

## Guns, Us and Them

In 2015, the police in Japan fired just six rounds. That was all that was fired by the entire police in the entire country. Japan has succeeded in bringing its yearly gun homicide rate to near zero. This was accomplished without the Japanese Prime Minister making ad nauseum speeches to eliminate weapons. This was achieved without any 'National Action Plan' and this was realised without announcing any 'Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad' by the Japanese military.

In the land of the pure and the faithful, the newly elected Prime Minister's maiden address to the Parliament included a very special reference to the elimination of all illegal weapons and private militias. The promise was received with great appreciation and optimism. The sceptics however knew that it was yet another placebo. The same promise had been made umpteen times by every previous Prime Minister - without getting rid of a single weapon. As expected, three months down the road, the new Prime Minister's promise is already a pipe dream.

The 2014 Peshawar school massacre forced the government to formulate a 'National Action Plan' against militancy and extremism. Three years down the road, the 'Plan' continues to exist only in the dusty files and myopic imagination of the bureaucrats and ministers. This was followed by a countrywide 'De-weaponisation and Explosive Control' program announced by the military as a key element of its 'Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad'. One is still to see the faintest signs of any public weapon recovery and elimination program under the new 'operation'.

Why is Pakistan (a country that loses over a dozen citizens and soldiers to gun related homicide every day) so reluctant to control the burgeoning growth of weapons amongst its population? Is it because of the government's utter ineptitude and cluelessness? Is it because the rulers do not wish to part with their feudal life style and private militias? Is it that the decision makers are heavily influenced by the powerful gun lobby that includes importers, sellers, dealers, manufacturers, smugglers and private security agencies? Perhaps all these factors collectively contribute to our learned helplessness - making us appear like a dysfunctional species good only at hollow speeches and false promises.

How has the rest of the world controlled the menace of guns to create almost totally weapon free societies. Japan introduced the world's first ever buy-back policy for weapons in 1685. Violation of gun laws results in extraordinarily harsh punishments. Somebody who fires a gun is committing three crimes: owning the gun, owning the bullets in the gun and firing it. Merely owning a handgun, which is prohibited for all civilians, is punishable by up to 10 years in prison. Even to buy an air rifle for sports shooting competition one has to attend an all-day class, pass a shooting range class and a written test. This is followed by a mental test, a drug test and a rigorous background check.

Australia launched its first national gun buy-back program in 1997. More than 700,000 firearms were surrendered, a program that cost \$230 million to the Australian government. The firearm homicide rate dropped by 59 percent. A yet another three-month national firearms amnesty was launched in 2017 which resulted in surrender of more than 30,000 guns. While 13 gun massacres occurred in the 18 years before the gun buy-back program, in the 14 following years (and up to the present), there were no gun massacres in Australia.

UK passed sweeping gun-control measures in 1997. It banned automatic, semi-automatic and pump-action firearms, introduced mandatory registration for shotgun owners, and banned private handgun ownership. The government launched a \$200 million buy-back program, which led to the collection of 162,000 firearms. In UK the firearms are now used in less than 1% of all recorded crimes.

Canada, Spain, Sweden, Iceland, Italy, Israel and Denmark have successfully deployed similar stringent controls for licensing, use, display, possession and storage of guns. Pakistan on the other hand continues to remain undisturbed about its tragic daily gun homicides. Its urban rulers and rural 'waderas' roam the streets with scores of private armed guards and goons. Hundreds of lawless 'private militias' intimidating, tyrannizing and harassing private citizens remain invisible to the law enforcing agencies. The Parliamentarians possess over 69,000 prohibited bore weapons – presumably many times more than the books they purchased in the last 2 decades. It is time that the ordinary Pakistanis should raise their collective voice against the state's silence over this barbaric and medieval gun-toting culture.

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