written on it. The impersonation allows such vehicles to access prohibited places, break traffic rules, indulge in crime and not be checked by police.

There are yet another about 100,000 cars in the province that evade registration (and hence taxes) by either using a foreign number plate, an AFR or a personalized number plate. This offence is largely committed by those in position of power, influence or simply the top of the line crooks. Totally subservient to the personal wishes of the politicians, the Sindh police is too scared to check any of these fraudulent vehicles for fear of getting into trouble with the powerful law-breakers.

How did the Sindh province manage to become a haven for lawless vehicles? It is now possible for an individual to get away in Sindh without registering a vehicle or paying the annual motor vehicle tax. The police will also generously not check an individual for fraudulently using a government, police, AFR, personalized, fake or foreign number plate. An ideal situation offering endless opportunities for crime and militancy.

A presentation was recently made to the Sindh Home Secretary and Secretary E&T Department to explain the state of vehicular lawlessness and to suggest the way forward. These reforms must begin by accounting for and formally registering all government and police vehicles and correcting the vehicle database held by the E&T department. An identical number plate system that does not differentiate between a government, police or private vehicle should be introduced. This shall put an end to the concept of privileged vehicles and the need to impersonate them.

While the Vehicle Registration and tax collection is a provincial subject, there is a need to create a common national database of all vehicles along with a country-wide standardization of the size, colour and font of number plates. With police getting hand-held tablets, a policeman anywhere in Pakistan should be instantaneously able to check the complete data of any vehicle belonging to any province.

No vehicle must be released from a show room or port, even for a single journey, unless it has been registered and is equipped with an officially supplied number plate. Car registration must involve original CNIC and biometric verification on the pattern of mobile phone SIMs. Motor registration and subsequent yearly tax should be payable using any mobile phone money transfer system. This will eliminate inefficiency and potential opportunities for corruption.

Implementation of the above suggestions is possible 'only' if the police receives adequate training, authority and independence to check 'any' vehicle and apply the necessary penalties without any fear or favour. There is something seriously wrong with a state engaged in fighting a war against terror but unwilling to control what could be easily detected by a half blind person from half a mile.