**Change in the air**

[Dr Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-syed-hussain-shaheed-soherwordi)

September 10, 2018

Pakistan finds itself at a critical juncture in its history. Election 2018 saw the emergence of the PTI as the largest party that went on to form government with the help of small parties and independents.

The party’s victory has been hailed as a sign of change and the rise of progressive forces. It reflects the PTI’s good governance and reforms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where it has improved its representation in the provincial assembly from less than a simple majority to a two-thirds majority.

The PTI government in KP was probably the first political government in the country to carry out substantial and far-reaching police reforms in the country since Independence.

In his book, titled ‘The Faltering State”, Tariq Khosa, an outstanding police officer, describes the ex-IGP and two other officers, in his words: “During my service, three police officers have left an indelible mark on me and were truly inspirational leaders: the Late Syed Sadaat Ali Shah...Z I Rathore… and Muhammad Abbas Khan. They all had one trait in common: the courage to say “no” to higher authorities issuing irregular or illegal orders. They picked battles with the high and mighty… As a tribute to these mentors, I have tried to focus on the depoliticisation of the police”.

In 1996, a paper titled ‘Problems of Law and Order, and Police Reforms’ was published. It was written by Muhammad Abbas Khan who was then Punjab IGP. Abbas Khan had the distinction of serving as a commandant of the Frontier Constabulary; the IGP of Punjab, Sindh and KP; the federal secretary; and a provincial minister. He was a member of the Abbottabad Commission, the chairman of KP’s Search and Scrutiny Committee and the Ehtesab Commission; and also shares the distinct honour with Qurban Ali Khan of having a police lines named after him in Lahore – and that too after his retirement.

Abbas Khan recommended far-reaching police reforms. His recommendations were based on the proposals contained in the reports of experts from Japan who had visited Pakistan on the then government’s invitation. Japanese experts offered their suggestions by using the example of Japan’s police, which is considered to be one of the best police forces in the world.

The experts recommended reforms in the concept of policing. They suggested that the forces should move away from being a “police for the government” and become a “police for the people”. The broader recommendations involved creating a new police force that was to be democratically controlled, politically neutral, and professional.

The institutions that would be required to implement these concepts were:

the National Public Safety Commission; the prefectural/provincial safety commissions; and the National Police Agency.

The police reforms introduced the Musharraf era, contained in the Police Order 2002, incorporated most of these proposals in the new law. The Police Act of 1861 was repealed. But before the 2002 order could be implemented, major amendments were made in the law that eventually removed its substance and let the shell remain. It was believed that the amendments were made to appease politicians who weren’t comfortable with the idea of a politically neutral and independent police force.

The PTI chief had quoted extensively from Mohammad Abbas Khan’s paper on police reforms during his public meetings. After the PTI assumed public office in KP in the 2013 elections, it selected Nasir Khan Durrani – a capable and upright officer – to lead the KP Police and pilot the police reforms.

This was an uphill task in KP as Durrani had to overcome strong and sustained opposition from those with vested interests. However, with the continued support of the PTI chief, the reforms were finally approved and a new provincial police law was enacted to provide a legal cover to the reforms. Another key constitutional amendment that the PTI wholeheartedly supported was the Fata reforms and the merger of the tribal belt with KP. The party expressed unambiguous support for the recommendations put forward in the report presented by the Sartaj Aziz-led Fata Commission. This was in sharp contrast to the approach adopted by previous provincial governments, which had invariably created hurdles for Fata reforms.

The Fata reforms process was initiated in 1997 when a proposal was moved to the federal cabinet to grant the right to adult franchise to the residents of the tribal areas. Until this point, this universal right had been denied to them. The move was initiated by Omar Khan Afridi, the then Safron minister. Abbas Khan, who had also served as the Safron secretary, played a key role in ensuring the success of the move by extending complete support for it and fending off hurdles that were being created by the then provincial government to frustrate the move. The cabinet subsequently approved the proposal and accorded the right of vote to all adults in the tribal areas in 1997.

The PTI is likely to benefit from its support for the recommendations put forward in the Fata Commission’s report and the merger of Fata with KP. With the PTI at the helm in the centre and in three provinces, police reforms are likely to be carried out at both the federal and provincial levels.

Reforms in other spheres of governance can also be expected – especially in the laws and the organisations responsible for curbing corruption, which is now rampant. Efforts to create autonomous local government structures, reform election laws, and improve governance can be also expected. Change is in the air. Let’s pray that it succeeds.

The writer is the director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Peshawar.