

Undermining authority

Lahore
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Tussle between Parks and Horticulture Authority and the city government is approaching a showdown. Lahore's beautification plans may take a back seat for the time being



Since its coming into existence in 1998, the Parks and Horticulture Authority (PHA) has perhaps been the only independent body of the Punjab government that has drawn equal appreciation and criticism for its performance. Today, after the emergence of the city government and a rather mysterious exit of Kamran Lashari as PHA chief, the authority finds itself locked in a tussle with the city authorities, described by one PHA official as being "headstrong".

The tussle began on the question of who owes the revenue that PHA generates through the installation of billboards? By now, it has gained so much of prominence that the Lahore district council, in its June

ties, on the other hand, do not see any reason in the authority's refusal to budge. "Let us see who wins," comments an official who does not want to be named.

The city government argues that its demand for revenue sharing is justified because it is Lahore Development Authority, a department of the city government, which pays about Rs 12 crore per annum as salaries to PHA employees. PHA claims that the notification that created it clearly mentioned where the revenue should go, on the implementation of plans made by PHA. 'Beautification of Lahore' is where the revenue generated by the authority is being spent, PHA officials say.

Dr Shabbir Ahmad, the newly-appointed Director General of PHA, is optimistic, nevertheless. Defending his department against what he calls 'undue criticism', he says: "We will continue working on the beautification of the city. I find no reason why we should let anyone create hinderances in our work."

Ferozepur Road, Firdous Market and many others. Do you think city government people have got the brains to make beautification plans like these? says a PHA official, seeking anonymity.

The city government does not seem to be impressed by this line of argument. "One simply fails to understand as to how PHA works," says city government's naib nazim Farooq Amjad Mir. The shifting of employees to PHA from other city government departments, according to Mir, is resulting in "loss of money and manpower".

No wonder the city government is seeking to abolish the authority.

Mir maintains there is no need for an separate department to look after the city in the presence of the city government. "PHA was set up through a notification. Its abolition therefore needs nothing more than the withdrawal of the notification," he says. In his opinion, the Local Government Ordinance 2002 has challenged the validity of PHA notification.

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26, 2003 session passed a resolution demanding that Punjab government withdraw the notification that created PHA. Besides the revenues, the other controversial issue is PHA's working style. The city government accuses the authority of not co-ordinating with the district government over its plans to beautify the city.

With no side relenting, PHA officials fear that the very existence of the authority may be in danger if they accept to give away the revenue to the city government. The city authori-

ty's refusal to budge. "Let us see who wins," comments an official who does not want to be named.

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Critical of the city government's claim on revenue, he says nowhere does the notification that created PHA allow any one any right on the revenue generated by the authority.

Some PHA officials claim the city government lacks the 'aesthetic sense' which they have. "Compare roads and places that PHA has worked on with what they looked like a few years ago: Jail Road, The Mall,

you think city government people have not the brains to make beautification plans like these?" says a PHA official, seeking anonymity.

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"We have, through our district council meeting, made our demands known in this regard," he adds, though he is not sure whether and when the Punjab government takes up the issue.

What will be the fate of PHA employees if the resolution is finally heeded to and the authority is abolished? Mir says they will be transferred to the departments they belonged to before the authority was set up.

Rafique Hasrat, Town Nazim, Nishter Town Lahore claims all the 150 nazims of Lahore's union councils are unanimous in their opposition to PHA. "The only way out for PHA is to work in tandem with the city government," he tells TNS.

Kamran Lashari, PHA's outgoing head, says "the city government must also take the responsibility of beautifying the city if it wants to get the revenue. "Responsibility and liability have to be interconnected," he says. "Apparently, the city government wants to get hold of the revenue but does not want to share the work."

What a Lahori wants is a beautiful city, PHA or no. "What the city government says may or may not be true but to a citizen like me the only concern is the beautification of the city," says Javed Arif, a resident of Model Town. "Over the last few years we have seen PHA doing some good things for the city, like setting up food streets and arranging the face-lift of areas otherwise hidden from the public eye. If the city government wants to take over PHA it must continue with the kind of work the authority is doing," he observes.



PHA's contributions: Food Streets and flowers. Photos by Rahat Dar