**Traffic violations**

BY H A J R A H M U M T A Z 2021-12-17

THERE are the big crimes, and then the little, everyday ones. The big ones generate horror, fear and even at times awe; the petty, unthinking, routine violations, though, act as corrosive acid eating away at the soul. Traffic violations, for example, are a routine reality across the country the motorways being possibly the only exception.

In general, prohibitive punishments go a long way towards effective deterrence. So, recently, the Lahore High Court ordered the imposition of a Rs2,000 fine for traffic violations, especially the violation of one-ways.

The bulk of such offenders are, as all of us experience daily, motorcyclists and rickshaws. (Not that the rich and powerful are exactly known for their desire to adhere to any laws at all, traffic or otherwise.) But in connection with the former category, the lord mayor Lahore retired Col Mubashir Javed requested that the court reduce the fine on compassionate grounds.

During the Dec 14 hearing on smogand pollution-related petitions, Mr Javed said that a rickshaw driver earns barely Rs700 or so in a day, and presented the example of a woman and her son on a motorcycle, flagged down on Canal Road. Reportedly, she burst into tears when the traffic warden issued a Rs2,000 ticket. `The woman did not even have Rs200,` said the mayor passionately.

The request was turned down by the judge, who rejected the assertion that the fine was excessive and exorbitant. His view was that `a collective effort` was the need of the hour.

This news item in particular resonated with me because a few days earlier, attempting to leave a busy commercial area where my car had been parked for some hours in a public parking space, I found my vehicle blocked by two others, illegally doubleparked. There were no traffic wardens around. Eventually, I found the drivers and they moved their cars but not before aggressive assertions that in fact it was I who had been wrongly parked, since the shop beyond the footpath was theirs. That it was public, unmarked, and open parking was lost on these two clearly educated gentlemen.

Isn`t unshakable self-righteousness to be envied? Another recent traffic experience, also in an upmarket commercial area: an SUV had been left parked in exactly the middle of the road, where the driver would assumedly have left it because of congestion but it was causing a logjam of about 30 or so cars, stretching all the way to the main road. A well-heeled lady passing by paused, and exclaimed in English: `What, has it just been left here?` Even as I nodded in indignation, her response silenced me: `Well, if I had a car like that, I too would have left it right there!` So, heavy penalties and better police presence will indeed go some way towards sorting out the mess that is traffic in Pakistan. It has more or less worked on the motorways, after all, and sporadically, here and there, for a while, in other places.

Nevertheless, how much simpler life would be how much more understandable the world if only things were in black and white. Much human endeavour has been spent in searching for simple answers, formulations, and guidance. In the current discussion, that would be to fine those violating traffic rules heavily, prohibitively, and the problem would be solved.

Sadly, for us, though, the world operates in shades of gray and in a series of layered complexities. Coming down with a heavy hand on violators is just one aspect of the problem.

The other is, does the state and its infrastructure provide the grounds to remove the temptation perhaps the necessity of rule-breaking? In the current discussion, have we enough roads, enough parking, at proper levels of maintenance, to support the growing numbers of vehicles? Are there well-thought-out and cohesive plans regarding urban mass transit, and their implementation thereof? According to the record of the Motor Registration Authority of the Punjab Excise and Taxation Department, as it stood in March, a total of 3.99 million vehicles were registered in Lahore during the past decade.

The vehicles include motorcycles, cars, SUVs, rickshaws, ambulances, tractors, trucks, vans and cabs. However, thousands of loader rickshaws have not yet been registered due to a dispute between the transport department and the manufacturers, although they are plying on all roads in Lahore.

In Karachi, meanwhile, in 2018 when the Sindh cabinet was making efforts to expedite the establishment of mass transit systems, it was told that over 6,000 private vehicles and nearly 3,000 motorcycles were being registered in the city every month. There is every reason to believe that the figure would have gone up in the following years.

It`s a double-edged sword: lawbreakers must be punished; but citizens should also have their way paved as much as possible by the state. Patchy efforts, no matter how well meaning or fuelled by frustration, might work once hell freezes over.  The writer is a journalist.

hajrahmumtaz@gmail.com