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**Eye of the tiger**

Since it was unleashed in March this year, Imran Khan's Tiger Force comprising, according to the government, mainly young professionals and students has been active in many fields. Initially set up to help deal with the coronavirus crisis and the issues of food and healthcare that this brought, the force has also been roped in to tackle the locust issue, trees plantation drives, and now the price hike issue.

We wonder if any of these volunteers have received the training necessary to handle these tasks. The rules of volunteerism suggest it works best when the concerned volunteer force receives at least basic training in the field in which they are to work. For Pakistan, this would have included hospital care, some knowledge of the coronavirus pandemic and how to handle SOPs and later, as it was turned into a kind of militia, the control of locusts or other pests and price control or tree planting. There is no evidence that any such training was offered.

It is also a fact that we already have many groups that are able to offer volunteers in many of these fields. The Saylani group, which set up soup kitchens for people is just one example. We also have the Edhi Foundation, Chippa as well as religious groups, which have their own welfare wings and work with extreme efficiency. In the presence of these volunteers, it is unclear why a new force was needed.

‘Tigers’ have always been a part of Imran Khan’s profile and this was the name he gave to his World Cup winning cricket team as well as to the group of volunteers who worked with him to raise funds for the excellent Shaukat Khanum Hospital set up in Lahore. But when the government is involved, and the tasks at hand are much larger than winning a World Cup, or even establishing a hospital, the question of volunteers becomes more complicated.

While some of the one million volunteers who are said to make up the force including the 350,000 who are reported to be active may be extremely well-intentioned and extremely efficient in their efforts, there have been multiple reports that there have been some that have taken their authority very differently. There have been reports of misuse of powers. This is no way to run a country; creating hostility is not the answer to the problems that exist.

Indeed, these answers may not lie in a volunteer force at all. Volunteers are extremely useful when they're run by NGOs or when they come in during times of crisis, such as a cyclone. It is true the coronavirus pandemic is a crisis, but the Tiger Force has been used well beyond this. It is also true that in the past, we have had volunteer setups of various kinds, which eventually failed to deliver anything of much use.

General Pervez Musharraf had set up a group of volunteers with much the same agenda as that put forward by Imran’s Tigers. He had said the force would be organised and used to assist people in various ways. There is no evidence that this ever happened. Since the time of Musharraf in the mid-2000s, that force has disappeared. Certainly it does not exist in any concrete form any longer. The same is true of other volunteer organisations set up in the past over the years since the 1970s.

There is also the question of how governments and volunteer forces are to work together. The task of checking prices should be the work of local governments and their various wings. The fact that local governments do not exist in all the provinces is of course a problem but this can be resolved quite quickly by holding elections. Till then, various wings of the provincial government can be assigned to look into prices, handle traders and work with them, rather than against them, so that prices can be controlled.

A private militia of any kind is always dangerous. It is the work of fascists and dictators across the world to set up such militias for their own benefits. We know that the Tiger Force is not intended to serve this purpose. But some of its members appear to be misguided on this count. There should be complete discouragement of anyone trying to force their way into positions where they can gain some benefit for themselves, or threaten traders and farmers.

The country cannot be managed in this fashion. A better way needs to be found. To run a government effectively, Imran Khan and his cabinet must first of all discover how to manage parliament and to work through it. The habit of passing laws through ordinances is dangerous. The same is true of the work of the Tiger Force. An outfit like it can only function for a limited period of time. It needs to be replaced eventually, by a systematic method of governance which can last from one government to the next and continue to function no matter who is running affairs in the country.

The loyalty of the Tiger Force to Imran Khan in particular is also reflective of our rather cultish politics. We need people who can work effectively, efficiently with good intention, but also with honesty and loyalty to the people rather than to a particular leader. The Tiger Force will not be able to achieve this. It is also essential that those who form any part of this outfit be given some guidelines and more training in the work they are to perform. Doctors say they proved to be somewhat of a handicap in hospitals at the height of the Covid-19 crisis in June this year, when they entered ICUs and simply harassed doctors rather than make any kind of programme which could truly benefit patients or relieve the tremendous burden on doctors.

It is time Imran Khan learnt to act more maturely as prime minister, alongside his cabinet, and moved away from Tiger Forces. And realised that it's best to manage matters through the various tiers of government which exist in every democracy and are intended to guide the people and assist them in times when they face problems, so that the problems can be resolved methodically and for a long period of time.

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