**The Smog Challenge**

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Air pollution in Pakistan is not a new problem, but it has now reached such a critical level that it poses serious threats to human life and other organisms. It is time for the government to address the root causes of this escalating pollution crisis, yet instead, artificial rain is being considered—a temporary solution that costs around 5 to 7 million rupees per application and offers no permanent relief from the crisis. Unfortunately, well-established, effective solutions remain underutilised, while public funds are spent without clear direction. The smog choking the country will not dissipate with artificial rain but rather through the declaration of an environmental emergency and the implementation of urgent measures.

Every administration has made claims about controlling environmental pollution, but no substantial actions have been taken to address it effectively. This time, too, the government is making grand statements about reducing air pollution. Legislation has been proposed in the form of Article 9A, aiming to secure the “Right to a Clean and Healthy Environment,” and while this draws global attention to the issue, neither the enforcement of this legislation nor the artificial rain is yet visible. The same old strategies from previous years are being repeated: banning brick kilns, prohibiting crop residue burning, and limiting the use of vehicles that emit high levels of pollutants. The Punjab government is now amending the Motor Vehicle Ordinance of 1965 to impose heavy fines on vehicles with excessive emissions, recognising transport as a major contributor to smog. Cross-border pollution and local waste mismanagement remain additional factors, and diplomatic discussions with neighbouring countries focus on new methods to prevent stubble burning by farmers and curb the resulting transboundary pollution. However, such measures are temporary, as they have been in the past, with no permanent strategies in place.

Even now, as part of the anti-smog campaign, authorities are targeting smoke-emitting vehicles, factories, and kilns without catalytic converters or advanced zigzag technology, yet smog continues to engulf many cities, including the provincial capital, Lahore. Air pollution in these areas has reached “severely harmful” levels for health. Just yesterday, the air quality index in Lahore registered at 394, and today it has reached 291, with some areas exceeding 400. As the anti-smog campaign remains ineffective, due in part to administrative shortcomings, the government has again decided to mitigate the smog through artificial rain. In December last year, artificial rain was tested in Lahore with support from the United Arab Emirates, and while this did reduce smog levels temporarily, it offers no lasting solution to the issue. Winter brings with it the added complication of temperature inversion, which traps pollutants close to the ground, worsening air quality and leading to respiratory health emergencies. This creates a layer of warm air that cannot rise, trapping harmful pollutants and exposing the population to toxic levels of smog.

The only way to achieve lasting smog control is by improving environmental conditions overall—through reforestation, shifting to greener fuel sources, and controlling emissions from vehicles, factories, and industries. Innovative technologies must also be explored; for example, China has made strides in reducing pollution by installing smog-free towers in cities, and other countries are even converting air pollutants into valuable products, such as diamonds. With efforts to improve the environment and adopt similar innovative solutions, it may be possible to turn air pollution into a resource rather than a crisis.

Unfortunately, the current government’s agenda does not appear to prioritise long-term solutions to the challenges faced by the public, nor does it focus on public welfare in meaningful ways. If the ruling party intends to maintain power for an extended period, it must start implementing policies that benefit the people. Countering air pollution should be approached as an urgent public health issue. Real solutions must include halting general waste and crop residue burning and closing non-compliant brick kilns under the zigzag policy. The government must take permanent and strict action against factories and vehicles that emit harmful fumes, while also speeding up the tree-planting campaign to purify the atmosphere. However, controlling air pollution is not a task the government can accomplish alone; it requires a collaborative effort from the public. Through communal participation, air pollution can be reduced, smog can be curbed, and the environment can be restored to a healthier state.

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