

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of November 2019

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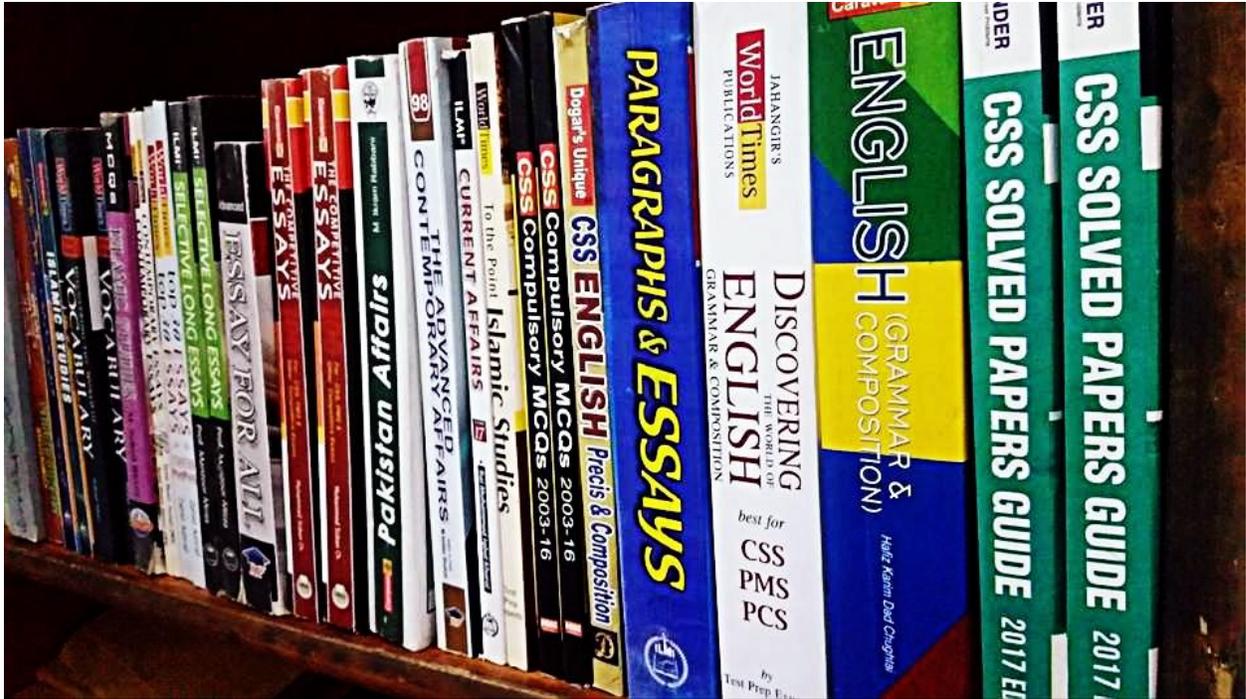
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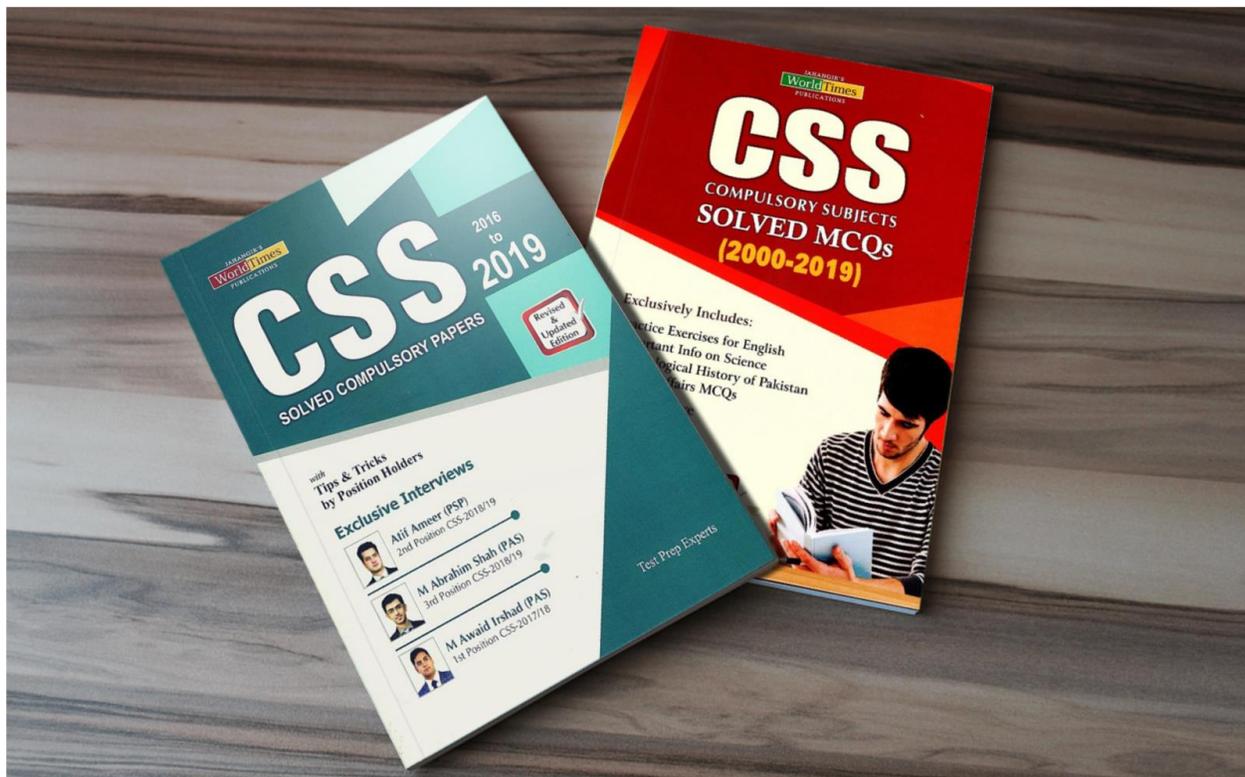
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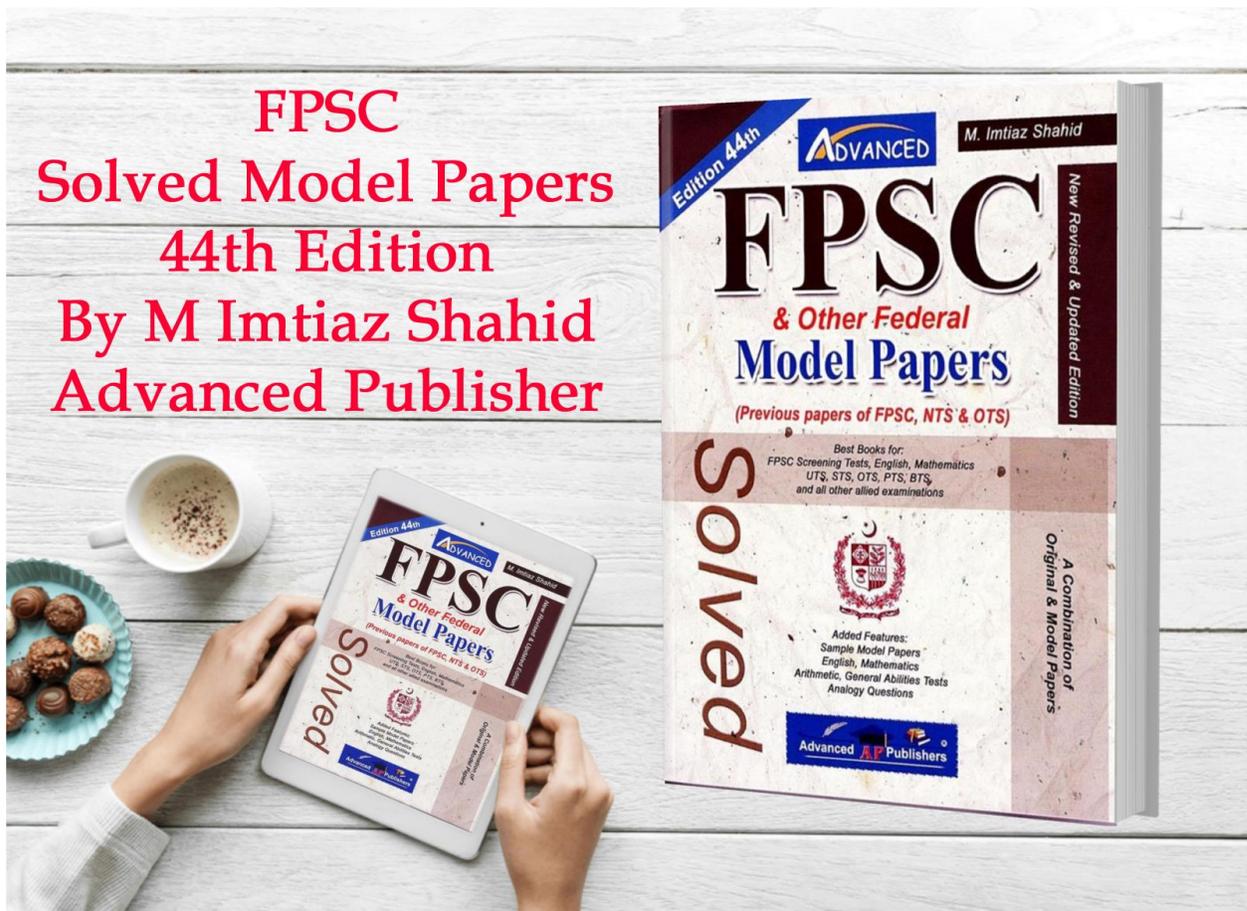
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Contents

Tezgam tragedy.....	10
Caving in to traders.....	11
China’s HR record.....	12
IHK status	13
The smog returns	14
Keeping truth alive.....	15
Terrorism redefined.....	16
Tezgam investigation	17
Women in journalism.....	18
State of economy	19
Amending NAB law	20
Yemen death toll.....	21
Bail for Maryam	22
Student unions.....	23
Karkey fine	24
The maulana puzzle	25
Malnutrition alarm.....	27
Cut in NSS rates.....	27
Climate challenge.....	28
FBR reforms.....	30
College teachers’ protest.....	31
Undermining the NA	31
FATF grey list.....	33
Polio persists.....	34
Kartarpur Corridor	34
Overcrowded jails	36
Snooker honour	37
The price of tomatoes.....	38
Kabul visit.....	39
Weighty schoolbags	40
IHK suffocation.....	41
‘B’ is for blockade.....	42

Dysfunctional NCHR.....	43
Nawaz’s treatment.....	44
Our ‘hidden’ shame.....	45
Iskander Mirza	46
Technical experts	47
Tests at home.....	48
Online censorship	49
Dharna politics	50
Privatisation debate.....	51
Gaza violence	52
Free to travel.....	53
Religious inclusion.....	54
Battle against diabetes.....	55
The legislation debate.....	56
PIA mismanagement.....	58
Karachi transport plans.....	59
Quality of discourse	59
Chinese papers.....	61
Dengue cases	62
Polio resurgence	63
Curbing optimism.....	64
Israeli settlements.....	65
CJ’s rejoinder.....	65
Resistant bugs	67
Iran petrol protests.....	68
Khan-Trump call.....	69
Funding controversy	70
Press freedom	71
Ehsaas beneficiaries.....	72
University harassment	73
Trigger-happy police	74
Disparaging CPEC	75
Prisoners’ rights	76

Suffocating space	78
Buzdar uncertainty.....	78
Plenty to hide.....	80
Women doctors	81
PTI to the rescue	82
Clean, green Pakistan?.....	83
SEZ commitments	84
India's new 'map'	85
Iraq protests.....	86
Migrant blues	87
Babri Masjid verdict	88
Start-up potential.....	89
Torture legislation.....	90
A shambolic affair	91
Punjab reshuffle.....	92
Weapon of war	93
Court's decision.....	94
Students' march	95
Junaid Hafeez case	96
ECP delay.....	97
Power tariff increase.....	98
Organ donation	99

Tezgam tragedy

THE Tezgam inferno near Liaquatpur in southern Punjab is a horrible reminder of the dangerous times we continue to live in, especially in a land exposed to perils that should have been eliminated long ago.

More than 70 lives have been lost in the fire that broke out early Thursday morning in the train as it journeyed upcountry from Karachi.

The railways minister added insult to injury when he blamed passengers for using a gas cylinder which caused the fire. Surely, if he was able to so quickly solve this mystery, he could have gone on to specify which passenger was responsible. Or did he mean that all of them were equally to blame? The real question is: who allowed those gas cylinders into the train?

Regrettably, accidents involving Pakistan Railways are frequent, and there have been a series of them during the year-old tenure of Minister Sheikh Rashid. A dozen of them have been categorised as 'major'.

Incidents of fire breaking out on trains in the country are also quite common.

Railways officials reported 12 fires over one year to the National Assembly during a briefing in July. In four of them, the fire had erupted in the dining cars that accompany the passenger bogies. There were at least eight incidents of fire elsewhere on trains.

Yet it took a fatal blaze of this magnitude for Sheikh Rashid to come up with the assurance that henceforth, the ban on carrying items such as filled gas cylinders on trains would be strictly enforced.

Many of those killed were said to be going to Raiwind for the tableeghi congregation. The minister said the ban extended to tableeghi members who, by his own admission, had been given some kind of an exemption on this count. This is an admission of negligence, and bound to fuel demands for the resignation of those in charge of Pakistan Railways in aid of a fair inquiry.

If the official response offered a sense of regret it was drowned in the effort to paint a perfect picture of what the railways would look like after the government approved a proposed reform scheme. This is an ill-timed reiteration of the vows

regarding a turnaround, and eclipses many issues related to the day-to-day running of the railways.

The railways minister might congratulate himself for coming up with a supposedly ingenious lottery scheme to hire new staff and go on endlessly on the need for funds to transform the system. But such thinking is at best an escape from reality, and does nothing whatsoever to address problems such as broken and crumbling tracks, improperly operated railway crossings, the lack of vigilance and security, and many other challenges plaguing the Railways.

The louder the pledges, the more obvious the contrast becomes between what is and what ought to be.

Caving in to traders

IT is a little difficult to say what exactly happened between the government and the trader community, but one thing is clear: the outcome looks very much like a capitulation on the part of the rulers. After a countrywide shutter-down strike that lasted a day and a half, a compromise was worked out that effectively postponed all decisions till January. The composition of the government delegation, which included the PTI's Jahangir Tareen as the key negotiator, suggests this was more a political solution to the matter than one driven by the economic interests of the state. Clearly, the sight of a shutter-down strike in the middle of the Azadi march was not palatable. On the other hand, the traders had been assured that their demands for replacing the documentation measures in the new tax regime, which is being rolled out by the government after its last budget announcement, with a flat turnover tax would be presented to the IMF for approval. Evidently, this was taken by the traders as a signal that the government was willing to play ball, but that it needed permission from its overlords before making any commitment.

Now we have a very different signal altogether. Postponing everything until January, and allowing political players to enter the negotiations, has sent the signal that this is no longer just an economic issue, but also one whose political fallout is beginning to bite. Hence the entry of Mr Tareen. The trader leadership has assured the government that it will urge its constituents to step forward and pay more taxes, and in return the tax authority will create a 'committee', in which the traders will be represented, to hear any specific grievances. One might have considered this as some sort of 'progress' to break the impasse had we not seen all this before. The

trader community is now notorious for offering more cooperation in the future in return for real gains in the present — gains usually defined as an exemption from whatever tax obligations the government is trying to urge them to accept. They are equally notorious for either reneging, or being otherwise unable to deliver, on these commitments by the time the deadline arrives. In the past, this has meant further talks, followed by fresh deadlines. This is how the status quo has dragged itself out for almost two decades now. So what's a few months more?

China's HR record

HUMAN rights should be beyond politics, as conscientious individuals must call out abuse anywhere in the world regardless of political proclivities. Unfortunately, it is the cold calculations of realpolitik that actually determine how states react to human rights situations. The recent UN debate on human rights in China, particularly in its Xinjiang region, is a prime example of how politics can shape stances on fundamental rights. Twenty-three states, mostly Western countries, slammed Beijing for its alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang targeting the region's native Uighur population, as well as other Muslim groups. A British statement urged China to refrain from "the arbitrary detention of Uighurs and members of other Muslim communities". In reaction, geopolitical allies of China, including this country, shot back praising Beijing's "remarkable achievements in the field of human rights". Over 50 states supported China, praising it for "promoting human rights through development". It is true that many Western states quickly pounce on geopolitical rivals, yet remain considerably muted when allies are accused of rights abuses. On the other hand, China's allies are willing to look the other way just to benefit from the economic clout of the People's Republic.

Beyond politics, the fact is that rights abuses anywhere must be condemned unconditionally. This country has rightly highlighted Indian atrocities in India-held Kashmir, though many Muslim states have kept quiet just to curry favour with New Delhi. Similarly, the situation in Xinjiang needs the attention of Muslim states. China is indeed an ally, therefore diplomatic channels need to be used to communicate the fact that the people of Xinjiang must be able to freely practise their faith. Perhaps delegations from Muslim states and international human rights groups should tour Xinjiang to see first-hand how the Uighurs are treated. Moreover, China itself would greatly benefit by opening up Xinjiang and letting the Uighurs and other Muslim communities take part in their religious and cultural

practices freely. Terrorism is a legitimate concern, but cracking down unnecessarily on people's way of life will only breed more alienation.

IHK status

ON Thursday, India gave final shape to the condemnable steps it had initially taken on Aug 5 by formally bifurcating India-held Kashmir into two union territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. This ill-advised move has drawn strong criticism from Pakistan and China, as both states have territorial stakes in what is an internationally recognised dispute. "No step by the government of India can change this," said the Foreign Office, referring to the disputed status of the region, while adding that an "iron curtain" remains in place in IHK. The Chinese reaction has been equally blunt, with Beijing saying that "India is challenging China's sovereign rights and interests by unilaterally revising domestic law. However, it is unlikely that such firm reactions from two of its neighbours will change India's attitude, considering the rigidity displayed up till now by its government in New Delhi.

Clearly, the Indian establishment seeks to subsume the Kashmiri identity and replace it with a new demographic reality. This is reflected by the fact that the Kashmiri flag has been done away with, and now people from outside the region can buy property in IHK. Yet Narendra Modi's government is actively promoting the farce that 'all is well' in the occupied region, despite the fact that hundreds of men remain incarcerated — many under the draconian Public Safety Act — and a curfew-like situation persists. Moreover, a recent junket was arranged in which right-wing members of the European Parliament toured IHK to lend credence to the fiction that the situation in the region is normal. Many of these lawmakers represent parties that have been described as neo-Nazi; however, this is not surprising, considering that early leaders of the RSS — the BJP's ideological parent — were unabashed fans of Nazism. Interestingly, the EU distanced itself from the visit, while a Liberal Democrat lawmaker said he was stopped from joining the trip to IHK when he demanded unfettered access to the region. "I am not prepared to take part in a PR stunt for the Modi government," Chris Davies told the media.

The fact is that despite New Delhi's best efforts to spin the situation in IHK, the truth is bound to emerge. This country has, of course, played a big part in making sure the voice of the Kashmiris is heard around the world, and such active

diplomacy has certainly helped paint a true picture of what is happening in the troubled region. However, many of the states that claim to be champions of human rights are strangely silent when it comes to publicly censuring India's behaviour in IHK. They are quick to point fingers at geopolitical rivals, yet remain mostly silent where the Modi government's excesses in occupied Kashmir are concerned. This hypocrisy should end and India must be told in clear terms that the brutal siege of Kashmir is unacceptable.

The smog returns

FOR several days now, the inhabitants of Lahore have been complaining about the toxic air they are forced to breathe. As the dreaded October-November smog — frequently referred to as the 'fifth season' — engulfs Lahore once again, the residents of Punjab's largest city are becoming increasingly fed up and demanding accountability and answers for this gloomy state of affairs.

As has become routine for some years now, the smog is expected to last till January-February of the next year. Undoubtedly, the pollutant-filled air will leave immeasurable public health damage in its wake, largely affecting the lungs and hearts of citizens, with the elderly and small children being particularly vulnerable.

Of course, such a strain on public health resources, life expectancy and the general quality of life has deep repercussions for our already gasping economy. The outcry this time around even led Amnesty International to take notice of the situation. The international rights group has condemned the Pakistani government for its failure to protect the lives of its citizens, qualifying it as a human rights issue.

Additionally, the lack of monitoring devices to measure air quality in real time makes matters even murkier, leading to disagreements about the exact figures and scale of the disaster.

Even though the outdoor air quality is said to have exceeded 550 on the Air Quality Index — which is quantified as hazardous — the minister of state for climate change downplayed the fears of concerned citizens in her recent address, saying the situation was being blown out of proportion due to 'vested interests'.

She repeated a thus far commonly held belief that the smog was entering the country by way of our neighbour India, with the farmers there engaging in stubble-burning right before the harvesting season. While this is certainly part of the

reason, a recent report by the Agriculture Department and UNFAO finds that most of the air pollution is likely to be locally created.

Meanwhile, environmentalists hold the transport sector, local manufacturing and agricultural industries that operate on substandard fuel quality chiefly responsible for the smog created each winter.

While the government has taken steps to address the issue, and these were pointed out by the minister, clearly not enough is being done on the ground to encourage sustainable changes. The seriousness of the threat posed by air pollution along with its long-term consequences cannot be downplayed.

Keeping truth alive

A DIRECT correlation can be drawn between a state's response to attacks on journalists and the freedom of its press. Where there is impunity for a crime as egregious as murdering someone in search of answers, it inevitably follows that numerous non-fatal tactics to intimidate and coerce the press are even more rampant. It is indicative of a concerted effort to suppress the truth: typically, a pervasive climate of unchecked corruption and systemic injustice. As recently highlighted by the Committee to Protect Journalists in its annual Global Impunity Index, for 12 consecutive years, Pakistan continues to remain among the company of other states "where journalists are slain and their killers go free". Today, on International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, this ignominious scorecard merits scrutiny. Despite a relative reduction in violence in recent years, why is it that the press in Pakistan today is still far from able to operate freely, under peaceful and just conditions?

The reality is that successive governments have either been reluctant or recalcitrant in actively pursuing the course of justice for the families of slain journalists. Whether at the hands of militants, mafias or elements of the establishment, of the scores of journalists' murders in the past two decades, only two have resulted in successful prosecutions. Inordinate delays and denials at every stage of the criminal justice process are tantamount to complicity with the perpetrators of these crimes. They are also a betrayal of any commitment to press freedom that the government might claim to have, as the after-effects of years of impunity are plain to see. These unsolved mysteries continue to cast a long shadow over the ability of the press to conduct critical or investigative reporting in

Pakistan, with self-censorship becoming a means of self-preservation. But, while truth can be suppressed, distorted and even manufactured — for a time — it can never die. History rarely looks kindly upon those who, whether by inertia or intent, stand in its way.

Terrorism redefined

WHAT constitutes terrorism? The Supreme Court on Wednesday provided much-needed clarity on the answer to what has proved to be a conundrum even for many legal experts in this country.

Read: ‘Terrorism’ too widely defined in Anti Terrorism Act, says SC; recommends Parliament bring changes

In a 59-page judgement authored by Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, the seven-member bench not only held the definition of ‘terrorism’ in the Anti Terrorism Act as being overly broad — something that has repeatedly been pointed out — but also that the courts have not always interpreted the ATA correctly.

In fact, the verdict acknowledges that through the course of the various amendments to the law, parliament has arrived at a definition close to the international perception of terrorism. That is, it is “a species quite distinct from all other usual and private crimes howsoever heinous or gruesomely executed”.

The verdict says that as per the ATA in its present iteration, terrorism is a “crime with the object and purpose of destabilising society or the government with a view to achieving objectives which are political in the extended sense of the word”. Thus the motive, or mens rea, rather than the fallout or potential fallout, is critical to determining whether an act constitutes terrorism.

The verdict directs the courts, including the superior courts in their appellate jurisdiction, to revisit their interpretation in which “the shifting of focus from the effect of the action to the design or purpose behind the action had not been noticed”.

The Supreme Court verdict has also rightly held the preamble to the ATA as being problematic because besides providing for “the prevention of terrorism, sectarian violence” it broadens the scope of legislation to include the “speedy trial of heinous offences”.

A number of crimes — including extortion and kidnapping for ransom — mentioned in the Third Schedule appended to the ATA are listed as falling within the scope of the legislation, without any qualification regarding the motive as arising from a personal desire for profit or vengeance. That has made the ATA inherently self-contradictory and, predictably enough, led to anti-terrorism courts being choked with crimes that have nothing to do with terrorism as defined in the law. Instead of facilitating the prosecution of terrorism, the ATA's flawed drafting has caused further delays in the disposal of cases that are clearly in furtherance of political and ideological motives.

In a matter of a few weeks, the Supreme Court has given two significant verdicts pertaining to antiterrorism legislation. The first laid down procedural guidelines in trials conducted by the ATCs: among them was that terrorism offences remain non-compoundable even if the aggrieved party pardons the perpetrator for compoundable crimes simultaneously committed during the act of terrorism. Taken together, both judgements have rationalised a critical component of the criminal justice system, and highlighted where work needs to be done.

Now parliament must act on the apex court's directions to prune the ATA.

Tezgam investigation

THERE are two basic issues when it comes to inquiries into train accidents in Pakistan. One, these probes are carried out by the federal government inspector of the railways, and therefore amount to little more than an internal investigation. Two, hardly any remedial measures follow these exercises. The same fate could befall the inquiry that Pakistan Railways has launched into Thursday's deadly Tezgam blaze. The difference is that while in earlier instances 'human error' by railways staff was routinely cited as the cause of an accident, this time investigators are almost inclined to put the entire blame for the fire that devoured 75 lives on the passengers. They already have it on the authority of the railways bosses that the fire was caused by a group of Tableeghi Jamaat members who were allegedly using a gas cylinder to cook food on the moving train. A preliminary report by the federal inspector hints as much, saying, "there was no evidence of a short circuit as claimed by some witnesses". A detailed inquiry report is to be submitted by Nov 20, amid promises of action against any official found guilty of negligence.

This could likely be a threat to junior officials since PR doesn't have a tradition of holding the senior ranks accountable for any accident under their watch. When a senior official was removed from his post in July, many thought that was punishment for a recent train crash involving the Akbar Express in which 25 people were killed. But this view proved erroneous when the officer was immediately appointed to a very important post at the railways headquarters in Lahore, while fingers were pointed at the driver and his assistant. Earlier, in June this year, a driver and his deputy were held responsible for an accident between Hyderabad and Kotri. Both men died in the crash. Many justifiably called the subsequent intra-departmental inquiry an unfair trial of the dead. By habitually pointing out the 'human errors' behind these accidents, the worthy investigating inspectors would have us believe that human resource at the railways' disposal is of a terrible quality. But why then has there been no indication of a scheme to improve the quality of manpower? There is logic to demands for an independent, transparent and fair probe of accidents — without any role for the railways officials. Indeed, the calls for a judicial investigation of PR's most serious accidents are not misplaced either.

Women in journalism

EVEN in the field of journalism, women are not spared the narrow interpretations of toxic masculinity regarding their behaviour. It has been revealed in a survey conducted by the nonprofit initiative Media Matters for Democracy that online harassment affects the work of 95pc of women journalists in Pakistan. The report, titled Hostile Bytes — A Study of Online Violence against Women Journalists, highlights the fact that women journalists are often subjected to abuse of a personal and sexualised nature on social media sites, even for merely criticising or challenging certain narratives or policies — unlike their male counterparts. The report also stated that 77pc of women journalists resorted to self-censorship to evade online harassment, which affected both their professional and personal life. Moreover, when these women journalists approached law-enforcement agencies to report online harassment, half of them received unsatisfactory responses.

Pakistan is already one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. The current political climate has made it even more difficult for the media to offer fair criticism of government decisions and policies. In this context, the social and personal costs that women journalists have to bear for merely doing their job makes them doubly vulnerable: not only do they have to deal with the professional

pressures of journalism — of which there are many in our country — they also have to counter warped societal notions regarding their ‘responsibilities’ as ‘traditional’ women. A ‘good’ Pakistani woman is one who is always patient and never complains; somehow, as this report reflects, this also applies to women journalists, who are forced to mute their own voices, resulting in their perspectives, especially on issues concerning women, being cast aside. Online harassment has multiplied with the use of social networking sites such as Twitter. It cannot be taken lightly and be dismissed as merely an extension of the existing social fabric of Pakistani society where fragile patriarchal honour is threatened each time a woman dares to demonstrate some degree of intellectual or physical independence. It is a disturbing trend that must end immediately.

State of economy

THE last fiscal year was one of the toughest for Pakistan, and the challenges are far from over. This is the gist of the annual report just released by the State Bank of Pakistan regarding FY2019.

Coming almost four months after the fiscal year concluded, the report remains timely for the important lessons it has for the present, particularly the insights it shares on why the investment scenario remains so dismal. Last year’s record high fiscal deficit of 8.9pc of GDP was the result of unrealistic targets set by an outgoing government, according to the bank. A poor revenue mobilisation effort combined with weak expenditure control contributed as well.

The unrealistic targets can be attributed to politics, since an outgoing government was hardly incentivised to leave behind a robust revenue plan, although the drafters of that budget will argue that the innovative thinking around which the numbers were built never found acceptance with the new dispensation.

That debate notwithstanding, a big takeaway from the report is the narrowness of the state’s revenue machinery and the enormously ambitious revenue drive that the government has launched. In large part, for example, last year’s weak revenue performance stemmed from the failure to mobilise new revenues via two mini-budgets, as well as the politically motivated reductions in sales tax and surcharge on fuels, particularly petrol and diesel.

Whether or not one agrees with the government's decision to try and protect the masses from fuel price increases, it is hard to disregard the fact that, given the inflation levels today, the decisions were shortsighted and failed to accomplish their stated purpose.

A close reading of the report shows the importance of restoring fiscal discipline, and in equal measure of broadening the tax base. These are the two principal challenges the government is currently working on. Although it is proving to be a difficult path to walk, having chosen it the government has little choice but to persevere.

Besides the fiscal situation, the report highlights the near-calamitous state of industry and agriculture, and clearly says that a large part of the contraction in the external account is due to collapsing demand in both these sectors, which between them account for more than half the size of the economy.

Therefore the contraction in the current account deficit is hardly something to be celebrated since it is being achieved by strangulating the economy, and agriculture has suffered strong water shortages on top of high input prices.

The investment climate is mired in high levels of informality that draw in investible resources, preventing productivity gains. With these weaknesses, the current account deficit will simply reappear with the return of growth. The need for deep and urgent structural reforms could not be more clear.

Amending NAB law

THE government has promulgated an ordinance through which it has amended the National Accountability Ordinance 1999 so that any person arrested for an offence involving an amount above Rs50m shall be entitled to 'C' class or equivalent in prison. This selective amendment in the NAB law, while many controversial elements remain in place, has rightfully elicited concerns that the

government is only interested in amendments that affect its political opponents. This is unfortunate because the NAB law in its present shape is a holdover from the Musharraf years and its genesis is rooted in that regime's intent to persecute and punish politicians on the other side of the divide. Framed with such a purpose in mind, the ordinance was packed with sweeping powers that often bypassed the established due process of law within the ambit of the courts. It is a telling failure of political will and vision that successive governments have refused to amend the law in order to bring it closer to a shape befitting a constitutional democracy.

This failure has come at a cost. Untethered from the constraints of the judiciary and unaccountable in any real sense to any other institution in the dispensation of its brand of accountability, NAB is today riding roughshod over politicians, bureaucrats and people from many other walks of life. The law in its present form allows NAB discretion that automatically translates into selectivity in the application of these powers. For instance, draconian provisions such as the denial of bail during the investigation stage have led to the arrest of prominent politicians without formal charges being framed against them. Indeed, it is not surprising that opposition leaders are facing the brunt of this accountability while various people associated with the ruling alliance facing similar accusations enjoy the fruits of unfettered freedom. It is clear then, that while it may be convenient to blame the decision-makers at NAB for the reckless use of their powers, the real fault lies with the law itself. Legal experts say the ordinance must be overhauled so it can be cleansed of those powers that go against legal checks and balances. Again as an example, the ordinance allows NAB to charge people on "misuse of authority" whereas this is a vague charge that can be applied to any decision taken in the running of state affairs. The hounding and arrests of many bureaucrats on such charges leading to near-paralysis in decision-making is a case in point. Selectively amending the NAB Ordinance is plain wrong.

Yemen death toll

NEW figures from a database project concerning the war in Yemen reveal that around 100,000 people have died in this brutal conflict since 2015. The figures, gathered by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project from multiple sources, further show that 12,000 civilians have been killed in directly targeted attacks. These grim figures do not include victims of the war that have died from starvation and disease, which would arguably push the numbers even higher.

Sadly, despite evidence of such widespread suffering in this impoverished land, the global community seems least interested in ending this vicious conflict. This is despite the fact that heartbreaking images of dying and malnourished children regularly emerge from Yemen; yet the global conscience seems undisturbed. Moreover, the Saudi-led coalition, which is fighting the Iran-supported Houthis to restore Yemen's government in Sana'a, the capital, has, according to the Aclad figures, targeted over 8,000 civilians. While both sides have committed atrocities, Riyadh's coalition, backed by the US, UK and other Western states, has bombed markets, weddings and schools primarily through air strikes. But the stalemate continues as the Houthis remain ensconced in the capital, with the Yemeni people paying a huge price for the geopolitical battle being fought in their forsaken country.

The picture is nothing short of devastating. This war has dragged on for far too long and has taken too high a human toll. An entire generation has been destroyed in Yemen and it will take several years to rebuild this shattered country. A long-term ceasefire needs to be immediately declared by the Saudi coalition, to which the Houthis must respond positively. From there on, external players must support their Yemeni allies in reaching a compromise that paves the way for a government with representation from all of the country's tribes and sects. Warfare has proved useless and it is only dialogue that can now resolve Yemen's political problems. Moreover, those states that claim to be the bastions of human rights and democratic values must be asked why they choose to remain silent when arms sold by them end up killing innocent Yemenis.

Bail for Maryam

THE scales of justice are finally inclined in favour of the Sharif family. Only a few days after her father was temporarily released from jail, Maryam Nawaz has also been granted bail. She was being held by NAB in the Chaudhry Sugar Mills case since August.

Well-wishers of the Sharif family had been insisting that Ms Nawaz needed to be by the side of her hospitalised father. Many might have seen the petition for Ms Nawaz's release on bail as an appeal on humanitarian grounds — in the same way

that Mian Nawaz Sharif was recently given an eight-week suspension in his detention for health reasons.

However, granting her bail on Monday, the Lahore High Court made it clear that it had decided the case on its merit. The two-member bench took note of the rampant corruption in the country and stressed on the need to curb this with an ‘iron hand’. But it ruled that it “... cannot keep its eyes off the legal proposition that bail cannot be withheld as a punishment ...”.

The judges observed that otherwise the court would “transgress into the power of the trial court to return its finding upon guilt on the basis of evidence”. The Lahore High Court did consider previous judgements where relief had been extended to women petitioners who had “neither absconded nor obstructed the process of law”.

The court, while giving relief to Ms Nawaz, asked her to submit her passport to the court officials — which was an anti-climax for those operating the rumour mills. The country had been abuzz with predictions that both Mr Sharif and Ms Nawaz were to ‘soon’ fly away quietly to some foreign destination. Their absence was thought essential to clear the field for the remaining PML-N leaders, their opponents and, most significantly, the ‘establishment’, to engage with one another in a way that best suited them. The rumours about the father-daughter duo’s ‘impending’ flight from the country persist, with an attending doctor saying on Tuesday that Mr Sharif needed to undergo genetic tests that can only be conducted abroad.

The news that Ms Nawaz was not setting off post-haste to a destination abroad necessitated changes in these imaginative scenarios about her departure.

In the ensuing phase, bets are being placed on whether or not Ms Nawaz is going to join Maulana Fazlur Rehman’s protest in Islamabad. There are many who expect her to celebrate her release from jail by raising a battle cry expanding on her father’s image of resistance, and as a reiteration of her promise to not compromise under adverse circumstances.

In reality, these wishes may be premature. Her uncle, Shahbaz Sharif, has been telling everyone that Ms Nawaz was needed to take care of her seriously ill father. For the time being at least, this is what she may want to concentrate on.

Student unions

THE Zia-era ban on student unions has long outlived the reasons for which it was put in place. Over the years, Pakistan's political leadership has made hesitant attempts at revoking the ban, and reviving student politics, but its efforts have come to naught. In the latest attempt, the unanimous resolution passed by the Sindh Assembly for restoration of student unions may yet be a first step towards stirring national debate on the revival of these bodies, at least in the province. In 2008, then prime minister Yousaf Raza Gilani announced his intention to revive the unions. Two years ago, the Senate passed a resolution in this regard, stating that the right to association was granted by the Constitution. The Senate resolution also addressed the 1993 Supreme Court verdict that prohibits students from participating in political activities, and stated that the revival of unions would not be in violation of it. The senators were of the view that the murder of Mashal Khan in Mardan might have been prevented had student unions existed in the country.

In fact, over the past three decades, there have been several incidents of deadly campus violence among rival student political groups, despite the presence of paramilitary forces in some varsities. The argument that a ban on student unions will deter armed violence on campuses was disproved long ago. Instead, the overall effect of the ban has been the very opposite of what was intended. Even a cursory glance at public-sector universities shows that student wings of all political parties continue to thrive, negating the notion that the ban has kept campuses from becoming politicised. These groups wield illegitimate influence over public-sector university and college authorities, not only hampering academic independence and smooth administration, but also making it easier for other extremist elements to flex their muscles on campus. The murder of Prof Khalid Hameed in Bahawalpur by a student is an extreme example of this. Then there is the Balochistan University scandal. One wonders whether the harassment case would have progressed differently had the students been able to access a legitimate forum that could have addressed their grievances. Let's hope that the PTI-led government, with its thrust on youth development and its large number of young supporters, takes concrete steps towards reversing the institutional damage of decades caused by the ban on unions instituted during one of Pakistan's darkest periods.

Karkey fine

IT is a welcome development that the government has succeeded in negotiating a waiver of the fine imposed on the country in the dispute with Karkey Karadeniz,

the Turkish company that had set up a rental power plant in Pakistan and that became the subject of intense judicial intervention. The amount that was awarded to Karkey by the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes was \$1.2bn, a substantial sum for a country that is on an IMF programme. Having the disputed amount settled through the government's intervention has surely helped the country.

What is worth considering here, however, is how much it took to extricate the government from the mess that was created by that judicial intervention in a set of commercial agreements. The governments of Pakistan and Turkey had to take up the matter at the highest levels — such accommodations do not usually come without some sort of quid pro quo. So if Pakistan has saved itself from being obligated to pay a fine of \$1.2bn, it is hopefully because of a goodwill gesture on the part of Turkey. Moreover, the option to settle via government channels is not open in other disputes where Pakistan is facing similar fines, most notably in the case of the Reko Diq arbitration. Such extraordinary interventions are possible in limited cases, and even in those it is debatable whether they are worth the cost that they must inevitably entail. There is no substitute, in short, for a sound policy environment and enduring respect by the various pillars of state for each other's responsibilities. In the case of the Karkey dispute, there is the real possibility that new disclosures made subsequent to the case might have played a role in helping persuade the Turkish authorities to waive the fine. But the real lesson here is that acting without solid evidence, particularly when it comes to foreign investors who enjoy certain protections, carries enormous costs for the country.

The maulana puzzle

IT is not only JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman who should be looking for an early exit from the current difficult situation. Opposition parties, the government, and indeed the country as a whole, must quickly emerge from this cloud of uncertainty that threatens to affect proceedings in many important areas.

Everyone with a stake in the democratic system must help the maulana and his party find an honourable route back home — especially at a time when the JUI-F's demand for the resignation of Prime Minister Imran Khan is too unrealistic to deserve serious consideration.

Those opposition leaders flanking the maulana in selective moments appear to understand how impossible the demand is. They — the politicians of the PPP and PML-N — have both a sizeable presence in parliament and sufficient interest to keep the current elected assemblies functioning.

Perhaps it would have been to everyone's benefit had the JUI-F chief, a veteran politician otherwise difficult to dislodge from his Dera Ismail Khan constituency, managed to retain his seat in the National Assembly in the 2018 election. In such an event, it would have been easier for the well-wishers of democracy in Pakistan to advise a debate strictly inside parliament — especially at a time when the PTI government is barely into its second year.

That could not be, because, according to Maulana Fazlur Rehman, there were powers that saw to it that he lost the polls for the two seats he contested in 2018, his defeat serving as the fundamental reason for his protest.

The charged speakers on stage may have discussed a whole range of issues as the JUI-F march culminated in a sit-in threateningly close to the heart of power in Islamabad.

There is nothing that seems to have caused the protesters greater grievance than the perceived insult to their leader's being 'left out' of parliament.

This puts greater responsibility on the maulana's allies sitting in parliament to prevail over him when any extreme options to target the government come up for discussion at the opposition meetings. Together with the government camp and all other visible and invisible kingmakers, these opposition politicians have to somehow remind the dharna leader about his continued relevance to the system.

The federal religious affairs minister seemed to have briefly attempted this when, in a fleeting moment of common sense, he praised the JUI-F chief's ability to bring such large numbers to the capital.

Chaudhry Shujaat Husain and Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi are two other senior practitioners of the art of the possible who have tried to build a cordial channel with the leader of the protest — over and above all the nonsensical noise created by the PTI.

The latter party has not come out of its own dharna mode to carry out the basic chores associated with everyday governance, let alone dealing with an opposition sit-in.

Malnutrition alarm

A RECENT flagship report by Unicef looks into patterns of food and nutrition intake by children around the world. The findings are disquieting, particularly when it comes to the state of children's health in South Asia. The region has been marked 'red' on the United Nations map. The organisation warns that nearly half of all children are not receiving a sufficient diet — the highest global figure in this regard. Poor consumption patterns lead to issues with growth, cognitive impairments, and go on to negatively impact the region's economies. According to the report, titled *The State of the World's Children*, approximately 409,000 children under the age of five died last year in Pakistan. Meanwhile, our neighbours India and Afghanistan recorded 882,000 and 74,000 deaths respectively in the same period. The region shows disproportionately high rates of chronic malnutrition, wasting and stunting.

Are policymakers paying attention to these figures? Pakistan hosts the world's fifth largest population, and the majority is young. Despite malnutrition affecting such a large portion of the total population, the issue rarely features in public discourse or political speeches, taking a back seat to the demands of realpolitik and more 'glamorous' topics. When Prime Minister Imran Khan was elected to power last year, many pinned their hopes on him to give such matters their due importance. In his victory speech after last year's general polls, observers were pleasantly surprised to see him highlight a very neglected public issue — the high rates of stunting among the nation's children. A year later, we have not seen the topic raised again by him, despite several new studies and reports being published on the extent of the problem. While this government has announced an ambitious social welfare programme, a lot of work is needed on the ground. Many of these issues are interconnected. For instance, the appalling health and growth indicators amongst children are linked to poor water and sanitation supplies, or lesser acknowledged gender disparities within households. Poverty is also endemic in the region, which leads to families under-investing in proper diets. There is also a lack of awareness of what even consists of nutritious food, while access to health facilities remains out of the reach of many families, particularly in far-flung rural areas. With the growing population showing no signs of slowing down, this country's children and their futures need to be accorded top priority.

Cut in NSS rates

THE latest cut in the rates of National Savings Schemes will hit some of the most vulnerable sections of society the hardest, and for this reason the government should have taken more time to consider the step. The announcement itself came late at night, which might suggest some protracted deliberation, but pensioners, widows and those with meagre savings, with no capacity to bear risk, have been sorely disappointed. The government's view is that the cut was necessary because of a fall in the rate of the Pakistan Investment Bonds and Treasury Bills, to which these certificates are ultimately pegged. But the fact that the government is in dire need of expenditure cuts at a time of mounting fiscal pressure is also inescapable.

There are a large number of people who rely on savings certificates for a significant share of their monthly income, and for whom there are no other safe investments available in society. It is a little disconcerting to hear the sound of celebrations in the stock market after this rate cut, because these certificates are competitors of the brokers, and once the rates decline, money moves away from them towards the stock market instead. Hopefully, the inclination to use rates to herd people towards the stockbrokers was not factored into the decision, because the reality is that the government is touting the recent upswing in the stock market as a measure of its success. It would be regrettable if the fiscal balance is being stabilised on the backs of pensioners and widows, but it would be even more reprehensible if the government were trying to herd more people towards the trade floor in an effort to further fuel the rise of the index. In any case, it is the responsibility of every government in every age to safeguard the interests of pensioners and widows, regardless of macroeconomic considerations. That responsibility must be lived up to by those who have made this decision.

Climate challenge

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's consistent efforts to highlight climate change at national and international forums show that he realises the scope of the grave environmental dangers that Pakistan faces.

In his speech to the UN General Assembly in September, climate change topped the list of our four biggest challenges. More recently, Mr Khan, while speaking at the inaugural ceremony of the seventh IUCN Asia Regional Conservation Forum, pointed out the close link between climate-related challenges and socioeconomic goals. He stressed the need to pursue development policies geared towards

environmental conservation, and said that mitigating the impact of climate change was crucial to achieving poverty- and development-related SDGs.

Mr Khan also referred — once again — to the billion trees that the PTI-led provincial government in KP claims it planted between 2014 and 2018.

There is no disagreement that the initiative was commendable, but it must be asked if the endeavour was enough to counter the overall effect of rapid deforestation, which at between 0.2pc and 0.5pc is said to be the highest in the world.

So, for all his earnestness to bring a subject close to his heart into the national discourse, how much has actually been achieved on the ground since the PTI came to power?

Unfortunately, the plans, though ambitious, are hardly well-thought-out. For instance, while a mass transit system is expected to reduce traffic congestion, and thus carbon emissions, the as yet incomplete Rs70bn BRT project in Peshawar has been roundly condemned for its poor execution.

Similarly, the cabinet's nod to another ambitious plan to convert at least 30pc of four- and three-wheelers into electric vehicles and 3,000 defunct CNG stations into charging stations — ostensibly to reduce air pollution and the fuel bill — is impractical in these days of a depressed economy.

How would these projects change the life of the millions of farmers, fishermen and villagers who bear the brunt of the devastation wrought by climate change when they lose their homes and livelihoods to extreme weather events?

The truth is that unless greater awareness is created among the majority of the people, even measures such as the ban on the manufacturing and sale of single-use plastic will receive a poor response.

Remedial steps by the government are required, and perhaps updating the country's National Climate Change Policy to include comprehensive short- and long-term targets, especially with regard to deforestation and environmental pollution, would be a sensible place to start. Such a step would require relentless campaigning by not just the top tier of the political leadership, but all levels of government.

Keeping in mind that Pakistan is among the top 10 countries most vulnerable to climate change, the prime minister will have to put his words into action and tirelessly work on sustainable environmental and development reforms.

FBR reforms

PERHAPS one can understand why the officers of the FBR have been so taken aback by the news that the government is planning deep-rooted reform at the institution, but it is difficult to empathise with their reaction. The prime minister had announced in his first public address that FBR reform was on top of his list of priorities, and the appointment of Shabbar Zaidi from the private sector was the second indication that tax policy and administration were both in the spotlight for the PTI government. It should not come as such a big surprise that sweeping reform of the sort that changes the very architecture of the institution is now being discussed at the highest levels of policymaking. Besides, it is the right of the government to undertake such reform, and whether or not it is obligated to consult the staffers of the organisation concerned while deliberating on the planned changes is open to question.

The FBR officers are demanding a say in drafting the plan. This is a way of communicating that only the reforms they agree to would be acceptable to them, which, in turn, is tantamount to denying the government its mandate to make and implement policy decisions. FBR officers are notorious for resisting change. They thwarted the reforms envisioned in the Shahid Hussain report of the early 2000s, as well as those associated with the sales tax act of 2010. Left to their own devices, nothing will ever change, and revenue leakages and inefficiencies will continue to plague the country. Perhaps it can be argued that the government can manage the process of reforms better to obtain buy-in from those most impacted by them, but this does not mean that the officers' association can be allowed to wield a veto over reform decisions. The FBR is by now notorious for alleged corruption and racketeering, and ending these, along with the attendant revenue leakages, is a top priority for the government. If the officers are so concerned about playing a role for the betterment of the country, as their public pronouncements seem to suggest, perhaps they should be more vigilant and discourage the culture of corruption that has taken root among their subordinates. They should provide wholehearted support to automating the board's functions and minimising contact between the taxpayer and tax collector. That will add credibility to their grievances.

College teachers' protest

IN a society where everyone is not equal before the law, or equally significant in terms of political considerations, certain people get to exercise their right to protest while others are summarily deprived of it. Wednesday saw yet another instance of the authorities' high-handedness towards the latter segment of the populace. A large crowd of some 250 college professors and lecturers from across Sindh was roughed up by the police outside the Chief Minister House in Karachi while they were staging a sit-in to demand what they claim are long promised time-scale-based promotions. Around 50 teachers, including women, were bundled into police vans and carted off to various police stations. The Sindh Professors and Lecturers Association representing the protesters announced a province-wide suspension of academic activities the following day to denounce the police action.

Heavy-handed tactics such as those displayed on Wednesday show a lack of maturity on the part of officialdom. Peaceful protests are part and parcel of a democracy, and a state must be able to handle them without resorting to unnecessary force or any action calculated to humiliate citizens agitating for their rights. That is also why timely negotiations with an aggrieved party are so critical to defuse a potentially combustible situation. One would expect the Sindh government to know this well, led as it is by a party with a long history of struggling against oppression. It is reasonable to assume that coming out on the streets is not the preferred option for most people, and by all accounts college teachers have been driven to this point by government apathy towards resolving their legitimate demands. Such official indifference has been the impetus for a number of protests, not only in Sindh but also elsewhere in the country — Lady Health Workers demanding their services be regularised, the visually impaired asking that the employment quota for the handicapped be implemented, and so on. Very often, protests have been met with police brutality, which only reinforces the people's alienation from the state.

Undermining the NA

THE optics couldn't have been worse for a government that is already facing a huge protest.

On Thursday, the PTI forcibly completed the formality of running 11 ordinances past the National Assembly. It took the treasury only a few minutes to get the job done as the deputy speaker played the role of a partisan referee, ignoring the opposition protestations.

On a day of truly shameful events, the person technically in charge of this do-it-yourself-exercise, the prime minister, held a meeting with his party legislators and then was in his chamber throughout. Even if he hadn't taken the trouble to turn up at the house that gives him his powers, there was little doubt that the rush to pass the ordinances enjoyed his full blessings.

This was truly in keeping with PTI tradition which attaches little respect to those who make up parliament. For the ruling party, all who oppose it in the assemblies are relics of a corruption-filled past that Prime Minister Imran Khan is keen to rid this country of. This line is applied to justify everything the PTI government takes up, including the passage of presidential ordinances.

The laws promise a profound impact. Among them is one that replaces the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council with the Pakistan Medical Commission, which has kicked up a heated debate. Another seeks to protect whistle-blowers reporting benami properties and assets, while one more focuses on the rights of women to own property.

For long, the people have asked for simplifying the process of issuing a succession certificate, which is what one of the new laws is aimed at. 'Establishment of legal aid and justice authority to provide justice to the poor and vulnerable segments of society' is the stated purpose of yet another law in this set, which again sounds like a good cause. But a cause worth pursuing must first appear worth discussing.

The imposition of legal provisions the way it has been done in this case — and under previous governments as well — smacks of a dictatorial disposition the country can ill afford, especially in these times of increasing polarisation.

The president should never have issued these ordinances, and if somehow he committed that error, the National Assembly should have been allowed to stamp respectability on these proposed laws by debating them.

It is clear that the ruling party has led a successful campaign against its opponents in parliament. It has exposed the opposition members to public scrutiny and any act on their part that is seen as compromising improvements in the system can

easily land lawmakers belonging to the anti-Imran Khan camp on the wrong side of the people.

The PTI has evidently betrayed its lack of confidence or it wouldn't have looked for ways to undermine parliament.

FATF grey list

LITTLE by little, the truth about Pakistan's difficulties involving the Financial Action Task Force is coming out. For a while, the attitude towards the global financial watchdog and its repeated warnings about the vulnerability of Pakistan's financial system to terror-financing and money-laundering risks were received with a casual shrug, as if none of it was to be taken seriously. Then came a period when we were told it was all a political conspiracy against Pakistan, and the vulnerabilities themselves deserved no consideration. Matters began to be taken more seriously by November 2017 with the first indications that the move towards blacklisting Pakistan could be real after all. By February 2018, this became quite evident, and Pakistan scrambled on two separate action plans, one for the Asia Pacific Group, which is a regional grouping of FATF, and the other submitted directly to the latter body. Since then, action has been patchy, but all along we were being told by different authorities that Pakistan was making progress, that soon the tide would turn and the movement would be in the opposite direction, away from grey listing and certainly not towards full blacklisting.

Now, suddenly, we have a new turn in this evolution of Pakistan's self-reckoning exercise where the demands and conditions of FATF are concerned. We are told by Hammad Azhar, the minister directly tasked with coordinating the implementation of the action plans as well as presenting Pakistan's case before the global watchdog, that grey listing is likely to continue all through next year since more than one action plan has to be completed — one of which is due to be evaluated next October. But then, he reverted to the comforting presentation of "partial compliance on 22 of the 27 points" in the action plan due for evaluation in February. There is no longer any point in putting a smiley face on the realities that Pakistan is facing on the FATF front, and it is high time the authorities told us exactly what is going on. The truth is that Pakistan is having a difficult time complying with the terms of its own action plan, and long after the expiration of its deadline for completion, it can at best report "partial compliance" on most

actionable items. The journey of denial needs to end soon so that the truth can be told in clear, unambiguous words.

Polio persists

EXPLOSIVE revelations in a recent investigation into Pakistan's polio programme by The Guardian have rattled the trust of many. Citing unnamed sources and a member of the polio eradication programme, the investigation alleged there was a re-emergence of the P2 virus in the population, possibly through an ill-administered vaccine. Furthermore, the article claimed, efforts were made to cover up this disturbing new development, while a furtive vaccine programme was planned to target the outbreak of the P2 virus this month. Presently, Pakistan uses P1 and P3 vaccines, as the P2 virus was thought to have been eradicated in 2014. The special assistant to the prime minister on health issued a statement denying these very serious allegations, but also confirmed there were seven new cases of vaccine-derived P2, after The Guardian story created a storm. He mentioned that the resurgence of the vaccine-derived P2 virus was not unique to Pakistan, as similar outbreaks were witnessed in countries that had long been declared polio-free. While there has indeed been a resurgence of the vaccine-derived P2 in some countries over the past two years, this cannot be accepted as a valid excuse.

There is a need for greater transparency, accountability, and perhaps an official investigation. One cannot help but question the former and present leadership of the polio programme, at a time when there has been a massive spike in the number of new cases in the country. Pakistan has the misfortune of being one of three countries in the world that are yet to be declared polio-free. In 2017, there were eight cases of polio recorded in the country. In 2018, this figure rose to 12. As of writing this editorial, three more cases have been reported, increasing the number of new polio cases to 80 this year. Pakistan's polio vaccination efforts have battled religious militancy and misinformation. It would be a tragedy if they failed due to the ineptitude of those overseeing the programme.

Kartarpur Corridor

AT a time of great confrontation and mistrust in the subcontinent, Pakistan has taken a major step towards peace by opening the Kartarpur Corridor in Punjab's Narowal district.

The corridor gives visa-free access to devotees from across the border to visit Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, one of Sikhism's holiest shrines, on this side of the fence. The corridor was formally opened by Prime Minister Imran Khan on Saturday in a ceremony attended by hundreds of people, including former Indian premier Manmohan Singh, as Sikh yatrees hailed the decision.

In his speech at the event, Mr Khan called for peace and cross-border trade between Pakistan and India, while also highlighting the grim situation in India-held Kashmir. Through the corridor, 5,000 visitors will be able to cross over from India daily to visit the shrine in Pakistan without a visa.

Indeed, religious tourism has great potential to promote people-to-people contacts in the subcontinent. Pakistan is home to other significant Sikh shrines — in Hasan Abdal, Lahore etc — and a similar formula can perhaps be adopted to let foreign visitors pay respects at these religious places through a more relaxed visa regime.

Similarly, there are ancient Hindu temples in Sindh's Thar region, the Hinglaj mandir in Balochistan, as well as Katas Raj in Punjab, which can attract visitors from India and elsewhere.

With Kartarpur, Pakistan has shown its intentions to facilitate non-Muslim visitors, and a more relaxed bilateral visa formula can help promote religious tourism. However, it takes two to tango, and India must also reciprocate by easing restrictions on Pakistani visitors wanting to pay their respects at revered Sufi dargahs on the other side of the border. The chill in bilateral relations has resulted in difficulties for Pakistanis wanting to visit the dargah of the revered Khawaja of Ajmer, Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi, as well as the tombs of other Muslim saints on the occasion of their urs or even otherwise.

Pakistan has extended a hand of friendship by facilitating Indian Sikhs in their demand to easily access Kartarpur; India must do the same and make arrangements for Pakistanis to visit Muslim sites in their country without hassle.

The promotion of religious tourism and people-to-people contacts should be pursued to reduce hostilities between Islamabad and New Delhi. However, the key irritants in the relationship — particularly the Kashmir issue — must not be lost

sight of. Mr Khan rightly said at the Kartarpur event that a just solution to the Kashmir question could help bring peace to the subcontinent.

Unfortunately, India's rulers have failed to grasp this basic fact for over seven decades. If India is serious about the pursuit of peace, a good first step would be to lift the siege of occupied Kashmir and let the beleaguered region's people breathe. Constructive dialogue on Kashmir, together with confidence-building measures, can help break the deadlock in the subcontinent.

Overcrowded jails

PAKISTAN'S prisons are packed beyond capacity. The exact scale of this nationwide crisis was recently presented in a report to the Supreme Court by the federal ombudsperson's office. According to the findings, there are a total of 77,275 prisoners held in 114 prisons across the country. Appallingly, these prisons only have a combined capacity to house 57,742 people. The vast majority — 47,077 — of these prisoners are languishing in the 42 jails of Punjab, against a total sanctioned strength of 32,477. This is followed by Sindh, which houses 17,239 inmates in 24 prisons, against its capacity to accommodate only 13,038 inmates. There are many negative consequences that are directly linked to the problem of overcapacity, and which affect both the psychological and physical health of the prisoners. Some researchers suggest that such suffocating conditions also impact the prisoners' conduct towards one another, pointing to a higher rate of assault in spaces with limited movement and space to breathe and think. Such learned antisocial behaviour can continue even after prisoners are released back into 'healthy' society. This state of affairs is especially alarming when we consider that minors, first-time offenders and petty thieves sometimes share the space with hardened criminals and terrorists in Pakistani prisons. Others have pointed to high blood pressure rates among inmates due to the stress caused to their mental and physical state by their living conditions. Additionally, there is a burden on resources, and prisoners suffer from malnutrition due to poor diets and a lack of medical attention. They can contract a variety of diseases, which can then be passed on to those in close proximity.

Overcrowding in prisons is a long-standing issue, written about countless times before, yet it does not seem to get the political attention it deserves, as both state and society seem to forget or are apathetic to the fact that prisoners have rights

too. Then there is the lesser-talked-about fact that the vast majority of Pakistani prisoners are still under trial or waiting for their trials to begin. A sluggish trial process is one of the major reasons prisons are teeming beyond capacity. While it is necessary for the government to create more prisons, detention facilities and juvenile centres, and simultaneously increase the capacity of existing ones, until the problem of judicial lethargy is not addressed, we may never see significant progress on the ground.

Snooker honour

RIDING the crest of a wave, Pakistan's prolific cueist Mohammad Asif has done the nation proud yet again by winning the IBSF World Snooker title in Antalya, Turkey, on Saturday. Asif coasted to an 8-5 victory over unseeded Jeffrey Roda of the Philippines in the final to clinch the coveted title for the second time in his career. The 37-year-old had first bagged the prestigious honour in 2012 in Sofia, Bulgaria, and has now joined the select group of just five cueists to have achieved the feat twice since the inception of the World Snooker Championship in 1963. To his credit, Asif never lost focus in the highly competitive tournament, displaying skill and precision to overcome some tough opponents en route to the final — including leading Thai player Kritsanut Lertsattayathorn in the semi-final.

It is ironic, though, that while the nation has rejoiced in Asif's remarkable win, the game of snooker is unlikely to receive an official shot in the arm thanks to the neglectful treatment meted out to it by governments of yore. Pakistan emerged on the horizon of global snooker in 1994 when Mohammad Yousuf won the world title at Johannesburg. Since then, several cueists have won a number of laurels for Pakistan including Asif, Mohammad Saleh, Asjad Iqbal, Mohammad Bilal, Babar Masih and a few others. However, they have failed to get any support or appreciation, let alone incentives, and are often seen running from pillar to post to raise funds in order to compete internationally. It is hence that the original spirit of the sport is getting diminished. Most snooker parlours that had mushroomed in the late 1990s across the country have now closed down, while the sport's parent body the Pakistan Billiards and Snooker Federation has struggled to get sponsorship for tours. Unlike cricket, hockey and squash which have experienced a downward trend in recent years, snooker has kept the Pakistan flag flying high. The government and private sector must realise the tremendous potential snooker holds and put their weight behind the cueists so that they can win more honours.

The price of tomatoes

AT a press conference called to tout the government's achievement in stabilising the economy, and to announce the first stimulus measures since the period of adjustment began, the prime minister's financial adviser, Hafeez Shaikh, found himself peppered, instead, with questions about the rise in prices of essential items.

Read: PM aide on finance chastised over price hike ignorance

Rarely has a government official found himself so much at sea in trying to field questions of such intimate importance to ordinary people.

When the responses given by Mr Shaikh sounded too vacuous, the questions became more pointed, ending, ultimately, with one reporter asking about the massive spike in the price of tomatoes, to which the adviser famously responded that, as per his information, tomatoes were selling for Rs17 per kilo in Karachi's wholesale vegetable markets.

Rarely has so much been said in so few words.

In that one fleeting moment, videos of which went viral in a matter of minutes and made Mr Shaikh the target of derision around the country, we all saw the immense gulf that separates the rulers from the ruled in this country.

It is entirely possible that many of our worthy policymakers have hardly ever gone to the market to purchase tomatoes. It is equally possible that they are largely indifferent to the impact that the food price hikes have on the daily lives of tens of millions of people in this country, who have no choice but to spend more than half their household income on food for their family.

But surely, our decision-makers should look beyond their mandate to fix the deficits in the economy and "create buffers", to use the soulless parlance of the IMF, in the fiscal equation as well as the foreign exchange reserves.

Surely, they should not be indifferent to how their policies will impact the population even as the financial managers try to correct the economic flaws.

Meanwhile, the macroeconomic stability that Mr Shaikh wants to underscore has actually been earned on the backs of the working and unemployed poor of this

country. It is they who have made the heaviest sacrifice in the government's slash-and-burn economic stabilisation effort thus far, and who have felt the greatest pain of these 'demand compression' policies.

Yet, once the buffers are created, and fiscal resources become available, they are to be spent on the rich first and foremost, in the old-fashioned hope that from there the wealth will trickle down to the poor. This is how Mr Shaikh was able to announce that Rs200bn will be spent to subsidise interest rates on loans for exporters, and Rs30bn would be similarly spent on loans for construction magnates. But for the poor, we see a package worth Rs6bn to be spent through the utility stores to make essential items affordable. The disparity is unmistakable, as is the terrible injustice behind it all.

Kabul visit

WHEN it comes to neighbours, states have little choice but to try and interact amicably, even though this can prove to be a considerable challenge at times due to a variety of reasons. The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been chequered for most of its history; the past few decades have been especially rocky, mainly due to internal upheavals in the latter country. However, it is in the interest of both states to maintain friendly ties and use statesmanship and sagacity to deal with irritants that threaten to derail relations. In the light of this principle, it is welcome that the foreign secretary and ISI chief visited Kabul on Monday, as a number of recent incidents have contributed to the cooling of the bilateral relationship. According to an Afghan official, the two sides discussed ways of "normalising relations"; among the issues reportedly discussed was a property dispute in Peshawar involving an Afghan bank, cross-border firing incidents and alleged harassment of diplomats in both states.

The high-powered delegation's visit to Afghanistan indicates that Pakistan is serious about mending fences with Kabul. The fact is that to improve relations in the long term, bilateral visits between political and military figures are needed to clear misconceptions and resolve disputes. Left unresolved, problems can snowball out of control and be blown out of proportion, hurting the prospects of peace in the region. Ultimately, peace in Afghanistan — though essentially an intra-Afghan issue — involves four major players; the government in Kabul, the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan and the Americans. At times, the respective players have

varying agendas, but Islamabad and Kabul need to be on the same page, even though it can appear as if the Afghan government's grip on power is tenuous. For a healthy bilateral relationship, as well as peace within Afghanistan, Islamabad and Kabul need to strengthen ties to ensure that minor irritants do not scuttle ties. All outstanding issues that both sides feel are important can be resolved through dialogue. There are, of course, some actors in the region that are loath to see good relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. That should not be a deterrent; in fact, it should make both sides see why it is important to work harder to improve bilateral ties. The exchange of high-level visits can help, while formal dispute-resolution mechanisms can be set up to address the problems that occur from time to time.

Weighty schoolbags

AN important new law is waiting to be approved by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cabinet. Drafted by the education department, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa School Bags Act, 2019, will make it compulsory for all educational institutions across the province to ensure schoolbags carried by children do not weigh more than 15pc of the student's weight. The figure is in accordance with international research, though some researchers have suggested that the weight of the schoolbags should be as low as 10pc of a child's bodyweight. As directed by the Peshawar High Court, the law must be passed and put into effect by both the government and private institutions before the new school year begins in 2020. Under the law, all schools must provide lockers and cupboards to students up till the 10th grade, while teachers will also have to tell the students in advance what books and course work they have to bring. Failure to comply with the law will result in heavy fines. If passed, the law will undoubtedly ease some of the burden and stress placed on students — which is in addition to their routine workload and homework — and can be replicated in the other provinces.

In the absence of proper facilities or arrangements, children have no choice but to carry their heavy learning material with them to school. Many have to walk long distances to reach their schools, and the strain on their young, still developing bodies — particularly the neck, back and shoulders — is considerable and entirely unnecessary. According to medical experts, heavy schoolbags lead to damage to the spine and muscles, which can go on to have a negative impact on a child's cognitive and learning abilities. There is already a high dropout rate of students

from school, and one of the reasons often cited by children is the exhaustion and sense of fatigue they feel. It is unfair for adults to make the simple pursuit of education so burdensome for the young.

IHK suffocation

IT is a grim milestone. Tuesday marked the 100th day of the siege of India-held Kashmir, after New Delhi clamped down on the region and did away with its special status guaranteed by the Indian constitution.

Since then, life has become a nightmare for the Kashmiris, as they have been living under constant lockdown, their routines disrupted by the heavy hand of the Indian establishment.

The matter was raised during a Senate session in Islamabad on Tuesday, with lawmakers questioning the UN's relative silence where the suffering of Kashmiris is concerned. Former Senate chairman Farooq Naek urged the government to approach the International Court of Justice over the matter, while the leader of the opposition in the upper house, Raja Zafarul Haq, condemned the inaction of the international community over Kashmir.

In the occupied region itself, journalists held a small silent demonstration in Srinagar to protest the blockade of the internet in IHK, and the crippling effect it has had on unfettered reporting from the region.

“The authorities have treated journalists [...] as potential troublemakers and choked journalism in the process,” one media person said at the protest. Indeed, Kashmiri journalists must be commended for their brave protest in the face of Indian brutality.

India's lockdown has affected people from all walks of life in IHK.

Mothers lament that their sons have been picked up in midnight raids by New Delhi's enforcers; schools and colleges have been shut, paralysing educational activities; trade and business have taken a similar hit; even religious occasions, such as Muharram and Eid, have not been spared as Kashmiris have been denied the opportunity to freely observe rituals.

Is this how a democracy — which India claims to be — behaves?

However, despite 100 days of suffocation, the Kashmiri spirit for azadi remains undeterred. However much India brackets the Kashmiri desire for autonomy and freedom with militancy, it is clear that the held region's people will not give up their democratic demand for self-determination, as New Delhi's brutal tactics for decades have failed to snuff out their courage and spirit of resistance.

Pakistan has made a major effort to raise a voice for the Kashmir cause across the globe, and many conscientious people have spoken up for the rights of the besieged region. In fact, activists within India have also questioned their government's appalling tactics in IHK.

India can continue its brutal approach in the region for another 100 days but the result is unlikely to be different, as Kashmiris will not start treating their oppressors as their benefactors. Instead of this failed approach, India must immediately lift the siege of Kashmir and listen to what its people have to say. The BJP-led government must understand this is not a conquered territory, but a region with its own unique history and culture that cannot be subjugated.

'B' is for blockade

MAULANA Fazlur Rehman has finally come up with his 'Plan B' that involves staging blockades of highways and even branch and intra-city roads across the country.

Frustrated by the lack of sufficient notice he received after besieging Islamabad about two weeks ago, the maulana had been hurling all kinds of veiled and not-so subtle warnings about the perils of his demands not being entertained. Since this was not the first time he was pressing for a bargain, the more favoured view predicted that he would finally have to make a reluctant return after being unable to find the right patrons and backers for his cause.

Maybe Wednesday's announcement of the JUI-F's new map will still be looked upon as a face-saving exercise by many. The problem is, what if the maulana really means it? He has already shown that he accepts and rejects advice at his own convenience and has sufficiently exhibited a mind free from any reasonable limits for anyone to take him and his Plan B lightly. His protest may be entering an extremely sensitive area and the JUI-F chief could find himself in a corner with no escape.

According to the declarations from the dharna stage, Plan B is to begin in the afternoon today. It entails moving the sit-in to a place on Peshawar Road close to the Motorway. However, rally leaders have indicated that a few of the vital arteries connecting cities, people, businesses and livelihoods are already in the process of being blocked.

A highway around Jacobabad was said to have been already closed and the Motorway has been marked for a forcible blockade near Rohri and Sukkur. Likewise, the highway between Rawalpindi and Peshawar was to be closed by protesters today. The JUI-F threatens to expand the measures to paralyse all manner of movement on the national road network, and the plan, if carried out, could have devastating effects on daily life.

Unless it is a bluff or a face-saving gimmick that some believe it will turn out to be, these events show an inclination for violent confrontation. Accolades, that are not always his due, have often been lavished on Maulana Fazlur Rehman for his politics. Right here on this route to a head-on clash with his power rivals, he must ponder and take all responsibility before he is moved by the fires burning inside him to attempt anything too adventurous.

Dysfunctional NCHR

FOR a government that is very vocal about human rights elsewhere in the world, the fact that the National Commission for Human Rights has not been functioning for the past six months should be downright embarrassing. The tenure of the chairman and six out of seven members of the NCHR expired on May 30, but the present government, amidst all its tall claims of upholding the rights of citizens, appears to be dragging its feet on new appointments. The PTI government's year in power has been marred by bureaucratic delays or mismanagement, especially in KP and Punjab; the situation also exposes the serious lapses on part of the federal human rights ministry. Since its formation, the commission has played a key role in investigating human rights abuses in the country. For some time now, the NCHR had been looking into NAB's alleged misuse of powers, and this unusual delay in the appointment of its members reflects badly on the government's promises of across-the-board accountability while also giving credence to criticism that NAB is being used for political victimisation.

On the other hand, the PTI-led government has been so caught up with the ongoing political turmoil that major incidents of human rights abuses in the country have not received the kind of attention they deserve other than the customary statements issued via Twitter. Be it incidents of police brutality in Punjab, the sexual abuse of young boys in Kasur, the Tezgam tragedy, the Balochistan University harassment scandal or people dying due to the shortage of rabies vaccine, the response by the federal government has been lackadaisical at best. It would be useful for the government to recall that one of the hallmarks of an ideal society is its justice system; the present state of affairs with regard to human rights in the country is contrary to many of the tall claims the PTI has made before and after coming to power. It is time for the government to stop the talk, and walk the walk.

Nawaz's treatment

THE courts granted former prime minister Nawaz Sharif bail so he could get the medical treatment he needs. The government agreed to remove his name from the ECL on humanitarian grounds so he could travel abroad. All seemed smooth till all of a sudden the government announced that Mr Sharif would have to sign an indemnity bond worth Rs7bn before he would be allowed to travel, as a guarantee of his return. PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif refused to sign the bond, and instead, challenged the decision in the Lahore High Court. A normal situation which could have been handled normally has now turned into a full-blown crisis.

This is despite the fact that there is no ambiguity about the seriousness of Nawaz Sharif's medical condition. The latest report from the government-appointed medical board has stated clearly that he is suffering from life-threatening ailments, and his platelets continue to hover at precarious levels. More alarmingly, the doctors have not been able to identify the underlying cause of the plunging platelet count. In short, the former prime minister needs urgent and immediate treatment abroad. In such a situation, the government's callous decision to demand an indemnity note smacks of political point-scoring and one-upmanship. This is wrong on all counts. First, Mr Sharif has shown in the past that he will not abscond from the law. He illustrated this in July last year when he and his daughter Maryam Nawaz returned from London after a court had sentenced them in Pakistan. Second, the courts have given him bail which fulfils the legal requirement for his travel overseas. The government is, then, under no legal requirement to ask for an

indemnity bond. Doing so is a political decision, and an unfortunate one. Third, the bond requirement is an afterthought in the wake of the disenchantment of some cabinet members who argued that letting Mr Sharif travel abroad would extract a political cost for the PTI government. Such indecision has soiled the feel-good factor generated by the original decision which was based on compassionate grounds.

The result is an acrimonious fight that is eating away precious time from the eight weeks' bail given to Mr Sharif for his treatment. The damage done to the political environment of the country will, unfortunately, take a while to mend. This was a good opportunity for Prime Minister Imran Khan to allow his empathy — which he has displayed quite often — to override his hostility towards his political opponent. Had he brushed aside the pressure from his advisers to add the indemnity bond clause to the one-time waiver from the ECL, he would have gained tremendous political capital from all sides. He did not do so, and now the situation has become a minefield of unforeseen consequences. The government should, even at this stage, undo the decision and allow Mr Sharif to travel unhindered.

Our 'hidden' shame

THE recent arrest of a known paedophile, Sohail Ayaz, has raised serious questions about the government's handling of child sexual abuse cases.

Ayaz had previously been convicted and sentenced to prison in the UK for child sexual offences, and then, reportedly, deported by Italy for his links to a child pornography ring. Unfortunately, this was not flagged by the authorities here, and he was able to secure a working contract with a KP government department under a foreign-funded project.

If it hadn't been for the mother of his latest alleged victim, there would have been no stopping his sickening activities. She approached the police in Rawalpindi when her son disappeared for four days. Police said that Ayaz has admitted to raping at least 30 children in Pakistan alone.

The incident reflects the extent of the unspoken social embargo on the subject of child sexual abuse in the country. As many as 1,300 cases of child sexual abuse have been recorded only in the first six months of this year, according to the NGO

Sahil. Yet, the reported cases are only the tip of the iceberg as countless parents shy away from registering police cases.

It is astonishing that Ayaz was caught after allegedly raping 30 children; had none of the parents of the victims come forward to report the crime to the authorities and demand stern action? This also shows the parents' lack of trust in the law-enforcement authorities that have a track record of victim shaming and mishandling cases of this nature.

Who can forget the comment of a police officer in Shahzad Town, Islamabad, who told the family of a missing 10-year-old girl in May that she might have eloped? When the police did spring into action later, after widespread condemnation, it was discovered that the suspect had been booked in two similar cases.

Meanwhile, the Chunian case suspect was found to have been nearly arrested twice before. Then there was the notorious serial rapist and killer Imran Ali in Kasur city, who was caught only after protests erupted when the body of little Zainab was found in a garbage dump. Four years after the child pornography ring was busted, the victims — almost 300 victims — from Hussain Khanwala village in Kasur district still await justice.

We as a society continue to fail our children. We will keep doing so until we open up and acknowledge the depth of the malaise within.

Iskander Mirza

HALF a century ago, on Nov 13 to be exact, Pakistan's first elected head of state, Iskander Mirza, died in London. He was governor general when Pakistan's first constitution was presented to him for signature. Mirza insisted he wouldn't sign it unless he was to be head of state. His wish was granted.

Those were days when men practising the art of politics were gentlemen politicians, for those losing power — or their families — were not murdered or made to rot in prison.

At a personal level, Mirza was a thorough, soft-spoken gentleman, but what history would remember him for was the unfortunate precedent he set by abrogating the constitution, imposing martial law and making army chief Ayub Khan the supreme commander of the armed forces and chief martial law administrator.

The coup occurred on Oct 7, 1958, and 20 days later Ayub made Mirza go into exile to assume all powers himself. This perverse tradition was to haunt Pakistan for decades; even today, it casts its evil shadows on our political structure.

Generals Yahya Khan, Ziaul Haq and Pervez Musharraf went on to ape Mirza, except that no one could outdo Zia in persecuting his political enemies and brazenly using religion to perpetuate his power for 11 years. Zia also has the dubious honour of having dissenting journalists whipped, his information minister being a member of a religious party.

Mirza wanted to return to Pakistan but was denied permission. He was later laid to rest in Mashhad.

There are many lessons we can learn from the first bout of martial law. Stability created by dictators is ephemeral, for Ayub's rule succumbed to popular agitation. Similarly, the constitutional nostrums by Zia and Musharraf to strip the 1973 document of its parliamentary character were undone subsequently through parliamentary consensus.

Direct military rule, or its unseen but ubiquitous presence, has done incalculable damage to the country, failed to strengthen state institutions, led to the rise of fissiparous tendencies and weakened Pakistan's roots.

Technical experts

THERE is little doubt that the government is in dire need of technical expertise to help navigate decision-making in an increasingly complex world. The case of LNG imports, to take one example, clearly demonstrates that there is a great deficit within the bureaucracy of the kind of technical knowledge required to effectively enter and operate within global LNG markets. The examples are, in fact, innumerable. From effective design of a policy framework to attract investment in petroleum exploration to management of public health hazards, the list of areas where the government requires specialised technical skills is very long indeed. That is why a new plan to induct technical experts into government service effectively as a layer above the Grade-22 federal secretaries has garnered much attention. There can be no doubt that the plan aims to plug a real deficit, but the question is, whether this is the right way to go about it.

Some questions immediately arise after even a cursory look at the proposal. How will these ‘technical experts’ interact with the federal secretaries and the larger bureaucracy that is already gearing up to resist the move? It is one thing if their input is given directly to the minister concerned. But if they are expected to have command over the bureaucracy below them, then the plan will clearly struggle to find traction. That is how it is in the US from where this particular idea draws its inspiration. In the US, the undersecretaries of state are brought in by the presidential administration as technical experts who work directly in policy implementation. Transplanting that model over here, though, has its own problems — as the government will soon learn if it works to advance the proposal.

The biggest weakness of the plan, however, is in how it seeks to create a shortcut for what is a deeper problem. We have an outmoded bureaucracy whose very training runs against the grain of specialised, technical knowledge. This was alright in the colonial era, when the chief task of the district collector was to keep the peace and ensure the collection of revenue. It does not work in the 21st century where the government has to increasingly operate in specialised fields. Creating an additional layer, Grade-23, above everybody else will not address the fact that below the technical experts will be the same people. In many cases, above the technical expert will be ministers who are also clearly unfit for their post. One wonders what sort of contribution a technical expert will make in the railways, to take one example, without any change at the top. In essence, the plan tries to address a real problem, but does so in a purely cosmetic way. Perhaps a little technical expertise could be helpful when drawing up such proposals in the first place.

Tests at home

IT finally seems to be happening. Pakistan’s cricket trajectory is set to experience one of its most emotional and truly historic moments, with the ending of a decade-long drought in Test cricket. If all goes according to plan, cricket fans in the country will be part of the two-Test home series against Sri Lanka to be played next month. A Pakistan Cricket Board press release on Thursday confirmed that the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium and Karachi’s National Stadium will host the two Test matches against the visiting team on Dec 11 and Dec 19 respectively. Needless to say, the news has taken the cricket-starved nation by storm. The agonising lull had seemed like an eternity — not just to the players and fans but also to those who realise that

cricket as a sport is a key catalyst in aiding social cohesion in a nation that has forever grappled with multiple ethnic, cultural and ideological divisions.

Pakistan, since it was granted Test status in 1952, has been a front-ranking cricketing nation with an impressive record in both home and away matches. Leading cricket teams visited Pakistan regularly until a decade ago, and the country has also had the honour of being a joint host for the two ICC Cricket World Cups that were held in 1987 and 1996. However, all that changed one unfortunate morning in March 2009 when a Sri Lankan team bus was attacked by gunmen in Lahore. Six visiting players and two staff members were injured. Eight other people were killed. No foreign team has toured Pakistan for a Test since then, though efforts to reintegrate the country into mainstream international cricket did result in ODI and T20 tours by Zimbabwe, the West Indies and, more recently, Sri Lanka itself. The PCB's hectic diplomatic efforts to reassure other cricket boards about the improved security situation in the country and safe playing conditions, in addition to the government's pledges of presidential-level security for the touring sides, had been in vain and a full-fledged Test series by a foreign team continued to elude Pakistan. But now, matters seem to be improving for Pakistan cricket. It is ironic, though, that it will be Sri Lanka that will help in reviving full-scale foreign tours to this country after the attack on its team a decade ago. A debt of gratitude is owed to the Islanders.

Online censorship

GIVEN the growing number of 'unspoken' and confusing restrictions on the country's media, it is no surprise that online policing of content, especially on the social media, has also increased. A Facebook transparency report has revealed that in the first half of 2019, the social media giant restricted around 5,700 posts in Pakistan on the government's request.

According to the report, the number of complaints filed by the PTA made up 31pc of the total content restriction requests, more than any other country. Facebook maintained that it restricted access to content that, according to the telecom authority, allegedly violated local laws pertaining to blasphemy, defamation and criticism of the country's independence and judiciary.

Though Facebook is not bound to follow the local laws of any country, the company often complies with requests from governments, security agencies and large

corporations. This 'pragmatism' has given rise to a lot of questions over the role of Facebook in compromising consumer data, and facilitating the spread of false information and political manipulation. The result of such a controversial role, however, is that the truth is compromised, which in turn amplifies a one-sided narrative.

In the absence of clear policies to curb the spread of false news, by both the PTA and Facebook, the restriction of content that is critical of the state's policies is tantamount to censorship. The PTA has already blocked access to around 900,000 websites, some of which include internet editions of Indian newspapers that in the past year or so have also felt the wrath of the Modi government over criticism of its policies.

On the other hand, a report by the EU DisinfoLab says that an Indian network was found to be operating 265 propaganda websites to influence global opinions against Pakistan.

Ironically, while there is a clampdown on media and active suppression of citizens' voices, there seems to be no attempt to deal with anti-Pakistan propaganda stemming from abroad. Perhaps the PTA should focus its energies on targeting actual propaganda, rather than muting the voices of citizens and journalists.

Dharna politics

THE latest episode of dharna politics this country has witnessed may or may not have a sting in its tail.

After all, Maulana Fazlur Rehman's 'Plan B' which entails JUI-F supporters blocking several major arteries all over the country — a series of 'mini dharnas', as it were — continues to be in play, keeping alive the potential for violent confrontation. However, there is a whiff of a face-saving exercise about it all, and the PTI government, despite its current travails, must be enormously relieved.

The optics of tens of thousands of protesters camped out in the centre of Islamabad had clearly given it the jitters, while the dispersed sit-ins currently under way do not, so far, pose a similar challenge. In fact, if they peter out, the maulana's undoubtedly considerable skill at maintaining his political relevance will be sorely tested. While the loyalties of his party's traditional constituency, the madressah cohort, would likely not waver, his aspirations of leading a joint opposition

movement against the PTI government — despite the JUI-F's minimal presence in parliament — will certainly go up in smoke. It could prove to be a very costly gamble.

Then there is a broader question: is a dharna ever an advisable course of action to bring down a government that has come to power through the electoral process?

The right to protest is inherent to a democracy; it is a legitimate political tactic in a system based upon the people's will, howsoever flawed may be the practical translation of that will.

The PTI government has made many a fumble, and at times displayed appalling indecision and political vindictiveness towards the opposition in the little over one year it has been in power. It has also often been an obstructionist and dictatorial government, preferring to rule by fiat rather than by consensus of the other parties in parliament.

Nevertheless, a government that has come in through the power of the vote should not be brought down through street agitation. A boisterous opposition can strengthen the system, but it must know where to draw the line. Not doing so can play into the hands of those that do not respect the will of the people.

On this score, the PPP and PML-N — possibly with the hindsight gained after their own experiences with dharnas by the opposition — have responded with restraint and maturity to the maulana's call for a mass protest. Of course, it was the PTI itself that attempted to overthrow the PML-N government with its mammoth sit-in that paralysed Islamabad for four months in 2014.

The Supreme Court's Faizabad dharna judgement rightly declared: "The right of assembly is recognised as a right to preserve the democratic order, but it cannot be used to overthrow a lawful government." The political parties must take their battle off the streets and into parliament, and bolster this country's perennially fragile democracy.

Privatisation debate

FOR a political party that did not highlight privatisation as a priority in its detailed election manifesto, and largely opposed all attempts at the same by previous governments, it is somewhat puzzling to see the energy with which the PTI is

pursuing the matter now. We have heard the finance adviser talk repeatedly about the importance of privatising the LNG-based power plants; the prime minister himself has underscored the importance of accelerating the privatisation of the steel mill; and now the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation has given directions for the privatisation of the SME Bank and PIA Investments. The urgency is such that the government is willing to disrupt the entire LNG supply chain just so that it can rip the two large power plants they wish to privatise out of their power purchase commitments. Moreover, the government has not only readily written privatisation into the IMF plan, but also programmed the funds to be received from it as 'revenue' rather than as a financing item, which would be the proper treatment to give to proceeds from privatisation.

All this runs against the grain of what the PTI has always argued, and, indeed, embarked upon once it came to power. All last year, we constantly heard about a holding company under which all state-owned enterprises would be placed, and how the government would ensure that they would be shielded from political influence. The idea was to turn these units around, but retain them as government-owned entities. Suddenly, all that is gone, and the speed and urgency with which privatisation is being advanced today is striking. The little accounting gimmick that allows the proceeds of privatisation to be counted as revenue rather than financing might provide a clue. The government has steep targets to meet for the collection of foreign exchange reserves as well as federal revenue by the end of this fiscal year. Without proceeds from privatisation, it is unlikely it will be able to do this. It is increasingly becoming clear that the only priority driving the privatisation agenda in the country is money, and if they are treated as a financing item, as required by the law, and not as revenue, then the proceeds will do little to help meet the targets. There is a greater need to debate the merits of privatisation in the case of the entities that are on the list.

Gaza violence

IN the Palestinian territory of Gaza — as indeed in other parts of the occupied Arab land — Israel is free to shed innocent blood at will, with the world doing little other than expressing concern and often looking the other way. In the latest outbreak of violence, over 30 people were reported dead in Gaza, nearly half of them civilians, before a fragile truce took hold. The violence was sparked after Tel Aviv killed an alleged Islamic Jihad fighter and his wife; the armed resistance group responded

with rocket fire targeting Israel, which triggered more air strikes by the Zionist state. In one particularly gruesome incident, a family of eight, including at least five children, were massacred by Israel in a midnight raid. Tel Aviv said it had targeted an “Islamic Jihad leader”. Though there was little by way of remorse, an Israeli army spokesman said they were “investigating the harm caused to civilians”.

Despite the Israeli statement, will those responsible for this cold-blooded murder of innocents be held accountable? If past precedent is anything to go by, Israel’s friends in high places — particularly in the US and Europe — will continue to protect their ally and defend its barbaric behaviour. It is argued that Israel has a right to defend itself from Palestinian rockets. While civilians should not be deliberately targeted anywhere, Palestinian rocket fire is a sign of frustration of the 6m people living in Gaza, often referred to as the world’s largest open-air prison. As the UN has described it, the Israeli blockade of Gaza “is a denial of basic human rights in contravention of international law and amounts to collective punishment”. Palestinian armed resistance is a reaction to Israel’s suffocating siege, as the Arabs are not free to work, farm and travel in the land of their fathers. And when hostilities do break out, children are mercilessly slaughtered as Israel trumpets its right of ‘self-defence’. Unless there is justice for the Palestinian people, this cycle of violence — especially Tel Aviv’s impunity — will continue.

Free to travel

FORMER prime minister Nawaz Sharif is expected to fly out of the country for his medical treatment on Tuesday after the Lahore High Court gave him permission to travel without providing any indemnity bond to the government.

The PML-N has celebrated the court’s decision as a vindication of their leader’s refusal to sign any such bond as demanded by the government. However, the court has extracted a signed undertaking from Shahbaz Sharif and Nawaz Sharif that the latter will return within the stipulated time of four weeks. This time is extendable only if the former prime minister can prove through his medical reports that his treatment requires him to stay abroad for longer. The undertaking by Shahbaz Sharif also says categorically that if at any time the government has credible information that Nawaz Sharif is “living abroad despite his fitness to travel”, a government representative will have the right to verify the state of his health from his doctor. On the face of it then, the matter seems to be settled for now.

There are, however, some complications.

According to the attorney general of Pakistan, the court has issued an interim order, which means that the final judgement on the issue is still awaited. While the court has suspended the requirement of the indemnity bond, it has admitted the petition for hearing in the third week of January. The court has specified that it intends to probe the matter in the light of five key questions that it has written in the interim order. These questions will help the court determine if the federal government can add conditions to the Exit Control List and whether a convict can be included in or excluded from the list. The final judgement, when it is delivered, will clarify the grey areas in the execution of the ECL that have emerged during this current situation.

For now, however, the government's attempt at blocking Mr Sharif's travel abroad have come undone.

Government spokespeople are attempting to paint the decision favourably but the fact is that the government tried to pull a fast on Nawaz Sharif and fell short. PTI officials may justify their actions in partisan realpolitik terms but it is obvious that the indemnity bond issue was an ill-thought afterthought that has done nothing except leaving its architects red-faced. The cabinet will now decide if it wants to challenge the Lahore High Court order but the reality is that Nawaz Sharif has got what he wanted and the government has not. Mr Sharif should now get the best treatment he can and ensure that he follows the court order regarding his return in letter and spirit. The system has trusted him. He should return this trust in full.

Religious inclusion

THE Punjab government is increasingly showing signs of its willingness to work towards the protection of the rights of minorities in the province. Last December, the provincial government announced the Minorities Empowerment Package aimed at uplifting marginalised religious communities. And now, after a meeting with the National Commission for Minority Rights, Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar has given directives for the collection of details of non-Muslim employees to ensure the protection of their rights, such as giving them a holiday on days of religious significance. He also announced Rs25m (in addition to a similar amount already allocated under the empowerment package) for scholarships to non-Muslim research and post-graduate students. Given the province's chequered

history with regard to extremism and violence against minorities, these efforts by the Punjab government are an encouraging sign of its desire to promote religious inclusion and harmony. Official proactive efforts might also check discriminatory attitudes towards non-Muslim co-workers by their Muslim superiors or colleagues.

Despite being the hub of political power in the country, Punjab has witnessed among the worst instances of religiously motivated violence against members of minority communities. Incidents such as the brutal anti-Ahmadi riots of 1953 and 1974, the merciless burning of Christian houses in Gojra (Toba Tek Singh) in 2009 and Badami Bagh (Lahore) in 2013, and the burning to death of a Christian couple in Kot Radha Kishan (Kasur) in 2014 remain etched in the nation's collective memory. However, some decisions taken by the judiciary and the government in the recent past — such as the acquittal of Aasia Bibi in a blasphemy case; the Supreme Court's decision to constitute a special bench to protect minority rights in light of a 2014 landmark verdict; and the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor for Sikh pilgrims — have led to some much-needed course correction. It is true that minority citizens in Pakistan are still marginalised to a large degree, and enjoy fewer freedoms than their Muslim counterparts. However, consistent efforts on the part of the federal and provincial governments to promote religious harmony and the rule of law will slowly but surely reverse at least some of the religiously motivated bigotry that non-Muslims in this country have been subjected to for several decades. It is to be hoped that the Punjab government delivers on what it has promised to the non-Muslim communities of the province, and that the rest of the country also emulates its example.

Battle against diabetes

THE battle against diabetes is one that the world has not been able to come to grips with. An estimated 463m people globally are afflicted with the chronic condition (up to 90pc of them with type 2 diabetes); that is 38m more than were living with it in 2017. These figures by the International Diabetes Federation, released on Nov 14 — World Diabetes Day — also contain alarming news for Pakistan. According to the report, we figure among the top 10 countries for absolute increase in diabetes prevalence, with over 19m people suffering from the disease. Of these, some 8.5m are undiagnosed, which makes them even more susceptible to the life-threatening health issues that diabetes can lead to if not

managed properly, including heart disease, stroke, kidney failure, blindness, lower limb amputation, etc.

Diabetes is known, for good reason, as a silent killer. It can sneak up on an individual without presenting any, or very mild, symptoms; public awareness about its innocuous onset is thus imperative to facilitate early detection. Our already creaking public health infrastructure is now dealing with the added burden of a condition that is the gateway to serious complications. It is also equally important for people to realise that unlike type 1, type 2 diabetes is preventable, even though some individuals may be genetically predisposed to it. A healthy lifestyle, in which exercise and a balanced diet play an important role, can help stave off this condition or at least help ameliorate its most debilitating effects. Unfortunately, however, in our part of the world, the tendency is towards a sedentary existence where maintaining one's weight within reasonable, prescribed limits goes against the cultural pattern. That, as the numbers show, has proven to be a recipe for disaster. As per the IDF report, diabetes prevalence in Pakistan has touched 17.1pc, an astounding 148pc higher than what was previously reported. Public and private health facilities must be proactive in dealing with this distressing state of affairs by raising awareness and early testing.

The legislation debate

IT was a rare but welcome day in parliament last week when the government and the opposition resolved a major dispute amicably and in the larger interest of the public.

After a productive meeting chaired by the Speaker of the National Assembly Asad Qaisar, the government agreed to withdraw the 11 ordinances it had rushed through the Assembly on Nov 7 and re-table them in the house or send them to committees for proper debate and scrutiny. In return, the opposition agreed to withdraw the vote of no-confidence that was filed against Deputy Speaker Qasim Suri who had allowed the treasury benches to bulldoze the ordinances amid furious protests from the opposition parliamentarians.

Some of these 11 bills will be sent to committees where the parliamentarians will get the time and opportunity to discuss them threadbare, call relevant officials and experts if a need arises to explore the ramifications of these bills in greater detail, propose additions or amendments wherever deemed necessary and only then

send them back to the house for a final debate and voting. Those bills that will be re-tabled in the house will be discussed and dissected as per the spirit of a proper parliamentary debate and then legislated through consensus or voting as the case may be. This dispute resolution comes as a breather for parliament that is widely seen as dormant in terms of its legislative performance. Since the government does not have the required numbers in the Senate to enact laws, it has opted for issuing ordinances as a shortcut to barrel ahead with the reforms it wants to enact through such laws. This path to lawmaking has been rightfully criticised for undercutting the spirit of debate that is supposed to enhance the quality of legislation passed by parliament.

The government has calculated that it may get the numbers it needs in the Senate next year so it believes it can keep its reform agenda in motion through enacting ordinances from the presidency till then. This is a bad idea. The opposition has done well to take a firm stance against this proliferation of ordinances and brought the process of legislation back on track. However, the amicable resolution of this dispute between the two sides raises hopes that a working relationship can be built between them as far as legislation is concerned.

The political fight should continue to be fought, as that is what a parliamentary democracy is all about, but there should be a loose consensus that legislation should not get derailed as a result of this fight.

As long as the parliamentarians keep in mind that legislation is the core function of parliament, they can carry on with their verbal duels if in the end they vote on the bills as per requirement and keep the wheels of such legislation moving smoothly.

PIA mismanagement

THE national airline, which is a listed company on the stock exchange, may not have filed any financial statements in the last two years for its shareholders as the law requires it to do, but it seems that its CEO is feeling increasingly free to give talks in different places and at different times touting the financial numbers that have not yet been audited and released. The policy board of the SECP has raised the flag that this could constitute criminal conduct designed to manipulate the market and that it needs to cease immediately. To support the very serious view that the policy board has taken of the matter, they mention trading data of PIA shares that they say sees a spike each time the CEO makes similarly casual remarks about the financial health of the company. What now needs closer examination — and the SECP has done this in the past where similar concerns existed — is to see if there is any trading taking place in PIA shares during one of these episodes by anyone with close links to the PIA top tier. Secondly, it should also be probed whether the latter has any interactions with stockbrokers who are seen trading PIA shares during these episodes.

For a publicly listed company to not file audited financial statements is a grave violation, especially if this practice has continued for two years, and along the way, trading in the company's shares has been suspended. This is currently the situation at PIA. Under these circumstances, when no auditor has yet signed off on the company's financial statements, the head would be required to show extreme discretion before discussing the financial health of his company in a public setting. Price manipulation through these kinds of practices has occurred in the past, and any company head taking their reputation, and the reputation of the management team they lead, seriously, would desist from giving the impression of being engaged in such an unethical exercise. For the head of a company, as large and as much in the public limelight as PIA is, to give the impression of indulging in price manipulation shows extreme irresponsibility. The possibility of an SECP probe that could involve more invasive scrutiny by the FIA to determine associations and interactions before, during and after these short price spikes, induced by the CEOs words, only strengthens this view.

Karachi transport plans

IT is hardly a secret that Karachi's public transport system has collapsed. Commuters face an uphill challenge every day getting to work, school and markets as most public buses have either disappeared, or the ones that remain are in decrepit shape, with passengers fighting to grab a seat, or ending up travelling on the vehicle's roof for want of space. This, in a nutshell, is the state of public transport in Pakistan's economic hub in the 21st century. Some private players have moved in to fill the gaps, such as ride-hailing apps (which are expensive) while app-based van services have also rolled out their fleets in the metropolis. But considering the fact that hundreds of thousands of commuters are on the move in Karachi daily, these interventions are inadequate. Yet we regularly hear in the media that various multilateral lenders are willing to finance public transport projects worth tens of millions of dollars; the people of Karachi read these announcements with some scepticism, and wonder when these buses will actually hit the roads. As reported in this paper, the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has approved a \$71m loan for the Red Line Bus Rapid Transit Project. The deadline for the project has been mentioned as December 2023.

The latest intervention is welcome. However the question remains: will one bus line (that is able to carry a little over 300,000 passengers daily) be able to significantly improve the city's public transport situation? Perhaps the bigger question is: will the project see the light of day, or be consigned to limbo due to unending delays? After all, the federally funded under-construction Green Line project — that was started in 2016 — still awaits completion, leaving a traffic mess in the centre of the city due to the closure of part of M.A. Jinnah Road. Both the federal and Sindh governments are experts in signing impressive-sounding transport deals for Karachi; yet the delivery and execution of these projects leave much to be desired.

Quality of discourse

THE last few weeks have been tense for Pakistan.

The ferment in the political situation manifested itself in the JUI-F dharna and its corresponding turbulence on the ground and on the negotiating table. This tumult

coincided with the bail of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the ensuing legal tug-of-war unleashed by the indemnity bond issue. Most people involved in these unfolding developments had strained nerves and frayed tempers. Stress does take its toll.

Stress, however, should not find expression in individuals whose every word has ramifications far beyond those within physical hearing distance.

We do not know if it was stress or something else that provoked Prime Minister Imran Khan to let loose on the opposition in his speech on Monday, but whatever it was it did no favour to a leader who is expected to hold his composure no matter how testing the times. Mr Khan, inaugurating a motorway project, was expected to talk about his government's performance, which he did at the start of his speech.

But then he went into a higher gear, lashing out at all his political opponents and repeating that he would spare no one.

He reserved the harshest words for Maulana Fazlur Rehman, Shahbaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. Perhaps the most unfortunate part of his tirade was his mocking of Mr Bhutto-Zardari by mimicking his Urdu accent. This act elicited guffaws from a partisan audience, but it left a sour taste in the mouth of most people.

The belligerence polluting our political landscape seems to have been injected with fresh toxins in these last few weeks.

The prime minister may have had his reasons for such renewed hostility, and many of these reasons may be valid. But the tone, tenor and choice of words to express this hostility were unfortunate.

During the time when he was on the container in 2014, Mr Khan used to resort to fiery and flammable rhetoric to attack his opponents. Oftentimes, his grandiloquence would splash out of the domain of acceptable decency but many would overlook this as the pronouncements of a man roaming the political wilderness.

Today, Mr Khan is the prime minister of Pakistan. This job requires him to be more circumspect in what he says, where he says it and how he says it. The high office he occupies demands from him a certain level of civility, propriety and dignity.

Mimicking an opponent and making fun of how he speaks does not fall within the parameters of such demands of his office.

Mr Khan may want to review this approach and help our national discourse recover some of its lost decorum.

Political differences are part and parcel of any elected dispensation. But Pakistan needs the rhetorical temperature to climb down a few degrees so that our politics does not boil over into a hate-war.

Chinese papers

IT'S there in black and white, 403 pages of a chilling prescription to erase the identity and 'reprogramme' the thinking of Chinese Muslim minorities — a dystopian '1984' playing out in real life. Even more unfortunate, it now seems clear the strategy emanates from the very pinnacle of the Chinese government. A trove of internal documents from within the secretive Communist Party of China shared with the New York Times by an anonymous whistleblower has thrown a spotlight on the thought process that underlies the brutal repression of Muslim ethnic minorities, mainly Uighurs, and their mass detentions in 're-education camps'. They reveal a government that conflates extremists with peaceful, observant Muslims in China — religious persecution in its purest form. Among the pages are texts of secret speeches allegedly by President Xi Jinping laying out the security offensive against extremism in Xinjiang province. In one of them, "a period of painful, interventionary treatment" for those "infected" by "extremism" is advocated; in another to "...show absolutely no mercy". The leaked documents also contain a guide for officials to use when dealing with queries from anxious Uighur youth when they find their family members missing: their relatives, the officials are instructed to say, were "infected" by the "virus" of Islamist radicalism for which they were required to be quarantined and cured. Moreover, Uighurs unwilling to accept the 'official' version of the situation should be cautioned their behaviour could prolong the detention of their family member/s.

For some time, accounts have been appearing in the Western media of a Uighur community under siege, and the detention camps in which as many as a million of them may be incarcerated. The stories have often been downplayed or dismissed as propaganda, usually by countries with high stakes in the world's second-largest economy. China has denounced the exposé as an attempt to discredit its efforts

against extremism which it has portrayed as a resounding success in Xinjiang — presumably as a result of a policy that is indeed entirely lacking in mercy. Significantly, however, it has not disputed the documents' veracity. That makes it much more difficult to affect ignorance about the atrocities being inflicted on the Chinese Muslims. Like many other countries, Pakistan too has a spotty human rights record, but when it can speak out against the human rights violations of the Kashmiris and the Rohingya, can it stay silent about the Uighurs?

Dengue cases

THE outbreak of dengue across the country seems to have been particularly vicious this year. Around 50,000 cases have already been reported. This is almost double the number of people infected with the virus in the past decade. The last serious outbreak of dengue was recorded in 2011 when some 27,000 people fell ill. While health officials argue that the increase is partly due to a global surge in dengue cases in countries including Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Philippines — where the number of people affected is said to be higher than in Pakistan — it still does not condone the health authorities' lackadaisical approach to a serious challenge. They failed to put in place preventive measures, although they had been warned last May of such an outbreak. WHO has declared dengue as one of the top 10 global public health threats; surely, the national and provincial health authorities could have ensured active vigilance and preventive measures before matters got out of hand. The communication gap between provincial health departments has also contributed to the increase in the number of cases. Although this time there appears to be an improvement in reporting mechanisms regarding the number of people afflicted in the country, experts argue that there are still several weak links in the disease surveillance system which need to be ironed out. Hopefully, the onset of winter will slow down the breeding of the disease-carrying mosquitoes in most of the country, although there are fears that this might not be the case in Karachi where a milder winter may not prevent mosquito breeding.

Though an Emergency Operation Centre dedicated to controlling the spread of dengue fever has been set up in Islamabad, it is not yet clear whether it is following a comprehensive plan to control the spread of the illness. Perhaps the EOC can begin work by verifying reports of two different strains of the dengue virus affecting patients and then share this information with health practitioners, along with putting out guidelines for treatment.

Polio resurgence

THE impact of political polarisation in Pakistan is beginning to show in the country's anti-polio efforts. In a scathing report, the International Monitoring Board has attributed the vicious resurgence of polio in Pakistan this year to a "lack of political unity". Describing the polio programme and related efforts as "a political football", the report states that the recent resurgence of polio cases — 88 so far this year, including seven of the more dangerous P2 strain that had been eradicated in 2014 — reflects "a massive reversal of the trajectory to global polio eradication", and that too in less than a year. Pakistan reported more than 80pc of the total global polio cases this year, with the crippling disease detected in areas that had been polio-free as recently as the beginning of 2018. This is not the first time that lack of political consensus with regard to the anti-polio efforts has been pointed out. But the present report has drawn greater attention to the internal factionalism caused in large part by the prevailing brand of national political discourse. It has also highlighted the extent of damage to whatever progress Pakistan had made in its anti-polio efforts over the years with the help of international donors.

In fact, deep political divisions are not specific to polio. Similar verbal sparring and blame games have hampered attempts at dengue control in Punjab and KP, as they have in Karachi where even municipal services such as garbage collection have been politicised. In addition, arbitrary bureaucratic changes and the inertia that has beset the civil service after the last elections have contributed to the crisis in provincial polio programmes. The fact that the polio programme, for all its flaws, has managed to continue is a tribute to the efforts of our polio workers who have had to face hostility from misinformed parents and threats to their lives by religious extremists.

The prevalence of polio was highest in 2014 when 306 cases were reported and the IMB had advised Pakistanis travelling abroad to carry immunisation certificates. However, the government had managed to restrict the active polio virus to a handful of locations in the country by 2018 and reduce the number of cases to eight. With Prime Minister Imran Khan's announcement to lead the vaccination drive himself, the PTI-led government appears well-intentioned. But it has allowed its petty rhetoric and open disregard for other political players to get in the way, leaving it with very little political capital to be able to have a constructive dialogue even on an issue as apolitical as polio eradication. One hopes that the

government will reflect on the findings of the report so that it can lead a joint effort by all provincial health authorities and politicians to work towards the eradication of a national and global health risk affecting the future of millions of children.

Curbing optimism

FOR the first time in four years the external deficit of the country has recorded a surplus, though a nominal one and only in the month of October. There are grounds for cautious optimism here that at least one of the critical deficits in the economy is being bridged steadily and the course of direction is the correct one. But a closer look at the numbers shows that such optimism, cautious as it might be, should be restrained. Much of the improvement owes itself to increasing foreign currency inflows into Pakistan government debt mainly because of the high interest rates on offer here compared to regional countries. Secondly, a large one-off payment made by the telecom companies for licence renewal has suddenly spiked the foreign investment numbers. Third, a dip in oil imports has helped constrict the trade deficit more than anything else, while exports show only a marginal increase. It is hard to see how any of these factors can be reliably considered as a sustainable foundation on which to build the external sector's strength.

What must be emphasised is that the current account deficit will reappear the moment the government guns for growth. At the moment, the slowing economy is the biggest reason for the slackening of the deficit, but once growth returns it is difficult to see how the deficit will be kept in check. Surely, the development itself — a current account surplus after years of sustained deficits — is an important milestone for the economic managers. But for the rest of us, it is merely a blip along a long road that must include sustainable reforms and improved competitiveness. Sadly on that front, there is no real progress to show. The recently announced national tariff policy claims to address some competitiveness concerns, particularly for exports, but whatever has been released of it thus far shows little more than antiquated thinking that belongs to the 1960s. Even the words 'infant industries' were mentioned in it, though one wonders what infant industries requiring tariff protections the authors of the policy may have in mind. For that we will have to wait for the full list of tariff protections that the policy aims to bring. In the meantime, all we have is a declining deficit that in part owes itself to luck, in part to a slowing economy, and in part to high interest rates.

Israeli settlements

EVER since the establishment of the state of Israel, most US governments — both Democrat and Republican — have maintained a policy of steadfastly supporting Tel Aviv regardless of its atrocious behaviour towards the Palestinians. But few American administrations have backed Israel's atrocities as openly as the Trump White House has. Whether it was the recognition of the holy city of Jerusalem as Israel's 'capital', or accepting the illegal Israeli occupation of Syria's Golan Heights as valid — all flying in the face of international opinion — Mr Trump and his team have spared no effort to humiliate the Arabs and reward Tel Aviv for its land grab. The latest in this long list of one-sided moves is the statement of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in which he has bestowed America's blessings on illegal Israeli settlements. The establishment of such settlements in the West Bank "is not per se inconsistent with international law", said Mr Pompeo, while adding in the same statement that the US "remains deeply committed to helping facilitate peace" between Palestine and Israel. How stabbing the Arabs in the heart by allowing Israel to occupy their land can facilitate peace is only something America's top diplomat can answer.

The fact is that the US has hardly ever been an honest broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict. But under Mr Trump's watch, all pretence of neutrality has been dropped, which has had deadly implications for the Palestinians. Knowing that the world's sole superpower will cover for them, Israel's establishment has pulled out all the stops in expropriating Palestinian land, and shedding Arab blood without compunction. While the UN and EU have both opposed the annexation of illegal settlements, there appears to be little the international community can do other than express 'regret' over Israel's behaviour. The Zionist state — particularly the right-wingers within the Israeli power structure — is doing everything it can to kill the two-state solution. With no hope of a viable state, the Palestinians will continue to resist and face the ugly reaction of the Israeli military machine.

CJ's rejoinder

IMRAN Khan's recent, ill-considered swipe against the judiciary, evidently triggered by what he perceived as a disparity in the judicial system's treatment of

the elite and the rest of the citizenry that allowed Nawaz Sharif to leave the country, has met with a firm response by the country's top judge.

Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, speaking at an event on Wednesday, said it was the government itself that had permitted the former prime minister to proceed abroad.

Clearly, the prime minister's calling upon the judiciary to 'restore public confidence' in its working irked Justice Khosa, who has made judicial reforms the cornerstone of his tenure. To that end, at the same event, he also appreciated Mr Khan's stated intention of enhancing resources for the judiciary.

As the final arbiter of the law and guardian of fundamental rights, the judicial system has a critical role to play in a nation's trajectory.

On that score, Pakistan's judiciary admittedly has an uneven record.

For instance, less than a decade after partition, the judgement in the Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan case ratified the governor general's dismissal of the first constituent assembly. That fateful verdict gave birth to the infamous 'doctrine of necessity' which has echoed through Pakistan's turbulent history and hobbled democracy time and again. Another stain on the judiciary's record is the death sentence handed down to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, often denounced as a 'judicial murder' for being based on overt political expediency rather than evidence.

These are but two of several instances where our courts unfortunately chose to be on the wrong side of history. Then again, more recently, the same institution has also delivered landmark verdicts that have upheld the highest principles of humanity, such as the acquittal of Aasia Bibi — that too in the face of a certain and violent backlash from the ultra right. The Faizabad dharna judgement, meanwhile, reaffirmed the supremacy of civilian rule and clearly defined institutional boundaries.

Such verdicts reassert the rule of law and strengthen democracy. However, progress has been patchy, stymied now and again by hyper judicial activism that has breached institutional boundaries, thereby weakening the democratic process.

Hopefully the superior judiciary is mindful of this history, and inclined to be more circumspect.

The present chief justice has focused particularly on the dire need for judicial reform, the absence of which causes untold misery to the less privileged.

For example, he has overseen the setting up of model courts that have considerably reduced the massive backlog of criminal cases; speedy disposal of cases also means reduced legal costs for litigants. Of course, far more needs to be done to make the justice system more equitable, such as free legal aid and financial support for prisoners languishing behind bars even after completing their sentences because they are unable to pay their fines. Nevertheless, the direction is encouraging, and it must be sustained.

Resistant bugs

FOR some years now, the irrational use of antibiotics across the world, including in this country, has emerged as a major health crisis. To highlight this concern, events have been held this past week to mark World Antibiotic Awareness Week — observed from Nov 18 to Nov 24. The theme this year is, ‘the future of antibiotics depends on us all’. According to WHO, around 700,000 people die globally every year because the overuse of antibiotics has made common bacterial illnesses more difficult to treat, and regular lifesaving medical procedures such as C-sections and hip replacements riskier to perform. WHO has termed antimicrobial resistance a global health crisis that could cause 10m deaths across the world by the year 2050.

Though increased resistance to antibiotics has emerged across countries of all income levels, the challenges are far greater for states such as Pakistan. Health experts have raised the alarm that with the increased use of antibiotics, consumed with or without prescription, a number of infectious diseases including tuberculosis, food-borne conditions and pneumonia are not only getting harder but almost impossible to treat. These illnesses are already rampant in Pakistan, which, unfortunately, also has the highest rate of neonatal deaths in the world while the maternal mortality rate remains the highest regionally. According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Risk Report of 2013, more than 70pc of the infections among newborns in Pakistan are caused by antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Last year, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention issued a warning that Pakistan could export the XDR typhoid fever — an extensively drug-resistant strain of the illness — believed to have emerged as a result of the overuse of antibiotics in the

country. In this regard, the Sindh government, earlier this month, introduced a vaccine for schoolchildren hoping to reduce the prevalence of XDR typhoid that has become endemic in many parts of the province. However, stronger measures are needed such as improving sanitation, cracking down on unqualified doctors and checking over-the-counter sales of antibiotics. Moreover, the widespread use of antibiotics in poultry and cattle farming, and agriculture, also compounds the problem. The federal health ministry had devised a national action plan in collaboration with WHO to curb the overuse of antibiotics; however, so far, there has been no implementation of this due to lack of resources. The authorities need to review the situation before another superbug emerges as a global health risk, posing a threat to lives in and outside Pakistan.

Iran petrol protests

OVER the past few days, Iran has been rocked by nationwide protests sparked by a sharp rise in fuel prices and rationing of petrol, ostensibly to free up funds the state can spend on low-income citizens. Considering the pressures on the Iranian economy — and on the ordinary Iranian, thanks mainly to US sanctions — the fuel price hike has hit a raw nerve, with people taking to the streets to vent their anger. The demonstrations have descended into violence in several instances, with protesters resorting to arson attacks; the authorities have struck back, terming the demonstrators ‘rioters’. Information coming out of Iran has been difficult to verify as the state clamped down on the internet, with a near-total shutdown of the web lasting several days. Only on Thursday did reports emerge of partial internet restoration. According to Amnesty International, over 100 people have been killed in the protests; the Islamic Republic has termed the figure “speculative, not reliable”. This is, indeed, a disturbing situation and further information is needed to confirm the extent of the bloodshed. While violence cannot be condoned from any side, it is the Iranian state’s responsibility to handle protests — which are the people’s right — in a humane manner, applying non-lethal methods of crowd control in case things get out of hand. Shutting down the internet is just as unacceptable, as it prevents the people from exercising their right to communicate.

The Iranian state will have to work overtime to improve the economic situation of its people in the face of crippling US sanctions. The latter — triggered by the Trump administration after the US unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal — have dealt a deadly blow to the Iranian economy, ensuring that Tehran, a petrochemical

powerhouse, is unable to sell its oil and gas or access the international financial system. This has fuelled civil unrest as Iranians have had to tighten their belts. Unless a solution to the impasse is found soon, instability is likely to increase in the Islamic Republic.

Khan-Trump call

WHERE Pakistan-US ties are concerned, many critics have described the relationship as transactional. It is often said that Islamabad has helped Washington carry forward its policy goals in South Asia and the broader region in exchange for material benefits. This may not be an erroneous impression. Still, it is a rather simplistic way of looking at things. From opening the doors to communist China for America to aiding the US in the anti-Soviet 'jihad' in Afghanistan, Pakistan has had a long and complex relationship with the world's sole superpower. Where Afghanistan is concerned, perhaps the realisation has dawned upon those that matter in Washington that without Pakistan, stability will be hard to achieve in that country. In a phone call on Thursday, President Donald Trump thanked Prime Minister Imran Khan for Pakistan's role in a prisoner exchange, in which Afghan Taliban detainees were swapped for two Western academics. During the call, Mr Khan also asked the US leader to continue mediation efforts with New Delhi with reference to Kashmir.

While it is true that Mr Trump's foreign policy agenda lacks stability (his country has withdrawn from several key multilateral agreements under him), the American leader is interested in bringing the long Afghan war to a close, chiefly for domestic reasons. The American establishment realises that the Afghan war is more or less unwinnable, and is, therefore, looking for a workable exit strategy to save face and ensure that the country does not turn into a haven for militant groups. The Americans also know that Pakistan has some leverage over the Afghan Taliban, and that any final settlement involving Washington, the Taliban and the government in Kabul will be very difficult to achieve without Pakistan's help. Therefore, Pakistan's leadership must communicate clearly to the US that it will do what it can to bring peace to Afghanistan. But the situation in India-held Kashmir cannot be ignored either. While Afghanistan can become a regional security risk should it implode, IHK can also become a trigger for war between two nuclear-armed states.

Pakistan's leadership must impress upon the Americans that they should use their good offices with India to help forge a solution to the Kashmir question, which is the key to peace in South Asia. Admittedly, India stubbornly claims that Kashmir is an 'internal' issue, but despite its tough talk, it is doubtful it has the wherewithal to resist American 'advice' to talk peace with Pakistan. Strictly speaking, the conflict between the Taliban and Kabul is also an 'internal' issue. But that hasn't stopped all regional states, as well as the US and others, from urging the hostile actors to make peace. If the US is serious about stability in all of South and Central Asia, then it must emphasise the importance of dialogue with Pakistan with the same seriousness as it pursues an Afghan settlement.

Funding controversy

OF all the problems the PTI has faced since its leader Imran Khan decided to turn it into a mainstream outfit, matching blow for blow, the foreign funding case has perhaps given it the most trouble. And now, as Prime Minister Khan asks the Election Commission of Pakistan that the PTI's case be heard at the same time as the foreign funding cases against the PML-N and PPP, he is, in effect, comparing his party with those he once deemed too corrupt to be spoken of in the same breath as the PTI.

In that sense, a sobering climbdown has taken place as the ECP prepares to hear the case on a daily basis from Nov 26. The decision on the nonstop hearing comes at the request of the opposition parties that are keen for a verdict during the tenure of the current chief election commissioner, which ends next month.

The opposition parties believe that the decision would pull the rug from under the PTI edifice. Not that the outcome can be predicted as a PTI petition is pending before the Islamabad High Court, but many, including a former senior ECP official, have claimed that an adverse verdict could have serious repercussions for the PTI, including the disqualification of all the lawmakers and even local government representatives of a party ruled as guilty.

The case has taken too long. The matter was first brought for adjudication by PTI dissident Akbar S. Babar in 2014. He had alleged that the illegal transfer of millions of dollars to accounts belonging to those working with the PTI had taken place.

The proceedings of the case have been slow, with the PTI moving the court with various pleas related to the legal points raised by Mr Babar. Before this bracketing of the PTI case with probes against the PPP and PML-N, at one point the PTI wanted the ECP investigation into its funding to be kept secret.

The legal battle aside, the manner in which the PTI has been acting makes very little political sense. Only the other day, Prime Minister Imran Khan made a statement about how the PTI had nothing to fear in this instance since an audit had proved it had done nothing wrong.

Mr Khan's party and government colleagues could try to reflect their leader's confidence in their public responses to this long-running funding controversy. But first, the PTI as a reformist party must prove that it has nothing to hide.

Press freedom

IN conferring an award on the editor of this newspaper, the Committee to Protect Journalists has shone a spotlight on the state of Pakistan's press in particular, at a time when independent journalism the world over is under threat. Historically, the country's journalists have been no strangers to the pressures of undemocratic forces and their aversion to the very concept of public-interest journalism; in fact, many media workers have paid the ultimate price with their lives. Yet the situation we face today is even more critical, with the entire fourth estate being bullied into submission by the ratcheting up of dehumanising anti-press rhetoric — even by sections of the incumbent political class. So why do it? Why hold the line when capitulation is the expedient course of action, when the alternative is loss of livelihood and financial ruin, being targeted for harassment and abuse, or even spuriously charged with sedition or cyberterrorism?

There is just one reason, and it is the same reason that has held true for countless journalists over the many decades of Pakistan's chequered past — to uphold a core pillar of democracy: the public's right to information. The citizens of Pakistan are constitutionally entitled to participate in the decision-making processes that are shaping this country's trajectory. They have the right to demand transparency and accountability of public institutions. And they have the right to express dissent in safety knowing that the state will defend this right and protect them against reprisal. The divergence between these principles and the current escalating erosion of fundamental rights must be challenged. The choice before us is either national

progress on the basis of an open society, or further injustice, inequality and impunity for the abuse of power. None other than the brave sons and daughters of this soil can win this struggle for the country's soul, and there is no time more urgent than the present for the press to unite in solidarity and ensure that all Pakistanis' voices are heard.

Ehsaas beneficiaries

IN a meeting of the PTI parliamentary party, legislators bitterly criticised their government's flagship programme Ehsaas for providing more benefit to supporters of the opposition parties and less so to voters of the ruling party.

Read: PTI lawmakers assail Nishtar, say Ehsaas benefiting opponents

According to a report in this paper, the parliamentarians came down heavily on the prime minister's special assistant on social protection and poverty alleviation, Sania Nishtar, saying she should do something practical instead of carrying out paperwork and surveys. They piled so much pressure on Dr Nishtar that at one point she broke down into tears. The prime minister had to intervene and ask the participants of the meeting to allow her to give her point of view.

Dr Nishtar later explained to this paper that she had to face a volley of allegations but she informed the lawmakers that the benefits of the Ehsaas programme were given to card holders of the Benazir Income Support Programme, and once the fresh survey was complete the coverage of the Ehsaas programme would become more comprehensive.

While this might be true and there may be many deserving citizens not covered by the programme, the argument peddled by the ruling party parliamentarians is unjustified. It is unfair to demand that the focus of the programme should be the people who supported the ruling party at the expense of those who voted for its opponents.

This attitude reflects a myopic and alarmingly partisan approach towards governance.

It is no secret that the PTI has fuelled its narrative with divisiveness but its parliamentarians should realise they are now the government of Pakistan, not the government of PTI. Their governance, including the Ehsaas project, is funded by

taxpayer money collected from all citizens and not just PTI voters. Therefore, this money must be spent on all citizens, regardless of their political affiliations. This is no rocket science. Yet it is surprising to see the PTI parliamentarians stooping to this level to gain political advantage at the expense of their opponents.

Given such an attitude towards the government's flagship programme, it is all the more important now to inject a greater level of transparency into the project.

Parliament should demand details of how the funds for Ehsaas are being allocated across the country and what criteria are being set for those qualifying to receive assistance under the programme.

A greater degree of parliamentary oversight will ensure there is no political victimisation and the money is spent fairly, equitably and on a totally nonpartisan basis. Providing a social safety net for the most vulnerable segments of the population is a good policy that has paid dividends in recent years.

The Ehsaas programme is conceived for the right reasons and if executed professionally and comprehensively, has the potential to impact the lives of millions of citizens. Due diligence, therefore, is of utmost importance.

University harassment

THE conversation around the University of Balochistan harassment scandal seems to have snowballed into a larger debate about the province's overall sense of deprivation and tenuous security situation. On Wednesday, acting vice chancellor of the university Mohammad Anwer Panezai told a Senate committee on human rights that the FC and police officials had agreed to vacate the campus. He was responding to a committee member's concerns that the presence of law-enforcement officials at the university might be contributing to the environment of fear at not only this particular institute but also in the rest of the country. He also said that the number of CCTV cameras in the university had been reduced — though he did not make clear the steps being taken to prevent the misuse of those that remained. He stressed that the university faced a "continuous threat of terrorism". The security concerns are legitimate. Balochistan has suffered from violence perpetrated by multiple anti-state actors. But the core issue remains the sexual harassment of students and the violation of their privacy in the largest higher education institute of Balochistan. Some initial steps have been taken to

address the situation, with the previous vice chancellor stepping down and four university officials being suspended for their alleged involvement. Moreover, the provincial government has issued directives to all universities in the province to set up anti-harassment cells, though so far only Khuzdar University has complied. Still, the facts remain hazy, and one hopes that once the FIA submits its final report to the Balochistan High Court on Dec 2, it will become easier to identify the perpetrators and take them to task.

Given the stigma attached to it, sexual harassment is difficult to tackle in conservative societies, especially in a country like Pakistan where antiquated notions of family and societal honour have always prevailed. This is especially true for the tribal families of Balochistan — more so in the case of women, many of whom may now find it difficult to convince their families to allow them to opt for higher studies after this incident. Already the female literacy rate in Balochistan is a mere 33.5pc — a stark contrast to the, admittedly deplorable, 52pc for the rest of the country. How the Balochistan government tackles the situation remains to be seen. But it is hoped that it will leave no stone unturned to arrest the culprits who may have put the future of thousands of young women in jeopardy.

Trigger-happy police

WHEN a mother penned a heartbreaking account of the night she lost her daughter to police crossfire in Dawn last year, it caught the attention of many people, including those in positions of power. Through her words and the details of her experience with law-enforcement and healthcare officials — which saw 10-year-old Amal succumbing to a stray bullet fired by a policeman after an exchange of fire with a robber, in a hospital — Beenish Umer was able to shed light on the inadequacies of state and private entities in dealing with such life and death situations. Thanks to the efforts of the parents, a bill was passed by the Sindh Assembly — the Sindh Injured Persons' Compulsory Medical Treatment (Amal Umer) Bill, or simply the Amal Umer Bill — which makes it obligatory for hospitals to give immediate treatment to victims of firing, assault or traffic accidents. All expenses for emergency services are to be compensated for by the government, and hospital staff is not to bother patients and their families with legal formalities or require clearance by the police before or during treatment. Failure to do so results in fines and up to a three-year prison sentence. Undoubtedly, it is a welcome measure: if implemented in letter and spirit, it will help many victims by

introducing more compassion and efficiency in the running of affairs in private and government hospitals.

But there is another issue that remains largely unaddressed: the lack of accountability of a trigger-happy police force, all too often allowed to get away with murder. This week, in the early hours of Nov 22, police officials shot dead an unarmed driver and wounded the passenger of a car they claim did not pull over when signalled to stop. The policemen then fled the scene and did not inform their superiors. While an FIR has been lodged against three policemen, it remains to be seen if long-term reforms will be introduced to prevent such incidents from recurring.

Disparaging CPEC

THERE are legitimate concerns about the impact that investments coming into Pakistan under the CPEC umbrella will have on the country's economy, but the recent intervention of US Assistant Secretary Alice Wells in this debate only serves to muddy the waters rather than spark a helpful conversation.

As a senior American diplomat, Ms Wells has sometimes been perceived as patronising towards Pakistan. Her remarks about CPEC, in which she tried to underscore the rising debt burden that Chinese investments are bringing to this country, can hardly be expected to ensure progress in the Pakistan-US relationship which itself has undergone a long period of tension.

Should the administration in Washington D.C. decide to act on Ms Wells' words, far from yielding any dividends, it will only create more obstacles in bilateral ties — a hint of this emerged over the weekend when government ministers said that Pakistan would go ahead with CPEC.

As such, the best advice that can be offered after her talk at the Woodrow Wilson Centre, during which she raised her concerns about the CPEC project to widespread media coverage, is to let her words lie where they fell.

Action speaks louder than words. The concerns being voiced about the growing ties between China and Pakistan by a faction within the Trump administration need more than words before they can be considered credible.

Ms Wells should be asked what the current US administration is willing to do to help Pakistan meet its needs for infrastructure in a way that does not aggravate the country's debt burden. If her response is not convincing, then her words will be overshadowed by the ability and willingness of Chinese capital to acquire long-term stakes in this country.

There is no doubt that a more detailed conversation is needed within Pakistan around the growing Chinese stakes in the economy. The repayment obligations are part of this debate. In addition, the direction in which these investments will take our economy in the future, particularly in vital areas such as agriculture that is the cradle of our food self-sufficiency, also needs a more sensitive discussion.

But this should first and foremost be a conversation among Pakistani stakeholders, including business leaders, political parties, the research community and the media.

The Trump administration will struggle to find a place in this debate since its input will inevitably be viewed through the prism of its escalating struggle to contain the emergence of China as a great power on the world stage — as epitomised by the ongoing trade war between the two.

It would be better if the bilateral dialogue between the US and Pakistan were to focus more on the tangible outcomes that both sides wish to see in Afghanistan, and leave out China and CPEC until such time that the US has something useful to contribute.

Prisoners' rights

PRISON walls are meant to sequester certain individuals from society, but they must not be an impediment to their constitutionally protected rights. However, that is not the norm in a country like Pakistan, where the rights of even free citizens are often not respected, let alone those of people who are incarcerated. Inmates without means and connections are of course at a particular disadvantage. It is therefore encouraging that the Islamabad High Court last week, having converted a convict's complaint into a petition, set up a commission — headed by Minister for Human Rights Shireen Mazari and including several rights activists — to ensure that the civil liberties of prisoners are duly protected. The complainant had accused executive authorities of negligence resulting in damage to his eyesight.

A retributive approach to justice, rather than a rehabilitative one, is often accompanied by a dehumanising approach to individuals behind bars. Such people tend to be seen by society as having forfeited the ‘inviolable dignity’ that is the fundamental right of every citizen. Many of these inmates are not even convicts, given that criminal trials take years to limp through Pakistan’s dysfunctional criminal justice system. Aside from the ethical considerations, there are legal obligations that govern the treatment of prisoners. According to international conventions, it is incumbent upon every government to protect civil liberties, while prison rules for each province stipulate an environment that affords access to health, vocational training, religious instruction, education, etc to all persons in custody. The reality is that no matter how comprehensive the rules, practical obstacles, such as overcrowding — which exacerbates resource constraints — prevent these rights from being fully realised. According to a report submitted to the Supreme Court a few months ago, there were a total of 80,145 inmates housed in 98 prisons in Punjab, Sindh, KP and Balochistan against a sanctioned capacity of 56,495. That works out to a shocking 42pc over the limit. Not surprisingly, living in such close proximity increases the chances of the spread of contagious diseases among the prison population, and adds to stress levels that can leave weaker/younger inmates more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence. Given these conditions, mental illness among prisoners is also on the rise. Of the 4,600 plus prisoners on death row in Pakistan, nearly 200 in Punjab alone are said to be suffering from some form of mental illness. The newly instituted committee has an important task at hand.

Suffocating space

FOR weeks now, a thick blanket of smog has been suffocating the people of Punjab, while smog-like conditions have also been reported in Peshawar and other parts of KP. On Friday, schools were closed in the cities of Lahore, Faisalabad and Gujranwala due to the poor air quality. Some residents have started taking measures to protect themselves, such as wearing surgical masks, but that is simply not enough to combat the severity of the threat to their health. The toxins in the air directly impact the heart, respiratory systems and life expectancy of citizens, and pose the greatest danger to the elderly, small children and expecting mothers. Meanwhile, poor visibility on the road leads to a greater number of accidents.

According to experts, the smog is created by a combination of factors, though most of the blame is often placed on farmers burning their rice stubble ahead of the harvesting seasons, both at home and across the border in India. Consequently, the twin cities of Lahore and Delhi have the worst air quality in the world during wintertime. Other major factors that contribute to poor air quality include the substandard fuel that drives the transport, manufacturing and agriculture sectors, while the hundreds of brick kiln industries that operate on outdated technology also contribute to the problem. Some days ago, Air Visual ranked Delhi as the most polluted city in the world, with an air quality index of 556, which was followed by Lahore ranked at 447. These figures are alarming; yet it is debatable whether the government is treating the public health crisis with the seriousness it deserves. It is time for the governments of Pakistan and India to put aside at least some of their differences and prioritise the safety of their citizenry. They must work jointly to come up with a solution to their shared climate crisis. Conditions may be murky, but the writing on the wall is clear.

Buzdar uncertainty

FROM being touted as a symbol of the common man's empowerment in August 2018 to becoming the 'imminent fall guy' just over a year later, it has been a steep climb down for Sardar Usman Buzdar.

Read: Calls for Buzdar's ouster rising in PTI

But even so, the signs are that while the Punjab chief minister may be down, he has not been ruled out.

The inability of the Buzdar setup is commonly listed as a significant failure of the Imran Khan government.

It is true that some of the most well-informed analysts believe that the 'expendable' sardar from southern Punjab could be sacrificed by Prime Minister Khan to meet the strong demands of change. However, there are problems with these views that see Mr Khan as just another pliant ruler.

The PTI chief has demonstrated, not least because of his inconsistent position on political matters in recent days, that it is not always easy to make him see the 'logic' of the steps that his alleged backers insist he must take. The unnecessary debate he managed to stir over the issue of Nawaz Sharif's medical treatment abroad is an example.

The same mind that appeared to be in a state of agitation over Mr Sharif's departure would not be prepared to see the Punjab chief minister being forced to exit. Hence, the topic of discussion in the many emergency meetings that have taken place between Mr Khan and Mr Buzdar could well be on survival, instead of dismissal.

It has also been observed that those who speak of an impending ouster of the chief minister disregard many factors.

If Mr Buzdar's nomination as chief minister was a compromise between Mr Khan's supporters in 2018, there are now too many groups within the PTI to call it a united entity. In fact, the gulf is widening and there are many power-wielders in the province, who Mr Buzdar would have to cut down to size in order to rule effectively.

In other examples of widening divisions, the general secretary of the PTI in central Punjab resigned over intra-party differences, while in a show of extreme resentment, a large number of PTI Punjab lawmakers stayed away from a recent parliamentary party meeting.

These are enough signs to caution the more astute PTI members against taking the risk of holding elections for a new chief minister. Mr Buzdar had won the chief minister's post by the slimmest majority in the house — securing 186 out of 371 votes. The tally included votes by the PTI, plus by the PML-Q and three independent MPAs. Against this backdrop, there is no reason for Mr Khan to

expose his government and party to the tough test that an election for a new chief minister in Punjab could turn out to be. He already has too many monsters to deal with. Creating a new one will not help matters.

Plenty to hide

OVER 100 days since the lockdown of India-held Kashmir, New Delhi is unable to silence voices from around the world condemning its behaviour in the occupied region. The latest of these has emerged in the US Congress, with Arab-American lawmaker Rashida Tlaib introducing a resolution that serves as a searing indictment of Indian actions in IJK. The resolution calls for many things, including asking India to lift the communications blockade and allow the provision of medical treatment without obstruction. The document notes that India's actions in the occupied region "are not reflective of the shared democratic norms and values between" Washington and New Delhi. Indeed, far from being democratic, India's brutish methods in the held region have more to do with fascism. As reported, a group of Indian activists have been barred by the authorities from visiting areas in IJK outside Srinagar. The activists include a former union minister as well as former government and military figures. Indeed, the question arises that if New Delhi has nothing to hide, why is it preventing its own citizens from seeing the conditions that prevail in IJK for themselves? Perhaps because there is plenty to hide, as the attitude of the authorities in held Kashmir reeks of a colonial mindset. For example, when family members of detained Kashmiri leaders visited them recently, security men reportedly frisked a toddler. Such degrading behaviour shows that while India has snatched their freedom from them, it is now trying to rob the Kashmiris of their dignity as well.

It is hoped that pressure from all quarters continues to be put on the Indian government, and that people of conscience across the world go on highlighting the dismal human rights situation in IJK. While the current ruling clique in New Delhi has shown it has a thick skin by shrugging off criticism, the world needs to keep raising a voice for the Kashmiris, who have lived under suffocating conditions for so long now. When powerful foreign friends of India — who up till now have preferred to pay only lip service to the Kashmir crisis — begin to speak up and condemn its behaviour in IJK, chances are that New Delhi may change its brutal approach. The US and European states are quick to point out human rights abuses

in countries that are geopolitical rivals. It is time they called a spade a spade when it comes to India's treatment of the beleaguered Kashmiris.

Women doctors

A REPORT in this paper has shed light on a new initiative which will attempt to bring 35,000 non-practising women doctors back into the field through the innovative use of technology. Launched by the Dow University of Health Sciences last year, the eDoctor programme has so far recruited 700 women medics in its training sessions. Many of these women left or were made to leave their careers many years ago and now have adult children. The programme offers them re-training courses that will update their expertise and knowledge of the medical field and enable them to practise once more. The problem of women doctors not continuing to work after graduation, marriage or motherhood has been a long-standing issue in our society, and written about countless times before. But there are also many men who leave the country to practise their profession in other lands. Unfortunately, and partly due to the brain drain and large number of non-practising doctors, Pakistan has one of the world's lowest doctor-to-patient ratios. It takes many years to create a doctor, and the amount of time and money that go into producing the nation's healthcare providers are seen as a waste of resources if the medics are not in position to tend to the sick.

While the concept behind eDoctor is certainly inventive and well-intentioned, and hopefully will achieve what it aims to do — deliver important medical services to the needy segments of society, while providing employment to women — there is the question of its outreach and how effective and sustainable it will be. But there is another, deeper malaise that needs to be addressed too, and that is not related to technological advancement: why do so many Pakistani families disallow women from having a career after marriage? It is unfortunate that even in this day and age, the Pakistani woman's role is restricted to the confines of the home — regardless of how educated she is, or her potential to contribute meaningfully to society.

PTI to the rescue

IT is a stunning volte-face, even for a government that has many an about-face under its belt.

On Monday, the PTI government filed a petition in the Islamabad High Court seeking a deferment of the verdict in the case against retired Gen Pervez Musharraf for high treason, due to be announced tomorrow.

The trial has dragged on since March 2014, when a special court constituted to try the former military dictator charged him under Article 6 for suspending the Constitution in 2007 and imposing emergency rule.

Exactly a week before his government came to Mr Musharraf's rescue, Prime Minister Imran Khan — evidently riled up by Nawaz Sharif's departure for medical treatment abroad — made an ill-considered jibe against the superior judiciary, asking it to “restore public trust by ending the impression about favouring the powerful against the poor”.

In a robust defence of his institution, Chief Justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa retorted that the judiciary had convicted one prime minister and disqualified another, and that a verdict against a former army chief was soon to be delivered.

Surely anyone familiar with Pakistan's history knows that an army chief can be counted among that sliver of the elite whose influence, to a great extent, endures beyond retirement. Indeed, so powerful is this office that Mr Musharraf is the first of his cohort to have faced prosecution for suspending the Constitution.

How then can a government that loses no opportunity to portray itself as a champion of ordinary citizens, and that has vowed to punish the abuse of office by the privileged few, rush to Mr Musharraf's defence?

The yet to be announced verdict notwithstanding, certain facts are irrefutable: the military dictator suspended the fundamental law of the land, thereby stripping the people of constitutional protections based on principles of justice and liberty.

When a party that has come to power through the electoral process can seek relief for such an individual, who is alleged to have committed one of the most serious crimes against the state, it could justifiably be accused of harbouring a soft spot for authoritarian rule. That a number of duly elected people's representatives —

including a former prime minister — have been subjected to months-long detention without charge while the government touts its ‘accountability’ credentials, only strengthens this perception.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has shown regrettably poor judgement in authorising the bizarre intervention on behalf of Mr Musharraf.

After all, it should have been self-evident that this move, far from burnishing the PTI’s reputation, would convey the impression of a government at odds with itself.

As expected, social media has dug up video evidence of Mr Khan many years ago denouncing the former army chief’s actions and his imposition of emergency. As head of a parliamentary democracy today, the prime minister should not have wavered from that stance.

Clean, green Pakistan?

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan on Monday inaugurated the Clean Green Pakistan Index, a project that will, in its initial phase, rank 19 cities in Punjab and KP on their cleanliness and ‘green’ character. This ranking, the government hopes, will invoke a competition among cities for improving their infrastructure and environmental sustainability. The cities are to be judged on different criteria including sanitation, beautification and the usability of public spaces. Even before he became prime minister, Mr Khan attached a great deal of importance to conserving the natural environment — unlike previous dispensations. He has also raised the issue at several international forums, including the UN General Assembly in September. The new project, then, is in keeping with his vision of a green Pakistan. However, how workable is it considering the paralysis in the local governments of Punjab and KP, as well as in the national economy? It is unclear to what extent the local administrations will be empowered to take decisions and if they can furnish or request additional funds for building parks, etc. In fact, for all the prime minister’s endeavours, his government has failed to come up with a comprehensive strategy for mitigating the effects of climate change.

While the prime minister was not wrong in saying during the CGPI inauguration that the previous Punjab government was responsible for turning Lahore into a concrete jungle, the fact does not detract from the PTI’s own abysmal performance, its ‘billion-tree tsunami’ in KP notwithstanding. For example, the

flagship development project of the PTI in KP, the Peshawar BRT, has been criticised on numerous counts, ranging from the destruction of public spaces to the use of substandard material for construction. Moreover, the PTI's own state minister for environment, Zartaj Gul, downplayed the eye-burning smog in Punjab, indicating that it had been exaggerated by those with 'vested interests'. International rights groups have called out the government over its inaction in tackling the smog hazards but so far there is no clear plan for improving the air quality of Lahore. Meanwhile, the ban on the sale and manufacture of single-use plastics has seen very limited implementation and factories producing them have hardly been checked. There is a lot the government can do to match its words with actions and deliver on its promises of an unpolluted environment by taking small but sustainable steps. However, blaming past dispensations while ignoring its own shortcomings is not the answer.

SEZ commitments

THE new phase of CPEC that is set to begin, and which the government is defending vigorously as the central pillar of the crucial corridor project, has as its centrepiece the creation of Special Economic Zones that will offer critical incentives to all industries that opt for locating their plant within them. But while this commitment is repeated regularly in public remarks, those businessmen who have invested in existing SEZs are lining up to say that they regret their decision because the government has reneged on its key pledges. Only recently, we saw the government impose a 1.5pc turnover tax on all enterprises including those located in the SEZs, even though the SEZ Act of 2012 specifically exempts them from such impositions. When delegates from these SEZs met the government and tax officialdom to take up their concern, their request was denied with special objection from the FBR that invoked the strict revenue targets being chased by the government as one of the justifications. Beyond that, enterprises that have begun operations in the three main SEZs of the country — Bin Qasim Industrial Park, the Korangi Creek Industrial Park and Khairpur Special Economic Zone — have also found that the government commitment to providing infrastructure has not been met, with some of them having to run on power connections on a temporary basis, the tariff of which is far higher than what they were told it would be.

This does not make for an edifying sight. Many of those who feel short-changed by these commitments — of infrastructure provision and tax-free status — are

foreign investors. If the commitments made to investors in the existing SEZs are not being met, the government cannot credibly extend the same to new investors in another round of SEZ construction. It is important that the government, whether provincial or federal, sit down and remove the concerns of investors in the three main SEZs before making further fresh commitments to SEZs under CPEC.

India's new 'map'

INDIA's expansionist intention has manifested itself in another dangerous move three months into New Delhi's attempt to formally annex India-held Kashmir. The Modi setup has come up with a fanciful new 'map', in violation of recognised geographical boundaries. This malevolent scheme deliberately identifies Azad Kashmir as well as certain areas of Gilgit-Baltistan as Indian territory.

Read: Pakistan rejects 'incorrect, legally untenable' political maps issued by India

Pakistan has dismissed the attempt as "incorrect and legally untenable", and termed the political map as one that violates UN resolutions. Islamabad has also reiterated that "no step by India could change the disputed status of Jammu and Kashmir as recognised by the United Nations", and has vowed that it will continue to support the just struggle of the Kashmiris.

Having gone through the ritual, however, the Imran Khan government should introspect to see whether it could have better pursued an international diplomatic campaign aimed at discouraging an increasingly aggressive India's adventurism. This is no easy task, but the question is: has Pakistan, with all its pledges to back the Kashmiri fight for freedom, given the urgent assignment its best shot?

On Sunday, the head of the parliamentary committee on Kashmir, Fakhr Imam, repeated the slogan about Kashmir being Pakistan's jugular vein. Examples of how some international players had expressed their concern over Indian cruelty in IHK were once again highlighted. We were assured that the French parliament had discussed Kashmir and that some US congressmen had gone so far as to ask their government some 'hard questions'. We were also told that both government and opposition in Pakistan were in total agreement on Kashmir. We were then reminded about Prime Minister Imran Khan's UN speech in which he "advocated the Kashmir issue in a way which was praised worldwide".

Nobody can dispute that the Kashmir question has been brought to the world's attention. But how is the government here going to move forward on that, especially as international rebukes, including hard-hitting statements from Pakistan, have had little impact on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's fascist designs so far?

An effective follow-up to the promises that Mr Khan made would have found Pakistani diplomats proactively and continuously engaging with world capitals to convey a true picture of Indian excesses against a people with a genuine demand for freedom. The latest method at 'persuasion' by New Delhi has to be countered with a strategy that places premium on consistency and reason.

Let there be no illusions about it: as things stand, the international community is being ruled by its own interests, evident in its overall silence on IHK which has been under an inhuman and prolonged curfew. This is all the more reason why there has to be a persistent and patient effort at coming up with a powerful argument, backed by as much evidence as possible, of the atrocities in IHK, so that it is impossible for anyone to deny the reality.

Iraq protests

FOR the past several weeks, Iraq has been witnessing intense turmoil, with regular street protests featuring thousands of demonstrators facing off against security forces. The latest incident took place on Sunday night, when protesters tried to storm the Iranian consulate in the holy city of Karbala. A number of people have reportedly been shot dead in the incident. Various reasons have been attributed to the protests, including rampant government corruption, economic stagnation and Iranian 'meddling' in Iraqi affairs. The fact is that for several decades now, Iraq has been unable to stabilise itself, for reasons external and internal. In 1980, Saddam Hussein launched a ruinous eight-year war to counter the Islamic revolutionary government in Iran; hundreds of thousands died on both sides. Then in 1990, the Iraqi strongman invaded Kuwait, which resulted in another war and crippling sanctions that had a devastating effect on ordinary Iraqis. And while the US-led invasion toppled him in 2003, peace and stability eluded Iraq, with one wobbly government following another, until the militant Islamic State group devoured huge chunks of Iraqi territory in 2014. Were it not for support from Iran as well as the US to the Iraqis, IS may well have been knocking on the gates of Baghdad. It is this

series of unfortunate events that, arguably, are largely responsible for the decay in Iraq today.

Perhaps the core reason for the lack of stability has been the Iraqi political elite's failure to deliver. While Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator who showed no mercy to opponents, the political system that followed him failed, perhaps because — as in Afghanistan's case — it was implanted from the outside and was inorganic. Today, an informal confessional system holds sway in Iraq, with power divvied up between the Shia and Sunni Arabs, and Kurds. While indeed democratic rule is the only solution to Iraq's problems, Baghdad's rulers must move beyond the facade of democracy — political parties, elections, parliament sessions — and deliver on the basic principles of representative rule, such as good governance, social justice and respect for fundamental rights. Iraq's oil revenues are calculated in tens of billions of dollars. However, very little of this is trickling down to the common Iraqi, thus fuelling protests. Blaming Iran or even the American invasion won't do. It is time Iraq's political forces focused on service delivery to ensure rights and prosperity for all the country's citizens, regardless of religious, sectarian and ethnic background.

Migrant blues

ON Saturday, French officials were shocked to find 31 Pakistanis hidden inside a truck during a routine check of vehicles near the Italian border. While it has not yet been ascertained whether this incident was a case of human trafficking or smuggling — and the distinction is important — it has raised alarm bells in Europe. Just a few days earlier, 39 migrants — believed to be Vietnamese nationals — were found dead inside an abandoned refrigerated truck in the UK. They had all suffocated to death. One young woman sent a heartbreaking message to her loved ones back home: "I'm dying because I can't breathe... Mom, I am so sorry, Mom."

Such tragedies highlight the desperation of migrants who attempt to escape what they see as hopeless living conditions in their home countries. Risking their lives in the pursuit of greener pastures, modern-day migrants attempt to escape war, religious and ethnic persecution, poverty and harsh economic conditions. Migrants from Pakistan are typically categorised as economic migrants from the rural and small towns of the country, who undertake a dangerous journey to Europe. Often, they are sold dreams of wealth and adventure awaiting them in other lands by

human traffickers. However, as witnessed in the most recent tragedy in the UK, many do not make their journey to their new homes successfully. Last year, 11 Pakistanis were counted among 90 migrants who drowned when their boat capsized off the coast of Libya. Indeed, this mass movement of people from one country to another is one of the most pressing topics of our century, which has so far been characterised by great inequality and strife. Illegal migration, human trafficking and smuggling are intercontinental issues, and so require cooperation among various countries and regions in order to tackle the problem successfully. However, until the root causes — income inequality, prejudice and war — are not addressed, we will continue to witness such tragedies in the coming years.

Babri Masjid verdict

FEW events in the history of modern India have been as polarising as the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid in the Hindu holy city of Ayodhya.

In an episode of unabashed ugliness, a frenzied mob of thousands of Hindu extremists — including some of the leading lights of the BJP, which now rules India — stormed the 16th-century mosque and reduced it to rubble, guided by the belief that the spot where the masjid was built was Ram Janmabhoomi, the place where Hindus believe the deity was born.

Communal riots followed the desecration of the mosque in many parts of India, while the demolition was condemned by major Muslim states.

This event has poisoned Hindu-Muslim relations in India since, and has served as a battle cry for the Hindu hard right, that has now captured state power in New Delhi.

On Saturday, the Indian Supreme Court ruled that a temple would be built on the site of the razed mosque. While the apex court did say that the demolition was illegal, by allowing the building of the temple, it has, through this verdict, indirectly supported the vandalism by the mobs. It is also a tad ironic that the decision came on the day when the Kartarpur Corridor was opened for Sikh pilgrims, indicating Pakistan's intentions to facilitate other religious communities.

Perhaps it would have been better had the court given the site to neither side, considering the sensitivity of the matter and its impact on communal relations in India. Moreover, on matters of faith and devotion, it is best if state institutions

maintain a non-sectarian outlook to ensure justice for all citizens. Looking back at the events since 1992, it can be argued that the destruction of the mosque marked the beginning of the end of the Nehruvian ideal of a secular India, and the triumphal, raucous arrival of the Sangh Parivar on the national stage. Some of the most fanatical fringes of the Hindu hard right participated in the orgy of violence in Ayodhya on that December day; today, many of these elements are in positions of great power in India.

Undoubtedly, the verdict will embolden the foot soldiers of Hindutva and send a message to India's minorities — particularly its Muslims — that religious triumphalism and violence tactics by the majority are condoned in modern India. The Indian establishment never ceases to boast about the claim that it is the world's 'largest democracy'. However, the post-Babri Masjid trajectory of the country has been anything but democratic, and especially with the election of Narendra Modi, it is clear that the national narrative is being shaped by Savarkar and Golwalkar rather than Nehru and Gandhi. Now, it is for the Indian people to decide whether they wish to adopt a democratic course, or build a Hindu rashtra where minorities are either hounded out, or forced to live as second-class citizens.

Start-up potential

TWO recent events have once again brought into discussion the performance of internet-enabled start-ups: the launch by the SECP of a start-up portal to encourage innovation and the 021Disrupt conference in Karachi that offered technology entrepreneurs a rare opportunity to raise funds for their ventures from local and foreign investors. Some major investors and entrepreneurs at the conference said that this year marked a 'watershed moment' for Pakistani start-ups, especially in terms of funding — a claim many will vehemently contest. Sadly, when we look at the entrepreneurial ecosystem here, there is not too much to celebrate. Indeed, the number of digital start-ups has been growing for the last five years, especially since the launch of 3G/4G mobile technology. This shows that we have the 'building blocks', such as increasing digital penetration through smartphones, incubators, accelerators, etc. to promote the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the country. Yet we remain in the early stages — in spite of the progress made over the last several years — due to poor access to funds, as well as regulatory and financial barriers, which continue to restrain start-up growth and bar venture capitalists from entering this market.

One study shows that the majority of digital start-ups die young because of lack of access to funds they need to survive and expand. Only one out of 10 firms is able to secure funding from friends, family or investors. Those that are successful in raising the money are unable to sustain their efforts for long owing to poor business and management skills and the absence of an entrepreneurial mindset, or because their ventures are replicas of successful digital business models from other countries, without factoring in local conditions. It is not only the lack of funding and unicorn ideas that are to blame. The regulatory environment isn't favourable either. For instance, the restrictions on the flow of funds into and out of Pakistan force many to set up companies in other countries and discourage foreign venture capitalists from financing or acquiring local firms. SECP regulations are a major hurdle in actual valuation and stock allocation of start-ups and their listing on the stock exchange to secure capital. On top of that, the present unfavourable tax policies neither benefit the investors nor the start-ups. Matters will not improve and the watershed moment will not arrive unless the government makes concerted efforts to revamp the poor business environment that is debilitating for both start-ups and investors.

Torture legislation

At a recent event in the capital, speakers from civil society, the legislature and law enforcement regretted the absence of domestic anti-torture laws. Despite endorsing the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and despite the presence of (the albeit limited) Article 14 (2) of the Constitution, which states that "no person shall be subjected to torture for the purpose of extracting evidence", Pakistan is yet to create effective laws to put the spirit of the convention and Constitution into effect. It was only recently that the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 2019, was submitted to the Senate Secretariat. If passed, the bill will criminalise torture in police custody. Unfortunately, brutality and abuse continue to be endemic in policing in this country, and are only strengthened by the lack of accountability. This was recently brought to our attention by the tragic and highly publicised death of young Salahuddin Ayubi, who was accused of theft and then tortured to death at the hands of the Punjab police. "Where did you learn to hit like that?" a bewildered Ayubi asked the official behind the camera phone that recorded his last moments. However, instead of investigating what was clear

abuse of power, officials announced a ban on the use of smartphones inside police stations across the province.

In 2016, a Human Rights Watch report documented the use of torture by police officials in Pakistan and found a serious need for reform. Amongst other issues, it pointed to flaws in the colonial-era laws that govern policing and deficiencies in the training of law enforcers. Officials confessed to not knowing any way of extracting 'confessions' from suspects other than the use of brute force. Torture is also widespread inside prisons and is employed to subdue or punish inmates, many of whom are still awaiting trial. There is an urgent need for reform and rethinking the old ways of enforcing the law.

A shambolic affair

THIS is without a doubt the most shambolic episode in the PTI government's tenure so far.

The snowballing controversy over the extension of army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's tenure is entirely of its own making, and one that cannot be laid at the door of previous dispensations. Moreover, the government's ineptness has not only damaged its own reputation but also threatens to drag the military as a whole into disrepute.

As far as it was concerned, the speculation about whether the army chief would be given an extension was laid to rest in an official statement on Aug 19 confirming that Gen Bajwa would indeed serve another three-year tenure. Then there was confusion about whether Imran Khan was the competent authority to take such an action, which was apparently not the case. Later, the government claimed that President Arif Alvi, as required by law, had signed off on the notification.

On Tuesday, Chief Justice Asif Khosa, in a stunning move, suspended the extension order on the grounds of procedural anomalies, and the fact there is no provision in the Army Regulations to support such an extension.

The episode lays bare the PTI government's authoritarian streak and its lack of maturity — a lethal combination.

For example, consider the manner in which, a few hours after the Supreme Court order, the cabinet rushed through an amendment to the Army Regulations to include a provision for an “extension in the army chief’s tenure”.

There are profound, long-term repercussions for the democratic process and for civilian authority at stake here; the situation demanded a broader parliamentary debate. And yet the government, out of sheer expediency and for the benefit of a single individual, went ahead — simply because it could.

Last week, Mr Khan remarked during an interview that he had decided to give Gen Bajwa an extension just a few days after assuming office. Even for a dispensation that repeatedly boasts of being ‘on the same page’ as the military, the prime minister’s premature decision to grant the extension smacks of impetuosity — or worse, trying to curry favour with the army chief. Reinforcing the impression of ineptitude, it emerged during the hearing at the Supreme Court that the prime minister had moved a summary seeking approval for reappointment while the president had issued a notification for extension in tenure.

This is a landmark case: unprecedented questions are being raised, threatening to upend the accepted status quo, and holding a mirror to society’s psyche.

Consider that four army chiefs have given themselves extensions while two others were so favoured by the government of the time — but no one thought to ask whether this was legal at all.

The court has also rightly noted that the regional security situation — the official reason given for the extension — is for the army to handle as an institution, rather than being an individual’s job. Surely there are other officers more than capable of leading the army. Gen Bajwa’s next step will determine whether he is thinking of himself or his institution.

Punjab reshuffle

A GENERAL lack of direction in people-based development prevails in Punjab where the government has been continuously moving the bureaucracy around. There have been far too many transfers in the administration during the 15 months that Chief Minister Sardar Usman Buzdar has been in office. In fact, there has been no letup in transfers ever since the provincial administration was shuffled in anticipation of the July 2018 election. There was a big shake-up soon after Mr

Buzdar took over, and since the start of this year, the bureaucracy has undergone further drastic rearrangements. All these changes have been justified in the name of the government's avowed search for officials who are in sync with its 'vision'. Meanwhile, the latest purge has hit the chief secretary and the inspector general of police. As other areas in the country struggle for a sufficient number of administrative officers to run their affairs, this is the fifth IGP for privileged Punjab where half a dozen higher education secretaries have come and gone during the current government's tenure so far. Frequent departures and arrivals have also been seen in the departments of school and services. Every other day, a district police officer or some other senior police official is given his marching orders and told to prepare to take charge of law and order in another area, leading to inconsistency and inefficiency.

This unrest in administrative ranks is rooted in the insecurity inherent in the PTI government's approach — not only in Punjab but elsewhere too. The issue is magnified in the latter province because of the perceived or real vulnerability of Mr Buzdar. The threat of a transfer order is all the more pronounced in times such as these when talk of the alleged incompetence of the provincial government and rumours about a possible replacement for the chief minister are at their loudest. Rulers tend to blame their bureaucratic teams for the challenges they face, and all these reshuffles over the last one year and three months demonstrate a clear PTI liking for the escape route. It is remarkable that Mr Buzdar, even when he is said to be up against a deadline to prove himself, hasn't overcome the fear of being thwarted by pro-PML-N officers. Supposing that he is capable of it, it is a pity he has not tried to win their trust to ensure a better-governed Punjab.

Weapon of war

ON the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Human Rights Watch once again reminded the world of growing evidence that the Indian security forces were using rape as a tactic to subjugate the people of India-held Kashmir. Back in the early 1990s, too, HRW found that women in occupied Kashmir were being raped and assaulted by security personnel on the mere suspicion of harbouring separatists. Whether it is used to inflict punishment, seek

retribution, or assert fictitious notions of racial and religious superiority, rape is a brutal means of psychological warfare that aims to humiliate and suppress an individual or group of people. However, sexual violence is not just an unintended byproduct of war or the subsequent breakdown of law and order; it is often a deliberate military strategy that is condoned by democratic governments through denial, apologetics or silence. Often, women are the direct casualty of such conflicts waged by men.

Sadly, there has been no letup in such tactics which have always been a part of human history. For example, in Iraq and Syria, the terrorists of the Islamic State group abducted minority Yazidi and Christian women and forced them into sex slavery by using their interpretation of faith to justify their horrific deeds. Even if freed, the stigma attached to victims of rape and their children remains. It was only recently that Yazidi women who did not wish to be separated from their children conceived from rape were allowed back into their communities. Meanwhile, the widespread rape of Rohingya Muslim women by the Burmese military was documented by HRW in 2017. That 'collective punishment' was 'justified' by labelling the entire community as terrorists. But there is no justification, and rape must be prosecuted for the war crime it is.

Court's decision

AFTER three days of high drama, the system found a solution and a potential impasse was averted. On Thursday, the Supreme Court, rejecting all notifications and summaries on the matter, issued a short order granting a six-month extension to Gen Qamar Bajwa's tenure as army chief.

The order said the government and parliament should specify the terms and conditions of the service of the COAS through an act of parliament and clarify the scope of Article 243 of the Constitution. Parliament, as per the order, should enact the said legislation within six months. Such a law would be expected to determine the length of the army chief's tenure — and the question of its extension.

The court order has helped the government come out of the corner it had painted itself into by its inept handling of the issue. The government is chiefly to blame for this needless confusion and controversy over a sensitive matter. It is therefore disappointing to note the prime minister's tweets blaming foreign enemies and

domestic “mafia” whereas the real culprit is the government’s own legal team that was unable to write a notification that could withstand judicial scrutiny.

The ball is now in parliament’s court. The people’s elected representatives have been provided an opportunity by the apex court to frame the legal process pertaining to appointments of army chiefs and the length of their tenure in office.

Given the central role played by army chiefs in Pakistan, and their crucial position within the state structure, parliament must come up with legislation that stands the test of time. This would entail deep deliberation and consultation between the government and the opposition so that all aspects of the issue are debated before the final legislation is drafted.

The process should not be rushed, and parliamentarians should take as much time as they require, within the stipulated period, to produce a law that strengthens all institutions and the system as a whole. In the course of their deliberations, they would also do well to remember that once parliamentary sanction is given to such extensions, it would be difficult to reverse course later.

The opposition has a key role. An issue as important as this must not be politicised. If and when the government reaches out to the opposition, the response should be positive despite the strained relationship. Without a constructive working relationship inside parliament, it would be very difficult to have the kind of debate that is required for the task at hand.

Finally, this paper believes in the strength of institutions. Although the court may have felt it necessary to prevent a sudden vacuum in the army leadership, Gen Bajwa has been given a face-saving opportunity to decide on a course of action that will serve the interests of his institution and the system as a whole — and not that of a single individual.

Students’ march

THOUSANDS of students will be taking to the streets today to demand their rights. The Student Solidarity March will see rallies being held in 50 cities across the country, under the aegis of the Student Action Committee, a national-level representative of smaller students’ organisations. They will demand the restoration of student unions, the reversal of budgets cuts, the formation of sexual harassment committees and an end to ethnic, gender and religious discrimination on university

campuses. The march is intended to be peaceful. However, the HRCP has expressed alarm over the government's attitude towards the marchers, which shows that participants might have to face hostility from the authorities. The HRCP has voiced its concern over reports of harassment and rustication of students. The human rights body has condemned the authorities' attempt to prevent youth from participating in a peaceful assembly, thus violating their constitutional rights, and has also drawn attention to a notification issued by the governor of Balochistan banning any 'political' activity on the University of Balochistan campus, while directing the security personnel deployed there to take 'necessary' action if required. Another example of institutional high-handedness ahead of the march came from Punjab University where an MPhil student was declared persona non grata on allegations of participating in violent activities on campus. The student, Husnain Jamil Faridi, had organised on March 20 a protest inside the campus against the shortage of buses. Four more students were also rusticated for reportedly taking part in the protest.

In fact, many incidents in the recent past, such as the murder of Mashal Khan in Mardan and the blackmailing of students by the administration of the University of Balochistan, have only proved that the absence of effective student representation has paved the way for ill-intentioned elements to prevail in university campuses, disrupting academic and administrative affairs and ruining the futures of thousands. The fact that students have to take to the streets to raise a voice for their rights and to air their grievances is in itself a testament to this fact. It is to be hoped that this march will lead to serious debate on the pivotal issue of students' representation and the revival of unions, that is, like it or not, the only way to rid campuses of unhealthy outside influence, while also making them more efficient in resolving students' problems.

Junaid Hafeez case

IN a society where the efforts of the high and mighty to seek top-level adjudication of their disputes gets much publicity, it is a relief that occasionally a plea by a common Pakistani trying to get the attention of the guardians of justice finds its way into the public debate. An example is the appeal attributed to the parents of a man who has been behind bars for six years as an undertrial in a blasphemy case. The appeal to the chief justice of Pakistan is brief, yet reflective of how such a sensitive matter and those linked to it can get stuck in the system. It speaks of all

kinds of problems, the refusal to hear the case being a prime challenge. It alleges that delaying tactics have been used to deny justice to Junaid Hafeez, who was a lecturer of the Bahauddin Zakariya University when arrested in 2013. There is mention in the letter about how the prosecution had moved five “absurd” applications to prolong the trial. That the case is pending even three months after the last witness — a police officer — had testified is indeed a point that needs to be looked into.

The parents of Junaid Hafeez say the blasphemy case against him is false. And as they solicit the support of Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa to end their long ordeal there is little else they can bank upon after this. This is certainly a controversial area but there are certain factors that need to be taken into account. The resolve of the judiciary, the ‘equal before the law’ stance of the prime minister and the willingness of the public at large to get to the bottom of pending cases in accordance with the law create room for all to assert their basic right to justice and a fair trial. Let all legal cases be taken to their logical conclusion without undue delay. All rules but most importantly the rule of law must extend to everyone without exception.

ECP delay

THERE is never a dull moment in Pakistan’s politics. Although the saga around the reappointment/ tenure extension of the army chief is over for now, another administrative crisis looms. The chief election commissioner will be completing his term later next week and his retirement will render the currently incomplete Election Commission of Pakistan, which is already short of two members who retired in January, dysfunctional. Given the deadlock between the government and the opposition over their replacement, few expect the process of finding a successor to the current CEC to begin anytime soon. When ECP positions fall vacant, the Constitution requires they be filled within 45 days. This condition has not been met in the case of the vacancies created after the retirement of members from Sindh and Balochistan because of a hostile relationship between the government and the opposition parties. It is feared that unless there is a sincere effort to come to an agreement, the replacement of the CEC will be delayed for a long time.

The failure of the government and opposition to appoint ECP members even after several months speaks volumes for the confrontationalist nature of our politics and the existing acrimony between the two sides. The government is largely to blame for this impasse. The Constitution provides that the prime minister must initiate the process of replacing the CEC or an ECP member by consulting the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly. A 2013 Supreme Court interpretation of the law requires these consultations to be 'meaningful', implying that the two sides should try to reach an agreement over the new appointments. In case of lack of consensus, they must send three names each to a 12-member parliamentary committee for decision. But the Constitution is silent on how to proceed in case of a tie in the parliamentary committee, which comprises an equal number of lawmakers from the treasury and opposition benches.

The scheme of 'meaningful consultations' can sometimes be quite frustrating, especially when the two sides decide to stick to their positions. But this is precisely the kind of situation where the 'art of the possible' can lessen mutual hostility and help resolve political differences for the country's good. Imposing its choice on the opposition seldom works; such a move always backfires as it did when the PTI tried to unilaterally induct its own ECP nominees in August. In fact, the delay in the completion of the ECP has given the opposition the upper hand in the matter of appointments. It will now be in a stronger position to force the hand of the government when the latter tables the bill defining the terms and conditions governing the service of the army chief and his reappointment/ extension as per Supreme Court instructions. The sooner the government mends its ways the better it will be for all.

Power tariff increase

IT might sound like a nominal hike, but the recent approval given by the Economic Coordination Committee for a 26-paisa increase in the power tariff increasingly cements the impression that the government will continue passing on the costs of its own inefficiency and inability to make adequate recoveries to paying consumers. The power sector regulator, Nepra, had approved a 15-paisa increase in the tariff, but at the ECC meeting, the government went beyond that amount to satisfy a key IMF condition before the first review is taken up for approval by the Fund's board in December. Raising power sector recoveries is a key IMF demand, and if the government is unable to comply, it is asked in the programme to pass

through the unrecovered amount in the power tariff. This means those who are paying their bills will have to also pay for those who are not. It is called 'full cost recovery' in the euphemistic parlance of the power sector, and is designed to help curtail the growth of the circular debt. Average power tariff after this increase will now be Rs13.77, which does not include taxes, fuel price adjustments and other surcharges.

Average power tariffs have already been hiked by Rs2.33 per unit, mainly to help curtail the circular debt. As the principle of full cost recovery is increasingly applied to power tariff determination, it can potentially put the tariffs on an endless upward climb. The principle itself makes commercial sense but is vastly unfair. It drains any incentive from the distribution companies to improve their recoveries since their management have the assurance that they can collect whatever amount they are comfortable with and the government can always write the unrecovered amount into future power tariffs. Along with the expectation to ensure full cost recovery, the government is also committed to a new mechanism to regularly review power tariffs. At the ECC meeting, the task of creating some kind of an automatic mechanism for power tariffs was delegated to a new committee in an effort to make the process similar to oil price determinations. These changes are fine, but without a wider vision for the reform of power tariffs, in a way that allows a greater role for market forces in tariff setting, these changes will be mostly cosmetic and driven by expediency.

Organ donation

BEFORE Abdul Sattar Edhi breathed his last, he made it clear that he wished to donate his organs to help those in need and as a way of encouraging others to follow his example. Upon his death in 2016, at the age of 88, his corneas were donated to two blind patients at the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation. Edhi's final act of generosity gave two individuals the blessing of sight, something most take for granted. However, despite repeated efforts and lobbying by the SIUT and the Edhi Foundation, organ donation remains an alien concept for most Pakistanis. While it is practised in Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and other regional states including Sri Lanka, Pakistan still does not have a culture

of organ donation. Even when someone wishes to donate their organs posthumously, their families are often not ready to fulfil their last wish or other hurdles are created along the way. This glaring gap between demand and supply, and growing income inequality, has given rise to a black market for human organs, where surgeries are performed illegally and without the necessary post-operative care — often on the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. To counter these dangerous practices, while providing vital services to those most in need, some parliamentarians have been trying to pass laws that would encourage and facilitate deceased organ donation.

For instance, since last year, Senator Mian Mohammad Ateeq of the MQM has been trying to pass an amendment to the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Bill. The revision would allow for a distinction made on the CNICs of organ donors, which would make their consent clear in the event of a fatal accident. As noted by the senator, such a mechanism is already in place in several countries around the world. But it seems neither Nadra nor the other members of the Senate are ready for change.