## Insecurity of violence

BY A R I FA N O O R 2023-05-09

SOMETIMES it appears that not much is written about Pakistan, its society and politics, and even less is noticed and discussed. Perhaps because, as a people, we read so little. But, despite this, books on Karachi tend to get better press, so to speak. Consider Laurent Gayer`s Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City, or Steve Inskeep`s Instant City: Life and Death in Karachi. Other than the Bhutto family (and Imran Khan), Karachi is worth publishing on. And it is just not the West; considerable English fiction produced within is based on this chaotic metropolis.

Academic research includes Zoha Waseem`s Insecure Guardians: Enforcement, Encounters and Everyday Policing in Postcolonial Karachi. The author focuses on the origins of the police force how it was set up as a colonial force to control rather than police a community, and its securitisation, where the police are not seen as a force controlling crime but where national security allows the state to suppress political dissent and expand and centralise its power.

This is obviously just a simplification of the argument; but then, a journalist can go only so far in understanding the world of academia.

However, what struck me while reading the book was the number of operations in Karachi this is not to say the number has been a secret, but just that it hit home hard.

While in our short memories, we equate terrorism with post 9/11 events, in Karachi, the issue goes back much further. It appeared back in 1985, when the then IG promised to crush terrorism. This was followed by an operation to clean up Sohrab Goth in the city. It was hardly the first one in a city where operations are as familiar to the residents as perhaps the humidity. But the targets were political, though the operations were described as being in the `greater good`. If earlier, the Zia years had witnessed a crackdown on PPP and Sindhi nationalists, the party was targeted again by Jam Sadiqand Irfanullah Marwat.

Then came Operation Clean Up in 1992 by the military against the MQM, which soon gave way to a civilian-led operation with exactly the same objective. The military was replaced by the police and the political leadership but with little change in tactics. This one ended with the assassination of Murtaza Bhutto and the removal of the Benazir Bhutto government. After the Musharraf regime, came the Lyari operation as well as the larger one in the city, which were made part of the National Action Plan. And yet, even after all these operations, the city is far from safe. One wonders if the cycle will continue.

This hits home not just because of the continuing instability in Karachi but also due to instability in another part of the country where, too, the state carried out an operation to `clean up`. Here, more than just a city was involved. Here, too, we declared `mission accomplished` before the violence began again. But there is a qualitative difference between the two.

Every operation in Karachi has initiated a debate; while there have been cheerleaders, there have also been critics who questioned the decision to undertake operations, human rights violations and the capacity of these efforts to actually address the challenges facing the city.

Curiously, there has been little such debate over the military operations in the northwest of the country. Perhaps the widespread acceptance that the rise of the TTP was an existential threat to Pakistan created such a sense offear that there was little opposition to, or questioning of, the decision to carry out the operations.

While there was some criticism over specific instances, the need for military operations with the use of heavy weaponry (including air power) was rarely questioned. Their `success` added to the silence: as the incidents of terrorism went down, it simply rationalised the initial decision.Intriguingly, in the initial years, there was also very little coverage of the dissenting voices of the inhabitants of these areas, who tried to highlight how they were affected by these efforts. Was it simply due to distance? Karachi is easier to report on and cover, as opposed to, say, the former Fata region. Or was it the fear of the militants? Once the `conflict` appeared to be over and the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement was born, the PTM`s voice was prevented from being amplified in the mainstream.

Even now, as the threat seems to be re-emerging, the questions that are being asked are about the absence of action and not about whether the operations conducted previously had approached the issue correctly. Many seem to agree that another operation is needed if not now, then soon enough. But to what end? In hindsight, it seems all we did was push the `problem` the militants across the border, and with the change of regime in Kabul, they are now allowed to operate with impunity. On our own side, little effort has been made to understand how to deal with the problem in case it re-emerged.

The police, which wasn`t able to withstand the onslaught of the TTP in, say, Swat, in 2007-2008, appears to be equally vulnerable at the moment.

Not only are they ill-equipped, some go so far as to say that they are short of the basics, including fuel for their vehicles. The only difference this time around is the pushback from the citizens of the affected areas, who are protesting the return of the Taliban and the possibility of another operation.

Can one hope that, if the violence exacerbates, the reaction is not a knee-jerk reaction; ie, another operation? Instead, solutions should be found by trying to understand the root cause of the ailments, be it in Karachi or the northwestern areas.  The writer is a joumalist.