

## Cloud of smoke surrounds parliament

The debate for or against cigarette smoking in the parliament reflects some worrying trends

By Dr Arif Azad

Parliamentarians all over the world are expected to be upholders of the legislation they themselves frame. This universal principal is respected more in observance than in breach. But not so in Pakistan.

The October 16 incident in Pakistan's Senate is symptom of a worrying trend: Health Minister Mir Ijaz Khan Jhakrani stood up to request the members not to light cigarette in assembly's public places. No sooner had the Health Minister finished that the Leader of the Opposition, Wasim Sajjad, rose to his feet to defend

the untenable — the right to smoke in public places.

The violation of prohibition of smoking law was defended on the ground of breach of parliamentary privilege, which was a jaw-dropping novelty. The Leader of the Treasury, Nayar Bokhari, feeling left out, also defended the right to smoke in public places.

At least, Jhakrani's perfectly sensible and reasonable request served to unite opposition and the treasury in seeking to justify violation of a law as a parliamentary privilege. How can the violation of a law be justified on the

ground of a breach of parliamentary privileges? And how can the notion of representative assembly being not a public place be defended? In any other democracy this notion would have been laughed out of the house. But in Pakistan, this went unnoticed in the wider reaches of the press, failing to generate a public debate about ethics and obligations of legislators and implications of their action for wider public policy.

This incident is troubling — against the backdrop of horrific figures on tobacco-caused deaths

in Pakistan. These tobacco deaths exact a heavy toll not only on the government purse but also finish off productive lives prematurely. Thus whatever transpires in the representative house carries implications for tobacco control policy.

Let us take the issue of tobacco use first. Tobacco use, the mother of all ills, has been on the rise in Pakistan. According to one estimate, 100,000 deaths are caused by smoking alone in Pakistan. This comes up to 273 deaths a day. A large part of this tobacco death is owed to second-hand smoke which affects non-smokers in areas where smoker puff at their cigarettes. These horrifying statistics should make our legislator shudder over the death-causing effect of smoking. Rather than promoting smoking they should be lining behind tobacco control efforts.

Then take the law on tobacco control.

This pro-smoking stance by our parliamentarian comes at a time when serious tobacco control



efforts are afoot in Pakistan. In recent years, the introduction of designated smoking areas in assembly secretariat was celebrated and observed. More significantly, in recent years, more concerted efforts have been made to control tobacco use on the international level by World Health Organisation.

This has resulted in the adop-

tion of Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC) by more than 160 countries, including Pakistan, which signed up to the document in 2004. This binds Pakistan to incorporate FCTC legal provisions into domestic law within a period of five years.

Some progress on this front has already been made recently. In 2009, Health Minister Mir Ijaz

Khan announced the introduction of pictorial health warning on cigarette packs by February 2010. This is laudable since this step puts Pakistan in the select list of about 30 countries that have undertaken to implement pictorial warnings legislation. Though the notification on pictorial warning has not gone far enough, yet it is a good beginning that needs to be built on in the coming years. A lot is required to see pictorial warnings to be implemented.

Of course the proverbial devil would reside in the details. But this is a significant step forward nonetheless. Our legislators are duty bound by nature of their office to support such measures and not to undermine either the law or policy by seeking to promote smoking that kills in billions. They can set themselves up as role models, as tobacco control advocates, rather than tobacco promoters.

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