

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of October 2019

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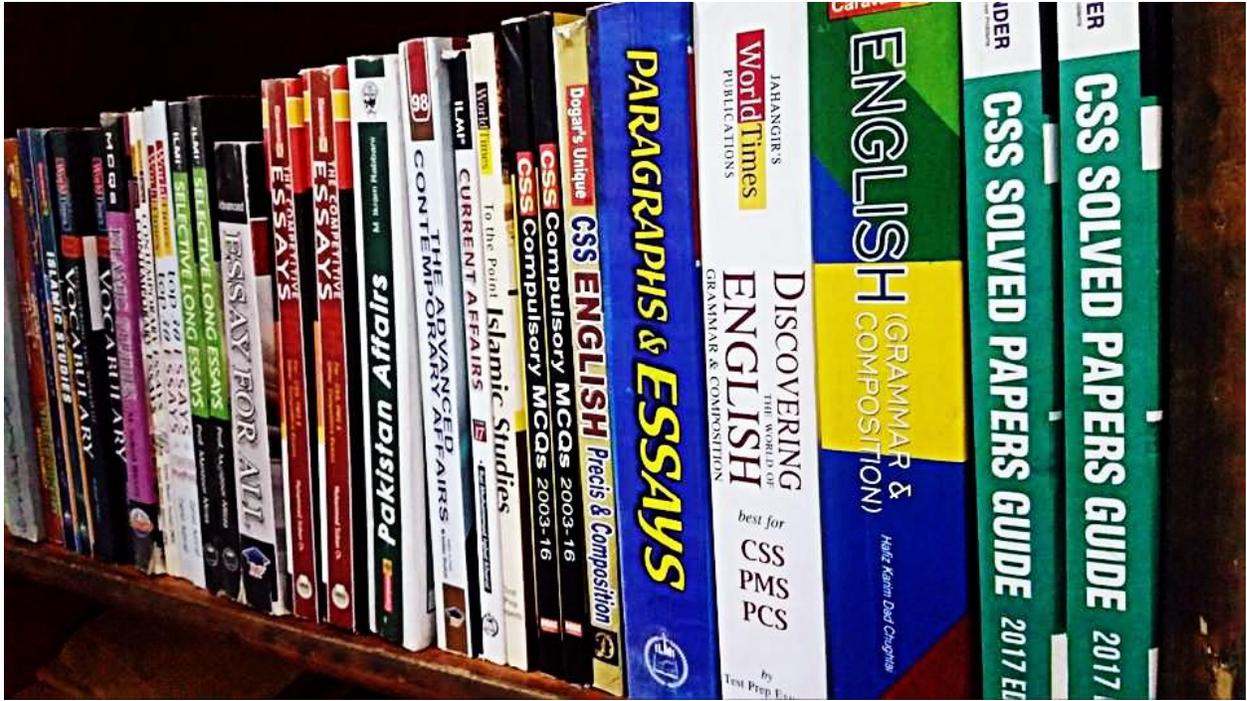
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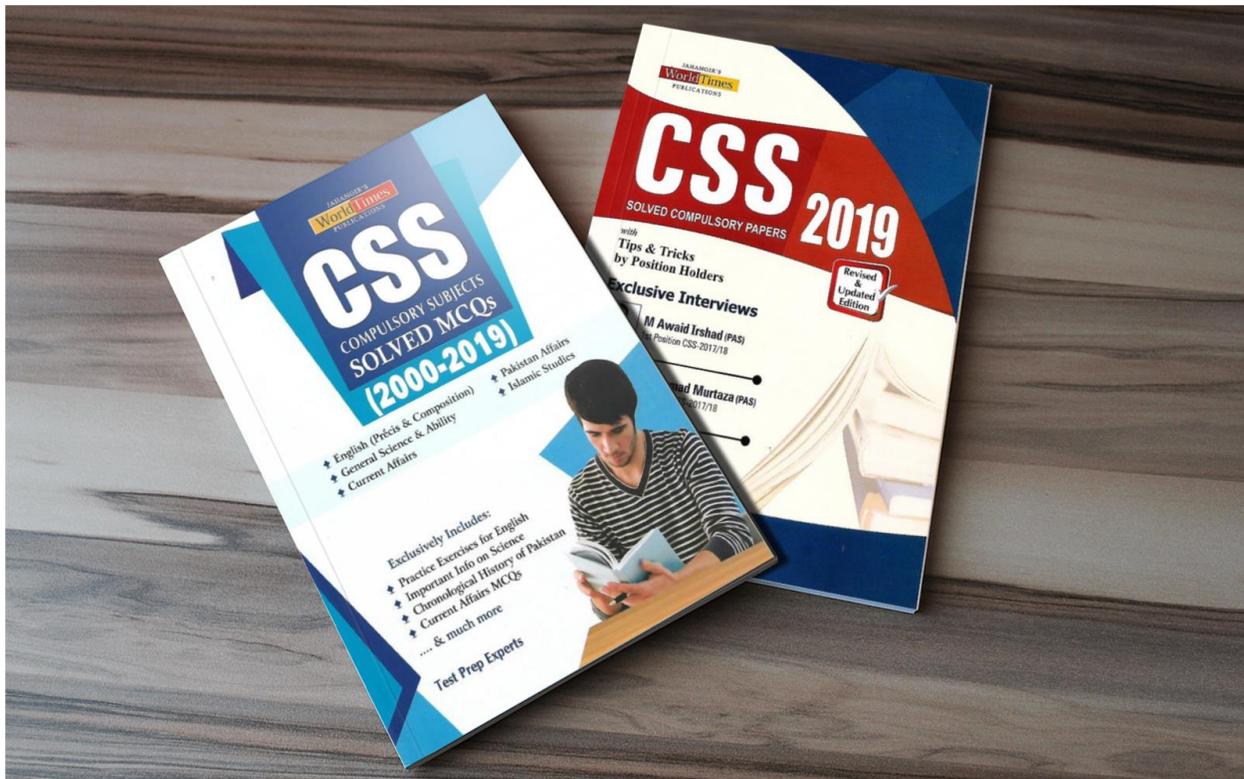
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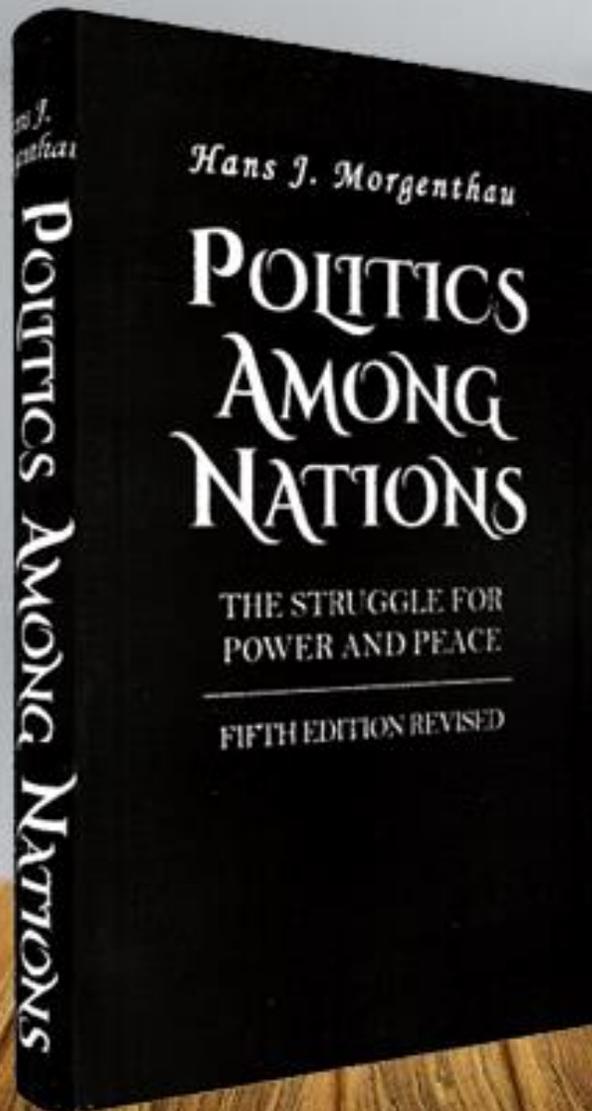
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China at 70

THE rise and transformation of China over the last seven decades — from an ideological state to an economic powerhouse — has been both complex and impressive. It has indeed taken much blood and toil, and the journey to transform an authoritarian, largely isolated state into one of the world's major powers has not always been a smooth one.

Today as Beijing observes the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic. Though its achievements should be celebrated, there should also be a critical review to see what can be improved internally to create greater social harmony and freedom, paired with economic prosperity.

The People's Republic was born in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the first shots of the Cold War were being fired. Led by Mao Zedong, the socialist revolutionaries defeated the nationalists and laid the groundwork for modern China. Mao, along with being the founding father of modern China, was a giant on the world stage, though his era was far from harmonious as the ravages of the Cultural Revolution showed.

This was an era of ideological zeal, when the socialist and capitalist blocs were locked in a global battle for influence. However, the modern financial strength of the PRC — the country is today the world's second biggest economy — is largely the handiwork of Deng Xiaoping, who oversaw great changes in the economic structure of his country and promoted the development of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

Today, China is socialist in all but name, though there has been a renewed focus by the state on Marxism under the helmsmanship of Xi Jinping. The current Chinese president has also been pushing economic growth, the Belt and Road Initiative being his signature project. Under the BRI, China is seeking to link continents in a web of trade and commerce, with Pakistan also benefiting in the shape of CPEC.

While the PRC's journey has been a success story, especially where economic growth and military strength are concerned, there are legitimate concerns about the state of human rights within China. For example, numerous foreign media outlets have highlighted the situation in Xinjiang, particularly with respect to the

Muslim Uighur ethnic group. There have been claims that the Turkic Uighurs are being forced by Beijing to abandon their religious and cultural practices, though the state denies this. The unrest in Hong Kong also refuses to die down, as protesters have been taking to the streets in the former British colony for several months now.

It is easy to brush aside these criticisms, but if China is to truly reap the harvest of its economic achievements, there must be internal harmony, with all nationalities given their due rights under the law, and greater freedoms for the Chinese people. Looking ahead, these would be worthy goals for leaders of the PRC to pursue.

Tourism potential

GOING by the findings of a recent Gallup Pakistan report, tourism in the country is on the path of revival. According to the report that relies heavily on federal and provincial data, tourist traffic to cultural sites has gone up from 1.6m visits in 2014 to 6.6m in 2018, with Punjab contributing about 95pc to this growth. The spike in the visitors is primarily triggered by domestic tourism. But there's also a visible uptick in the number of foreign travellers — the figure has doubled for museums and cultural sites. The growth is very encouraging. Many would take this increase in foreign visits as an indication that Pakistan is becoming a popular destination for foreigners; these figures have prompted the authors of the report to suggest that “tourism could be a potential game changer for the country's struggling economy”. But that may be an overly optimistic assessment — at least at this point — even though the country has so much to offer to tourists in terms of geographical diversity and cultural heritage.

For starters, take the overall negative perception of Pakistan internationally, and the many concerns that foreigners have vis-à-vis security in the country. Although the government has time and again expressed its resolve to make Pakistan a 'heaven for foreign tourists', it has done little to sell Pakistan's image as an attractive, secure tourist destination. We failed to take advantage of the goodwill created by the British Backpacker Society that ranked Pakistan as the world's top adventure travel destination last year, or Forbes' description of the country as one of the “coolest places” to visit in 2019, because we could not market ourselves. Countries such as Malaysia and Thailand, on the other hand,

spend millions of dollars each year on marketing their attractions to woo a continuous stream of foreign travellers. Indeed, the incumbent government has taken a few initiatives to ease travel restrictions for foreigners. But that is not enough, and there is a dire need to build on those actions to curb officialdom's propensity to eye international travellers with suspicion. More than that, the federal government and the provinces need to develop a physical and hospitality infrastructure in places where they want to promote tourism. At present, the country remains a tourist-unfriendly place. If we want tourism to flourish, the government will have to work hard on all aspects to encourage domestic and foreign travellers. Otherwise, we can forget about a 'heaven for tourists'.

Terror in Chaman

THE loss of a senior leader of the JUI-F in a bomb attack in Balochistan last Saturday once again underscores the need for top-level vigilance and intelligence gathering in the province.

The fatal attack in Chaman on Maulana Mohammad Hanif Achakzai, a deputy secretary general of the JUI-F and an influential figure in the area, would not have materialised had proper reconnaissance been carried out. An IED was detonated by remote control just as the cleric-cum-politician came out of a building. The explosion killed him and two other men who happened to be at the spot, while several others were injured.

The bomb was tied to a motorcycle that had been strategically placed near the maulana's office — an arrangement that would have required precise and prior knowledge of his schedule. Balochistan, especially its border areas, has genuine reasons to be worried about militants trying to create trouble.

The province has unfortunately figured quite extensively in the news for militant attacks, the latest taking place yesterday in Loralai when one policeman was killed in a gunfire exchange with militants. Some divide the perpetrators of such attacks into two categories — the Baloch separatist groups that Islamabad claims are acting at the behest of foreign patrons, and terrorist elements which often operate from Afghanistan or have links to the long-standing Afghan conflict.

JUI-F members are particularly in need of extra protection considering that the party leaders have been frequent targets of planned attacks believed to be

emanating from Afghanistan. In recent times, tensions have increased in Afghanistan and there is a need to strengthen border security.

It is inevitable that groups with militant credentials that are unhappy with the JUI-F, would target the party's office bearers. In fact, in recent months, Balochistan has seen a spike in acts of terror along the Quetta-Chaman road, despite the overall decline in violence in the country.

Unless prompt action is taken and security and surveillance beefed up, the threat will only grow

Yemen endgame?

A FLURRY of activity in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region points to the fact that the ruinous war in Yemen — now in its fifth year — could be wound up soon, if the protagonists agree to terms. This would come as welcome news to the beleaguered people of Yemen, who have been facing death, disease and starvation since the Saudi-led intervention in their country was launched in mid-2015. However, there should not be any premature conclusions, as the complex and volatile situation in the region can change within hours. Moreover, the road to peace in Yemen goes through Riyadh and Tehran, as the Saudi war against the Houthis is primarily seen as part of the larger regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

A number of recent events show that the Houthis are capable of inflicting major damage on Saudi Arabia if the stalemate drags on. While the Yemeni militia claimed responsibility for the devastating attacks on oil facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia last month, Riyadh and its Western allies put the blame on Iran. Even if there were questions involved regarding the Houthis' capability to carry out such sophisticated attacks, fresh evidence has emerged that the Iran-allied militia recently launched a major incursion near Saudi territory; the Houthis claim they killed or wounded hundreds of Saudi-allied troops, along with having taken Riyadh's troops prisoner. The group has released what it says is footage of the operation to back up its claims. Moreover, on Monday the militia, which controls the capital Sana'a, released hundreds of enemy combatants, including a handful of Saudis, calling upon the "other party to take a comparable step". The moves are, apparently, not going unnoticed in Riyadh. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told American outlet CBS that he looked upon a Houthi ceasefire

offer as “a positive step to push for ... active political dialogue”. He also said in the same interview that the solution to his country’s stand-off with Iran lay in a “non-military solution”.

Perhaps these realisations have emerged after it dawned upon the powers that be in Riyadh that the war in Yemen is nothing short of an unmitigated disaster, and a simple victory is out of the question if the current situation continues. From here, the Saudis should reach out to the Houthis and respond to their ceasefire offer; such an opportunity to end this atrocious campaign must not be lost. Moreover, a settlement in Yemen may help create the groundwork for direct Saudi-Iranian talks to bring peace and stability to the region. There are also reports in the media that Riyadh has approached Iraq to open a backchannel with Iran. Indeed, the relationship between Riyadh and Tehran is fraught with mistrust, so no miracles should be expected. But if there is a desire on both sides to negotiate a way out of the quagmire, it would be a much preferable alternative to conflict.

The ‘traitor’ label

The situation calls for Prime Minister Imran Khan’s intervention.

After four months in custody, MNAs Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir had a torrid time in the National Assembly on Monday; the proceedings illustrated how little we have learnt from our tempestuous history of nationalist movements.

The two independent legislators from North and South Waziristan, who are affiliated with the PTM, had been arrested for their alleged involvement in two separate incidents. One was the deadly May 26 clash between military personnel and PTM activists at the Kharqamar check post that resulted in 13 deaths, and the other an IED blast in which four army officials were martyred. On Sept 18, an anti-terrorism court in Bannu granted bail to Mr Wazir and Mr Dawar in the second case, enabling them to participate in parliamentary proceedings.

In the assembly, however, several cabinet members made it clear in a number of ways that they considered the two legislators to be traitors, and demanded proof of their loyalty to Pakistan in return for the government negotiating with them.

Parliament offers a platform where its members can disagree, even disagree strongly, with each other on important issues that concern the people they

represent. However, to use it to accuse fellow legislators of treachery is an abuse of that privilege; indeed, such allegations undermine the very purpose of the institution — to bring together the many parts that make up the whole of Pakistan.

Mr Wazir and Mr Dawar were elected by the people of Waziristan to represent them.

To impute a sinister ‘agenda’ to them and question their patriotic credentials is tantamount to casting the same aspersions on their electorate. What can be achieved by that, except to further alienate a people who after decades of a terrible, devastating conflict in their native areas, have been brought into the constitutional fold for the first time in Pakistan’s history?

The prime minister himself has conceded that the PTM’s demands are not without merit. An appropriate intercession from him at this point could prevent negative repercussions in the long run, and the unintended consequences of which we should be acutely cognisant. Consider how Bacha Khan, Attaullah Mengal and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to name but a few, were declared traitors by a state wishing to silence genuine grievances and suppress legitimate political demands.

That resulted only in deepening the ethnic divides and, in one case, to this nation being torn asunder.

Post-truth world

POPULARISED by President Donald Trump in the run-up to the US elections, the term ‘fake news’ has been a part of common jargon for some time now. Unfortunately, it is also increasingly an accusation levelled against ‘liberal’ media outlets by some of the world’s most powerful figures to shield themselves from accountability or criticism — or to ensure that only one narrative (their own) exists. Nevertheless, misinformation, disinformation and mal-information are indeed among the principal threats facing global communities and traditional journalism in the 21st century. Most worrying is the speed with which such false information is shared and uncritically absorbed by ‘consumers’ through social media and WhatsApp. In Pakistan, we have witnessed the disastrous effects of such malicious campaigns, including the serious damage done to the anti-polio

efforts in recent years. For instance, in April, a hoax about children falling sick after being administered polio drops was widely shared on social media, which led to an 85pc increase in vaccine refusals in KP alone, and a massive spike in the number of new polio cases this year. In India, there have been several instances of lynch mobs descending upon the innocent on the basis of mere rumour, the brutal consequence of panic and paranoia fuelled by WhatsApp forwards. Last year, in Mexico, two men were burned to death after locals received fallacious messages alerting them to the presence of child kidnappers who had entered the country.

With greater technological advancements, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence, the ability to mislead the public through ‘fake news’ is only going to increase in the years to come. Keeping this threat in mind, 20 member states of the UN have signed an agreement put forth by Reporters Without Borders, which aims to “promote reliable information over disinformation” by ensuring internet providers promote “trustworthy content and pluralism”. Perhaps the biggest casualty of misinformation is trust itself, the glue which holds societies together.

Opposition protest

THE flurry of political activity focused on the JUI-F’s planned march continued on Wednesday. While there are no definitive answers, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, after a meeting with the PML-N, did say he would consider the opposition’s request to delay his advance on the capital. The latest meeting comes a day after an earlier session between the PML-N and PPP where it was decided that the two parties would meet the JUI-F chief — separately — to try and convince him to postpone the march. That in itself is an indicator of how far apart the two main opposition parties are on the issue; a joint approach could have reflected some progress on an agreement. But so far, the only thing that unites them is their desire to see Prime Minister Imran Khan pack up and go. The PPP and PML-N do not have a roadmap to accomplish this huge task. In fact, they have not unveiled any scheme to achieve even a smaller target than the overthrow of the PTI setup. For instance, they have displayed little interest in tackling the government head-on over many of the unpopular measures that have contributed to the current price hike.

For his part, Maulana Fazlur Rehman insists he has a map, not dissimilar to the one used by Prime Minister Imran Khan to come to power, even if the present challenger lacks the kind of patrons who allegedly sponsored the Khan journey. The JUI-F chief has implied that the protest will have the desired effect of unsettling the Khan government. He appears to be relying on a 'tip-off' by commentators who say that there is a public sentiment against the government that an opposition movement of sufficient proportions could ignite. But even if the PPP and PML-N are able to provide the numbers to back up the campaign, the leadership of the two parties has shown itself to be incapable of rising above their own interests and readily throwing their weight behind the maulana.

The opposition is generally tentative about the campaign. The voices of caution emanating from the opposition camp have been joined by observers who say that the situation is not conducive to a protest march against a government which only recently completed its first year in office. While this may be a valid argument, the opposition, that is often advised to protest and debate in parliament in the interest of democracy, is right in pointing out the scant respect that the prime minister and PTI politicians have shown towards the legislature. What option does it leave the opposition with, if not street protest? The onus is then on the government to demonstrate that it respects healthy opinion and is ready to listen to and address the opposition's grievances. It will have only itself to blame if the opposition proceeds jointly outside the elected houses.

Online transactions

THE finalisation and approval of the first-ever e-commerce policy framework is a positive development. The policy framework focuses on protecting both the consumers and online retailers, implementing more effective regulations without hampering the growth of this industry, promoting financial inclusion and digitising payments, harmonising taxes, and creating new jobs. The good thing is that the policy has been developed after extensive consultations with private- and public-sector stakeholders. These have included e-commerce companies, the central bank, FBR, the ministries of IT and commerce, etc. Therefore, we see broad agreement by online retailers on the measures proposed in the framework to regulate the industry in such a way that it continues on its rapid growth trajectory.

Online shopping in Pakistan has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years due to advancements in communication technology, including the expansion of internet access and branchless banking. At present, we do not have reliable or verifiable data regarding the exact value of online transactions, because approximately 90pc of total purchases still remain cash-based. Yet the size of online retail business in the country is estimated to have grown to anywhere between Rs50bn and Rs100bn. The rapid increase in the popularity of e-commerce has also led many brick-and-mortar retailers, major brands and individuals to start their own online retail shops to reach out to the emerging market of online buyers. In spite of this significant rise in technology-driven business-to-consumer, or B2C, transactions, the size of the online market in Pakistan is minuscule when compared to what it is in China and India. In India, e-commerce retail sales are estimated at \$38bn, while in China these stand at a staggering \$1.5tr. Also, the Chinese and Indian markets have seen a huge influx of foreign investment in this sector. In contrast, foreign investors are reluctant to invest in the industry here because of connectivity problems as well as infrastructural and regulatory issues that impede the repatriation of their profits. The framework does not help in tackling such issues. All the same, we have a policy that can help grow this industry, safeguard the interest of consumers and mobilise significant tax revenues for the government. The next step is its implementation. Many remain sceptical on this count because our bureaucracy is not known for the execution of policies. The framework needs further refinement but that will be possible only when it is put into action.

Our plastic problem

THE Sindh government's decision to enforce a province-wide ban on the manufacturing, sale and use of plastic bags shows there is a growing awareness among legislators about the importance of safeguarding the environment and public health.

Alongside the ban, an awareness campaign has been launched, and cloth bags distributed among some of Karachi's residents. This is not the first time the provincial government has attempted to ban plastic bags. In fact, the Sindh Prohibition of Non-degradable Plastic Products (Manufacturing, Sale and Usage) Rules and the Sindh Environmental Protection Act have existed since 2014.

Just last year, the Sindh cabinet issued a notification on the use of polythene and plastic bags, which was to come into effect in phases within three months. But such a move was never successfully implemented. A similarly unsuccessful attempt had been made back in 2006, with the passing of the Sindh Prohibition on Manufacture, Sale and Use of Polythene Bags Ordinance.

The Pakistan Plastic Manufacturers Association estimates that approximately 55bn plastic bags are used in the country each year. Other estimates place the figure well over 100bn. While banning plastic remains a massive challenge, coordinated efforts amongst the various provinces may ease the burden.

On Aug 14, in an attempt to limit the damage, the Islamabad Capital Territory too placed a ban on the use of single-use plastic, which was expectedly met with resistance from various stakeholders. Unfortunately, whenever such a ban has been announced, there have been protests from the retail and manufacturing industries, which employ tens of thousands. This was witnessed on Tuesday, when scores of workers in Lahore held demonstrations against the government for potentially rendering them jobless.

The government must ensure that does not happen, and compensate workers and manufacturers and give them viable, long-term alternatives. Otherwise, in its attempt to do good in the long run, it might just end up creating a bigger problem for itself in the short term.

Power tariff hike

THIS government has now presided over three separate hikes in power tariffs, aside from the regular fuel adjustment surcharges that are revised and updated as per routine. The latest such hike came on Wednesday, when in one go the government notified a 33 paise per unit increase, on top of the 53 paise per unit hike that the regulator had already approved. The additional increase, according to the finance ministry, was to help bear the cost of the subsidy that the so-called 'lifeline consumers' (those who consume less than 300 units per month) receive. In what appears to be a sleight-of-hand move, the government has passed on the cost of that subsidy to consumers, thereby freeing up some fiscal space for itself, and at the same time, turning the country's power sector and its billing and recovery system into even more of a surrogate revenue-collection machine.

These kinds of gimmicks need to be avoided at all cost; whenever the government resorts to them, it needs to be called out on it. Under pressure to keep expenditures down while lifting revenues, the government is behaving like its predecessors as it begins to lean on power tariffs and fuel prices to make some easy billions for itself. When past governments resorted to such practices, they were criticised, not least by Imran Khan himself. But now, the present government itself has retained the benefit of falling oil prices in the global market, rather than passing it on to the consumers who are already weighed down by inflation. Not content with that, it is now passing on the cost of some of the subsidies — and of its own inability to improve system efficiency — directly to the consumers.

Meanwhile, the public is still waiting to learn what the government's big ideas for power sector reform are. We know privatisation will play a role, but there is nothing yet on how the government intends to improve sector governance, or whether pricing reform is even a part of its vision. There is even less knowledge of what is being done to improve transparency in the power sector. These are mutually reinforcing priorities that are needed to put the power sector on the path of self-sustaining growth. Without pricing reform, investment will always be pegged to guaranteed returns. Without improvement in sector governance, there will always be circular debt, higher or lower in some periods than in others but always present. Without transparency, there will be no meaningful improvement in governance. The absence of any vision for power-sector reform makes tariff hikes even more difficult to bear. At this rate, we will be endlessly raising tariffs to pay for system inefficiency, as well as bearing the associated costs, such as subsidising lifeline consumers; thus there will be no real gain. This is not the way to run things, especially in the power sector.

Neglected province

BALUCHISTAN seems to have faded from the national narrative; only when it is the theatre of a terrorist attack does it surface, that too very briefly. The HRCP's report from its fact-finding mission to the province — aptly titled Balochistan: Neglected Still — lays bare the deepening alienation among its people and their disillusionment with the state. At the top of the list of grievances is the continuing practice of enforced abductions, which has reportedly expanded to include women victims from Awaran and Dera Bugti, a development bound to intensify

the sense of humiliation and helplessness among the local population. The observations in the document, gleaned from interviews on the ground with representatives of political parties as well as civil society activists, including lawyers, members of labour unions and academia, etc, paint a picture of extreme repression and despondency. The right to security of person and rights to due process, freedom of speech, information, etc — all have evidently been sacrificed in the fight against separatist elements.

The fruits of the 18th Amendment have bypassed Balochistan; neither do the results of last year's election have legitimacy in the eyes of a vast swathe of its population. There will certainly be those who will argue that the state's security-centric policies are precisely what have cooled the ongoing insurgency, thereby clearing a major obstacle to CPEC-related projects in the province. Evidence of meddling by foreign intelligence agencies has been proven beyond doubt; at the same time, one must also concede that such sinister endeavours can only take root in existing local grievances that have found no redress. CPEC is touted ad nauseam as being a 'game changer' for locals. However, the real game changer would be for the Baloch to be able to exercise their right to self-governance within the constitutional framework and exert independent control over their vast natural resources. This would be the surest way to erode any lingering support for the insurgency and deny the separatists a convenient narrative with which to attract disaffected Baloch youth. As though these problems were not grave enough, the latest HRCP report also highlights the growing resentment among the province's Pakhtun population at what they perceive to be the state's strong-arm tactics against PTM activists in Balochistan. This is a new element in this cauldron of competing agendas and conflicting interests. The state must dispassionately review its policies and craft a new people-centric approach that brings the nation together.

Sri Lankan series

THE return of international limited-overs cricket to Pakistan finally became a reality with the arrival of the Sri Lankan cricket team last week and the subsequent ODI series that has been won 2-0 by the hosts.

The three-match ODI series in Karachi will now be followed by an equal number of T20 games in Lahore, thus making this 13-day tour by the Islanders the

longest by a front-ranking cricket team to Pakistan since March 2009 when a harrowing terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team's bus suspended international cricket activity at home.

Read: Sri Lanka Cricket says received terror attack warning ahead of Pakistan tour

Though 10 leading Sri Lankan players opted out of the tour citing security reasons, and heavy rain threatened to scuttle the matches, the series has still given hope to fans that international cricket is returning to Pakistan.

There have been signs of this happening.

The recent visit by Cricket Australia's CEO Kevin Roberts and its security head Sean Carroll as well as the forthcoming trip of deputy ICC chairman Imran Khwaja to witness the T20s in Lahore next week is good news.

Credit for this ought to be given to the PCB that has worked hard to convince the ICC and member cricket boards to consider Pakistan as a safe country for the game. However, more than the PCB or the ICC, Pakistani fans perhaps owe a debt of gratitude to the Sri Lankans themselves for agreeing to undertake this landmark tour, especially in view of what they experienced in 2009.

Having said that, the authorities should have ensured that crowds filled the National Stadium.

Unfortunately, heavy security, needless road blocks and steep ticket prices discouraged many fans who watched the matches on their television screens and mobile sets.

Analysts will vouch for the fact that in past decades, cricket was a catalyst for uniting a nation split along multiple ethnic, religious and ideological fault lines.

Pursuing peace?

WITH the Afghan peace process — thanks to the complexity of the situation and the varying agendas of the parties involved — it is best to expect the unexpected. Only some time ago, it seemed as if efforts to bring the long war in Afghanistan to a close had hit a dead end, after US President Donald Trump abruptly announced via Twitter that talks with the Afghan Taliban were off. The decision

came after an American soldier was killed amongst others in a Taliban attack in Kabul. Prior to this, it had emerged that Mr Trump had planned an unprecedented meeting at the Camp David retreat featuring members of the militia and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Moreover, after the Taliban targeted the recently held Afghan elections, it appeared as if chances of peace became even more remote. However, over the past few days, activities in Islamabad have shown that a fresh push for peace is being pursued. On Thursday, senior Taliban leader Mullah Baradar was in the capital and met the foreign minister; a statement released after the meeting mentioned that both sides called for the “earliest resumption” of the peace process. Aside from the high-powered Taliban team, Zalmay Khalilzad, America’s point man for Afghanistan, was also in the federal capital at the same time.

Clearly, efforts are afoot to restart the peace process, and Pakistan is playing a central role in this. Publicly, the American position is lukewarm, with Mr Trump reacting cautiously to a question regarding the resuscitation of peace talks. But behind closed doors, the situation may well be different. The difficulties are considerable, but if Pakistan is able to facilitate peace talks between the US and the Taliban, it will be a major diplomatic victory and will help improve the security situation in the entire region. Yet, this will by no means be easy, and expectations should not remain too high. The best way to proceed for Pakistan would be to employ experienced foreign policy hands and use the backchannel to facilitate contacts between Washington and the Taliban.

Meanwhile, much will depend on the results of the Afghan presidential election. Though the Taliban are dismissive of the government in Kabul and played a major role in disrupting the polls, with a new Afghan government in place a fresh peace overture may be possible. Yet much depends on a peaceful transfer of power in Kabul, while the Taliban must also put a halt to violent activities within Afghanistan to help the peace process move forward. Ultimately, as we have written previously in these columns, it will have to be an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process, with regional states and foreign powers playing the role of facilitators. If the Afghans themselves — the Taliban as well as Kabul’s power players — are not ready for peace, there is little that outsiders can do.

Industry meetings

INDUSTRY leaders' recent round of meetings with the army chief and then the prime minister betrays a sense of mounting anxiety around the state of the economy. Such meetings have taken place before too, but rarely have they been made into high-profile affairs, complete with press releases and photographs being issued afterwards. Both meetings dragged on for hours, and though the details of what was discussed are sketchy, it is clear that the message given by the army chief to the industry leaders was one of patience. He found it necessary to underscore that the army and government were on the 'same page', and told the attendees that it would take time to stabilise the economy. This message captures the gist of what took place at these meetings. The industry leaders have been asked to not expect rapid changes, and expectations of any revival packages need to be tempered. Why the message could not have been delivered by the government alone is an indictment of the latter's own inefficiencies.

For the moment, the government is constrained to walk the path of adjustment and resources are limited. But beyond resources, two themes that have repeatedly emerged in public pronouncements by these leaders is a runaway accountability drive that is being led by people who do not understand the nature of the business deals they keep interfering in, and the poor quality of implementation of the government's policy direction. These elements are unrelated to the availability of government resources or the ongoing economic adjustment. They relate directly to the political choices being made by the government, as well as the poor quality of leadership coming from the top. This is turning into an unmistakable conclusion. Decisions are made but rarely implemented. Policies are debated, drafted, perhaps even signed, but the wheels of government below the line do not move in tandem with what the policy dictates. The only direction that economic policy has today is a relentless adjustment, gained through taxes and a pitiless strangulation of the economy through 'demand compression'. Beyond this, there is nothing. And the danger now is that after the voice of the industry leaders has been heard but not heeded, we will be left with an economy that has no deficits but not much of a productive base either. Without thinking beyond adjustment, the government will undoubtedly run the risk of repeating yet one more cycle of eternal return to the IMF.

Media unity

THE media industry has finally risen to the occasion. In a show of unity that had become rare in recent times, all factions of print and electronic media organisations, along with the owners of media groups, held a meeting in Islamabad where they came to the unanimous conclusion that not only would they reject the government's move to set up media tribunals, they would also put up active resistance to it. Pakistan's media industry has witnessed dark times before as well, when it was subjected to gag orders and brutal censorship. This time, however, the clampdown is unique in terms of the varied sources of economic and political pressures that those in power are able to apply, without specifying any reasons. In recent times, economic pressures have forced owners of media houses to actively endorse and practise corporate censorship, undermining the overall struggle for press freedom in the country in an increasingly polarised political environment. Resentment within the media itself is also building up as major media houses have resorted to layoffs and pay cuts to minimise their losses. For journalists to then put aside their differences with media owners and rally for a greater cause is commendable. At the same time, it underscores the serious challenges the industry faces as a whole.

Another outcome of the meeting was the constitution of a standing committee to determine a future course of action aimed at fighting media curbs. If the committee succeeds in achieving its immediate goals, it can also become a platform for encouraging a healthy debate on the industry's role as the fourth pillar of state. Perhaps this forum can help develop a consensus on a strong code of ethics and encourage professionalism among media workers, which would go a long way in projecting the media as a strong, united entity. Meanwhile, it is time for the state to acknowledge that democratic progress can only be ensured with an independent and upright media that refuses to be a mouthpiece for the government's misplaced priorities.

Sedition charges

INDIA'S descent into totalitarianism is acquiring chilling new dimensions by the day.

On Thursday, the police filed charges of sedition and other offences against 49 eminent personalities for writing an open letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in which they demanded an end to the lynching of Muslims, Dalits and other minorities in the country. Such incidents, often captured in harrowing videos, are occurring with frightening regularity, particularly in BJP-ruled states.

The letter, whose signatories included filmmakers Shyam Benegal, Mani Ratnam and Aparna Sen, called for the perpetrators to be meted out “exemplary punishment ... surely and swiftly”, and described ‘Jai Shri Ram’ as having been reduced to a “provocative war cry”.

The individual who filed the petition before a chief judicial magistrate was quoted as saying that the celebrities had “tarnished the image of the country and undermined the impressive performance of the prime minister”.

On the contrary, the letter is an exception to what appears to be the success of the Modi government's supremacist ideology in extinguishing, or at least silencing, India's collective conscience.

Aside from sedition, the FIR also includes charges of public nuisance, hurting religious feelings, and insulting with the intent to provoke breach of peace.

It is the mark of a society hurtling towards a dystopian nightmare when an appeal for humanity and compassion can be so grotesquely perverted.

Since it came to power at the centre five years ago, the BJP has embarked upon an organised and relentless campaign to not only quash dissent in the public discourse but to vilify such dissent as being ‘unpatriotic’.

In 2015, more than 40 writers, including a niece of Jawaharlal Nehru — often described as the architect of Indian secularism — returned top national awards to protest the climate of intolerance beginning to take hold in the country.

Attacks on journalists and progressive thinkers critical of the Hindu far right spiked; several of them, such as newspaper editor Gauri Lankesh, were murdered.

Today, much of the Indian print and broadcast media has become a cheerleader for the BJP and a mouthpiece for official propaganda, putting a positive spin on some stories, and relegating others to obscurity.

The government and its allies in big business have used their budgets strategically to reward compliance and punish critical coverage; some high-profile sackings of recalcitrant editors have also served to reinforce the point.

As an Indian columnist recently observed about local media outlets: “How can they question the system when they are the system?”

This craven surrender was perhaps never better illustrated than when India-held Kashmir was stripped of its special autonomy two months ago.

The triumphalism that coursed through the media landscape, with barely a murmur of dissent — above all, the total media blackout in the beleaguered territory — leaves no doubt that the world’s biggest democracy is no longer worthy of that distinction.

CNIC and taxes

THE government gave an important concession to the trader community on Friday, while simultaneously telling all industrial and commercial consumers of power and gas connections to get themselves registered for income tax by Oct 15. Presumably, there will be tough action after that date, though the FBR chairman, who made the announcement, did not specify what steps are being contemplated. For the trader community, the government relaxed a part of its documentation requirements, telling the traders that all CNICs submitted for tax purposes would be “deemed to have been reported in good faith by the supplier”. This means that if the supplier has provided an incorrect CNIC, the action will not be a punishable offence. This was an important sticking point in the ongoing documentation drive, since manufacturers and suppliers of goods say they have no way of knowing whether the CNIC shown to them by the buyer belongs to a third party or not. Without this knowledge, they cannot complete the transaction under the existing rules, and supply chains of industry along with distribution

networks have suffered enormous disruption. But another important condition remains in place, which is the one that requires all payments to be made into a bank account that is in the name of the person whose CNIC has been submitted for tax purposes.

Clearly, an aggressive game of give-and-take between the government and the business community is now in full swing, particularly where the traders, who are at the heart of the documentation drive, are concerned. Those unregistered manufacturers who have been availing industrial or commercial category utility rates but have not registered for tax purposes now face “an aggressive campaign” from Oct 15 onwards, as per the announcement of the FBR, and traders have been offered a carrot in the withdrawal of the punishable offence clause in the Sales Tax Act. This is smart policy handling and the FBR deserves its round of credit for structuring its efforts in this manner. But the struggle ahead is a particularly difficult one, and pressure to relax conditions will mount further. The government must decide clearly how far it is committed to this course of action, and then stick to it. Going down this path, which will bring its fair share of confrontation, and then relenting under pressure, does more harm than good when it comes to the admirable goal of documentation.

Disability discourse

ACCORDING to the WHO, approximately 15pc of Pakistan’s population consists of persons with disabilities. For such a large group, PWD are severely overlooked and underrepresented in every aspect of life, including politics and lawmaking. Until the passage of the 18th Amendment, there was only one law that spoke to the rights of PWD: the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance of 1981, which ensured employment for them. Since devolution, however, Balochistan, and Sindh have passed their own laws concerning PWD. Glaringly, Punjab and KP have not followed suit. Last year, the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018, was tabled by the human rights ministry, but it is yet to be presented to the National Assembly.

Advocacy groups such as the Potohar Mental Health Association have pointed out certain flaws in the law. First, they feel the definition of ‘disabled’ is outdated, since it is not aligned with the UN Convention of Rights of Persons with

Disabilities. Second, even though all PWD face some level of stigma, women with disabilities bear the brunt, and the language in the bill is not inclusive towards them. Third, the allocation of funds is unclear. Fourth, unlike other marginalised groups, PWD do not have representative seats at the National Assembly, which is against the UNCRPD, and this bill does not mention political representation for them. Lastly, despite being assigned special CNICs, the process of attaining them at Nadra offices is long and cumbersome, while 'proving' their disability is perceived as discriminatory. While keeping these issues in mind, the passing of the new law will nevertheless be a welcome step in making Pakistan a more equitable society, safeguarding the rights of PWD and ensuring a life of dignity for them. If passed, it can also be adopted by the Punjab and KP assemblies with amendments. It is important to remember that PWD do not need sympathy or charity, but are deserving of their due rights as citizens of the state.

Iraq unrest

STABILITY has been a rare commodity in modern Iraq, with wars, foreign invasions and internal strife standing in the way of national progress.

In fact, in the post-Ottoman period, apart from brief patches of normalcy, the story of Iraq has largely been one of unstable governments, military coups and — especially in the recent past — foreign meddling and bungled nation-building efforts.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the American invasion of 2003, Iraq has failed to see good governance and an improved standard of living for its people, despite its considerable oil income.

It is these factors — bad governance, unemployment, corruption — that have apparently fuelled the ongoing protests in various Iraqi cities.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

As per media reports, over 100 people have been killed over the past week in the disturbances, as security forces have taken on the protesters, reportedly firing live rounds at crowds.

Read: Protesters flood Iraq streets anew as death toll nears 100

There is a growing chorus for the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi's government, which has been in power for barely a year. Though the Iraqi premier has scrambled to respond to the protests, the next few days will show whether or not the government has taken enough measures to placate the demonstrators.

There is a dire need to end the violence and restore calm before the protests further destabilise what is already a fragile country.

Sectarian and ethnic troubles are never far from the surface in Iraq, and demonstrations can take on ugly communal colours if not handled with tact and statesmanship.

In fact, the perceived mistreatment of the Sunni community in Iraq was one of the reasons that led to the growth of the militant Islamic State group, while Kurdish-Arab relations have been lukewarm even in the best of times.

Moreover, many of the protesters have raised anti-Iran slogans, recalling the spectre of Arab-Persian rivalry.

Considering these fault lines, the Iraqi government, religious leaders and tribal elders must all play their part to restore calm and ensure the protesters' genuine demands are not exploited by vested interests to create chaos.

Moreover, hundreds of thousands of people are headed for Karbala, including many foreigners, to observe Arbaeen in the days ahead. Therefore, the restoration of security must be a primary concern for the administration to ensure the event is marked peacefully.

In the long term, only good governance can bring stability to Iraq.

While it is true that Saddam Hussein's brutal regime, the long war with Iran, America's invasion, and IS atrocities have all taken their toll on Iraq, it is time for the country's political class to rise up and deliver the goods to their people.

A corruption-free system that ensures fundamental rights for all regardless of communal background can improve matters. However, if more of the same cronyism and instability continues, the implosion of a nation that for centuries was the centre of Islamic and Arab civilisation is an unfortunate possibility.

A step forward

THE Supreme Court's decision to constitute a special bench for the implementation of its landmark 2014 verdict on the protection of the fundamental and religious rights of minority communities in Pakistan, is commendable — even if it has come five years late. The bench has been tasked with ensuring compliance of the detailed 32-page judgement written by former chief justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani at the conclusion of a suo motu case pertaining to the 2013 Peshawar church bombing. Hopefully, the constitution of this bench will expedite the federal and provincial governments' implementation of other recommendations in the judgement — one of the most significant works of jurisprudence on the protection of rights and religious freedoms of minority groups in Pakistan. The special bench will also be free to hear complaints regarding the violation of minorities' rights, thereby opening up a channel for the resolution of their problems that have largely been drowned out in the cacophony of religious rhetoric.

The 2014 judgement provided a roadmap for critical course correction by giving clear direction to the federal and provincial governments to take action under the existing laws to protect the rights of minorities, besides broadening the purview of religious freedom against the backdrop of international human rights laws, which some quarters deride as a 'Western' concept. The verdict underscored the need for promoting a culture of social and religious tolerance, and provided eight wide-ranging recommendations, including prompt registration of criminal cases against those who desecrate places of worship; setting up of a special police force to protect places of worship; taking action against people who initiate or spread hate speech on social media; and amending school and college curricula to help promote religious tolerance. But as is often the case in Pakistan, if any action was taken, it was inadequate, much to the concern of religious minority groups in Pakistan. Their worries have not been misplaced, as the church attacks in Lahore (2015) and Quetta (2017), and the mob violence in Mirpurkhas and Ghotki this year, later demonstrated. It is ironic that a country founded on the principle of religious freedom as enunciated by the Quaid has done so little to protect the minority groups residing within its boundaries. Every citizen must be equally free in the eyes of the state, irrespective of his or her religious beliefs.

Vaping deaths

THE news of 18 vaping-related deaths in the US comes as a shock to many — particularly those who had switched to vaping as the ‘somewhat healthier’ alternative to cigarette smoking. Along with these deaths, there have been over 1,000 cases of respiratory illness (the symptoms reportedly include shortness of breath, chest pain and fatigue) that health authorities suspect to be linked to vaping in over 1,000 patients across the US since June. As investigations are under way, the cause of the sudden illness has not been confirmed yet. But health authorities strongly suspect it is linked to vaping. The first suspected vaping-related death took place in August.

Vaping has been growing in popularity as the less toxic alternative to cigarette smoking at a time when there is a cultural shift in public perceptions around the latter habit in the US. However, prior to the deaths, there had been warnings and concerns raised about the ‘social acceptability’ of vaping, particularly among younger demographics, in the absence of any long-term clinical tests done to determine the harmful effect of such products. In 2008, the WHO had warned marketers not to market e-cigarettes as an alternative to cigarette smoking. Until tests are conducted, it would be considered deception and playing with the public’s health. Several states in the US have now placed a ban or restrictions on certain vaping products and e-cigarettes in reaction to what some are describing as a ‘health emergency’. Many other countries have also banned or placed restrictions on the use, sale or import of e-cigarettes, or the nicotine-containing liquid; they include India, Mexico, Thailand, Qatar, and many others. In Pakistan, the vaping trend never caught on on a large scale due to the heavy price tag attached to vaping devices, compared to the much cheaper price tag on cigarettes and chewing tobacco. However, at least until more information can be provided and clinical tests carried out, there should be strict restrictions on vaping and vaping products in Pakistan.

NAB’s shame

THE chairman of the National Accountability Bureau, retired Justice Javed Iqbal, has moved with unseemly speed after it emerged that top industry leaders had complained to the army chief about the bureau’s high-handedness.

Within days, he took to the airwaves to announce that NAB would not be taking up certain cases involving businesses, particularly if they were linked to tax evasion or loan default, and that he would let the bodies responsible for dealing with these issues proceed on the matter instead.

Read: NAB won't probe tax evasion, bank default cases

Mr Iqbal also expressed alarm upon learning that industry leaders had complained about his bureau to the army chief; he sought to create an impression that only one individual did so. However, reports from those who were at the meeting are clear that almost all those who attended strongly criticised NAB for operating far beyond its mandate, and certainly its capabilities.

The chairman's response betrays a certain panic.

This is not for the first time that the accountability bureau has been publicly assailed for its lack of capacity and overweening ambition to be the arbiter in all matters, including those that it has no business with.

But now that the army chief has been brought into the picture, the NAB chairman has moved suddenly and offered certain carve-outs in his field of operation, saying those under him would not deal with those cases.

Recently, two separate regulatory bodies — Nepra and the SECP — openly said that their operations were being adversely impacted by NAB whose officials are often accused of having a very limited understanding of the complex nature of the deals they want to investigate. Mr Iqbal seems to have been impervious to this observation that is indicative of his bureau's overreach.

The NAB chairman's announcement that the bureau would refrain from pursuing cases involving businessmen has cast doubt on his own mandate. He is supposed to, and has repeatedly said that he does, operate only as per the law. So, how does the law allow him to revise his responsibilities — which is effectively what he intends to do?

In the aftermath of his remarks, all other actions taken by the bureau will look even more like a witch-hunt, because the only people left to go after now — which NAB has already been doing quite assiduously — are bureaucrats and the opposition politicians, while the chairman appears to be calling the shots himself.

With so many of NAB's actions — including arrests on charges that have yet to be substantiated — already controversial, it would have been much better had Mr Iqbal decided to work towards establishing NAB's credentials as an independent and fair accountability body that is capable of investigating suspected corruption across the board in a professional manner.

Instead, NAB's reputation stands thoroughly compromised, and its claims of conducting a robust accountability drive sound hollow.

Focus on Kashmir

DESPITE New Delhi's efforts to cover up the atrocities it has unleashed in India-held Kashmir in the aftermath of the Aug 5 decision to do away with Article 370 of the Indian constitution, the plight of the Kashmiris is being recognised across the world. It can be argued that Pakistan's diplomatic and moral support has played a major role in raising a voice for the Kashmiris in one of their darkest hours. Lawmakers, activists and common citizens in various countries have decried the denial of basic rights to the residents of IHK, and the suffocating conditions they have been made to live in by New Delhi's enforcers for over two months. In this regard, a US congressional delegation called upon the AJK president and prime minister in Muzaffarabad on Sunday, and on Monday met Pakistan's prime minister and army chief, to express its concern about the rights abuses in IHK. Moreover, American presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren has called upon India to respect "the rights of the people of Kashmir". Leading Canadian politician Jagmeet Singh has also denounced "what India was doing to the people of Kashmir". Indeed, all people of conscience recognise that this is not a political issue, but one of human rights, and that India's claims of being the world's biggest democracy ring hollow in the face of its atrocious behaviour. Pakistan has been pleading Kashmir's case at the world's highest forums; the prime minister's powerful speech at the UN General Assembly reminded the world that Kashmir should not be forgotten, while the Foreign Office has actively informed world capitals of what India is doing in the occupied region.

Such efforts have rightly brought the Kashmir question onto the world stage, but the core issue should not be forgotten — the usurpation of Kashmiri rights through changes in the Indian constitution. While Indian forces must stand down and lift all restrictions on the freedom of movement, communication and

assembly in IJK, lasting peace can only come when the question of Kashmir's status is decided once and for all, through the collective will of its people. No forcible solution will be accepted by the Kashmiris, and New Delhi, as well as the world powers, must realise that only through a democratic political process can the issue be resolved. Once the people have decided on their future, all three parties — the Kashmiris, Pakistan and India — must work together to implement this decision for lasting peace in South Asia.

'Pinktober'

EACH October, Breast Cancer Awareness Month is marked around the world, with events held to raise awareness about the disease, encouraging discussions on how to care for those suffering from the illness, along with increasing understanding on how to detect the disease in its early stages. According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer, approximately 1.38m cases of breast cancer are detected each year, resulting in 458,000 annual deaths. Additionally, breast cancer is the most prevalent form of cancer amongst women, with those from low- or middle-income brackets most likely to suffer due to late detections, and the second most prevalent form of cancer in the world. While there is no cancer registry system in place to determine just how widespread the disease is in Pakistan, Pink Ribbon estimates that there is an average of 90,000 patients diagnosed each year, while around 40,000 die from the disease. Meanwhile, the Journal of Pakistan Medical Association claims that Pakistan has the highest rate of breast cancer in Asia.

Last week, the Prime Minister's Secretariat in the capital city and Minar-i-Pakistan in Lahore were lit pink to raise awareness. Similarly, in 2017, the Shah Faisal Mosque turned pink one evening to mark 'Pinktober'. While some have levelled criticism against the 'corporatisation' of breast cancer awareness, such actions are important in mainstreaming discussion about the disease in societies like ours, encouraging women to get regular checkups, as well as removing the stigma attached to the often fatal condition, which unfortunately is still prevalent in many parts of Pakistan. Women's health is ignored, and our society still struggles to talk about breast cancer or even take its name due to warped ideas and a sense of shame surrounding anything to do with women's bodies — a hesitancy and silence so burdensome that it results in the deaths of a large

number of women. This October, Pakistanis should make an effort to talk about the disease, and reach out to those who have been diagnosed with it.

Feeding the hungry

IT is laudable that Prime Minister Imran Khan remains committed to his cherished aim of creating a welfare state in Pakistan. Sadly for him, patience is running out and the schemes that have been launched thus far appear to many as mere photo ops. He recently renewed his pledge to push ahead for a welfare state that provides for the poor and the needy on the premises of a soup kitchen run by the Saylani Welfare International Trust near Peshawar Morr, Islamabad. He promised 1,200 more such facilities across the country in what seems to be a cooperative model between private and government initiatives to run welfare schemes. He also used the occasion to ask critics as well as his supporters to be patient, once again invoking the example of the state of Madina while also arguing that 70 years of 'wrong policies' in Pakistan could not be reversed in 13 months.

But perhaps the event is more noteworthy for what was not said. For example, when he came to power, the prime minister had himself told the country to give his government three months before criticising his administration. Today, 13 months later, he is asking for patience but cannot say how long the people will have to wait to see the promised benefits. He has also said nothing about how the model soup kitchen he unveiled will be scaled up. When launching the Ehsaas programme back in March, he had pledged to carry out a string of important reforms, with legislative changes accompanying the rollout of the programme. But as of today, most of those promises are languishing while the photo ops continue. For instance, the accompanying policy statement of the Ehsaas programme said that the allocation formula of the NFC award would be retooled to make it more "need-based" and more responsive to welfare-oriented goals. However so far, his government has not been able to advance the NFC talks, and the agenda it brought to the last round of talks was not in keeping with the policy statement of the Ehsaas programme.

No doubt the prime minister is right to point out that profound or radical change will not come in 13 months. But surely, the public should be witnessing greater effort and progress in this direction. A ministry has been created for social

protection and poverty alleviation, and various programmes have been clubbed under it. But eventually, the poor need protection from rising inflation, especially food inflation. Soup kitchens are fine as a palliative in these times, but they do not amount to a policy response. The government needs to stop taking critical comments to heart, and focus its energies on more holistic policy responses to get through the difficult times it says we must live through before the break of a new dawn.

Turkish offensive

WHILE Syria has been largely quiet in the recent past, save for a few violent episodes between the rebels and President Bashar al-Assad's forces, a new front is about to be opened as Turkey prepares to launch an operation in northern Syria to establish a 'safe zone'. This throws up serious questions about the violation of Syrian sovereignty by a foreign power; the planned Turkish incursion also risks bringing Ankara's forces face to face with the SDF, a Syrian Kurdish militia backed by the US, which the Turks consider an extension of their nemesis, the PKK. And if the rhetoric coming from Turkey as well as the Kurds is anything to go by, this engagement will hardly be a peaceful affair. Moreover, the Kurds' American allies have backed off and have apparently given Ankara the green light to move into Syrian territory, a decision the SDF has said is a "stab in the back". As usual, President Donald Trump has sent mixed messages, agreeing to pull back American forces (against the advice of some of his own officials), but also threatening to "obliterate" the Turkish economy if Ankara takes any "off limits" action. What constitutes 'off limits' is anyone's guess. Considering the bad blood between Turkey and the Kurds, a violent encounter cannot be ruled out, while Mr Assad's principal foreign friends — Russia and Iran — have also questioned the planned incursion. To top it all, the lack of a coherent US policy has muddied things, creating the groundwork for further chaos in Syria.

Unfortunately, the Syrian civil war has been greatly exacerbated by foreign intervention. Those supporting the opposition — the US, Europe, Turkey and the Gulf Arabs — pumped in much treasure and manpower to try and dislodge Mr Assad, while Moscow and Tehran did their best to prop up their ally in Damascus. The result has been a battered country, with hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced. Additionally, the ungoverned spaces in Syria helped give birth to some of the most dreaded terrorist groups of modern times, such as

IS and Al Nusra. Instead of turning Syria into a geopolitical chessboard, foreign forces must work to bring Damascus and the opposition together for a settlement. The UN has planned the formation of a Syrian constitutional committee; all efforts should be made to support this endeavour, and fresh military adventures in the country should be avoided.

T20 series loss

THE inspirational moment of playing in front of a home crowd in the first T20 international cricket series in nearly a decade has ended in disappointment for Pakistan. Although positioned as the top team in the ICC T20 rankings, Pakistan were outplayed by a young, inexperienced yet exuberant Sri Lankan side which is touring without the 10 senior players who opted to stay away citing security reasons. After having lost the ODI series 0-2 last week in what was seen as a contest where the visitors were still trying to come to grips with the environment and playing conditions, the T20 series was a riveting win by Sri Lanka in a show of confidence, ambition and skill in front of a packed and appreciative crowd at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium. Led by skipper Dasun Shanaka, the Islanders executed their game plan to perfection on the back of fine performances by Danushka Gunathilaka, Shehan Jayasuriya, Bhanuka Rajapaksa, Wanindu Hasaranga — all future stars.

Pakistan, on the other hand, put up a listless show, featuring a collective slump. There was hardly any notable effort — Mohammad Hasnain's hat-trick in the first T20 was the only real highlight. The lingering effect of the World Cup loss is there for everyone to see. There are too many players with suspect fitness and concentration levels, and there is no evident plan to counter the opposing team. Even if there is one, the players have proved themselves incapable of implementing it. Captain Sarfraz, reeling under his own poor form with both the bat and the gloves, has been unable to infuse fresh purpose and zest in a side that almost always appears to lack self-confidence. His body language suggests fatigue and he has failed to inspire hope. But to be fair to him, under the current management, he is unlikely to shine independently given the towering shadow of Misbah-ul-Haq whose role as head coach-cum-chief selector will continue to dwarf the skipper's role until better sense prevails at the PCB.

The Chinese model

THE prime minister's visit to China has reaffirmed the traditionally close ties between Islamabad and Beijing, with the highest echelons of power from both sides exchanging views on political, economic and military issues.

Of course, China has long been admired by Pakistani leaders for its transformation from a backward, isolated state into a modern economic powerhouse. But though there are many things we in Pakistan can learn from China's impressive rise since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, there are also lessons on what to avoid, especially if the ruling establishment wants to stick to the confines of the democratic system.

During his Beijing visit, Prime Minister Imran Khan has been quoted as saying that this country would do well to follow China's example and put "500 corrupt people in Pakistan in jail".

The statement seems to be a milder version of what Mr Khan's cabinet colleague Minister for Water Resources Faisal Vawda said not too long ago, that 5,000 people should be hanged to secure the future of 220m.

While corruption is indeed a bane that has been eating away at Pakistan's vitals for decades, the aforementioned comments reveal a disturbing mentality.

Instead of filling the jails with the 'corrupt', or worse, hanging people in the streets, the leadership of the country should be talking about creating a viable system that punishes unscrupulous individuals in a transparent manner, and eliminates the scourge at the grass roots.

There are many things in the Chinese model that are worthy of emulation. But frequent executions and purges — the horrors of the Cultural Revolution should not be forgotten — should not be among them.

However, there can be little argument with the fact that over the past seven decades, China has made huge strides in many fields.

Before the communist revolution, barely 15pc to 20pc of the Chinese people were literate; today that figure is over 90pc. Moreover, as per the World Bank, over 850m people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in China.

These are no mean achievements and show a determination on the part of the Chinese leadership and people to change the course of their country's destiny. This tenacity must be appreciated.

Also, after the fall of the USSR, Beijing has played a role in bringing an element of multipolarity to global politics to prevent the US from becoming a global hegemon.

To top it all, China has stood by Pakistan in difficult times, and CPEC is an example of this time-tested friendship.

For Pakistan, there is much to learn from China — perhaps the primary lesson should be that progress can only come through discipline, economic stability and socioeconomic uplift.

While the more violent episodes of modern Chinese history should not be replicated, the relationship between Islamabad and Beijing can mature and improve in a variety of sectors.

Mental health

IT is a global challenge of mammoth proportions: according to the WHO, one in four individuals suffers from some form of mental illness. It is estimated that almost 800,000 people commit suicide every year, and by 2020, depression might overtake other diseases to become the leading cause of death across the world. Today, many countries are observing World Mental Health Day; this year's theme aptly focuses on suicide prevention. Data indicates that suicides are prevalent in low- and middle-income countries, and are the second leading cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 and 29 years. Though Pakistan has the second youngest population in the world, the discourse around mental health remains extremely limited. The Pakistan Association of Mental Health estimates that more than 34pc of the population is affected by mental illness, but they remain deprived of adequate treatment, mainly due to the lack of facilities and the societal stigma attached to the subject. Reportedly, some 13,000 people commit suicide every year in Pakistan, and more than 95pc of them suffer from mental disorders.

Though Pakistan is one of the 194 signatories to the WHO's Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan, the issue is seldom a subject of national discourse. It

was first highlighted in the 1998 National Health Policy when mental health became a component of primary healthcare, but this effort came to naught. Then came the federal Mental Health Ordinance in 2001, and later the mental health acts were passed by Sindh and Punjab in 2013 and 2014 respectively. But these steps have neither altered how this issue continues to be perceived in society, nor have they helped in mainstreaming discussions around mental health and the provision of treatment facilities. Pakistan faces many complex developmental problems and there is ample evidence to suggest that mental health is directly related to developmental indices, eg economic growth and malnutrition. Currently, mental disorders cost the country up to Rs250bn. Pakistanis have braved terrorist attacks, political violence, natural disasters and internal displacement, among other hardships. Addressing these concerns will automatically lighten the burden of mental illness. At the same time, it is imperative that the government engage in a robust campaign to remove societal stigmas attached to the treatment of mental health problems. In fact, such treatment should be a part of overall health-related development in the country.

A task half done

HUNDREDS of schools in KP hit by the earthquake in 2005 have yet to be restored. Lack of funds is a major problem. Some 3,600 schools spread over the badly affected districts of Abbottabad, Mansehra, Shangla, Battagram and Kohistan, were declared too dangerous for holding any activity. Half of these schools have been reconstructed. Work continues on the rest of them at various stages. The Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority has been working on rebuilding the schools at a pace which can hardly be described as steady — because of funding challenges. Erra had the task of restoring a mind-boggling 2,900 schools; this is a stark reminder of just how crippling the earthquake was, as it demolished infrastructure located over vast areas of Pakistan and, in particular, Azad Kashmir. Of these, 1,800 schools have been reconstructed whereas work on 1,100 others is still to be accomplished. According to a news report, the provincial government has rehabilitated just 29 out of a total of 760 schools that it was supposed to have restored.

Over all these years, rebuilding costs have increased as new, fancier projects overtake the old ones in a race for funding. Meanwhile, a large number of students and teachers in the affected KP districts continue to be denied proper,

civilised space to pursue knowledge with the guarantee of security and dignity. In the absence of their old premises, many of these schools hold classes in rented buildings and inside tents installed in open spaces. A decade and a half is a long time. A whole generation and thousands of more learners have passed through these makeshift schools thrown up by the 2005 quake, overseen by teachers faced with a long, unending emergency. Those who could have played a role in expediting reconstruction have conveyed a negative message — that Pakistanis do not quite give due importance to education. They might want to atone for their lack of initiative by trying to move things faster now.

PM's China visit

THE high-level visit to China by the top political and military leadership of Pakistan has yielded some positive movement in this country's attempts to draw international attention to the atrocities being perpetrated by New Delhi in India-held Kashmir. The joint statement released at the conclusion of the visit mentioned the Kashmir dispute as well as the UN resolutions, which is an advance on previous such statements. There is room for Beijing to build on this, since there is an overlap in the concerns of Pakistan and China regarding the arbitrary change of status of IJK that is internationally recognised as part of a disputed territory. In fact, the statement leaves the door open for further diplomatic action as it says that "China is paying close attention to the current situation in Jammu & Kashmir and [the Chinese side] reiterated that the Kashmir issue is a dispute left from history, and should be properly and peacefully resolved based on the UN Charter, relevant UN Security Council resolutions and bilateral agreements". China, the statement says, is opposed to "any unilateral actions that complicate the situation". Hopefully, Beijing will highlight the same concerns at the summit in Mammallapuram between China and India that begins today, and call for the matter to be resolved either within or with the assistance of the United Nations.

Pakistan renewed its commitment to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor at the meetings, and presented the promulgation of an ordinance creating the CPEC Authority as a sign of its intention to fast-track the building of the corridor. The second phase of CPEC, which envisages the inflow of vast Chinese investments from the private sector into Pakistan, has been stuck for almost two years now. Progress is also at a standstill on an agreement on financing

arrangements for the main railway upgradation project known as ML-1, the multibillion-dollar project that is supposed to upgrade the main line of the railway system from Peshawar to Karachi, enabling the high-speed movement of passengers and cargo. There was also an agreement between both sides to move ahead with the second free trade agreement. So it seems that the overall framework of China-Pakistan cooperation in the 21st century, which includes the corridor, the FTA and security cooperation has received a boost from the meeting, and one hopes that the government here seizes the opportunity.

The statement shows that the government may well have renewed Pakistan's commitment to this overall framework, but does not seem to have brought any new elements of its own to the table. If all this is agreed on, one is left wondering why there has been so little progress in the past one year, given that these same elements have been emphasised in the statement released after the December Joint Cooperation Committee meeting in Beijing. If the government is serious, we should now see material progress on the ground.

Gift of life

FOR a nation that prides itself on its charitable instincts, Pakistanis are very niggardly about pledging their organs to save the lives of people experiencing end-stage organ failure. Last week, an event held by the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation in Karachi put a human face to these patients' suffering. Several of them, mostly young people living with renal failure, spoke about their despair at the non-availability of organs for transplantation and the cost to them in terms of their career plans and the impact on their families. Their stories may have differed in the details, but they all sprang from, quite simply, the very human desire to live. Certainly, dialysis does give kidney failure patients a fighting chance, but the procedure takes a steep toll in terms of quality of life and employment prospects.

SIUT, along with some segments of civil society, has been at the vanguard of a countrywide campaign to raise awareness about deceased organ donation through talks, seminars, public service advertisements, etc. The need for such a drive is clear: around 200,000 individuals die from organ failure each year in this country, including approximately 20,000 from renal failure — but until now there have been only seven transplants with the help of deceased organ donations.

Despite all efforts, only 15,000 people in Pakistan have thus far registered as organ donors. Given that organs can only be harvested in specific circumstances — an individual being certified as brain dead while on life support, which keeps oxygen flowing to the organs — this number is nowhere near enough to make a real dent. Practical measures, such as more ventilators in hospitals, the subject of cadaveric donations being made an integral part of medical curricula, etc, are vital. The unavailability of living donors in the patients' family, compounded by the lack of deceased organ donors, also fuels the illegal business of vended organs, and Pakistan has only quite recently shed its global reputation as a thriving bazaar for this practice. In order for this campaign to get some wind in its sails, it must be accorded due importance at the highest levels of government. After all, the health burden, not to mention lost working days on account of end-stage organ failure, is enormous. Top state officials, including the president and the prime minister — with his celebrity status — amongst others, should sign up as organ donors and encourage others to follow suit.

Targeted killings

OVER the past few years, the law-and-order situation in Karachi appears to have improved drastically. When compared to its blood-soaked past, Pakistan's economic powerhouse is now deemed a much safer and more livable city. Violence had become intertwined with the city's identity, and most of its young residents had grown up only witnessing rampant terrorism, sectarianism, kidnappings, robberies and extortion, as powerful and often politically backed criminals operated with impunity on the city's streets. But despite some improvements, the challenges regarding law enforcement, extremism and rising inequality are far from over. More worryingly, certain crimes seem to be on the rise again. Just last month, according to new data released by the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee, 18 people were murdered across the city in targeted killings or during armed robberies. Other crimes recorded in September include one case of kidnapping for ransom and three instances of extortion. In the same period, 163 vehicles were stolen, out of which 26 were snatched at gunpoint. Meanwhile, 2,806 motorcycles were reported as stolen, including 147 that were taken through armed encounters.

The violence has continued into the next month, which suggests that criminal elements are resurging. Just last week, a PTI worker named Muhammad Asif

was killed as he was heading home from a mosque in Azizabad, when armed assailants fired upon him. Towards the end of the previous year, prominent MQM politician Ali Raza Abidi was shot dead inside his car as he tried to enter his house in Karachi's Defence area. This was then followed by a spate of killings that targeted members of minority communities and various professionals. Such news reports will undoubtedly bring back a sense of unease to the residents of Karachi, who had started welcoming the 'normalcy' that other cities are accustomed to, as memories of the not-too-distant past return. The government and the law-enforcement authorities must ensure the city does not slip back into its old ways.

Altaf Hussain's predicament

THE focus has once again shifted to the MQM whose leader Altaf Hussain has formally been charged in a court of law by the Metropolitan Police for "encouraging terrorism". But any fear of panic or violence resulting from Thursday's legal move in London proved short-lived.

There were few signs of anger in Karachi and other urban parts of Sindh, where until a few years back, the MQM made its presence felt in no uncertain terms.

Ironically, it was Mr Hussain's incendiary words, for long his most potent weapon, that landed him in trouble — and, if convicted, he could face up to 15 years in jail. Specifically, the charge of terrorism is based on an address he delivered via telephone to his supporters in August 2016, provoking them to go on the rampage in Karachi.

The unthinkable has happened in the three years since Mr Hussain demonstrated his powers to turn a group of people into a menacing mob — Karachi has learnt to not react with anger to the news of Mr Hussain's troubles.

The MQM as a tool of political clout — indeed, as an instrument of fear — has ceased to exist. In its place, there are factions, which are fighting for life, including Mr Hussain's own surviving coterie that is known by its hugely restricted title of MQM-London.

Most of Karachi's lawmakers today belong to the PTI, which had been in the forefront of the drive to pull down the Altaf edifice.

There is indeed little by way of support for the old MQM which originally claimed to have a monopoly over the Mohajir sentiment, before professing to represent the aspirations of ‘oppressed’ nationalities under the expanded umbrella of ‘Muttahida’ or ‘united’.

The ring around Mr Altaf Hussain and his MQM-London is getting narrower as cases such as the murder of Imran Farooq nine years ago in London are back in the spotlight. Crucial evidence in the Imran Farooq case has just been submitted in a Pakistani court. On the side and casting a dark and disturbing shadow on the party and its founder are cases such as the one where the police claim to have held a man suspected of murdering as many as 111 people. There is also a case of money-laundering against Mr Hussain.

The terror charge against Mr Hussain in London is a milestone as it shows the willingness of the country he has been living in for several years now to move purposefully against him. But at home, for the millions who were for so long forced to live with the MQM brand of politics — militant violence, extortion, bloody revenge and much more — the search for the truth has to be conducted right here, in their midst.

There can be no closure unless the dark secrets are unmasked and justice is allowed to take its due course.

Gas price reform

IT has been apparent for a number of years now that gas pricing in Pakistan is in need of urgent reform. The recent news that a Rs55bn bill is being prepared by the two gas distribution companies, known as ‘the Sui sisters’, in order to ensure continuous winter supplies for domestic consumers in the northern distribution zone that includes Punjab and KP, illustrates the cost of inaction on this front. Since last year, the government has been relying on diverting imported LNG towards domestic consumers to ensure continuous supplies. Last year, that decision cost Rs29bn in subsidies because imported LNG is almost five times as expensive as domestically produced gas. This year, that bill will be almost double — Rs55bn — because the volume of gas needed for the domestic sector is larger, given the ongoing declines in domestic fields. And no doubt, next year the bill will be larger still.

It is no secret that Pakistan's fields are in decline and the supply of domestic gas is decreasing. About a decade ago, domestic gas accounted for slightly more than half of Pakistan's primary energy supply, while today, that figure has dropped to around 35pc. Meanwhile, imported LNG is posting impressive gains year after year as it fills the vacuum left behind, rising from zero per cent of total primary energy supplies in 2014 to 0.7pc in 2015, 3.3pc the next year, and 5.6pc the year after. More recent data will show this percentage rising even faster. A time is fast approaching when the quantity of imported LNG in the system will be equal to that of domestic gas. At that point, continuing to administer the price of gas through cost-plus pricing formulas that seek to protect unrealistic returns on assets for the aging 'Sui sisters' will no longer be possible. And that point is less than a few years away, given the pace of the increase of LNG. It is becoming very urgent to move on pricing reform in the gas sector, and the focus must be on a greater role for the market in this process. This needs to be the principle with which the government approaches the problems presented by the gas utilities and their mounting losses, and not revenue considerations. Further delay in this process will only lead us towards a costly and disorderly resolution which will be forced by the hand of necessity.

Releasing prisoners

THE Saudi government's decision to release 579 Pakistani prisoners is a welcome step towards the fulfilment of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's promise of freeing some 2,100 Pakistanis incarcerated in various cities of the kingdom. Most of the released prisoners were charged with drug trafficking, stealing, forgery, bribery and illegal border crossing, while one person was allegedly involved in a case of rape. Since the crown prince's visit to Pakistan in February this year, the Saudi government has also released around 3,400 Pakistanis who they held in various deportation camps. However, much more remains to be done in terms of improving the transparency of Saudi Arabia's criminal justice system.

Since the beginning of this year, at least 26 Pakistanis accused of various crimes have been executed by the kingdom. The victims included a married couple charged with trying to smuggle drugs into the country and a labourer who spent eight years in jail before meeting his end. According to Justice Project Pakistan, more than 2,800 Pakistanis still remain incarcerated in Saudi Arabia. A majority

of people who get into trouble with the kingdom's appalling criminal justice system belong to poor working-class families who often get used by sub-agents, either by deception or force, or are pilgrims preyed upon by racketeers. They do not have access to any legal or consular representation and are unable to understand the nature of the crimes they have been accused of committing, because the judicial proceedings take place in a foreign language. The kingdom's criminal justice system operates through a series of very opaque regulations that are often swiftly executed through blanket decrees, such as the beheading of 37 people in a single day in April. Maybe, Prime Minister Imran Khan, with his new role as an intermediary between Saudi Arabia and Iran, can reiterate his concern about the fate of Pakistanis jailed in Saudi Arabia, and persuade its leadership to grant a fair trial to prisoners and revisit their archaic criminal justice system.

The march momentum

THE country is in the middle of a build-up that could encourage and embolden JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman. The tension between the government and opposition over the maulana's threatened march on Islamabad at the end of this month is mounting.

There have been some crucial appearances this week as well as significant words. Many of the latter were voiced by the government's ministers and advisers, but going by their tone they have actually aided Maulana Fazlur Rehman.

The most important moment in the context of the 'Azadi March' came when the leader of the biggest opposition party in the country, the incarcerated Nawaz Sharif, was allowed a window to the media. While at court in connection with a case, he offered his complete support to the initiative. Further, in an expression of regret, he said he should have been more receptive to the JUI-F chief's call for protest against the alleged rigging immediately after the 2018 election. He termed the march a correct political move — his approval itself was quite a milestone achieved by the maulana.

While there is a difference of opinion within the PML-N that could prevent Mr Sharif's word from being accepted as readily as his commands were in the past, the signs are that, ultimately, the N-League will proceed in the direction of the

former prime minister's choosing. There may be a few sour notes along the way, such as where the dissenting group will not be visibly too committed to the cause. But supporters of the march, in the PML-N and outside, tend to believe that once the momentum is there, it will be almost impossible for anyone in the opposition camp across the political spectrum to resist the temptation of jumping onto Maulana Fazlur Rehman's bandwagon.

The same logic is being used to predict a more robust participation by the PPP and other parties in the protest than their leaders are committing to at the moment.

As the opposition increasingly deploys its energies to rally popular support, and the date of the march approaches, the reaction from within the government camp is two-pronged. One, there is growing emphasis by key members of the prime minister's economic team on the promise of change soon but this is overwhelmed by ruling party reactions which increasingly betray panic. A collective salvo comprising all kinds of denials, counter-allegations, caustic insinuations and some very valid criticism of the maulana's adventurous itinerary is thrown at the opposition every few minutes — which reconfirms the impact the march has already had on the ruling setup.

The most sensible government response so far — if the reports are true — is where the prime minister is said to have told his aides to keep the option of talks with the maulana open. This is something the government should have tried long ago.

The militant threat

OVER the past four decades, a variety of jihadi organisations have taken root in South Asia, thanks largely to the anti-Soviet Afghan 'jihad', a geopolitical adventure marshalled by the US, financed by the Gulf Arabs and supported by this country.

Though many outfits have been neutralised in the aftermath of 9/11 and the so-called war on terror, the region is still not completely free from the menace of extremist militancy. For example, more ferocious terrorist outfits have emerged, such as the self-styled Islamic State group, while 'veteran' players such as Al Qaeda have branched out and formed new wings.

Among these is Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, a group formed a few years ago and primarily consisting of militants of South Asian backgrounds. The group has been known to be involved in acts of terrorism in this country.

Earlier this week, reports emerged that AQIS's Indian-born chief Asim Umar was killed in Afghanistan in an operation conducted by Kabul's forces with American help in September. The Afghan Taliban claim the AQIS chief is not dead, but have offered no evidence to the contrary. A hardened militant, Asim Umar maintained links with the banned TTP as well as other terrorist groups and was said to be a major propagandist for Al Qaeda.

The reported death of a high-profile militant shows that despite the low profile terrorist groups are currently maintaining, they have not completely been neutralised, and unless there is cooperation on counterterrorism efforts among regional states, the spectre of religiously motivated militancy can re-emerge at a more opportune time.

Moreover, the Taliban must reconsider their approach to sheltering foreign militants. If they seek to be legitimate players in Afghan politics, they must cut all links with foreign terrorist groups. Lest they forget, it was their association with Al Qaeda that prompted the US invasion in the first place.

The fact is that ungoverned spaces in the region, especially in Afghanistan, will allow militants space to regroup and plan further mayhem across the globe. In particular, the IS Khorasan 'chapter' is active in Afghanistan, attracting several recruits, including disgruntled Taliban elements, from that country. It poses a distinct threat to all countries in the region.

Transnational terrorism recognises no borders, which is why the states of South Asia must pool their energies to counter what is a common threat. Acting in isolation will allow militant groups greater space to operate.

Delayed LG election

THE delay by the PTI-led government in KP in providing the required information to the ECP for conducting LG polls in the province is not only a blow to democratic stability in the province, it also goes against the PTI's own mandate of empowering politics at the grass roots. The ECP has persistently asked for official documents for the framing of delimitation rules, maps of urban and rural

areas, notification of the total number of village and neighbourhood councils and the limits of tehsil councils, and data regarding the number of LG seats. But the government has failed to comply. This delay is in sharp contrast to the rushing of the Punjab Local Government Act, 2019, and the Punjab Village Panchayats and Neighbourhood Councils Act, 2019, through the PTI-dominated Punjab Assembly some time ago. Though the PTI seems to be employing two different strategies in the two provinces it governs, the goal appears to be the same. Given the prevailing political climate and the questionable performance of the PTI in KP, it seems that the delay is an attempt at holding on to the status quo. On the other hand, in Punjab, the rush to dismantle the existing LG system was seen as an attempt by the party to establish its own power base at the local level.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has time and again stressed the importance of strong local governments for enabling grass-roots development. It is ironic that the governments in KP and Punjab are following in the footsteps of previous rulers, whom Mr Khan calls 'corrupt'. Playing petty politics will only create more hurdles in the way of effective service delivery to the citizens. Empowering local institutions and governments does not only uphold the spirit of good governance and of the Constitution. It also buttresses the ruling party's own welfare efforts geared towards helping the poor people of the country.

Illegal trade

RECENTLY, the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board launched an FIR against a 31-year-old man from Mansehra for attempting to sell a common leopard's hide on the internet. Under the Islamabad Wildlife Protection Act, 1979, the hunting, selling and trade of the endangered animal, its skin or any body part, is illegal. Yet such trade continues unabated, and live animals, and their parts and derivatives, can easily be found in marketplaces across the country. When the WWF carried out an extensive study to assess the scale of the wildlife trade in Pakistan recently, they found the practice rampant in local markets, while also noting the international demand for such products. The internet and the presence of the dark web has also exacerbated the problem and presented new challenges for authorities to grapple with.

In this most recent incident, during an undercover operation, several common leopard and leopard cat hides were discovered at a house in Ughi, which is

worrying given the animals' diminishing numbers in the wild. In recent years, illegal hunting for their body parts has drastically reduced the leopard population in the northern parts of the country. Cubs are also kidnapped from their mothers to be sold into the illegal wildlife trade. In addition, the high rate of deforestation has led to the destruction of the habitat of many animals, including the leopard's prey, which leads them to search for other forms of sustenance away from their natural habitats. Besides this, climate change and unprecedented weather patterns have led leopards to stray into human territory, while protected forests and national parks are intruded upon, resulting in increasing tension between the leopard and the local populations, and less sympathy for them being hunted down. To put an end to the illegal trade, the WWF has listed a number of recommendations, which include: developing an effective database for monitoring purposes, banning websites and social media sites that engage in the practice, and altering consumer behaviour and demand through mass awareness campaigns.

Landmark verdict

THE gaps in the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, most recently amended in 2018, often pose challenges for the legal system. On Friday, a seven-member Supreme Court bench pronounced its judgement on some of the ambiguities arising from the legislation, with a focus on situations when non-compoundable offences under the ATA are committed in tandem with offences tried under the Pakistan Penal Code. Various aspects of the issue have been addressed in different verdicts, but the consolidated ruling by a larger bench of the apex court should suffice to settle it once and for all. The 27-page judgement authored by Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa holds that terrorism offences remain non-compoundable even if the aggrieved party pardons the perpetrator for compoundable crimes simultaneously committed during the act of terrorism. However, according to the ruling, in case of such a pardon, the relevant court has the discretionary power to reduce the sentence awarded for the non-compoundable offence. Furthermore, in case the convict is pardoned by the aggrieved party after the filing of a first, unsuccessful mercy petition before the president, an individual sentenced under the ATA would be able to file a second mercy petition.

Aside from laying down procedural guidelines in trials conducted by the anti-terrorism courts, the Supreme Court verdict may have the salutary effect of reducing the number of death sentences handed down for non-compoundable offences. According to the Justice Project Pakistan, the liberal use of capital punishment in this country accounts for 26pc of the world's death row population and 13pc of global executions. A 2014 study by JPP and Reprieve, another non-profit fighting against the death penalty, found that of the 800 prisoners on death row who had been convicted under the ATA, in nearly 88pc of the cases "there was no link to anything reasonably defined as 'terrorism'".

This state of affairs is closely linked with a fundamental flaw of the ATA, which is its overly broad definition of terrorist acts. No less than 18 crimes — including extortion and kidnapping for ransom — are listed as falling within the scope of the legislation, whose preamble states it is meant to "provide for the prevention of terrorism, sectarian violence and for speedy trial of heinous offences". The result is a blurring of lines between acts of violence driven by ideological or political motives — the generally accepted criteria for defining terrorism — and ordinary, even serious, crimes that spring from a personal desire for vengeance or profit. While some judges have cautioned against charges under the ATA being indiscriminately filed in criminal cases, others have been less particular about what constitutes "heinous offences". The ATA should have facilitated the swift disposal of terrorism cases. Instead, the ATCs are clogged with cases that cannot be defined as terrorism at all. It is high time for clarity on this score as well.

Turkish incursion

IF the Turkish incursion into northern Syria launched last week is not contained soon, it may well evolve into a fully fledged new war drawing combatants from across the region. Ankara launched what it calls Operation Peace Spring with multiple objectives, primarily to create a 'safe zone' inside Syria to which it can repatriate millions of Syrian refugees currently in Turkey, as well as combating the semi-autonomous Syrian Kurds it looks upon as 'terrorists'. However, far from creating an atmosphere of peace, the offensive is likely to fan the flames of war, while violating the territory of a sovereign state. Both sides — the Turks and the Syrian Kurds — have accused each other of targeting civilians, while there has been fierce fighting in the region concerned. Ostensibly, it was a green light from

Washington that allowed Ankara to make the move; in the process America's Kurdish allies were left by the wayside to fend for themselves and ward off the Turkish military. Moreover, the Turkish offensive was launched without the approval of Damascus, which throws up questions about its legitimacy in terms of international law.

Before this latest flare-up, all indications were that the situation in Syria was returning to normalcy, with a UN-backed committee consisting of the Syrian government and opposition factions planning to hammer out a new constitution. However, with the latest developments, the viability of this process is thrown into doubt. And perhaps the most dangerous fallout of chaos in northern Syria remains the fact that thousands of IS prisoners — militants and their families — guarded by the Kurds may escape from internment centres. Already a few IS prisoners have reportedly made a jailbreak. It should be remembered that the IS threat was neutralised after a major international effort; if an irresponsible military operation allows the fighters of the 'caliphate' to regroup, the security of the entire region will be compromised. There is still time for Ankara to pull back from the brink; its legitimate concerns — refugees, terrorism, etc — must be discussed within the framework of international law, and with the Syrian state on board. A cavalier military incursion is likely to create more problems than it solves. As for the Kurds and others in the region who depend on an American security umbrella, this should serve as a cautionary lesson. Where the Trump White House is concerned, policy can change within minutes and be announced via Twitter, in complete disregard of saner counsel.

Beyond deficits

ONLY a day after the financial adviser to the prime minister, Hafeez Shaikh, announced that both the critical deficits — fiscal and external — that have plagued the economy — are under “complete control”, the World Bank reminded us that far more remains to be done. In a new report in which the bank takes a deep look at growth, its risks and drivers, in the greater South Asian region, the picture that emerges is a bleak one. The entire region is plagued by a grinding slowdown, and industrial activity is actually contracting in most countries. Exports are showing a mixed performance, with some countries such as Bangladesh continuing to power ahead, albeit on the back of an almost razor-thin competitive advantage in ready-made garments alone, while India and Pakistan are

struggling. For the first time in many years, South Asia is no longer the world's most dynamic region, mainly because of the slowdown in India.

But the bank does point out the “idiosyncrasies” in the regional dynamic, those elements that are unique to each country, and in this department, Pakistan continues to face an uncertain future. Yes, the current account deficit has shrunk, as Mr Shaikh proudly underscored during his weekend press conference, and, yes, the fiscal balance is improving. But the cuts in public spending are key drivers of a massive, across-the-board slowdown in the economy, and this slowdown in turn is compressing demand. This is far from a policy triumph. It only means that the symptoms have been addressed.

Once the phase of stabilisation ends, the real policy challenge will remain, ie how to get growth started again. The bank points out that this cannot happen in any sustainable way without meaningful improvement in competitiveness and deep structural reform. If the growth engine of the economy were to be primed once again without this reform, the deficits would simply reappear and we would be back to square one, as we have already been so many times. So it is worth remembering that this is not the first time we have seen the fiscal and external deficits contracting like this. Each time this has happened in the past, those in power simply squandered the policy space earned through so much toil and tears by resorting to the same old formula of low interest rates, high public spending and an artificially fixed exchange rate to give us one quick growth spurt. Somebody with Mr Shaikh's background, and level of understanding, should not need to be reminded that the real challenge has yet to begin. The World Bank report says that in Pakistan “measures to restore macroeconomic stability weigh heavily on growth”. At the same time, the burden of the past will weigh heavily when the time comes to restore growth. That is when the financial team's mettle will really be tested.

PM in Tehran

THERE is little doubt that any outbreak of violence between Saudi Arabia and Iran will have a destabilising impact on Pakistan for a variety of reasons. Perhaps this helps explain Prime Minister Imran Khan's shuttle diplomacy between Tehran and Riyadh.

Mr Khan was in the Iranian capital on Sunday and met Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani. The prime minister is due in Saudi Arabia today. While in Tehran, Mr Khan said that efforts to facilitate dialogue between the Saudis and the Iranians were his own initiative. The prime minister added that he wanted the “brotherly countries to iron out their differences”. He had also said on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly last month that the US president had asked him to “de-escalate” the situation with Iran.

Considering the combustible situation in the Gulf, there are signs that multiple efforts are underway to bring down the political temperature, mainly through backchannel means, but also through public diplomacy like that of the prime minister.

There have been reports of a secret UAE effort to open channels of dialogue with Iran, while Saudi Arabia is also said to have sent messages to Tehran via Iraq. Such efforts must be encouraged. A peaceful resolution to the crisis in the Gulf pitting Iran against Saudi Arabia and its allies is a far more preferable course than confrontation.

In this regard, Pakistan is indeed in a unique position. Both Shias and Sunnis call this country home, while it shares a long border with Iran, as well as maintains cordial relations with the Saudis. Therefore, it can act as a bridge between Tehran and Riyadh and help facilitate a dialogue.

On the other hand, should things go awry, Pakistan will be among the first victims of instability. The religious factor means that sectarian passions will be inflamed, while violence in the Gulf, not far from this country’s waters, will have a debilitating effect on the national economy, as will the spiralling oil prices.

The task before the leadership is complex; the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has now entered its fifth decade, and both states are in two distinct geopolitical camps with opposing agendas and visions for the Middle East. It will take a high level of diplomacy and trust for Pakistan’s efforts to pay off. But as it appears, the response from Tehran has been positive. It remains to be seen what the public reception to the idea of facilitation is in Riyadh.

Selling poison

FOR years, health authorities have warned about the harmful effects of gutka — a chewing tobacco made of betel nut, lime water and other substances — that is widely consumed in powder form throughout the province of Sindh. Its use is particularly pervasive amongst the poverty-stricken coastal communities, even amongst small children, and is often used as an appetite suppressant or mild stimulant. The harmful habit — in fact, addiction — can only be described as a culturally acceptable choice of slow poison since a wide range of diseases have been linked to its use: mouth ulcers, oral submucous fibrosis and oral cancer in the most tragic instances. According to the World Cancer Research Fund, Pakistan has the second highest rate of oral cancer in the world, and it is also the most prevalent form of cancer amongst men in the country.

Keeping these harrowing realities in mind, the Sindh High Court slapped a ban on the sale and manufacturing of gutka and mainpuri across the province this August. All violations of this law will be registered under Section 337-A of the Pakistan Penal Code, which criminalises those who cause ‘intentional’ harm to others. As noted by the high court at the time of passing the directive, this is not for the first time that the authorities have tried to push the provincial government to act against the sale and manufacture of such toxic products. Following the most recent stern orders, the Sindh Police claimed to have registered 211 cases against offenders across the province, predominately in the city of Karachi. They hope that this will act as a deterrent against the prevalent use of gutka and mainpuri products. While some have objected to the current move as being too ‘harsh’, one must keep in mind the harsh realities of such harmful products and the suffering they cause to the vulnerable sections of society, thus necessitating strict action. Keeping past failures in mind, however, one can only hope that the authorities can sustain the change this time around.

Back in parliament

THE formula has been reasserted. The Islamabad High Court’s call to parliament to come to a decision regarding the appointment of two members to the Election Commission of Pakistan has underscored the guiding principle on the resolution of political questions. The ruling came on Monday, with Islamabad High Court

Chief Justice Athar Minallah letting the government know that the route it adopted on the matter was unconstitutional. He was hearing petitions against the federal government's move to appoint new ECP members from Sindh and Balochistan via an order by President Arif Alvi. Justice Minallah refused to entertain a request by the government to stall the case until the Supreme Court gave its judgement on the matter.

A member each from Sindh and Balochistan retired from the ECP earlier this year. The process of finding their replacements was to begin with the convening of a consultative meeting between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly. The two leaders of the respective camps were supposed to send three names they agreed upon to a parliamentary committee for further action, or, failing that, three names each of their choice. But there was no consensus on a candidate. The controversy came to a head in August when the government notified the appointment of Khalid Mehmood Siddiqui and Munir Ahmed Kakar as the two new ECP members. Bearing nomination from President Arif Alvi, the two men arrived at the ECP offices, only to be spurned by the chief election commissioner who termed their appointment unconstitutional. The Islamabad High Court has now ruled that the ECP is too vital an institution to stay suspended. This means that while parliament's right has been respected, the lawmakers are in their turn expected to resolve the affair without wasting any more time. Justice Minallah reposed his faith in the "august house" in an act that will hopefully boost confidence in the abilities of the elected legislators.

This is an essential reminder for introspection in a country which is in the habit of blaming, distrusting and maligning politicians, often without cause. There is a growing tendency to take all issues pertaining to politicians in parliament as well as outside to court. In a land where controversial interventions, soft coups and overthrows have been all too common, this propensity for legal arbitration has been likened to the Pakistani habit of inviting the 'apolitical' security establishment to adjudicate on matters outside its domain, earning the latter an undesirable reputation. Even today, instead of containment through political engagement, preventing a political move through legal decree is spoken about, without any apparent consideration for how debilitating that can be for the political system and those who operate it, including parliament. Justice Athar Minallah is right. The trend has to be strongly discouraged.

AQIS in Karachi

ACTS of terrorism in the country's urban centres are certainly down, especially as compared to the situation a few years ago. However, this does not mean that the threat of militancy has been vanquished and the security apparatus can rest easy.

As reported in this paper on Tuesday, according to the Sindh police's Counter-Terrorism Department, a "splinter cell" associated with Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent is "regrouping" in Karachi. The militants, it was said, had apparently returned from Afghanistan and were planning to activate sleeper cells in the metropolis. As Tuesday's deadly bombing in Quetta demonstrates, the militants are on the lookout for soft targets and can strike whenever they have an opportunity to do so.

It should be remembered that before the militant threat was dealt several blows through a combination of military operations (eg Zarb-i-Azb) and police action in the cities, acts of terrorism had become a frequent, unfortunate part of life in Pakistan. Mosques, markets, schools and political rallies were all attacked by extremist killers, resulting in a high number of casualties and sending a wave of fear across the nation.

Thankfully, the situation has changed for the positive, though in the recent past, several attempts have been made to sabotage the relative stability in the country, such as the Kuchlak mosque bombing in August. The key, as experience shows, is to conduct intelligence-based operations and bust terrorist groups before they can carry out acts of violence.

In this regard, the Sindh CTD has done well to raise a red flag about the presence of AQIS in Karachi; now the security agencies must step into high gear and bust the cell before it is able to carry out acts of mayhem.

Militants may be keeping quiet, but this does not mean that they have abandoned their violent ways. For example, sectarian groups have also reared their ugly head, as a number of targeted killings in Karachi have recently indicated. But with a combination of good intelligence and law enforcement, these violent actors can be countered and put out of business.

The National Action Plan remains a workable solution to uproot terrorism from Pakistan, and needs to be implemented with full force.

This country has suffered much due to years of the state ignoring the terrorist threat. Now when the situation is relatively better, the state must prevent new threats from emerging, and neutralise the remnants of old militant outfits.

The polio problem

ON the behest of the government, the Council of Islamic Ideology issued around 100 fatwas in support of polio vaccination. While some are lauding the move as a much-needed breakthrough, similar pro-polio vaccination fatwas have been declared in the past. For instance, in 2013, Maulana Samiul Haq and the Sunni Ittehad Council issued a fatwa in favour of anti-polio campaigns and condemned the targeted killings of health workers. The most recent fatwa comes a month after the Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication raised concerns about the persistence of the virus in Pakistan and Afghanistan in a meeting in Cairo. Indeed, Pakistan and Afghanistan are the only two countries battling to control the polio virus, as Nigeria is well on its way to being declared polio-free. In particular, Pakistan is struggling to control a massive spike in the number of new cases this year. At the last count, the figure stood over 70, with the vast majority of cases recorded in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, followed by Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab.

While the major hurdle in eradicating polio in the past was religiously motivated militancy (the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban brutally gunned down polio health workers and security personnel in their war against the state, spreading the falsehood that the vaccine was a conspiracy to sterilise Muslims), the greatest challenge in more recent times has come from misinformation campaigns that are quickly disseminated through social media and create panic and paranoia among the people. While the challenges to anti-polio efforts by militancy are not over yet, the issue of vaccine refusal is arguably now more about a lack of awareness regarding health and how vaccines work. The battle against polio must be tackled on a war footing, and community leaders and local mosques must be engaged in such efforts. It is not an easy task, but one must remember that countries with even larger populations and conflict zones have been able to successfully eradicate the disease.

Riyadh meeting

IN Riyadh, on the second leg of Prime Minister Imran Khan's 'facilitation' trip to Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is not known how the rulers of the kingdom reacted to the Pakistani offer of bringing together the cross-Gulf rivals.

Mr Khan met the Saudi king and crown prince and reportedly 'advised' them to peacefully resolve regional issues.

The Foreign Office was quiet on the response from the Saudi royals, while as per a bland statement in the Saudi press, the two sides "discussed ... the latest developments at the regional and international arenas".

This is, of course, not much to go by, and only those who were privy to the huddle can better comment on how this country's efforts to reduce tensions between two major Muslim states were perceived in Riyadh.

Earlier, Mr Khan received a comparatively more positive response to his offer in Tehran, with the Iranians stressing that a resolution of the Yemen issue could pave the way for better relations with Saudi Arabia.

Read: Welcome peace gesture by Pakistan, says President Rouhani alongside PM Imran

Regardless of the reactions, the prime minister's efforts at mediation should be lauded, as a violent Saudi-Iran confrontation would have a destabilising effect on the entire region, and this country would certainly not be immune from its effects.

As it stands, Riyadh and Tehran are locked in a battle for influence in the Middle East, with the theatre stretching from the Levant to the Gulf. This rivalry dates back to 1979, when Iran exited the American camp and adopted Islamic revolutionary rhetoric as its guiding principle in statecraft. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, remained anchored to the West, and the relationship between Riyadh and Tehran has been rocky ever since, with the Arabs accusing Iran of 'exporting' its revolution, while the Iranians have criticised the pro-West Gulf monarchies for advancing American interests in the region.

Today, both sides have competing interests in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, and if a shooting war were to break out, the front line would be stretched across these countries.

It would be correct to say that an intense game of nerves is being played in the Gulf, and one wrong move or miscalculation by either side could set the region on fire. Therefore, more efforts to bring Riyadh and Tehran together are needed.

Whatever their geopolitical differences, Saudi Arabia and Iran must work out a modus vivendi and assure each other of mutual security. Dragging outside powers — such as the US — into the equation will only complicate matters, ie regional security should be left to the regional states. Perhaps ending the brutal Yemen war could be a first step towards a more peaceful region.

‘Triple burden’

IN an alarming report on the state of global child nutrition, Unicef has declared that at least one half of the world’s children under the age of five are victims of ‘hidden hunger’. This means that essential vitamins and minerals are missing from their diet. The report also highlights that at least one-third of the world’s under-five population is either undernourished or overweight — obesity rates are surging in the developing world — leading to lifelong health problems. Moreover, out of the total 700m children in the world, at least 149m are stunted: because of nutritional deficiencies, they are shorter than what is normal for their age, and their brain and bodily functions may also be affected. Another 50m suffer from wasting. The report collectively calls the three aspects of malnutrition a “triple burden — undernutrition, lack of critical micronutrients, obesity”.

The report is a wakeup call for Pakistan which is among the seven countries that make up two-thirds of the global undernourished population. On assuming office, Prime Minister Imran Khan correctly identified stunting as a major cause for concern. According to the 2018 National Nutrition Survey, four out of 10 children in Pakistan under the age of five are stunted. This is the third highest statistic in the world. Moreover, nearly 18pc suffer from wasting while almost 30pc are undernourished. Unfortunately, Pakistan also has the worst mortality rate in the world, while the maternal mortality rate remains one of the highest in the region. Though the prime minister, in his maiden speech, promised a renewed focus in these areas, the overall thrust of development is still towards ‘hard’ investment ie large infrastructure projects. The only positive step in this regard from the PTI-led government has been the Backyard Poultry Initiative under which 5m desi chicken were distributed to the public in the rural areas of Islamabad, Azad

Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan at subsidised rates. The intention was to provide adequate animal protein to undernourished populations and alleviate poverty, but these goals will take far more time and effort to meet than the mere distribution of poultry. The prime minister should revisit his promise of improving maternal and child health, which is key to realising the other SDGs. Investment in early childhood development will result in concrete rewards as those who benefit will go on to become part of a productive workforce that will act as a powerhouse for development by boosting economic and social growth.

Casualty of JUI-F march

A DISCUSSION regarding the evolution — or rather the lack of it — of the National Games over the last few years has evoked several depressing memories for those who are committed to seeing them held regularly. The latest setback is the postponement of the 33rd edition of the Games in Peshawar by a couple of weeks. The justification for the disruption of the jinxed event this time has been provided by the JUI-F's Maulana Fazlur Rehman as he grapples with the heavyweights in Pakistan's power arena. The 'Azadi March' could cripple some, if not all, activity in his home province of KP. The National Games have been the planned protest's first casualty. After what has happened in the past, nobody is confident that the event will be held even on the new scheduled date. This edition was to begin in Peshawar on Oct 26. It has now been pushed to Nov 9-14. The announcement came just when the National Games' torch was on its way to the KP capital, which had 'bravely' accepted the responsibility of hosting the sporting gala once the original venue, Quetta, gave up after trying for many years. Balochistan could never come up with the infrastructure. There was always too much in the pipelines and too little on the ground.

The lack of funding, including the absence of resources needed to develop a worthy enough infrastructure, has been a huge factor in the repeated delaying of the Games. But there have been other issues that, in recent times, have spoiled matters, such as politics in the country's sporting organisations and the latter's clash with one another. It is very unfortunate that this often ugly internal friction has been allowed to exist for so long; it has had a terrible effect on a vital sporting tradition. There has to be a strong reassertion of the belief in how these events are essential to the life of the country and people. Only then can the

National Games survive temporary hurdles created by politics within and outside Pakistan's sporting organisations.

University scandal

THE sexual harassment and blackmailing scandal that has erupted at the University of Balochistan may well have jeopardised the education of thousands of young women in the province. The fact that the privacy and safety of students at a well-regarded institution is being taken so lightly by the varsity administration raises concerns about the credibility of other universities in the country as well.

If the Balochistan government was trying to advance the cause of women's education in the province before, it has an even greater responsibility to do so now. If it does not investigate the scandal in a transparent manner and award exemplary punishment to the perpetrators, irrespective of their clout, many parents will stop their daughters from opting for higher studies. Besides it will give conservative tribal and political forces an excuse to buttress their efforts to suppress women's education.

As per the details, students were being filmed by secret cameras installed in washrooms and smoking areas inside the campus. According to FIA officials, the videos recorded were of a 'personal nature' and involved the mingling of male and female students.

So far, the FIA has been able to trace 12 videos that were used to blackmail and harass female students. Statements by various students' organisations seem to confirm claims that such harassment had been going on for quite some time on campus.

An atmosphere of fear and anger justifiably prevails, with students calling for the vice chancellor to resign. It is a matter of shame that the university ignored the students' complaints and they had to approach the Balochistan High Court that took suo motu notice.

Though the scandal also echoed in the Balochistan Assembly, which has constituted a 10-member inquiry committee of its own, it remains to be seen what actionable evidence the FIA will come up with that it has not already found in its month-long investigation. It is expected to submit its report to the court by Oct 28.

These disturbing developments have affected both male and female students, but it is obvious that it is the latter who will feel the effects the most. Balochistan is regarded as the least developed of the provinces, and national and international statistics bear this out. The female literacy rate in the province is 33.5pc as compared to 52pc for the rest of the country, according to the Pakistan Economic Survey of 2018-19.

In fact, there are quite a few districts in Balochistan, such as Dera Bugti, Sherani and Qilla Abdullah, where the female literacy rate has persistently remained below 10pc. Coupled with conservative tribal attitudes, the scandal may put greater distance between women students and their dreams.

The authorities must take immediate action to punish the perpetrators, reassure families that this kind of incident will never occur again, and provide counselling services to all those who have gone through the trauma.

Media blackout

FOR a change, media censorship has been called out in real time on television. On Wednesday, a press briefing by Maulana Fazlur Rehman was being shown live on Geo when the news anchor interjected to say that the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority had ordered there be no live telecast of the event. The channel would therefore, she said, be unable to continue with the broadcast. At least this time viewers were privy to who had ordered this brazen violation of the people's right to information. More often, broadcasts in today's Pakistan are arbitrarily suspended in a manner better suited to repressive regimes where 'autonomous' regulatory authorities are in reality a handmaiden of the state. Pemra has no authority to order the instant blackout of any transmission. The legislation under which it functions stipulates, in a nutshell, that it must issue a show-cause notice to the offending television channel and then, if the regulatory authority's Council of Complaints so recommends, proceed to sanction it appropriately.

Instead, there have been several recent instances where opposition politicians' interviews and press conferences — perfectly legitimate in any democracy — have been unilaterally suspended mid-broadcast; these include former president Asif Zardari, Maryam Nawaz, and now the JUI-F chief who is gearing up for the 'Azadi March'. In July, Pemra issued notices to 21 channels for airing a press

conference by Ms Nawaz; a day later, three channels were forced off air. In fact, even Pemra was caught off-guard when Mr Zardari's interview was stopped just a few minutes in — which, of course, begs the question who ordered the channel to take it off air. The government itself after a few days came out with half-baked reasons for why the regulatory authority should not have allowed the event to go ahead. Certainly, hate speech and defamatory statements should not be given space, and TV channels must ensure time delay mechanisms are in place to prevent such an occurrence. On its part, however, a more mature approach is to be expected from the government, particularly a PTI government. The party milked the benefits of the much more tolerant media climate that prevailed in the country during its four-month-long dharna in 2014. The sit-in — complete with the no-holds-barred diatribes that were issued from atop a container — got wall-to-wall coverage. The party must not be so squeamish when it is on the receiving end of what is part and parcel of a democracy.

Doctors' protest

PROTESTS by doctors are endemic in parts of Pakistan. A new generation of young doctors takes over from the previous one; thousands are replaced by thousands of others. Governments come and go, and there are many changes. But the doctors continue to chant at the top of their voices as they did many years ago. Both in KP and Punjab, the cause of the protest are new laws. The KP doctors oppose a new ordinance that deprives them of key executive posts in local-level hospitals. In Punjab, the unrest is the result of the Punjab Medical Teaching Institutions Act, 2019. The protest has been organised by the Grand Health Alliance (GHA) which includes the Young Doctors Association and enjoys more than just the tacit support of senior doctors. The new law seeks to free public-sector hospitals in the province from government control. The doctors are objecting to the new terms, saying they would no more be government servants; instead, they would be beholden to independent boards of governors. The authorities claim they have accepted certain amendments to the act, but that has not had a placating effect.

It was the Shahbaz Sharif government that conceded the most important of the doctors' demands amid much celebration. The victory in Punjab was hailed as heralding improvement in the job situation for doctors all over the country. But it didn't quite succeed in ending the doctors' street shows. There has been a

change in perception since then. In Punjab and KP, or anywhere else in the country for that matter, doctors must adjust to certain realities that there is no escape from. As the new model of an autonomous hospital emerges on the horizon, the real cause for concern is not what it will offer to the doctors — who would be justified in asking for fair rewards for their skills, knowledge and time. The real worry is what these autonomous facilities will offer to the millions of patients who are so dependent on public-sector hospitals for treatment.

Loans for youth

THE Kamyab Jawan Programme launched by Prime Minister Imran Khan to deliver on one of his party's major election promises has wide scope. It aims primarily at creating new jobs and reducing poverty by disbursing interest-free microloans and subsidised small loans among young men and women, especially from the country's 45 most backward districts, for setting up new businesses or financing existing small enterprises. The scheme is also expected to facilitate the establishment of smart science laboratories at seminaries in order to bring the students there into the mainstream, while also providing skills training to the youth in collaboration with the industry. Further, teachers will be trained to impart skills and provide vocational training, thus narrowing the skilled labour gap between industry and the services sector. Overall, the various initiatives under this programme will cost Rs100bn. Out of the total amount, 25pc is reserved for women. If spent well, all this money, which is to come from the UNDP, is projected to reduce poverty and youth unemployment in the country.

This is not the first scheme that has been launched in the name of empowering the youth. Successive governments have undertaken similar ventures in the past, with varying degrees of success. More recently, the Nawaz Sharif administration had introduced a similar, multipronged initiative — the Prime Minister's Youth Loan Programme — shortly after coming to power in 2013, promising to give subsidised loans cumulatively amounting to Rs100bn to the youth over a period of five years. In fact, the PTI rulers' youth project borrows generously from the previous government's initiative. However, the earlier scheme could achieve very limited results because of several political, financial and administrative factors. Less than a quarter of the total funds allocated for disbursement in five years could be lent, mostly to applicants from the PML-N stronghold of Punjab.

Since no study has ever measured the outcome of that scheme — or any other such initiative in the past — it is hard to comment on the impact it might have had. Yet it is safe to assume that such initiatives are inherently constrained because they are largely driven by political motives. One big factor that had led to the failure of the previous youth programme was the lack of interest shown by banks for fear of losing money. The PTI has promised to maintain complete transparency and uphold merit to keep the programme free from political interference — no easy task considering the pressure mounted by its legislators who would want their voters to be accommodated. Moreover, since the scheme is based on the ‘push strategy’, whereby the government will be ‘pushing’ loan disbursement, it would be a good idea to organise sessions for the loan applicants to train and guide them on the different aspects of running the businesses that they want to invest in.

Talks’ offer rebuffed

JUI-F CHIEF Maulana Fazlur Rehman has upped the ante against the government by refusing the latter’s offer of talks.

In Lahore on Friday, the maulana appeared determined to carry out his ‘threat’ of a march on Islamabad on Oct 31. He stood by resolving not to back off as Mian Shahbaz Sharif told a media briefing about the PML-N’s plans. Mr Sharif said his party was committed to holding the rally in the capital in two weeks’ time, and repeated that the PML-N strategy after that would be decided later.

The former Punjab chief minister added his voice to the growing chorus calling for fresh elections in the country but chose not to answer questions about any tensions between him and his elder brother Nawaz Sharif over the JUI-F’s forthcoming protest.

It appears that if Shahbaz Sharif had any reservations about the protest earlier, he was now reconciled to the idea of going ahead with it. The opposition’s emphasis on Prime Minister Imran Khan’s resignation and the demand for fresh elections have become more pronounced after the government came up with a committee to engage the aspiring protesters in talks. The formation of a committee, headed by Defence Minister Pervaiz Khattak, was welcomed by many but dubbed as belated action by others.

According to one view, the government's offer of talks took the opposition leaders, primarily the JUI-F chief, by surprise. It was argued that the ball was now in the opposition's court that was in no position to spurn this gesture of 'friendship'.

However, the so-called master stroke failed to secure any long-term gains for the government. This anticlimax is of the government's own making, insists the maulana. He was given an opportunity to make this claim after Prime Minister Khan, speaking in the wake of the offer of dialogue to those who threatened his government's ouster, adopted a sarcastic tone and passed remarks about the chief architect of the agitation in the making.

The current assembly is found to be lacking in a number of things — and much of the blame for this should be put on the treasury members. Mr Khan's statement that the house was running without diesel — an obvious reference to Maulana Fazlur Rehman's unhappy sobriquet — was nothing short of adding fuel to the fire. It hurt his challenger and unnecessarily gave him more reason to go ahead and plan for his advance on Islamabad.

CDA vs hostels

THE move to seal a hostel in Islamabad's E-11 area for violating CDA bylaws reveals a severe lack of forethought on part of the development authority. On the one hand, the CDA, by turning a blind eye to the many commercial enterprises that function illegally outside its own headquarters, has implicitly condoned the former's practices. On the other hand, a very large number of students will be displaced as a result of the CDA's efforts to seal private hostels. Thousands of students enrolled in many public and private universities in Islamabad have no choice but to live in private hostels because the educational institutes where they study do not provide them with adequate lodging. Many students come from outside the capital and do not have any relatives in Islamabad. Most of these private hostels are overcrowded and lack proper amenities but there is no alternative to them. Though the HEC is responsible for ensuring that university campuses have adequate facilities before taking in students, even the basic requirements are often overlooked when awarding NOCs to sub-campus or private higher educational institutes. It is an open secret that all high-rises and

apartment buildings — except for three — in Islamabad functions without obtaining completion certificates.

Considering that there are far more serious violations of the rules, if the authority wants to act against establishments that operate outside CDA by-laws, it should ensure that the implementation of its regulations is across the board. As far as the hostels are concerned, most students stay there out of compulsion. It a fact that the owners and managers of private hostels exploit the situation for their own benefit, but it is equally true that it is the CDA itself that allowed its regulations to be flouted in the first place. Many of these hostels have operated for years and the CDA has tolerated them. If the CDA wants to take action, it should provide ample notice to the students to make alternative living arrangements instead of forcing them to live in constant fear of displacement.

FATF's concerns

THE latest message from Paris is unmistakable. The tone of the Financial Action Task Force on the conclusion of its plenary indicates how seriously the world is taking Pakistan's inability to meet global anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing standards.

Read: Pakistan escapes FATF blacklist, but gets warning

These concerns were voiced in so many words by the FATF president when he noted: "Pakistan needs to do more [to fix the weaknesses in its anti-money laundering/combating financing for terrorism regime] and it needs to do it faster. Pakistan's failure to fulfil the FATF global standards is an issue we take very seriously."

It must do this across the full range of the 27-point national action plan agreed on with FATF, or risk action which could include Pakistan being blacklisted along with countries considered a haven for terrorism financing.

The outcome of the plenary is quite the opposite of what ministers and officials had projected.

Contrary to official claims, Pakistan has missed the third deadline for implementing the measures required to exit the grey list. Only five of the 27 measures — which include identification and supervision of terror-financing risks

and boosting control on illicit currency movement — have been ‘largely’ addressed. Sadly, the government has never cared to publicly share the document. It is, however, unclear if FATF rules bar it from making the plan public or if it is keeping it a secret for some other reason.

Indeed, FATF also acknowledges the progress made by the country towards improving its AML/CFT regime, but didn’t find it adequate enough to let it off the hook.

It underlines that Pakistan hasn’t adequately demonstrated “proper understanding of the transnational terror-financing risks posed by terrorist groups” [operating from its territory] and conducted supervision on a risk-sensitive basis.

FATF requires Pakistan to deliver on its commitment to crack down on terrorism financing by fixing the strategic deficiencies in the AML/CFT regime such as identification of cash couriers, enforcement of controls on illicit currency movement, effective implementation of financial sanctions against all internationally designated terrorists and militant groups, as well as their agents.

Failure to meet the February deadline for making “significant and sustainable progress” will put the country on the blacklist and have serious consequences for its struggling economy, including tough sanctions on its banks and a freeze on official and private capital inflows.

The time to linger on Pakistan’s commitments has passed. It is now time to walk the talk if the country wants to escape being blacklisted or even get another extension to comply fully with the global AML/CFT standards after the expiry of the current deadline.

Captaincy rigmarole

THE PCB, with its knack of attracting controversy, has once again made a hash of a simple change of guard in the national cricket team. As the aphorism goes, ethics is about knowing the difference between what one has the right to do and what is the right thing to do. But clearly, this is lost on the cricket board which has its priorities mixed up as it assesses Tests, ODIs and T20s using the same yardstick. While there is no doubt that the cricket team’s performance in the Tests and ODIs during the past year and a half left much to be desired and called

for a change in leadership, its brilliant performance in the T20 format has seen it perched on top of ICC rankings since January 2018 with no serious challenge from any side. On Friday, the PCB announced sweeping changes by bringing in middle-order batsman Azhar Ali as the new Test captain and the inexperienced Babar Azam as the new T20 skipper, in place of Sarfraz Ahmed. Azhar's previous stint as ODI captain had ended abysmally in 2016. Handed the Test reins now, Azhar has the toughest of challenges awaiting him in the shape of the upcoming Australian tour. No Pakistan team has ever won a series Down Under, and both Azhar and Misbah-ul-Haq — head coach-cum-chief-selector — should be mindful of that.

However, a change at the top in Tests was inevitable since Sarfraz had clearly lost the zest to successfully lead the team in the five-day format. Having said that, his removal as T20 skipper is patently unjust given his fantastic record of 29 victories and only eight losses in the format at the international level. True, the home series' whitewash at the hands of a depleted Sri Lankan side is impossible to defend. And yet, his fate should not have been decided on the basis of this defeat. Sarfraz deserved to be retained as T20 skipper. The PCB has erred by handing the T20 mantle to the team's best batsman Babar, who has no prior experience of leadership in international cricket. With the added burden of captaincy, he is bound to feel the heat in Australia. The new dispensation at the PCB may want to show that it means business but all that it has done is to make decisions that are likely to backfire. Much of the team's performance can be traced to how the PCB functions. That needs to change if Pakistan cricket is to go back to its winning ways.

Entry denied

IN keeping with their paranoia of an independent media, the authorities in Pakistan deported Steven Butler of the Committee to Protect Journalists when he arrived in the country this week. Mr Butler had reached Lahore to take part in the Asma Jahangir Conference. He was told that his name was on the 'stop list' of the interior ministry; he was sent to Doha, from where he was put on a flight to Washington. In a scene reminiscent of the era of hard-core dictatorships, the airport authorities were said to have 'confiscated' his travel documents. Typically, there has been no explanation about the incident from any government spokesperson here, fuelling speculation about the possible reasons for Mr

Butler's deportation. Many news reports referred to a CJP special report about Pakistan issued last year which had noted the worsening climate for media freedoms in the country.

The immediate domestic and international reaction to the door being so rudely shut on a foreign journalist, a would-be guest at an event to honour the memory of Asma Jahangir, one of Pakistan's most vocal human rights activists, was measured. A tweet by one Pakistani human rights group expressed disappointment at the government's decision which it said "must be re-evaluated". Amnesty International also called for an immediate reversal of the decision. However, since then, the debate has moved on to tackling the broader question of how Pakistan can promote a soft image of itself if it continues to stick to a policy of abruptly refusing someone with a valid visa entry into the country, without assigning any reason. It also bears asking whether a 'stop list' is a valid mechanism, or yet another ad hoc measure like the FIA's 'blacklist', which is meant to prevent people going out of the country. The gains made by the visit of foreign royalty, cricketers of a friendly country and sundry groups are all compromised by news such as this which spreads far and wide. Why give anyone any cause to suspect that the country has something to hide?

Internment centres

IT is a long overdue redressal of rights violations perpetuated against the people of the tribal areas, an injustice that became all the more indefensible after the region's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in early 2017. On Thursday, the Peshawar High Court declared the scores of internment centres operating in the area since years as being unconstitutional. The two-judge bench also ordered the provincial police chief to assume control of the sites within three days and form a committee to review each case and free the individuals found to be detained on undetermined grounds. Crucially, the Peshawar High Court also struck down the legislation that allowed laws in force in Fata and Pata before their merger with KP to remain extant even after that historic event, whose avowed purpose was to bring these areas into the constitutional fold. These regulations, enacted in 2011 but applied retrospectively from 2008, gave security forces sweeping powers to arrest and indefinitely detain any individual, and also sanctioned the setting up of internment centres. For the government to not only try and maintain the status quo through its legislative powers, but to extend that

status quo surreptitiously to the rest of KP through an ordinance passed in August — also declared illegal by the court — defies all norms of justice.

The shadowy detention centres in Fata and Pata, sometimes likened to the Guantanamo Bay prison complex or the ‘black sites’ in Afghanistan, have long been a stain on this country’s reputation. ‘Security concerns’ is a bogey calculated to elicit unquestioning acquiescence of the wider public to repressive, extralegal measures that jettison constitutional guarantees of due process and security of person. This is nowhere better illustrated than with the internment facilities and all that has become associated with them; including enforced disappearances and unprecedentedly opaque trials by military courts, many of which ended in the death penalty being handed down.

Numerous reports have emerged of individuals having been abducted, and held at such locations for years, without charge and without trial — or without any intimation to their families who have been left running pillar to post in an effort to locate their loved ones. In October 2017, the Supreme Court summoned a complete record of the detainees at 45 internment centres; the government subsequently disclosed during the proceedings that it had sent 1,330 people to these sites. However, even where the courts have attempted to assign responsibility for enforced disappearances or obtain information about the prisoners, they have been thwarted time and again by government functionaries through one legal loophole or another. There can be no more emphatic denunciation than the Peshawar High Court’s verdict of this ‘security’ regime that transported individuals into a black hole where they languished at the state’s pleasure. Finally, for people of the tribal areas, in an importance sense, it is no longer a case of one country, two systems.

Modern-day slavery

UNDER Unesco’s definition, modern-day slavery is characterised by “an element of ownership or control over another’s life, coercion and the restriction of movement” and “by the fact that someone is not free to leave or to change an employer”. Under this terminology fall all acts of coerced services and exploitative labour — from human trafficking and debt bondage to forced marriage. Modern-day slavery goes against the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically Article 4, which states that “No one

shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms". Regrettably, this ideal is far from being a reality for tens of millions of people around the world. Human bodies are callously reduced to objects of capitalist value — and only that — to be used, abused and bartered in the pursuit of profit. As Europe marked its Anti-Trafficking Day last Friday, the secretary general of the Council of Europe made an appeal to the governments of the continent to ensure justice for the victims of human trafficking, along with reparations. In the past several years, the European Union has struggled to contain the menace of human trafficking within its borders. While it is difficult to give exact figures on the scale of such illicit activities, the UN estimates that approximately 40.3m of the world's population can be classified as modern-day slaves, with many trapped in the human trafficking web through the use of coercion, deceit or violence. Unlike smuggling, trafficking is always carried out without any form of consent of the victim. Furthermore, the vast majority of victims are women and girls, while nearly 25pc of all victims are children.

With some of the highest rates of slavery in the world, Pakistan is no stranger to the evils of modern-day slavery. Approximately, 3.19m Pakistanis are classified as modern-day slaves. Many become imprisoned in trafficking rings and forced marriages — a practice so common, it barely causes a stir and remains underreported — while others get tricked into organ mining and debt bondage — a contract so cruel, it is often passed down several generations, and is especially rampant in the agriculture and brick kiln industries, with entire families working to pay off the debt. It bears repeating: slavery is not a problem of the past.

Luck of the draw?

A RECENT petition before the Lahore High Court, filed by the Pakistan Railways Employees Union, has challenged the appointment of more than 800 new inductees through Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed's rather novel hiring process of selection via lottery rather than on the basis of merit. Yet even this seemingly randomised process has been called into question by the petition's claim that over half of these recruits mysteriously hail from only two constituencies — one of the railways minister himself and the other of his nephew, MNA Sheikh Rashid Shafiq. Besides this, a question mark hangs over the potential application of this arbitrary approach to hiring in other government departments. The railways minister announced his intent to fill up vacancies by balloting in May this year. On

June 17, following the federal cabinet's approval, the Establishment Division issued a notification detailing amendments made to the Civil Servants (Appointment, Transfer and Promotion) Rules, 1973. The amendments included changes to Rule 16 to allow for vacancies in BPS-1 to BPS-5 posts to be filled on a local basis "through balloting". Granted, this was followed on June 29 with a memorandum of guidelines providing some criteria of qualification and aptitude, but this appears to have led only to more confusion than clarity.

When the present government assumed office last year, some 171,000 federal posts lay vacant. Such a massive deficit of human resources has undoubtedly strained federal functioning, but there is no quick or easy fix to this conundrum. In fact, exposing such recruitments to questions of their legitimacy — through a process that is both unconstitutional and illogical — will only create more impediments in the way of good governance. This shortcut method of hiring government employees gives rise to many issues, such as its susceptibility to rigging. Another question is whether these arbitrarily selected cohorts of inductees would later be subjected to performance evaluations. And if the answer is 'yes', then why can't a similar evaluation process simply be applied at the hiring stage itself?

No more PMDC

THE presidential 'ambush' that dissolved the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council through an ordinance on Sunday and replaced it with the Pakistan Medical Commission, is baffling to say the least. Even if the intention was honest — the prime minister's special assistant on health has claimed that the change has been made to modernise the country's medical education regime — the route taken by the government to bypass the elected parliament on the issue has made the entire exercise controversial.

The government had failed to push through the Senate a similar law — the PMDC Ordinance 2019 — to deal with issues related to medical colleges, attached hospitals and health professionals earlier this year because of stern resistance from the opposition parties enjoying a majority in the upper house. But it would have been much better for the government to have made a serious attempt to take the opposition parties into confidence on its proposals, instead of choosing the less-favoured path of resorting to presidential ordinances. Let alone

talking to the opposition parties, the writers of the new law did not even consult the management of the public medical institutions, bodies representing doctors and other stakeholders before unilaterally and secretly implementing the decision. The haste shown by the government in bringing in the ordinance without wider consultation gives credence to the allegations that the step had been taken in connivance with the management of the private medical institutions and to please their politically influential owners.

The PMDC — the statutory regulatory authority responsible for prescribing standards for, and governing, medical education and profession in the country — had for some time been enforcing stricter criteria to regulate the mushrooming of private medical colleges in the country in line with an earlier apex court decision. Some of these colleges were shut down and others were made to stop admitting students who could afford to pay huge sums in donations, even if they were at the bottom of the merit list. In order to mitigate the financial burden on middle-class students, the PMDC had capped the fee for all private institutions. The teaching hospitals attached with these institutions were made to comply with stricter criteria and improve facilities. It is quite obvious that the owners of these colleges did not like the restrictions that would cut into their massive profits and force them to provide better facilities to their students. The new ordinance will allow the private medical institutions much greater autonomy to operate. They will now be free to accept donations from students, charge higher fees, choose a university of their own liking for affiliation, set their own criteria for hiring faculty and what not. True, there had been several complaints against the PMDC and the far-from-ideal manner in which it was being run. But surely, the military-style coup to eliminate it was not warranted in the least.

LoC violence

IT was a bloody Sunday in the vicinity of the Line of Control as at least six civilians and an army jawan embraced martyrdom in AJK due to “indiscriminate shelling” by Indian forces.

The Pakistan Army replied in kind to the provocation, with the ISPR saying that around nine Indian soldiers were killed in the Pakistani counterattack.

The Indians have claimed that “terror launch pads” were targeted on the Pakistani side, but this claim is hardly credible as all evidence shows that innocent civilians were murdered in cold blood by New Delhi’s forces.

According to the Foreign Office, since 2017, the Indians have committed nearly 2,000 ceasefire violations. Such reckless behaviour on the part of New Delhi is totally unacceptable, and in the highly charged atmosphere currently prevailing in South Asia it is akin to playing with fire. Emotions are running high, mainly due to India’s brutal lockdown of India-held Kashmir, and such flagrant violations are sure to draw a response from Pakistan. It would be fair to ask if ultra-hawkish elements within the Indian establishment are purposely seeking to escalate matters with Pakistan.

If India claims it has smashed what it calls terrorist infrastructure in this country, where is the evidence?

The FO has rightly called upon the five permanent UNSC member states “to ask India to provide information about the alleged launch pads”.

The fact is that the state has cracked down on militant groups, and there is no evidence that infiltration into India or across the LoC is occurring from this country. Rather, it seems that the Indians are attempting to promote a psychological warfare campaign against Pakistan.

This is also being done to take the world’s focus away from the atrocious human rights situation in occupied Kashmir.

It seems that the Indian establishment is using a mixture of lies, brinkmanship and violence to cook up another crisis. However, beating the drums of war is one thing; managing a fight between two nuclear-armed states is quite another.

It is hoped that the Hindu extremist clique that rules India realises that should tensions increase to the point of conflict, it will wreak massive devastation in this region.

India needs to immediately cease its hostile behaviour along the LoC and end the siege of IHK. A new conflict in South Asia will be in no one’s interest — and will only worsen matters for the toiling masses.

The religious card

GIVEN the JUI-F's religio-political credentials, the main participants in the party's forthcoming march on Islamabad will comprise former or current students of madressahs affiliated with the outfit. It is true that if all goes according to plan, the representatives and supporters of other parties will also take part. However, the religious colour will be hard to miss, ie, the focus will be on the JUI-F cadres. Commentator after commentator on television and in the print media has warned JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman and his followers against the dangers of raising faith-based slogans. The interior ministry has already written to the cabinet, asking for a ban on the uniformed stick-wielding razakaar or voluntary force called Ansar-ul-Islam. In fact, the government, right up to Prime Minister Imran Khan, has referred to the 'religious card' while discussing the JUI-F march, even if this mention has been limited to cautioning the organisers against resorting to any such option. Politicians supporting the maulana in his anti-government crusade, such as Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, have also voiced their concern on this count.

Alleged poll rigging was the original theme the march was to be woven around. Maulana Fazlur Rehman has been working to create an opposition protest movement around that single point from the day he suffered an ignominious defeat in the 2018 general election. Later, as he wooed his party supporters and followers of the particular sect he represents, he let slip remarks linked to emotive religious issues such as Khatm-i-Nabuwwat. Other JUI-F representatives have also ensured that the religious element in what is purely a political issue is not diluted. They have publicly disparaged the prime minister's original plan to include an economist from the Ahmadi faith in his finance team and have also criticised him for the acquittal and subsequent release of Aasia Bibi who had been charged with blasphemy. The maulana should know better than to allow his representatives to make remarks that can be construed as hate speech and to use religion for political gains.

Madressah reform

THE debate over how to reform madressahs in Pakistan is not a new one. While seminaries in the country experienced explosive growth during the Zia years, producing the human raw material required for the anti-Soviet Afghan 'jihad', during the Musharraf era, and especially in the aftermath of 9/11, the establishment had second thoughts about these institutions. The various madressah reform campaigns over the years have had mixed success, with the clergy expectedly putting up resistance to any efforts by the state to encroach upon what they perceive to be their turf. However, the present government has also indicated that it wants to 'mainstream' the institutions. The Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training says a directorate to oversee madressahs is almost ready, and that ulema are on board. A few days earlier, while meeting clerics, the prime minister had also remarked that 'revolutionary' reforms to overhaul seminaries were in the works.

If the government were to succeed in bringing madressahs into the mainstream, specifically in overseeing their curriculum and ensuring their registration, it would be a feat worth appreciating. However, this is easier said than done. For example, there are no concrete figures about how many seminaries — registered and otherwise — exist in the country; estimates range from 30,000 to 60,000. Moreover, ensuring that all sects and sub-sects that run madressahs are on board is another challenge. It would be wrong to say that all madressahs preach terror and extremism; many do not, but as the experiences of Lal Masjid as well as of the seminaries that helped produce sectarian and jihadi terrorists show, even a small unregulated minority is enough to challenge the writ of the state. What is more, there are relevant questions about what the students of madressahs will do after they graduate. Surely not all graduates can be absorbed as prayer leaders and Quran teachers. Therefore, these youngsters need life skills along with their religious education that can help them find gainful employment upon completing their courses at seminaries.

Madressah reform efforts, therefore, must focus on two key areas: eliminating extremist and sectarian content from the syllabus, and giving seminarians training that will help them find jobs in a wide variety of fields. While the state has indeed cracked down on seminaries linked to militant groups, more needs to be done to eliminate content that may fan extremism and sectarianism in the

impressionable young minds that study in madressahs. Instead of focusing on the 'othering' of different sects and faiths, madressahs need to teach young pupils the compassion and civic duties that religion stresses. Moreover, cosmetic changes — such as introducing English and computer classes — will not do much unless madressah pupils are given vocational training that will make them employable in the job market. But most of all, the state needs to reform the public education system so that the majority of parents can send their wards to school.

Redacted pages

AUSTRALIAN newspapers on Monday made a powerful statement against state censorship. In a coordinated campaign, they published identical, redacted front pages accompanied by a question: "When government keeps the truth from you, what are they covering?" The media industry in that country has been in an uproar since several months over raids by police on a journalist's residence and the headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to recover leaked documents that had provided material for an exposé published in 2018. The story blew the lid off plans for an Australian intelligence agency to be given unprecedented powers to spy on the country's citizens, and was deeply embarrassing for the government. The development comes amid a climate of increasing restrictions on the media's right to access information, particularly on grounds of national security.

This is a growing trend across the globe, with governments treating freedom of speech and the right to information as a privilege they bestow on their citizens. The pretext of 'national security' in a post-9/11 world is particularly useful, being an amorphous concept that can be made to fit any inconvenient truth and throttle independent reportage. This is naturally par for the course in countries with dictatorial regimes where the leadership is unaccountable and whose workings are closed to media scrutiny. Worryingly, however, many democratic governments are also weakening the fourth pillar of the state, with populists such as President Trump attempting to erode the credibility of news outlets critical of their policies, while overtly supporting those that give them more favourable coverage. That has further emboldened leaders elsewhere. In India, the illegal media blackout in held Kashmir after the region was stripped of its autonomy has been largely successful in stifling the voices of people suffering under the Modi government's tyranny. The Australian newspapers' shock tactic on Monday is

familiar to many senior journalists in Pakistan who have worked under Gen Zia's military dictatorship. During that regime, in a pointed rebuke against restrictions on the press, newspapers began to leave blank spaces where official censors had excised entire reports or certain lines in the text. The media in Pakistan is once again in the grip of censorship from official quarters, though this time it leaves behind no 'press advice' as evidence of its intolerance for dissenting views. Unfortunately, however, also missing now is the unity among media players that can make for a collective resistance against the state's high-handedness.

PM's snub

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's decision to not meet Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah during his visit to Karachi on Monday was tantamount to a public rebuke that ill behoves the prime minister of the country.

The fact that Mr Khan decided to meet members of the anti-PPP alliance GDA but not Mr Shah demonstrates more than just a dismissive attitude towards the provincial government; it conveys that he has no qualms about widening the divide that already exists between the centre and the Sindh setup. How then can he expect the public to believe the federal government when it says it is willing to extend its support to resolve the issues of Karachi and the rest of the province?

Mr Khan is the chief executive of Pakistan and its constituent provinces, and the responsibilities and requirements of his office are above and beyond what is expected from the leader of a political party. He represents all sections of the public — whether or not they voted for his party, they look to him for the resolution of their problems.

If, as Mr Khan has suggested, the federal government has taken over the responsibility of works which the provincial rulers were obligated to undertake, there needs to be a clear strategy for carrying out these additional duties, otherwise these projects will be marred by organisational chaos.

Though it is true that the performance of the PPP in terms of governance has been dismal over the past decade or so, the fact that the party came to power yet again through the popular vote is not something to be taken lightly. The problems

of governance in Sindh cannot be resolved without talking to the biggest and most important stakeholder in the province.

There is no other way to pave the way for development other than rising above petty politics and talking to the representatives of the provincial government who have been voted into office by the people of Sindh.

Kashmir reactions

DESPITE New Delhi's tough-looking posture regarding its activities in India-held Kashmir, it is quite apparent that international reactions to the Modi government's brutal tactics in the region are beginning to hurt.

For one, it is clear that India's ill-advised move of annexing occupied Kashmir by changing its constitutional status has not altered the status quo internationally; much of the world still considers Kashmir a disputed territory, exposing India's fiction that the troubles in IJK are an 'internal matter'.

The other day, US Assistant Secretary of State Alice Wells reiterated Washington's position in a briefing giving to a Congressional panel, saying that the US considers the LoC "a de facto line separating two parts of Kashmir".

Elsewhere, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has stood by his criticism of India's tactics in IJK at the UN General Assembly in September. The veteran leader's forthright comments have drawn the ire of Indian trade bodies, with one concern calling for a ban on the import of Malaysian palm oil.

Moreover, Turkish President Recep Erdogan's raising of the Kashmir issue — also at the UNGA — has reportedly made Narendra Modi postpone a forthcoming visit to Ankara.

The fact is that due to India's size and economic potential, it has bullied smaller and less powerful states into toeing its line. However, now that stronger states are challenging its actions and calling out the atrocious human rights situation in IJK, New Delhi is showing visible discomfort.

Indeed, all the spin in the world cannot change the situation on the ground in occupied Kashmir.

The region's people have been suffering under a suffocating lockdown for over two months, and people of conscience around the world are expressing their disapproval of these brutish actions. Even the Indian drama of carrying out strikes against 'terror launch pads' on this side of the LoC has been exposed, as envoys from various states were given a tour of the affected areas on Tuesday, clearly showing that the victims of India's ceasefire violations were innocent civilians.

Indeed, it is to the government's credit that human rights violations in occupied Kashmir are now being discussed at world forums.

Pakistan's diplomats have apprised key world capitals of the situation in the occupied region, and the result is that states and individuals are speaking out against the violence in IJK and calling for justice for Kashmiris.

From hereon, the Indian state can do one of two things. Either it can continue to sulk and break off or downgrade ties with all those that criticise its horrible behaviour in IJK. (This may not be a workable policy, especially if more and more states start calling for justice to be done in Kashmir.) Or New Delhi can adopt the path of dialogue and statesmanship, end the siege of Kashmir, and work with Pakistan and the Kashmiris for a long-term solution.

After Asma

THE Asma Jahangir Conference in Lahore last weekend was a spirited attempt at highlighting some of the causes that the champion human rights campaigner had stood for in her lifetime. Supremacy and efficacy of civilian rule, faith in democracy, the influence of elite power groups in the country and rule of law and freedom of expression were some of the themes the event was woven around, and it must have been a source of encouragement for those struggling for the implementation of human rights to see a positive response from the public. The attendance was encouraging and there was clear appreciation for those who went about their duty of advising a progressive interpretation of the laws and principles, both written and unwritten, while taking the caravan forward. The conference was very much in sync with the reason-based approach with which Ms Jahangir pursued her targets right up to her sudden death in February 2018, and the country could do with more such events, especially at this particular moment in time. For instance, there have been issues of censorship that the

media as a whole has had to increasingly contend with. And while there have always been sensitive questions asked about it, the fear of a lopsided division of powers has been most strongly felt in recent times as institutions are no longer reluctant to hide their controversial role in the scheme of things. The response to this necessitates a coming together of people — common folk, intellectuals, human rights defenders, etc.

Indeed, such events can go a long way towards establishing solid institutions — both at the government and private level — that can help shape policies and reasonable attitudes that are vital to the forward journey of a people. And hopefully, they can also encourage and bring to the fore individuals who are brave enough to take a leading role in any campaign or movement that involves the firm assertion of the fundamental and human rights of every citizen of this country — individuals who have the will and patience to harness energy and ideas in a meaningful journey towards a set objective. Leaders such as Asma Jahangir, who is so dearly missed every time the truth becomes a bit too difficult to handle, are needed to speak on behalf of the millions who continue to suffer the excesses of a callous state.

Wildlife conservation

THE Ministry of Climate Change's decision to compile a red data list for threatened or endangered wildlife and plant species is a good first step towards protecting rare flora and fauna in the country. Besides providing a framework for wildlife conservation efforts, this list will also help battle illegal wildlife trade. According to the IUCN, at least four ecosystems in Pakistan are among the world's most biologically outstanding ecoregions. Pakistan is home to an estimated 174 species of mammals, 177 species of reptiles and 668 species of birds. Out of these, about 50 species of mammals and 27 of birds are considered endangered, while 17 species of insects are also under the threat of extinction. For the compilation of this red data list of plants, animals and other organisms, the climate change ministry will collaborate with international organisations working on ecosystem preservation and wildlife conservation. Though the list will be Pakistan-specific, it will be based on internationally recognised guidelines used to evaluate the extinction risk. According to the WWF's Living Planet Index report of 2018, populations of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles have declined by at least 64pc in the Indo-Pacific region — which includes

Pakistan — between 1970 and 2014. The report also points out that the rampant illegal wildlife trade has badly damaged the country's biodiversity, and it has termed smuggling of freshwater turtles and pangolins as a major cause for concern. Furthermore, unchecked deforestation over the years has caused many animals, such as the leopard, to lose their habitat.

In Pakistan, conservation efforts had been stymied by the lack of credible data and information. However, this list, by providing data about the range, population size, habitat and ecology of and threats to endangered species of animals, birds, insects and plants will be able to identify and provide an outline for effective conservation efforts in the country. The list might also prove helpful in improving regulation of hunting permits granted by the provincial wildlife departments. The data can be used to increase awareness among local communities to help preserve the natural habitats of threatened species.

Business kudos

THE government is in a celebratory mood. And why not? After all, Pakistan has gained 28 places to rise to the rank of 108 on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index 2020 in addition to securing a slot among the top 10 nations with the most improved business climate. The improvement in the EODBI ranking is the biggest upward jump in the country's history and a major achievement which led the prime minister to take to Twitter to declare "another of our manifesto commitments fulfilled". The bank said the "rise is significant and made possible by collective and coordinated actions of federal government and provincial governments of Punjab and Sindh over the past year". The country has been rewarded for improving business regulations.

The regulatory reforms implemented under the accelerated reform agenda have made starting a business easier, simplified the approval process for obtaining a construction permit and ensured regular building quality inspections. They have also introduced online payment modules for value-added taxes and corporate income taxes, besides reducing the number of taxes and levies from 47 to 34. It is also easier and faster now to get an electricity connection and register property, and so on. The 'ease of doing business' reforms are expected to facilitate small and medium enterprises, and the higher EODBI ranking is likely to help improve the country's image.

However, while the reforms look great on paper and the government has been praised by global lenders, there are still areas of concern, such as the enforcement of contracts where Pakistan needs to work harder to make progress and further improve its position. The ground reality is that the reforms 'enacted' so far remain confined to official files only. The government, for example, may have made it easier on paper for firms to get an electricity connection, but investors, especially small- and medium-sized companies, continue to face the same old bureaucratic red tape when they apply for a connection. They still cannot get electricity without paying a substantial price to the authorities to avoid delays. Moreover, while promoting an environment to facilitate business is crucial to reducing the time required for setting up a venture and cutting costs, this alone cannot convince an investor — local or foreign — to start pouring money into the country. If the EODBI ranking were the only or the most important factor in attracting investment, Bangladesh with its rank of 168 on the index would not have seen global brands racing towards it. There are several other factors, such as political stability, rule of law, international country perception, etc, that hugely affect investment choices. These factors influence the investors' decision more than the EODBI ranking of a country, even if the latter is on the top of their 'check list'. The government must do all it can to address the shortcomings and remove the hurdles.

Nawaz Sharif's health

SOME official responses to the illness and treatment of Mian Nawaz Sharif can easily earn the PTI setup pride of place among the most blundering governments.

The news about the dangerous fall in the blood platelet levels of the thrice-former prime minister was received with a lot of concern generally, except by those who decided to use it as an opportunity to make personal comments about the patient. There was the usual reference to his eating habits and the privileges certain prisoners enjoyed whereas the rest were left to suffer in their cells. Corruption and conviction were also mentioned as a volley of taunts was heaped on an unwell Mr Sharif whose condition required urgent diagnosis and treatment.

The worst possible attitude on show was reserved for prime ministerial adviser Firdous Ashiq Awan, who herself holds a medical degree. True to form, just as

the bulletins of Mr Sharif's health reported the dangerous drop in his platelets, she made a crude attempt at sarcasm, perhaps not realising that her government was courting a potential disaster by being so dismissive about the former prime minister's illness and casual about his treatment.

In fact, it took the entire government a long time and a few repeats of Mr Sharif's blood tests to understand the kind of mess it had created for itself through its arrogance and lack of sympathy. It is all very well to talk about equality and privileges but this was not the occasion for it.

It is said that it was on the orders of the top leadership that the message was conveyed that Mr Sharif was to be provided with the best possible care. Mr Sharif's detained daughter Maryam Nawaz, whose earlier attempt to meet her father in hospital was frustrated, was finally allowed to pay him a visit.

The question regarding his 'mystery' illness was cleared when he was diagnosed as suffering from an auto-immune condition called idiopathic thrombocytopenia purpura which is said to be a treatable condition; the former prime minister was expected to show an improvement over the next few days.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has finally persuaded himself to send a get-well-soon message to Mr Sharif. However, the manner in which his medical condition was used to settle scores by some of Mr Sharif's opponents has left a gaping wound which may continue to cause pain and anguish for a long time to come.

Gun culture

THE fact that our lawmakers — many of whom have served in high government positions — have to own weapons worth millions of rupees for their 'protection', speaks volumes for the state of security for the common man. According to a report in this newspaper on Thursday, a total of 89 provincial and national members, and 10 senators, have declared in their assets filed for the year 2018 their ownership of multiple prohibited and non-prohibited weapons that include G-3 battle rifles, submachine guns and Kalashnikovs. These legislators are people who have power and privilege at their disposal. Yet, instead of working to regulate the flow of arms and improving the state of security in the country, they take advantage of their position to obtain weapons for themselves. Where social realities are concerned, this reveals the disparity between the common man and

the powerful elite. It also shows the mistrust that these legislators have for the very state machinery/system of which they are a part.

As per a report by the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey, there were around 44m legal and illegal civilian-owned weapons in Pakistan by the end of 2017, the number being the fourth highest in the world. Furthermore, the ownership of military-owned guns stood at 2.3m while weapons owned by law-enforcement agencies numbered a paltry 944,000. The total value of declared arms imports in the country, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, was around Rs6m for the year 2018 — about Rs10m less than the value declared by former president Asif Ali Zardari for the ownership of various types of unspecified weapons. It is an open secret that the process and regulations surrounding gun licensing have many loopholes that have, on several occasions, been exploited by terrorists and anti-state actors. It is, hence, deeply unfortunate that the abuse of power by federal and provincial lawmakers in terms of the responsible use and declaration of weapons sets such a bad precedent for both the public and those intending harm.

Labour woes

THE ILO has launched its Better Work Programme in Pakistan for improving working conditions in the textile industry and ensuring compliance with international labour laws to help local companies compete globally. The programme will also help ensure that local textile companies provide a safe and healthy environment for their workers and allow the strengthening of labour unions and workers' organisations within the industry. Around 4.2m people are employed in the garments, textiles and footwear sector, according to an ILO report for 2014-2015. The textile sector as a whole contributes 8.5pc to GDP and accounts for 70pc of total exports. However, according to Human Rights Watch, most workers in Pakistan's textile industry are unregulated or are not given written contracts and are forced to work overtime in harsh conditions without being given adequate leave in case of sickness. Moreover, they are routinely denied social security, wages and other benefits.

The report also highlighted the role of private textile companies in suppressing the activities of workers' unions that campaign for employees' rights and the government's negligence in allowing these companies to violate existing labour

laws. Pakistan is a signatory to several international covenants on workers' rights and has a number of laws in place for their protection. However, the gaps in the laws themselves and negligence with regard to their implementation have resulted in worsening conditions for Pakistan's largely unregulated labour force. It has also resulted in the pulling out of international businesses, such as Walt Disney, which ceased doing business with Pakistan in 2014 on account of poor working conditions. According to the Global Slavery Index report, 2018, Pakistan ranks third out of 167 countries in terms of having the highest number of victims of 'modern slavery' — 3.19m. Even deadly incidents like Karachi's Baldia factory fire have failed to result in greater protection for millions of workers. Let's hope that the BWP convinces both government and industrialists that progress in trade cannot come without uplifting labour conditions in the country.

Pending justice

THERE is widespread disbelief in the country over an antiterrorism court's verdict in January's shootout case in Sahiwal. The government has decided to challenge the ruling which acquitted all six CTD officials in the killing of four people.

While not a unique occurrence, no less than 27 of prosecution witnesses turned hostile, allowing the accused relief. These witnesses were originally there to help prove the guilt of the accused police officials in the killing of Muhammad Khalil, his wife Nabila, their teenage daughter and Zeeshan, a friend of Khalil's who was driving the car.

The Lahore-based family was on its way to a wedding when it came under a hail of bullets. In the absence of any witnesses testifying against the accused, the ATC judge dismissed the possibility of supportive evidence reinforcing the prosecution's case. This included the footage showing images of the car in which the victims were travelling along with three minor children who survived the attack. The footage led to outrage across the country.

This was considered an open-and-shut case of an overzealous police force going mad with their chase after a wrong tip-off. Even the prime minister and members of his cabinet promised exemplary punishment for those responsible.

However, there were also sceptics who warned that the proceedings in court could lead the judge to draw conclusions contrary to the general perception.

Those cynics have been proved right, pending of course a government appeal against the verdict.

The Sahiwal verdict on Thursday was followed by a statement by Muhammad Khalil's brother who accepted the ruling and asked that the case not be used for any political motives. But if that was an attempt to quickly end the matter, the government's decision to challenge the decision, even if it had to do so without support from the heirs of the victims, has thwarted the move. The case, the debate it stirred, is still open, with its many dimensions about justice, privileges and necessities justified by emergencies.

There have always been grave concerns about how easily the police get away with the gravest of excesses but this is about a more privileged law-enforcement arm. The CTD is a force born of special needs in the wake of the war against militancy, with special cover provided to its acts. But it must still be held accountable for actions that take the life of the innocent.

Online surveillance

A NEW report on Pakistan's internet surveillance, published by investigative agency Coda, has once again sounded the alarm on the long-standing issue of the state spying on its citizens. This is a matter of concern even if the PTA has sought to dismiss fears of an invasion of privacy. The Coda investigation revealed that the government has acquired a "web monitoring system" from Canada-based company Sandvine. The system would allow for monitoring and analysis of all internet traffic moving into and out of the country using a method called Deep Packet Inspection, which would allow for both broad and targeted surveillance of internet activity. According to Coda, the Pakistan firm Inbox Business Technologies Ltd acted as a local partner for Sandvine in signing the agreement with multiple parties including the PTCL. The contract is reportedly worth \$18.5m and dated Dec 12, 2018. While authorities have previously shared that surveillance tools are aimed to curb grey traffic (eg illegal international calls) and other unlawful activities, this reasonable argument is not grounded in reality. To begin with, Sandvine has a documented history of selling its technology to authoritarian regimes for purposes that undermine basic civil liberties. In an investigation by Canada-based Citizen Lab, its DPI equipment was found to be

used in Turkey, Egypt and Syria both to censor content and to redirect users, resulting in the installation of spyware.

Secondly, the state's track record and current trajectory with regard to internet regulation and specifically, surveillance, has been abysmal. The most commonly documented targets in the digital space have been social and political activists, members of rights groups, journalists, and more broadly, citizens who challenge or critique the state's narrative. The fear of online surveillance and consequent harassment, detainment, job loss and other negative outcomes has peaked in the last two years; to assume the installation of a new system for online monitoring will not be used for continued or amplified targeting would be naïve.

Thirdly, the laws that govern digital surveillance are flawed. Acts like the Monitoring and Reconciliation of Telephony Traffic Regulations, 2010, and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, provide an overbroad and ambiguous/ill-defined legal framework for all forms of surveillance, leaving room for misuse and abuse. Unfortunately, there has been little to no debate as to how these laws comply (or conflict) with basic human rights. While the Coda report findings aren't unexpected, they should serve to remind the government and other key players that without a reassessment and overhaul of how online surveillance and control is carried out, Pakistan will permanently enter the list of bad examples of internet governance. Such a standing will have far-reaching implications on the diplomatic front and the business front among others. Perhaps most importantly, online surveillance without proper checks and balances will leave everyone, including those in power, at great risk.

Renal database

THE launching of the Pakistan Renal Data System by the Pakistan Society of Nephrology is a milestone in our attempts to assess the prevalence of chronic kidney diseases in the country. With this registry, clinical information will be collected from private and public hospitals across the country to make it easier for researchers and medical practitioners to spot and identify the causes of renal failure. It will also enable them to review patient demographics, and enhance the scope of local and clinical research on the subject. For many developing countries, including Pakistan, the challenge in countering various illnesses often stems from the lack of locally available clinical information due to which health

practitioners have to rely on international databases that often overlook region-specific dimensions of an endemic disease. According to the Pakistan Medical Association, around 20,000 people die of kidney problems every year in Pakistan. With about 20m affected individuals, the country is said to rank eighth in the world with regard to the prevalence of chronic renal ailments. Besides helping improve research, this registry will also help pinpoint problems in renal therapy including dialysis and transplant.

Data collected so far by the PKRDS has already provided greater insight into the subpar dialysis standards in Punjab. It seems that almost half the 1,500 patients registered with this portal contracted hepatitis C within three months of starting dialysis. With time, and some help from the government, this registry can also function as a centralised network for dialysis and kidney transplant patients, enabling online registration for dialysis sessions and the listing of potential donors. Taking its cue from this initiative, the government can coordinate with health institutions to launch similar directories of other serious ailments, such as cancer and HIV/AIDS, to help expand research on disease prevalence. Such initiatives will make it easier for the government to plan and execute targeted interventions to manage chronic illnesses, as well as seasonal disease outbreaks such as dengue.

FBR fear of traders

THE Federal Board of Revenue appears somewhat indecisive over the implementation of an array of measures introduced in the current budget to document domestic commerce by effectively taxing the flourishing wholesale and retail sector.

It is, for example, delaying the enforcement of the key CNIC condition on purchases exceeding Rs50,000.

Now a report indicates the board's willingness to introduce a turnover-based fixed tax regime for small to medium traders, instead of taxing them on the basis of the size of a shop, and the nature and location of a business.

The report quotes the FBR chairman as saying that the government could accede to the traders' demand provided it gets the IMF's prior approval during

the first quarterly review of Pakistan's performance against the benchmarks set for its \$6bn loan, which will get under way on Monday.

The tax authorities' reluctance to implement the measures to bring wholesalers and retailers into the tax net is quite understandable.

They are afraid of the shutter-down power of the country's large trading community, which has consistently refused to become part of the formal economy since the introduction of consumption tax in the late 1980s.

The traders brought the powerful military dictator, Gen Pervez Musharraf, to his knees in 2000 and forced him to withdraw a decision to register them under the general sales tax law.

Political governments have never found enough will or courage to tax wholesalers and retailers who contribute around 18pc to the nation's economy but pay less than 1pc of total FBR taxes.

The traders do not want to pay income tax, sales tax or any other tax and have always resisted any effort that would help the government track their undeclared incomes and help document the economy. This is perhaps the only issue that unites the otherwise politically fragmented community. Each time a government makes a move to tax them, they pull down their shutters and take to the streets to get a free pass. Several rounds of talks between the FBR and traders since the announcement of the budget have ended in a deadlock and the delayed enforcement of taxation proposals because of threats of a nationwide strike.

If the government thinks it can still persuade traders through negotiations to become part of the documented economy, or buy time to divide them, it is mistaken. And the rollback of the documentation effort is definitely not an option because it will jeopardise the government's plan to achieve the targeted tax revenues and document the economy, especially at a time when the country faces a real threat of a downgrade from FATF's 'grey' to 'black' list in February. It will have to enforce the measures to bring traders into the tax net sooner or later. The sooner it does the better it will be for the flagging economy.

Kartarpur deal

WITH much bad blood currently being witnessed in the Pakistan-India relationship — primarily because of the crackdown in India-held Kashmir — the signing of the Kartarpur Corridor deal between the two states on Thursday is a welcome bit of news. High officials from both states signed the agreement that will allow Indian Sikhs to visit the revered religious site in Punjab's Narowal district without a visa, after having registered in advance. As per the Foreign Office, up to 5,000 visitors can be accommodated daily through the agreement, with the capacity to handle more. The deal is evidence that the government is thinking ahead and making a peace offering despite strained bilateral ties. While there are many issues to be sorted out between Pakistan and India — with Kashmir topping the list — some progress can be made in other sectors, particularly people-to-people contacts. In this regard, the restoration of bus and train services between the two states could be a first step. In fact, progress on 'soft' issues may well lead to a breakthrough on the more difficult questions, as walls of hatred and mistrust slowly begin to crumble through engagement and dialogue at the popular level. This might seem like a far-fetched idea in the current circumstances, but such efforts may well break the ice.

Indeed, religious tourism has great potential on both sides of the border. Some of the most revered Sikh shrines are located in Pakistan, and perhaps if the Kartarpur experiment is a success more processes can be put in place to make it easier for Indian Sikhs to visit holy sites in this country. There are also some ancient sites sacred to the Hindu community, such as Katas Raj, which can feature prominently on the religious tourism trail. Similarly, some of the subcontinent's most revered Sufi saints' tombs are located in India, such as that of Khawaja Moinuddin Chishty in Ajmer, and Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi. Countless followers of these revered individuals in Pakistan would be delighted to visit their dargahs if the visa regime were made less stringent. And of course the matter of divided families cannot be overlooked. There are many families who have relatives on the 'other side', and there are also cross-border marriages. Stopping divided families from meeting due to draconian visa regulations is cruel and unjustified. Political matters, such as Kashmir, need resolution, but people-to-people contact should not be abandoned due to frigid bilateral relations.

Afghan talks

THE fact is that were Afghanistan to implode, the chaos thus spawned would not remain confined within its borders, and would spread across the region.

Perhaps this is the key concern behind the quadrilateral talks that took place in Moscow focusing on Afghan peace, and featuring diplomats from Pakistan, the US, Russia and China.

Read: Four countries call for reducing violence in Afghanistan

All the participating states have stakes in Afghan security, which is why the meeting called for a resumption of stalled peace talks between the Afghan Taliban and the US, the real power behind the government in Kabul.

The participants also “urged all sides to immediately reduce violence”, as recently released UN figures show that a large number of civilians have been killed in acts of violence within Afghanistan.

The quadrilateral process is a welcome development and may pave the way for regional states to support Afghan peace.

Where the US and Russia are concerned, ironically, both states have played key roles in bringing Afghanistan to its current sorry pass.

Kabul became a central battlefield in the Cold War, as the Americans and Soviets jostled for influence; Afghanistan has yet to recover from the instability of the ‘jihad’ that was fought in its cities and towns.

And while the erstwhile USSR was humbled for its imperial hubris, the Americans soon found themselves involved in a new Afghan adventure, this time bringing ‘justice’ and ‘democracy’ to Afghanistan by punishing the Taliban for their support to Al Qaeda in the post-9/11 scenario.

However, today both Washington and Moscow find themselves trying to bring peace to Kabul.

Naturally, if Afghanistan is destabilised further, Russia will be concerned due to its geographic proximity, while the US will also want to prevent terrorist groups from finding refuge in the country. As for China, it also fears Afghanistan becoming a base for extremists that may target its interests. And Pakistan has

the most to lose from an unstable Afghanistan; for the past four decades, this country has been affected by the instability within the borders of its western neighbour.

Apart from the fears of neighbours and regional powers, Afghan civilians have paid a high cost for hostilities between their government and the Taliban. As per UN figures, over 1,100 non-combatants were killed in violence between July and September, with the Taliban carrying out numerous bloody attacks during the Afghan presidential polls.

It is hoped the quadrilateral process is carried forward so that talks between the US and Taliban resume.

Meanwhile, reports that the results of September's presidential election have been delayed are worrying.

A power vacuum in Kabul will only result in more chaos, which is why a representative government acceptable to all Afghans must take power soon. And while external players have their roles, lasting stability can only come when the Taliban and their Afghan rivals decide to end hostilities and work for peace.

Twitter takedown

AN investigation by the Committee to Protect Journalists illustrates India's determined efforts to stifle diversity of opinion on social media — even more so where the issue of India-held Kashmir is concerned. According to the results, since 2017, Twitter at the request of the Modi government has blocked nearly a million tweets from various accounts. And given that the requests — dating between August 2017 and August this year — were retrieved from only one open database, the picture that emerges is likely just a snapshot of the actual situation. The CPJ found 53 letters to Twitter from the Indian government during this period asking the social media giant to take action under its Country Withheld Content policy to block all or portions of 400 accounts. Around 45pc of those accounts were focused on the disputed territory. The Indian government was undoubtedly gratified by the social media platform's response: nearly 90pc of the withheld accounts referenced Kashmir. In August alone, when the Indian government stripped the region of its special status and imposed a media blackout while engaging in brutal human rights violations inside the disputed territory, nine legal

requests were sent to Twitter citing 20 accounts and 24 tweets. That constituted a considerable spike in the frequency of such requests.

Significantly, all the requests that originated from India's ministry of electronic and information technology — 40 of the 53 in total — cited legislation pertaining to national security and public order to make their case. That is an old canard to suppress criticism of official policy that could paint a country in a negative light. Usually, even when a country's mainstream media has been browbeaten and/or swayed by financial blandishments into becoming cheerleaders for the government, social media, given its nature, remains a largely untamed space where global voices can be heard. In this instance, several journalists' accounts were also caught up in the Twitter moderation dragnet. The social media giant's opaque moderation policy sometimes encourages speculation about its criteria for blocking accounts or taking down tweets. In August, 200 accounts belonging to Pakistanis posting content in support of Kashmir were blocked. Despite its claims of impartiality, evidence indicates Twitter's increasing compliance with requests from the Indian government. To maintain the platform as a space for open discourse and exchange of ideas, Twitter must consider requests to block accounts within the larger political context, and distinguish between incitement to violence and fair comment.

Top polluters

BIG corporations are accused, often justifiably, of transgressions such as unethical labour practices, conflicts of interest, etc. Now, a report by the #breakfreefromplastic global movement illustrates their appalling contribution to the problem of environmental pollution. On Sept 21, World Clean Up Day, BFFP mobilised over 72,000 volunteers to conduct a 'global audit' by collecting discarded single-use plastic waste to determine which international brands were the worst offenders. Of the almost half a million pieces of plastic collected in 37 countries, 43pc was marked with a clear consumer brand. The top three offenders were Coca Cola, Nestle and Pepsico, with single-use plastic waste belonging to Coca Cola adding up to 11,732 pieces, more than the next three global polluters combined. Among the top 10 are also Unilever, Mars, P&G, Phillip Morris and Colgate-Palmolive.

In a world where 'disposable' had become a byword for convenience, there has been a seismic shift during the past decade or so as awareness about environmental pollution and climate change has increased. However, for giant multinationals such as the ones that emerged at the top of the global audit, the bottom line trumps social responsibility. Using cheap, non-recyclable packaging material, the disposal of which they do not pay for, has been a hugely successful business model. The consequences are disastrous, choking rivers and waterways, poisoning the air when the plastic waste is burned; the toxic components then leach into the soil and enter the food chain. While Pakistan was not on the list of countries where the global audit was carried out, most of the multinationals that scored among the top polluters in the report have a major presence in this country, with a commensurate footprint in terms of plastic waste. There appears to be a new resolve in officialdom's efforts to address the issue. But there is clearly more to the problem than the ubiquitous plastic 'shopper'. What is the government going to do about the multinationals' major contribution to the scourge of plastic waste in the country?

In panic mode

JUI-F CHIEF Maulana Fazlur Rehman's Azadi march may not be as visible to Pakistanis in general as some other protest advances on Islamabad have been, but the government is quite aware of the approaching storm.

Clearly, it doesn't like what it is seeing, and is panicking. In the last few days, it has taken steps that have betrayed serious concerns on its part. Two of the JUI-F chief's most prominent aides, Mufti Kifayatullah and Hafiz Hamdullah, have been forcibly removed from the chessboard just as the protesters were digging in their heels for what could turn out to be a tense war of nerves.

The challenger must be given his due. The maulana, with all the reminders about his compromises for power from recent history heaped on him, looked quite composed at the far end of the campaign. But the same could not be said about the prime minister's team. Perhaps the government is driven by the ideals of maintaining a two-pronged strategy: keeping a firm front against the protesters even when a dialogue had been opened with the march's organisers. The way that policy has been applied speaks volumes for an administration that is wary and insecure.

Hafiz Hamdullah is a former senator and ex-provincial minister. He has suddenly been discovered to have faked his identity, and has been declared an alien. The move has been lambasted and deserves yet more condemnation.

Not only does it target a firebrand right-wing politician with a proven ability to provoke outrage, it is also an innovation that takes the tendency to declare political opponents as foreign agents to a new level altogether. Now all one needs to do is to declare that a particular person is not a Pakistani national and order television channels to not host this alien. But under what law is a question that the authorities appear to have little time to answer in these times when they are faced with the menacing hordes marching on the capital.

The government has promised that the marchers will be allowed to proceed up to the outer posts of Islamabad, but then it falls on the old and trusted Maintenance of Public Order law to detain Mufti Kifayatullah in Haripur jail. His crime? He was wooing people to take part in the same march that the government has allowed the JUI-F to organise.

Those who have watched the protests in the country over the years can tell the Imran Khan government that opposition politics is akin to a game of cards. The administration has to keep a straight face and go about its business in an ostensibly routine manner. Any expression of emotion, any act that can be construed as a reflection of the tensions inside could give a player away. Panic in the official ranks is what keeps the opposition coming at them.

Baghdadi's end

ABU Bakr al-Baghdadi, the shadowy 'caliph' of the self-styled Islamic State group, has reportedly died in an American raid in Syria, near the Turkish border. President Donald Trump triumphantly announced this on Sunday, recalling the gory details of Baghdadi's final hours. Apparently chased by American troops, the notorious Iraqi militant met his end after detonating a suicide jacket; reportedly three of his children died with him. On the face of it, this is a symbolic blow to IS, and while a host of states, mostly American allies, have hailed the operation, others remain circumspect. For example, Russia, which has a military presence in the region where Baghdadi was killed, has expressed doubt, with one Russian general saying they had no information on the operation, while a senior parliamentarian in Moscow said that "last respects have been paid to al-

Baghdadi at least five times in the past”. Iran, which has been affected by IS violence and helped Iraq push back the militant group, has also reacted with caution, with one minister calling Baghdadi “your [America’s] creature”. But if the American version is taken at face value, this would spell the end of a man responsible for an orgy of violence that swept through the Middle East from the rise of IS in 2014, with the ‘caliphate’ capturing large swathes of Iraq and Syria, including the city of Mosul. Moreover, militants inspired by the IS ‘brand’ carried out acts of terrorism in different parts of the world, responding to the call of a man who expropriated Islamic symbols and led an apocalyptic cult that was only defeated through the efforts of various states.

While Baghdadi may be dead, the militancy he inspired certainly lives on, and states around the world, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia, must remain alert to new terrorism threats. It has been commonly seen that though militant groups suffer a blow after the death of charismatic leaders — Osama bin Laden in Al Qaeda’s case, Mullah Omar in that of the Afghan Taliban — their ideology lives on and often, if the infrastructure of terrorism is not uprooted, they can evolve into more ferocious outfits. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq, the forebear of IS, grew out of Al Qaeda. Therefore, the challenge now is to counter those inspired by Baghdadi, such as the IS Khorasan ‘chapter’ active in Afghanistan, before they can regroup and spread havoc.

Attack on artistic freedom

THE public opening of the Karachi Biennale 2019 on Sunday was marred by controversy when unknown men forced the partial closure of one of the installations at Frere Hall. In hindsight, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise. The ‘offending’ exhibit by Adeela Suleman was a requiem for the hundreds of victims of alleged ‘encounter specialist’ Rao Anwar. Evidently, the disgraced former SSP still enjoys the support and protection of certain quarters capable of acting secretly and with impunity. Instead, the evening ended with a hapless KMC official attempting to defend the indefensible before a press conference held by members of civil society in protest. Worse still, by yesterday morning, the rest of the exhibit had been vandalised. Later that evening, the KB19 team released a craven statement distancing itself from the artwork.

Among the feeble excuses made by some against this exhibit's display is that it tarnished Pakistan's and its law enforcement's image. But it was this fiasco and the events which inspired the artwork that do actual damage to our credibility. Such claims are premised on the notion that art should be milquetoast and apolitical — unless, of course, its politics are nationalistic. What happened at Frere Hall is a chilling illustration of how insecure the powerful are of their own populace, the desperate lengths to which they will go to police them, and the surrender and collusion of the country's elites in the face of such pressures. The organisers should recall that trying to delink art and politics invariably backfires, as recent controversies involving Contemporary Istanbul and the Whitney Biennial have shown. The relentless assaults on artistic and academic freedom in Pakistan by depoliticising and controlling all areas of knowledge and cultural production must be resisted. Politics is not a crime; free expression is a constitutional right. Now that the KB19 team has spoken, those responsible for this blatant censorship and vandalism must reveal themselves. Citizens have a direct stake in public art, and are owed an official explanation.

Pemra's absurd directive

IT is a bizarre directive, but entirely in keeping with the relentless assault on press freedom in this country.

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority on Sunday declared that TV anchors could no longer offer their opinions on either their own talk shows or on other current affairs programmes as “subject matter experts”.

Their role, it said, must be limited to that of a “moderator” alone.

Moreover, according to the regulatory body, participants in such shows should “be selected with due care having credibility as fair and unbiased analysts with requisite knowledge/expertise on the subject matter”.

It referenced the Islamabad High Court having recently taken notice of talk shows in which the judiciary and institutions were ‘maligned’ and sub judice matters discussed, as the reasoning behind its latest salvo against freedom of expression.

Not surprisingly, the directive generated a furore among the media and the political class. Even federal ministers Shireen Mazari and Fawad Chaudhry as

well as former finance minister Asad Umar minced no words in denouncing the move.

After trying to justify yet another ill-thought-out action taken by the ‘autonomous’ regulatory authority, the PTI government backtracked a little, claiming — falsely — that Pemra had merely issued an ‘advisory’.

The authority has no jurisdiction to define the job description of those in the profession of journalism. Nor is it its prerogative to expound on the qualifications of an ‘acceptable’ analyst.

Certainly, there are considerations as to language, sub judice matters, etc that talk show hosts must keep in mind, and there are procedures prescribed under the Pemra Act to deal with code of conduct violations.

However, procedures have fallen by the wayside in an environment where debate and dissent are being actively and unlawfully suppressed.

The arbitrary measures taken to straitjacket the media during the past year — some of them originating from ‘unknown quarters’ — include ordering channels to be taken off air, press conferences muted or not aired at all, interviews suspended, etc. The government also floated the preposterous idea of media tribunals which was fortunately shelved when it met with vociferous condemnation from the journalist community.

The ever-expanding strictures on press freedom are now beginning to throttle even the voice of those television anchors who earlier shrugged off allegations that the media in Pakistan is under sustained attack.

One may well ask whether Pemra’s latest move is a response to the fact that talk show hosts have of late become a tad more critical of the government’s performance, which some PTI legislators have found extremely irksome.

A free press is one that holds the state’s feet to the fire. The drive to reshape the media landscape into an anodyne entity shorn of any independent thought or public interest journalism can only be countered by collective resistance. Any threat to freedom of expression is a common enemy of journalists and should be treated as such.

IMF talks and strike

THE first review of the ongoing IMF programme has kicked off in Islamabad at precisely the same time as the traders' strike, which by all indications has been widely observed around the country. The timing is very significant, since the government has promised to forward the traders' demand for the withdrawal of some key documentation measures to the IMF. The fact that the Fund will be asked to consider this request in the midst of an ongoing countrywide strike will perhaps add some urgency to the discussions. What is important, however, is that in the middle of this urgency, the costs and consequences of a retreat from the documentation goals of the government, announced in its last budget as well as clearly laid out in the Fund programme, will be very large. The traders are adamant that who they buy from and sell to is none of the government's concern, only the quantum of revenue that is recovered from them is its business. But in the last budget speech, it was clearly said that the "primary theme of this budget is to improve documentation of economy", and conceding to the traders' demand to consider one tax on turnover as a full and final settlement of their tax obligations would be nothing short of a retreat from this position.

The IMF must impress upon the government the cost of retreating from its goal of documentation of the economy. It is fair for the government to search for ways to break the impasse created by the imposition of a CNIC condition upon all transactions of traders since this condition has nearly jammed the wheels of the economy. The supply chain of vendors, suppliers, distributors, retailers and wholesalers that keeps the manufacturing industry in motion and supplied with raw materials, and access to markets where they can disgorge their output, is currently halted mainly due to the imposition of this condition. It was easy enough to see the impasse coming in July when the documentation efforts were launched, but at the time the government repeatedly struck a strong and unequivocal note, signalling its determination to not back down. Having come this far, if it should now bow before the traders' demands, the 'primary theme' of the budget and the government's economic programme would stand defeated, barely one quarter into the new fiscal year.

Hockey fiasco

IT is nothing short of a national shame. For the second consecutive time, the Pakistan hockey team failed to qualify for the Olympics. After their failure to make the grade in the Rio Games in 2016, the few hopes that Pakistan harboured for the Tokyo 2020 Games were dashed on Sunday when Holland defeated them 6-1 in the second qualifier to book a berth at the Olympics. Though the Pakistanis had shown some spark in the first qualifier when they had held hosts Holland to a 4-4 draw, they allowed the Dutch to trample all over them in the second match. However, such has been the state of Pakistan hockey over the past two decades that it came as no shock to fans and critics when the team failed to qualify. For the mandarins who run the hockey show, though, the priorities lay elsewhere. The harsh truth is that the national sport has been reduced to a game of musical chairs, where the Olympians of yesteryear have taken turns to deprive hockey of both prestige and funds. Pakistan — three-time Olympic winners in 1960, 1968 and 1984 — are currently ranked at 17th in world hockey.

Meanwhile, the country's obsession with cricket has not helped as hockey's sponsors and well-wishers have switched their loyalties to the gentleman's game, the highly successful PSL being a prime example. A similar plan to raise a private league to revive hockey's flagging fortunes has sadly not taken off, primarily due to the ineptitude of the Pakistan Hockey Federation and the government's indifferent attitude. The sport has undergone a major transformation over the years insofar as pace and technique as well as rules and regulations are concerned. The European nations have adapted well to the change. But Pakistan hockey seems to be still playing the old-style game more suited to the 1970s and 1980s. Pakistan will have to alter the entire pattern of play if they want to ensure a place for themselves at the Paris 2024 Games.

Maulana's march

TENSIONS are mounting as Maulana Fazlur Rehman's Azadi march is expected to reach the capital today.

The government granted permission to the JUI-F chief to hold his sit-in within the precincts of the city, and an expanse of land a few kilometres from Zero Point

has been designated as the venue for the congregation. The march that commenced from Karachi has ballooned into sizable numbers as it travels north through Sindh into Punjab and onwards to Islamabad.

Mercifully, so far there have not been any reports of disturbances or disruptions to the life of citizens, and the organisers of the march have kept their word about remaining peaceful and orderly.

Yet the real test begins as the marchers enter the capital and Maulana Fazlur Rehman unveils his plans for the dharna. Protest is his democratic right and as a citizen of Pakistan, he is fully within the ambit of the law in exercising his right. After all, this is what the PTI argued when staging a dharna on Islamabad's D-chook in 2014.

It is in fact a good decision by the PTI government to allow the JUI-F chief to bring his supporters unhindered as per the agreement signed between the party and the Islamabad administration. If both stick to this agreement, the protesters should stage a sit-in at the designated venue, voice their protests, air their grievances and then disperse peacefully without causing any civic disturbance.

Any action beyond this would be considered undemocratic — as it was during the PTI-PAT dharna, and later the TLP protest, when violence and major disruptions to daily life were witnessed. The maulana may criticise the government but his demand for its removal cannot be supported. The responsibility is on him to ensure there is no incitement to violence or any action that can be construed as a direct threat to an elected government.

The dharna is also a test for the two main opposition parties that have lent him their support. The PPP and PML-N may have had their reservations, and possibly still do, but their key leaders will be sharing the dharna stage with the maulana. A key question would be whether this shared platform would cement unity within the combined opposition or turn out to be a temporary alignment of forces based on a shared interest. The next few days may provide an answer.

These next few days will, however, feel like eternity for the government. It is vital that decision-makers hold their nerve even if faced with grave provocations. The law-enforcement agencies should do their utmost to avoid any use of force while facilitating the citizens of the twin cities to the maximum. It is the responsibility of the government to keep the political temperature in check by not responding

rashly to speeches from the dharna. The system must hold firm. So should the political leadership.

Needless suffering

A RECENT report in this paper highlighted a significant (and significantly overlooked) consequence of the doctors' strike in KP, which has been going on for some time now: the human cost of doctors, nurses and paramedic staff not showing up for duty, which is felt most deeply by patients desperately in need of medical attention. While the protesting doctors' bodies, the KP police, the government and provincial health authorities battle it out, with apparently no negotiation process in sight, it is unfortunate that the patients are made to suffer the most — particularly children — through no fault of their own, and because of developments they have no control over. In the report, parents of children in need of life-saving vaccinations have complained about missing staff at the hospitals they have visited, at a time when the province is suffering from an entirely preventable outbreak of measles amongst some sections of the population.

Furthermore, the strike presents yet another blow to anti-polio efforts in KP, which has the highest number of polio cases in the country. In recent months, the province has witnessed various communities refusing to have their children vaccinated until other vital services are provided by the government in their localities; a massive spike in vaccine refusal rates due to disinformation campaigns that have created an environment of suspicion and hostility; and an ongoing, even if diminished, threat from religious militancy. On top of all this, the province now has to contend with missing medics to administer polio drops to children whose parents do bring them to health centres for immunisation, which also leads to a burden on the limited staff that continues to show up for duty. This is not the first time that such a strike has resulted in suffering among the population, as similar accounts were reported back in 2012, when several public health clinics were closed during a strike by doctors. While the medical professionals may have valid reasons and every right to protest against what they deem to be an injustice against them, they also have an ethical duty towards patients. A path must be found that does not disrupt such essential or emergency services to the public. In order to end such needless suffering, doctors and provincial authorities must overcome their mutual antagonism and come to the

negotiating table. And they must do so as soon as possible, before more lives are endangered through politics and neglect.

Women's T20 series win

WHEN asked to comment on women playing cricket, Sir Len Hutton, one of England's greatest batsmen in the 1940s, remarked that the idea was "absurd", that it was "like a man trying to knit". Had Sir Hutton been alive today he would have had to swallow his words in the face of the amazing talent that women cricketers are displaying globally. In a recent example, Pakistan's women cricketers whitewashed the visiting Bangladesh women's team 3-0 in the three-match T20 series at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium. With home assignments few and far between since 2009, it is a rare sight to see a foreign team visiting Pakistan for any sport. And given the limited exposure of women cricketers, it is not easy for them to remain in the groove all year round. Hence, Bismah Maroof and her team deserve high praise for their fine show. Give or take a couple of players, the two sides were similar in strength but Pakistan emerged as the better side through sheer team effort and application. Once again the victory onslaught was led by the prolific Javeria Khan and Bismah herself, who ensured that the hosts posted decent totals on the board for the bowlers to defend. Anam Amin, a left-arm spinner who made her debut in 2015, has blossomed into a match winner and turned in a praiseworthy performance.

It is a shame, though, that there was no television coverage of this exciting series. This was a disappointment for the Pakistani team that emphasised there would be more acceptance of women's cricket if the electronic media supported their matches. Despite the growing stature of women's cricket across the world, it is by no means at par with men's cricket when it comes to emoluments or media coverage. This mindset needs to change with cricket boards boosting women's cricket and attracting more sponsors. In fact, it is clear that the greater interest being shown by the PCB in women's cricket is already beginning to make a difference.