



## Unignorable imperative

By

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Beginning April until June 19, the Auditor General of Pakistan disclosed embezzlement, irregularities and mismanagement of over Rs 722bn in state offices and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in just one financial year. Even if some of this amount was later recovered why, to begin with, did these misdemeanours take place?

More worrying is the fact that the recovered amount owes itself almost entirely to 'judicial activism' that the regime finds annoying. Overall, the role of the state and its functionaries in this context reflects a level of irresponsibility witnessed for the first time in Pakistan's history.

As bad is the regime's record in enforcing the law, and maintenance of order in society. Admittedly, this chaos also owes itself to the inadequacy of the law enforcers, their biased and cursory investigative practices, and malfunctioning of the lower judiciary. But isn't removing these flaws the state's responsibility? Such outcome isn't amazing, given the fact that the elections, wherein 45 percent of the entries in the electoral rolls were fake, brought this regime into power, and the NRO permitted many otherwise unfit politicians (including many with fake academic qualifications) to become lawmakers.

The regime then appointed suspect characters in key positions in state offices and SOEs, which encouraged bypassing the law. Despite warnings from the judiciary, politicians and observers, the regime delayed remedial action as long as it could, which made lawlessness of all varieties an attractive and beneficial proposition.

As a consequence, crime especially targeted killings that we are condemned to witness everyday are at a record level, and go on despite repeated conciliatory meetings between the warring coalition factions; these meetings are mere deceptions; what continues unabated is the killing of the rivals as in the early 1990s.

Apparently, the coalition partners want to turn the cities (offering prospects of bribery, loot, and land-grabbing) into their fiefdoms, Karachi being their main target. No coalition partner realises that crippling Karachi means freezing almost half the productive capacity of the country's commercial and industrial sectors. Continuing street violence, and consequent daily disruption of economic activity, has hurt Pakistan beyond repair; its image has virtually been destroyed by this chaos. Yet, all the warring coalition partners - self-proclaimed defenders of the law and democracy - don't seem bothered about containing this cancer.

An example of how the regime is 'building' foreign investors' confidence is its treatment of the KESC. This outfit that, until May 9 kept Karachi's industrial and commercial sectors least affected by the power shortfall, is now hostage to just 4,000 laid-off workers who have the backing of the coalition partners. KESC alleges that its offices, power generating units, transmission lines, and equipment are being damaged by its laid-off workers, who were compensated by the voluntary retirement offer package. Yet, the Sindh police is not protecting the KESC offices and installations, which is severely handicapping KESC in supplying electricity.

On the national level, power shortages are crippling life as a whole and hurting the commercial and industrial sectors to a point where they are closing down - a process that holds out horrible prospects for employment of the country's youth that now form more than half the country's population.

After auto fuels disappeared from markets everywhere, except parts of Karachi city, the Minister of Petroleum Dr Asim Hussain (a physician, not energy sector expert) realised what was wrong. And, not surprisingly, all he did was threaten the OMCs, not remedy the circular debt that is preventing the OMCs from stocking up.

Over-reliance on oil, courtesy decades of flawed planning, is a reality. That being so, it is imperative for the state to ensure that the oil industry maintain sufficient stocks at all times but, instead of imposing this discipline and helping the OMCs and refineries to observe it, the state reacted only after the system failed. And this happened despite the 'highest-ever' forex reserves.

While big businesses use unfair competition, benefit of questionable contacts in state offices, smart tax evasion tactics, etc), retailers and wholesalers are a law unto themselves, and hoard and price the goods as they wish; the state doesn't catch them and the trade associations impose no self-regulatory checks on them.

In spite of known cases of cartelization in basic food sectors (wheat, rice, sugar, etc), that fuelled inflation to a point where families opted for collective suicides, the regime took no steps to rein in the black sheep in the retail and wholesale markets, perhaps, because they were serving some powerful vested interests.

Superior judiciary, which was forced to intervene in these matters because of the inactivity of the regime or its involvement in these illegalities, has contributed more than its share in upholding justice. Instead of learning lessons from the court verdicts and mending its ways, the regime prefers to defy them. On the diplomatic front, the regime's performance has been miserable. The secrets that surfaced after the Raymond Davis affair exposed the whole variety of ways, wherein the regime compromised strategic national and security interests. That event, however, was just the tip of the iceberg.

The killing of bin Laden and the PNS Mehran tragedy proved what was an eye-opener for everyone, including the rank and file of the armed forces. On the domestic front, the latest killings - Saleem Shahzad, Sarfraz Shah and five Chechen nationals - exposed for the umpteenth time, the regime's laxity in supervision of the security agencies.

Is Raymond Davis being tried by the US authorities for the crimes he committed in Pakistan, is the US being forced to honour the unanimous resolution of the Pakistan's parliament against drone attacks, or will US-NATO-Afghan interventions in Pakistan go on unabated, remain unanswered questions.

Despite all this, the regime is focused on completing its term. To achieve that end, it is willing to join hands with anyone on any terms. What goes on in the parliament as a whole exposes the profile of our politics. Winston Churchill had, it seems rightly, forecast that politics in Pakistan will become the domain of the rogues.

Put all of it together and you see the total absence of a sense of responsibility in the regime; the variety of crises that crop up everyday exhibit an undeniable lack of competence as well as vision. This mix has proved lethal, and undisputably disqualifies the regime from holding office anymore - change is now an un-ignorable imperative.

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