

### **More loyal than the king: single-use plastic ban**

The measure of success or failure of an idea is found in its implementation, and the dustbin of history is replete with examples of many ‘brilliant’ ideas that sound great in theory but failed at execution, from China’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ to United States’ ‘War on Drugs’.

It appears that a micro-level tragedy motivated by best bureaucratic intentions is currently unfolding in the federal capital. On July 25<sup>th</sup>, the Environmental Protection Agency through an SRO announced a ban on polythene plastic bags, popularly known as single-use plastic carrier sacks.

That single-use plastic is hazardous is well-appreciated by almost anyone who has ever witnessed plastic bags choking sewerage lines, causing refuse overflow. But in their overzealous drive to show performance, it appears that the civil administration is causing farcical suffering.

This is not to question the merits of the policy or raise unnecessary concern over lack of inexpensive alternatives. Teething problems witnessed initially were very much predictable, and in defence of the civil administration, it gave a three-week long breathing space for vendors to transition consumers to substitutes.

Yet, the extension of the ban to polypropylene (PP) bags is creating unnecessary hardship. According to Iskander Khan, chairman of PP woven sack manufacturers’ national association, PP bags are being confiscated by EPA against both the letter and spirit of the July SRO.

For the uninitiated reader, polypropylene is a recyclable and reusable material that is widely hailed as a cheaper substitute to single-use plastic. While Islamabad’s affluent segments have happily chosen to switch to cotton bags retailing between Rs25-30 per piece, it looks as if PP bags have suffered due to their less ‘chic’ appearance.

Except, ‘hip’ does not always equal environmentally friendly choices. According to a 2018 Danish government-commissioned study titled “Life Cycle Assessment of grocery carrier bags”, cotton bags should be used 7,100 times before being discarded to have a lower environmental impact than single-use plastic. The equivalent number for paper bags is 43 – and, surprise surprise! Just 37 times for PP bags.

PP bag are universally accepted as less environmentally dangerous, and by taking a less expensive choice away from consumers, the civil administration is arguably making its own job harder. Vendors and shop keepers in low- and middle-income neighbourhoods are already turning nostalgic for single-use plastic, complaining that customers for fresh produce often have to be turned away if they forget to bring their own containers along for shopping. And in times of economic hardship, it is not entirely unimaginable that the government may be forced to reconsider its well-intentioned actions if the outcry by vested interests reaches a critical mass.

The only argument advanced by detractors of PP sack is that it is not explicitly mentioned in the list of permitted bags in the SRO. But that reflects less charitably on EPA’s interpretation of its own law, which obviously adds the caveat of “bags made of material other than polythene and includes but is not limited to.”

It is hoped that EPA’s recent actions under federal government Green initiative have not been designed to fail. An immediate review therefore is needed for the extension of ban to PP sacks, before the issue is dragged in courts. This will create risk of vested interests muddying waters and using the opportunity to seek a reprieve for polyethene as well, a U-turn EPA and its line ministry of climate change should not afford.