## [Enemies next door](https://www.dawn.com/news/1424213/enemies-next-door)

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THE most famous case in recent memory was that of the little girl in her pink jacket. Seven-year-old Zainab Ansari, the little girl whose face became familiar to Pakistanis for all the wrong reasons, was abducted, then raped and killed, by a 23-year-old neighbour. In the days after the crime, after he had thrown Zainab’s body in a trash heap in the neighbourhood, Imran Ali watched her parents suffer and search. He never said a word. Until he was arrested, Zainab’s parents had no idea that their worst enemy, the killer of their daughter, lived so close to them.

The vast majority of Pakistanis live in close proximity to each other. Whether it is an urban slum or high-rise or a small village, other people are usually quite nearby and quite involved and aware of what is happening on the other side of the wall. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a large number of disputes involve people who live right next door or very close.

Zainab’s murder happened in January this year. In April, a five-year-old girl was abducted from the Batapur area in Punjab. Her kidnapper was her 20-year-old neighbour who took her to a haveli nearby and raped her. When the child’s mother, who had been searching for her daughter, found them, he ran away. The little girl died in the hospital.

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Neighbourly disputes do not always stem from cases as egregious as child abduction and murder. In one case from Sukkur, the sons of a man employed with Wapda have been harassing a neighbour, who has also been residing in the Wapda colony. It all began at the neighbourhood mosque, where the neighbour objected to the two boys coughing in his face. They took such affront at his request that they beat him up and broke his nose. Then, some time later, another dispute began with a maid who was employed at both the houses. The man with the sons is employed at a slightly higher post and so decided to forbid the maid from working at the neighbour’s house; he threatened to have her banned from the colony if she did not agree to this arrangement. This, too, was not enough. For the past two years, the man and his sons have been throwing trash in front of the home of the neighbour who they beat up at the mosque.

This case is worthy of note because it is representative of most of the disputes that arise between neighbours. Many may not be clear-cut crimes with proof that can lead to legal action. They are, however, cases that make life miserable, day after day.

In a fast urbanising Pakistan, neighbours who have no understanding and connection to each other are routinely thrown together. When, as in the Sukkur case, they perceive their neighbours to have less power or fewer connections with the higher-ups than they do, an exploitative pattern often emerges. Those with a little less money or a little less power are imagined as less deserving of respect, of civil treatment, of kindness or basically any other positive treatment. The neighbourhoods of Pakistan are full of such stories; the throwing of trash in front of homes without armies of servants or armed guards to protect them is an everyday occurrence. It is also an emblem of a sick society.

In the past few days, politics has been at the forefront of everyone’s discussions and attentions. The possibility of a ‘new’ Pakistan has been bandied about, and many millions believe that just such a country is around the corner. Hope is a good thing, but so is consideration of the exact sort of moral afflictions that pervade Pakistani society. Can a country transform without the sort of inner transformations that make civil behaviour and kindness the norm rather than the exception?

Neighbours, based on their proximity, can be the first basis of community and cooperation, both of which can make life better for all involved. If, in fact, this is no longer the case, if in truth many neighbours consider each other enemies and that the best-case scenario is simply not being actively hurt or harmed, then what is the solution? Do these forms of incivility and exploitation happen because Pakistani institutions are corrupt — or because Pakistanis themselves are brutal, eager to hurt, unable to do the right thing when the threat of punishment does not loom large?

These are all questions to consider when the possibility of a new Pakistan is dominating the national conversation. If anything, the divisive nature of the results has led to an eruption of even more incivility, a lack of kindness, a further erosion of empathy. The new leadership that is about to take over the reins of the country must understand that leading means addressing not simply the country’s debt, its looted exchequer, its failing institutions, but also the moral rot that afflicts all those who make the machinery of the nation. Being higher than another in any hierarchy, whether it is wealth or caste or post, is considered a licence to be immoral — and because everybody does it, nobody minds and nobody cares.

A new Pakistan requires new Pakistanis, those who do not believe that not getting caught means not being guilty. Those immediately next to us, who share the air and the alley, are the first test for this capacity for tolerance and mutual coexistence. So far, Pakistanis (and not Pakistan) have been failing at this — and it certainly is time to change.

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