

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of April 2018*

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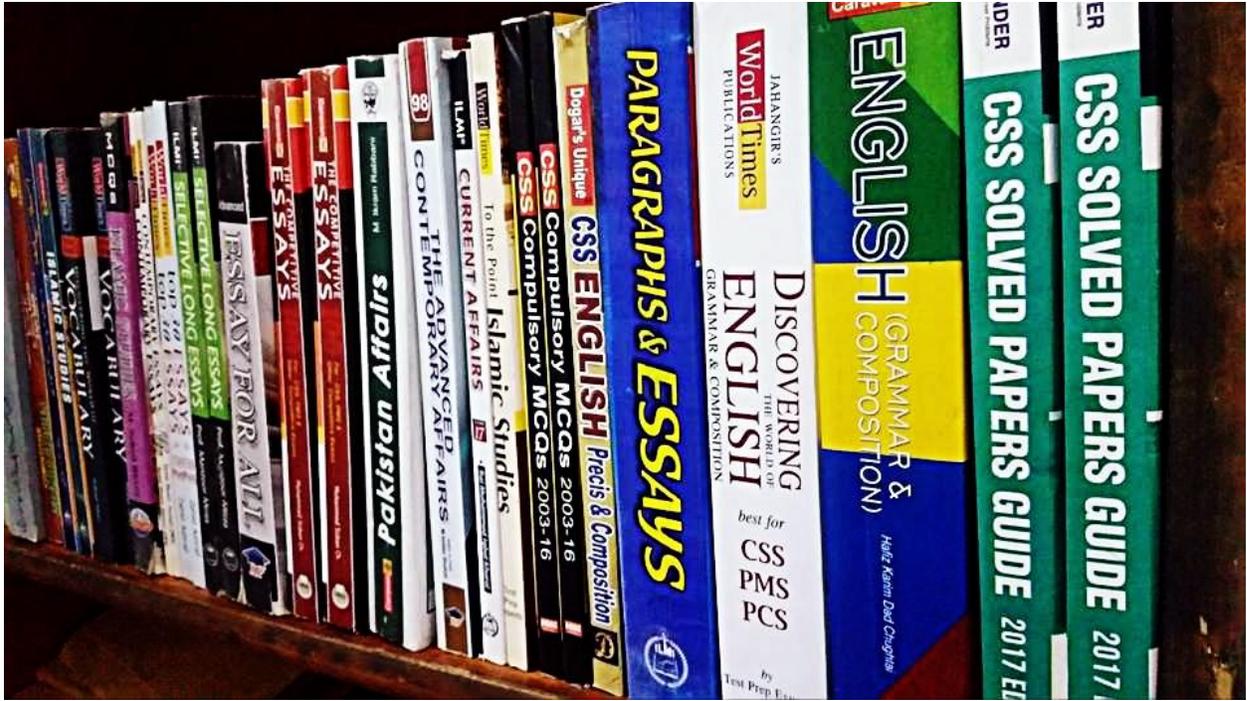
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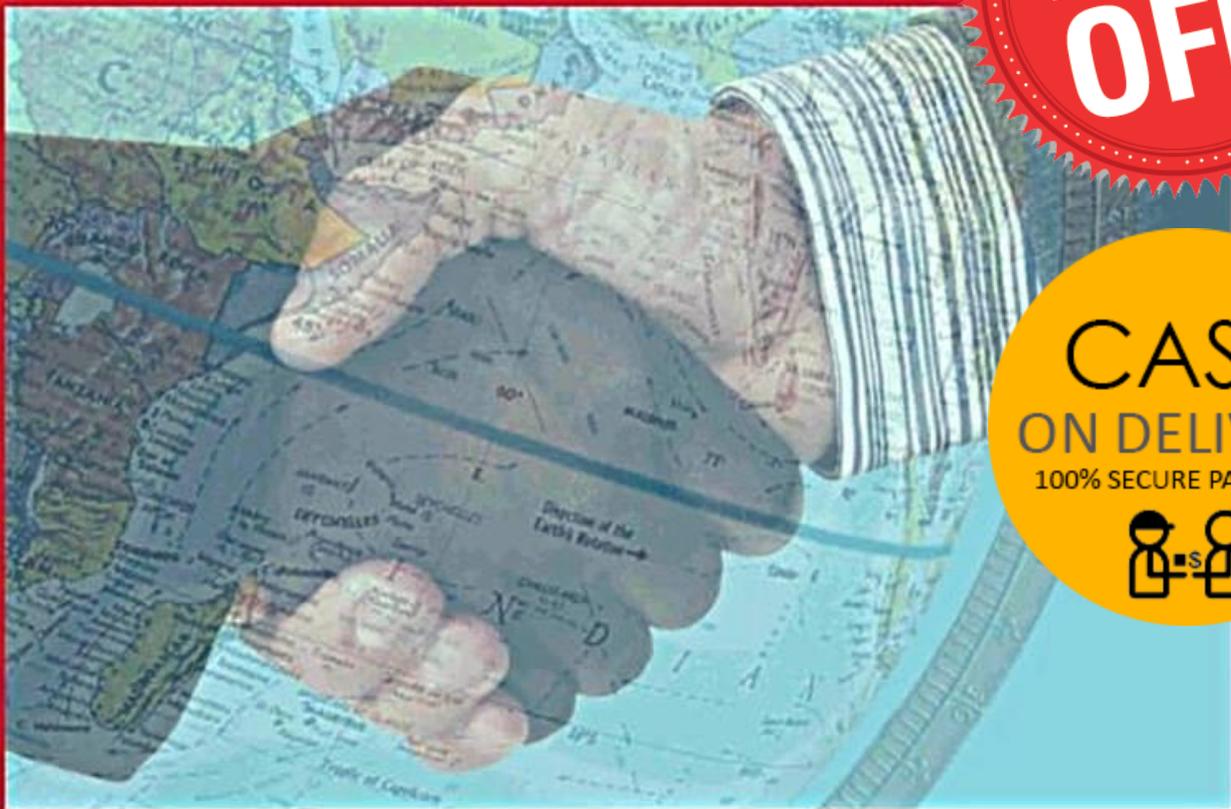
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# Comparative Politics & International Relations

for Civil Services (Main)

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## Water sharing and shortages

THE latest meeting of the Permanent Indus Commission between Pakistan and India has just concluded in Delhi with a renewed request from Islamabad for a visit to various sites of the Indus basin in held Kashmir. The sites include, as per media reports, the Kishenganga and Ratle hydropower projects on the Jhelum and Chenab rivers respectively, as well as the newer Pakal Dul and Lower Dalnai hydropower projects also on the Chenab. The number of these run-of-the-river hydropower projects that India is building on the rivers whose waters belong to Pakistan under the Indus Waters Treaty is increasing, and given the severe shortages that are now occurring with growing frequency in these rivers, the treaty's provisions for dispute resolution concerning the use of these waters is being tested. In the days to come, and in future meetings of the PIC, it is imperative that both countries talk to each other in good faith, make all requests for inspections on firm grounds instead of mere suspicions, and also make all arrangements for on-site visits. Water diplomacy between both countries must not be allowed to become entangled in the territorial and boundary disputes that otherwise mar their ties.

For the government of Pakistan, it is also crucial to monitor the severe shortages of water in the Jhelum river, and as far as possible, keep a close eye on downstream flows from Mangla. How the diminished stock of water is being used, and how its allocations are being impacted due to reduced stream flows is as important an issue for Pakistan's future as is the question of how the flows are being impacted by the hydropower works being build on the Indian side of the river.

At the end of the day, both countries are facing a common challenge when it comes to their water economy: climate change. No amount of acrimony and point-scoring over water projects will help either of them to manage the highly erratic river flows, snow and rainfall patterns of the future. The leadership of the water bureaucracy in both countries needs to play the lead role in sensitising their fellow citizens and political leaderships about the importance of keeping a cooperative path going forward. The Indus Waters Treaty has well withstood the test of time, and its provisions are working down to the present day in providing a platform to settle post-modern water conflicts. But climate change is a different ball game, and more than the treaty, the spirit of cooperation built between the

water bureaucrats on both sides is what will carry the two countries through the coming storms.

## Threat from IS

THE statement by the National Counter Terrorism Authority chief, Ihsan Ghani, at a news conference on Friday that the militant Islamic State group poses a real threat to Pakistan comes as no surprise to anyone watching regional developments.

The growing presence of IS in Afghanistan, he said, is bound to have spillover effects in this country.

That is a logical inference; violent extremism does not adhere to geographical boundaries. Indeed one can argue that IS already has a presence here. Several acts of terrorism in recent years have been claimed by the group.

Among them are the church bombing in Quetta a few days before Christmas last year; the bombing of several shrines including that of Shah Noorani in Balochistan and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sindh; the kidnapping and murder of two Chinese nationals in Quetta, etc.

There is also reason to fear that IS-affiliated Pakistani militants returning from the Syrian civil war could unleash further violence in this country.

Nevertheless, the country's leadership has tended to downplay the clear and present danger from IS. Former interior minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali, for example, consistently denied the group's presence on Pakistani soil, once doing so only days after IB director general Aftab Sultan had stated to the contrary.

The most recent assertion by Mr Ghani about the threat to Pakistan from IS should, in theory, carry weight. After all, he heads the body that is supposed to oversee counterterrorism operations in the country on a strategic level.

Unfortunately, despite nine years having passed since it was formed, Nacta remains toothless and ineffectual.

According to the law under which it operates, the body's mandate is to formulate a national counterterrorism strategy and monitor its implementation, and collate information from all intelligence agencies to produce national threat assessment reports for the government.

Instead, Nacta's progress has been halting and piecemeal. The draft of the long-pending national counterterrorism strategy has only last November been submitted to the government.

Intelligence agencies still tend to work in silos, reluctant to share information with each other, precluding the cohesive approach necessary to stamp out every vestige of terrorism, in which IS is but one player.

In order for Nacta to play the role originally envisaged for it, the government must recognise the importance of civilian input at the federal level in the fight against terrorism.

Failing this, the gains from the military operations cannot possibly be sustained.

## Mobilising women voters

IN Pakistan, the impression that women tend to be less knowledgeable about politics than men should be removed. Such a mindset is the reason why political parties appear to have little confidence in female poll candidates and few women with electoral ambitions have broken through such gender prejudice.

On Friday last, a Jamaat-i-Islami parliamentarian from Swat, Aisha Syed, announced that women in Dir would vote in this year's election — a happy change from the last four decades which saw political parties of all stripes collude to keep women out of the voting process in many KP districts. Ms Syed's observations also came on the heels of the vote cast by thousands of women in the recent Upper Dir by-election — they had voted for the first time since 1977.

This re-poll took place because the previous results had been annulled by the ECP as women had constituted less than 10pc of voters, a violation of the law.

There is, perhaps, reason to hope after all that women's participation will gradually increase in electoral politics, with reforms being implemented and political parties inducting more women candidates.

Besides patriarchy holding women back, there are other reasons why they are less likely to vote — if they believe their voices are not going to effect change; and if they are sidelined by political parties. For this to change, the ECP must not only be proactive in registering women voters, it must also ensure separate polling booths, security and transport to polling stations for them.

And it must warn known offenders against deliberately disenfranchising women. Party leaderships have yet to focus on the value of female enfranchisement, and to increase the recruitment of women candidates from diverse backgrounds. If this were to happen, female constituents would know that lawmakers take the need to increase their representation in government seriously.

Bringing women to the polls is a winning formula for all parties because women without political affiliations will remain undecided voters until the end; and they do respond well to issue-based concerns

## **Kashmir bloodshed**

AS India continues to use brutal methods to crush dissent in occupied Kashmir, it is clear that the Kashmiri people have rejected fear and are bravely confronting New Delhi's harsh tactics to speak up for their rights.

Some 20 people have been killed in acts of violence in the held valley since Sunday — at least 17 by Indian forces.

While the Indian military alleges that many of the victims were 'militants', civilians too were amongst the dead as four demonstrators were killed when police opened fire on them.

Thousands of Kashmiris had taken to the streets to denounce Indian rule as New Delhi had launched an 'anti-militant' operation near Srinagar.

The situation on Monday was equally tense; a general strike was observed while the administration placed parts of the region under curfew.

Over the past few years, such spurts of violence have understandably become very common, as New Delhi uses increasingly harsh methods to clamp down on Kashmiri aspirations for freedom.

Particularly since the BJP took power in the centre in 2014, matters have been going from bad to worse, as the Hindu nationalist party seems hell-bent on decimating all vestiges of autonomy and crushing the people's desire for freedom with brute force.

In fact, one of the worst incidents of Indian arrogance and disdain for the locals took place last year during a by-election, when troops tied a Kashmiri man to a jeep as a human shield.

The Indian military went on to reward the officer who was chiefly responsible for this reprehensible act, while the example of a BJP leader selling T-shirts depicting the incident and glorifying the Indian army, exposes the false narrative that is continuously being spun.

Such acts on part of the Indian establishment reflect a desire to dehumanise Kashmiris and belittle their indigenous struggle.

Pakistan has condemned the round of latest violence against the Kashmiris in strong terms.

However, while Pakistan should continue to offer the Kashmiris moral and diplomatic support, it is Indian civil society that needs to raise a louder voice against human rights violations in held Kashmir.

In 2016, when a Kashmiri human rights activist was detained, many prominent Indians wrote an open letter demanding his release.

Today, those who value democratic freedoms in India must ask their state — both the government and the military establishment — to respect the human rights of Kashmiris.

Unfortunately, the people of the region are hardly treated according to the democratic values India swears by, and the international obligations it is supposedly committed to.

While the ideologues of the Sangh Parivar that have infiltrated the Indian establishment may continue to dream of 'conquering' Kashmir, brutal tactics will only add to the people's alienation.

## Farcical politics

PRIME MINISTER Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has continued to attack the recently held Senate elections as undemocratic and farcical. The prime minister is right. As poorly as the PML-N has managed parliamentary affairs in the current term, the ambush in the Senate was an ominous signal ahead of the general election. From a political non-entity installed as the Balochistan chief minister to a political non-entity installed as the Senate chairman, the manipulation of the democratic process has been brazen. What is truly dispiriting, however, is the manner in which mainstream opposition political parties have colluded with anti-democratic forces. To be sure, with no party having a majority in the upper house and the ruling PML-N alliance short of a majority by a few votes, the opposition parties were entitled to seek the Senate chairmanship. But it was fairly obvious that the major opposition parties, the PTI and PPP, were only able to overcome their animus towards each other because of third-party intervention. The choice of candidate for Senate chairman was also telling: neither the PTI nor the PPP had much reason to promote a political non-entity to the prestigious post; there was most likely outside intervention.

Sympathy for the PML-N has rightly been limited because the ruling party has not done much to strengthen democratic institutions during its current tenure. But concern about the democratic system is about more than the fate of an individual party or political leader. Democracy can only survive, and eventually be strengthened, if the people are allowed to freely exercise their right to vote. It is that right which is under threat. In the previous parliament and the general election that followed, it was the PPP and its allies that found themselves under pressure from anti-democratic forces and militants. This time around, it has been

the PML-N that has been under pressure. What's to prevent whichever party (or parties) that forms the next government from suffering at the hands of shadowy forces? Of greatest current concern, however, should be a sophisticated form of pre-poll rigging that could shape electoral politics and the politics of the government that follows in anti-democratic ways. Eager as the PTI, PPP and sections of the PML-N have appeared to be to collude with anti-democratic forces to improve their political fortunes in the next general election, all parties must understand that the democratic process depends on progressively free and fair polls. A manipulated election process must be resisted by all parties.

## Sindh's child malnutrition

IT is widely accepted that political parties are trusted to govern with responsibility to improve the well-being of underprivileged communities. In this regard, the ruling PPP government's performance in Sindh has been so abysmal when it comes to preventing food insecurity, disease and early marriages that women in the province fare even worse in terms of malnutrition than their counterparts in Nigeria. The death on Saturday of six infants in Thar, because of malnutrition conditions, was a grim reminder of the alarming levels of child undernourishment in Sindh. Evidence of child neglect has been apparent for years in Thar where malnutrition has been linked to the deaths of at least 155 children so far this year; almost 50 fatalities occurred in March alone. This is a damning indictment of a government known for repeatedly making promises to improve things. What action has it taken to address the persistent lack of health facilities, vaccinations, clean water and the chronic malnutrition in Thar? Lately, more than 200 children in Sindh also contracted measles; eight children have died so far without access to medicines. Such a multifaceted health crisis warrants severe censure of a government devoid of a conscience.

Meanwhile, instead of waiting for the judiciary to intervene in executive responsibilities — in this case the increasing child deaths in Tharparkar — political parties must improve their performance. Recent UN statistics portray a disturbing picture: 48.1pc of women are food-insecure in Pakistan; and 36.6pc of men are undernourished. Only a discerning government knows that ignoring the persistent alarm bells is to the detriment of future generations and building a future workforce. For starters, what is required is increasing access to safe water

and sanitation for more families. Also, education on nutrition awareness is imperative. Ensuring nutritious food distribution through vouchers until local communities become food-sufficient is a workable approach. Without pro-poor policies, the sorry reality is that Pakistan will miss the UN's 2030 target of ending childhood malnutrition.

## Details of internees

IT has become a familiar ritual and the results so far have been discouraging. A three-member bench of the Supreme Court has tried time and again to obtain details of individuals detained in internment camps.

Thus far, there has only been delay and obfuscation by the federal and provincial governments.

On Monday, Justice Ejaz Afzal, who heads the three-member bench, once again asked that the details of individuals detained in 11 internment camps in KP be placed before the court.

The information sought is basic and uncontroversial: the crimes the internees are accused of; whether cases have been registered against the detained; the status of the cases registered; and the courts in which these cases are pending.

Taken together, the details asked for amount to a bare minimum justification for the prolonged detention of individuals.

The Action in Aid of Civil Regulations, 2011, provided a legal framework for detention many years ago and the first military operations in Fata were conducted more than a decade ago.

Today, there is simply no justification for continuing to shield from judicial scrutiny the details of individuals detained by the state, at least some of whom have surely been in detention for years.

There has been widespread public support for the action against militants, and the superior courts have given the state wide latitude in dealing with militancy.

If there is a reasonable suspicion of involvement in militancy, surely proof can be assembled against a suspect. In many cases, the families of missing persons are simply trying to ascertain the whereabouts of their relative and to arrange a meeting if possible.

What is the purpose in denying them such information?

State excesses can feed a sense of alienation and anger that help militant networks gain fresh recruits. Moreover, a state cannot use tactics similar to the militants to fight militancy.

The Pakistani state is fighting to defend a system that is intrinsically different to and superior than the one offered by militants.

That demands treating all prisoners in a lawful manner.

Yet, it is becoming apparent that the political government and the state security apparatus may not respond to the Supreme Court's rightful demands in good faith.

The seemingly endless delay and obfuscation have not yielded any indication of what concerns, whether legitimate or not, the state may have in sharing with the Supreme Court the data demanded.

If that were the case, surely an acceptable solution to the impasse could be reached. But if the delay continues, the Supreme Court should consider taking sterner action.

As Justice Afzal rightly noted, it is the judiciary's foundational duty to protect the liberty of citizens and prevent citizens' right to freedom from being abused. More than enough time has passed.

# Murder of Christians

WHILE the level of extremist violence in the rest of Pakistan has fallen sharply over the past couple of years, Balochistan has seen no real reprieve.

In Quetta on Monday, four members of a Christian family were killed and one injured by gunmen while they were travelling in a rickshaw.

Belonging to Punjab, the family was visiting relatives in the Balochistan capital, and was likely being tailed by the assailants after they had identified them as Christians.

IS has claimed responsibility for the attack, which took place a day after Easter, in a statement on its news website.

This is only the latest in the outfit's campaign of violence against the community. Last December, a few days before Christmas, at least nine worshippers were killed and around 50 wounded when suicide bombers sent by IS struck a church in Quetta.

In May 2017, the group kidnapped two Chinese nationals from the same city, alleging they were preaching Christianity, and murdered them a few months later. Balochistan has witnessed sickening levels of sectarian violence during the last several years, mainly against members of the Shia Hazara community who are particularly vulnerable because of their distinctive physical features.

Aside from targeted killings, the latest of which claimed one man's life and injured another this Sunday, many Hazaras have also been massacred in large-scale bombings such as those in early 2013. Most often, it is the virulently anti-Shia Lashkar-i-Jhangvi that has taken responsibility for these attacks.

While there are known to be linkages between IS and LJ — they have in fact carried out a number of joint operations — and among other terrorist groups, the profile of IS in particular is in the ascendant.

Attacks targeting religious minorities in the province and beyond, such as the suicide bombing at the iconic Lal Shahbaz Qalandar mazar in Sindh last

February which killed over 70 people, are increasingly being claimed by the outfit.

The Nacta chief's warning less than a week ago, that IS poses a clear and present danger to Pakistan given its growing footprint in neighbouring Afghanistan, is no overstatement.

In this context, Balochistan is especially relevant. Its long-standing crisis of governance, much of it self-created, is conducive for violent extremist groups to flourish on its soil.

Even a small garrison town like Quetta apparently cannot be secured from terrorists bent on destroying Pakistan's pluralistic heritage.

The state should direct all its energies into wiping out their safe havens in Balochistan.

## **Bullying the media**

AS if reports of a widespread blackout of a news channel across various parts of Pakistan over the past few weeks were not troubling enough, Minister for Interior Ahsan Iqbal's assertion that neither the information ministry nor Pemra is behind this move (which was subsequently corroborated by both institutions) is cause for considerable alarm.

While this is not the first time that Geo News has been abruptly pulled off air, the current suspension demonstrates an increasingly sophisticated form of media censorship in its clandestine circumvention of institutional mandate and denial of due process.

Who, then, consider themselves above the laws of this land?

The fact that most affected areas appear to be military-run cantonments and housing authorities, and the forces behind the clampdown remain hidden, invites conjecture.

But what is clear is that, while the electronic media is certainly accountable to Pemra's code of conduct and the public's interest, it cannot be made to answer to shadows.

In this regard, the regulatory authority must exert itself more forcefully, not just to ensure that cable operators resume Geo's transmission, but to investigate and reveal the elements behind this unconstitutional act.

As a democratic polity, Pakistan's people have an unassailable right to the freedoms of information and expression, a key pillar of which is an independent press.

Imperfect as our political and media landscapes might be, they are the result of local struggles, not foreign agendas.

Eroding this hard-won yet fragile space through conspiracy-mongering, coercion and a proliferation of abstruse 'red lines' is made all the more easier when there is disunity among media groups that prioritise competing interests over safeguarding press freedom.

There should be no prevarications; Pakistan's media must collectively draw its own line in the sand and stand ready to defend it.

Today, Geo is in the crosshairs, but the failure of others to call out and resist such intimidation now could threaten to destabilise the entire institution of journalism in Pakistan tomorrow.

## Saudi-Israel thaw?

IN terms of Middle East politics, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has recently made some statements that — if indicative of Riyadh's future policy — could have a significant impact on the region.

On Monday, comments published in American magazine *The Atlantic* quoted the prince as accepting Israel's right to exist, alongside a Palestinian state, while last month, speaking to *The Washington Post*, he appeared to admit that the Saudis were responsible for the spread of Wahhabi ideology across the Muslim world as part of the Cold War. Considering Saudi Arabia's place in the Muslim and Arab worlds, these words coming from the man who actually runs the show in Riyadh must not be taken lightly.

Concerning the spread of Wahhabism/ Salafism as a religio-political ideology, it is good that the prince has accepted this fact. In the *Post* interview, he said that the Saudis had promoted mosques and madressahs across the globe as a pushback to communism, and that Riyadh's Western allies were on board.

This is no doubt true, as we experienced firsthand the use of religion to reverse the red tide in Afghanistan.

However, the prince indicated in the same interview that this policy of exporting a narrow brand of faith was being reviewed, which should be welcomed.

Coming to the recognition of Israel, it should be remembered that the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 — spearheaded by the Saudis — had already called for normalisation of ties with Israel if it went back to the 1967 borders and recognised the Palestinian right of return, among other things. Mohammed bin Salman's statement, however, is most likely inspired by his extreme dislike of Iran — something he shares with Tel Aviv.

Interestingly, King Salman was swift to call for support to the Palestinians in a phone call to Donald Trump after his son's remarks were published. While once any Arab state making peace with Israel was considered a pariah — eg Sadat's Egypt — today's sad reality is that Arab governments are willing to put the Palestinian issue on the back burner to establish ties with Israel.

On the domestic front, the crown prince may be blazing new trails by ensuring greater freedoms for women and a more relaxed social order. However, true reform can only take root if political freedoms and free expression are also encouraged. This is something the Saudi leadership must ponder over. Meanwhile, there is great need for caution on the external front.

## Kunduz attack

A DEADLY attack has killed and injured scores in Kunduz, Afghanistan, and has bloodily exposed the dangers inherent in a stepped-up aerial bombardment campaign in the country. The Afghan defence ministry has promised an inquiry, but is also claiming that many militants were killed in the aerial attack. That claim has yet to be independently verified; however, what is already clear is that numerous civilians, many of them children, were killed or injured in the attack. At the time that Afghan helicopter gunships unleashed their weapons on the target, a graduation ceremony for children was being held in the madressah. Whether a horrible mistake was made and the wrong target was attacked or if an intelligence failure meant that an Afghan Taliban target was hit at a moment that produced a high civilian casualty toll may be established in an inquiry. What should be clear, however, is that such risks can never be reduced to zero. Particularly in a chaotic war zone that many parts of Afghanistan are and with the Afghan security forces suffering from a great many deficiencies, the risk of catastrophic mistakes occurring will remain unacceptably high. Foreign forces operating in Afghanistan, including US forces, have also made a number of errors. In October 2015, a US air strike destroyed a trauma centre in Kunduz run by Doctors Without Borders, killing and injuring scores.

There are few lessons that can be learned anew in a war that has gone on for nearly two decades. But it is patently obvious that counter-insurgencies cannot inflict massive damage and destruction on the very people it hopes to rescue from the militants. Shocking attacks, such as the one in Kunduz on Monday, coming so late in a war against the Afghan Taliban can have significant and widespread negative effects on the population. Questions such as whether the Afghan state is any better than the Taliban who terrorise swathes of the population may be asked with fresh urgency among the people. Moreover, the possibility of a spirit of revenge taking hold among the surviving victims and

families of the dead and injured could be exploited by the Taliban. There is a reason why previous US administrations have at times hesitated to use indiscriminate weapons in Afghanistan: the risk of a terrible error tends to be greater than the gains of a successful strike. The Trump administration and Kabul should urgently reconsider the new, looser rules of military engagement.

## West Indies tour

THE West Indies cricket team's short but successful tour to Karachi for a three-match T20 series is being seen as Pakistan's biggest step yet towards the restoration of international cricket in the country. Foreign players were unwilling to visit the country after the 2009 terrorist attack on the Sri Lanka team in Lahore. However, a tour by a high-profile World XI to Lahore last September followed by the one-off T20 against Sri Lanka had rekindled hopes of a revival. And now, the staging of the thrilling back-to-back games in Karachi, including the Pakistan Super League final and the West Indies T20s, are being viewed as the most concrete measure yet towards the return of full-scale international cricket in the region. Indeed, it has been a celebratory week for Karachi which has been buzzing with excitement. For the first time in nearly a decade, the city, that is otherwise associated with violence, made headlines for hosting an international sports event after so many years. Braving high temperatures and the stringent security measures, Karachiites thronged to the National Stadium in their thousands to make the series a truly memorable one. Most of the credit for the incident-free event must go to the Pakistan Cricket Board, the law enforcers and the Sindh government for coordinating their efforts and adhering to a workable plan. In fact, in the larger scheme of things, where the focus is on peace and normality returning to the city, the lopsided results on the field are hardly worth a mention.

That said, the critics have been correct to highlight the depleted strength of the West Indies team sent to Pakistan sans its top players which has been rather disappointing for cricket fans here. Pakistan, since its debut in world cricket in 1952, has remained a front-ranking cricketing nation, and it is important that the PCB negotiate such tours on strong, equal terms befitting its status, especially in this case when the visiting players have been paid extraordinary remunerations for the assignment

# Voter registration

ADULT franchise is a fundamental pillar of democracy. It is the right to vote irrespective of religion, gender or ethnicity — a right belonging to all adults in the citizenry. But for that right to be exercised, the electoral rolls must be accurate and up-to-date. In Pakistan, that has meant the ECP periodically updating its voter lists based on CNIC data. With a general election scheduled for this summer, the ECP announced on Sunday that the preliminary electoral rolls can be updated, modified or corrected until April 24. Until then, all citizens entitled to vote can check their voter details through a variety of channels, including some 14,500 ECP display centres across the country where complaints can be made and changes requested. The process is not known to be fundamentally riddled with flaws and errors, but there is a major caveat: Nadra has still not managed to provide universal CNIC coverage. That means there are a number of citizens, estimated in the millions, who may find themselves deprived of the right to vote come election time.

The problem is neither new nor unknown. In December, the ECP launched a nationwide campaign in collaboration with Nadra and civil society organisations to try and bridge a gap of 12m between registered male and female voters. With an overall voter registration of roughly 97m last September, 12m amounted to a gap significant enough to bring into question the very claim of adult franchise. More worryingly, the gap had grown between 2013 and 2017 by more than a million — meaning efforts to establish gender parity in voter lists had not been particularly successful. Certainly, with women numbering fewer than men in the overall population by several percentage points, the voter lists will not be 50-50. But as the chief election commissioner has himself said, women lag behind men overall in voter registration because of social codes in parts of the country where women participating in public affairs, even merely to the extent of the obtaining a CNIC is frowned upon.

Yet, the problem is not just that some communities discourage their female members from obtaining CNICs or voting. Obtaining a CNIC or amending its details can be a frustrating and time-consuming experience. A report in this newspaper yesterday cited the closure of more than a dozen Nadra swift/executive registration centres in Karachi in recent months as adding to the aggravation of the citizenry in dealing with the authority. If conditions in the

megapolis are bad, it would not be a stretch to imagine that Nadra is performing much worse in more remote parts of the country. Between now and April 24, Nadra and the ECP should work on a war footing to try and ensure that millions of Pakistanis are not denied their right to vote.

## Prescription audit?

A PRESCRIPTION audit proposed by Dr Asad Hafeez, director general at the Ministry of National Health Services, raises several questions. There is no doubt that bad prescribing habits are an economic burden on patients. The shortage of trained doctors here leads them to prescribe unnecessarily expensive tests and branded — instead of generic — drug orders, without tailoring to individual needs. Even in countries with unified healthcare systems, this can affect efficiency leading to wastage of resources. Most importantly, however, health hazards due to inappropriate prescriptions lead to negative outcomes for the patient. That said, when it comes to ensuring that best clinical standards are being followed to ascertain whether doctors are prescribing appropriate medication and management of the ailment, there are several lacunae. For one, there are no broad guidelines defining the standards of best clinical practices in Pakistan. In countries where prescription audits — such as the one proposed — are conducted, medical research is prioritised as part of the healthcare infrastructure by local governments. This means fostering a research culture as part of scientific curricula nationwide. Unfortunately, this is a distant reality in Pakistan, where medical research spending is very limited. Due to a lack of locally generated funds for sustainable investment in research, medical practice is less science and more dogma. How then, can there be any agreed upon locally developed clinical guidelines and prescription standards, without knowing what ideal prescription practices look like?

This approach to knowledge leaves no room for new discoveries to objectively inform good prescribing practices. Thus anecdotal evidence and societal pressures, rather than objectivity, is what primarily drives prescribing patterns of doctors in a society where medicines are freely available in the market without prescription. Moving forward, it is important to keep in mind that it is essential for the government to, first, actively motivate local healthcare providers across the board to identify the challenges they face within their own clinical practices,

resulting in the inefficient use of resources and poor patient outcomes. Then, instead of the authorities chastising doctors, the latter should be involved in the development of standardised patient care guidelines with room for change via regular medical auditing. During this process, the government needs to ensure that these guidelines are in line with international best medical practices, by linking local healthcare professionals with other specialists in countries having similar healthcare systems to those in Pakistan.

## Coal miners' deaths

THE news of six coal miners who died in a mine in Balochistan after inhaling deadly methane gas should surprise no one, considering the lax safety standards that govern this occupation.

Fatalities in the coal-mining sector in Pakistan are becoming far too common and there is a dire need for better labour protections.

It has become almost routine to hear of miners suffocating to death or being killed in an explosion following a methane gas leak which is ignited by the lanterns they use inside these dark, cavernous mines, or from a fall that leaves them buried in the mine hundreds of feet below the surface with no chance of being rescued.

Dying in a coal mine is one of the worst deaths imaginable, and it is heartbreaking to see how only their fellow miners understand the enormity of the ordeal they have to endure.

There is no doubt whatsoever that miners deserve far better workplace protection than they are currently being given.

Sending human beings into deep mines with lanterns as their only source of illumination is tantamount to endangering their lives deliberately.

In most countries where labour protections matter even minimally, the use of open flames inside coal mines is strictly banned, forcing mine owners and operators to invest in proper lighting equipment. In addition, oxygen masks and

secure torches are also required for every miner to have attached on his body at all times.

All people entering mines have to go through training in emergency protocols, and wear special protective gear while inside the mine.

These measures are the bare minimum, and they should be made mandatory for all mine operators in Pakistan as well.

After this, laws that hold operators accountable for every loss of life in the mines are essential.

This may raise the price of locally produced coal — but then no fuel should ever be regarded as more precious than human life.

## Critical roll

THE Election Commission of Pakistan has exercised its legal discretion and once again decided to appoint members of the subordinate judiciary as returning officers. That decision has now been endorsed by the major political parties in the country.

While political endorsement of ECP decisions is not legally required, it can be helpful for the electoral process to have political parties support the commission. The role of ROs is critical to the electoral process. In 2013, PTI allegations against ROs and criticisms by other parties mired the election result in controversy for more than a year after the polls.

Part of the problem is that while members of the subordinate judiciary are seen as the least partisan and politically tainted of the options from which ROs can be selected, the subordinate judiciary does not necessarily have great administrative experience. The electoral process being fundamentally a vast administrative exercise, the lack of required expertise among ROs can hobble the process. Certainly, there can and should be improvements on the performance of ROs in 2013. First, the ECP itself should make clear that constitutional and legal authority for organising and conducting the election lies with the ECP.

Article 218(3) of the Constitution is crystal clear. ROs selected from the subordinate judiciary must report to and are answerable to the ECP, not their parent institution. Encroachment by other institutions into the ECP's constitutional domain can only undermine the democratic process.

Second, the ECP must do better to train and advise ROs. While a third on-time poll in 10 years means significant experience has been accumulated in holding elections, the 2018 general election will be the first held since a significant revamp of the country's electoral laws and procedures last year. Moreover, with fresh constituency delimitations, there could be a number of new challenges in the upcoming election.

Third, ROs should be given particularly clear guidelines when it comes to accepting and rejecting candidates' nomination papers. While always a factor in elections, candidates seeking to get their rivals disqualified could be a major factor in the next general election.

In the past, there have been inconsistencies in the application of the relevant laws and some ROs have injudiciously exercised the right to reject a candidate's nomination papers. The ROs have a solemn duty to perform and they should be given adequate training, but ROs should also be held to a high standard of conduct. The democratic project needs a clean and fair election.

## Correcting course

THE murder a few months ago of a young man from South Waziristan — days after parliament had extended the jurisdiction of superior courts to the tribal areas — once again underscored the need for expediting the move to bring Fata's people into the mainstream.

While the staged encounter took place in Karachi, Fata's tribespeople view Naqeebullah Mehsud's killing as emblematic of their collective experiences under draconian colonial-era laws, exacerbated by problematic aspects of our counter-insurgency efforts.

It has galvanised a peaceful, rights-based Pakhtun movement that, two months in, continues unwaveringly, as seen in the large rally in Peshawar yesterday. The state ought to read the tea leaves and ameliorate their disaffection. For its part, the military has pledged to demine the area and replace Watan cards with CNICs.

Last week, during a visit to South Waziristan, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa met Naqeebullah's father to assure him of justice for his son. He also claimed that the area had entered a phase of stability and development. Such an outcome, however, is unsustainable with a security-oriented institution behind the wheel of the mainstreaming drive in Fata.

As the clock winds down on the PML-N's current tenure, among its most consequential failures has been the party's inability to implement the National Action Plan's recommendation to introduce reforms in Fata.

Undoubtedly a behemoth challenge, and albeit worsened by poor civil-military cooperation, it is primarily to blame for consistently caving into the political pressure of its coalition partners, the JUI-F and PkMAP — even as a sizeable section of the tribes are expressing their discomfort with the status quo that these parties' leaders seek to preserve.

As this paper has stated before, the aforementioned bill has significant issues, not least of which is that it does not repeal provisions of the Frontier Crimes Regulation. The previously introduced rewaj bill was also controversial for giving legal sanction to anti-women practices.

But with every reform attempt, the PML-N has dithered as its allies have cried 'too much' while the opposition complains 'not enough'.

All sides must put an end to political point-scoring at the expense of a marginalised people, and get back to basics. Empowering Fata's stakeholders (especially women) — by seeking their consensus, granting equal rights and restructuring the civil administration to resemble what exists elsewhere in Pakistan — must be the keystone of a policy that all parties commit to maintaining, even after the transition of power to a newly elected government.

All of Fata's people deserve to be heard, not just those who have hitherto claimed a monopoly over articulating their aspirations.

## Who will clean Karachi?

IF the current political leadership fails to fix Karachi's burgeoning waste disposal problem, a snapshot of this city in a few years could easily show it as being overrun with filth and disease. If truth be told, smelly garbage mounds lining open sewers are a common sight in certain city districts. According to a report last week, Karachi generates at least 13,000 tonnes of daily trash; clearly, cleaning up the backlog of years of waste in addition to collecting everyday garbage is not only a colossal task but one that is near impossible without robust municipal intervention. Persistent government failure to clean up Karachi has resulted in a gargantuan solid waste management crisis, one that is attributed to flawed governance plans, corruption and inadequately managed resources. Since taking over waste management responsibilities from the KMC in 2014, the PPP-led Sindh government has not been able to meet the challenge. More recently, outsourcing garbage disposal to contractors and Chinese companies has proven expensive and unsustainable. In fact, it has failed to yield visible results. What's more, environmental decline has contributed to rising disease prevalence — even the provincial task force on polio eradication has warned the Sindh chief minister that increased polio prevalence is linked to uncollected garbage. Despite such counsel, the authorities continue to govern through profit-making arrangements with foreign companies rather than strengthen civic institutions. The provincial government's performance is characteristic of a grossly ineffective authority limited to rally rhetoric, championing legislative bills and outsourcing governance. Clearly, this should serve as an eye-opener for voters desirous of a clean, sustainable future.

For an effective waste-management ecosystem to function as in other democracies, the city government should be given space and resources to govern responsibly. That said, municipal efforts to curb the city's overflowing garbage should be complemented by other city stakeholders' participation. Only if voters make waste disposal a key political election issue will matters improve.

## Why bypass parliament?

THE tax and economic reforms package that Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi announced last week has many elements and some are undeniably controversial, such as the tax amnesty offered to Pakistanis holding assets abroad or undeclared assets inside the country. Indeed, the amnesty does not inspire confidence that the PML-N is serious about economic reforms, even if the party does go on to win another term in office in the general election. But set aside those very real concerns for a moment and focus on another damaging and unnecessary move by the PML-N: having President Mamnoon Hussain promulgate four ordinances on Sunday instead of taking the reforms package to parliament. Presidential ordinances are recognised by all parties as a potential subversion of the democratic process and therefore the Constitution was amended to further restrict their use. But parties that are in opposition are drawn to the legislative shortcut when in power and the PML-N is no exception.

There is no justification whatsoever for the PML-N to have used presidential ordinances to bypass parliament to bring into law its tax breaks and sundry changes. The argument that parliament is about to complete its term and therefore a quicker path was needed is really one against the ordinances: why not include the so-called reforms in the PML-N's election manifesto and let the voters decide if they support such dramatic concessions? Neither is it parliament's fault that former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and former finance minister Ishaq Dar were not interested in such reforms — reforms that the current prime minister and current finance adviser now claim are essential to economic growth and bolstering the state's finances. If the reforms are so essential, why not permit parliament to debate them? The PML-N may have suffered a reversal in the Senate recently, but the party has more senators now than it did before the election. With the aid of allies, as it has done for the past four-plus years, the PML-N can still have legislation passed in the Senate.

The problem is twofold. The reforms are controversial and do not appear to pass an economic smell test. A tax amnesty could theoretically make economic sense; but would need to be carefully designed and properly vetted. The PML-N's new law appears to be designed more to appeal to special interests and perhaps a small section of potential voters ahead of the general election. In addition, the PML-N generally appears to have a disdain for parliamentary norms and

procedures. Mr Sharif was infamous for his aversion to attending parliamentary sessions, but the situation has barely improved since his ouster. Prime Minister Abbasi often appears more eager to brief Mr Sharif in one of the latter's residences than take parliament into confidence. Negative attitudes at the very top can affect the standing parliament.

## Season of defections

THE pre-poll show is on once again. The so-called political dissidents have taken centre stage, saying they can no longer suppress the urge to dissociate themselves from a party they had so much against.

The ball was set rolling in Balochistan with the application of an odd formula. The provincial assembly remained. The PML-N was thrown out of power.

A new party emerged on its rubble to rule the province. In between, we saw a Senate election that was tackled, without much ado, with the alleged help of groups of politicians who always appear at hand to help their 'masters'.

In fact, this trend of changing loyalties is on the increase. There have been large-scale exits from the already weakened MQM in Karachi.

The Pak Sarzameen Party has been the beneficiary, and its election prospects have received a boost, and doubts about it being the chosen banner have been summarily dismissed. And even though the PPP, in the run-up to the general elections, could have been viewed as 'pro-establishment', a closer look reveals that the party may be facing opponents it would like to tag as planted.

Besides Sindh and Balochistan, KP is in the midst of finding its own dissidents and then adjusting them in the right parties.

The big game, of course, is, as always, Punjab. Here, it seems that it is time for the old horse PML-N to give way to fresh arrivals from the stables — and some among them are inevitably, and aptly, going to be tagged as the king's parties.

One such party emerged in Lahore on Monday. It comprises a handful of MNAs and 'influential' figures from southern Punjab who have risen up to the call for a Seraiki province. These are by no means old, diehard PML-N politicians, but they do form the vanguard which is likely to inspire a rebellion deep inside the Sharif camp.

All these politicians are fully within their rights to cross over and be counted on the other side. But the problem is that in their move together, there is a clear indication of some troubling formula at work. Perhaps this is no occasion to be speaking in riddles.

Plainly stated, this is simply a re-enactment of what happens in the run-up to the polls. And the fear remains that the rest of the show may also be replete with the same old details.

## **New Islamabad airport**

AFTER years of endless delays, suspicions of poor management, bad planning, and much wastage of funds, it seems that the new Islamabad International Airport will become operational for domestic and international flights from April 20.

Said to be built according to international standards as Pakistan's first 'greenfield airport' — ie it has been constructed from scratch, unconstrained by existing infrastructure — it will be the largest airport in the country and is designed to facilitate a large number of passengers — 15m — annually in its first phase. The design allows for expansion, at a later date, to eventually take the annual capacity up to 25m passengers.

Forty years after its planning began, it would appear that the IIA has not come a moment too soon.

The older facility, the Benazir Bhutto International Airport, has for long been a disgrace to travel through. With hardly any facilities, and grossly insufficient lounge, parking, baggage reclaim and layover facilities, the BBI has several

times featured on international lists of airports to stay away from — and for good reason.

Nevertheless, the new airport is not without its flaws.

With its opening scheduled less than a fortnight away, and notwithstanding notable features such as a four-level terminal building and parking bays/jetways for A-380 aircraft, there are significant problems to contend with. For example, no dedicated public transport has yet been apportioned to a facility located at a considerable distance from Islamabad/Rawalpindi; arrangements to make available clean drinking water have yet to be finalised; and several security towers lack toilets and essential lighting.

More than all this, however, is the question of whether such a costly facility was worth it, given that the number of international airlines — mainly from the Gulf — flying to Pakistan has shrunk to barely a handful. Ultimately, Pakistan will have to recover its place amongst the comity of nations as a safe and attractive destination — and that will not be achieved through bricks and mortar alone.

## Caretaker PM talks

PRIME MINISTER Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Khursheed Shah are scheduled to meet today for the next round of a constitutionally mandated consultation to nominate a caretaker prime minister ahead of the next general election.

With parliament's term set to expire in less than two months and the caretaker administration set to take over from the beginning of June, assuming the PML-N does not abruptly dissolve parliament before then, the next few weeks are undeniably crucial to the democratic process.

Several things need to be considered here. In the absence of an agreement, between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition, the Constitution stipulates two other options: sending the decision to a joint parliamentary committee and if that too is deadlocked, the ECP selecting a prime minister from one of the candidates presented to it.

Yet, it may be important for the government and opposition to demonstrate they can nominate well-regarded, apolitical and non-controversial candidates as caretaker prime minister.

The leader of the opposition should consult the other opposition parties, particularly the PTI, for their input on caretaker selection.

Recent events in the Senate have soured the overall parliamentary environment, but the seriousness with which political parties carry out their constitutional duties can shape the democratic environment.

A consensus nominee for caretaker prime minister among the PML-N, PPP and PTI would suggest the leaderships of those parties are able to work together when required to do so for the sake of democratic continuity.

Unhappily, the parties are treating the discussions and their preferences as secret for now.

This tends to fuel conspiracy theories and public concerns about behind-the-scenes deals that can be deleterious to trust in the democratic and electoral process.

It is hoped that the PML-N and the opposition will announce their respective candidates for consideration at the earliest.

While a smooth and uncontroversial caretaker nomination process is certainly needed, it is apparent that the democratic project is in need of significant improvements in other areas too.

As political parties prepare to reveal their election manifestos and campaign strategies, the leaderships ought to remember that even in the most intense of electoral fights, there are higher, democratic principles at stake.

Even as the country inches towards the next general election, democracy is under significant pressure in the country. Perhaps during the consultations for the caretaker prime minister, the political parties can also discuss the code of

conduct that the ECP will enforce during the campaign.

The major political parties should themselves recognise that a fierce election fight is different from a dirty election campaign; the former can help strengthen democracy and offer voters a genuine choice while the latter undermines the electoral process and further opens the door to anti-democratic forces.

## Child abuse in Punjab

IN her tragically short life, Zainab from Kasur might have dreamed of being many things, but no one can argue that she would have wanted to posthumously become the poster child of a nation's desperate appeal to eradicate the blight of child sexual abuse.

Yet, spurred by her family's understandable need for justice, this is the mantle the media, the government and the superior courts foisted on her in their collective hand-wringing and notice-taking.

With such an appropriation of grief, however, comes a heavy responsibility. So, three months on, honour-bound by the oath we swore to not let this happen again to any other child, we must ask whether our professed resolve was not merely reflexive.

We must ask because, over the last weekend alone, six children were reported raped and one boy reported missing in Kasur.

In Sahiwal that same weekend, an eight-year-old girl was burnt alive, while a week earlier in Faisalabad, another minor girl was found murdered — both allegedly after being raped.

The absence of official statistics is almost immaterial — even one child is one too many.

But, *prima facie*, such aggregated reports cannot be taken to suggest that the prevalence of child abuse is higher in Kasur or any other district in Punjab compared with the rest of the country.

What they do reveal is that, despite the media focus on Kasur's paedophilia problem that began in 2015 and was renewed in 2018, little appears to have changed on the ground for Punjab's vulnerable children.

They reflect a discrepancy between the provincial government's rhetoric — of having improved governance standards — versus the reality.

Punjab Police remains blatantly compromised by inaction and indifference. Fourteen years since passing a child protection law, investigations and prosecutions (when they occur) are typically mishandled, and protective services exist almost in name only.

Meanwhile, the efficacy of suo motu action by appellate courts warrants scrutiny as a top-down approach to a bottom-up problem if they elicit mere tokenistic interventions that gloss over the need for sustained reform of the criminal justice system.

The media, for its part, shares culpability.

While the fourth estate can act as a robust mechanism in ensuring accountability, after Zainab's murder, it in large part succumbed instead to sensationalist and speculative reporting for the sake of ratings, and other ignoble ends, before moving on to the next issue.

For the child victims of sexual abuse however, without justice, there is no moving on.

## Electable women

AS the general election approaches, much remains to be done to increase support for women candidates — especially those who hail from areas where the female population has little access to opportunity.

Recently, Ali Begum, a 63-year-old veteran bureaucrat from Parachinar in Kurram Agency, announced she would contest the general election as an independent candidate.

As a tribal woman, she has taken on the responsibility to represent the concerns of her people who have struggled without fundamental rights for decades. In a male-dominated parliament, elected newcomers like Ali Begum would have to demonstrate commitment and leadership qualities.

However, as the only woman working in planning and education at the Civil Secretariat Peshawar in the 1980s, she has had years of experience navigating male-only spaces.

A victory might inspire younger women to enter politics, especially in conservative districts where most seldom leave their homes.

Backtrack to 2013, when in an unprecedented move, two independents, Badam Zari (Bajaur) and Nusrat Begum (Lower Dir — in KP) dared run for office from areas where women were banned from voting.

Despite having lost, their candidature spotlighted the aspirations of women from conservative regions.

Indeed, independents are challenged by drawbacks such as shortage of campaign funds and the practice of vote adjustment between parties decided upon by male leaders.

Still, as women fight to get a seat at the table, the ECP must push political parties to nominate them for general seats to enhance gender mainstreaming. Most importantly, the votes of women and the under-30 youth electorate could become key breakpoints in this election.

Political survival, therefore, is best guaranteed by satisfied voters whose concerns are not discounted.

If next-generation women leaders and the youth are archetypes for democratic change, then, it would be pertinent to point to Jamaat-i-Islami's clever campaign in KP to enlist a million women voters.

It may be based on political expediency but is certainly replicable when the goal is to increase legislative space for women.

## Dir back with the civilians

AROUND a decade ago, with the Pakistani Taliban in the Malakand division in the ascendant and the state making shocking capitulations, there was a great deal of fear and uncertainty in Malakand and across the country.

When a military operation began in April 2009 in Lower Dir, soon after the infamous Nizam-i-Adl Regulation was passed, this newspaper stated in an editorial: “It can only be hoped that the operation in Dir is not a one-off move aimed at countering western criticism of Pakistani inaction. To be successful, it has to be part of a wider strategy of taking on the Taliban with all the force the military commands. Tribesmen who opposed the Taliban have been losing heart ever since the Swat deal.”

The following month, Operation Rah-i-Rast was formally launched in Swat. It proved to be a turning point in the fight against militancy.

Nine years on, the military has now handed back control of security in Lower and Upper Dir districts to the civilian apparatus.

The transfer is a welcome milestone in the incremental return to normality in the region.

It demonstrates that the military is keen to transfer management of security in the region back to civilian authorities and that the civilian authorities have re-developed the capabilities needed to govern and enforce the law.

There have been doubts about the capacity and willingness of civilians to take over security and administrative responsibilities in many militancy-hit regions where military operations have been carried out.

At times, there have also been questions asked of the military leadership’s willingness to create the circumstances necessary for a transfer to civilian control after counter-insurgency operations have been completed.

But quiet and diligent work outside the limelight appears to have paid off, and in Upper and Lower Dir a situation has been arrived at where direct control of security and law enforcement has been handed back to civilians.

It is to be hoped that civil and military coordination will be close and continuing in the Dir districts because the transition period could produce unexpected challenges.

Moreover, across the Malakand region, there will have to be a progressive handover back to the civilians, so lessons learned now and new systems created could be applied elsewhere.

In February, another milestone was achieved in Lower Dir as more than 1,000 women voted in re-polling in several local government councils, ending the decades-old deliberate disenfranchisement of women in the region.

The positive security and political changes in the region ought to be wholeheartedly supported by the provincial and federal tiers of government.

Post-conflict areas should not be allowed to simply return to their pre-conflict existence.

Bad policies and bad governance combined to make such areas vulnerable to militancy and extremism in the first place and the state owes it to the people of the affected regions to not repeat the mistakes of the past.

## Growth returns

THE projections differ fractionally, but all outlooks on the economy show that the growth rate by the end of the fiscal year will come in at a twelve year high. Ever since the great financial crisis hit Pakistan's economy in 2008, the growth rate of the economy has languished around 2pc, climbing marginally in subsequent years, but always remaining below the crucial 6pc needed to absorb new entrants into the labour force. This is supposed to be the year when all that changes. Recent figures released by the government project growth to be 5.79pc, slightly below the target of 6pc set at the start of year, while the World

Bank projected 5.5pc for this year and the IMF 5.6pc. The State Bank has forecast the most optimistic outcome, saying the target is likely to be met with growth coming in at 6pc by the end of the fiscal year.

Differences aside, the fact that all these projections show the economy approaching the minimal growth rate for an economy the size of Pakistan needs to be acknowledged. What remains to be debated, however, is the quality and sustainability of this growth, not the fact it exists. The Fund, for example, notes the improvement, but quickly adds that “continued erosion of macroeconomic resilience could put this outlook at risk”. The government’s own data shows that construction has played a considerable role in pushing up GDP, with major activity in cement, utility vehicles and petroleum products also contributing to a large extent. Power generation and gas supply showed improvement as well. Most of these activities that are the centres of dynamism in the new growth are consumption led, and vulnerable to the ongoing deterioration in the external account. Agriculture exceeded its growth target, but trends in this sector are responding more to the vagaries of weather and the level of demand rather than any reforms or improvements on the supply side that could be the result of government policy. Retail and wholesale trade similarly exceeded the target, but it too is dependent on imports and agriculture, so does not make for a reliable source of renewed growth. In aggregate terms the economy appears to be doing well, and this improvement is indeed visible in many places. But the quality of the growth appears fleeting and hurriedly put together, as well as standing on a weak foundation given the yawning deficits on the fiscal and external accounts.

## Shujaat’s disclosure

ONLY God and Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain know why the veteran politician from Gujrat has come out with his memoirs at this point in time. The book comprises a selection, presumably, of the most important moments in the life of Chaudhry Sahab, who has been in the thick of it right from the 1980s. He has seen many a setup born and wound up, and has been a kingmaker apart from holding seriously senior ministerial posts. He has been one of those who had a close relationship with Gen Ziaul Haq and then Gen Pervez Musharraf. The book, which apparently has been ghost written, is a treasure trove for students of politics and history since it casts a quick but revealing glance at so many rulers,

from even before the Z.A. Bhutto era to Mian Nawaz Sharif's and Benazir Bhutto's rule. The Musharraf period saw Chaudhry Shujaat's fortunes touch their zenith and this is why much of the focus of this memoir appears to be on this particular stretch in his life; especially on the pain its narrator experienced at having been let down by the general once so desperate for allies among the national politicians.

The account holds Gen Musharraf, the very maker of the PML-Q that was a vehicle for power for Chaudhry Shujaat and others, responsible for the party's defeat in 2008. And in this still somewhat stifled protest at having been used and ditched, may be discovered the reason why this book has come to light now. It is once again the season for new pro-establishment alliances and Chaudhry Shujaat is unlikely to do anything which will hurt his reputation as a mild, worldly-wise man ready to reconcile with reality. But it seems he does finally want to — politely — remind the powers that be against repeating the old formula of exploiting and dumping politicians. In any case, the book does raise questions which can next be taken up by other, bolder politicians, where and when they can be found.

## Slow pace of justice

THE phrase 'speedy justice' has become almost a platitude. Judges and politicians have uttered it ad nauseam; the latter have set up special courts in a superficial attempt to facilitate its dispensation. Militants in Swat and the northern areas have even used the concept to 'justify' their brutal actions. Indeed, many of Pakistan's problems can be traced to the lack of mechanisms of justice that are responsive to the people's needs. Nevertheless, that does not mean the situation is immutable. One should therefore welcome the words of Chief Justice Saqib Nisar on Wednesday at an event in Quetta attended by members of Balochistan's higher judiciary, where he emphasised the role of the bench in providing swift justice. Highlighting its failures in this respect, he pointed out that thousands of cases have been languishing in courts for decades.

To elucidate further, there are over 2m cases pending before various courts in Pakistan, a large majority of them in the lower judiciary. Shockingly, it takes between 20 to 30 years for a moderately complex civil case to be resolved; the

pendency for criminal cases is only marginally less. Studies indicate that two-thirds of the total prison population in Pakistan comprises undertrial inmates; in several instances, prisoners have been acquitted after enduring years of incarceration. Shortage of human resources, including state prosecutors and counsels; inefficient case management; outdated court procedures; incompetent police investigations; and corruption, particularly in the lower courts, etc give rise to interminable adjournments, and sometimes appalling miscarriages of justice.

Among the most egregious examples of the latter must rank the case of two brothers who were acquitted of murder by the Supreme Court in 2016 after decades behind bars, only for it to be discovered they had been executed the year before.

Such a dysfunctional system gives rise to further injustices as people take recourse to informal mechanisms of dispute resolution, including jirgas and panchayats whose 'verdicts' often violate fundamental rights, especially with regard to women. Demonstrating its willingness to settle for half-baked measures in lieu of actual reform, the National Assembly passed a bill last year giving legal cover to such regressive bodies, ostensibly to address the problem of judicial delay. The fact is, neither the government nor the judiciary has made any coherent and sustained effort to fix Pakistan's broken criminal justice system. Only former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry attempted to clear the case backlog, at least in the superior courts. While the recently expressed sentiments of the current chief justice are laudable, the apex court has been unable to find the time outside taking suo motu notices to do the same, a step that would at least signal some movement towards speedy justice. It also falls to the government to bring in legislation to simplify cumbersome, colonial-era court procedures. Speedy justice should become a reality, not remain an aspiration.

## Ascent of unreason

ON this day last year, we watched in horror scenes of a brutal lynching. By all accounts, Mashal Khan was dedicated to speaking up for truth and justice — for this, not blasphemy, he was killed. Mashal embodied an optimism that is difficult for many of us to emulate as we witness our society continue its descent into an abyss of its own making. If the events of last year have taught us anything, it is

that in this milieu of intolerance, none dare revisit a law that is often exploited and used as a proxy for material, not spiritual, gain. Even the courage to do so would perhaps make little difference at a time when vigilantes feel emboldened enough to perpetrate violence and coercive acts with impunity by claiming a monopoly on virtue. The chilling effect this has had is plain for all to see. Far from the complacent myth that such radicalism is confined to madressahs, Mashal's death exposed the fact that all our institutions of learning — which ought to be safe spaces of enlightened and vibrant discourse — have become factories of unreason, fostering a suspension of critical thought and a peddling of unexamined, hateful assumptions. Those who question the status quo are, at best, branded malcontents or, at worst, silenced.

Mashal's murder was also an indictment of the complicity and hubris of a state apparatus that believes it has absolute control over its social engineering toolkit, as though there are convenient levers on ratcheting public hysteria or exploiting religious sentiment. Through a combination of external pressures and internal introspection, the state finally appears to be willing to undo some of this wrong. But our country has undergone decades of brutalisation of our national psyche and erosion of our social contract. It will take decades more — and an unwavering commitment to uphold the rule of law and fundamental rights — for it to heal. One year on, we must ask again: what land do we want our children to inherit? Reflecting on the barbaric manner in which his own son's life was snuffed out, Mashal's father could have succumbed to the desire for retribution. Instead, he delivered this message: "There is a Mashal in every home." This is both a commendation and a warning. Unless we have the grace and humility to mend our fractured polity and protect future Mashals, there may be no light left at the end of this long, dark tunnel.

## Poor choice of envoy

FOREIGN Minister Khawaja Asif has risen to the defence of Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's choice for Pakistan ambassador to the US, Ali Jehangir Siddiqui. Responding to a question in parliament, the foreign minister argued that there is no bar on the prime minister selecting a non-career diplomat as ambassador. Indeed, he claimed that the political government can appoint up to 20pc of envoys from outside the pool of career diplomats — incidentally, there

exists a small quota for retired military officers too. Moreover, Mr Asif has dismissed a NAB inquiry that was recently opened against Mr Siddiqui, noting that no charges have been framed as yet and other politicians and government officers have faced similar inquiries. Finally, he claimed that if parliament so desired it could legislate and introduce a system for vetting and approving envoys nominated by the government similar to one used in the US Senate. In each of his claims, Mr Asif is right. He is also very wrong.

The problem with political appointees is not that they are political appointees, but their lack of relevant experience. So far, even the PML-N has failed to give a robust account of what in Mr Siddiqui's background qualifies him to be Pakistan's envoy to the US. There are two specific factors that need to be considered here: Pakistan-US ties are going through a particularly fraught phase, with a mercurial president in the White House and the US military stepping up its operations in Afghanistan. In addition, the PML-N government is mere weeks away from completing its term. Two months after that, the country will have a new government; if it wins re-election, the PML-N will have an undeniable fresh mandate to try and set policy direction then. Surely, holding off on a nomination was more appropriate and if the PML-N is still determined to appoint a new envoy, someone with the relevant experience for the US job can be selected.

Unsurprising verdict

THE decision was not unexpected, and few can be surprised that a lifetime disqualification is the result. The legal arguments and the verdict determining the length of the disqualification of lawmakers will be debated by experts in the days and weeks to come. There are two primary arguments against a lifetime disqualification under Article 62 (1)(f). One, Article 17 of the Constitution guarantees a fundamental right of association — to form or be a member of a political party and, therefore, have the right to hold elected office. Because Article 17 is a fundamental right, other parts of the Constitution that may curb that right should be read as narrowly as possible under the law. Therefore, Article 62 (1)(f) should not be a lifetime disqualification. Two, Article 63 (1)(g) stipulates that a person convicted of a crime of “moral turpitude” and sentenced to jail for not less than two years can contest elections if five years have lapsed since his release. Since the offence of moral turpitude is similar to an offence that deems someone to be not “honest and ameen” under Article 62 (1)(f), a similar period of

disqualification should apply, ie five years. The court has rejected both arguments.

The upshot is that the superior judiciary can, either of its own volition under its suo motu powers or on the petition of someone trying to have a rival disqualified, hold hearings on the applicability of Article 62 (1)(f) to an individual and then declare that person disqualified for life — without there having been a trial to decide if a crime has been committed. Set aside the implications of Nawaz Sharif and Jahangir Tareen for a moment. Is a political landscape in which such judicial power is wielded beneficial to the democratic project? Certainly, Mr Sharif's own mistakes and hubris have contributed to his deepening legal woes. But the democratic project is about more than the fate of the individual, and the latest judgement has increased the judicialisation of politics. With a general election imminent, one expected to be fiercely contested, the role of the judiciary is likely to be significant. Applying the widest possible constitutional interpretation of Article 17 would have opened the democratic process further and may have encouraged all citizens to participate in the electoral process. Instead, there is now greater uncertainty than ever. If Article 62 (1)(f) is applied liberally, a swathe of the political class could find itself sidelined electorally.

Perhaps introspection is required by all sides. Nawaz Sharif ought to consider the cost to the democratic system of trying to force his way back in. Other political parties should consider that the political elimination of a rival today could be applied to them later. And just as the security establishment ought to consider the long-term damage caused by interference in the political process, the court, too, should reflect on the cost of judicialisation of politics.

## Curbs on diplomats

FIRST it was India, now it is the US. Pakistani diplomats in missions abroad may once again be caught in a broader bilateral dispute. According to reports in sections of the media, the US is preparing to impose onerous travel restrictions on Pakistani diplomats stationed in the embassy and consulates in that country. Allegedly, if Pakistani diplomats in the US wish to travel outside a 40-kilometre radius from the embassy or consulate they are posted to, they will have to send a request to US authorities at least five days in advance. The travel restriction may

come into force on May 1. It is not clear if the measures contemplated by the US are retaliatory or punitive.

Security considerations in Pakistan can often require the obtaining of a no-objection certificate by foreign diplomats prior to travelling to certain parts of the country. In the case of the US, there has long been a tussle over visas — the US alleging that either the vetting of visas for its diplomats takes too long or the visas are issued for shorter durations than requested. The tussle reached a peak under the last PPP-led government when it was alleged that the then-ambassador to the US Husain Haqqani issued visas will-nilly to Americans without obtaining a security clearance from Pakistan.

What is clear is that diplomats should not be dragged into bilateral disputes. The Trump administration's demands of Pakistan have injected fresh tension in the Pakistan-US relationship, and the unprecedented potential targeting of Pakistani diplomats in the US suggests that Washington is willing to explore novel ways to punish this country. That is not just unwise, it is counterproductive. The Foreign Office may not be the focal point of the relationship between the US and Pakistan, but it can help inject some stability into a relationship that teeters between American anger and Pakistani annoyance. As for Pakistan, the authorities here ought to consider the impact of various measures that have limited the ability of INGOs and diplomats to move freely around the country. Certainly, there are security concerns that must be taken into consideration. An attack on or kidnapping of foreigners could have serious repercussions for the country. Yet, it appears that a number of the restrictions on foreigners in Pakistan are rooted in excessive fears and paranoia about the real reason why they may be in the country. A more measured approach is needed.

## A vaccination win

THE emerging hepatitis B vaccination strategy being effectively employed in KP, as a report in Dawn indicated yesterday, is an example of applying preventative knowledge in the interest of the public's health to safeguard their collective future. Recent estimates show that Pakistan and Egypt bear 80pc of the regional hepatitis disease burden. Hepatitis B, a blood-borne virus, is a silent killer as it remains undiagnosed and is as yet, incurable. Thankfully, vaccines have been

developed which protect the person exposed to the virus from becoming infected with it. Thus identifying those at most risk of contracting the disease, such as individuals exposed to blood products, is just as important as the safe delivery and administration of the hepatitis B vaccine. KP's strategy would demonstrate that active decisions on how to break the hepatitis B virus transmission are being taken.

In Pakistan, routine public health activities fall under the federal Ministry of National Health Services with provincial-level implementation. In contrast, the Health Research Council coordinates its hepatitis strategy via a 'technical advisory group'. This could help explain the current differences between provinces when it comes to vaccine administration under the Expanded Programme of Immunisation as opposed to the hepatitis B inoculations. By applying public health innovations — such as vaccines — to our realities, we avoid contracting diseases leading to death or disability. Vaccination coupled with knowledge of the disease, its transmission and progression, allows each individual to contribute to making his or her community free of vaccine-preventable diseases. This is apparent from the awareness sessions being coupled with vaccinations given to children attending elementary school in KP, showing us how dual roles within the health and education sectors held by a single person — in this case the provincial health secretary who also oversees education — can maximise simple synergies.

## New provinces

IT is a sound idea and one that all political parties ought to consider taking up in the next parliament. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's invitation to all political parties to come together for a dialogue on creating new provinces is unlikely to be taken up in the final weeks of the current parliament. Indeed, the very fact that Mr Abbasi extended his offer in Bahawalpur and went on to criticise the South Punjab Province Front, suggesting that the group should wait for the general election to determine if it has a public mandate, indicates that the PML-N does not expect to convene a multiparty conference on the issue soon. Yet, the case for reconsidering the four-province structure of the federation is undeniably strong.

To begin with, the constitutional future of Fata has yet to be settled, with the PML-N delaying implementation of its own Fata reforms package. If a merger between Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is deemed the most appropriate, the future of the existing provinces can also be considered at the same time. As Mr Abbasi noted, there have long been claims to a separate Hazara province in an area of KP that also happens to be a political stronghold of the PML-N. Meanwhile, the population of Punjab is more than 100m. The sheer size of Punjab demands that at least some consideration be given to whether smaller provinces would be better for administration and governance purposes. Certainly, there are no easy answers and great care will need to be taken to ensure that a national debate on new provinces does not descend into bitter, partisan fighting.

Yet, a series of constitutional amendments and the landmark seventh National Finance Commission award since the transition to democracy began in 2008 suggest that serious political debate can be held and consensus on tough issues is possible. There is another aspect to the debate on new provinces: the mostly dysfunctional local government systems that exist in the provinces today. While new provinces may be necessary, they are not the only solution to the democracy and governance deficits that exist today. The third tier of the state, local governments, is often where many of the services that the citizenry needs or is demanding can be provided most efficiently. A combination of more provinces and much stronger local governments in all provinces could be the key to better governance.

## Lentils consumption

A RECENT FAO report on the global state of food and agriculture raises several concerns in Pakistan's case. Focusing on the interplay between climate change, agriculture and food security, in line with trends elsewhere in the world, the report highlights the decline in protein consumption via lentils. Historically, agriculture has been a balancing act between human activities and natural resources. The situation in Pakistan with its agrarian background is no exception. Agricultural emissions contribute to climate change, thus for our region to eradicate the double burden of hunger and poverty we need to stabilise the global climate, by shifting our approach towards sustainable agriculture. This would require us, as citizens, to enable an environment which encourages the local production of

beans and lentils by preferentially utilising them over meat and dairy as part of our dietary sources of protein. Chronic undernutrition is a major challenge in developing countries leading to high stunting rates amongst children of low-income households. A shift towards micronutrient deficiencies is seen as increasing household incomes impact food consumption patterns. Malnutrition has long-term negative implications for the economic development of a nation. In light of the high prevalence of malnutrition in Asia, it would be wise to remember that the nutritional value of lentils is high, and that they are also an essential source of vitamins, micronutrients and proteins as we strive to attain nutritional security.

The Pakistan Agricultural Research Council has committed to supplying 1,000 tons of mung, maash, masoor and gram seeds to farmers in southern Punjab, Balochistan and KP as part of a 10-year pulses development project. Although this means increasing production on marginalised land, the question is: what local conditions are required in these areas to facilitate the promotion of nutrition-specific agriculture? Other plans include a 'buy back' provision of Utility Stores Corporation to purchase mung, maash and masoor directly from farmers to discourage imports. However, major impediments on the food-supply side remain unaddressed. In light of Pakistan's malnutrition being consistent with the type found in Asia, lending lentils an increased significance through nutrition-sensitive agricultural interventions is essential. Unfortunately, without identifying what the bottlenecks to consuming this nourishing food are, the nutritional as well as the market potential of lentils will remain underexploited. Without food production, food supply and food patterns being targeted together, we cannot attempt to end hunger and poverty as per the SDGs.

## **Faulty reasoning**

CERTAIN misogynistic practices are sometimes so deeply embedded in sections of society that their unacceptability cannot be emphasised enough. That is especially so when opposition to them is voiced by individuals in positions of authority, who can change the discourse by example, enact legislation to criminalise such 'traditions', or enforce compliance by implementing the law. The remarks by Sindh Inspector General of Police A.D. Khowaja on Thursday in Sukkur at the inauguration of a regional women protection cell are thus very

pertinent. In his address, the province's senior-most police official described it as unfortunate that 'honour' killings were carried out even in this day and age, and said that such violence against women was based neither in culture nor on religion. He also referred to other forms of gender violence, including sexual assault of girls, adding that parents have a duty to teach their children how to handle such situations

The Sukkur DIG Khadim Rind also voiced his thoughts on the occasion. While he may have been well meaning, his prescription betrayed the oft-repeated and entirely fallacious reasoning that causes the problem to become more deeply entrenched and renders the public space yet more insecure for women. According to him, parents must monitor their daughters' mobile phone use to prevent them from becoming involved with predatory men who can later blackmail them with photos or messages of an intimate nature. Such an approach views the problem from the wrong end; indeed, it is the lazy way out. Why should girls and young women be kept under surveillance, in effect pay the price in terms of their liberty, to prevent men from behaving badly? If certain regressive quarters had their way, society would function along strict gender-segregated lines so as to remove all 'temptation' from the presence of males. Instead, should we not ask parents to educate their sons not to exploit women and to treat them as having as much right to the public space as they do?

## Anti-judiciary speeches

WHERE caution and sensitivity were required, all sides seem determined to plunge headlong into confrontation and crisis. A decision by a three-member bench of the Lahore High Court to ban the broadcast of so-called anti-judiciary speeches by Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz and other PML-N leaders is unfortunate. Tasked with enforcing the interim order of the court, Pemra will also have 15 days to decide complaints pending against the alleged anti-judiciary speeches broadcast by TV channels. The latest mini crisis to emerge is rooted in several problems. Set aside technical and legal arguments for a moment because the issue is sub judice before the Lahore High Court, there are at least three separate conflicts that are apparent. First, the failure of the government to turn Pemra into an authentically independent and empowered regulator has allowed all manner of interference in the contents of broadcast media. That

interference, both by the political government and other state institutions, has turned TV news channels into a stage for bitter partisan fighting — with journalistic independence and the rights of the viewer to both impartial information and informed opinion deeply undermined. The government's failure to ensure the independence of Pemra has allowed it to become hostage to political and other agendas.

Second, as the judicialisation of politics has increased, the judiciary has become a greater part of the national discourse. That perhaps may have been manageable from a democratic perspective were it not for two other changes. While some of the criticisms by the PML-N of the judiciary have been ill-advised and excessive, independent legal experts have also expressed concern about the judgements that have seen Mr Sharif progressively shut out from electoral and party politics, at least in an official capacity. The judicial verdicts needed to be well argued, firmly rooted in existing law and setting good precedent. Unhappily, that does not appear to have been the case. Given the political implications of the judgements, political controversy was perhaps inevitable. It is the legal controversy — questions being asked about the verdicts by senior and independent legal analysts and practitioners — that is problematic. In addition, the superior judiciary has appeared willing to discard old norms and wade into the public discourse by making frequent remarks to the media and delivering speeches with political hues. The judicialisation of politics is a trend that the judiciary itself ought to reconsider.

Third, the Sharifs and the PML-N failed to offer a strong defence in the Supreme Court when the Panama Papers issue was before it. Through more than two dozen hearings and over many months, the Sharifs' poor legal strategy in the Supreme Court mystified most legal experts. Mr Sharif has gone on to pay the ultimate political price for those mistakes, but does not appear to have accepted

That it was his and his family's legal strategy that may have been deficient.

## Death penalty report

IN the four years since the death penalty was revived in Pakistan, an estimated 500 prisoners have been executed while more than 7,000 inmates languish on

death row. Published by Amnesty International in its report, *Death Sentences and Executions 2017*, these figures are especially alarming when capital punishment, which this paper strongly opposes, is administered for offences that fail to meet the threshold of the ‘most serious crimes’. Noting the country’s rate of executions to be at the highest level in its history — 60 executions in 2017 — it lists Pakistan as one of the five most prolific global executioners in the world. This is a damning citation. In part, these revelations are disturbing because it is universally documented that the death penalty has no deterrent effect, is often imposed after grossly unfair trials, and risks irreparable miscarriages of justice. Then, the intervention of military courts has fuelled greater injustices after the lifting of the moratorium in 2014 as part of a counterterrorism plan. Because they violate international trial standards as charges against civilian defendants are not made public and there is lack of transparency and due process, their framework must be re-evaluated for the sake of preserving the nation’s democratic credentials.

In fact, the state must look beyond such arbitrators of justice and rehabilitate the broken criminal justice system. The latter is so incapacitated that it is unable to offer adequate defence to underprivileged litigants on death row. In an appalling case last year, the Supreme Court acquitted two brothers on death row of murder — only to find out that they had already been hanged a year earlier. Incarcerating juveniles and mentally ill prisoners for years on death row is yet another serious travesty of justice. Meanwhile, the president should exercise his constitutional authority by examining pending clemency petitions from death-row prisoners. It takes moral leadership to act in the interest of humanity when there is political pressure to do otherwise. It also stands to reason that justice and mercy are integral to upholding human right laws. Our leadership would do well to revisit the philosophy of the magnanimous Bard on the concept of mercy when he wrote: “the quality of mercy is not strained ... It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. ‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest.

## Uninspiring athletes

PAKISTAN’S lacklustre performance at the recently concluded Commonwealth Games has yet again raised the question of why a country of over 200 million

people is unable to produce a respectable number of award-winning sportspersons.

The 56 athletes who represented Pakistan in the 12-day extravaganza at Gold Coast, Australia, could only win one gold and four bronze medals.

Mohammad Inam Butt's gold medal on the penultimate day was in line with the impressive show that Pakistani wrestlers have been putting on at the Games since 1954, but it still could not hide the uninspiring performance of the other athletes.

In the 13 editions in which Pakistan has competed, the wrestlers have scooped up as many as 42 of the total 75 medals that the country has won so far.

But the cupboard has been pretty bare otherwise. The debilitating standards of hockey, which used to be a guaranteed medal sport at one time, have cost Pakistan dearly during the past two decades.

It was no different this time and the four drawn games played by the team, including one against the lowly ranked Wales side, led to its ouster from the semi-final race.

Poor infrastructure and governance have not helped. Lack of facilities at the grass roots is another challenge, especially for athletes belonging to the rural areas.

Despite possessing natural talent and a will to excel, their progress is often hampered by lack of social mobility and facilities.

Besides, there is hardly any transparency in the selection of players, while the ineptitude of sports administrators running many sports bodies as personal fiefdoms have caused considerable damage. If our athletes are still doing well it is despite the system, not because of it.

There is an alarming need to put away the ills harming sports, to bring in sincere, competent people to run sports affairs and to take stringent steps to ensure that

hefty grants do not go to waste and are properly utilised to upgrade the existing infrastructure and impart modern training.

## Netting property

THE most interesting part of the recently announced tax amnesty scheme is the portion that relates to undisclosed property and attempts to get the correct rates declared at the time of sale of land. The Voluntary Declaration of Domestic Assets Ordinance, which deals with the details of domestic assets being declared under the scheme, is a vast roster of the assets that can be declared under it. Included on the list are used and new cars, precious stones, machinery and accounts receivable by enterprises as well as stock in trade, and paper investments such as prize bonds and national saving scheme certificates. The drafters understand the breadth and scope of black money accumulation in Pakistan, and how businesses run their accounts and structure their balance sheets to conceal cash flows and assets. Financial adviser Miftah Ismail is perhaps entitled to some of his optimism that the scheme can yield billions of dollars and bring over a million people into the tax net, as he reiterated at a seminar in Islamabad recently.

In the area of property, the scheme is interesting because it brings a new element ie the powers that the state will now have to purchase any given property at specified prices within six months of a transaction. Secondly, the scheme will place restrictions on non-filers of income tax returns to be able to buy or sell property. Even if these two steps fail to realise a large amount of property under the scheme, it can be reasonably hoped that they will serve to reduce the volume of speculative money pouring into real-estate investments and help bring the land prices down. At the moment, land is beyond the reach of the average, law-abiding citizen, partly because of a shortage, but also because the property markets have become the safest haven for the vast black money hoards accumulated in our economy each year. Plugging its access to real-estate investments could add a serious cost to maintaining black money hoards. The government hopes this will be enough to 'change the economic landscape' of the country, as Mr Ismail has put it following the announcement of the scheme. That, however, remains to be seen.

## HRCP report and the ‘missing’

THE details may change somewhat from year to year, even show an improvement here and there, but the overall picture of the state of human rights in this country remains dismal.

The HRCP’s latest annual report — dedicated to that redoubtable human rights defender, the late Asma Jahangir — is a trenchant illustration of the fact that a decline in casualties due to terrorism does not necessarily translate into respect for people’s inalienable rights.

Granted, some progressive legislation was enacted, but we fell short on a number of fronts.

Religious minorities and law-enforcement personnel continued to be targeted by extremist elements.

Mob violence, especially driven by allegations of blasphemy, showed no let up; in fact, the nation plumbed a new low with Mashal Khan’s murder.

Gender equality and sexual violence against women and children still pose a huge challenge.

Moreover, sinister methods have been devised to stifle freedom of expression, both in mainstream and social media, and society in general.

To this is linked yet another issue of grave concern — highlighted in the HRCP report — which is escalating alarmingly: enforced disappearances.

The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances received 868 cases last year, more than in either of the previous two years.

Thus while the nation has comparatively less to fear from collectively being in the wrong place at the wrong time, its citizens increasingly have to look over their shoulder, and watch what they say and do if they value their freedom, sometimes their very lives.

The practice of enforced disappearances is a stain on any civilised country, and it is a manifestation of unrepresentative, unaccountable state elements tightening their grip over Pakistani society.

The vile practice, which figures prominently in the playbook of some of history's most infamous regimes, began in this country from the backwaters of Fata and the provinces and has now reached a point where anyone, anywhere, is fair game.

Numerous bloggers, journalists, rights activists, political workers, etc have experienced the terror of the midnight knock and, increasingly, abduction in broad daylight.

All that is required is a point of view that is secular and/or questions the national security policy.

For a government-appointed body with the mandate to document missing persons and bring the perpetrators to justice, the CIED, while doing well in the first, has comprehensively failed in its second task.

That, arguably, is why the abductions have become ever more brazen.

Given this context, the statements on Tuesday by the head of the commission, retired Justice Javed Iqbal, before the National Assembly Standing Committee on Human Rights, are extremely unfortunate.

Disregarding multiple eyewitness accounts, ignoring the reality of grossly unequal centres of power in Pakistan, and holding the government alone responsible, makes the prospect of putting an end to enforced disappearances even more remote.

The finger of blame should be pointed where it belongs.

# Education for trans people

EVERY being has the right to a life of dignity. For the subcontinent's transgender community, this right was eroded by the ethnocentrism of the British Raj that codified their status in 1871 as a 'criminal tribe' inherently 'addicted' to crime.

In many ways, our nation has yet to correct this divergence from our tolerant roots to the systemic discrimination of trans Pakistanis.

There are glimmers of hope, however, and with it the hope that these glimmers could be signs of a broader commitment.

One such sign this week was the inauguration of Pakistan's first school for trans people in Lahore, with plans to open more schools in Karachi and Islamabad.

The school is dedicated to providing education from primary level to matriculation, and technical and vocational training, for trans people of all ages — a welcome step to ensure that adults, too, can access education hitherto denied to them, and with it the opportunity for gainful employment.

Such initiatives by civil society and NGOs deserve to be lauded, but should not lull our elected representatives into complacency.

The existence of specialised private services is an indictment of their failure to ensure trans Pakistanis' access to mainstream public services.

The task of righting the wrongs of our colonial past — and enabling trans Pakistanis to move out of the margins and into the mainstream — requires progressive codification of its own.

Last month, the Senate passed such legislation in the form of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2017.

The bill defines a trans person as anyone who self-identifies as having non-binary gender, and that any such person has inalienable fundamental rights, including the right to free and compulsory education as per Article 25-A of the Constitution.

This is affirmatively guaranteed through anti-discrimination provisions, admission quotas in both public and private higher education institutes, and supplementary vocational training programmes.

Its passage in the National Assembly and enactment by the president must be expedited before it is allowed to lapse upon parliament's dissolution.

## **Karachi's artificial power crisis**

THE prolonged bouts of load-shedding in the country's largest city and beating heart of its industrial and commercial life has now assumed crisis-like proportions. It all started suddenly towards the end of March when a routine request from K-Electric to its fuel supplier, Sui Southern Gas Company, for the enhancement of gas supplies with the onset of summer temperatures was abruptly denied. As a result, KE has been unable to fire up some of its turbines, creating a shortage of power with the ensuing load-shedding across Karachi that has crippled industry and caused a renewed spike in generator sales. What made the whole affair quite suspicious were the shifting reasons given by SSGC for denying the request for enhanced gas supplies. First, it argued that it was receiving curtailed supplies from the fields. When the petroleum ministry said that all the fields were functioning normally, SSGC invoked outstanding payments — for which there is already a repayment agreement in force — followed by the absence of a gas sale agreement between KE and SSGC (which has been the case for almost 40 years). Curiously, although the city has been suffering for more than a fortnight now, there was near total silence from Islamabad, despite two protestations from the Sindh chief minister and sustained coverage of the crisis in the media. Eventually, the power sector regulator, Nepra, sent a team to Karachi to inquire into the matter.

Based on this inquiry, Nepra has agreed that refusal by SSGC to honour the request for enhancement of gas supplies has played a role in the current stand-off. Unfortunately though, Nepra's role in the supply of fuel is limited since the oil and gas sector does not come under its ambit, so it can do little more than issue an 'advisory' to the federal government to enhance gas supply. But the Nepra team went further by faulting KE for not activating its power plants on alternative

fuel instead. This sounds a little unfair on the surface though we will know more should the regulator follow through on its stated intention to file a legal case against KE. It is unreasonable because common sense tells us that arranging alternative fuel, especially at a time when furnace oil imports are being discouraged, takes time. Then there is also the matter of large outstanding liabilities on tariff differential payments owed by the federal government to KE whenever plants are run on the more expensive alternative fuels.

It is high time that the federal government broke its silence on the matter. Gas allocations are a policy matter, and the prime minister now has an obligation to say something. He can start by telling us whether or not he owns the decision to refuse the routine request for the enhancement of supplies.

## Pilgrim politics

IT is a fact that both Pakistan and India share a religious heritage that is now commonly cherished by those on the 'other' side of the divide. Pakistan has many sites sacred to both Sikhs and Hindus, including gurdwaras and mandirs, while India hosts iconic dargahs, masjids and tombs of Sufi saints. However, while freedom of travel is severely restricted for citizens of Pakistan in India and vice versa, the limited number of pilgrims and religious tourists allowed to travel between the two countries are also facing great pressure as the bilateral relationship remains frozen in a state of mutual mistrust. On Tuesday, the Foreign Office denied Indian claims that Pakistan was responsible for urging Sikh pilgrims visiting this country for the Baisakhi festival to protest in favour of Khalistan. A senior Pakistani diplomat in New Delhi had earlier been summoned by the Indian government over the issue. New Delhi had also claimed that local authorities had denied Indian diplomats access to Sikh pilgrims visiting Pakistan. Earlier, Pakistani pilgrims wishing to participate in the urs of Khawaja Moinuddin Chishty in Ajmer, and Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi, could not make the trip as India had not issued them visas.

At least where religious visits are concerned, the two sides should not politicise these centuries-old pilgrimages that date back to a time before nationalism and hard borders existed. Such visits should also be allowed to continue unhindered in order to promote people-to-people contacts. Indeed, in the currently poisoned

atmosphere that prevails in Pakistan-India ties, where each side is viewing the other with suspicion, the free exchange of visitors may be wishful thinking. However, what is possible is for both states to honour the existing protocols governing religious visits. Instead of blowing up incidents and allowing them to transform into diplomatic spats, visits to sacred sites on both sides of the border must be encouraged and facilitated by the two establishments. In an ideal world, visits to shrines, historical sites and between divided families could bridge the gulf that exists in the subcontinent and perhaps pave the way to solutions to thorny political problems. But with hawkish lobbies on both sides — especially the Sangh Parivar in India — beating the war drums and spreading hateful rhetoric, such exchanges may be difficult. Both countries must strive to keep the channels for pilgrims wishing to visit the other side open and help break down the barriers standing in the way of such trips.

## Child worker's torture

LAST year, public outrage over the abusive treatment meted out to 10-year-old Tayyaba, a young domestic worker in Islamabad, shone a light on the deep recesses of child labour in this country. The young girl suffered bruises, wounds and burns to her body while employed as domestic help by an additional judge. It was when the Supreme Court took suo motu notice of her plight that the case was investigated. On Tuesday, the Islamabad High Court convicting both accused — the additional judge and his wife — ruled they were guilty of “wilfully harm[ing]” a child under their watch. They were given one year in prison and a fine of Rs50,000 each as punishment. However, it was disappointing that they were granted bail almost immediately after the verdict — especially because an innocent child was the victim of violence. Given a 21-page judgement describing Tayyaba’s injuries, medical reports to corroborate the same and witness statements confirming mistreatment, such reprieve raises questions about the state’s resolve to safeguard child rights. Nevertheless, the verdict sets a sound precedent — especially since one of the perpetrators is an additional judge who is duty-bound to administer justice but clearly embodies what is the epitome of societal callousness towards those who are marginalised and entrenched in poverty.

Because child labour often traps the most marginalised in society, the practice of employing domestic workers does not preclude sourcing help from children whose young years are mercilessly stolen from them. Correcting this requires combating illiteracy and poverty in the long term. One way forward is by incentivising education and also imparting vocational training to allow young people to learn a trade. Meanwhile, despite a plethora of child labour laws and child protection legislation, underage workers are abused and exploited because legislative implementation is ineffectual for the most part. This makes it all the more necessary to protect children, women and other vulnerable groups, especially when continued progress on our human rights record should take precedence.

## Imran's bold move

FINALLY, a political leader has taken action, going beyond the condemnations and lamentations of the political system that have become so common.

In an extraordinary news conference in Islamabad on Wednesday, PTI supremo Imran Khan named members of his own party in the KP Assembly who allegedly sold their votes in the recent Senate elections.

Twenty PTI MPAs from KP were named by Mr Khan, who claimed that internal party action will be initiated against the accused legislators before evidence is turned over to the National Accountability Bureau.

Mr Khan's unprecedented attempt to tackle corruption in the electoral process deserves praise. While corruption is endemic and will not be easily defeated, a national political leader trying to lead by example must be acknowledged and should be welcomed.

To be sure, a news conference and verbal allegations do not constitute proof and the accused MPAs are entitled to due process and their rights under the law. Mr Khan has suggested that corruption was unearthed by monitoring the voting process in the KP Assembly.

The single transferable vote is a complex voting system and can yield patterns, but it must be remembered that the ballot is secret and suspicion does not equal proof.

Moreover, a system that effectively allows the party chief to decide who the party's Senate candidates are and requires MPAs to vote as ordered is itself a flawed process.

It is possible — though much should not be made of this point — that some MPAs voted according to their conscience or for reasons other than personal gain.

Nevertheless, all political parties have at some point alleged corrupt voting practices in the Senate elections. The allegations reached a crescendo in the elections held last month, but it does appear that vote-buying is a long-standing practice that needs to be exposed and eradicated. Mr Khan has set a welcome democratic precedent.

To cleanse the Senate voting process of corruption and fraud, significant changes will be needed. To begin with, parties must acknowledge both losses and gains in alleged corrupt practices.

In KP, the PTI missed out on Senate seats it expected to win; in Punjab, the party gained a seat in controversial circumstances

Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar, a former ally of the PML-N turned bitter foe and frontline PTI member, has claimed that his victory in Punjab, despite the PTI having less than the required number of MPAs in the province to guarantee a Senate seat, was a triumph of fair politics.

The PML-N has predictably claimed the opposite. Surely, the PTI cannot only see corruption when it loses and fair play when it wins?

The broader question of Senate reforms must be addressed too. Whether the Senate should be directly elected or the secret ballot abolished can be debated by parliament.

What is clear is that the current system is eroding confidence in the democratic project.

## NFC and population

A SENSIBLE proposal aired by a number of experts at a UN-sponsored seminar deserves attention. The suggestion was to find a way to delink the flow of resources under the National Finance Commission Award from the population. Currently, under the seventh NFC Award, population holds 82pc weight in deciding the provincial share in the horizontal distribution of resources. The participants of the seminar were correct to point out that this creates a disincentive for provincial governments to run effective population control programmes and bring down fertility rates in their respective domains. At the moment, every census is followed by an argument between the provincial authorities over how much their share has been understated. A large part of the reason is because population plays a big role in a number of critical arenas of the federation — from deciding seat shares in parliament to the delimitation of constituencies and distribution of federal resources. Back in 1976, India was confronted with the same dilemma when one of the world's largest population control programmes was launched there. It decided to freeze the distribution of resources according to the population shares of the 1971 census. The weight given to population in deciding the horizontal distribution of resources in the finance commission in India is 25pc

The finance commission there gives greater weight to factors like per capita income and fiscal discipline when deciding allocations of tax revenues between the states. In approaching the question of horizontal distribution, the finance commission there put two principles at the forefront: equity and efficiency. After this, it capped the federal transfers initially at 37.5pc of gross revenue receipts, then slowly raised the cap to 39pc in successive years. In the horizontal distribution, the greatest weight (47.5pc) is assigned to what it calls the 'fiscal capacity distance', a measure used to evaluate the level of tax effort that every state is putting in to mobilise own revenues. To be sure, the freezing of population at 1971 levels has created its own problems over there, but the reduced weight given to population in the horizontal distribution of resources is instructive. Perhaps it is time to think of reducing this weightage here too, while

increasing the weight given to revenue collection or generation, to ensure a proper alignment of interests away from the attempt to inflate population figures, towards mobilising provincial tax bases instead.

## Punjab University protest

IN a society where fascist tendencies are increasingly becoming pronounced, a teacher armed with a desire to inculcate a spirit of inquiry among his or her students is a dangerous entity. One can imagine how a vibrant academic environment would threaten those trying to engineer conditions in which no one dares raise a voice for their rights or question accepted notions of statehood. Hence, assistant professor at Punjab University Ammar Ali Jan, with his notions about encouraging students to engage in debate and apply bookish theories to existing social issues, had to be excised from the academic environment. On Tuesday, however, students at the campus in Lahore came out in droves to protest the recent dismissal of the Cambridge-educated academic by the PU administration and demand his reinstatement. According to them, Mr Jan had run afoul of the authorities because of his political activism and progressive approach to education. To make matters worse, the professor is also a supporter of the Pakhtun Tahaffuz Movement, the establishment's current *bête noire*.

In short, Mr Jan appears to be exactly the kind of individual for whom the space in Pakistan is rapidly shrinking. But his dismissal is only the latest in a sustained, orchestrated campaign to stifle academic freedom, and impose a blackout on anyone who may lead students, and the wider public, to question state policy, particularly when it ostensibly pertains to national security. A few days ago, Habib University in Karachi, a supposed bastion of liberal arts, cancelled a talk about ethnic rights, a telling development in the wake of the moves to prevent media coverage of the PTM's activities. An event planned at Lums in Lahore to commemorate the first death anniversary of Mashal Khan met a similar fate. A few years ago, also at Lums, a talk by Baloch nationalists was cancelled after 'advice' from some quarters. Suppressing dissent ultimately exacts a terrible cost: surely our own history should have taught us that.

## Persistent deficits

THE fiscal year in progress opened with a revised figure for last year's current account, which came in at above \$12bn, an all-time high for the country. The deficit had tripled in one year, and worries mounted that the country was on an unsustainable growth trajectory. Partially in response to these fears, the government took some steps to try and curb imports through regulatory duties, which paid meagre dividends in the next quarter when the deficit fell fractionally from its corresponding quarter in the previous year. A few more steps followed, such as two rounds of exchange rate depreciation. Exports grew by 12pc in the second quarter, the first rise after years of decline, while imports grew faster still, despite the regulatory duties. Now the third-quarter data is showing that the deficit is back, jumping by 22.5pc in the first nine months of the fiscal year, despite the fact that last year's third quarterly data already showed a record increase.

It might be a bit too early to say, but it is possible that the steps taken by the government to curb the deficit — duties and depreciation — may have run their course, with their effects largely priced in. If this is the case, then there are good reasons to worry, since it would imply that the problem persists while the government is out of ideas. It is unlikely that in the closing weeks of its term the government can come up with a plan to reverse this trend. All attention is going to be concentrated on the approaching polls and the mounting political challenges. From here on, the economy must wait till a strong new government, with a full mandate behind it, is sworn in before any thought of remedial action can be considered.

In fact, fears that matters would unravel this year could well prove true — again. Already the State Bank, IMF, the World Bank and ADB have collectively flagged the external account deficit as the Achilles heel of the country's economy. Some reports emanating from within the finance ministry suggest that the message has been received. Thus far the only course correction being offered is the controversial tax amnesty scheme, which the government hopes will result in enough money being brought back into the country from abroad to earn valuable new time. How much time might be earned through the exercise, though, is hard to say, since the underlying dysfunction of high consumption and low productivity will remain in place, leading to continuing drains on the external account. With its

term drawing to a close, the PML-N can rightfully claim to have restored growth to the economy. But the persistent rise in the current account deficit only shows that Pakistan's economy is not in a position to afford this growth.

## Acid attacks

IT has been widely documented that women in this country are targets of acid crimes for rejecting marriage proposals, for arousing jealousy among relatives, or, in some way or the other, for having provoked patriarchy. In essence, such heinous attacks are largely based on the notion of male ownership of women's bodies and of control over their actions in conservative communities. The reality that this unforgivable crime is more often than not perpetrated by male relatives is underscored by Thursday's shocking acid attack on three students from the University of Gujrat. The three students, who included two sisters, suffered severe burns when they were attacked by three men at a bus stop — one of the alleged perpetrators was the sisters' maternal uncle, an Islamabad police official; the other two worked for a government development authority. This and other instances of acid crimes show that destroying a woman's face and body for perceived misdemeanours is intended as revenge and punishment, and intentionally targets the identity and individuality of victims. This is all the more reason why Punjab's chief minister must immediately ensure that severe punishment under the law is awarded to those guilty of such brazen attacks, most of which are concentrated in the province. Moreover, the government should heed growing calls to regulate acid sales. In the long term, however, curtailing acid crimes requires removing entrenched misogynistic attitudes that deprive women even of their right to life. One way is to disseminate information through sustained campaigning on gender equality.

Used as an inexpensive weapon of choice, acid causes severe physical disfigurement leading to extreme psychological and physical trauma. The shocking nature of this crime alone demands the strictest punishment so that emboldened regressive elements do not act with impunity. However, statistics provide evidence to the contrary. With at least 400 annual acid attacks reported by rights organisations, and 80pc of them targeting women, the country's anti-acid crime legislation has failed as a deterrent in the seven years since it was enacted. This is a damning reflection of the state's apathy when it comes to the

implementation of a watertight law that stipulates that acid crime is non-compoundable with imprisonment ranging from 14 years to life and a minimum fine of Rs1m as punishment. Notwithstanding philanthropic rehabilitation initiatives, the state itself has no official projects to financially compensate and rehabilitate burn victims. Public-private initiatives are direly needed to change societal norms that permit men and boys to believe this crime is acceptable behaviour.

Dynasties to choose from

IN a recent interview to the BBC, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari stressed on just how impossible it was to escape dynastic politics in Pakistan. He recalled that the mantle of leadership was thrust upon him — and his father — after the death of Benazir Bhutto in 2007, just as it was once imposed on his mother after the judicial murder of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Understandably, such an explanation is bound to — and justifiably does — draw criticism. However, while the PPP may believe that, with the killing of its leaders, it has reason to depend on dynasty for survival, it is by no means the only party that has flagrantly and jealously chosen to keep the leadership within the family. The Sharifs are equally possessive and so are many other parties, both religion-based and so-called secular ones. The question is always: Bilawal or Bakhtawar or Aseefa? Nawaz or Shahbaz or Hamza or Maryam — or, why not, the very talented Suleman Shahbaz? Indeed, why not?

In fact, 'circumstances' is the key word here. Circumstances do prevent a break from dynasty and there is a lot of truth in the opinion that dynasty did help the PPP survive — until now, that is. The BBC interviewer wanted to know whether it was Mr Bhutto-Zardari or his father Mr Asif Zardari who ran the party's affairs. Given that the young man is increasingly looked upon as a son following in his father's footsteps, this was a somewhat irrelevant question. It is here that we must tread on more complicated ground where a political heir is faced with the difficult proposition of having to choose from not one, not two but at least three legacies: his father's, his mother's and his grandfather's — even if we were to forget the altogether distinct traditions set by his uncles, Murtaza Bhutto and Shahnawaz Bhutto. For Mr Bhutto-Zardari, while there may be no escape from dynastic politics, the right lead is what he should be concentrating on.

# Withdrawal of police security

THE sheer scale of the problem is evident from the numbers: 12,600 policemen across the four provinces and the federal capital deputed to provide security for unauthorised individuals. Among the unauthorised individuals enjoying police security at the taxpayers' expense are politicians, judges, police officers, bureaucrats, foreigners and well-connected civilians. Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar has demonstrated the power of the law by issuing a seemingly straightforward order to inspectors general of police across the country to withdraw police security from individuals not authorised by the rules to receive such security. The effect has been immediate and massively disruptive. It is hoped that the right lessons will be learned from the exercise.

To begin with, two competing sets of realities ought to be acknowledged. A great many of the 12,600 policemen deputed on security duty were likely protecting individuals who did not need such protection and may have only sought police security as a status symbol. However, there are also surely cases where such security was necessary and merited. The problem is that no government, provincial or federal, has made it a priority to update and rationalise the rules under which police security is provided so as to objectively determine which individuals need it. Perhaps it can be argued that the chief justice's order ought to have taken into consideration the legitimate security needs of some individuals. The approach to be adopted in Islamabad, as announced by IGP Azam Temuri, may be a sensible middle ground: creating a committee headed by the DIG police security and including representatives from Nacta and intelligence agencies to deal with requests for police security. The wrong way forward may be the one opted for in Sindh. To seemingly circumvent the chief justice's order, the home department in Sindh has simply issued an order to increase the categories of individuals who are entitled to receive police security.

A tug of war between institutions is unnecessary and will reflect poorly on everyone involved. The long fight against militancy and extremism has clearly created a security threat for some individuals and they deserve state protection. But police forces across the country are under-resourced and overstretched, and it is vital that police duties are streamlined and rationalised with a view to maximising public safety and security. Too often the decision to provide police security is a highly politicised and personalised process. Such decisions need to

be taken by professionals exercising their best judgement. Perhaps the Supreme Court itself can seek advice and relevant opinion on the matter and suggest a path ahead for police forces across the country. VIP culture needs to be discouraged, but the state's responsibilities need to be factored in too.

## Why Commonwealth?

IN the modern international relations regime, regional blocs are key structures through which countries join forces to enhance trade, cooperation and in certain cases defence, in many ways resembling the alliances of the old world. There is a veritable alphabet soup of regional organisations — including the EU, Asean, Saarc and many others — that form part of the global vocabulary. While some, such as the EU, have made strides in bringing states that were once enemies closer together (though the European dream has been severely jolted in the aftermath of Brexit), others are mere talk shops, such as Saarc. However, the utility of one multilateral bloc in particular — the Commonwealth of Nations — has been questioned, especially in a postcolonial world where many former colonies have come into their own. It is basically a club of Britain's former colonies, including this country, a subdued reflection of what the British Empire once was. The heads of the bloc were recently in London (Pakistan was represented by the prime minister) to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government conclave, and the most significant news to emerge from the meeting was the intended replacement of Elizabeth II by her heir, Prince Charles, as head of the bloc.

As the age of empires and colonies is long gone, it would be only right to point out that the Commonwealth is an anachronism. After all, there is little that links Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka, for example, with faraway Antigua or Tonga other than a shared colonial baggage. It would also be fair to ask what benefits membership has brought Pakistan and other former colonies. While we should endeavour to maintain cordial ties with all states, including our former colonial master and fellow ex-colonies, perhaps the energies of this nation should best be spent on building regional linkages. On paper, Pakistan is a member of Saarc, ECO and SCO, amongst other regional blocs. But the fact is that these organisations have failed to live up to their potential of bringing states closer together and resolving disputes. Saarc, for example, is a dead letter due to a

Pakistan-India dispute, a dispute the formation of the bloc has failed to resolve. Ideally, Pakistan can benefit from establishing linkages with states in the region, especially South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Multilateral blocs can play a key role in developing regional trade and cooperation, allowing freer flow of people, goods and ideas.

## A suspicious ‘burglary’

THE timing and modus operandi of the ‘burglary’ at the home of a Human Rights Commission of Pakistan consultant in Lahore is suspicious, to say the very least. On Thursday night, a couple of individuals broke into Maryam Hasan’s residence and took away her laptop, two hard drives, phones, some cash and jewellery in an operation that lasted over an hour. Ms Hasan is the editor of the recently launched HRCP annual report, a damning indictment of the rising incidence of enforced disappearances and other tactics being used to coerce the media and civil society into silence.

According to the HRCP, the intruders told Ms Hasan they had come the day before as well but had left upon not finding her home; they also questioned her about her professional engagements. Such brazen intimidation cannot be condemned enough. Clearly, the men’s intention was not only to break into Ms Hasan’s home and take into their possession material on which the findings of the HRCP report may have been based. They also sought to terrorise her and, by implication, anyone else who chooses to take a stand or share information with the commission that the powers that be do not want exposed. In fact, the men may as well not have bothered with the token theft of cash and jewellery. The HRCP has rightly said it “will hold the provincial authorities responsible for any attempt by state or non-state actors to harass any person associated” with the commission. It also called upon the Punjab government to identify the culprits and arrest them swiftly. The raid, and a raid it was, on the home of Ms Hasan illustrates the issue that lies at the core of the HRCP’s latest assessment of the human rights situation — a state that believes it is accountable to no one, and will stop at nothing to achieve its objectives. Unless members of civil society rally together to protect their hard-won freedoms, there can be no viable pushback.

## JI chief's allegations

THE latest revelations have come from somewhat unexpected quarters, but the details are in line with what has been alleged and suspected since the farcical election. The controversy over the election of Chairman of the Senate Sadiq Sanjrani is refusing to die down — and rightly so. The latest individual to come forward and publicly cast aspersions on the fairness and integrity of the vote that saw Mr Sanjrani catapulted from political obscurity to one of the highest constitutional offices in the land is none other than Sirajul Haq, emir of the Jamaat-i-Islami and ally of the PTI in the KP government. The JI chief has claimed that ahead of the crucial vote in the Senate, he was lobbied by KP Chief Minister Pervez Khattak to vote for a candidate for Senate chairman who Mr Khattak claimed would be nominated by powerful forces outside the PTI. At the time Mr Khattak approached the JI chief, the former was unaware of even the identity of the candidate for Senate chairman that the PTI had committed to backing.

The JI chief's claim has been obliquely denied by Mr Khattak and angrily denounced by a PTI national spokesperson, but it should not be easily dismissed. In the run-up to the election of the Senate chairman and on the day of the vote itself, it was apparent that electoral politics alone could not explain the strange coalition that came together to defeat the PML-N candidate and elevate a political non-entity to constitutional high office. The seemingly manipulated events in the Senate came after a coup inside the PML-N in the Balochistan Assembly installed another previous political non-entity as chief minister of the province. Taken together, it has appeared that anti-democratic forces ventured deep into the political terrain to engineer electoral outcomes that have seriously undermined the democratic process. It is not a matter of the PML-N losing out. Democracy is also about the integrity of the process, and it is fairly clear that extra-parliamentary forces encouraged, directed and facilitated a particular outcome.

What can be done? At this stage, at the very least a parliamentary or judicial inquiry is merited. Arriving at the truth will not be easy given that a number of parliamentary parties backed Mr Sanjrani and virtually all parties have alleged corruption in the election of senators. But it is necessary to draw a line and try and protect the democratic order. Even by historical standards, Mr Sanjrani's

election and the allegations swirling around the voting in the provincial assemblies are deeply troubling. The democratic transition is a decade old, but the events of March may have done more to undermine the democratic process than a number of other anti-democratic episodes over the last decade. The truth should be made known to the public. Sirajul Haq and others should lead the way.

## Kabul bombing

WHILE a number of violent militias and terrorist groups have been active in Afghanistan, the militant Islamic State group is emerging as one of the most savage outfits operating in that war-torn country. On Sunday, IS claimed responsibility for an attack on a voter registration centre in Kabul's Dasht-i-Barchi area (the terrorist group had targeted the same area during Nauroz celebrations last month) causing around 60 fatalities and injuring nearly 100. The area is inhabited mostly by members of the Shia Hazara community. In another bombing on Sunday, a roadside bomb exploded near a registration centre in Baghlan province killing six; however, the identity of the perpetrators is still uncertain. It has been a very difficult year so far for Afghanistan; according to UN figures over 750 people have been killed or maimed in militant attacks between January and March. And while more 'established' actors such as the Afghan Taliban have played a major role in this violence (the militia reportedly carried out an attack in January in which over 100 people died), they have been challenged by a rising IS, which has begun to expand its footprint in the region.

Clearly, the rise of IS in Afghanistan must not be taken lightly, for unlike the Afghan Taliban, who are more nationalist, IS is an expansionist pan-Islamic concern, which wants to create a revived 'caliphate'. While it has suffered heavy defeats in Syria and Iraq, IS appears to have regrouped amidst the lawlessness in Afghanistan. This is a development Afghanistan, Pakistan and other regional states cannot ignore, for if left to its own devices IS can cause major havoc. Perhaps it is imperative for Islamabad, Kabul and other regional capitals to forge a sustainable counterterrorism plan to root out the group before it replicates what it did in the Levant. This may be difficult to carry out, considering the level of mistrust that currently exists between Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, both states must realise that IS is a threat to their common security. The mistakes made by the states of the Middle East in allowing the group to grow into a

monster must not be repeated here. In this regard, the US-led coalition in Afghanistan must do more to help neutralise IS, while other regional states, such as Russia, China and Iran, can also be brought on board for a broad-based counterterrorism plan. Given a vacuum to operate in, IS will only grow into a potent regional menace.

## Migrant smuggling

DESPITE attempts to check people smuggling, the FIA has failed to stop criminal networks from facilitating and profiting from this illegal trade. Disregarding the risks of drowning at sea or of indefinite detention, Pakistani migrants pay a hefty fee to travel through perilous land and sea routes to reach Europe. In January alone, 240 illegal Pakistani migrants, mostly young men, took the Mediterranean route to Italy, according to a report in this paper on Monday. Other reports have described yet another rescue off the coast of Libya involving a boat with 200 migrants, including Pakistanis. Narrating the dangers encountered by Pakistani migrants — such as being kidnapped for ransom or shot by Iranian border security — the report explains how and why most take the land route through Balochistan onward to Iran and Turkey to reach Europe. Increasing numbers of migrants from Pakistan on the central Mediterranean route demonstrates that the business of people smuggling thrives despite Europe's curbs to keep migrants out. In February, the FIA proposed collaborating with authorities in Iran, Turkey and Greece to bust global trafficking networks. While this is an effective response, a precondition for effective action includes tackling smuggling networks at source. Cracking down on agents in Punjab, for instance, will send a clear message to offenders that preying on the poor comes with a prison sentence and a fine.

With an estimated 40,000 illegal Pakistani migrants travelling annually to Europe, this exodus is driven by poverty, religious persecution and violence; even militants joining the Syrian civil war have travelled these illegal routes. This trend, however, demonstrates that young men are so desperate that even though the likelihood of dying while trying to reach Europe is alarmingly high, they will risk their lives. When young men resort to such extreme measures it is a damning indictment of a leadership that has only offered empty platitudes to its young people instead of education and economic security.

## CJP's remarks

AN unfortunate and unnecessary war of words is continuing, obscuring some very real problems that need to be addressed.

Perhaps angered or distracted by a short trip to the UK to visit his ailing wife, Nawaz Sharif launched into a deeply ill-advised tirade against the judiciary on Monday.

It is not clear what Mr Sharif hopes to achieve with such outbursts.

The PML-N is still the ruling party at the centre and in Punjab.

If the executive is being impeded or its work disrupted by interference from other institutions, the PML-N governments at the centre and in Punjab can speak for themselves.

Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif have the platform and the authority to speak against interference and institutional encroachment.

The ousted prime minister is entitled to his opinion, but must be made aware that his intemperate remarks can have destabilising effects on the democratic project.

Surely, that cannot be the goal of the PML-N and Mr Sharif?

If Mr Sharif's latest comments are troubling, Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar's remarks from the bench on Monday have potentially far-reaching implications that ought to be clarified.

According to media reports, Chief Justice Nisar remarked that Article 204 of the Constitution, which deals with contempt of court against a high court or the Supreme Court, may need to be given a longer-term effect than the maximum six-month jail sentence prescribed by the Contempt of Court Ordinance, 2003.

It ought to be stressed that the remarks were made during a contempt of court case pertaining to police and other officials convicted of manhandling former chief justice of the Supreme Court Iftikhar Chaudhry.

That issue has now been referred to a larger five-member bench on appeal.

Yet, there are concerns regarding the implications of the remark that the punishment for contempt may be interpreted to extend until “the accused purges himself before the court”.

A recent constitutional analogy may suffice.

In interpreting Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution, the Supreme Court declared that so long as the qualification criterion of Article 62(1)(f) exists and there is a judicial verdict in force that declares a parliamentarian or parliamentary candidate to not meet the standard of “sagacious, righteous and non-profligate, honest and ameen”, the individual is permanently barred from public office.

If a similar lifetime interpretation is applied to Article 204, the constitutional clause dealing with contempt of court, would an individual be kept in jail permanently unless he “purges himself before the court”, presumably by admitting contempt and pleading for the court’s mercy?

As stressed above, the remarks attributed to the chief justice in the media do not constitute the Supreme Court’s final opinion on the matter of contempt.

But it is disquieting that the possibility of lifetime jail sentences for contempt of court has been alluded to by the highest court in the land.

## Protecting personal data

ON Monday, ride-hailing company Careem, which has been operating in Pakistan since 2015, announced a massive security breach had occurred in January, potentially compromising the personal data, collected through its app and stored on its computer systems, of over 14m users (riders and drivers alike) across 13 countries. Such a major cyberattack has once again exposed vulnerabilities in protecting individuals’ digital identities, particularly in Pakistan where, despite a burgeoning internet user base, there is as yet no legal framework for data protection. Such protection places limits on what, how, and

for what purpose data is harvested by private and state entities. Although one of the stated objectives of the flawed Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, is to “afford protection to citizens”, the law addresses cyber security from a distinctly national security, not digital privacy, perspective. And despite the IT ministry’s repeated claims last year to introduce a data protection bill, it has yet to materialise.

Pakistan is not an island; our digital footprints extend to, and are affected by attacks on, international databases. While enacting data protection legislation will not, ipso facto, protect the country from such breaches, it is nonetheless essential for ensuring transparency, legitimacy and accountability for all stakeholders. Consider how, here at home, we have experienced a major ATM skimming scandal in recent months, Punjab’s land holdings records were hacked last year, and Nadra’s database has reportedly been compromised on several occasions in recent years. Yet our government continues to fail to recognise the magnitude of this emergent threat and, consequently, has failed to guarantee its citizens’ fundamental right to privacy. The realm of privacy has rapidly expanded with increased ICT use, and the lack of legal safeguards can hurt consumer and investor confidence in the country, especially in our nascent e-commerce and online banking regimes. A law that prioritises protecting citizens’ personal information, places effective limits on corporate interests and state security imperatives for data mining, and adopts safeguards against unauthorised data collection and use, is crucial in this day and age. Unlike the case with Peca, where recommendations made by digital advocacy experts, civil society and private companies were ultimately ignored, the government might hopefully engage more meaningfully with such consultations, improve the national discourse on digital privacy, and introduce a bill that reflects the best interests of its citizens.

## Organ donation

LAST week saw a welcome focus on promoting deceased, or cadaveric, organ donation that, by meeting the need of patients suffering from end-stage organ failure, would curb illegal commercial transplants. At a news conference on Saturday by members of a coordination committee set up at Karachi’s Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation by the Supreme Court, speakers pointed

out that lack of public awareness of cadaveric donation was a major stumbling block. Every effort must be made — and the media of course can play a vital role here — so that the idea of pledging to donate one’s organs after death takes root in the minds of the country’s population. The news conference followed the conclusion of a two-day conference on the illegal transplant trade and the promotion of deceased organ donation.

It is a sad indictment of Pakistan’s societal attitudes that legal cadaveric donation has not yet managed to inspire an appreciable number of individuals, even amongst the educated classes, to undertake this selfless act. Led by Prof Adib Rizvi, director of SIUT, several members of the medical community and civil society spent many years lobbying for the passage of legislation to criminalise commercial transplants. The legal framework, which also regulates cadaveric organ donation, has been in place for some years now, and it behoves the more enlightened members of society to lead by example. Some years ago, the then president Asif Ali Zardari pledged to donate his organs, a laudable step for a personality in a position of influence. Just last month, the chief justice of Pakistan, Mian Saqib Nisar, also said he would donate his organs. Pakistan needs far more people in prominent positions to show others the ethical and humanitarian way to help those who are in need of a new lease of life. It defies all principles of justice and ethics that people be coerced by whatever reason to ‘sell’ their organs. Cadaveric organ donation can help curb such a reprehensible trade.

## Discord over budget

THE chaotic end of the National Economic Council meeting on Tuesday in some ways resonates with the overall disordered circumstances under which the budget is being drawn up.

With discord between the provinces — minus Punjab — and the federal government, the meeting, in which crucial allocations for the development budget were to be finalised for next year, ended with a walkout and an acrimonious blame game. However, the impasse is not likely to derail the finalisation of the allocations since provincial assent is not necessary for planning the development budget.

What is unusual this year is the amplitude of the chief ministers' dissent with regard to the question of resource-sharing. According to reports emanating from the meeting, the objections began at the very outset. The chief ministers of three provinces — Sindh, KP and Balochistan (Punjab sent its finance minister who chose to stay) — walked out of the meeting after arguing for about an hour.

The disagreement revolved around resource commitment by the centre to projects in the provinces, in the interest of “balanced development and regional equity” as per Article 156(2) of the Constitution. The centre argued that this responsibility now belonged to the provinces after the 18th Amendment, and that federal development priorities were now focused on mainly national infrastructure.

The sudden nature of this dispute, which has not marred previous budget-making exercises in this way, suggests that the chief ministers showed up at the meeting with their minds already made up, and brought political motivations to an economic forum.

The leadership at the centre can cry foul but the chink in their own armour that was so effectively exploited by the chief ministers, and through which politics entered the conversation, is their own failure. The singular emblem of that failure is the inability to pass a National Finance Commission award during the PML-N's five years in office.

Such matters ought to have been settled long ago at the NFC table but were not. As a result, matters moved along largely on the basis of an ad hoc understanding between all federating parties. This understanding was vulnerable all along to the gambit which the parties running the provincial governments — and that happen to be in the opposition in the National Assembly — were able to seize upon in the hour of the PML-N's weakness.

The integrity of the budget process has taken a hit, but it will not be fatal. The allocations will still be decided by the cabinet as per its own wishes. But the repeated attacks on the government's prerogative to decide allocations for the next dispensation, as well as the breakdown of consensus at the start of the

budget process, will significantly weaken ownership and cloud economic policy for the entire year. Share

## Quetta attacks

THE cruelty of a murky, apparently endless war in Balochistan was once again bloodily underlined on Tuesday. At least six security personnel were killed and more injured in a vehicle bombing and a double suicide attack by militants. It should be shocking that not only are militants able to penetrate Quetta seemingly at will but that they are also capable of launching coordinated attacks which involve multiple attackers. However, the regularity with which Quetta is struck by militants suggests that the government and the security and intelligence apparatus do not have the capacity to secure Quetta, let alone the rest of the violence-hit province. It appears that no matter who the chief minister of Balochistan may be, or who among the military leadership is rotated through the province, accountability and true security are beyond the national leadership. Balochistan Home Minister Sarfraz Bugti typically shrugged off responsibility in a series of tweets. “Till the safe havens of terrorists prevail in #Afghanistan, peace can’t be guaranteed in Pakistan,” Mr Bugti has claimed. The home minister has also demanded that the Afghan army and foreign forces in Afghanistan “do more”. Mr Bugti does not seem to believe that security failures in Quetta and Balochistan generally may be a factor in the continuing violence.

Certainly, there is foreign interference in Balochistan and all manner of militant groups — separatists, Islamists, anti-Pakistan, factions and splinters — are active in the province. Hizbul Ahrar, a splinter group of Jamaatul Ahrar, itself a breakaway faction of the banned TTP, has claimed responsibility for the attack on the Frontier Constabulary camp. While such claims are virtually impossible to independently verify, it should be noted that Hizbul Ahrar and Jamaatul Ahrar trace their roots to Mohmand Agency. As ever, when militants find it difficult to attack in one region, they focus on another, more vulnerable one. While that may be the nature of the fight against militancy, the state can be more proactive in its strategy. With only weeks left before the dissolution of the federal and provincial governments and the formation of a caretaker setup to take charge ahead of the general election, an urgent review of the security situation in Balochistan is required. Election campaigns and the polling process are likely to be targets of a

range of militants active in Balochistan. If it is impossible to end all violence immediately, it should be possible to dramatically step up security arrangements in the days and weeks ahead.

## Murder most foul?

Given the horrific circumstances, it is a relief that Pakistan's laggard justice system has been stirred into action, even if prompted by external quarters.

On the orders of a magistrate, the body of Sana Cheema, a young Italian woman of Pakistani origin, was exhumed on Wednesday in Gujrat district for investigation into the cause of her death. The 26-year-old died last week and was buried without an autopsy since the family said her death was from natural causes.

However, the Gujrat police took notice of reports appearing in the Italian media, and a social media campaign by her friends, which held that she had been murdered for 'honour' — allegations with enough strength to draw the Pakistani community out for a demonstration in her neighbourhood in Italy.

Police in Pakistan collected information that also cast suspicions over the account presented by the young woman's family. A murder case was then lodged against her father, brother and uncle.

It is now for the police and the courts to determine the suspects' culpability, or lack thereof. However, there is a larger lesson to be learned from the tragedy.

There are many young people in the West who, like Sana Cheema, are second-, third- or even fourth-generation immigrants of Pakistani descent. Even if the older generations have found integration difficult in their homes in the West, it is unjust and illogical of them to expect their descendants — particularly women — to follow the patriarchal mores of their country of origin.

In Pakistan, such killings are a gruesome reminder of how, for long, the law was lax when it came to punishing those who committed this horrendous crime —

indeed, instead of being looked upon as murder, the practice is still seen by many as an exercise in protecting family 'honour'

Investigations have yet to confirm the cause of Sana Cheema's death. If it is proved that she was a victim of 'honour' killing, she will join the unfortunate ranks of the thousands of women in this country to have met this fate.

## And development for all...

THE Economic Survey this year, like many previous ones, was little more than an opportunity for the current rulers to roll out their signature achievements and press for the continuity of policies in the next government.

Presented earlier than usual, because of the looming deadline imposed by the election schedule, it could present only a sketchy portrait of the economy in the ongoing fiscal year, with much of the data in it spanning a six-month period.

Still, the government representatives, four ministers seated side by side, found ample opportunity to talk of their achievements and virtually taunt their critics with their track record.

The government ended load-shedding, claimed Minister for Planning Ahsan Iqbal as he began the presentation, arguing that the power crisis had been pushing Pakistan towards "a civil war" at the time it took the reins. The government built roads to connect remote areas, brought investment, revived growth ... and so on.

Economic Survey 2017-18: 'We put Pakistan back to work,' declares govt as final survey unveiled

Financial Adviser Miftah Ismail then argued that growth had been revived even though the external sector presented challenges. But here too there was no ground for serious concern, he asserted, since due to exchange rate depreciations, the current account deficit was coming down.

So if all is fine as they are telling us, why are the alarm bells sounding with growing urgency as the government's five-year track record unfolds? Today the

State Bank, the IMF, the World Bank and the ADB are all united in their warning that the increasing external deficits pose a real threat to the growth rates being touted by the government, and these warnings have continued even after the depreciations, indicating that more might yet be required to control the situation.

What kind of growth is this, one is tempted to ask, that depletes our reserves and creates threats to its own sustainability.

It would have been a lot easier to find comfort in the numbers presented in the Survey and underlined by the ministers during their news conference, had we not heard all this talk before. But we have been here in the past, in the mid-2000s, when exactly the same narrative was rolled out, albeit with growth rates and transformations in the economy that were far more robust than what we are seeing these days, despite the CPEC investments. Those years ended badly, and the memory lingers to this day.

Of course, history need not repeat itself. One is left wishing that the track record presented by the government team at the unveiling of the Economic Survey had more than just raw numbers behind it. With little change on the structural side, whether in the power sector or in productivity or in public-sector enterprises, we can only witness the spectacle of growth with unease.

## Talks with PTM

WHERE there are disagreements and differences, dialogue is necessary and desirable. The Pakhtun Tahaffuz Movement has stirred the national conscience — and controversy as well.

At its core, as has now been publicly acknowledged by government and military officials, what the PTM is seeking is legitimate, just and constitutional. Certainly, some of the intemperate remarks by PTM leaders cannot be condoned and are manifestly counterproductive.

It is not clear how positive change can be effected when the motives and very character of those with whom dialogue is necessary are challenged.

Just as Manzoor Pashteen and his fellow youth leaders have made some wild accusations against sections of the state, the PTM leadership has been attacked as anti-state and anti-Pakistan. Neither of those sets of accusations has been helpful and it is welcome that PTM has now met a group of tribal and political mediators after the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa apex committee endorsed talks with the PTM last week.

The mediating jirga is expected to meet government and military officials to convey the PTM's demands while the PTM leadership will consult its members about the next steps for the group.

At least two points need to be made here. For the state, it is necessary to address the core of the PTM's demands: missing persons and an overhaul of security measures in Fata. Resolving the issue of missing persons is critical to establishing Pakistan as a constitutional, rule-of-law, rights-protecting republic.

Too often the debate on missing persons is skewed towards the alleged necessities and constraints of the long fight against militancy. The fight against militancy, terrorism and extremism is more than a decade old and will almost certainly extend into the foreseeable future.

There was and is no justification for the state to not declare, bring charges against and put on trial all terrorism suspects who are in custody. What does and should differentiate the state from the militant is the lawfulness of all that the state does.

Similarly, as Fata is progressively resettled and reforms are enacted in the region, the people there must be treated with the same dignity and rights that Pakistanis elsewhere in the country demand. For the PTM, if it continues with its national rallies, the decision to hold a rally in Karachi on May 12 should be reconsidered.

The ethnic hues of that dark day should be avoided. Further divisive rhetoric by the PTM should also be immediately eschewed.

## Penalising journalists

A recent report by Reporters Without Borders only confirms the grim reality: journalists across the world face dangerous obstacles in their work, created by both state and non-state actors.

However, while the latter can hardly be expected to respect fundamental rights, one can certainly question the intentions of those countries that, while professing democratic values, clamp down heavily on the domestic media.

In this regard, the example of Turkey stands out. On Wednesday, a Turkish court convicted 13 journalists working for the Cumhuriyet newspaper on charges of terrorism; the journalists have been penalised for supporting what the Turkish state considers to be terror groups, including the Kurdish PKK, leftist groups and supporters of cleric Fethullah Gulen — all the bêtes noires of the Recep Erdogan-led government.

The charges date back to the failed 2016 military coup. Last month, 25 media persons were jailed for their alleged links to Mr Gulen.

Cumhuriyet has taken a line on major national issues that is opposed to the government stance. Perhaps that is why the paper's staffers have been punished on questionable charges of terrorism.

Further, Mr Erdogan has called snap polls in June; given the current wave of severe press restrictions, the ruling AKP leadership certainly appears to be attempting to muzzle all dissent before the elections.

The AKP has indeed worked hard to turn around the Turkish economy and keep the generals at bay; Turkey's modern history is replete with instances of coups, and the military has intervened multiple times to overthrow elected dispensations.

That is why the Turkish state and people did well to thwart the 2016 coup.

However, this does not mean that civilian autocracy should snuff out all opposing viewpoints in the country. To preserve the gains that Turkey has made and to

prevent a slide towards autocracy, Mr Erdogan must allow a free media and political opposition to thrive.

The AKP has won several elections in a row; it should not further taint its democratic credentials by indulging in authoritarian tactics.

## Budgeting on hope

YESTERDAY'S budget speech provided the perfect metaphor for the state of Pakistan's economic management: a lone man in the middle of a room straining to be heard above the thunderous roar of politics all around him.

This state of affairs has been the norm for far too long now, and it is the principal reason why reforms have never been able to be advanced with any seriousness.

Two things stand out in this budget. One is the severe weakness of the government, the other is the shift in allocations away from development towards current expenditures. Both are linked.

What we are seeing is a government hobbled by severe challenges to its rule, having to bend over backwards to accommodate as many special interests as it possibly can.

The key feature of the budget is the opacity of its revenue plan. It almost appears as if the government is not too worried about the resources, and that more attention has been paid to doling out the allocations and the incentives.

Out of the 18pc increase in tax revenue, totalling almost Rs750bn, the largest increases appear to be coming from indirect revenue measures such as the petroleum levy and taxes on communications.

FBR taxes are going up by Rs500bn, with the increases divided almost equally between income taxes, sales tax and customs duties.

Editorial: What kind of growth is this that creates threats to its own sustainability?

Considering that much relief has been given on all these heads, it appears the assumption behind these increases is a combination of broadening the tax base due to the amnesty scheme as well as natural growth owing to inflation and the depreciation of the rupee (which should lift sales tax at the import stage and customs duties). In short, the revenue plan is floating on hope, while expenditures have been given detailed treatment.

This is to be expected. The government that is drawing up this budget may or may not be the one to actually have to abide by it.

As it stands, this budget is likely to require many midcourse changes.

Many of the proposals are laudable — for example, the reduction in customs duties on imports of raw materials and other such measures.

But the Achilles heel of the budget will be its revenue requirements to meet the elevated current expenditures.

The redirection of resources away from development spending towards current expenditures provides one source of funding, as well as the stupendous hike in bank borrowing — up by Rs625bn — and a higher estimate for provincial Surpluses.

If the assumptions underlying it materialise, it will successfully boost consumption, with possible knock-on effects on growth (and imports).

But if, as is more likely, the assumptions prove too optimistic, the next government will be forced to modify it in significant ways, possibly rolling back many of the incentives given to middle-class households and industry.

## Khawaja Asif's exit

LIKE a chain reaction, the dominos appear to be beginning to fall.

After the Supreme Court's judgements disqualifying Nawaz Sharif for life from public office on the basis of Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution, it was clear that

others could be netted in the iqama and undeclared foreign earnings trap. To be sure, it is a trap of the politicians' own making.

Whether done deliberately to conceal certain facts from the voter or out of a lack of care because nomination papers have not been scrutinised carefully in the past, it is clear that foreign work, residency permits and income that elected representatives are entitled to or are drawing in foreign countries have not been fully declared by several politicians.

The latest PML-N victim is Khawaja Asif, who has been doggedly pursued by a bitter constituency foe, Usman Dar of the PTI, for many years. Mr Dar's quest to unseat arguably Sialkot's most famous politician has finally been agreed to by the Islamabad High Court, which has declared Mr Asif ineligible for parliament. The now former foreign minister has vowed to take his appeal to the apex court, but it does not appear that the Islamabad High Court misinterpreted the test that the Supreme Court has ruled applicable.

Indeed, the PML-N and other parties should pay heed to the advice of the three-member bench

Unlike other recent judgements, the Islamabad High Court verdict has effectively lamented the judicialisation of politics in the country. The bench has made clear that neither can nor should the people's verdict, in the form of choosing their elected representatives, be easily overturned. The text of the judgement suggests a preference for politicians settling political disputes in political forums rather than rushing to the courts at the first opportunity.

There are at least two things the political leadership will need to turn their attention to.

First, following extensive improvements to the electoral system in the form of parliamentary legislation last December, political parties must educate their candidates about poll rules in the upcoming general election. In particular, the nomination forms to be submitted by candidates must be closely vetted. There is less room than ever for misdeclarations or forgetfulness in that area.

Second, the political leadership will need to look at overhauling Articles 62 and 63 of the Constitution and removing the remnants of dictators' influence on the

Constitution. The next lot of legislators should settle political disputes inside parliament.

## The will to vaccinate

THERE are ample reasons for most developing countries to celebrate World Vaccination Week as they unite under the slogan 'Protected Together'. Countries such as India, Vietnam and China have strategically harnessed changing global political trends by investing in national policies to favour local production of rotavirus vaccines. Further, cost-effectiveness studies have led to sustainable, local costing mechanisms with domestic demand meeting the population's needs for rotavirus vaccine self-sufficiency. Such initiatives have been useful in breaking the hegemony of big pharma, based in the global north, over essential, life-saving vaccinations required urgently by the global south. Although the government efforts to introduce rotavirus vaccine in Balochistan during World Vaccination Week 2018 are heartening, provincial-level vaccination challenges have only become more apparent — with measles campaign mishaps in Sindh and vaccinators reportedly going missing in Punjab after a police crackdown on their protest. Lack of vaccine coverage, incomplete vaccination and the absence of self-sufficiency at the federal level are the main reasons the country is consistently falling behind regional as well as global targets, despite vaccination being a crucial first point of healthcare contact.

When it comes to Pakistani children under five, vaccine-preventable diarrhoeal diseases and respiratory illnesses are the main cause of death. Initially, evidence was collected in the 1990s, under the auspices of WHO, implicating rotavirus in life-threatening diarrhoeal episodes. It is unfortunate that since then, a lack of national-level ownership — ie public health infrastructural and institutional investments — and deficient political will — ie policies — means Pakistan cannot successfully achieve and maintain vaccination goals without international vaccination supplies. For vaccine self-sufficiency to even begin, a unified stance at the federal level is required to counter vaccine hesitancy; set up reliable, internal vaccine surveillance mechanisms; secure financing for locally sustainable vaccine supplies; establish standard procedures for vaccine evaluation; and invest in research for the development of vaccines tailored to our population needs.

## Budget debate

AFTER the political theatre, the serious work begins. Later this week, on May 2, parliament is set to open a debate on the federal budget presented by the PML-N. In addition to choosing a caretaker prime minister, the budget debate is likely to be one of the last major contributions of the current parliament. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi struck the right note by inviting opposition parties to debate inside parliament the budget presented by his government and also the overall governance and economic record of the PML-N government. Sensibly, the major opposition parties, the PPP and the PTI, have decided to participate in the budget debate rather than boycott it, with their leaders vowing to expose what they allege is a budget focused on pre-election handouts rather than the severe economic challenges the country is facing. If the government and opposition approach the budget debate with seriousness of purpose rather than as a formality, perhaps some improvements can be incorporated.

Certainly, the rowdiness and unparliamentary behaviour of sections of the opposition during Finance Minister Miftah Ismail's speech should not be repeated. Parliament is for debate and appropriate verbal sparring, not fisticuffs and abuse. Misbehaving lawmakers reflect poorly on the democratic process and parliamentary leaders, including from the PML-N, should advise their colleagues to conduct themselves appropriately during the debate. Likewise, while the opposition is entitled to criticise the appointment of the unelected Mr Ismail as finance minister and the PML-N has unnecessarily stirred controversy by invoking Article 91(9) of the Constitution, the budget debate ought to reflect substantive issues rather than purely procedural matters. Perhaps the opposition can suggest a rule change for the next parliament to ensure that an elected member of parliament presents future budgets. Democratic norms should strengthen the democratic process rather than allow unnecessary deviations.

The substantive issues in the budget debate are already apparent. The PML-N government's revenue projections are based on a number of assumptions that could easily prove to be untrue. A larger percentage increase in current expenditures against development spending also needs to be examined. The pressure on the balance of payments may have abated in recent months, but the improvement will have to accelerate if crisis is to be staved off. Meanwhile, there is a potential problem in the caretaker government implementing the first weeks

of the budget in the next fiscal year before handing over control to whoever wins the election scheduled for later this summer. With a majority in the National Assembly, the PML-N should have the budget and the Finance Bill approved without too much trouble. But it would set a welcome precedent if the PML-N incorporates serious suggestions from the opposition in the final budget. The democratic project would be cast in the right, beneficial light ahead of a general election that is expected to be fiercely contested.

## Undoing of Iran deal?

WHILE their recent talks in Washington with their US counterpart included various key issues, there was one major foreign policy question that both French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel brought up: the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the JCPOA. And while the Europeans tried to convince Donald Trump not to scuttle the deal as the May 12 deadline for the US president to recertify it approaches, there is little evidence they were successful. In fact, as Mr Macron commented after his sojourn in the US capital, it is highly unlikely that Mr Trump would recertify it. Indeed, the nuclear deal is not a bilateral arrangement — it involves Iran and the P5+1, the five permanent Security Council members plus Germany; yet should the US leave the agreement, many of the financial benefits Tehran would have accrued under the deal would no longer be available. Mr Trump has used a number of nasty epithets to describe the agreement — “insane, the worst deal ever” etc. However, many observers have hailed the 2015 pact as a commendable example of multilateral diplomacy that averted a potentially disastrous new confrontation in the Middle East. Unfortunately, as the feelers coming out of Washington indicate, that confrontation may very well be back on track.

Mr Trump, backed by Israel and his hard right domestic constituency, feels the deal is skewed in Iran’s favour. He is also critical of Iran’s regional activities — missile tests, geopolitical involvement in Yemen, Syria etc. However, if there are issues that the US or the Europeans feel need to be addressed, they should open the channels of dialogue with Tehran and discuss these. Sabotaging a deal that by the accounts of all neutral observers, especially the IAEA, is working by clubbing together other issues is not smart foreign policy. The Iranian government is quite clear: a new deal or renegotiated deal means no deal. While all sides should shun a rigid approach, the US and its allies must realise that

torpedoing the JCPOA will create a new conflict in the Middle East with devastating consequences for all. But perhaps that is what the cabal of hawks that currently surrounds the US president wants. There are currently just under two weeks before Mr Trump's decision. In the interests of regional and world peace, the US leader should carefully consider the consequences before announcing his choice.

## Increased maternity leave

WOMEN'S empowerment is a concept with many moving parts. Adequate maternity leave is one of those elements, and it has received scant attention by policymakers in Pakistan. Women should not be 'handicapped' in the workplace by the traditional expectations of them as children's primary caregivers; being a mother and a working woman are not mutually exclusive. There seems to be some recognition that our laws need to be more in sync with international practices, even if it is largely in the context of infant health. Last week, the information minister, Marriyum Aurangzeb, at an event to promote a mass awareness campaign about infant morbidity and mortality from preventable causes, referenced the obvious correlation between exclusive breast-feeding and an increase in paid maternity leave.

The number of working women in Pakistan today is far higher than it was in 1958, which is the year to which the currently operative law on maternity leave and benefits dates. That legislation stipulates only 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, including six weeks prior to and six weeks after delivery. Moreover, even this is not implemented properly, and penalties for violations are absurdly low. The absence of an institutionalised culture of maternity benefits enables companies to do as they please. Many establishments do not even have a policy for maternity leave; sometimes, especially in the informal sector, they simply terminate the services of the women concerned. Thus, for working women, delivering a baby can often have serious financial consequences. Moreover, the lack of adequate, paid maternity leave means that women in the formal, especially the corporate, sector are confronted with the prospect of being sidelined for promotion if they choose to spend more time bonding with their babies. Each of these scenarios take away from women's right to a level playing field in the public sphere. Not only must paid maternity leave be increased to six

months, but every company should provide a crèche on its premises. A guilt-free mother is a more productive employee.