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Consider this: Shakespeare's tragic romance Romeo Juliet is on. The auditorium of Peshawar University is the venue, and the university's English literary society is the organiser. All of a sudden, during one of the high points of the play, an emotional Romeo takes Juliet in arms and hugs her. Only a few conservatives among the audience wink in disapproval, while the rest rise in applause for the spontaneity of the scene, among them "Juliet's" father as well (eyewitness account by a university veteran).

This was in early 1965.

Fast forward to 2002-2007: (Peshawar reels under the bigots of the opportunistic Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal)

Females cannot appear in billboards. No picture or female depiction in public places. Nishtar Hall, which used to host stage plays and musical concerts, is shut down and famed singers like Gulzar Alam are either in hiding or lie low in profile or leave the city for fear of religious zealots.

Whether the decline in Peshawar, or Malakand's siege by Taliban zealots, the MMA also carries a great part of the responsibility and owes an apology to the Frontier's people. It was the MMA that looked the other way and kept silent as Mangal Bagh, Mufti Munir Shakir, Haji Naamdar, and Maulana Fazlullah established their fiefdoms around Peshawar and Swat.

And now comes July 2009: "Baba, will we be able to play in the street and buy ice cream from the market without fear," one of my nephews asks his father, when told the family is moving to Oman for a new posting.

The fears that Dr Mazhar saw in the eyes of his son and the uncertainty that accompanied the query on ice cream epitomised the socio-political decline that the city has undergone in the past three decades, beginning with the Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan.

The city has virtually turned into a microcosm of the consequences of a disastrous policy pursued by the ruling establishment – personified first by Gen Ziaul Haq and then Gen Pervez Musharraf, equally assisted by the mutual animosity of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in the 1990s.

Foreign airlines have suspended to and from the city. Ever more bunkers and road blocks are appearing on vital link roads. The murders of a USAID worker in March and a UNHCR worker on July 16 have more volatility to the socio-political environment, thus creating an air of fear. That most of the markets have lost their teeming crowds is also a direct consequence of the Peshawarites today live in fear and uncertainty, unnerved by a multitude of factors.

Firstly, the string of abductions – mostly of influential and wealthy people – haunts almost every resident of this city that has seen a dramatic surge in criminal activities. Professional criminal

gangs, which in many cases enjoy political patronage, operate all around the city, often taking cover of various Taliban groups. The latest surge actually began with the plunder and torching of NATO-cargo parked at various terminals in the periphery of the city in December 2008.

Those attacks and abductions – close to 150 in the first four months of this year – injected fear and uncertainty into the hearts and minds of the locals.

Secondly, an extremely corrupt and arduous judicial system compounded by a thoroughly dishonest police has added to the plight of the hapless people, who every now and then hear of news of justice being dispensed by Mangal Bagh Afridi's Islamic courts.

Afridi's associates simply send for people (even living in the city) against whom affectees lodge complaints and seek justice for the simple reason that the existing system doesn't provide justice to the majority of Pakistanis.

The courts are suffering from insufficient staff, resulting in high pendency which again is complicated by the endemic corruption within a system which at times doesn't provide justice even to very senior government officials.

Thirdly, the bunkered leadership of the coalition comprising the ANP and the PPP has done little to assuage people's fears or address fundamental issues of governance. Roads in the city remain potholed, utility services inefficient, and long power outages continue to fuel people's frustrations. Adding to the outrage are the news and rumours of corruption within the ruling coalition – as valid a perception as was during the MMA government. And certain phrases, attributed to people in the seat of power by word of mouth, are visible on rickshaws or other means of public transport. One of them, for instance, says, "Don't talk of Easy Load, it annoys baba". This relates to an important person in the province, who is rumoured to be involved in all lucrative deals and appointments.

Fourthly, the absence of respect for the rule of law among politicians and the bureaucrats as well as the division of administrative powers – governor, chief minister, the corps commander, intelligence outfits – has resulted in insensitivity even to public issues of urgent importance.

Despite being represented in the local government, the provincial assembly and parliament, most people feel disenfranchised just because the contact between the voters and their leaders is minimal. Once voted into power, most MPs launch themselves into the pursuit of lucrative political and financial business. The MMA government did the same. The result; Peshawar, my city, today lives in fear, frustration with the socio-economic structures crumbling in the face of rising crime and the invisible nexus that exists between the world of politics and crime – all under the cover of insurgency.

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