

A violence promoting SRO

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The government's SRO (1) / 2018, a notification issued on the eve of 16th December, a day when over 140 school children were brutally gunned down by militants using prohibited bore weapons, is not just most unfortunate and insensitive but also reflects the ruling elite's penchant for guns, violence and militancy. The new SRO removes the ban on issuance of prohibited bore gun licenses and also enables our militant class to own unlimited number of weapons of mass destruction. The ban, a rare act of sanity introduced by the previous government was whimsically overturned by the new incumbents.

What made the government issue such a self-destructive proclamation. Was it an act of political appeasement and bribe or simply an instrument of surrender to the militant, rich, powerful and violent elite of Pakistan. After all it is only the members of the parliament, the lawless feudal landlords and the hard-core criminals such as Malik Ishaq Jhangvi who are the typical recipients of such prohibited bore gun licenses. The latest notification is likely to usher a new era of armed goons, violence, militancy, lawlessness and tribal culture in Pakistan.

The key commonality between the APS tragedy and the daily cases of other violent instances making headlines in our media, is the prevalence of some 20 million legal and illegal weapons in the hands of militants, mafias and private individuals in Pakistan. It is a well documented fact that gun violence is directly proportional to the prevalence of guns in any country. USA is a prime example of this sickness. On the other hand, sensible countries such as Australia, Japan and UK, through deweaponisation schemes, have almost completely eliminated gun-violence in their societies.

It is ironic that weapons have become a symbol of power, status and wealth for the pampered elite of Pakistan. Only between 2008 and 2013, the Federal Government issued 69473 licenses for prohibited bore weapons on the recommendation of the parliamentarians. This was confirmed by a written statement presented by the Interior Minister in the National Assembly on 28 February

2013. Likewise on 29 December 2014, the Provincial Home Minister informed the Punjab Assembly that 50 per cent of 1.8 million arms licences issued in the province were fake and there was no record of 900,000 arms that were issued by the Punjab government.

The Sindh Home Minister is on public record for having issued 300,000 prohibited bore gun licenses to his friends and party supporters.

The Supreme Court of Pakistan in its Suo Motu case 16 of 2011 had stated that, *"Karachi is full of arms and ammunition of prohibited and non-prohibited bores including licensed and illicit, therefore, Karachi has to be cleansed from all kinds of weapons by adhering to the laws available on the subject, and if need be, by promulgating new legislation."* Sadly this judgement never saw the light of the day.

When a state begins to abandon its responsibility to protect its citizens, it is replaced by thousands of private guards, criminal gangs and gun-toting goons. This has become true for Pakistan where hundreds of rural and urban private militias and armies maintained by its militant elite operate with complete impunity, in gross violation of Article 256 of the Constitution.

It is time for the Federal and the Provincial governments to fulfill their constitutional duty to protect the lives of all citizens, stop weaponising its pampered elite and to honour the Supreme Court deweaponisation judgment of Suo Motu case 16 of 2011.

It is time for the government to declare that all categories of weapons must lie only in the domain of the state and that no citizen regardless of his/her status be allowed to possess, carry or display any weapon - licensed or otherwise.

It would be prudent for the government to withdraw its violence promoting SRO (1) / 2018, put an end to issuance of all gun licenses and to declare the existing weapon licenses (largely issued on the basis of favour, status, influence or bribe), as null and void.

It is time for the government to execute a nation-wide scheme for surrender of unlicensed weapons and buy-back the licensed weapons, on the same model as the one successfully implemented by Australia and UK. Finally it is also time for Pakistan to understand that its 25 million out-of-school children and the easy access to 20 million guns are a perfect recipe for a disaster whose script is being fueled by weapon promoting notifications such as the SRO (1) / 2018.