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Role of a City Government in Urban Security

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With a population of 2.5 million, Medellin is the second largest city of Colombia, a Latin American Country. In recent years, the city has won numerous international awards, such as most innovative city in 2013, Lee Kuan Yew World City Award in 2016, best South American City to live and many others. Life in this Latin tourist and innovation Mecca was not always that coveted in its recent past.

Just 25-years back, Times magazine dubbed it as the most dangerous city on earth. Plagued by drug mafias and urban militias, the city had a murder rate of 381 per 100,000 residents in 1991, highest in the world. Now, in 2017, the same has been

brought down to 23 per 100,000 residents against a UN benchmarking of 10 murder per 100,000 residents. From a murder capital of the world, Medellin has become the top travel destination of the country.

Revival of Medellin has its roots in strong support of the government for the devolution of governance and political will to eradicate the menace of mafia and militancy. In 1991, Colombia gave more powers to local governments to elect their own leaders and more control on local development. Simultaneous efforts by innovative mayors in neighborhood revival and dismantling of militias has reinvigorated the city. It is a success story of local city leadership taking a lead in improving livability of deprived sections of the population, hence inducing prevention approach for reduction in crimes.

Now the question may arise about the standing of Pakistani urban centers from global security perspective. On travel advisory basis, it is considered a dangerous country for travelling by foreigners. Global safety indices marked Pakistani cities among the most unsafe cities to travel and live. A recent 2017 EIU index on safe cities has ranked Karachi last among 60 global cities. And STC Safety Index for year 2017 has ranked Lahore and Karachi at 167 and 168 out of 178 cities.

Why this focus on safety and security in cities? Reason is simple, cities remain the engine of growth of any country. If their safety perception is low, then we may forget about attracting large scale investment for creating employment opportunities for our burgeoning population. This country is not small. With 207 million population, Pakistan

is the 6th most populous country. This population is spread over a vast area of 0.8 million square kilometers. As per 2017 census, it has 97-cities with a population 100,000 and above. Based on different urbanization definitions, urban population is underestimated by 20-30%, which creates another constraint on planning urban security.

With a federal structure, Pakistan is governed in a more centralized manner than other such federations. Take a case of Police, the main lynchpin of internal security apparatus in Pakistan. While being a provincial subject, a tussle always ensued between political class and bureaucracy to control the helm of affairs of the police. In major urban centers, huge trust deficit exists between police and citizenry, despite uninterrupted democracy for last 10-years. Question is not the level of Police autonomy, but a productive engagement between police and citizenry.

And political class can play a vital role in it, if more devolved structure is utilized for the purpose. Against 1173 MNAs, MPAs and Senators, the existing local government system boasts of around 150,000 elected councilors. Now, this huge elected representative class remains neglected in security issues despite their much greater outreach than our MNAs and MPAs. LG system is effectively being used globally for implementing preventive approach as compared to repressive methodology of law enforcement. Police-Local Government engagement becomes an amalgamation of both preventive and repressive strategies to ensure enhanced urban security.

Mayors in many worldwide jurisdictions are governing their own municipal police. It may be difficult to implement in Pakistan due to this centralized mindset that is not ready to trust lower tier self-governance. However, there are numerous preventive models for emulation available for local governments in Pakistan. Elected Mayors and their councils can augment their contribution in urban security by boosting their support to community policing and youth engagement programs. For most of the common citizens, it is easy to reach out to the councilor of their area than its MNA and MPA.

This engagement requires more debate to fine tune, but it is an opportune time to think over, as PTI government ponders over developing more autonomous local government system. It is pertinent to mention here that national development cannot be sustainable without greater urban engagement and this engagement may not be optimal in case of low urban security.

About the Author: The writer is an entrepreneur cum public policy practitioner. He has over 2 decades of diverse work experience in Pakistan Navy, Investment Banking, Management Consultancy and Entrepreneurship. He regularly contributes newspaper articles in national dailies and appear as guest on TV talk shows on issues pertaining to economy and governance. He is also Member Advisory Board CGSS