**How to escape the long arm of the law**

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The message from Zaman Park, Lahore is loud and clear: Imran Khan is a popular leader and thus needs ‘special treatment’. The courts should wait for hours if he has to appear before them. The police have no right to serve non-bailable arrest warrants or even dare to arrest him. He can defy the police, courts and law with a couple of thousand hardcore activists who can allegedly throw petrol bombs and stones on the police.

I want to make one thing clear: I am not a supporter of the use of brutal state power against political activists and ordinary people. The state must protect people’s basic human and constitutional rights before taking any action. I personally oppose any kind of repression and suppression carried out by the state without any legal or constitutional justification and logic.

But what happened in Zaman Park Lahore is not a simple case of state repression and brutal use of force. Khan and PTI workers did everything to stop the police from entering his residence, and they were quite violent with law-enforcement officers.

Khan has now sent a clear message that he is above the law and untouchable. His actions have asserted that NAB, the FIA and the police have no right to investigate him on any charges. The reason is simple. He considers himself a clean and honest man and sees his opponents as corrupt and dishonest.

We were told for years through the media that Khan was the saviour of this nation. Now thousands of his supporters strongly believe this; they also believe in the propaganda spread to sideline and undermine the mainstream political leaders and parties. Even when events point to the fact that Khan is no different from other leaders, his supporters do not accept this reality.

Whoever planned this police action in Zaman Park must be congratulated for sending a clear message that the state can impose its writ on only the weak and the marginalized. Khan has emerged much stronger after the Zaman Park fiasco. He has proved to his supporters that he is still stronger than his opponents sitting in the power corridors. It is a morale-boosting victory for the PTI.

The federal coalition government led by the PML-N has lost further political capital in this fiasco. The government has exposed its weaknesses and vulnerability.

Khan has made it the new normal to appear in the courts with hundreds of hardcore workers. He appears before the courts with big processions and courts are allowing this to happen. This is special treatment for a special political leader who was nurtured to defame and oust the other established political leaders.

We are setting another dangerous precedent. But others must think before they dare to behave like Imran Khan. They will need to build their image of a clean man who never commits any sin. They will need a certificate from the apex court declaring them ‘Sadiq and Ameen’, and 24/7 coverage in the media. Such people will need support from within state institutions and structures to survive, and someone to bail them out when they are in trouble. Other leaders should not do anything like Imran Khan if they are not a popular leader. They will also need judicial intervention and leniency whenever required.

Khan had contested the 2018 general elections on the slogan “do nahin, aik Pakistan”, which was printed on panaflex banners and installed across Lahore. This slogan was used to convey the message that all Pakistanis would be treated fairly and justly, and nobody would get special treatment from the law, which would be applied equally. It promised that Pakistan would be run on the principles of the state of Medina. The principles of equality, supremacy of law, social and economic justice and fairness will be applied.

Imran Khan failed miserably to apply these principles when he was in power. Now he is demanding special treatment like the rest of the elite. The fact is that the Pakistani elite considers itself above the law. The ruling elite flouts the laws and the constitution openly without any fear of accountability. They lecture people about following and respecting the law but blatantly defy it whenever the law tries to take its course.

Powerful officials, individuals and institutions in this country enjoy impunity. They can violate the constitution and the laws with ease to achieve their goals and protect their economic and political interests. These events continue to remind us that we are living in a country where the law is applied selectively.

If people are rich, powerful and influential, they can get away with heinous crimes. The ruling elite in Pakistan has long been believed that it is above the law due to its political power, money and influence. This attitude is perpetuated by a general lack of accountability and law enforcement as well as by a culture of corruption and impunity. The ruling elite has also been able to use its power to avoid prosecution or punishment in the cases of abuse of power or other unlawful activities and wrongdoings.

The criminal justice system is weak. Accountability is limited to political victimization and witch-hunt. The prevalence of nepotism and patronage networks makes it difficult for the law to be applied fairly and evenly.

Also, rampant poverty and widespread inequality in Pakistan have caused the law to be applied selectively. Those with more resources and connections are more likely to receive favourable treatment and be less likely to be punished for their wrongdoings.

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