

A hazy policy

The Delhi government, the Supreme Court-mandated Environment Pollution Prevention and Control Authority (EPCA) and the National Green Tribunal (NGT) agree that the capital's ongoing air pollution crisis is an "emergency". Unfortunately, nothing they have done over the past three weeks has assured the city's smog-struck residents that the three agencies are willing to work together in confronting the situation with the urgency it requires.

Two days before Diwali, the EPCA enforced a slew of measures, including a ban on diesel generator sets, that seemed to signal the SC-appointed body's seriousness in dealing with the pollution that ensues after the festivities. The EPCA also indicated that it would recommend the odd-even policy of road-rationing if Delhi's air quality did not improve. But when it made such a recommendation last week, the city had already registered "severe" on the Air Quality Index. The Delhi government, despite its reservations over road rationing, decided to comply with the directive. The odd-even policy should have been in place on Monday. But the NGT felt that the policy was too watered down to be effective. The green tribunal wanted the exemptions to two-wheelers, women and government servants to go first. The AAP government promised to respond to NGT's reservations but on Monday, it appeared before the green court more than an hour late. This means that the odd-even policy will not be in place even today. Meanwhile, the level of particulate matter in Delhi's air is seven times more than what it should be.

Delhi's persistent air pollution problem should have made all authorities alive to the necessity of concerted action. But the EPCA, NGT and the Delhi government have pulled in different directions. Even earlier, in January, the Delhi government told EPCA that the shortage of buses in Delhi makes road-rationing a difficult proposition: The city has less than half the number of buses it requires. This excuse — also a reason for the exemptions — actually betrays the Delhi government's own ineptitude. During the AAP government's two-and-half year stint in office, Delhi's bus fleet has reduced by 8 per cent, according to the Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways — this when the party had promised to increase the number of buses in the city in the 2015 elections that brought it to office. That said, the NGT could have shown the sagacity demanded during an emergency by allowing the government to go ahead with the "watered down" odd-even policy — nothing, after all, prevented the Green Court from demanding a more stringent policy if things didn't improve.

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