**Victimizing the Punjab Police**

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The past few days have shown that Punjab has no citizen-police liaison body, which could evaluate the performance of police officers and reward those who served the citizens aptly during a given tenure. Everything has been subjected to the will of the political masters as if the police were their servants.

This August 14 saw the Punjab Government led by Chief Minister Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi shuffling the positions of dozens of police officers, including Superintendent of Police (SP) and Deputy Superintendent of Police in the province, especially in Lahore. The objective was not to provide Lahore with efficient police but to seek revenge for what happened on May 25, when the long march of the Pakistan Tehreke Insaf (PTI) failed to take off from Lahore.

On May 25, defying Section 144, the Lahore-based leadership of the PTI tried to draw together party workers to initiate the Punjab chapter of the Haqeeqi Azadi March (Real Freedom March). The idea was to replicate the Azadi March of August 14, 2014, carried out by the PTI and the Pakistan Awami Tehrek (PAT). At that time, the PTI chairman Imran Khan and the PAT chairman Allama Tahir-ul Qadri were considered conjoined twins; fighting for the shared cause of regime change. Both wanted to topple the central government of the then Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif.

This time, the PTI might have thought of repeating the 2014 episode, but the party overlooked the fact that it enjoyed the unfettered support of neither the PAT nor the intelligence agencies. This time, the PTI was to its own devices, and this was where the PTI faltered, though the Khyber Pakthunkhwa chapter of the long march led by the PTI chairman yielded promising results. The PTI’s Lahore-based leadership was not in a position to replicate the past performance, especially when PTI Chairman was absent. Consequently, the attempt made on May 25 met a failure.

Any prospective long march would land on the ground between the H-9 and G-9 areas of Islamabad, infeasible to the PTI’s protest objectives.

The failure of one chapter of the long march exposed the weakness inherent in the PTI. That is, it is led by one man; it is devoid of a constellation of leadership; and it is otiose without the one man, the PTI chairman.

When did Hammad Azhar lead a rally from Lahore to Islamabad before this? Never! The same is true about Mian Mahmood ur Rasheed, Shafqat Mehmood, Andleeb Abbass, Dr Yasmin Rashid, and other stalwarts of the PTI. None of them can take up such a gigantic challenge. In 2014, even the PTI chairman had to seek support from outside the party. Further, politicians such as Mian Mehmood ur Rasheed are old hands, not novices like Hammad Azhar. Did they not know that the police could arrest them to neutralize the rally?

The veterans lacked confidence that they could accomplish the arduous task. This was why they surrendered rather agreeably, except for Dr Yasmin Rashid, who put up resistance to multiply her political capital. She needed to get elected next time. This was sheer politics. Nevertheless, the blame for the failure of the long march was laid squarely on the police, which was made whipping boy that dared stop the enthused PTI workers from crossing the Ravi Bridge en route to Islamabad.

Section 144 is not imposed by the police to deal with protestors of any hue but by the executive under the advice of the political government. The police are just an implementing force. The PTI knew this fact, as the party had tasted power both in provinces and at the Center.

May 25 personified a power struggle between the provincial coalition government headed by Hamza Shahbaz Sharif and the PTI. The power struggle was not of the police’s making. The police working in Lahore were the same that were deployed during the tenure of the PTI-led provincial government, run by the then CM Usman Buzdar. The police could not change their face. It was the political masters that had to decide what they demanded from the police.

Unfortunately, in the power struggle, the citizens of Lahore have suffered. They have lost the services of several brilliant police officers, who were transferred on August 14, 2022. This limited word space permit mentions of just two of them. One was Waqar Azeem Kharal, who was the SP Operations Model Town, Lahore. He was an officer known for his dedication to his work. Honest and daring, he had come to Lahore with the experience of SP City Peshawar, SP Operations Mardan, and SP City Gujranwala. The citizens found him working almost round the clock. His absence is felt deeply. The other was Akhlaq Ullah Tarar, who was the SP City, Lahore. A brave officer and a prolific writer, he spent his initial service years in Quetta, serving as SP Sariab, the area where wearing a bulletproof jacket is a must. In just a few months of tenure in Lahore, he made his mark. Both became victims of political vengeance and were ordered to report to the office of the Capital City Police Officer. Reportedly, their services were diverted from Lahore. Political tussle consumes brilliant police officers, making Lahore barren.

If the Lahore police were able to frustrate Haqeeqi Azadi March heading towards Islamabad on May 25, no one stopped the PTI from launching another such march in the wake of the Haqeeqi Azadi gathering on August 13 at the National Hockey Stadium Lahore. After the shuffle in the police department, the Lahore police are amenable to the PTI’s provincial government run by CM Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi. Now the PTI can mobilize its workers to launch another long march on Islamabad. Nevertheless, it is known that the PTI cannot launch any such march at least this year for two reasons. First, the PTI’s Lahore-based leadership is incapable of taking such an initiative. Second, any prospective long march would land on the ground between the H-9 and G-9 areas of Islamabad, infeasible to the PTI’s protest objectives.

No doubt, protest is a democratic right of every citizen. On May 23, in Model Town Lahore, some PTI workers shot dead a police constable, Kamal Ahmed. What happened to the case? CM Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi must answer this question.

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