**[The thin blue line in crisis](https://www.dawn.com/news/1829658/the-thin-blue-line-in-crisis)**

[Afzal Ali Shigri](https://www.dawn.com/authors/4611/afzal-ali-shigri) Published April 26, 2024 Updated a day ago

THE spotlight on Pakistan’s police force tends to be for all the wrong reasons. Political parties frequently include police reform in their manifestos and statements. However, this commitment often seems like a mere ritual. Periodically, commissions, committees, and experts are engaged to suggest reforms. Yet, their recommendations typically end up being superficially implemented, and are ultimately consigned to the archives.

Even when reforms are introduced, they’re often not taken seriously. If their implementation challenges arbitrary government decisions, they’re reversed or abandoned. It’s a cycle where change is promised, but meaningful progress remains elusive, leaving the police system stagnant and ineffective.

This approach has had a destructive impact on our policing. Resultantly, successive governments, instead of considering this central aspect of governance when facing law-and-order challenges, often look for quick-fix solutions. The easy way out is to call in the civil armed forces that were created for the specific functions of protecting the borders and enforcing the law in areas governed under special laws for a predetermined period.

This option has so frequently been applied that it has practically become a regular feature of law enforcement, resulting in the overlap of jurisdictions, without delineation of the spheres of responsibility of two forces. Karachi is a classic example of such an arrangement that has continued for many years. According to the law, the responsibility of crime control and maintenance of peace lies with the police. The civil armed forces have a supporting role to play.

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A force permanently deployed in a certain jurisdiction cannot work in a supporting role indefinitely and is, therefore, delegated policing powers for a fixed period, creating a dichotomy in the most important function of the state. If prolonged reliance on the civil armed forces is inevitable, the government should enact a special law and assign a specified area for policing to them so that they are held accountable for their actions.

Here’s a summary of common grievances against the police:

i) The police often resort to harsh methods reminiscent of colonial-era suppression, especially in the rural areas, with little or no accountability for their actions.

ii) The katcha area in two provinces has turned into a lawless no-go zone and a safe haven for gangs of dacoits, who resort to violent crime in the cities and towns and then return to this riverine area.

iii) Urban megacities suffer from a notable policing failure to control crime, leading to the proliferation of organised crime syndicates and rampant street crime.

iv) Corruption within the police, coupled with undue external influences, undermines trust in law enforcement, leaving citizens with no recourse even in the case of minor incidents.

v) Frequent incidents of terrorism perpetuate an atmosphere of fear among the people who hold the police responsible for this situation.

vi) A dysfunctional criminal justice system fails to convict criminals, allowing them to operate with impunity, thus continuing a cycle of crime and victimisation, and the police being the coercive arm of the criminal justice system is held responsible.

The routine response to these complaints includes new draconian laws that give vast powers to the executive, the establishment of new law-enforcement units/ institutions, special courts, and funds for fancy equipment. To make matters worse, the postings of officers at command level generally violate the rules and the much-trumpeted policy of merit in political manifestos. When these officers fail to deliver, resulting in protests, they are suspended and penalised and scapegoated for any failure. Successive governments have failed to reform the criminal justice system, particularly its core component, the police force.

Ironically, amidst numerous reports from commissions and committees, it was a dictator who, in 2002, repealed the antiquated colonial-era police law. This legislation addressed all fundamental aspects of policing, drawing from international best practices in law enforcement. It established an operationally independent police force democratically overseen by civil society. The streamlining included upgraded command structures and specialisation.

Moreover, it introduced civil society oversight through various tiers of public safety commissions and ensured accountability using independent police complaint authorities for each police force. And yet, this law was mutilated with the advent of a political government under the same ruler.

Subsequently, under the guise of the 18th Constitutional Amendment, elected governments legislated a new provincial police law, rendering it corrupt beyond recognition, in violation of a Supreme Court ruling declaring the police law a concurrent subject. Strangely, the 1861 Police Act remains the valid law for ICT, blatantly flouting a high court judgement.

In 2018, the then Supreme Court chief justice, alarmed by public grievances regarding policing, convened a committee of nine retired IGPs under the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan. Tasked with examining key issues in policing, the committee proposed recommendations for government action. These encompassed a standardised model for police law, enhanced police accountability, improved investigation procedures, alternative dispute resolution methods, urban policing strategies, counterterrorism measures by the criminal justice system, and legislative reforms.

Comprising both retired and serving police officers, this committee produced a comprehensive report within six months, following rigorous consultation. Copies of the report were distributed to all the provinces, with directives to consider and act upon it in accordance with judgements issued by the superior courts on related matters. However, the provinces displayed little interest.

The glaring lack of action and genuine effort towards enacting substantive reforms underscores the struggle to achieve meaningful police reform. This inertia is fuelled by entrenched interests and short-term political motives that favour a police force lacking in accountability, strength, and independence, and serving the ruling elite rather than ensuring the safety and peace pledged to the public.

It is imperative for political leaders to acknowledge that sustainable security and peace cannot coexist with a flawed policing apparatus. Instead of scapegoating an already compromised institution, it is time for introspection and decisive corrective measures to rectify systemic issues.

*The writer is former IGP Sindh and convener of the Police Reforms Committee, Law and Justice Commission.*

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