

When public servants pollute the public's air

Usman Qadir | 09th May 2025



Every morning for the past two weeks, I have awakened to the sharp sting of smoke infiltrating my home. The curtains are heavy with the smell of burnt waste, and my children complain of itchy eyes and sore throats before they even leave for school—a school whose outer wall is barely ten feet from the smouldering heap. This is not just an inconvenience; it's a serious public health hazard, and it's entirely avoidable.

The source is no mystery—someone is openly and routinely setting piles of organic and plastic waste ablaze on the side of a nullah. The smoke drifts into homes, clings to clothes, and fills the air with acrid fumes. Burning solid waste in open air releases fine particulate matter (PM2.5), carbon monoxide, and toxic compounds like dioxins—all of which pose grave risks, particularly to children, the elderly, and those with respiratory conditions.

According to the World Health Organization, exposure to PM2.5 increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, and respiratory illnesses.

What makes this situation especially egregious is that the practice is not merely harmful—it is illegal. The Pakistan Environmental Protection Act (1997) prohibits the discharge or emission of any effluent or waste or air pollutant in an amount, concentration, or level which is in excess of the National Environmental Quality Standards. Open burning of garbage is forbidden by the Islamabad Capital Territory Solid Garbage Management Regulations 2023. These regulations are not just symbolic — they carry consequences for those caught. Repeat offenders can face penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment. One would expect such measures to deter this harmful practice.

Trying to report the issue to concerned offices of the CDA is an exercise in futility and exasperation. The CDA helpline is of no help. Contact numbers listed on the official website are out of service or unattended. Even emails to the CDA appear to have gone into a digital void. Hopefully, this is a one-off experience and not how a public institution, funded by taxpayers, is meant to function.

When approached directly, CDA staff on site appeared to have no clarity on whether this practice is sanctioned by the Authority or the work of someone else. No clarity on such a key issue speaks volumes about the efficacy of implementation and enforcement of something that should be frowned upon.

In an effort to address the issue, even the Fire Department was contacted several days after the burning initially began. They acknowledged dispatching teams to extinguish the fires, only for the fires to be reignited the next day, if not sooner. Not only does this pose significant legal issues, it also taxes the city's emergency services' resources. According to Section 436 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which addresses mischief by fire or explosive substance with intent to destroy house, etc., intentionally starting fires, particularly in residential areas, can be regarded as arson. Repeatedly starting fires after they have been put out shows a wilful disrespect for the law and public safety.

Composting is a viable and environmentally friendly alternative to the open burning of organic waste. By converting organic materials such as leaves, grass clippings, and food scraps into nutrient-rich compost, a city can reduce its landfill use, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and improve soil health. This not only reduces the negative consequences of waste incineration, but it also benefits urban agriculture and green spaces. Community-based composting projects are an affordable solution for cities with limited financial resources.

These programmes can be implemented with little effort, using basic means such as compost bins or designated composting spaces in neighbourhoods. If we can engage local communities in composting projects, it will increase environmental knowledge and responsibility, leading to more sustainable waste management practices. Composting turns rubbish into a useful resource while enhancing environmental balance and public health.

The indifference of both public officials and fellow citizens to this issue reflects a deeper malaise. As a society, we have come to accept dysfunction as the norm. Public service in Pakistan appears to be disconnected from the idea of accountability, and citizens are too often resigned to helplessness or apathy.

At the heart of this unfortunate affair lies an education system that discourages critical thinking, moral reasoning, and civic responsibility. We churn out graduates, but not citizens. We teach religion, but not ethics. Instead of strengthening institutions, we build new campuses. We need to think beyond, think of our future and the future of our children.

This is not just a complaint about smoke in the air—it is a plea for responsiveness, responsibility, and reform. The right to breathe clean air is not a privilege. It is a constitutional guarantee and a human necessity.

It is time we made our voices heard. Let us ask that CDA enforce the clear directive against open burning, invest in composting infrastructure, and respond to citizen complaints with seriousness. Clean air is a right—not a favour to be selectively granted.

Is anyone in power listening?

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