

A state in retreat By Zeenia Shaukat

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IN May, 45-year-old Mahmood Akhtar committed suicide by setting himself on fire outside the Punjab chief minister's (CM) office after failing to meet the CM regarding an application for a house under a government scheme. The father of four had sought the CM's intervention after his file, submitted to the complaints cell, failed to elicit an adequate response.

Why did Akhtar go so far? More importantly, why did he want to meet the province's highest authority to seek as regular a facility as a government-sponsored house? As a citizen, did he not trust the state to facilitate his access to the service on merit? Akhtar's suicide proves that he was not confident that his application stood any chance.

He felt that by setting himself on fire he would invite enough public attention for the authorities to address his issue. And that is what happened. Yet in killing himself over regular bureaucratic inaction, Akhtar became another tragic tale of disempowered citizenship, a result of anaemic state-society relations.

In simple terms, state-society relations are defined as the interaction between societal groups and state authorities. The state, as a service provider, carries out its constitutional duty to deliver on people's rights and maintains systems that enable service users (the public) to access state resources and institutions. Of course, the public is expected to engage with the state to claim its rights. Though state actions are influenced by various factors and actors, it remains a dominant force in regulating activities and setting rules for conflict resolution between social forces.

The common man expects the state to protect his constitutional rights, facilitate links to resources and opportunities for economic and social well-being, make institutions of justice accessible and offer resolution for grievances.

Does Pakistan, as a state, provide any of this? Self-immolation victim Akhtar, rape victims Kainaat Soomro and Kastoori Kolhi, and thousands others who, like them, engaged with the state for justice and their rights would have replied in the negative.

Pakistan's state structure is represented by the political class, a mighty civil bureaucracy, a resource-rich military and now an assertive judiciary. Powerful landlords, industrialists, media barons and flavour-of-the-season religious groups remain the important actors influencing state actions. However, in terms of its role as protector and promoter of public interest and welfare, the state demonstrates serious capacity deficits. A glance at the relevant figures taken from various publications makes this abundantly clear.

Pointing to weak state institutions, the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2009 ranks Pakistan 95 out of 133 for judicial independence, 87 for favouritism in government officials' decisions, 82 for the public trust reposed in politicians and 103 for the legal system's efficiency. According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) Survey 2008-09, only 9.78 per cent of the households surveyed are satisfied with the police, an essential state service. All this signals extremely low public trust in the basic institutions of justice, law and order, governance and the conduct of state representatives.

Moving to the state's commitment to the critical sectors of health and education, we find similar inadequacies. The PSLM Survey reports that 71 per cent of the sick or injured consult private medical facilities while only 18 per cent visit public hospitals or dispensaries. A 2007 country profile on education notes that enrolment in private schools accounts for 30-36 per cent of the total. There is no electricity in 61 per cent of the primary state schools while 23 per cent remain without textbooks. With health and education respectively receiving 0.5 and 2.4 per cent of the GDP, the compromised standards of services need hardly any explanation.

A skewed resource distribution model increases the disadvantages to the citizens. Pakistan's Gini Coefficient for 2006 stood at over 0.3, representing a higher concentration of wealth in fewer hands. An Asian Development Bank report on social protection points out that 58 per cent of the country's 6.6 million rural landowners hold less than five acres of farming land. The latest Household Integrated Economic Survey indicates that the 20 per cent highest-income households bring home three times more than the 20 per cent lowest-income earners in urban areas.

Amid such an asymmetrical distribution pattern, the state's declining role in public welfare reflected in the (projected) government spending-to-GDP ratio is highly worrying. It remained in the range of 15-16 per cent from 2007 to 2009, and rose slightly to 16.9 per cent in 2009-10. Less developed countries generally exhibit similarly low levels of state spending. According to the 2010 Index of Economic Freedom, Nepal's budget-to-GDP ratio is 16 per cent, while Bangladesh's is 14.3 per cent and India's stands at 28 per cent. States with a greater share in the economy are in a better position to protect citizens' rights. Examples are 44 per cent in the UK, 52 per cent in France, 37 per cent in the US and 39 per cent in Canada.

Pakistan's economy is driven mainly by the private and informal sector. The latter constitutes 30 per cent of the economy and employs 73 per cent of the non-agriculture labour force. This means that no labour legislation, including minimum wage, is applicable to this section of the workforce while access to social security and other entitlements is practically non-existent.

The state's marginal role in the economy, governance deficits and institutional inadequacies restrict the range of choices available to citizens. The protection of rights, provision of means of income, housing, health, education and social security remain severely crippled. Spiralling inflation makes matters even more challenging. The ever-rising food prices also stem from the state's inability to rein in the mafias controlling vital food production sectors and its failure to ensure fair market liberalisation.

At the end of the day, statements such as the significance of democracy, the 18th Amendment, successes in the war against terror and a nuclear arsenal make little sense to the common man, who has no means of approaching the state for his basic rights, who is expected to engage with the state as a client rather than as a stakeholder.

The writer is a senior research associate at the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research.

zeenia.shaukat@gmail.com