**Police reforms in Punjab**

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As the PTI-led government is gearing up to take over both in Islamabad and Lahore, there is talk of imminent reforms within the Punjab police. For many years, the PTI has been accusing the ousted Sharifs of abusing the police system and perpetuating the thana culture that has ossified corruption and criminal behaviour within the police and entrenched their nexus with the oppressive feudatory system.

This has severely challenged efforts that aim to bring relief and justice to those who continue to suffer, regardless of whether they live in urban or rural settings. The gruesome murder of over a dozen PAT workers in Model Town in 2014 had provoked serious questions about the conduct of the police and their pliant relationship with the political leadership.

In another example of the reservations held about the Punjab police, Ayesha Ahad, the secretly-wedded wife of Hamza Shahbaz Sharif, had filed a petition before a sessions court to have cases registered against police officials who had kept her in illegal custody and tortured her. Similarly, the nexus between organised crime and the police can be easily gauged from the activities of the erstwhile Chotu Gang, which operated with impunity in Rajanpur and Rahim Yar Khan till March 2016. The infamous gang master, Ghulam Rasool, was able to wreak havoc because he had close connections with the police and local politicians. Had he not been captured through an army operation, he would have thrived without fail.

While such examples highlight the mutually beneficial relationship between the police and criminals, the failed police operation exposed the lax training regime and the commitment of police personnel. That the Chotu Gang was able to murder more than half a dozen policemen and kidnap dozens more was a terrible indictment of their operational unworthiness.

A senior Punjab police officer who retired last year acknowledges the systemic rot within the force and the retrograde political interference. However, he doesn’t agree with the negative portrayal of the police that the PTI has advanced. While the retired cop is severely critical of the Sharifs for entrenching cronyism within the services, he gives credit to former chief minister Shahbaz Sharif for investing in modern technology and training.

One such worthy initiative is the Punjab Safe Cities Authority that started from Lahore – in keeping with the tradition of patronage that the Sharifs granted for the city. The Lahore Safe City project has set out an impressive template for future policing in the province as it has successfully started to integrate new technological innovations within the policing activities, and with impressive results.

Akbar Nasir Khan, the chief operating officer of the Lahore Safe City project who has worked on the project for over three years, is a firm believer in integrating technology within the system to make changes. When he gave me a broad overview of the Punjab Safe Cities project at its headquarters over two years back, it sounded quite out of place, even though it was not operational at the time.

Earlier this week when I asked him about police reforms, he stressed on “building safe and smart cities and towns through technology; legislative and operational autonomy; and well-equipped human resources at the operational and ground level”.

Imran Khan has been right in claiming that most of the ills of the police force across Pakistan are triggered by politicisation and unwarranted political interference. This discourages honest and hard-working police officers, and incentivises lethargy and political patronage.

The PTI government in KP had achieved commendable progress in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as it curtailed interference and allowed the police force to function professionally. It gave the police administrative autonomy and operational independence, and invested more material resources to increase professionalism within the force. This allowed the force to improve its operational capability and efficacy.

The increased ability to thwart acts of terrorism and organised crime show the massive improvement that has taken place within the police. As a result, public perception that only evoked dread in the past has seen quite a transformation. Even the opposition parties are grudgingly appreciating the growing professionalism and neutrality of the force in the province.

Buoyed by its success with police reforms in KP, the PTI seems prepared to replicate its model in Punjab. This is where it starts to get complicated. First, Punjab’s population is nearly four times larger than that of KP. Most of the population in the frontier province lives in rural settings. In comparison, Punjab has five big metros and dozens of big cities and towns where people often enjoy ‘urban anonymity’. These factors engender a different set of complications that the police in KP don’t encounter.

In addition, the rampant pessimistic view that the entire criminal justice system in Punjab – from courts to lawyers and from the prosecution system to the judiciary – is severely politicised presents unique challenges. In KP, the government accorded official sanction to the centuries-old jirga system by making it an important component of the alternative dispute resolution system. This frees up valuable policing time – a prospect that cannot be availed in Punjab.

An important variable that should be considered in any reform initiative within the Punjab police is that there is quite some consternation within the lower ranks of the force – the non-PSP cadre – about the promotion and incentive regime. The force seems to be divided along the ‘khaki’ (the non-PSP) and ‘noori’ (the PSP cadre) lines, with the khakis resenting the system. However, some of them have started entertaining optimism about the forthcoming government. A mid-ranking police officer showed hope about police reforms as he provided me with a list of suggestions:

a) Provincial police officers (DSPs/SPs) should get their due share in postings as district police officers and above, and must be given due share in promotions.

b) Constable and inspector officers must be provided with conveyance, hazard allowances, medical facilities, and free education for children.

c) Budget allocations for police stations and SDPOs are required.

d) Across-the-board accountability and command responsibility should be prioritised.

e) Better service conditions and responsive command structures must be provided.

f) A complete and absolute distinctive separation of investigation functions should be encouraged.

g) Functional specialisation should be emphasised in all wings of policing.

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