[**The impact on police morale**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1604241/the-impact-on-police-morale)

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RECENTLY, Islamabad witnessed a serious crime wave preceding the [tragic death of a young man](https://www.dawn.com/news/1599257) in firing by police personnel on duty. The indiscriminate use of deadly force by police drew vociferous criticism from the media and civil society.

Crime control and the operational duties of police are the direct responsibility of senior commanders under the IGP, and as immediate supervisors of their subordinates, they are answerable for any lapses resulting from weak monitoring. In a case of excessive use of force, the normal procedure involves a magisterial inquiry to ascertain the facts of the incident, determine the role of the police officers concerned, and, if neglect or any other motive is established, fix responsibility for criminal action. Under intense pressure, the police made the request for a judicial inquiry and registered a criminal case under the anti-terrorism law without awaiting the outcome of the former; the nominated policemen were immediately arrested.

To further soften the criticism, in a knee-jerk reaction the police chief of the capital city was unceremoniously transferred and made an OSD. Worse, an impression was created that the officer had been transferred prematurely due to his incompetence. This decision was made only to deflect criticism of the government for its failure to introduce the promised reforms that would check the wanton use of force by police.

The transferred police official had performed his duties efficiently for more than two years and focused his attention on his primary responsibilities as chief. He maintained order and controlled crime despite the endemic shortage of resources of manpower, equipment and transport. These difficulties did not deter him from accepting the numerous challenges that tested his nerve and competence to the limit. He addressed key issues for bringing lasting improvement in the ranks of the capital police.

Whimsical transfers of senior officers leave lasting scars on the collective psyche of the police.

There was no fresh recruitment for almost 10 years in the police. He initiated recruitment of police at various levels through a transparent process. He also cleared the backlog of promotions of members of the force at various levels, thus restoring confidence of the police in their leadership. He took over the Safe City project which was in the initial stages of gestation and faced glitches and maintenance problems. He made the project fully functional and was also able to complete a purpose-built office for the central police headquarters that was earlier housed in constabulary barracks.

For operational duties, he was, however, hamstrung by an archaic police law of 1857 which, despite the legal requirement that it be replaced with the new police law of 2002 with the induction of local government, remains in force. Under this law, he lacked operational and administrative autonomy and his officers at senior and mid-command levels were posted by the interior ministry or the local chief commissioner.

Even within this compromised arrangement, he did a good job in dealing with numerous crises that required deft handling due to the continuous media focus on the capital city. Under his guidance, the situation was never allowed to get out of hand. Despite an overall good track record, the government suddenly transferred a good officer under external pressure. Governments should learn to act with grace. Similar whimsical transfers of senior officers in other provinces and now in Islamabad leave lasting scars on the collective psyche of these law-enforcement institutions.

It must be understood that police personnel comprising armed uniformed manpower are exposed daily to high-risk operations and tend to form an emotional bonding with their commanders as comrades in arms. The maltreatment of their commanders puts the entire force under stress with a long-term negative impact on their performance and exposes the fragility of the entire set-up that is then perceived as being vulnerable to quirky political decisions.

If the head of the force is held responsible for an individual case of indiscipline or poor performance, thereby ignoring his exemplary record of two years and projecting him as a failure, it is likely that the men he has led will not accept the decision and lose all confidence in the sagacity of the government. This attenuates the morale of the force, thus preventing it from functioning effectively and facing the daily challenge of highly volatile and violent situations due to the existing challenges of extremism and terrorism confronted by these men.

Disgracing the police chief is not reform. If the government has any interest in reforming our police, it should immediately notify the application of Police Order 2002 and set up all the institutional structures of civilian oversight and independent police complaint authorities, thus letting the institutional arrangement hold the police accountable for all its actions. Taking important decisions such as the transfer of police chiefs on the basis of anecdotal evidence negates the claims of institution-building.

Without waiting for the promised reform, a decision that can be taken quickly (which would make an immediate difference to the situation) is the posting of a competent police officer after due diligence. Such an officer should be selected purely on merit with a fixed tenure so that any transfer that is made prematurely takes place through a neutral and transparent process already defined by the law. With merit-based selection and an assured tenure, he will be able to work in peace instead of worrying about his survival and turning into a darbari when he should be serving the people.

One good professional officer commanding a disciplined, armed force will make a huge difference and give relief to a large population with a salutary impact on overall governance.

Lastly, if a transfer is necessary out of political considerations then at least the dignity of the office of police chief should be protected and the change should be made gracefully without any kind of stigmatisation. It is unfortunate that this government and previous dispensations have paid only lip service to police reform, yet they try singularly to change the police for the worse and outdo their predecessors to ruin an already weakened institutional arrangement.

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