

Guns – a choice between peace and profits

It is not that the civil and military are not on the same page. It is just that they are no pages in the book. The only strategy is to wait for the next attack, next bomb blast or the next act of terrorism. The only response is to restart doing more of the same, yet more vociferously, raise the level of rhetoric, summon yet more meetings, appoint yet more committees and issue yet more directives. Everything reactive and tried out umpteen times. No wonder Einstein used such a harsh term for 'doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'.

Over 60,000 innocent civilians have lost their lives in a war they never fought and to an enemy they never knew - "koi utra na maidaN meiN, dushman na hum, koi saf ban na paaee, na koe a'lam". Often blown to smithereens, killed, kidnapped or mugged for not sharing the same ideology, being a public figure or simply carrying a cell phone. Clearly there is something grotesquely incorrect about our approach to fighting crime and terrorism.

At least four fundamental concepts need to be addressed at the outset if the state of Pakistan is serious about tackling militancy. These are, a) that providing equal security to all citizens is the business of the state and not that of private gangs, guards or goons; b) that the policy of an endless reactive warfare must be replaced by a scientific and proactive approach of demanding surrender of some 20 million weapons held by civilians; c) that all militant groups, regardless of their ideology or patronage, be disbanded and d) that increasing the height of walls, building more barriers, hiring more guards, adding more weapons and creating more fortifications is a corporate, capitalistic and counterproductive approach. It makes the state shrink and furthers the space enjoyed by the terrorists.

Sane nations around the world have opted to eliminate or control weapons as a first step towards elimination of crime and militancy. In contrast, Pakistan has chosen to promote a free-for-all weapon policy. It has neither disbanded (as required by Article 256 of the Constitution) scores of existing private, political and sectarian 'militias' nor demanded surrender of millions of illegal and quasi legal weapons in the hands of civilians. Weapon licenses continue to be issued and the never-ending last date for computerisation of weapons continues to be stretched as a mark of

magnanimity towards militants. The most recent extension now pushes this date from December 2015 to December 2016.

In May 2015 the Sindh Government announced its decision to cancel 595,146 out of a total of 1,057,456 gun licences that it had generously issued. The announcement was just as bogus as the licenses. No steps were taken to execute this decision. In August 2016 the new Sindh Chief Minister once again made an identical press statement. This too was not backed up by formal notification of cancellation nor have these weapons been surrendered. The pattern of fake gun licenses is identical in all provinces. Punjab has formally admitted to having no record for 900,000 out of 1800,000 gun licenses. The KPK province actively encourages gun culture by facilitating teachers, government servants and doctors to obtain gun licenses.

Fighting a war of survival while simultaneously promoting weapons and tolerating militant groups is beyond the realms of logic. It only lends further credence to the wide-spread belief that weaponisation is a state-sponsored activity. It is patronised by the powerful ruling elite of Pakistan. A law-maker himself holding plus 200 prohibited bore gun licenses cannot be expected to vote in favour of de-weaponisation. The fact that the infamous National Action Plan (NAP) conveniently and completely missed out 'de-weaponisation' in its 20 point agenda is yet another case in point.

While many of the militants who threaten the security forces on the mountains of Waziristan have been effectively neutralised, their counterparts, criminals, 'militias' and banned outfits continue to retain their efficacy. Loaded with weapons ranging from 9 mm pistols to machine guns, automatic rifles, hand grenades, rocket launchers and anti-aircraft guns, they continue to strike at their chosen targets in the rural and urban areas of Pakistan. It may not be unkind to admit that despite scores of committees, meetings, resolutions and promises, the state has miserably failed to take even a single meaningful step to proceed against this menace.

The much needed de-weaponisation in Pakistan is strongly resisted by its own powerful and devious brand of National Rifles Association (NRA). The NRA in our case is represented by legislators who hold over 69,000 prohibited-bore weapon licenses. It is represented by manufacturers, transporters, stockists and sellers of

weapons. It is represented by those engaged in smuggling, import and distribution of weapons. It is represented by those who have issued millions of gun licenses without any mandatory checks. It is represented by the cartel of government officials and dealers who exchange both real and fake gun licenses for an under-the-table price. It is represented by the bureaucrats who have perfected the techniques of data disappearance by declaring any record as 'not available', lost or burnt. And finally a large chunk of this disaster capital goes to the powerful private security agencies whose business flourishes with every bullet that diminishes yet another life.

De-weaponisation in Pakistan is thus in direct conflict with power, influence and financial interests of the gun lobby. Those in possession of weapons and those whose profits depend upon manufacturing, import, smuggling, licensing, sale and weapon-related services cannot be expected to give up weapons either voluntarily or happily.

Thus a peoples' mass movement for abolishing all weapons and limiting them to the exclusive domain of the state may be the only way forward. It is heartening that individuals and organisations such as Citizens Against Weapons (CAW), Citizens-Police Liaison Committee (CPLC), Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Pakistan Institute of Labour & Education Research (PILER), Shehri CBE, Shirkat Gah, Tehrik-e-Niswan, Pakistan Medical Association (PMA), Citizens Trust Against Crime (CTAC) and Children's Literature Festival (CLF) have come together to endorse their support for a nation-wide de-weaponisation program. While these are much needed and encouraging developments, they need to be scaled up many times in order to de-weaponise the minds and hearts of our decision makers.

"Slavery wasn't a crisis for British and American elites until abolitionism turned it into one. Apartheid wasn't a crisis until the anti-apartheid movement turned it into one" writes Naomi Klein in her book, 'This changes everything'. What is needed in Pakistan is a similar people's social movement for abolition of weapons. Our state has become a helpless hostage to gun-wielding individuals and 'militias'. Must we not break away from a system that makes access to automatic weapons easier than access to decent schooling or clean drinking water?