

An administrative blackhole

DMAIDr Manzoor Ali Isran

Karachi seems to be a hapless city, with no one owning it despite the fact that it feeds millions of people. Its problems are increasing day by day and no solution is seen in the offing. People are crying for help but no one is coming forward. Politician and other powerful stakeholders seems to have put blinkers on their eyes. Our politics has intriguing paradox; when a politician is in power, they rob the city and when in opposition, they call it their mother.

To me, politics is responsible for the solution of these problems but it unfortunately still seems to be stuck in the gutters and sewages. We saw recently how three political parties had a race to clean gutters and nullahs following the heavy rains in Karachi. Maybe English utilitarian philosopher Herbert Spencer would in our context have said that 'if people don't have votes then politicians won't be cleaning nullahs'.

According to Anthony Downs' Economic Theory of Democracy, political parties always work to create a vote bank and for that they favour their voter duly or unduly to retain them. It is unfortunate that politicians in our country are treating us as mere voters but not citizens. If I am a voter of the party in power, I shall get favours but if I am not a voter, I will be denied of my due rights. AThis is happening in Karachi nowadays where we are mere voters and this is our only identity.

Karachi is a mega city with a population of more than 20 million. It is the hub of economic activity in Pakistan and constitutes the jugular vein of Pakistan. It contributes more than 20 percent to GDP and more than 70 percent to the national exchequer. It is a pulsating commercial hub and home to banks and corporations, shipping and transport links, entertainment and the arts. In addition to being a technological center and informational float, it is also a port city where most of Pakistan's exports and imports are carried out.

There is problem with our approach towards the problems of Karachi. Instead of adopting adhocism, we have to find a proper solution to the problems of Karachi; and for that we need a proper diagnosis with a holistic approach. To me, the biggest problem is the mammoth increase in population which is outstripping resources. Karachi today seems to be in a proverbial 'Malthusian Trap'. On the one hand, the mammoth population increase is outstripping scare resources and on the other hand, the administration of the city is failing to manage issues arising out of population increase.

Realistically speaking, the increase in the population and the resultant social transformation must be matched by expansion and improvement in administration. But this is not happening and the problems of Karachi are compounded to an alarming level. The slums are growing but without the basic amenities of life such as health, education, sanitation and infrastructure.

Karachi is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. There is a problem if diverse societies are divided along ethnic lines. The research of William Easterly, former World Bank chief researcher, builds link between ethnic fractionalization and poor public service and institutional outcomes. According to him, even US cities and counties devote less resources to education and other public goods than more ethnically homogeneous cities and counties.

The Trojan horse of ethnic division in Karachi was injected by dictators – from Zia to Musharraf – under the proverbial policy of divide and rule. This division had devastating consequences which have not yet been outlived by the city, which has been turned into a boiling cauldron of underdevelopment, unemployment, lawlessness, violence, extremism, terrorism, killings, kidnapping for ransom, bank robberies, muggings and torture and mafia wars and extortion. All these made the life of the inhabitants of Karachi – in Hobbes' words – ‘nasty, brutish, solitary and shortish’. Hobbes said these words when Europe was passing through the dark ages. Today Karachi too is passing through the same dark ages where all are against all and fighting pitched battles to grab power and resources.

The turning of Karachi into a typical Hobbesian society is attributed to the ethnification of politics and politicization of the city administration that has led to uneven development of the city, with urban governance and planning emerging as a major problem. Karachi has evolved demographically, economically and politically but the growth of the Karachi administration has remained stunted. It lacks the capacity to tackle socio-economic issues. According to Foreign Policy Magazine, Karachi is growing faster than New York and Shenzhen.

The ethnification of politics and politicization of administration as promoted by dictators to serve their own ends has led to the criminalization of politics. Before Partition, Karachi was a peaceful city where different ethnic groups lived in complete harmony without disturbing each other and politics was for the overall development of city; administration was free from all kinds of biases and served the people selflessly. Today, though, Karachi is a boiling cauldron of ethnic hate and criminalization of politics.

The criminalization of politics has changed Karachi from metropolitanism to tribalism, making it lose its character of being an important node in the architecture of globalization, along with other cities like Mumbai, Seoul, Singapore, Hong Kong, etc. Without any doubt, Karachi is a global city keeping in view its international trade potential and strategic location. Different governments should have tried to develop transnational relationship with other cities in the region.

While highlighting the importance of global cities, Professor Saskia Sassen of Columbia University, the leading urban theorist of the global world, argues in her book ‘Global City’ (2001) “Cities are major nodes in the interconnected systems of information and money, and the wealth that they capture is intimately related to the specialized businesses that facilitate those flows – financial institutions, consulting firms, accounting firms, law firms, and media organizations. these flows are no longer tightly bound to national boundaries and systems of regulation; so the dynamics of the global city are dramatically different than those of the great cities of the nineteenth century”.

There is no doubt that Karachi has the dynamics of Sassen’s ‘global city’ but those dynamics have been lost due to the failure of the city administration to create and maintain social order that is favourable for business and investment.

Sadly, Karachi is losing its metropolitan character and becoming more of a tribal society, which is characterized by increasing violence among different tribes. However, if Karachi wants to benefit from the gains that globalization brings to cities then the Sindh, federal and local governments have to improve the way the city is governed, and curb the spate of violence, crime and terrorist activities by giving autonomy to the city's law-enforcement agencies and build dialogue between the people of Karachi and different tiers of the government. The dialogue should focus on certain principles – participation; decentralization; equity, inclusion; accountability; responsiveness to civil society; efficiency of service delivery; sustainability and security.

These principles if followed will strengthen relations among all stakeholders, and produce better outcomes for the residents of Karachi. The following steps are suggested to be taken in this regard:

First, to put an end to politics of ethnicity, we must promote political socialization. In this regard, the role of national political parties is crucial. Second, there is a need to improve urban governance via a participatory governance model with a small government and big society to liberate the city from the old and outdated governance system which has become more irrelevant and anarchic.

Third, we need to separate politics from administration, giving more autonomy to institutions. Fourth, address the issue of increasing population

And, finally manufacturing should be moved to other cities and Karachi must focus on the knowledge economy and services sector. This way other cities will also develop and promote more jobs and improve the living standards of the people there.

Hope all the stakeholders, led by the federal and Sindh governments will do their best to make Karachi a better place.

The writer works as professor in the department of management sciences at

SZABIST, Karachi.

Email: isran@szabist.edu.pk