**Rule by mob**

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This past week’s widely publicized case of a mob seeking to attack a young woman in Lahore on the suspicion of blasphemy flowing from her attire was a powerful reminder of a lingering threat to Pakistan’s daily life.

The event on Sunday in the crowded ‘Ichhra’ neighbourhood could have become ugly without the timely and brave intervention by a young police officer.

Notwithstanding the images of Assistant Police Superintendent Syeda Sheharbano Naqvi fearlessly escorting the young woman clad in a ‘burqa’ away from a charged crowd, the event said much about Pakistan’s slide on multiple fronts.

These range from a consistently compromised quality surrounding rule of law to the growing trend among the public to take the law in their hands. Ultimately, this tragic slide has brought Pakistan closer to a de facto rule by one mob or another rather than justice delivered by a well-functioning state.

In this case too, the evidence ultimately from the scene suggested that the woman who was targeted for her shirt bearing words in Arabic carried a message of love and affection crafted in calligraphy style.

While police officer Naqvi indeed qualifies for a rich commendation, her unique role does not change the character of the environment that surrounds Pakistan today. Indeed, the glaring reality of the prevalent and popular mood stems from two broad trends that have evolved over time.

First, the breakdown of rule of law is rooted in factors ranging from the politicization of the government machinery to the abrupt devolution of government authority under the tenure of former president Gen Pervez Musharraf. While the authority of senior government officials including civil service and police officials was systematically weakened, a new and efficient ruling order has still not evolved to take charge. It is hardly surprising that the writ of the Pakistani state, which was heavily diluted following the devolution plan, has further weakened over time with no indication of the slide about to be halted.

Second, Pakistan’s failure to block the misuse of religion in targeting of individuals has only given increasing confidence to the perpetrators of this crime. And, while those who operate in the name of religion have gained considerable clout, the state of Pakistan and its society have simply stepped back from bearing any responsibility to fix this disorder.

Appreciating this slide is all the more vital as Pakistan’s recently elected governments have taken power in the provinces while they are about to step in to rule over Islamabad. Their choices for the future are set to decide the direction of Pakistan as the country grapples with a range of societal, political and economic pitfalls.

Instead, fanciful choices such as offering free Wi-Fi for Lahore or the creation of five new IT cities in Punjab – promised by newly elected Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz in her first speech – will hardly address Pakistan’s acutest challenges. As the country remains surrounded by high inflation and spiralling food prices along with acute challenges on the security front, the priorities for the new government ought to be radically different.

On the one hand, a bold agenda for the future must foremost address adverse societal trends that could dangerously escalate violence on the streets of Pakistan. Faced with a dangerous trend, it is vital to use all national platforms from parliament to the media and independent forums to evolve a national consensus in favour of exactly what kind of a country Pakistan should become. On the face of it, it is already very clear that Pakistan’s mainstream population, though religious and committed to Islamic values, notably does not favour radical choices.

At the same time, it is equally vital to address the condition of the state’s machinery, notably the structure of the civil service and the police in relation to their ability to enforce the law. Unless such a review is urgently undertaken and followed up with reforms to lift the quality of the government’s own performance, the capacity of the state to take charge of Pakistan will just lag behind.

On the other hand, as Pakistan remains surrounded by a very dismal economic outlook, it is incumbent upon its recently elected governments to urgently press ahead with long overdue reforms. For instance, instead of devoting increasingly shrinking public funds to projects for building of infrastructure, it is vital to reform the country’s present framework.

Rather than setting aside funds for new showcase projects, Pakistan urgently needs to begin tackling the underperformance of its agriculture sector which holds the key to controlling spectacular increases in food prices in recent years. In a country where almost half of the population depends entirely or partially on farm incomes, the agriculture sector holds the key to stability.

Ultimately, Pakistan is blessed to be gifted with icons such as police officer Naqvi. But that alone will not halt a potentially reckless and eventually dangerous slide.

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