**[Politics of police reform](https://www.dawn.com/news/1596614/politics-of-police-reform)**

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AT the time of elections and during their tenure, political parties vehemently profess their commitment to police reform. It is educative to read the manifestos of the three leading major political parties of Pakistan as a way of evaluating their intentions about reforming the police.

In their manifesto, the PPP deals with the police along with the civil armed forces, broadly mentioning the need for enhancing the autonomy, intelligence and operational capacity of law-enforcement agencies. This is followed by random mention of computerisation, counterterrorism, gender imbalance and response capacity.

The PPP manifesto then talks about the enhancement of resources and induction of police officers in terms of the UN peacekeeping experience to benefit from their work in conflict zones. This part of the document seems to have been drafted without any understanding of the role of civilian police as an essential part of the criminal justice system.

It is ironic that political governments have not built on the democratic principles of a law introduced by a dictator.

On the other hand, the entirety of the PML-N’s wisdom and reflections on police reform seems to have been encapsulated in a single spare sentence pledging to “reform the police service through initiatives such as smart policing and community policing in order to make the police force citizen friendly and an efficient crime-fighting agent”. To say the least, this is a sad reflection on the commitment of these major parties in reforming the most important arm of the state to maintain public order and peace in the country.

It is only the PTI that accorded this issue due importance and identified the broad fundamental issues of depoliticisation and strengthening of police. In addition to delineating the steps for achieving these objectives, the PTI undertook to replicate the KP Police Act, 2017, in other provinces, professionalise police through reorganisation and provide specialised training. It further undertook to improve public outreach to police and to address the gender imbalance by recruiting more females into the force.

The manifestos of 2018 rightly gave hope that the PTI would address this most important aspect of reforms comprehensively with due impact on the entire criminal justice system. However, it is unfortunate that after winning the 2018 election, the PTI demonstrated conspicuous reluctance to follow the KP Act, 2017, with IGPs keen to implement the reforms in true spirit being shown the proverbial door.

The PTI has showcased the KP police reform as a model to be emulated by all police forces in Pakistan. On the other hand, the other three provinces, wrongly presuming that the 18th Amendment gave them the exclusive authority to legislate police law, sought various ways to frustrate any reform despite the existence of Police Order, 2002, originally the blueprint for the KP police law. While Punjab amended the Police Order, Sindh introduced a new law (albeit retaining some parts of Police Order 2002), and Balochistan reverted to Police Act, 1861, thus practically freezing any progress on reform. The federal government chose to continue with the 150-year-old Police Act for the capital territory.

A military ruler promulgated Police Order, 2002, for creating a politically neutral, democratically controlled and accountable police force. Ironically, successive political governments have refused to create the structures to ensure political neutrality and a credible accountability framework, thus frustrating the very purpose of the democratic principles so carefully woven into the 2002 police reform by a dictator. Due to the continued and wanton use of police by the party in power for political considerations, a people-friendly police force has remained an elusive dream, and ordinary citizens suffer at the hands of a police force which is functioning in a legal void to the lasting benefit of vested interests.

Dismayed by the inaction of political governments to reform the police and the resulting deterioration of the entire criminal justice system, the then chief justice of Pakistan, in order to address the root cause of the collapsing criminal justice system, decided to use the platform of the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan for establishing a police reforms committee comprising nine former inspectors general of police with an established record of leading and implementing reforms at different stages in Pakistan. The sitting IGPs were also co-opted in this committee and comprehensive terms of reference covering all important aspects of law enforcement with an emphasis on relief to the vulnerable segment of the society was notified in 2018.

Within five months, the committee produced a two-volume police reforms report after in-depth consideration of all aspects of policing in Pakistan. It produced a model police law to be introduced in every federating unit of Pakistan. This law was based on the 2002 model incorporating some amendments to address new developments and challenges faced by the police in a fast-changing world impacted by information technology.

The second volume of this report specifically addressed urban police structures, the alternate dispute resolution system, police accountability, improvement in investigation, combating of terrorism by the criminal justice system and some amendments in various laws. This report was submitted to the government of Pakistan and the provinces with recommendation for implementation.

In the meantime, the issue of the jurisdiction of the federation and the provinces for legislation on police was also resolved by the superior judiciary during hearing of public interest petitions. The seven-member bench of the Supreme Court held that the federal government and the provinces had concurrent jurisdiction with primacy of the federal law in case of any conflict over provincial legislation. Yet even this judgement by the Supreme Court of Pakistan has been brazenly ignored.

Despite the existence of this recently drafted report by the sitting police leadership and nine retired senior officers with input from the highest level of judiciary, the government instead of benefiting from this contribution has chosen to ignore this document. This constitutes an unspoken refusal to reform the police as an autonomous and professional institution for ensuring the ‘rule of law’, an act that is anathema to the political elite. Police reforms will therefore remain a hollow political slogan with horrendous impact on future governance and politics of Pakistan.

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