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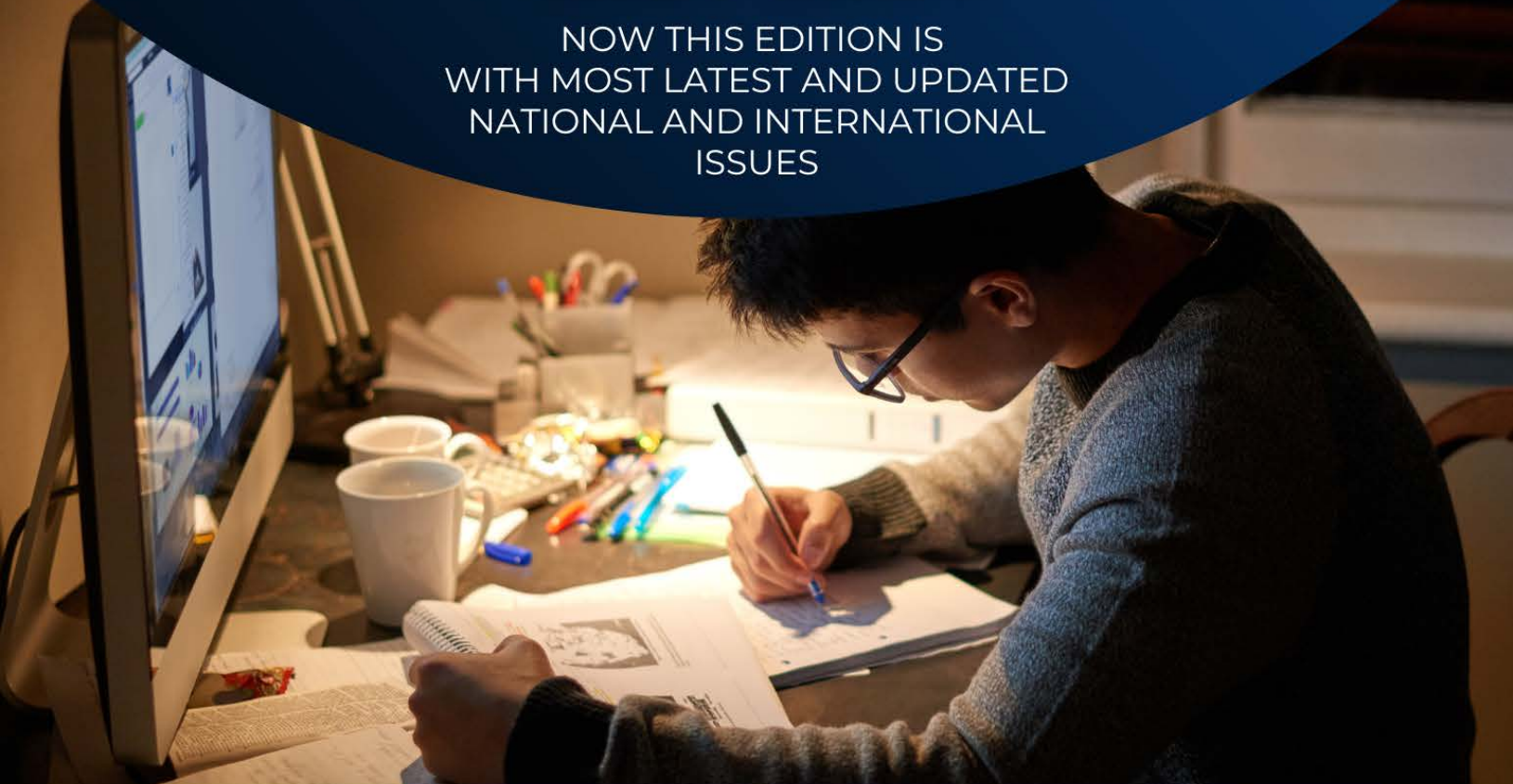
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DAWN

EDITORIALS

JULY 2024

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Stealing heritage

CONTRADICTIONS define Pakistan. While the country's repository of antiquities can change its fortunes, recurrent news about illicit trafficking of antiques and resources does not seem to unsettle the authorities. Another heist is happening in Mansehra: Agror and Tanawal areas, formerly the pre-Partition princely states of Amb and Pulrah, have become hotbeds of mineral and precious stone smuggling. Multiple union councils of a region flush with granite and white stone reserves face excavation and blasting. Residents, perturbed by chemicals and explosives causing environmental degradation, deforestation, water contamination and damaged waterways and roads, also lament official apathy towards unlawful mining and collapsing infrastructure. In fact, the once prosperous territory is bereft of socioeconomic progress. The malaise is an old one: shared greed for money is the vital nexus between corrupt officers and smugglers, allowing heritage raiders to run amok, undeterred by the thought of penalties and jail time.

In the midst of an economic meltdown and misery, citizens could do without criminal shortsightedness on the part of the state. These windfalls can be monetised for the benefit of communities. Instead, they are embezzled to fill the coffers of a select few. The government has to stem the pillage; exposed heritage and mineral-rich sites need to be secured with security and fencing. Every historic locality requires documentation and digital itemisation with the help of international preservation experts. In addition, enhanced border monitoring, alongside training in inspection skills, awareness, and graft-proof mechanisms for law enforcement must be initiated at once. Moreover, smuggling rings cannot be dismantled without vigilant security agencies. The authorities need to realise that the time for solace is long overdue. As the populace grapples with monetary, climatic and geopolitical turmoil, the value of these assets should be harnessed for the sake of respite through tourism, employment, amenities and development. Or else, the plunder will only gather speed.

Published in Dawn, July 1st, 2024

Nebulous definition

IS it a 'vision', a loose programme, or an actual kinetic 'operation'? A week on, we don't precisely know. Operation Azm-i-Istehkam seems to be suffering from the same kind of uncertainty that one presumes it set out to fix. It is worrying that a major counterterrorism initiative announced amidst a dramatic surge in violent incidents seems so untethered from specifics. The government has prevaricated about its actual scope and intent and, facing stiff resistance from representatives of the battle-fatigued areas where it is presumed it will be executed, has quickly played down its ambitions. Unnamed security sources have spoken to local media to assure that there will be no displacement of civilian population under the operation, nor will it entail a large-scale military action. So what will it be then, exactly?

Pakistan's ambassador in the US, Masood Khan, was recently seeking small arms and modern equipment from Washington for the drive. The envoy's explanations at a Washington-based think-tank illustrated the 'Azm-i-Istehkam' for prospective foreign backers. According to Mr Khan, the initiative has three components: doctrinal, societal and operational. According to him, work on the first two components is already underway, and work on the third is about to be initiated. It is for this third component that Pakistan is seeking "strong security links, [and to] enhance intelligence cooperation, resume sales of advanced military platforms, and work on 'the sustainment of US-origin defence equipment'", according to a news report on his interaction. Meanwhile, the defence minister has also spoken about the possibility of pursuing terrorists in hideouts based in Afghanistan. Not only do these two developments seem to contradict assurances of the limited scope of kinetic operations, they also contradict what Defence Minister Khawaja Asif recently stated about Pakistan not seeking help from Washington for the initiative. Why is there such a glaring disconnect between what the government intends to do and what it is publicly stating? The government should answer. Some of the other details that have come to light seem sensible: checking smuggling and cross-border infiltration and strengthening the prosecution of terrorism-related crimes. However, the government needs to communicate clearly and share a consolidated programme with all stakeholders if it hopes to achieve success. Azm-i-Istehkam seems to be in flux at the moment, and any quest for durable stability should ideally start from a more permanent plan.

Resolution 901

ON Friday, two days after a stinging endorsement from the US House of Representatives of widespread concerns regarding the legitimacy of our recent general election, the National Assembly formally dismissed 'Resolution 901' as "interference" in Pakistan's internal affairs and an "attempt to undermine the state".

The Pakistani counter-resolution against HR901 did not pass with the same overwhelming support accorded to the latter, however. Our parliament was only able to get a simple majority of lawmakers to endorse the repudiative resolution, while the US Congress had seen 85pc of its membership voting 98pc in favour of a "full and independent investigation of claims of interference or irregularities" in the Feb 8 election.

The PTI refused to vote in favour, saying it was not consulted. Instead, it seemed to be revelling in the world's self-appointed 'democracy police' rebuking the Pakistani government, which, it must be said, should drop the pretence that all is well when it clearly is not.

Our lawmakers' failure to stand united in the face of foreign criticism may not have been unexpected, given the vitiated political climate, but it was still disturbing to witness. Matters are now at a point where our representatives do not care if the world perceives Pakistan as a house divided. The treasury benches' condemnation of those who refused to vote in favour would only have solidified this perception.

The nay-sayers were immediately branded 'terrorists', 'traitors', and 'enemies of the state' who had, in the words of one particularly self-righteous MNA, "no right to call themselves Pakistanis". With such a propensity to spew venom against political opponents, it is no wonder that our parliamentarians are having trouble finding common grounds, even where questions of national sovereignty are concerned.

It may be recalled that the US Congress's resolution had also condemned "attempts to suppress the people of Pakistan's participation in their democracy, including through harassment, intimidation, violence, arbitrary detention,

restrictions on access to the internet and telecommunications or any violation of their human, civil, or political rights”.

But while it is a fact that these are all realities for the Pakistani people, it is not up to a foreign parliament to dictate how we should be running our country. Likewise, this publication has demanded a transparent inquiry into the last general election, but it does not believe anyone except the people of this country can make that demand.

The US has its own messy legacy to consider of sabotaging democratic governments and propping up dictators around the world. Our problems are our own to resolve. The country has suffered much from foreign interference and must learn to act as a sovereign state. At the same time, it cannot expect to act poorly and not get noticed.

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India's victory

IN the end, the best team won — the team that held its nerve best when the stakes were the highest. Batting lynchpin Virat Kohli had laid the platform before bowling ace Jasprit Bumrah brought his side back into the game and when Suryakumar Yadav took that catch — the debate will rage on whether it was a legitimate take or a six — the glory was India's. For Rohit Sharma's men, the T20 World Cup crown ended an 11-year wait for an international title. For South Africa, the loss in their maiden global tournament final adds to their long list of heartbreaks. The title seemed to be theirs with 30 runs required off the last 30 deliveries; the momentum with them. But India came back, just like they did against arch-rivals Pakistan in the first round of the tournament, to stun the South Africans. Bumrah delivered telling overs to clip Proteas' wings. Yadav then pulled off a stunner on the boundary — replays later showing that the skirting had been pushed back — to dismiss David Miller. For their stalwarts, Kohli — who hit 76 in the decider — and captain Sharma, it was a fitting farewell with the duo announcing that it was their last Twenty20 International. India took the title by winning all their matches, overpowering a South African team that had won all of its games before the final, and even without Kohli and Sharma, they look well-placed to dominate cricket's shortest format in the years to come.

There are lessons here. India stuck with Kohli and Sharma even though their strike rates came under question. They backed the others too. Most importantly, they kept faith. A World Cup where Afghanistan made a shock run to the semi-finals, and where there were some stunning upsets, has shown that the big boys of world cricket cannot rest on their laurels. There is a need to constantly improve to be the best.

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Jail security

BACK-to-back jailbreaks in different regions do not inspire confidence in the capabilities of law enforcers tasked with keeping penitentiaries secure. On Sunday, 19 inmates managed a jailbreak from Azad Kashmir's Rawalakot jail. This security lapse was followed by reports on Monday that three inmates managed to flee from a sub-jail in Balochistan's Duki town.

In both cases, those who escaped were prisoners convicted of heinous crimes. In the Rawalakot episode, there had been clear warning signs that security on the premises was not up to the mark. For example, the jail building is reportedly derelict and the facility unsuitable for housing hardened criminals.

But it is not just far-flung areas of the country where jail security leaves much to be desired. Last week in Karachi, the prime suspect in the murder case of a young engineer fled from the City Courts where he had been brought for a hearing. According to reports, the suspect managed to push a police constable out of the way and disappear into the adjacent bustling commercial area.

Whether it is maximum-security prisons or smaller lock-ups, a proper audit is needed to ensure that dangerous individuals undergoing trial or who are already convicted are not able to escape and continue with their nefarious activities. A larger view of jails is also required.

For instance, serious overcrowding in jails makes managing the premises a huge problem. And in cases of cities such as Karachi, where the main jail is located

inside a densely populated area, penitentiaries should be shifted to more isolated locales to protect the population, and manage security breaches more easily.

The authorities should not take these jailbreaks lightly. Already crime levels are high in the country. If those convicted of murder, rape or terrorism are able to break free and return to the streets, it will not reflect well on the competence of our criminal justice system.

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Coping with disaster

THE monsoons are practically upon us, bringing with them the fear of urban flooding, flash floods, and accompanying devastation. Each time the Met Office issues a warning of 'above normal rains' or 'vigorous monsoon activity', the question of preparedness — or rather the lack of it — comes up: how well can Pakistan's disaster management authorities and civic agencies cope and provide relief to the affected communities? Regrettably, our response to the increasing number of extreme weather events across the country has consistently fallen short. Successive governments have pledged to upgrade the urban infrastructure and enhance disaster management capacity to minimise the loss of life and property. But little has actually been done and the loss of lives as well as of public and private infrastructure continues year after year. It is not as if the authorities lack the plans or the money needed to ensure disaster preparedness. The problem lies in the poor execution of these plans and the injudicious utilisation of funds before and during the monsoons.

This year, too, the national and provincial disaster management authorities have 'activated' their emergency operations in anticipation of vigorous monsoon activity in the upper and central parts of the country during the current week. They have told the civic agencies to make sure they are ready to respond to any potential crisis. Will this year be any different from the past? Few believe so. Indeed, it is impossible for disaster mitigation efforts to keep pace with extreme weather events, which are becoming increasingly common due to global warming. Not even the developed countries can avoid all the havoc wreaked by excessive rains, storms and similar events. But many countries have been investing in and upgrading their urban infrastructure, as well as training and

equipping civic agencies to provide immediate rescue and relief services. Regrettably in Pakistan, even large cities like Karachi and Lahore remain ill-prepared and ill-equipped to deal with unusual precipitation as the authorities remain in a state of slumber until a major disaster knocks on their door. With Pakistan among the countries most affected by climate change, there is no option but to be prepared. Pakistan cannot reverse climate change but it can prepare itself to protect its citizens and infrastructure from natural disasters such as the destructive floods of 2022 and earlier through better planning and execution.

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Orwellian state

IT seems that the goings-on in judges' homes is not the only thing that piques Big Brother's curiosity. Our security apparatus also listens to what ordinary citizens are talking about on their phones, reads the messages they exchange with other people, and watches what they do on the internet.

This startling revelation has come to light recently, thanks to a submission to the Islamabad High Court. The information given to the court revealed that the country's telecom regulator, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, has forced telecom companies to implement a mass surveillance system through which up to 4m citizens can be monitored at any given time with the click of a button.

Called the 'Lawful' Intercept Management System in true Orwellian nomenclature, this system is being run without any regulatory checks and balances or legal controls, allowing the intrusive eyes and ears of unnamed intelligence agencies to spy on anyone they want.

'Leaked' phone calls involving prominent citizens had dominated news headlines and social media not so long ago, prompting petitions from some of the affected individuals against intrusive surveillance by the state. The existence of LIMS may not have come to light had the IHC's Justice Babar Sattar, who heard a petition on the matter, not insisted on demanding answers from the state about who had the power and resources to conduct such surveillance of civilians.

What has since been uncovered is chilling for anyone who cherishes personal freedoms. The judge noted in his order that citizens' data was being collected without any human intervention or legal warrant, with "the entire content of communication between consumers undertaken through the network of the telecom licensee, including audio and video content and web page records", being shared with unnamed agencies, according to news reports.

The potential for abuse of such detailed information collected on citizens is immense. The fact that any citizen at any time can be made vulnerable by the state simply listening to and watching what they are doing and using that information to blackmail them would make anyone feel insecure.

Many serving judges have recently complained about the pressures they face, and this should be warning enough that the powerful in our country do not respect any moral or legal boundaries when it comes to implementing 'orders from above'. There are good justifications for keeping an eye on known criminals, terrorists and foreign spies, but implementing a system to spy on one's own people is a perverse abuse of power and should be stopped forthwith.

The state must be made to secure legal warrants as a necessary requirement for initiating surveillance of any individual. Such immense power should not be accumulated by any institution as the potential for abuse and the consequences for personal freedoms can be disastrous.

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Paralysis in academia

LIKE all other sectors, higher education is not immune to the debilitating financial crisis that is currently roiling the country. In addition, many universities are suffering due to mismanagement and maladministration. While the long-term effects of this crisis on higher education will manifest themselves over time, many employees of these institutions, both serving and retired, have been facing problems of a more immediate nature as their pay and benefits have not been disbursed for months. For example, staffers of the Karachi-based Federal Urdu University say that neither the current staff nor retired teachers received their

salaries/ pensions over Eidul Fitr and Eidul Azha. Medical facilities for them have reportedly also been suspended. Around 50 retirees were not given their dues; a number of them have passed away, while the rest are still waiting for their dues. Those familiar with the situation say the university has the funds to clear the dues of the retirees, but is acting lethargically. Earlier this year, a similar situation was witnessed at Karachi University, where both teaching and non-teaching staff protested over remuneration issues.

The situation facing universities is stark. For example, in May the federal government cut off funding worth billions of rupees to provincially chartered varsities. While the provinces should indeed shoulder greater financial responsibility, the abruptness of the federal move is difficult to comprehend. There are no quick fixes to this crisis. However, what both the federal and provincial authorities must ensure is that academic and administrative staff continue to receive salaries and pensions regularly. Suspending remunerations — especially to retirees — in such times of economic misery is particularly cruel. Whether at the Federal Urdu University or other institutions, the state needs to resolve these issues without delay. Lack of financial security at universities will compel capable educators to flee to greener pastures, dealing a particularly severe blow to higher education in Pakistan's public sector.

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High food prices

THAT the country's exports of raw food rose by 37pc in the last financial year over the previous one is a welcome development for Pakistan's wobbly economy, which is rapidly being pulled down by an acute shortage of foreign exchange to pay import bills. Food exports jumped from \$5.8bn to \$8bn in the first 11 months of the last fiscal, the country's top trade development body TDAP reported. The largest increase is noted in the value of rice exports on the back of India's ban on its outbound basmati shipments to protect its consumers. Other major food exports include raw meat, maize, spices and fruit. While the increased food exports are beneficial for the economy and our weakened balance-of-payments position, they have also led to fears of domestic shortage of some items and the knock-on impact on food prices in Pakistan. These concerns are not without reason. The majority of consumers here have been struggling to survive a

consistent spike in the cost of living, especially with regard to food, for over two years now. Even though the pace of inflation has slowed down in the last few months, the price of food and other essentials remains beyond the reach of ordinary citizens.

Pakistan cannot hope to grow its economy and exports sustainably without a major boost to agricultural productivity and rural incomes. It is not incorrect to say that the agricultural economy, which employs almost 60pc of Pakistan's workforce and significantly contributes to GDP, is at a turning point. The sector's enormous potential remains unexplored. Besides, it remains vulnerable to extreme weather shocks due to climate change. The considerable productivity gap means that agriculture can make huge contributions to the national economy by boosting food and other crop exports, and eliminating the rampant rural poverty in the country. But that is almost impossible without private sector participation and investment in research, seed systems, and mechanisation. However, corporate investments in agriculture will be hard to attract unless the political leadership and policymakers seize the opportunity through focusing on substantive policy changes and infrastructure development. Corporate participation in agriculture is the key to managing the challenges within this sector and tapping its true potential, not just for boosting farm exports but also eliminating domestic supply gaps to stabilise food prices over longer periods.

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Elusive justice

IN Pakistan, justice of any form is, more often than not, difficult to come by. Recently, judges and prosecutors from across the country found themselves in agreement at a seminar in Karachi on the need to urgently reform the colonial-era Code of Criminal Procedure, which, it seemed from the discussion, was the biggest hurdle they faced in ensuring justice.

Several other proposals also came forth, among which were some to improve the investigation and prosecution of criminal activity through improved coordination and communication between investigators and prosecutors, with a view to preventing the collapse of cases due to insufficient or defective evidence.

Other recommendations included the introduction of deterrent measures to prevent frivolous and false litigation, a pervasive issue plaguing the legal system. Yet more changes were sought from the legislative branch, including depoliticisation of the police and proactive legislation on legal reforms from the political leadership.

One need only conduct a brief survey of those who have come into contact with the legal system to realise that it is fundamentally broken. From antediluvian laws to a corrupt enforcement apparatus, from a perennially understaffed judicial system to inept prosecution and perverse penal systems — none work towards ensuring justice, one of the most basic duties of any state towards its citizens.

These days, it is just as common for the accused to walk free in instances where it seems obvious that a crime has been committed as it is for a seemingly innocent citizen to be punished for an obviously fabricated crime for which there is no compelling evidence on the record. It is no wonder, then, that victims often run from the justice system, instead of turning to it: they would rather resign themselves to living with injustice than dare to hope for reparations from the state.

A similar sentiment was expressed by former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi on the same day the Pakistan Prosecution Forum was discussing reforms. Perhaps exasperated by an accountability case which has, by Mr Abbasi's account, "been pending for five years without progress", the politician said the country "will not progress till NAB exists". NAB, the state's tool of choice for putting out-of-favour politicians out of commission, has provided some of the most prominent examples of how perverted our legal system can be.

However, as discussed earlier, the actual problem is much deeper. Till the Pakistani justice system institutionalises the fundamental principles of justice — fairness, equality and entitlement — it cannot fulfil its responsibilities. It also seems that the tools it is equipped with — ie, various laws and procedures — are insufficient for this purpose. Therefore, the legislature needs to step up and address the existing deficiencies in the legal system. This is one of the most pressing issues of our time.

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Dodging culpability

IT is high time the judiciary put an end to the culture of impunity that has allowed the missing persons crisis to persist. In a significant decision, the Islamabad High Court recently dismissed a set of appeals against fines imposed on the defence and interior secretaries, the Islamabad chief commissioner and several police officers for failing to recover three persons who have been missing for years. Before making its decision, the division bench asked if the government had, after the fine was imposed, succeeded in determining the whereabouts of the missing individuals, to which the additional attorney general, representing the errant officials, replied in the negative. Wondering whether the government was still “waiting for a miracle”, the court observed that the authorities repeatedly seek time in such cases but then “do nothing” to recover the missing. This, in fact, is the long and short of the government’s strategy to deal with the growing number of citizens going ‘missing’ each year.

It is a galling situation: it is no secret why citizens are routinely disappeared, and who most commonly does the disappearing. Yet, state representatives act oblivious or, worse, attempt to gaslight the grieving families. Meanwhile, fundamental rights are violated, families torn apart, and deep anti-state resentment grows, especially in communities that are routinely targeted. Then, when officials are held responsible for their obvious failures, they hide behind extensive legal defences and technicalities of the law to avoid accountability for their complicity. Perpetrators and their protectors’ ability to leverage power and state resources to seek legal protections even as they abuse the law themselves makes it all the more imperative for the superior judiciary to say ‘enough’ and refuse to become a part of this vicious cycle. Unless senior officials are held to account for failing in their responsibilities, it is unlikely that they will work sincerely to end the practice of disappearing citizens.

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Creeping militancy

WHILE military personnel and LEAs have mostly been targeted in the current wave of militancy, the list of targets is by no means limited to security men. Politicians and public figures are also in the terrorists’ cross hairs, as the tragic

killing of former senator Hidayatullah Khan in Bajaur on Wednesday shows. Khan was killed, along with four others, in an IED blast while on his way to a campaign event in connection with a KP provincial by-election. Though no claims of responsibility have yet emerged, police officials have called the blast an act of terrorism. The grim fact is that Bajaur and other tribal parts of KP have witnessed steady militant activity over the last few years. On the day the former senator was targeted, the military said it had killed a “high-profile terrorist” in Bajaur. Terrorists in the past have also targeted political figures and events. In January, Rehan Zeb, a young politician contesting the general elections, was assassinated in Bajaur, while a massive bombing in July 2023 targeting a JUI-F rally in the same district resulted in over 50 fatalities. The latter atrocity was claimed by the ISKP terrorist group.

Considering that the plethora of militant groups that operate in the country are stridently opposed to democracy, Hidayatullah Khan’s killing — and similar incidents before it — is perhaps designed to send a chilling message to political forces to steer clear of what the terrorists consider to be their stomping grounds. The culprits could include anyone — from ISKP and the TTP to any of the offshoots that have sprung from these deadly outfits. The names are, in fact, immaterial; what is important is for the state to ensure that no part of Pakistan is vulnerable to terrorist attacks. KP and Balochistan are particularly vulnerable in this respect. But the militants cannot be allowed to stifle political activity and prevent citizens from organising and expressing themselves. While local communities may not be in favour of full-scale military operations, the state needs to use all other tools at its disposal to secure these vulnerable areas and make sure that the lives and properties of citizens are safe. The administration recently launched its Azm-i-Istehkam campaign with great fanfare; ensuring security in areas worst hit by militancy must be the central plank of this campaign.

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Trade cooperation

AT their meeting on the side-lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation-Plus summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to improve bilateral trade ties.

They discussed the issues impeding financial and banking connectivity for easing bilateral trade flows as Mr Sharif called for reviving and expanding trade under a barter system. Mr Putin responded positively, saying that ties between Moscow and Islamabad had recovered in recent years due to improvement in trade linkages. He was hopeful that both Russia and Pakistan would enhance their energy and agriculture cooperation.

Mr Sharif also used his visit to renew calls for strengthening Pakistan's trade and economic cooperation with the Central Asian states, asking their leaders to establish road and rail connectivity and offering them transit rights through this country to trade with the rest of the world via the Karachi port.

Speaking at the inaugural session of the trilateral summit of Pakistan, Turkiye and Azerbaijan, he proposed tripartite institutional mechanisms to strengthen commercial ties. He also mentioned plans to host a regional connectivity summit to provide trade corridors to Central Asia.

While rail and road connectivity with Central Asia is a long shot, Mr Sharif's meetings with regional leaders indicate his desire to end Pakistan's growing trade isolation by integrating the national economy with that of other countries in the region.

That Pakistan remains the least integrated economy regionally, in spite of its geographical advantage and potential to become what Mr Sharif calls an "ideal trade conduit" in the region speaks volumes about our policymakers' 'trade isolationist' mindset.

In fact, Islamabad is not part of any effective regional trading bloc. The two regional economic blocs Pakistan is a part of — the Economic Cooperation Organisation and the South Asian Free Trade Area — have been dormant since their formation. While other members of these blocs have significantly boosted economic cooperation, our share of trade with ECO and the South Asian nations is negligible. Out of the four countries Pakistan has borders with, it is only with China with which we have significant trading linkages. With the other three — India, Iran and Afghanistan, our trade position is dismal.

Several factors have impeded Pakistan's economic integration within the region but political and territorial disputes with neighbouring countries, imagined and real security concerns, a narrow band of exportable products, and reliance on the West for both trade and aid are among the main reasons for our continued economic isolation.

Trading blocs have helped their respective member states become competitive and have contributed greatly to their economic development. Will Mr Sharif be able to translate his dream of integrating Pakistan within the region by liberalising trade cooperation with South and Central Asia? That remains to be seen.

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Ballooning bills

A SECOND cycle of nationwide protests and agitation against the ballooning price of electricity will start soon. On Monday, the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority will hold a public hearing on a proposal to squeeze out Rs700bn more from customers through a revised electricity tariff applicable from the first of this month. Since this tariff revision is considered a 'necessary step' to meet revenue requirements outlined by the IMF for Pakistan to qualify for yet another bailout package, the hearing is likely to be a mere formality. Therefore, as soon as the proposal is formally accepted, the per-unit price of electricity will go up by an average of Rs5.72 for all of next year, which will increase the base tariff to Rs35.50 per unit, compared to Rs29.78 for the current year. However, the real, applicable rate of every unit of electricity will average between Rs65 and Rs72 per unit, as customers will also be billed for surcharges, taxes, duties, and levies, as well as monthly and quarterly adjustments. The impact of these changes will begin sometime later this month, with the poorest expected to see their bills rise by as much as 51pc.

A nationwide, prolonged heatwave over most of June and early July would have likely necessitated an increase in electricity usage, which is why the higher tariff will come as a double whammy for those households which were not careful about their consumption. The question is, does the vast majority have sufficient fiscal space in their household budgets to absorb the impact? It is unlikely. Wage growth has been greatly outpaced by inflation in recent times, and because of

stagnating growth, most households have consistently lost purchasing power over the past few years. This much has been evident from the sharp decline in electricity consumption. Of course, electricity charges need not be so high: though the government cannot easily avoid capacity charges, curtailing theft and line losses remains a common-sense measure to bring prices down. Yet successive governments have remained uninterested in enforcing tighter regulation, letting helpless consumers pick up the tab. Last year, the protests had eventually simmered down: the question this year is whether the public has finally reached a breaking point or if there is room still for it to continue absorbing the costs of policy failure.

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Labour's landslide

IN a historic moment for British politics, the Labour Party has achieved an unprecedented victory, securing over 400 seats in the general election. The day after the vote, it was clear that the people wanted a new government and a new prime minister. In his maiden speech as Britain's new PM, Keir Starmer said that the country needed "a bigger reset" and that his government would be "unburdened by doctrine". He vowed that his government would fight every day to make people believe in them, and that he would put country before party. This landslide win marks a dramatic shift in the UK's political landscape, which for 14 years has seen Conservative rule. More recently, and especially since the war in Gaza intensified, Tory rule has been marked by divisiveness, discrimination and bigotry. The results of Thursday's election reflect not just widespread public support for Labour's vision, but also a rejection of Conservative policy. Labour's success can be attributed to several factors. But many feel it is the frustration and resentment voters felt towards Rishi Sunak's government that gave Labour its historic electoral success. The result is a repudiation of the Tories' handling of critical issues, such as economic inequality, declining health services, and high cost of living. No doubt the Conservative Party's inability to address these concerns contributed to its losses. Labour promises a progressive agenda, with substantial investment in public services, transforming Britain into a clean energy superpower, and a commitment to social justice. It is clear from the losses seen in former Tory heartlands that the people had had enough.

With a commanding majority, Labour now has the opportunity to implement its ambitious platform without the hindrance of political gridlock. However, with great power comes great responsibility. The Labour Party must now translate its electoral promises into tangible outcomes. Delivering on their commitments will be crucial to maintaining the trust and support of the electorate.

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Gagging social media

It is hoped that better sense prevails and the prime minister turns down the Punjab government's troubling suggestion calling for the gagging of social media apps during Muharram.

The provincial administration had earlier written to the interior ministry calling for a shutdown of various platforms — Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, X, etc — between Muharram 6 and 11 “to control hate ... and to avoid sectarian violence”, citing the threat of “external forces” supposedly disseminating hate material.

Security concerns are absolutely valid during Muharram, which begins either tomorrow or on Monday, but mass shutdowns of the internet/social media are not the most advisable method of ensuring peace. This policy focuses more on the symptoms — hate material and misuse of social media — rather than the actual disease — the presence of violent hate groups that have been fanning the flames of communalism in society for decades.

The fact is that the proposed move can be used as a precedent by some elements within the state to permanently throttle free expression, and deny access to apps that have become part of life for millions of Pakistanis.

Shutting down apps can result in disrupting communication across the country, while businesses that depend on these platforms would face immense losses. Moreover, if the state starts deploying such unwise tactics, they can also be used, in future, to shut down apps when strikes, protests or rallies are called by parties or organisations that are not in the state's good books. This has occurred in the past as social media apps have been shut down during PTI rallies post-May 9.

Instead of gagging social media, less intrusive and less draconian methods can be applied to maintain peace during sensitive periods, primarily through greater vigilance and monitoring. In this regard the Punjab government's decision to have all majalis recorded and submitted to the relevant police station may help in monitoring controversial content, and prosecuting hatemongers of all persuasions. This will require considerable manpower as thousands of majalis are organised during the first 10 days of Muharram. But if Punjab's rulers think they have the technology and manpower to pull off this feat, then they could help contain the spread of sectarian material. Since the police will have recordings of all speeches, any errant individuals can easily be traced and investigated.

The fact is that in most countries Muharram passes off without incident. But because significant chunks of society in Pakistan have been radicalised, and confessional differences exploited, things are different in this country. Shutting down the internet, phones and social media is not the way to ensure communal peace. Going after hatemongers and violent sectarian groups, as well as monitoring troublemakers from all confessional backgrounds, can be much more effective in keeping violence at bay.

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Political prerogative

ON the question of national security at least, the PTI is willing to lend an ear to the government. The party's decision to participate in a political stakeholders' conference on Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, confirmed to the media by the PTI's incarcerated chief Imran Khan on Friday, has been welcomed by the PML-N-led government and is being seen as a significant development with respect to the prospects of the proposed military action.

The PTI has been one of the strongest critics of the operation and has resisted it strongly, along with other opposition parties. The party and those aligned with it on the matter believe that another military operation may destabilise the country further by disrupting the economies of the affected areas and precipitating the kind of social uprooting and upheaval that became part and parcel of earlier military operations against militants and terrorist forces.

Despite those reservations, Mr Khan has instructed party leaders to hear the government out and present the PTI's concerns through the forum of the proposed multiparty conference. "It is good to hear the PTI founder's statement [...] this is a matter of national importance, and all political parties should be taken on board," the information minister said. However, the government should announce a date for the conference as soon as possible in order to capitalise on the opportunity. Since the PTI rules KP and represents a large section of the national electorate, its buy-in is critical for the operation's success. Encouragingly, some in the ruling party seem to be taking the PTI's willingness to participate as an opportunity for engagement on broader issues as well. The defence minister, while commenting on the matter, has said the government remains open to engaging with the PTI and that the PML-N president, too, has kept the doors for negotiations open.

However, the government and opposition's tentative steps towards political engagement on Operation Azm-i-Istehkam may face difficulties. The Corps Commanders' Conference, held on the same day the multiparty conference was being considered, was followed by a terse public rebuke to those criticising the operation. The military command reportedly considers the critics to be engaging in "deliberate misrepresentation of the [military's] vision, only for furthering their vested interests", according to a statement issued by ISPR.

This perspective seems to completely overlook the concerns held by the residents and representatives of the areas that are most likely to be affected by the proposed operation.

To avoid the social instability that the politicians have voiced their concerns about, it would be better if the proposed counterterrorism operation starts only after a political consensus has been reached. It should be left to parliament to decide how the country must proceed on the matter.

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Pezeshkian's test

THE list of challenges, both domestic and foreign, before Iranian president-elect Masoud Pezeshkian is a long and difficult one. Described as both a reformist and a centrist, the heart surgeon and veteran lawmaker clinched the Iranian presidency during Friday's run-off election by narrowly beating his conservative rival Saeed Jalili. Mr Pezeshkian was appointed health minister in the Khatami government, and has served several terms in parliament. But now, as holder of the country's second most powerful office after that of the supreme leader, he will be expected to deliver on the many promises he made to Iranians during the campaign. These include greater social freedoms, removing crippling US-led sanctions, as well as improving Iran's external relations.

Domestically, the Iranian electorate has signalled that the system must change, in line with its wishes. Therefore, Mr Pezeshkian will have to carefully navigate between the expectations of his voters and the demands of the clerical establishment. Along with social freedoms, the greatest domestic challenge before the new Iranian leader will be to improve his country's stagnant economy, which has been throttled by years of sanctions imposed primarily by the US. One critical way of removing sanctions would be to revive the frozen nuclear deal. Mr Pezeshkian's reported choice of foreign minister, Javad Zarif, signals that he may be serious in restarting the JCPOA negotiations. Mr Zarif played a central role in successfully negotiating the nuclear deal during the Rouhani administration. But we must remain cautious about the prospects of a rapprochement between Iran and the West, especially if a second Trump presidency — which is looking increasingly likely — becomes a reality. It was Donald Trump who tore up the nuclear deal in 2018, and there is little to suggest the Republican contender is jettisoning his past stance and warming up to Tehran now. Elsewhere, Mr Pezeshkian will need to guide his country as it confronts an aggressive Israel in the region, while also continuing the thaw with the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs. Questions also remain about whether the incoming president will deepen ties with Russia and China, continuing the strategic policy of his predecessor Ebrahim Raisi. Where relations with Pakistan are concerned, it is hoped Mr Pezeshkian will continue the policies of the Raisi administration, which sought to significantly improve trade and people-to-people ties between the neighbouring states.

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Amending SOE law

IN Pakistan, reforms move slowly, particularly when powerful lobbies are involved. The reform of state-owned enterprises — agreed with the IMF in 2019 under the \$6bn Fund bailout to improve SOE governance and financial efficiency and to ready these entities for privatisation — is a glaring example. A law to improve SOE governance and operations prepared in 2021 was passed by parliament only last year, and that too under immense pressure from the IMF and other multinational lenders. However, it remains largely unimplemented due to political and bureaucratic hurdles. The government recently amended the SOE law in order to accomplish one of the prior actions it needs to complete before it can clinch a deal with the IMF. The new amendment empowers the government to appoint and remove directors of federal SOEs through an institutional mechanism on the recommendation of a board nomination committee. The idea is to select the best available human resources to efficiently run these entities, and to remove them if they are found wanting in their performance as board members.

This is in line with good corporate governance practices. Sadly, the opposition took this opportunity to make the issue subject to controversy and accused the government of ulterior motives. If the opposition leaders had concerns regarding the amendment or suspected the government of wrongdoing, it was their best chance to thoroughly debate the law and suggest meaningful changes to strengthen it rather than attempting to settle political scores. No legislation is perfect. The job of the opposition is to keep a close watch over the government and hold it accountable for every misstep or bad legislation. That said, it is the government's responsibility to provide parliamentarians with the opportunity to discuss and debate every piece of legislation rather than rushing them through. Lack of transparency and productive debate always bog down real reforms at the expense of the economy and the people.

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Feudal crimes

FEUDAL impunity is destroying Pakistan's poor populations. This is particularly true in Sindh where the vulnerable endure harassment and exploitation at the

hands of powerful landlords. Last week, a large number of activists from the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum protested against the unlawful occupation of lakes, including the Kakaho lake in Sanghar district by the Hingorjo community, and other freshwater bodies along the coastal belt, which stand usurped by feudal might. PFF leaders have been agitating for long against the feudals whose excesses — the encroachment of sweet water lakes, depriving fisherfolk of their fishing rights and threatening them with false cases and seizing their boats and fishing nets — have ended hundreds of livelihoods. Sadly, the anglers' hardships have worsened since the launch of the fishing licence scheme as they are kept away from fishing areas by armed goons.

Feudal clans wield immense power over the province's political and social structure, which makes pro-fishermen policies impossible to formulate. In fact, there have been many instances where serving ministers have allegedly been part of the mafia that illegally appropriates marine wealth. As a result, while the power elite rakes in millions, fishermen and their kin are left to waste with hunger. This is yet another textbook instance of state failure; communities without financial capital and political clout cannot hope for administrative action. It is deplorable that our fractured justice system — unfair, weak, and subservient to the influential — is the reason for the agony of the fishermen. Sindh's corrupt police force enables every injustice perpetrated by exploitative power structures, reducing indigent people to slaves. It is hoped that NGOs, rights activists and civil society join the campaign for fishermen's rights and protection, as well as build pressure on international rights bodies to raise the matter with the government. In times of economic stress, sustained monetary support for fisherfolk is paramount.

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Ending vigilantism

THE dangers that vigilantism — especially mob attacks and lynchings inspired by dubious rumours and allegations of blasphemy — pose to society are immense. And unless there is a committed pushback from state and society, these extremist tendencies can unleash a reign of anarchy in this blighted land. Fortunately, there does appear to be a realisation within the corridors of power that the threat at hand needs to be tackled forthwith. In a recent interaction with

clerics, Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz highlighted this grave issue, and promised to take action against those who promote the dangerous culture of vigilantism. Ms Nawaz rightly pointed out that behind many of these incidents of alleged blasphemy are personal vendettas; allegations of desecration are cruelly used as excuses to settle scores, often with deadly consequences. She also promised to crack down on those involved in mob attacks, while observing that some preachers often misused loudspeakers to egg on bloodthirsty crowds.

The incidents of mob violence and lynching are too numerous to list here. Suffice it to say, far too many innocent people have paid with their lives, or lost property, due to spurious allegations of desecration, where zealous mobs have decided to dispense 'justice'. While many minority citizens have been targeted, Muslims have not been spared a dreadful fate either. It is welcome that the Punjab chief minister has taken notice of the issue, as many of the recent incidents — Sargodha, Jaranwala — have occurred in that province. But this is a national problem that needs a national response. Firstly, officials must go beyond words and take action against all those involved in promoting this culture of violence. A blueprint exists in the form of the National Action Plan; all that remains is the wherewithal to implement the plan's counter-extremism recommendations. As we have stated before in these columns, deradicalisation may take years, if not decades, as extremism has struck deep roots in society. But implementing the law must be an immediate priority. This means taking action against those involved in making false allegations, as well as bringing to book those who promote violence and vigilantism. Economic and social progress will be impossible if we ignore the growing threat; if such incidents continue, and more innocent people are harmed, Pakistan risks becoming a pariah state. The time for action is now.

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Taxing targets

AFTER setting a massive revenue target for the Federal Board of Revenue for the next fiscal year, the government seems to be building pressure on the tax authority to perform. It is just as well that this may lead to a tightening of the net around those who have so far managed to evade the taxman.

A day after another massive shakeup in the FBR, which reportedly saw the transfer of dozens of officers of the Inland Revenue Service and Customs Groups, and with more transfers and postings of senior officers expected over the weekend, the tax authority was told to immediately go after the around 4.5m citizens it had identified, which it thinks are liable to pay taxes but do not. The prime minister is also reportedly overseeing an accelerated action plan to digitise and reform the FBR, along with a review of its existing and required resources. These are all positive signs.

Reportedly, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif is serious about cracking down on corruption within the FBR, introducing a merit-based culture, and reforming the institution. Worryingly, however, he has involved two intelligence agencies, according to a report in local media, to 'assist' him in the task of identifying and penalising FBR officials.

Time will tell how successful this strategy will prove. The FBR has generally proven to be a difficult nut to crack for most past governments, with efforts to reform it invariably encountering resistance as soon as certain thresholds begin to be crossed. That said, it is clear to all and sundry that Pakistan's economic viability depends on the Board's ability to extract revenue in line with government policies and that the room for failure is no longer there. With the ongoing economic crisis, the need for a diligent tax authority has become an existential necessity for Islamabad.

The FBR's operational competencies aside, the fiscal policies, as outlined in the budget, have set it up for another huge challenge. It can expect to be reminded very soon that taxation is just as much a political issue as it is a fiscal concern. The FBR may begin executing the tax directives more diligently than before, but how will the government react when the various 'protected' classes once again begin agitating against its tax drives?

Not only that, the salaried classes, usually a lot easier to control, also seem to be in a black mood. Discussions on various social forums these days are increasingly turning to questions about why they should pay so much in taxes and if it isn't more sensible to be operating off the books. This is a dangerous sign for a government battling a crisis of legitimacy. How delicately and firmly it handles discontent will make or break its tax plans.

GLOF threats

THE threat that glacial lake outburst flooding poses to northern communities is considerable, as people in Gilgit-Baltistan recently experienced. Hundreds of people in Skardu have become homeless as raging floods, triggered by melting glaciers, have swept away homes and crops along the Burgi nullah. Local people say the flash flooding has also damaged their water supply. The PDMA has issued GLOF alerts for northern KP as well. It has warned that warming temperatures are likely to persist till mid-July, meaning that GLOF events, flash floods and landslides are very likely. Unfortunately, as the world warms, such climate-induced events are likely to become more common; the only way out is for the state and local communities to adapt to the changing circumstances.

The immediate need is for the state to come to the aid of the affected communities in GB, and prepare settlements in KP for what lies ahead. But the bigger picture conveys that mitigation and adaptation are the only ways that mountain communities can protect themselves against nature's wrath. The state has, working with the UN, started to make some efforts towards addressing the GLOF challenge. As per the world body, glaciers in the Hindu Kush, Himalayas and Karakoram ranges are melting rapidly, and over 3,000 glacial lakes have formed in GB and KP. Around 33 of these are said to pose significant hazards, putting over 7m people in harm's way. As recommended by experts, interventions such as early warning systems, as well as plantation, drainage structures and mini-dams can help protect people and crops from the ravages of GLOFs. And as the Skardu deputy commissioner has observed, people should refrain from encroaching along nullahs and watercourses as this stops the natural flow of the water. Halting global warming is beyond our control; what the state can do, along with affected communities and global experts, is to implement plans that mitigate the effects of rising temperatures.

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Suspicious revisions

FOR an institution that frequently relies on rigid interpretations of rules and laws, particularly when dealing with the affairs of one particular political party, it is

rather disconcerting how routinely disdainful the ECP is when it comes to rules and regulations applying to its own conduct. According to a recent discovery by an NGO, confirmed by this publication after an independent review, dozens of critical election results that had been shared by the Commission officially on a public drive were quietly 'updated' late last week. It was subsequently discovered that a total of 41 Form 45 results for national and provincial assembly constituencies in Punjab and KP had been modified by the Commission on the official Google Drive managed by it. The authority has thus far not provided a satisfactory explanation as to why these changes were made or why so many changes pertained to constituencies in the city of Lahore in particular. It appears that a recent finding from Pattan-Coalition 38, the NGO in question, flagging the absence of Form 45 documents for 21 different Lahore constituencies was what prompted the ECP to make the changes, even though it had initially dismissed the report as 'baseless.'

But can this be so easily written off as an 'honest mistake', as one ECP official has insisted? The polls conducted in Punjab attracted the most controversy following the general election conducted by the ECP on Feb 8, and it has been discovered that many of the recently 'updated' results pertain to seats that have been challenged by losing contestants. This is deeply troubling. Additionally, it is worth highlighting that the Commission had previously blocked the formation of new election tribunals for Punjab for weeks till it was 'rescued' by new legislation empowering it to move cases between tribunals and appoint retired judges of its own choosing to head new tribunals. The Supreme Court recently had to intervene and force the ECP to consult the new LHC chief justice on the issue, but the appointment of desperately needed tribunals for Punjab remains a pending matter. These actions and other reasons have given rise to valid concerns regarding the ECP's commitment to transparency and fairness in all poll-related matters. The ECP may be a constitutional body, but that cannot mean it has carte blanche to continue doing as it pleases.

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Supplementary grants

THE ex post facto parliamentary approval of huge unbudgeted expenditures of Rs9.4tr — up by 389pc from Rs1.9tr sanctioned a year earlier — during the last

two fiscal years underlines how the government is abusing the powers it derives from the Constitution to deal with possible budgetary shortfalls, and unexpected new expenditures or cost overruns.

This practice of altering the original budget by obtaining retrospective approval of fund re-appropriation or new expenditures made during a given fiscal year, without parliament's nod to supplementary budget statements, is not new. But the rapid growth of these unauthorised expenditures affirms that the fiscal authorities have lately been interpreting Article 84 rather liberally to bypass parliamentary and public scrutiny. This is despite the fact that the constitutional provision is meant to give the government access to funds for unforeseen financial needs in times of emergencies or contingencies to ensure the unhampered functioning of public services.

A story on the excess expenditures by three successive governments between May 2023 and May 2024 through supplementary grants reveals that subsidies and the power sector, water division, defence and civil armed forces and related agencies stand out in exceeding budgetary allocations or securing finances for unbudgeted expenditure and initiatives.

Many expenditures for which the government sought retrospective parliamentary approval have little to do with emergencies or contingencies. Several expenditures, such as additional funds for CPEC security, military pensions and other retirement benefits, the Green Corporate Initiative of the armed forces, Pakistan-Iran border fencing, K-Electric and public power generation plants, etc, could have been anticipated when the original budget was passed.

The abuse of a constitutional provision meant for unforeseen financial needs betrays bureaucratic disdain for parliament and public opinion, in fact, even democracy. It is also a sort of violation of a 2013 Supreme Court observation that "the amounts as approved in the budget passed by the National Assembly have to be utilised for the purpose specified in the budget statement.

Any re-appropriation of funds or their utilisation for some other purpose, though within the permissible limits of the budget, are not justified..." The recent re-appropriation of funds for needless payment of 'honoraria' to PMO officers, as well as for parliamentarians' development schemes and renovation and

construction of judges' residences at a time when the government has implemented additional taxes of Rs1.7tr underscores the urgency for restricting the government' powers under Article 84 to alter the approved budget, except in extreme cases.

Even when an expense is made in emergency situations, it should be immediately brought before parliament for debate and approval to ensure the integrity of the budget, avoid unnecessary additional expenses and reduce digressions from the approved original spending framework. These changes are crucial to ensure tight fiscal discipline and contain budget deficits.

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Policed state

PAKISTAN is under grave threat from its own citizens, or so the interior ministry would have us believe. According to a recent statement made before the Sindh High Court on behalf of the ministry, the government feels it necessary to keep the ban on X in place because it considers the social media platform a "threat to peace and national security".

The statement reads: "hostile elements operating on X have nefarious intentions to create an environment of chaos and instability, with the ultimate goal of destabilising the country and plunging it into some form of anarchy". For anyone aware of Pakistan's sociopolitical context, it is not difficult to guess who is being described as 'hostile elements'. There are many disgruntled and disillusioned citizens who have taken to using the platform to vent their frustrations against state institutions that clearly appear unnerved by the unchecked criticism and would like to see them silenced.

The ban on X, the interior ministry says, does not curtail freedom of expression or restrict access to information. In fact, 'it is a measure aimed at ensuring responsible use of social media platforms'. But how does completely blocking access to a global platform encourage responsible use of social media? And how does silencing all Pakistani citizens on X contribute towards national stability and democratic governance? The government does not shed light on these questions.

Meanwhile, another recent development provides a fresh example of how extensively constitutional freedoms are being encroached upon. Following the uncovering of a mass surveillance apparatus spying on potentially millions of citizens, the government has, through an SRO, formally allowed intelligence personnel to intercept and trace calls of any citizen “in the interest of national security”. To be clear, this was already being done, albeit without warrants or legal sanction. It will now continue with legal sanction, but likely still without warrants.

The PML-N-led government must be asked: what is it thinking, giving up important personal protections under the pretext of ‘national security’? Even if the circumstances demand enhanced powers for security institutions, these should not be conceded without adequate checks and balances in place.

There are many seasoned politicians within its ranks who should know better than to expect such measures to yield positive results in the long run. Likewise, silencing social media is no solution to the actual problem of growing public discontent, which is being augmented by the government’s poor policies.

What is needed most right now is for Pakistan to be as accommodative of competing narratives as possible. It would be prudent, therefore, to spend more energy understanding and addressing public concerns rather than treating everyone as an enemy. Suppressing a restless public and blocking dissent will only create more frustrations, which may spill over in unforeseen ways.

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In critical condition

IT is time to sound the alarm. The Senate Standing Committee on Health provided some shocking figures on Monday — Pakistan has a shortage of approximately one million nurses, while some 30,000 to 40,000 doctors registered with the PMDC are not practising medicine. The fact that the strength of Pakistan’s nursing staff stood at about 100,000, despite its need for a tenfold increase, was also emphasised on International Nurses Day in May. Besides, in 2022, WHO’s Pakistan head had warned of a human resource crisis in the health sector, calling on the country to fortify its health workforce. The crisis has not

crept up on us. As healthcare has never been a political commitment for successive governments, it is hardly central to policymaking. The lack of planned and sustained investment in the medical corps has resulted in a national emergency.

Without a doubt, Pakistan's health workers have long felt abandoned by the state. And the time for an urgent prescription is now. To begin with, health personnel working in the public sector, regardless of their experience and specialisation, must have a reliable service structure to count on, aided by career planning and growth. The relevant government departments should proactively find the means to retain health professionals as well as expand their numbers in an overhauled system, especially if they want to prevent more medics leaving the country for greener pastures. What is also the need of the hour is amplified incentives for the nursing staff, such as schedules that suit their needs, health insurance and protection against infections. It is important to enhance their quality of life not only with higher salaries and benefits, but also with greater recognition of their all-important role in looking after patients round the clock. In addition, health departments must hold regular training programmes for updated certification to ensure a modern nursing workforce. For the most part, private nursing schools are substandard, making it critical for the authorities to monitor and upgrade these facilities so that the majority of nurses hired are graduates. In a moribund economy, this degree of scarcity in manpower means a public health crisis, and it is more than apparent that unless active measures are in place, the exodus will intensify. This pivotal sector requires systematic implementation of solutions and reforms to reverse the damage.

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Arshad Sharif judgement

THE judgement of a court in Kenya has brought some clarity to the brutal murder of Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif in that country in October 2022. Yet many questions remain unanswered, and Pakistani authorities must do the needful to ensure that the slain anchor's family can access justice. As per the ruling of the High Court of Kenya in Kajiado, the killing by Kenyan law enforcers was found to be "arbitrary, un-proportionate, unlawful and unconstitutional". Moreover, the court found that the respondents — various Kenyan government agencies — had

violated the rights of the petitioners, Sharif's family and Kenyan journalist bodies. The court also ordered payment of monetary compensation to the murdered journalist's family. The Committee to Protect Journalists has termed the verdict "an important step towards ending impunity", while also calling for prosecuting those responsible for the killing. Sharif's widow, on the other hand, has noted that while the journalist was served justice in Kenya, his case in Pakistan remains pending.

The Kenyan court's verdict appears to endorse a fact-finding report submitted to the Supreme Court in December 2022. That report has termed the killing a "targeted assassination" while observing that the involvement of "transnational ... characters in Kenya, Dubai and Pakistan" in the crime could not be ruled out. It also found "discrepancies" in Kenyan LEAs' version of events. It is important to uncover the full facts of this case not only to ensure that Arshad Sharif's family gets justice, but also to identify the powerful elements that may have been involved in silencing a voice of dissent. It needs to be established whether Sharif was made to flee Pakistan, and later the UAE, due to his critical views. The judgement has confirmed that the killing was unlawful; now the 'why' and 'who' behind this crime must be determined. The Kenyan justice system has done its job; our investigative authorities and courts must now complete theirs.

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Negligence at PHOTA

THE impression that the state is being careless towards aspects of organ trade control is damaging. Recent news about the Punjab Human Organ Transplant Authority being without a regular head for a year and a half reeks of negligence, and the extension in its director general's tenure for a sixth term violates the PHOTA Act, which mandates regular appointments of the head. Despite frequent news about the involvement of educated people, doctors and administrators in sinister networks, the body responsible for regulating organ transplants in Punjab finds itself at the centre of controversy, with allegations of favouritism. Moreover, the current DG, in disregard of the apparent conflict of interest involved, reportedly heads the urology department at a local hospital too. Last year, the Punjab health department shortlisted 16 candidates for the job but the effort came to naught.

More troubling is the fact that PHOTA appears compromised at a time when organ trafficking is at a significant scale in Punjab, which has witnessed an upsurge in illicit transplants over the past year. The racket thrives in times of economic distress and Pakistan's present situation is one that enables exploitation. Hence, the necessary manpower and a non-controversial, scrupulous administrator are the need of the hour to monitor evil elements and eliminate human organ sale. The onus for PHOTA's state falls on the government; it has not only put the physical security of citizens at risk but also emboldened corrupt forces and odious networks to operate with impunity. What this country needs is a coordinated, vigilant and effective approach led by experienced, upright supervisors. Lawmakers cannot leave any room for Pakistan to revert to its earlier avatar of an organ tourism destination. Organ trafficking dehumanises society, particularly the poor, and feeds a global black market. Activists and the medical fraternity need to keep the pressure on lawmakers to fortify PHOTA and free it of all interference.

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Taxing agriculture

OUR inability to collect sufficient tax revenue is resulting in persistently high fiscal deficits, forcing successive governments to accumulate an unsustainably high debt — domestic and external — to finance their budgets year after year. The current administration has now pledged to raise tax-to-GDP ratio by over 3pc from the existing 9.5pc to 13pc in the next three years as it negotiates another IMF bailout to avert an economic meltdown. However, few believe it can do so without taxing every sector of the economy equitably. Agriculture is one potential area that can produce sizable revenues. Nonetheless, the sector contributed less than 0.1pc of the direct tax collection of Rs3.7tr in the last fiscal year, despite comprising nearly a quarter of the national economy. Why is this so? One reason is that agriculture income tax remains a provincial subject because it suits the interests of big landlords who enjoy substantial political clout in the assemblies. Besides, the provinces have limited capacity to assess farm incomes and collect tax accordingly. More importantly, tax rates on farm income are much lower than the federal rates applicable to income derived from other sources. The highest slab on agricultural income is just 15pc in Sindh and Punjab, compared to nearly 39pc on salaried individuals.

The abysmally low rates on farm incomes have in effect turned agriculture income tax into a 'tax haven' for tax cheats. An IMF paper has indicated that tax exemption on agricultural income makes this sector a legal, and sometimes illegal, tax shelter for other forms of income. Transfers from other sectors of the economy to agriculture are commonplace to avoid income taxes. It means application of federal tax rates on agricultural income could yield substantial revenues for the budget and reduce the growing burden on the rest of the economy. But this is not possible unless agriculture income tax is transferred to the centre for assessment and collection under normal income tax laws. That will require a consensus at the NFC forum and then a constitutional amendment. Until we get there, the provinces must bring agriculture income tax rates on a par with normal income tax rates and transfer it to FBR. The revenues from farm incomes can be distributed amongst the provinces till an agreement is reached to make it part of the divisible tax pool.

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Population crisis

PAKISTAN is the world's fifth most populous nation, yet the resources and socioeconomic tools needed to provide for over 240m souls are severely lacking. The only logical measure is to bring down the fertility rate in order to provide a better standard of living to citizens, as well as the generations to come. Unfortunately, successive governments, beyond providing lip service, have failed to act to prevent the population bomb from coming close to detonation. If we continue on this trajectory, the UNFPA projects that Pakistan's population may hit 263m by 2030, which is just around the corner. Does Pakistan have the resources to adequately feed, clothe, educate and house this massive number? The answer is worryingly self-evident.

Therefore, today, as World Population Day is being observed globally, both state and civil society must pledge to address the population issue in a progressive and sagacious manner. This can be done by declaring a 'population emergency', and committing funds and efforts to the cause of addressing the explosive population growth. While some states have taken invasive steps, such as limiting the number of children couples can have, there are better examples in the

neighbourhood that do not infringe on personal rights, yet achieve the goal of planned families.

In this regard, UNFPA cites the Muslim-majority states of Turkiye, Iran and Bangladesh, which have managed to implement successful family planning programmes. As per the UN body's research, these countries succeeded because the state was fully supporting policies aimed at reducing population growth, while information and family planning services were easily available to citizens. There is no reason why Pakistan — which in the 1960s had initiated similar plans — cannot learn from these Muslim states, with which we share many cultural similarities.

Perhaps the biggest factor that can give a boost to family planning campaigns is unwavering commitment from the state at the federal and provincial levels. There needs to be buy-in from political parties, as well as the clergy.

The fact is that due to the social structures in Pakistan, it is imperative to have ulema, tribal elders and other community leaders on board to successfully implement family planning programmes — from big cities to the furthest hamlets. Both men and women need to be counselled about the options available. Moreover, successful programmes, such as Lady Health Workers, can be utilised to provide information and reproductive health services to women.

At the policy level, the skewed weightage given to large populations in the NFC Award formula should be reconsidered, as provincial administrations will continue to ignore rampant population growth in order to secure more funds. For a balanced future where all Pakistanis have access to food, water and basic services, a successful family planning model is essential.

Published in Dawn, July 11th, 2024

Misery and despair

A PERVERSIVE gloom darkens the days of almost all working-class Pakistani households. From tea shops to opinion columns in local newspapers, the conversations reflect a growing unsettlement with the status quo. Most serious economists appear increasingly alarmed that Pakistan has sailed too deep into

uncharted, treacherous waters. They worry that public mutiny may be inevitable unless there is an immediate course correction, of which there is no sign.

Meanwhile, on online discussion forums, increasing numbers of desperate mothers post queries for part-time jobs because they are no longer able to meet school fees and household expenses on one pay cheque. Heart-rending videos on social media document the desperation of street vendors, labourers, pensioners and widows as they struggle to balance their electricity bills and food expenses, while educated professionals are sharing anecdotes about the cutbacks they have been forced to implement as they wonder whether they will ever be able to get their quality of life back.

Is a life lived happily and respectably too much to ask for from your country? Many young citizens seem to believe so. A worryingly high proportion of the demographic wants nothing more than to leave. They would rather live and work anywhere than in Pakistan, which, they feel, undervalues their economic contributions, underappreciates their social needs, and suffocates them with arbitrary restrictions. The people responsible for their welfare do not care. They are too focused right now on 'economic management', which historically seems to entail little more than repeatedly selling to the IMF the idea that the Pakistani authorities are serious about getting the economy back on track. However, we have yet to see any attempt at meaningful reforms or a realisation that their efforts at 'stabilising' the economy are impoverishing millions and driving the young away.

Never before has Pakistan been tested with such severity of economic distress, nor has society ever been as demoralised as it appears now. This is not sensationalism; economists and historians agree it is a fact. It would appear, therefore, that the most serious challenge right now is restoring hope among the masses.

For starters, the unending political crisis must be resolved urgently. Prolonging it is only exacerbating feelings of despair about the country's future. Secondly, taxation must be made vastly more equitable. A few million honest taxpayers should not be forced to foot the bill for the legislature and executive's failure; it is highly demotivating for the most productive workers. Thirdly, the political leadership must provide the youth with a vision for a better tomorrow.

This does not mean promises of more motorbikes and laptops: there needs to be a bigger, more forward-looking plan in place that can help absorb millions of new entrants into the workforce in meaningful employment opportunities.

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Temporary extension

THE cabinet's decision to allow 'legal' Afghan refugees — meaning those with Proof of Registration cards — to stay in the country till June 30, 2025, is a more humane choice compared to the problematic repatriation campaign initiated last year. However, it should be borne in mind that the reprieve is temporary and that one day, these individuals will have to return to their country of origin, and it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to facilitate a voluntary repatriation process, and help create the conditions in Afghanistan that can sustain the returnees. The decision will affect 1.45m Afghans in the country and was taken after the UN high commissioner for refugees visited the country to discuss the issue.

Waves of Afghans have been fleeing decades of war and persecution in their homeland, and most have either ended up in Pakistan, or used this country as a transit point to reach third countries. The latest cohort of refugees arrived in Pakistan after the Afghan Taliban rolled into Kabul in 2021, precipitating the collapse of the Western-backed government. But after decades of hosting Afghan refugees, the state has cited security concerns — militants entering the country in the guise of refugees — as a reason for initiating the repatriation campaign, while Pakistan's precarious economic situation also makes sparing resources for millions of asylum-seekers difficult. Therefore, the state, UNHCR, the Western countries that were involved in the occupation of Afghanistan as well as the Taliban regime must work together to implement a workable plan that allows the remaining Afghan refugees to safely return home. Afghans who worked for Western governments or for the Karzai and Ghani administrations — particularly those who were involved in military and intelligence activities — face danger if they go back. In such a situation, the states that employed them need to speed up their visa process so that they can leave Pakistan. Even otherwise, those states that spent billions of dollars waging war in Afghanistan must now chip in and help support Afghan refugees. The Taliban, on their part, should

create a climate conducive to the return of their compatriots. This entails shunning retribution, and assuring all returnees that their fundamental rights will be respected. Moreover, the international community should help revive the Afghan economy and build infrastructure so that returnees have jobs they can take up, and a roof over their heads.

Published in Dawn, July 12th, 2024

THE verdict is in. It was the PTI, not 'PTI-backed independents', which won the most seats in the Feb 8 general election. This distinction, for those not familiar with the twists and turns of the reserved seats saga, is especially significant as it has been made by the Supreme Court itself.

The majority judgement means that not only will the PTI be restored as a lawful political party in the national and provincial assemblies, but it will also be able to claim a large share of reserved seats for minorities and women and, thereby, solidify its position in the various legislatures.

This is a stunning reversal of fortunes for a party that was, both before and after the recent general election, being treated as a defunct entity with seemingly no political rights based on the ECP's gross misinterpretation of the Supreme Court's Jan 13 verdict that denied the PTI the use of its 'bat' symbol.

"The PTI was and remains a political party," the Supreme Court clarified shortly after noon to an anxious crowd gathered on its premises on a sweltering Friday. On this point, 11 of the 13 judges seemed to agree. The majority upheld that the denial of an election symbol to a political party does not affect its constitutional and legal rights to continue functioning as a political entity, including its right to participate in an election or to field its candidates.

It was these rights that the ECP had so blatantly subverted when it repeatedly refused to let PTI candidates contest on their party-issued tickets and insisted on treating its returned candidates as independents. Now, through its judgement, the Supreme Court has, as a form of restorative justice, allowed the PTI to reorganise itself in parliament and make a fresh bid for the reserved seats that were denied to it, as is its right.

In so doing, the Supreme Court has undone a historic injustice. The PTI-SIC alliance was always an abnormality, a marriage of convenience necessitated by the unique and arbitrary conditions and restrictions imposed on the PTI by the ECP. To make matters worse, the ECP not only refused to recognise the coalition's right to a share of reserved seats, it also gifted them to other parties.

The decision flew in the face of reason and the principles of proportional representation and, therefore, had to be undone. Fortunately, the majority of the judges decided to go further and do complete justice by undoing the series of wrongs that had been caused by the ECP's reprehensible decisions based on the 'bat' judgement. It is now hoped that this judgement will preclude the kind of blatant engineering that defined this last general election. The government and establishment must not stand in the way of its implementation.

Published in Dawn, July 13th, 2024

Anti-smog strategy

BY acknowledging that smog is a year-round problem, and not just a winter issue, the Punjab government has taken the first meaningful step towards tackling a public health catastrophe. However, while this 'policy shift' is indeed a positive development, will it also lead the provincial authorities to rethink their haphazard interventions to deal with the problem? No strategy will be successful unless they reorder their priorities and realign their infrastructure development agenda with the goal of reducing the emissions responsible for the toxic air quality that we breathe every day.

As reported, the authorities are set to pursue a coordinated, cross-sectoral response to effectively cope with this perennial environmental epidemic that has taken over the entire province in recent years. The new anti-smog approach will revolve around a crackdown against all major polluters and the mobilisation of communities to create safe, smog-free spaces at home and workplaces through a multisectoral approach involving the transport, agriculture, energy, education, industries, municipal, and health departments. Prima facie, the plan appears to be meticulous. However, its success largely depends on a paradigm shift in the government's ability to slash its own carbon footprint by moving away from brick-and-mortar development to a green framework. In Lahore, for instance, the policy

of widening roads and developing signal-free corridors, instead of ensuring effective traffic management or creating an efficient public transport network for all has not only reduced the city's green cover but has also increased vehicular emissions many times over in the last decade and a half. Likewise, the uncontrolled use of coal, waste rubber and discarded motor lubricants by industry around the city has become a major contributor to air pollution. No wonder the metropolis is now ranked among the world's dirtiest and most polluted cities. Without a major provincial development policy revamp, it would be foolish to expect the industry and people to change.

Published in Dawn, July 12th, 2024

Looming flour shortage

FOR once, it is hard to argue against the reason that compelled flour mills to call a nationwide strike from Thursday. The flour mill owners are demanding that the government revoke its decision to declare them 'withholding tax agents' for the collection of 2.5pc advance tax imposed across the retail supply chain. They want the authorities to directly collect the said tax from retailers and other players in the chain. The imposition of withholding tax on the retail supply chain in the budget for the present fiscal year, rather than taxing traders directly as is the widespread demand, underlines the deep-rooted problems of inequity and unfairness plaguing our inefficient tax administration. The mill owners are justified in rejecting their status as withholding agents because it saddles them with heavy costs, opening up new avenues of corruption for the tax authorities. According to the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, the dealers had refused to share their tax details with the mills with regard to the withholding tax and the mills cannot bear this expense from their own pockets. It is beside the point that withholding taxes always burden consumers through price increases — just like any other indirect levy — and not the persons meant to be taxed.

That said, the strike has raised the spectre of nationwide wheat flour shortages in urban areas over the next several days, owing to disruptions in fresh supplies to the market. With chakkis and flour dealers also joining the strike, market watchers expect the present stocks available with retailers will be exhausted fairly soon, especially because the PFMA has pledged to continue the strike until its demands are met. The staple's shortage would be calamitous for lower- and

middle-income urban households, which have been crushed by record food inflation over the last couple of years as well as heavy direct and indirect taxation owing to the tough fiscal adjustments being made to meet the requirements of another IMF bailout. By not directly taxing traders and many other segments of the population, the government has again made a bad policy decision and pushed itself into a blind alley. What options would the authorities be left with if flour millers refuse to budge from their position? In that scenario, it might allow them to implicitly pass on the cost to the unfortunate consumers through a price increase.

Published in Dawn, July 13th, 2024

Injustice undone

THE verdict is in. It was the PTI, not 'PTI-backed independents', which won the most seats in the Feb 8 general election. This distinction, for those not familiar with the twists and turns of the reserved seats saga, is especially significant as it has been made by the Supreme Court itself.

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Same old script

WHEN it comes to the troubling issue of enforced disappearances/ missing persons — either Baloch or belonging to other ethnic/ religious groups, or political parties out of favour with the powers that be — the state clings to the same tired script. It either denies the problem exists, or comes up with unconvincing alibis to explain what may have happened to the missing individuals. When the heirs of the missing come out on the streets, the state either ignores them, or unleashes its wrath on the protesters. The latter course was adopted when police clashed with supporters of the Baloch Yakjehti Committee in Quetta on Thursday. BYC supporters had been protesting in the provincial capital's Sariab area for over a week, seeking the whereabouts of Zaheer Zeb Baloch and other missing persons. When their pleas failed to capture the state's attention, the activists decided to march to the city's Red Zone. They

were met with tear gas and baton charges, while a number of them, including women, were arrested. BYC head Dr Mahrang Baloch said two of the injured people were in critical condition.

This unpleasant episode mirrors the ‘welcome’ Baloch marchers received upon their arrival in the federal capital in December last year; Islamabad Police meted out similarly brutal treatment to the demonstrators, among whom were women and children. Then too they were protesting for the same reasons. It is unfortunate that the state does not want to learn from these negative experiences. Firstly, as this paper has repeatedly said, if the state believes any individual has been involved in wrongdoing, they must be brought before a court of law, and their constitutionally guaranteed rights respected. Secondly, if the government continues to wield a big stick against peaceful protesters, instead of addressing their legitimate demands, the gulf between the rulers and the ruled will continue to widen, creating major obstacles in the path of national cohesion.

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Cricket shake-up

SOMEONE had to take the blame and bear the brunt of the fallout from Pakistan’s disastrous showing at the T20 World Cup. This past week saw Wahab Riaz, perceived as the most influential member of the men’s cricket team selection committee, and Abdul Razzaq, also a selector for the women’s team, being sacked. The move prompted a strong rebuke from the aggrieved parties. Amid reports that the duo had overruled the other five members of the committee in the selection of players, Wahab and Razzaq said that every member had one vote and it was impossible for them to wield their influence on the other five. The committee was appointed only four months ago — a novel set-up that had five selectors as well as the coach and captain of the team, with Wahab, previously chief selector, being made a member. Things, as Pakistan’s humbling group stage exit from the World Cup showed, have not worked out and the selection committee has been reshaped. The committee now has four voting members and five ex-officio or non-voting members. Two members of the previous selection committee, former batters Mohammad Yousuf and Asad Shafiq, will continue and be voting members alongside the captain and coach of the format. The five non-

voting members — all PCB employees, including assistant coach Azhar Mahmood — are likely to work as advisers on selection matters.

How it will function remains to be seen but the development adds to the instability that has engulfed the selection committee over the last two years. It has been a case of revolving doors, with five chief selectors having come and gone since January 2022 before PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi decided to have no one at the helm of the committee. Giving the selectors a consistent run might have helped but for now, Mr Naqvi has to prove that his decision to revamp the selection committee can actually work for Pakistan cricket.

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Iddat ruling

IT was a needless, despicable spectacle which only ended up uniting both conservatives and progressives in condemning the state. Now, some five months later, the convictions handed to former prime minister Imran Khan and his spouse Bushra Bibi in the infamous 'iddat case' stand overturned. The ruling, issued by an Islamabad district and sessions court, marks a significant milestone in the incarcerated PTI leader's legal battles. After earlier acquittals and suspension of sentences in other cases, this was the last legal hurdle keeping him behind bars. It remains to be seen what fresh challenges await him, with the government insisting it will do everything within its powers to keep him in jail. Returning to the case, the unprecedented scrutiny of Mr Khan and his spouse's marital affairs was condemnable not only because it was undignified and detrimental to women's rights but also because it was in complete violation of cultural norms. The case was fast-tracked before the Feb 8 election just to 'show' the public that Mr Khan suffered from severe flaws of character. Instead, it only served to disgust the public and earn him more sympathy — a realisation that came to his detractors too late.

This case will be remembered as a low point in the country's political history, when the lines between accountability and personal privacy were blurred in unprecedented and unforgivable ways. Lawyers, rights activists and even religious scholars had denounced it as a blatant violation of two individuals' dignity, noting that the state had no right to decide the validity of a marriage

based on conjecture about a woman's menstrual cycle. It was also pointed out that the hastily conceived conviction in the original case had opened the door to frivolous litigation against other divorced women from vengeful ex-husbands. It is hoped that this dangerous precedent will be undone through the presiding judge's detailed reasoning for his judgement. Lastly, a reflection on the judiciary's renewed efforts to reclaim its independence: this verdict was not expected, considering the circumstances in which the original case was conducted and how the last judge to hear the review petition was forced to recuse himself right when he was about to announce his judgement. It is hoped that it is a sign that the country's justice system is finding its feet after the sustained attacks it has faced.

Published in Dawn, July 14th, 2024

Miles to go

PRIME Minister Shehbaz Sharif's budget for the present fiscal year has whipped up seething anger against his administration at home but won him a \$7bn package from the IMF to temporarily shore up an embattled economy.

An IMF statement says that it has reached a staff-level agreement with Pakistan on a 37-month Extended Fund Facility. Islamabad will be able to access these funds once the deal is approved by the IMF Executive Board, which is contingent upon "the timely confirmation of necessary financing assurances from Pakistan's bilateral development partners" [read: China]. The programme "aims to capitalise on the hard-won macroeconomic stability achieved over the past year by furthering efforts to strengthen public finances, reduce inflation, rebuild external buffers, and remove economic distortions to spur private sector led growth".

While it was relatively easy for the government to cross the first bridge towards the agreement by imposing exceedingly painful direct and indirect taxes on the urban middle classes, the new programme targets will continue to test its commitment to reforms over the life of the deal.

For starters, the IMF wants the authorities to go after the under-taxed sectors and properly tax exporters, retailers and agriculturists to continue fiscal consolidation and increase tax revenues through measures contributing to 3.5pc

of GDP. The current budget already aims to raise tax revenues by 1.5pc of GDP to meet the programme goal of 1pc primary surplus this year.

Another contentious condition relates to the abolition of agricultural support prices, especially for the staple wheat crop, and associated subsidies. It is pertinent to recall how farmers came out to protest after wheat prices plummeted sharply when the state did not purchase their surplus. The statement indicates that the government has also agreed to phase out incentives to Special Economic Zones, and refrain from new regulatory and tax-based incentives, or any guaranteed returns that could distort the investment landscape, including for projects channelled through the army-led SIFC, to create a level playing field for all businesses. How it will affect SIFC efforts to lure investment from 'friendly' countries is anybody's guess.

Other programme goals — periodic power and gas price adjustment, SOE governance reforms and privatisation, transfer of more fiscal responsibility to the provinces, and market-based monetary and exchange rate policies — actually represent the unfinished agenda of the previous programmes. The agreement has indeed provided much-needed breathing space to the government, but it has also created serious political challenges for it.

While most reforms agreed with the Fund are the need of the hour for future debt sustainability, others are going to seriously impact economic growth and fresh investments, at least in the short term. The country's finance team must feel relief after clinching the deal. But they should remember that it has just kicked the can a little further down the road. The challenges facing the economy will compound soon if this relief is not turned into an opportunity.

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Drug fog

THE country has an old drug problem. While the menace has raged across divides of class and gender, successive rulers have failed to clear its fatal fog. Recently, the CIA busted an international drug trafficking ring in Lahore; it supplied illegal substances to the youth including those in educational institutions in Punjab and smuggled hard drugs out of the country. The agency claims to

have recovered “the largest-ever quantity of cocaine”. But the raid is far from a first: in May, the Lahore police’s Organised Crime Unit caught the Jordan Gang, another ‘international’ network selling designer and party drugs to upper-crust youngsters. The provincial police head stated in April that the force conducted over 300 raids in a day and made 125 arrests. Despite the scale at which these drug mafias operate, and the narcotics seized in drug hauls, the authorities expect to succeed without fixing the cause. An SSDO report in May revealed that conviction rates under the Control of Narcotic Substances Act (1997) fell drastically: from 16pc in 2022, it sank to 2pc in 2023 in Punjab.

Additionally, the decline shows that grave flaws in the investigation and trial procedures have only helped culprits evade stipulated penalties. This means that little will change unless the criminal justice system undergoes extensive reforms. With news about police officers — 234 were mentioned in a report in March — being embroiled in the drug trade, it is obvious that neither the police-narcotic cartel nexus nor political patronage of the abhorrent market can be allowed to persist. The government must prioritise investing in the security force with manpower, financial incentives and modern equipment, otherwise crackdowns will remain futile. Social and environmental forces fuel drug abuse among frustrated youth; tackling a mental health crisis is critical for successful substance abuse prevention. It is not advisable to humiliate the young with drug tests in educational facilities. Instead, the state should fight the curse with sensitivity.

Published in Dawn, July 15th, 2024

‘Complete’ justice

NOW that the matter of PTI’s reserved seats stands resolved, there are several equally pressing issues pertaining to the recent general election that need attention. Foremost among them is the question of how quickly and fairly the dozens of petitions pending before election tribunals can be resolved. In their separate verdicts on the reserved seats case, the judges of the Supreme Court, including the chief justice, have noted that the ECP acted unlawfully by disbarring the PTI from contesting the Feb 8 election. Many have seen the judgement as a ‘damning indictment’ of the ECP’s decisions. The question naturally arises: can this ECP be trusted to ensure that election tribunals will dispense justice fairly and in a timely manner, especially after it was recently gifted legal powers to

appoint retired judges of its own choosing to oversee them? The answer, after recent experiences, is a resounding 'no' from most observers. In fact, there are now growing calls for the chief election commissioner, as well as the provincial commissioners, to resign and take responsibility for one of the most controversial general elections in recent memory. Constitutional body or not, the ECP has clearly lost the public's trust.

The second question pertains to the Senate elections, which were conducted after the ECP, in violation of the Constitution, handed over the PTI's share of reserved seats to other parties. Naturally, this action affected the outcome of the Senate elections by giving rival parties more votes than they deserved. Though most legal experts believe that the Supreme Court's judgement will have no bearing on the Senate elections due to certain technicalities, this does not seem very fair. If the ECP's illegal and unconstitutional decisions thwarted the public will and distorted the mandate given to each party by the people, then, for the sake of democracy, this injustice, too, must be undone. However, the process needs to begin with closer scrutiny of all contested results before the election tribunals, as it must be determined where and how far the ECP deviated from established rules and procedures for there to be greater clarity on how much of the public's mandate was distorted by its decisions. The idea must be to set a precedent that forever dissuades any institution from interfering in the democratic process based on arbitrary decisions made by a few individuals.

Published in Dawn, July 15th, 2024

Afghan challenge

THE recently released UN monitoring team's report on Afghanistan captures the dilemma confronting the international community where dealing with the country's Taliban rulers is concerned. On the one hand, the Taliban have managed to stabilise Afghanistan after decades of conflict. But on the other, under the hard-line movement's rule, terrorist groups are flourishing on Afghan soil. A third scenario should also be of concern to foreign states, particularly Afghanistan's neighbours: IS-K — which is opposed to the Taliban — is believed to have between 2,000 to 6,000 fighters, and is using Afghanistan as a base for its external operations. Moreover, the terrorist outfit is also looking to poach fighters from other militant groups.

Though the Taliban regime is by no means a progressive pro-people entity, it has managed to bring a semblance of stability to Afghanistan after over four decades of war. The UN report says that as the Taliban “transition from insurgency to governing authority”, they have brought down petty corruption and reduced poppy cultivation, while managing to keep the precarious economy afloat.

Perhaps it is because of these limited gains that there has been no mass opposition to the Taliban’s obscurantist rule. Afghans are tired of forever wars, while the Western-backed Karzai and Ghani administrations were notorious for their corruption and bad governance. Yet if the Taliban seek full recognition from the international community, they need to do much more, particularly in the areas of women’s rights and by creating a more inclusive governance structure, which guarantees fundamental freedoms for all.

With regard to militancy, as the UN report highlights, the global community must keep its eyes and ears open. For example, the report says that the banned TTP has become the largest terrorist group in Afghanistan, and has developed a working relationship with Al Qaeda. Moreover, endorsing what Pakistan has been saying for a while, the report points out that the Taliban rulers are “unable or unwilling” to tackle the TTP threat.

As per the UN, the TTP conducted over 1,200 attacks against Pakistan last year. But it is not anti-Pakistan militants alone that are using Afghanistan as a base. The anti-China ETIM group, Al Qaeda, as well as IS-K, which threatens Iran, the Central Asian states and Pakistan, are all using Afghanistan as a “permissive haven”. This requires a coordinated response from the international community, particularly Afghanistan’s neighbours, as they are most at risk from terrorist groups.

The Taliban should be told that they need to take action against ‘good’ militants who support them (TTP, Al Qaeda), as well as ‘bad’ militants who oppose them (IS-K). On this, there can be no compromise, and foreign states must emphasise that diplomatic recognition and trade relations all depend on greater counterterrorism efforts.

Published in Dawn, July 15th, 2024

Non-stop massacres

THE massacre of innocents continues in the killing fields of Gaza, as most of the world looks away. Moreover, many of Israel's foreign enablers are shedding crocodile tears over the Palestinians' suffering, yet dutifully continue to arm and support the Zionist state as it conducts one of the bloodiest campaigns of extermination against a civilian population in the modern era. The latest outrage came on Saturday, when Israel attacked the Mawasi refugee camp in Khan Younis. Tel Aviv dispatched fighter jets and drones against defenceless people living in tents. At least 90 people were slaughtered, and some 300 injured in what was supposed to be a 'safe zone' protected under international law. But as the world has witnessed over the past nine months, no place in Gaza is safe from Israel's murderous forays. Tel Aviv claimed two senior Hamas commanders were killed in the attack; the Palestinian group has denied this. The Mawasi massacre was followed a day later with an attack on a school doubling as a refugee camp in Nuseirat. At least 17 people perished in that atrocity.

For the Palestinian people, this has turned into a battle of survival. Most of the West stands loyally by Israel as it murders innocents, while, true to form, the Muslim world remains conspicuous by its absence. Veteran Palestinian leader Hanan Ashrawi succinctly summed up the dismal state of affairs when she said that "American bombs ... rain down on Gaza" while "Israeli government and thugs" prevent food, medicine and fuel from reaching this forsaken territory. Ceasefire talks are going nowhere as Benjamin Netanyahu is cunningly pretending to talk peace, while mercilessly pounding Gaza. What is clear is that a return to the pre-Oct 7 status quo is impossible. When the dust clears, either the Palestinians will secure freedom and dignity, or Israel will succeed in its mission of ethnically cleansing this ancient people from their homeland.

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Nato at 75

EMERGING from the ashes of World War II, and locked in confrontation with the Soviet-led Communist bloc for over four decades during the Cold War, Nato recently celebrated its 75th birthday in Washington. Yet, rather than bringing long-lasting global stability, the military alliance has, arguably, contributed to

instability by maintaining a warlike posture that has threatened other states. For example, while Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is unjustified, it was Nato's continuous eastward expansion after the fall of the USSR that set alarm bells ringing in Moscow and put it on a collision course with the West. And if the combative rhetoric that emerged from the Washington summit is any indication, Nato intends to continue throwing its weight around the globe, provoking others to react. The Ukraine-Russia conflict topped the agenda, with Nato promising to deliver billions of euros, including in armament, to Kiev, and assuring the former Soviet state that it was on an "irreversible path" to Nato membership. Russia replied that Nato was intent on "maintaining confrontation", and that it would "deter" the Atlanticist alliance. China was also used as a punching bag at the summit, with Nato accusing Beijing of being a "decisive enabler" of Russia's military endeavours. The Chinese foreign minister urged Nato to "stay within its bounds". Along with Russia and China, the Nato states also listed Iran and North Korea as foes to be confronted.

If the Nato states are serious about maintaining a 'rules-based' international order, they must shed their Cold War mentality. Threats and gunboat diplomacy should be shunned, and a new global geopolitical order created on the basis of mutual respect, beneficial and sustainable trade, as well as human development. Warmongering and neo-imperial rhetoric will win Nato few friends in a changed world. Instead of promoting forever wars, the common security of all states must be emphasised, and negotiated settlements to outstanding disputes prioritised. If the Russian invasion of Ukraine is to be censured — and it should — then the decades-long Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and the ongoing genocidal violence in Gaza, must be shunned with equal vigour. The ball is, frankly, in Nato's court. The Western alliance can either choose to sort out its conflicts with Russia, China and other adversaries peacefully, or prepare for an era of open-ended confrontation.

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Banning PTI

IT is dangerous for a government to appear so desperate. Like grains of sand, power slips quicker from the hand the tighter the fist is clenched. In their obsession with countering the resurgent PTI, the ruling parties are, wittingly or

unwittingly, pushing the country towards even more chaos and anarchy instead of accepting ground realities and working around them.

Though 11 judges of the Supreme Court, including the chief justice, only last week recognised the PTI's bona fides as a political party, the coalition government is now seeking a complete ban on the party itself.

The shock proclamation came on Monday afternoon, along with announcements that the government had decided to seek a review of the Supreme Court's ruling in the reserved seats case as well as proceedings under Article 6 against former president Arif Alvi, former prime minister Imran Khan, and former deputy speaker of the National Assembly, Qasim Suri.

Was this the government's best response to losing its two-thirds majority, which, in any case, had only been secured thanks to a series of unconstitutional and unlawful decisions taken by the Election Commission? Was the prospect of the largest party in parliament being restored to its rightful status so alarming that the ruling parties, in the tradition of military dictators, would seek to ban it on dubious charges?

If the government thought it was projecting power through Information Minister Atta Tarar's Monday press conference, it was gravely mistaken. It only managed to appear desperate and intimidated, clutching at straws while the tide rises around it. One can only hope that it was merely testing the waters for what the reaction may be to such a move. Nevertheless, it was a shock that the stalwarts in its ranks had not shot down the proposal before a minister went public with it.

It appears that the government and its backers within the establishment have still not realised that they are in uncharted territory. Previous regimes that ruled through political coercion and fear tactics had strong economies backing them. The conditions right now appear to be far from conducive for the type of brinkmanship and adventurism being displayed by the current regime. If the idea is to precipitate a collapse of the democratic political order, then, by all means, the authorities should proceed.

However, if social and economic stability is what is sought, they would be well-advised to undertake a hard course correction.

At the same time, the PTI also needs to display some flexibility and greater maturity. It appears that it has gained enough leverage to be able to achieve its political objectives without the country having to travel further down the path of political violence and social instability. Victory in politics is rarely absolute. It must open itself to negotiations.

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Diversity in UK politics

THE recent UK elections have ushered in the most diverse parliament in the nation's history. Under the leadership of newly elected Prime Minister Keir Starmer, the Labour Party's victory not only marks a shift in political power but is also a significant step towards diversity within the House of Commons. Notably, a total of 15 British Pakistani MPs have been elected. Among them, the appointment of Shabana Mahmood as lord chancellor stands out as a historic achievement. Ms Mahmood is the first woman to hold this prestigious position, and also the first lord chancellor to speak Urdu and take oath on the Holy Quran. Her elevation to such a significant role sets a powerful example for women and people of colour. The increased representation of British Pakistanis in parliament reflects in seasoned politicians such as Afzal Khan, Imran Hussain and Naz Shah, as well as newcomers including Dr Zubir Ahmed and Naushabah Khan. Their victories in the election show that, despite obstacles, it is possible for ethnic minorities to participate in public service. The broader picture of this election reveals that 13pc of the House of Commons is of Black, Asian or ethnic minority background — an increase from 10pc in 2019. This shift brings the composition of parliament closer to reflecting the diversity of Britain's population, where some 18pc of the people come from minority backgrounds. Interestingly, however, this fact is not reflected in the new prime minister's cabinet, with many pointing out that former prime minister Rishi Sunak had more diversity at the ministerial level.

The make-up of the new parliament is a testament to the growing influence of minority communities in the UK's political landscape. No doubt these communities have battled, and will continue to fight, discrimination, racism and bias in society. But their inclusion shows that representation is the new norm across political parties, and that the voices of their communities will be heard.

Export delusions

THE trade ministry's 'plan' to almost double exports to \$60bn over the next three years is nothing more than wishful thinking. The 'new' target compares with the IMF projection of exports rising by 22pc to \$37.2bn during the targeted period. What has changed — or might change — that makes the government think it can pull off such a feat? Is the new target backed by a solid plan or strategy?

After all, Pakistan will be required to consistently grow its foreign sales by nearly 25-30pc a year to double its export earnings in three years. This kind of growth entails vast private investments both in industry and agriculture to boost productivity, as well as diversify exports. There is no evidence of any such thing happening in the foreseeable future, though. It is, therefore, safe to assume that this fantastic target will remain elusive — just like previous targets, which had aimed to raise the country's export revenues to \$100bn.

Stagnating exports have always been a source of concern for Pakistan's economy. Over the last several decades, exports have mostly been marked by marginal gains in their (dollar) value during global commodity super cycles, plummeting quantities and falling global market share, thus posing a major challenge to sustainable economic growth.

Exporters often blame high energy prices and shortages, fluctuations in global demand, domestic policy shifts, etc, for their poor performance, despite living off significant subsidies, as well as tax and cash rebates, at the expense of the people. There is no denying the fact that these constraints exist and impede export development. However, their impact on export performance is clearly exaggerated by the powerful textile lobby that wants to retain its benefits.

The exporters' failure to diversify their goods, improve productivity, upgrade technology, explore new markets, and move up the value-addition ladder to become globally competitive is as much responsible for Pakistan's chronic inability to export to its full potential as any other factor. Plummeting exports as a ratio of GDP is one of the major reasons driving the current economic slowdown and the balance-of-payments crisis.

Pakistan needs to increase exports to bridge its trade deficit, improve its external sector and finance growth. But one cannot raise exports by coming up with a target that is not backed by a solid plan to increase investment and productivity.

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A way forward

IN the midst of the storm triggered by the government's ill-advised announcement about banning the PTI, there is a ray of hope.

Aide to the prime minister Rana Sanaullah clarified that the decision had yet to be okayed by the cabinet. He reportedly told a local publication late Monday that while the government has not finalised its decision, it saw only two choices before it: talks, or all-out war. Mr Sanaullah regretted the fact that PTI founder Imran Khan had not been amenable to talks.

A day later, Deputy PM Ishaq Dar and Defence Minister Khawaja Asif indicated that the matter would be taken forward in consultation with the government's allies and parliament. While the government's stance reflects a paucity of ideas, it is important to note that negotiations and consultation are seemingly not off the table. Before political leaders inflict more damage, they must give talks a chance.

If direct negotiations are not possible, one option the government must consider is to form a parliamentary Committee of the Whole comprising all current lawmakers. The entire gamut of major challenges should be put up for debate before this committee, including security, economic issues and the prevailing socio-political instability. Doing so will help take the attention away from the daily ugliness that defines politics today. It may even provide an opportunity to reset the political narrative: it is unconscionable that all politics is being dominated by the travails and intrigues of a handful of individuals while the masses suffer. Leaders from both sides of the aisle may take the debate as an opportunity to demonstrate to their voters that they are not single-issue politicians; that they are cognisant of the challenges before them and have the capacity and will to work them out.

During this time, the political environment should be improved for there to be constructive engagement between the rival factions. It is the responsibility of the parties in government, as wielders of state power, to create the conditions necessary for constructive talks. It is extremely counterproductive for ministers to come on TV and endorse the ongoing victimisation of political opponents, as there is a very real risk that the short-sighted policies being adopted by various state institutions, which are being celebrated uncritically by the government, may end up sabotaging all hopes for greater 'istehkam'. Stability can only return when the cycle of violence stops. The government would do well to heed these words.

Meanwhile, the PTI must provide a realistic framework for at least the first few rounds of engagements, which preferably does not involve impossible preconditions. A rigid approach will only extend the party's needless suffering till the government breaks, while a give-and-take approach may yield better results. Politics should not be reduced to a zero-sum game.

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Urban flooding

THE provincial authorities have been taking precautionary measures, or so we have been told, to cope with emergency situations that could result from the extreme monsoon rains expected this year. Yet, millions of city dwellers, especially across Punjab and KP, must brace themselves for urban flooding and flash floods over the next several days, as warned by the NDMA. Over the last few decades, Pakistan's cities — big and small — have experienced extreme episodes of rain-inflicted flooding that has claimed lives and destroyed property. This is because our cities are not prepared to deal with the unpredictable rains that are becoming a routine feature of the monsoons due to climate change. And temporary measures can only partially mitigate the damage from flooding.

Urban flooding is not a phenomenon specific to Pakistan. Cities even in the developed world are confronting the issue, as global warming is inducing climatic changes and causing more and more extreme weather events. Urbanisation itself, particularly unplanned urbanisation in developing countries such as ours, has created the perfect conditions for pluvial flooding. This is necessitating solutions to control and mitigate the effects of urban flooding, with governments

building and rebuilding climate-resilient urban infrastructure to protect their people and the economy from damage. This is the area on which Pakistani authorities must concentrate. Unfortunately, we are still focusing on firefighting rather than diverting our resources to better urban planning. Pakistan is among the top countries most impacted by climate change, which is another reason why we should be instituting 'preventive measures', such as investing in urban governance, storm-water drainage, storage and management systems, as well as solid waste disposal management. However, climate-resilient urban development is not possible under the existing political and administrative system. Building a climate-resilient urban future requires a strong and efficient, as well as financially empowered local government system. Without that, we will only be putting out fires and not preventing them.

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Oman terror attack

THE normally peaceful sultanate of Oman was shaken by sectarian terrorism on Monday when militants belonging to the self-styled Islamic State group attacked a mosque where hundreds had gathered to observe Muharram ceremonies. Six people lost their lives in the atrocity, four of them Pakistani. On Thursday, Omani police said that three suspects — all brothers and Omani nationals — adhering to “misguided ideas” were behind the attack and were killed upon resisting security forces. IS had earlier boasted that it had targeted “Shias practising their annual rituals”. Swift action by the Omani authorities helped bring the situation under control, or far more lives could have been lost.

Oman has largely been spared the terrorist violence and sectarian fissures that some of its other Gulf neighbours have witnessed. The Ibadi school dominates the sultanate, while there is also a large Sunni community and a small Shia minority. Yet, all confessional groups appear to live in peace and maintain a spirit of tolerance. Even politically, Oman has played the role of a bridge between Iran and Saudi Arabia during incredibly tense times, helping maintain diplomatic contacts between the Gulf giants. Therefore, this attack appears to have been an attempt to spark sectarian tensions in the sultanate. It should be remembered that just next door in Yemen, IS maintains a considerable foothold. Omani authorities should remain vigilant, lest violent sectarian actors try and spoil the

peaceful atmosphere in the country. Looking at the larger region, it appears as if IS is trying to spread its wings after being cut down to size in Iraq and Syria. The terrorist group has, in the recent past, claimed attacks in Russia and Iran. Now it may be looking to hit other 'soft' targets to maintain its profile, and attract new recruits to its cause. Hence, regional states need to maintain alertness and keep channels open with each other, as IS recognises no borders and is a transnational terrorist threat. Pakistan should remain particularly alert, not only because of this country's unfortunate history of sectarian violence, but also because fighters of the IS-Khorasan 'province' are lurking in the shadows across the border in Afghanistan. When IS emerged as a major terrorist outfit around a decade ago, it had blindsided the international community. Its remnants cannot be allowed to rebuild and continue its blood-soaked legacy.

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Misplaced priorities

TROUBLE is brewing in KP, where terrorist outfits are growing ever more emboldened in their attacks. This week, two outrageous assaults on a cantonment and a rural health centre in Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan, respectively, claimed the lives of 15 Pakistanis, including 10 soldiers, in the latest escalation by TTP-backed militants, who are believed to be operating from safe havens in Afghanistan.

Though Islamabad has issued a 'strong demarche' to Afghan representatives, demanding "immediate, robust and effective action" over the attack on the Bannu cantonment, it has been clear for a while that the de facto government in Kabul is failing to rein in the TTP, which is now the "largest terror group" operating on its soil, according to a recent UN report. It is imperative, therefore, for the Pakistani state to act against these terrorists and their facilitators. However, its plans have so far been frustrated by the state's poor strategising.

About two weeks ago, the government had floated a proposal for an all-parties conference to discuss Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, which had been welcomed by the opposition parties, including the PTI. However, after the early enthusiasm, there has been no development on this front, and it is feared that the initiative

may be delayed indefinitely due to the breakout of fresh hostilities between the PTI and the current regime.

This is dangerous from a national security perspective, as plans for combating a major existential threat have inadvertently become subservient to the seemingly never-ending political tussle. The state must keep in mind that it is not just the PTI, but several mainstream parties that have serious concerns about the proposed operation, and it is vital to get them on board before the state launches kinetic operations. Not doing so risks provoking the citizens residing in these areas, which may create unnecessary complications.

Consider, for example, that the first reaction from Bannu residents to the assault was to issue a statement that, among other things, made it clear they would not evacuate the area in case of a military operation. Locals said they would rather stand up and fight the terrorists themselves than abandon their homes for another antiterrorism drive. They recognise the problem, but they have no interest in the solution being proposed by the state. This is mainly a political failure, arising from the government's inability to manufacture broad-based consensus around the need for a military operation.

There is an urgent need for this failure to be rectified. Too many lives are being lost to an enemy that is growing in strength the longer the infighting continues in the corridors of power. The government must call its APC at the earliest and invite all stakeholders to take part. This matter cannot be delayed further.

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Fitch's estimate

FITCH seems to be more optimistic about Pakistan accelerating its economic growth rate to 3.2pc during this fiscal year from last year's 2.4pc than most other international agencies. The Pakistan — Country Risk Report, published by BMI, a FitchSolutions company, believes that (the expected) monetary easing, improved agricultural output, a relatively stable exchange rate, and slowing inflation will drive up growth this year. Yet, the Fitch estimate is below the government's modest growth target of 3.5pc. The report also indicates that the government will miss its ambitious budget targets, as "risks are heavily weighted

to the downside”. For example, it has predicted that while the budget deficit will narrow from 7.4pc of GDP in FY24 to 6.7pc, the target of 5.9pc will still be missed. Likewise, the current account deficit will remain small, but widen from 0.8pc of GDP to 1pc due to a larger trade deficit, which will expand from 7.5pc of GDP to 7.7pc because of a jump in oil prices or lower-than-expected grain production.

In spite of a slightly more hopeful outlook, the agency feels that “economic recovery is fragile and another shock would quickly push up the cost of servicing Pakistan’s large government debt burden”. The biggest threat to economic revival stems from continued political instability. That has actually been the main thread of Fitch’s commentary on Pakistan’s economy since the controversial February polls, which have thrown up a minority government supported by partners from the outside. Besides factors like a jump in global oil prices or an extreme climate event, it adds, the fragile political situation could also derail recovery. The recent political developments have also strengthened the impression that the current situation is becoming untenable for the minority PML-N government, despite support from the security establishment. A resolution to the existing deadlock will have to found sooner rather than later. Or we may see the economy slide again — and faster.

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Bangladesh chaos

CHAOS has engulfed Dhaka, as well as other parts of Bangladesh, over the past few days. Anti-government protests had been gaining momentum for several weeks, yet popular outrage exploded after several demonstrators were killed in confrontations with security forces and government supporters. Educational institutions have been shut, many media outlets are off air, while a widespread internet blackout has been reported from the country. According to one count, around 40 people have died in the violence, while hundreds are injured.

Students have been at the forefront of the protests. Many young people took to the streets after a court reinstated quotas for the children and grandchildren of ‘freedom fighters’ — those who participated in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 — in government jobs. Public sector employment is a popular option for

many in Bangladesh, yet nearly half the jobs are reserved under various quotas. With the economy stagnating and millions of Bangladeshis out of work, the court decision has unleashed much pent-up anger. The situation remained tense on Friday, with sporadic protests reported from the country.

The demonstrations over job quotas cannot be seen in isolation, as an economic slowdown, as well as a sense of political disenfranchisement, has created an explosive situation in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Shaikh Hasina Wajed secured a record fourth term in elections held earlier this year. Boycotted by the opposition, they had raised questions of legitimacy. Earlier, Shaikh Hasina had overseen a crackdown against opposition forces, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

In such a politically polarised atmosphere, with economic growth not meeting the expectations of many Bangladeshis, such mass protests were only a matter of time. Thousands of garment workers had also taken to the streets last year demanding higher wages. The Bangladesh government should deal with the situation carefully lest the protests spiral out of control. The demonstrators' legitimate demands should be met, while the deaths of protesters should be investigated in a transparent manner.

Moreover, the unfortunate events playing out in Bangladesh should serve as a warning sign for other South Asian states. Political victimisation coupled with economic stagnation and heavy-handed state reaction is a recipe for disaster. All political forces should be allowed to freely operate as per democratic norms, while the state needs to act with compassion and transparency in times of economic distress.

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Royal tantrum

DESPITE the government's protestations, a constitutional crisis seems to have been averted — at least for now. After two days of deliberations, the Election Commission announced late Friday afternoon that it had 'decided' to implement the Supreme Court's verdict in the reserved seats case and had directed its legal team to immediately identify any confusion that may arise during the process.

However, in response to 11 Supreme Court justices' finding that it had grossly misinterpreted the bat symbol judgement to not recognise the PTI as a political entity and violated the law in doing so, the Commission continued to remain defiant. It was clear from its press release that the ECP still harbours reservations about the reserved seats ruling and that its implementation may not be as smooth as one would hope. Nonetheless, things seem to be moving in the right direction.

The development came amidst ominous warnings of a 'constitutional meltdown' and a 'looming emergency', which had been propagated all week by various TV 'analysts' as well as ministers, while rumours circulated that the ECP would defy the court. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif appeared on a TV talk show on Thursday to warn that a "constitutional breakdown is about to happen..."

It may be recalled that the ruling PML-N had set off a major controversy earlier this week when it announced that the largest party in parliament would be banned. It was then forced to walk back that announcement amidst heavy condemnation from friends and foes alike. Humbled publicly, the party then took to lashing out at both the judiciary and its political opponents, accusing the former of favouritism and the latter of hatching conspiracies against the country.

The PML-N's confrontational stance and overt refusal to respect court orders on arguably flimsy pretexts is a dangerous sign. The party seems to be throwing a tantrum over being denied a two-thirds majority, which it had only secured due to a series of patently unjust and illegal decisions taken by the ECP. It is unjustified for it to escalate tensions on this matter to the point where they may bring two branches of the state into direct conflict with each other.

On the one hand, the PML-N wastes no time condemning the PTI for causing 'irreparable harm' to the state due to the events of May 9; on the other, it seems to have no qualms about the harm it is causing to the tripartite arrangement of power by directly attacking the superior judiciary with accusations of bias towards the PTI and saying the courts want to 'derail' the political system with their judgements. The party must dial back its rhetoric and reverse course. History will not remember it kindly if it continues down this path of confrontation.

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Grave concerns

PUNJAB Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz's open assault on the Supreme Court for ruling in favour of the PTI in the reserved seats case came as a shock. Although neither her provincial government nor the federal government seems to be at any risk of losing power, Ms Nawaz on Friday appeared to accuse Supreme Court judges of trying to bring Imran Khan back to government by "rewriting" the Constitution. Addressing the superior judiciary, she said: "If a government has been installed [...] you should let it run. We will not let this be easy for you. God willing, this government will complete five years. If someone tries to destabilise it or subvert it or create political instability, they will be dealt with iron hands." As if this wasn't enough, she implied that the judges of the apex court had "sold their consciences". This attack seems to be part of the PML-N's strategy to 'go on the front foot' against the Supreme Court and the PTI following the denial of a two-thirds majority in parliament. The ban announced on the PTI was part of this strategy, but it found few takers, including, it seems, from within the PML-N.

Is Plan 'B' meant to provoke the judiciary with open threats, even if the PML-N has no good reason to do so? It is true that both Ms Nawaz and her father, Nawaz Sharif, were once made to suffer several unfair decisions by the courts. One of those decisions had robbed Mr Sharif of his government. However, that was then. More recently, the Sharifs have been either the direct or indirect beneficiaries of a slew of important decisions made by the superior courts, and their 'good fortune' has seen all their legal worries melt away, almost by miracle. In short, the PML-N has had little to complain about till this particular judgement. Why, then, did Ms Nawaz choose to make herself vulnerable to contempt charges? The judiciary has, in recent months, grown increasingly protective of its independence — something that the PML-N itself was campaigning in favour of till last year. Amidst growing concerns about interference from state institutions, the judges are unlikely to view such comments favourably. Supreme Court decisions are, after all, binding under Article 189. Defiance is contempt. The PML-N should proceed with extreme caution.

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Olympics contingent

FROM 10 in Tokyo the last time, it is now down to seven in Paris, and split across just three disciplines. When Pakistan's contingent marches out for the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics next week, it will be the country's smallest in the history of the Games — matching the seven athletes sent to Rio de Janeiro in 2016. The failure of the hockey team to qualify for three Olympics straight has contributed to the downsizing of the contingent, but it is also reflective of how Pakistan has fallen behind as a sporting nation. Countries across the world, smaller in size and population, have used sports as a tool to promote a soft image. In Pakistan, however, there has been all talk and little action. Hardly any attention is paid to reforming a crumbling sports structure; policies for its revival remain stuck on the table and rarely take to the field. Despite all that, however, and relying purely on natural talent, Pakistan do have a genuine medal hope at the Olympics. Javelin thrower Arshad Nadeem not only qualified for the Games but also has a realistic chance of ending Pakistan's 32-year Olympic medal drought. Shooter Kishmala Talat, Pakistan's first markswoman to qualify for the Games and who won bronze at the Asian Games last year, holds an outside chance. But that's about it.

For a country that once prided itself on its athletes, it is a sign of how fast matters have declined. It also indicates the lack of a proper national sports policy or framework. Federations for each sport run on their own, most claiming they are only answerable to their respective global bodies and not to the government. Athletes are complaining about the lack of funds and sporting events. It is a situation that must be urgently addressed. The government should work with the federations to formulate a national sports code to ensure greater participation and more medal chances.

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Civil unrest

KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA and Balochistan are smouldering. Civil unrest has rocked the two provinces in recent days, with large protests culminating in violent confrontations between security forces and unarmed protesters in Khuzdar, Quetta and Bannu.

So far, the protests have focused on various security-related matters: in Balochistan, activists have agitated against continuing enforced disappearances, while KP has seen major disturbances over the killing of a poet as well as the Azm-i-Istehkam operation announced recently by the government.

However, with the impact of the new taxation regime becoming more pronounced as the first month of the new fiscal year draws to an end, there remains a very real possibility that public dissatisfaction over rising costs of living could also spill into the streets soon. This is a serious challenge for the government, which currently seems to be too preoccupied with legal and political developments to be paying enough attention to the deteriorating law-and-order situation.

What has been happening recently in both KP and Balochistan is important to understand. The protesters agitating in the two provinces have been sending a similar, clear message to the state: we have had enough. Be it the state's long-condemned policy of disappearing citizens for extrajudicial 'punishments' or security operations that end up inflicting immense costs on ordinary citizens; the people are now intent on pushing back and regaining greater control over their lives.

In Balochistan, where years of brutal repression by the state have hollowed out the provincial political structure, it is women who are increasingly taking centre stage and taking the fight for civil rights forward. In KP, one of the key recruiting grounds for military forces, ordinary people are now adamantly insisting on peace and refusing any further part in Pakistan's long wars. Unless the state lends its people a sympathetic ear, these troubles will continue to grow.

It is most unfortunate that the country's democratic political system has been viciously undermined over the past few years. The parliamentary structure is supposed to act as a pressure release valve for public frustrations by giving people's representatives a platform to share their grievances. Instead, it has been gradually distorted to the point that it now seems to represent the will of the few, instead of the aspirations of the many. There is, consequently, little faith in either its legitimacy or ability to solve ordinary people's problems. Faraway Bangladesh, which is currently witnessing a massive public uprising led by

students, is one example of what can happen when adverse economic conditions collide with entrenched sociopolitical dissatisfaction.

Pakistan cannot continue to sleepwalk through its crises. The government must start putting out fires instead of fanning more flames. This necessarily entails allowing the public to make itself heard. More suppression may only result in a bigger explosion of discontent.

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Seeking Priya Kumari

PRIYA Kumari — the minor girl who vanished on Ashura in 2021 while serving water at a sabeel in Sukkur district — is one of our many festering wounds. On Friday, civil society made yet another attempt to demand her recovery with a protest in Karachi's Clifton area against the Sindh government's failure to solve the case. The protesters were met with baton charge by the police and some were taken into custody on the pretext that the gathering had blocked both tracks of the main artery. The incident speaks volumes about the lack of political will that haunts the province. It underlines the patronage and protection extended to criminal elements, which perpetrate child abuse and trafficking, making minority girl children exceptionally vulnerable. Therefore, despite the Sindh home department constituting a JIT in April to investigate police failure and the home minister's recent claims that Priya Kumari had been located in Bahawalpur, there is no sign of the child.

Is a syncretic environment a thing of the past in Pakistan? The lax performance of the criminal justice system indicates that the answer may be in the affirmative. But the government should remember that Priya's case represents the various divisions tearing society apart — faith, poverty, gender and crime. In neglecting the plight of minority girls, the state is violating international laws, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women that compels governments to protect women. In addition, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child necessitates that the economic, health, social, constitutional and cultural rights of children be granted. The ruling elite, police, prosecution, investigation and judiciary need to recognise that abysmal conviction rates and delays have resulted in rampant exploitation and crimes against children. Hence,

before the situation reaches a point where people choose mob justice over the criminal justice system, expeditious delivery of justice must be guaranteed.

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Blow to occupation

THE International Court of Justice has delivered a legal blow to the decades-old Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. In a non-binding advisory opinion, sought by the UN General Assembly, the ICJ has endorsed what many around the globe already know: that Israel has been illegally occupying Palestinian land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem since the 1967 war. The occupation, the court added, was impeding the Palestinians' right to self-determination, while it asked the international community not to "render aid or assistance" to Tel Aviv with regard to its presence in the occupied territories. The ICJ further called on Israel to stop building new settlements and remove existing ones. It should be noted that Israeli settlers — protected by their military — are known for their extreme violence against Palestinians, and even many of Tel Aviv's staunchest foreign backers are appalled by vicious settler attacks. The Palestinians have naturally welcomed the court's views, while Israel has, expectedly, dismissed the ICJ's findings as "lies". The Zionist state believes that it is beholden to no law, as the ongoing slaughter in Gaza illustrates, and has repeatedly shown that it can trample on the international 'rules-based order', as the global community meekly watches on. But the ICJ's decision comes at a crucial time, and gives much-needed context to the Palestinian question: the people of Palestine are fighting for their legitimate rights — and for their land, stolen from them first in 1948 and again in 1967. Unless these key issues are addressed in a spirit of justice and equity, peace will not come to this ancient land.

Now the question remains: will the powerful members of the international community put pressure on Israel to vacate the occupied territories, as the ICJ has demanded? This is unlikely to happen, as the global order is driven by realpolitik, not principles. Therefore, there are 'bad' occupations, such as the Russian presence in Ukraine, which must be resisted by the 'free world'. On the other hand, there are 'good' occupations, such as Israel's devouring of Arab land, which can be conveniently ignored. But the problem is that if the world keeps ignoring the Israeli occupation, Palestinian anger will keep exploding as it did on

Oct 7 last year. Hence, a viable Palestinian state — free from Israel's stranglehold — is the only solution to this long-festering dispute.

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Population calamity

PAKISTAN's population bomb is not ticking anymore; it has already exploded.

The detailed results of the 2023 digital census published by the government after a year's delay reveal that the population increased from 207.68m in 2017 to 241.49m in 2023, at one of the world's highest growth rates of 2.55pc. There have been reservations expressed by some political parties as well as the Sindh government on the way the census was conducted. Many suspect that the 2023 census understates the total population.

If allowed to increase unchecked at the present rate — over thrice as fast as the global average growth rate of 0.8pc — Pakistan's population might double by 2050. Some conservative estimates, such as the one by the UN, forecast that the numbers will surge to 403m. This will have far-reaching implications for the economy and society, putting an enormous strain on food security, socioeconomic infrastructure and public services. Hence, the urgent need for steps to reduce population growth.

There are two contrasting opinions about the country's burgeoning population: one views it as a case of rampant poverty and a growing strain on the state's capacity for public service delivery, while the other touts the increasing numbers as a demographic dividend that can be harnessed to drive faster economic growth, since 67pc of the population is below the age of 30, and 80pc below 40.

The reality is that it is proving to be more of a bane than a boon, as it is a big strain on our already stretched resources, and has made eradication of poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy a lot more difficult than it should have been. This fact is brought home by Pakistan's poor ranking on the UNDP's Human Development Index. With extreme weather events, including destructive floods and droughts, which turn large areas of land uncultivable and uninhabitable and

force communities to migrate, disregarding population control is no longer an option.

Pakistan's exponential population growth may be attributed to several factors: religio-cultural beliefs, social taboos, poverty, female illiteracy, lack of access to birth control and family planning services, etc.

However, many other countries facing similar impediments have successfully overcome their high population growth problem. For example, Bangladesh, which faced a high fertility rate and a rapidly growing population in the 1970s, has brought down its fertility rate to less than two births per woman, and the population growth rate to just above 1pc.

Likewise, India's growth rate has dropped to 0.8pc. Countries such as Turkiye and Iran have also reduced their fertility rates to 2.1pc and 2.3pc, compared to Pakistan's 3.2pc.

Their success shows that Pakistan can also control its growth rate by following the examples of its peers and implementing functional family planning programmes and campaigns.

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Stressed cotton economy

DECREASING cotton production should be a worry for the government because of its socioeconomic implications. Early arrivals for the current period show that the crop's output has almost halved from the same time last year. Consequently, cotton traders are expecting the next harvest to be around 7.7m bales, which is significantly lower than the government target of 10.2m and last year's 8.2m bales when the crop bounced back after the flood losses of the preceding year. Ginners and traders attribute the current dip in output to erratic weather patterns and market conditions where growers have struggled to recover their costs. The heatwave this year is said to have delayed early cotton sowing. Overall, cotton production appears to have stagnated at 7-9m bales a year after hitting a peak of 14.1m in 2004 and 13.5m in 2012.

Cotton is Pakistan's most important industrial crop and its significance for the national economy cannot be overstated. It provides raw material for the textile industry that fetches 55-60pc of our total export revenues. Besides, it is a major source of oilseed for the local extraction industry and animal feed producers. More importantly, tens of hundreds of households depend on this crop for their livelihoods. Thus, the decline in its production can have far-reaching socioeconomic implications. Until the 1990s, India faced a similar situation. In fact, it lagged behind Pakistan in cotton production. However, its policymakers and farmers were quick to embrace new seed technologies to increase their output to nearly 35-40m bales and expand their textile industry and exports. On the other hand, our cotton economy remains under stress due to the use of low-quality seed, disease, erratic weather resulting in frequent floods and drought, higher cost of production, etc. With the country in desperate need of boosting exports to shore up its external account, it is time our policymakers took measures to fix the issues plaguing Pakistan's cotton economy.

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Frankfurt vandalism

THE state needs to seek serious answers from the German authorities regarding the July 20 mob attack targeting Pakistan's consulate in Frankfurt. A crowd of around 400 protesters — some holding aloft tricolour Afghan flags used before the Taliban takeover — had descended on the consulate in the German city. Later, protesters stormed the premises, “endangering the lives of ... consular staff”, as per the Foreign Office. There were also reports of protesters trying to remove the Pakistani flag and pelting the mission with stones. German state media has said the demonstrators were highlighting “complaints” against Pakistan's defence institutions. As the government has pointed out, under the relevant Vienna Conventions, it is the responsibility of the host government to protect foreign missions on their soil. If, for example, a foreign mission had been stormed in Pakistan, all hell would have broken loose, and Pakistan would have been derided for its ‘poor’ security protocols. Therefore, the German authorities need to explain how a mob of hundreds was able to descend on a foreign mission and storm it relatively unhindered. They must also ensure that such ugly attacks, which endanger lives, are not repeated.

Segments within Afghan society have for decades harboured an anti-Pakistan bias, and it is likely the protesters were inspired by them. Pak-Afghan relations have been testy since independence — Afghanistan voted against Pakistan's entry to the UN — while matters have turned more complicated over the years as Afghanistan has suffered from internal unrest, foreign invasions, insurgencies and terrorism. There is little doubt that Pakistan's own record vis-à-vis Afghanistan has hardly been stellar. Past mistakes and flawed policies must be acknowledged and avoided. Moreover, Pakistan should never again allow itself to be sucked into the proxy war of global powers. The legacy of war, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, left Pakistan with millions of Afghans on its soil. Each new conflict has compounded the issue. Aggressive international diplomacy is now needed by Pakistan to address the problem of refugees as well as to improve ties with Kabul — in the latter case, through a frank discussion about the past and present and the need for both sides to cooperate to contain violence. Unfortunately, a long history of hate and mistrust — which underpins both Pakistan's ties with Kabul and the violence of the (anti-Taliban) protesters in Frankfurt — will be difficult to overcome.

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Security concerns

THE clarification was much needed and, perhaps, could have come sooner.

The DG ISPR's Monday press conference was helpful in addressing some key concerns regarding the scope and objectives of Azm-i-Istehkam, even though it remains to be seen whether the briefing will have its intended results. The only complaint was that it should not have been left to the ISPR to set the record straight: it had been the government's responsibility to manage national political consensus on Azm-i-Istehkam, and it clearly failed in this regard.

Talking to representatives from local media, DG ISPR Lt-Gen Ahmed Sharif clarified that the initiative was always a broad-based, integrated counterterrorism campaign, "not a military operation as it is being presented". It will not entail mass displacements or social disruptions à la Operation Zarb-i-Azb, he assured, explaining that it only envisioned the coordinated implementation of updated anti-terrorism policies on which political consensus had already been reached.

A point raised by the DG ISPR seemed particularly pertinent. Lt-Gen Sharif pointed out that any successful CT strategy required equal support from the civilian government. He said that once an area had been cleared of threats by the armed forces, it was the civilian leadership's responsibility to rebuild and transfer control back to locals. However, 'build and transfer' had not kept up, which allowed terrorists to re-emerge, forcing security personnel to stay engaged in a 'clear and hold' cycle in problem areas.

This continued engagement of armed forces had given rise to resentment among local populations, he acknowledged. This seems to be a very valid issue that must be addressed by the political leadership of KP and Balochistan and should also be discussed more in the media. It is worth asking why civil administrations have been failing in this regard and what may be done to strengthen their efforts.

However, the press conference seemed to lack an accurate diagnosis of the challenges the armed forces are currently facing. The general's assertion that criminal elements and terrorists are working together to sabotage Azm-i-Istehkam may not be without merit, but it seemed unfair to paint the political opposition to it as the work of 'criminal mafias'.

Likewise, while it was positive that the spokesperson largely kept his focus on security-related issues, it was disappointing that politics and politicians did end up featuring in this discussion. A key takeaway from the briefing was that the nation needs to present a united front against forces intent on exploiting its weaknesses. It would seem necessary for this to happen that discussions on national security are separated from the ongoing political turmoil. All stakeholders want what is best for the country and its people. Their differing approaches shouldn't be viewed with such suspicion all the time.

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Political vendettas

IT seems that the PML-N and PPP need to be reminded again that they are doing themselves a considerable disservice by either directing or quietly endorsing the ongoing victimisation of the PTI. The police and FIA raid on the

party's offices in Islamabad on Monday, linked to alleged 'anti-state activities', and the subsequent arrest of ailing septuagenarian Raouf Hasan should have been unacceptable to any party that claims to be democratically inclined. The ransacking of party offices and hounding of political opponents are dictatorial traditions that should have remained buried in the past. And they serve little purpose: it may be recalled that the PTI, after being installed, had gradually lost its goodwill because it chose to focus on jailing opponents rather than delivering good governance. Instead of learning a lesson, its opponents, when they came to power, continued to expand the scale of political victimisation to the point where they have now lost their moral high ground.

Indeed, the scale of political repression and the number of political prisoners in custody today seems unprecedented for any elected government in the country's history. If this trend continues and if history is any guide, the PML-N and PPP can expect to suffer that which they are failing to prevent today. When the PTI was ousted, there had been high hopes that these two parties would herald the revival of democratic values and traditions. Instead, they have ruled rather complacently through one of the darkest chapters in the country's political history. Their leaders should remember that the Pakistani people have a proud history of rejecting oppressive rulers, be they the uniformed or the civilian kind. For the sake of their legacy and future, the two ruling parties must stop and reassess. They ought to be leading by setting better examples. The decisions they have made so far have hurt them more than they have hurt the PTI.

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IPP debate

A FIERCE debate blaming the exorbitant electricity prices on expensive power purchase agreements with IPPs has been raging for the past couple of weeks. The issue itself is not new. The media has long been highlighting it while urging successive governments to undertake serious reforms to fix the collapsing power sector. Contracts with IPPs — that also include fixed capacity payments and guaranteed returns to ensure their availability — and expensive consumer prices are only partly to be blamed for our growing power woes and high electricity rates. Multiple reasons — including recent ones such as steep exchange rate depreciation, elevated interest rates, increased cost of imported fuel for

generation, shrinking demand, and taxes — responsible for the massive gap between the basket price at which the government buys electricity from the producers and at which it sells to consumers are not even a part of the ongoing conversation. The campaigners have identified an easier target.

Spearheaded by former caretaker trade minister and textile lobby leader Gohar Ejaz, who has dubbed the power purchase contracts with IPPs a “rip-off”, the narrative against the power producers has hit many a nerve. After all, there is not a single soul in the country who has not been affected by bloated electricity bills. The most affected are middle-class households living from paycheck to paycheck. So when someone like the former minister says on a daily basis that power consumers have been saddled with unaffordable electricity bills because of the power purchase contracts signed with IPPs and that these agreements must therefore be cancelled or amended, he is applauded by both TV show hosts and an inflation-stricken public. However, the ill-considered demand for cancelling legally binding contracts with the IPPs amounts to asking the sovereign to default on its international contractual obligations, a step that will frighten foreign investors away. The report that Mr Ejaz intends to approach the Supreme Court on the issue has revived memories of the Reko Diq case where an adverse verdict had resulted in Pakistan suffering a loss of \$900m, an amount it will not be able to recover from the project for many years. Sovereign default is not the answer. There are other solutions, such as the government, which owns nearly half the generation capacity built from tax money, letting go of its profits, and controlling system and theft losses, which could work.

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Reforming militants

A MAJOR question confronting the state concerns those militants who have laid down their arms — euphemistically referred to as the ‘good’ Taliban. Ask the people of areas badly hit by militancy, and they want nothing to do with these individuals.

For example, at the recently concluded Bannu Amn Jirga, participants wanted the ‘good’ Taliban out of their area, while calling for an end to pickets set up and patrols by such fighters. This is a dilemma for the state: what to do with those

who are willing to forgo violence? The matter is complicated, and a solution should be found by consulting the people's representatives, security experts and academics.

By all means those terrorist ideologues and facilitators responsible for the killing of thousands of Pakistani civilians and security men over the years cannot be welcomed with open arms, and must face the courts. Similarly, militants — good or bad — cannot be allowed to roam around freely and create a parallel structure, even if they have surrendered to the state: only the government has the authority to maintain law and order across the country.

But the question of the thousands of foot soldiers, particularly child fighters groomed by terrorist groups and juveniles, is more complex. Pakistan is not alone in facing this dilemma; for example, around 40,000 wives and children of IS fighters are currently being held in a Syrian camp run by Kurdish armed groups, as in most cases their countries of origin refuse to take them back.

Instead of giving militants — who surrender to the state and promise to renounce violence — complete liberty, they can be put through deradicalisation programmes.

Such initiatives have been tried before, in Swat for instance, at centres run by the military as well as NGOs. Initially, hard-core militants should be separated from low-level cadres not involved in gratuitous violent activity, with the former punished as per the law.

The deradicalisation process should involve psychological help as well as education and vocational training, so that the reformed militants can contribute to society. Even after completion of the programme, security forces need to keep an eye on the erstwhile militants so that they do not 'relapse' and return to the path of terrorism.

Of course, this is not easy, and will require funds and consistent effort. Moreover, the successes and failures of previous deradicalisation programmes need to be scientifically analysed so that the same mistakes are not repeated.

Deradicalisation should be seen as one component of countering violent extremism, which is part of the revised National Action Plan. Along with religiously inspired militants, it can also be extended to Baloch fighters who wish to renounce violence, and reintegrate into society.

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Rating risks

FINANCE Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's recent discussions with the executives of the two top global credit rating agencies, Fitch and Moody's, are aimed at persuading them to upgrade Pakistan's present junk or speculative sovereign ratings. The virtual meetings can be linked to his visit to Washington in April for the World Bank Group's spring meetings as Islamabad scrambles to find a way to re-enter the global bond markets for raising fresh debt to meet its foreign financing requirements and shore up its international reserves. The minister has often talked of plans to tap the bond markets, starting with the launch of the first Panda bond to buy \$300m debt from Chinese investors. The government expects that the new IMF deal, improving economic fundamentals, and a raft of 'fiscal reforms' introduced in the new budget will convince the credit rating agencies' to upgrade Pakistan's ratings to help boost global investor confidence in the country's ability to meet its debt payment obligations on time.

Even though the two agencies appear more optimistic about Pakistan's growth prospects and improvements in its external account because of IMF support, they remain worried about political instability weakening the government's ability to implement the tough reforms, thus upending the recent fragile economic recovery. Moody's, for example, says that the harsh "upfront conditions" might demand more muscle than an electorally weak government can show to execute the promised reforms effectively. Similar views have been expressed by Fitch in its new report. Terming the continuing political instability the biggest threat to the economy, it fears that the PML-N-led government may not last beyond 18 months. The Fitch and Moody's representatives, according to reports, did not broach this issue during their interactions with the minister but these concerns must have been at the back of their mind. Their decision to upgrade Pakistan's current ratings will largely depend on how the political situation unfolds in the coming weeks.

Hamas-Fatah deal

THE Beijing Declaration signed in the Chinese capital on Tuesday reiterates the need for internal Palestinian unity at a critical time when people of the occupied territories are facing merciless slaughter at the hands of the occupying power. Moreover, the diplomatic coup has further strengthened China's image as a peacemaker in the strife-torn Middle East, succeeding where many other foreign powers have often failed. Fourteen Palestinian factions signed the declaration, with Hamas and Fatah being the most prominent of them. The former controls Gaza, while the latter runs the occupied West Bank through the Palestinian Authority. Both parties have been bitter rivals since a violent power struggle erupted in 2007. The Beijing Declaration seeks the formation of a unity government and the achievement of "Palestinian independence at an early date". Of course, standing in the way of these noble aims is Israel, which is furious with Beijing for inviting Hamas to the talks. Also, the Israeli parliament recently passed a bill rejecting the establishment of a Palestinian state, effectively telling the world Tel Aviv has no intention of vacating the occupied territories.

The idea of a unity government is a much better 'day after' plan than the questionable schemes being dreamt up by Israel, the US and some Arab states. These include the presence of foreign 'peacekeepers' in Gaza. Numerous Palestinian factions have said they will not accept foreign troops on their land. Yet the fact remains that the unity government can only be formed once the slaughter in Gaza stops. Instead of foreign powers dictating their future, or worse, Israel installing loyalist puppets to police the Palestinians, the people of Palestine must be free to decide their own future through democratic means. And once the conditions for elections are established, the international community, as well as the Palestinian factions themselves, should respect the winning party's mandate. As for Beijing's growing role in the Middle East, this is China's second major accomplishment after last year's Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Perhaps China has succeeded as it does not bring with it the baggage of being an ex-colonial overlord in the region, while Beijing does not promise 'ironclad' support to an occupying power. The uniting of Palestinian factions in Beijing is another indication of a changing world order, where new global players are emerging to challenge the hegemony of the old order.

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Bad measures

THE ongoing tussle between the current regime and PTI will only end up causing lasting harm to Pakistan. This much can be expected when all rules and laws have been set aside, and politics is being dictated by individuals' egos rather than the greater good. After a long campaign of coercion and intimidation, which has yielded nothing of import, the regime is now insisting on dismantling the country's largest political party on arguably frivolous charges.

However, doing so will only provoke the PTI's large support base and further deepen the distrust between it and the state. Meanwhile, in foreign lands, PTI leaders are working single-mindedly on internationalising their party's suffering by approaching different lawmakers to share their grievances. They do not seem to realise that engaging foreign interests in Pakistan's domestic political affairs may weaken their country's standing and make it much more difficult for it to assert its position in its international dealings.

It is most unfortunate that matters have come to this, and both sides deserve equal blame. The state has already taken its intimidatory tactics too far with its campaign of arrests and abductions. There is no reason why it should now also seek to rob millions of Pakistanis of their right to be represented by the PTI.

Its desperate moves are only provoking those at the receiving end to more and more extreme measures as they attempt to reassert themselves. It should realise that it is actively creating the conditions for more civil unrest, instead of finding solutions to the challenge.

Likewise, it defies understanding why, after its long campaign against foreign interference during the cipher saga, the PTI is now inviting international pressure on the Pakistani state. The party may be battling the might of the state, but this fight must be fought in Pakistan, not on foreign soil. It also seems unjustified for the PTI to be taking the fight abroad without exhausting all its options within Pakistan. It cannot get what it most desires without first making sacrifices, yet the party has barely tried to forcefully assert itself. Political victories cannot be achieved without mobilising a party's support base, but the PTI seems least interested in doing this. Just like the regime, it, too, seems to be making the fatal flaw of completely disregarding ordinary citizens.

This brings us back to the first point: Pakistan's political crisis has turned into a tug-of-war between a handful of individuals fighting for very narrow objectives. They do not seem to have realised that they have put the country's best interests at risk. Both sides must de-escalate and agree to keep within their lanes. The law and the national interest must be respected. Pakistan cannot afford this domestic cold war any longer.

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PTI's 'hunger strike'

IN a theatrical display of protest, the PTI has introduced a novel concept: the four-hour hunger strike. While one might appreciate the creativity behind this brief abstention from food, the question arises: is this a serious attempt to instigate change, or a publicity stunt aimed at attracting media attention? Called after a raid on the PTI's central office and the arrest of Raouf Hasan, the strike demanded the release of Imran Khan from prison. Given the gravity of the party's challenges, is this the best its leaders could do to protest? Hunger strikes have historically been a profound form of protest. They symbolise an individual's commitment to a cause so deep that they are willing to endure extreme personal suffering. Mahatma Gandhi's fast in the British colonial era and Bobby Sands' fatal hunger strike during the Troubles in Northern Ireland were poignant demonstrations of unwavering resolve. Such sacrifices have not been timed to end conveniently before dinner but endured for days and weeks. In Pakistan, the history of hunger strikes is equally dignified and solemn. From teachers to families of missing persons and Baloch activists, hunger strikes for justice have been desperate measures taken when all other avenues are exhausted. These strikes garnered respect and sympathy because they were genuine and rooted in a desire for justice.

Contrast this with PTI's four-hour 'fast'. It is difficult to take such a protest seriously. Were its members checking their watches, counting down the minutes until they could finally break their fast with a snack? The very notion reduces the gravity of hunger strikes to a gimmick designed more for social media likes than for instigating actual change. The criticism of it is widespread, and rightly so. If the PTI genuinely seeks to protest against injustice, it must find methods that

command attention and convey seriousness. True protest against injustice requires sacrifice and sincerity, not half-hearted performances.

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Macabre spectacle

ISRAELI Prime Minister BENJAMIN Netanyahu's speech to a joint session of the US Congress on Wednesday was a shameful spectacle. Here, a man accused of overseeing the murder of over 39,000 Palestinians in Gaza, was receiving a rapturous applause from the representatives of the American people, though many Democrats stayed away from this macabre performance. Democratic lawmaker Rashida Tlaib's presence in the chamber, wearing a keffiyeh and holding aloft a sign that read 'war criminal', was an act of incredible courage. Meanwhile, just outside, thousands of ordinary Americans were denouncing the fact that such a divisive character had been invited to the hallowed halls of Congress. Even many prominent American Jewish organisations opposed his invitation to address the lawmakers. Unfortunately, even in established democracies, the power and influence of vested interests — in this case the pro-Israel lobby in Washington — can steamroll the will of ordinary citizens. As for the contents of Mr Netanyahu's speech, it was, to use a colloquialism, the same old shtick. The key points were a promise to achieve "total victory", demonisation of Iran and its 'axis of terror', and a request for more US aid so that he could "finish the job faster". Considering the Israeli leader's bloodstained record, 'finishing' the job can be construed as the total depopulation of Gaza. Then there were blatant untruths, such as the absurd claim that Israel was meticulously trying not to harm civilians. Are we to assume that 39,000 dead Palestinians, including children, were all Hamas operatives?

The Israeli leader's speech illustrates the sad fact that though many Americans oppose what is being done in their name, where support for Israel is concerned, most of their political establishment is in thrall to Tel Aviv. And in an election year, both major US parties will look to flaunt their Zionist credentials to secure the blessings of deep-pocketed pro-Israel and evangelical groups; for many of the latter, this is a religious war that must be won at any cost. Israel knows that regardless of the party that wins the presidency in November, America's 'ironclad' support for its genocidal endeavours will continue. Perhaps that is why

Mr Netanyahu has yet to commit to a long-lasting ceasefire. He knows that he can continue the slaughter in Gaza by counting on his powerful Western friends to protect him from global outrage.

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Judicial constraints

THERE is little wrong with the proposal in principle, even if the timing raises some concerns. During a Wednesday session, the Senate Standing Committee on Law and Justice agreed on the need to increase the number of Supreme Court judges, citing the growing pendency of cases before the apex court.

The law minister suggested that the backlog has grown because judges ignore timelines as they are not accountable for their performance; the committee chair, however, held that the Supreme Court is simply receiving more cases because the number of high court judges has increased, which has sped up the resolution of cases at the lower level, leading to more appeals landing before the apex court. A legislative bill on the matter has been deferred till the committee members can see 'empirical evidence' to support their decision, but the committee agrees that the number of judges could be increased at any time through simple legislation.

While the number of cases piling up at the Supreme Court does support the suggestion for inducting more judges, it would have been better if the proposal had come from the judiciary itself. The fact that it is being prescribed by the legislature will be questioned, given the political context. In too many instances, the current government has attempted to bypass challenges to its rule with tailored legislation.

Accountability laws, election laws, laws governing the armed forces and intelligence services, laws affecting the functioning of the judiciary and even laws directly affecting fundamental rights have been tinkered with and changed in the past two years to align with the ruling class's priorities, often without taking opposition opinions into account. At the same time, key government leaders have taken highly confrontational positions against the judiciary every time a decision

has gone against them. The reaction to the recent reserved seats case is a case in point.

This creates doubts regarding the government's intent. Observers will ask why the authorities are suddenly worried about how many judges there are in the Supreme Court. Does it have something to do with how the bench ruled in the reserved seats case?

Some critics will see this as another attempt to pack the court, given how the appointment of ad hoc judges triggered a similar controversy. These are serious questions that the government will not be able to avoid.

Of course, the Judicial Commission of Pakistan will thoroughly vet all new entrants to the Supreme Court, but perhaps it would be best if new inductees are initially tasked with solely clearing the backlog, instead of being assigned to major cases. This would forestall most of the objections that could be raised. Lastly, the judiciary, too, must be invited to give its input on this proposal.

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Upholding rights

EVEN a perceived threat to civil rights and freedom of expression undermines democracy; it impedes the enforcement of laws and creates a trust deficit between the state and the people. Therefore, the arbitrary detention of HRCP chairman Asad Iqbal Butt by the police, apparently to keep him from participating in a protest against enforced disappearances, is being viewed as a bid to intimidate rights champions and regulate free speech. The truth is that the sanctity of rights bodies, such as the HRCP—practically the only independent voice for the powerless—should be inviolable in a civilised environment.

The unfortunate incident shows that the state machinery needs a reminder: demonstrations and social justice movements strengthen democracy and institutions and ensure balance of power. Nothing can change the fact that citizens continue to disappear, without the option of due process. The criminal practice is an attack on constitutional freedoms—reason enough for political forces to agitate for the recovery of absent citizenry and its right to legal

recourse. Only in an authoritarian state is the agony of families in search of loved ones overlooked, and Baloch youth are forced to live under the threat of being disappeared from educational facilities, homes and public spaces. The role of the judicial system has been disappointing: what prevents it from prosecuting those responsible for enforced disappearances? The fight for the 'lost' people of Pakistan is a battle for the country's soul; it is losing generations to radicalisation engendered by conflict and stolen liberties. Every citizen deserves safety within the legal system and access to justice. Thus, it is high time collective trauma and disappearances came to a halt. The wrongdoers, irrespective of clout and rank, must be held accountable, while each missing person must be produced in a court of law. Besides, Balochistan's discontent, and its people's struggle for the missing, demands humane acknowledgement and remedy from the state.

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Brutal crime

THE horrific incident of a woman allegedly gang-raped in front of her husband and three-year-old daughter near Sukheki in Hafizabad district, Punjab, the other day is but one more reminder of our society's failure to protect women from the savagery of the heartless brutes living amongst us. The event, which brings back gruesome memories of the Sialkot Motorway rape case from 2020, underlines how vulnerable women are outside their homes, and even in the presence of their families. Thousands of women and young girls are sexually abused and violated across the country every year but only a fraction of such occurrences are reported due to social stigma and lack of public faith in Pakistan's criminal justice system when it comes to prosecuting the rapist. The odds have always been against the rape victims — from victim-bashing to faulty investigation and evidence collection to weak prosecution — from the very start. It is extremely rare that a perpetrator gets caught and punished for his abhorrent action. Some cases do capture the attention of the media and the people, sparking public outrage for a few days or weeks. However, not much has changed in the way that we, as a society, look at or treat such incidents.

That the Hafizabad and Nankana Sahib police were more interested in washing their hands of the case than helping the hapless victim shows how insensitive our law-enforcement agencies have grown to such harrowing crimes against women.

The Motorway case had indeed resulted in some welcome legal reforms, including the adoption of a broader definition of rape, the introduction of harsher punishments for the perpetrators, and an end to the degrading ‘two-finger’ test for rape victims. Additionally, changes in the laws called for the creation of anti-rape crisis cells and special courts for speedy trials in such cases, and the establishment of a countrywide registry of sex offenders. Yet these reforms mostly remain unimplemented; no effort has been made to even sensitise the police to the gravity of crime involving rape and sexual assaults, let alone train them to properly investigate such cases and handle evidence, or to improve prosecution so that the perpetrators of such heinous crimes do not go unpunished. The battle to eradicate crimes against women is a long one, and it cannot be won unless we start fighting it with determination.

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Back in parliament

MORE than two years after MNAs loyal to former prime minister Imran Khan fatefully resigned from the legislature following the April 2022 vote of no-confidence, the PTI returns to the National Assembly.

The Election Commission has finally acknowledged 39 of the party’s 80 returned candidates as ‘PTI lawmakers’, thereby implementing one part of the Supreme Court’s judgement in the reserved seats case. It may be recalled that these 39 candidates had, in one way or another, indicated their affiliation with the party before the Feb 8 general election.

For the 41 more candidates unable to do so, the court had given another opportunity to re-state their affiliation through signed and notarised statements submitted to the ECP. However, even though most of these 41 candidates have already filed their statements, their status remains pending as the ECP is now ‘confused’ about how their allegiance is to be verified.

Time will tell whether the ECP has been hostile towards the PTI under compulsion or for some other reason. Whatever the case may be, it has appeared obvious for a while that its priorities seem to be something other than midwifing and facilitating the democratic process.

If the Commission were working solely to ensure that all parties with a public mandate were given their rightful place in parliament, it would not have continued dragging its feet on the clear-cut order from the Supreme Court in the reserved seats case. That it is still finding reasons to frustrate the smooth implementation of the verdict is troubling, not least because a host of regime-aligned 'analysts' have appeared on TV screens since the judgement was issued to claim rather confidently that the reserved seats will 'never' be given to the PTI. One hopes that this is not some part of a conscious effort to thwart the Supreme Court.

The remaining lawmakers who wish to be associated with the PTI must be declared to be the party's candidates forthwith, and the process must move on to the allocation of the reserved seats it is entitled to by virtue of its position in the National Assembly.

As 11 judges of the Supreme Court pointed out, it was the ECP's fault that the PTI was unable to take part in the recent general election as robustly as it would have wished. It is, therefore, its responsibility to set right all the wrongs it committed in the process. If some semblance of fairness is restored in parliament, the political system may be able to start functioning as intended.

Faith in the Pakistani democracy has dwindled to dangerously low levels due to the flawed election exercise held on Feb 8, and implementing the Supreme Court's order may even help calm the overall situation and lower the political temperatures somewhat.

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Defeat but well played

PAKISTAN'S players got close but it was not enough. Victory for Sri Lanka, thanks to a superb innings by Chamari Athapaththu on the penultimate ball on Friday, denied Pakistan a spot in the final of the Women's T20 Asia Cup. The experience and guile of Sadia Iqbal had kept Pakistan in the hunt after the spinner claimed four wickets to derail Sri Lanka's chase of 141. But Chamari Athapaththu kept her nerve to take Sri Lanka into the final against India. Sri Lanka had also beaten Pakistan in the semis of the previous edition of the

tournament by one run. The pain of this one, though, will linger. Pakistan had their chances but could not avail them. The players were in tears at the end, being consoled by the support staff off Sri Lanka's Dambulla ground. However, the team can take heart from the fact that they fought till the end. It was heartening to see the PCB chairman gushing with pride at the team's resilience immediately after the game ended. That's the sort of backing the team needs to go forward.

Ahead of the semi-final, the recently installed Pakistan head coach Mohammad Wasim stressed that he had given the players the licence to play attacking cricket. Wasim had been handed the reins in a bid to overturn the fortunes of a struggling team. Pakistan had lost the series against both the West Indies and England heading into the tournament, and confidence and hopes were low. After opening with a loss to India, Pakistan beat both Nepal and the UAE to finish second in their group before ultimately going down fighting against Sri Lanka. With Wasim having been able to inject a sense of aggression into Pakistan's style of play, things may improve for the women's team. What is needed is more consistency in all matters — from selection to training — so that the near-misses become less frequent.

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Debt concerns

PAKISTAN's efforts to secure energy sector debt relief from China's banks and insurers do not seem to be getting anywhere. With the country's energy and finance ministers in Beijing to formally request the authorities there for relief, one of the stipulations of the recently agreed \$7bn IMF bailout programme, chances of a positive response from China do not, for the moment, appear rosy. Islamabad is reportedly looking for an eight-year extension in the repayment of energy debt, conversion of dollar-based interest payments to Chinese currency, and a reduction in overall interest rates for Chinese-funded projects. Chinese power companies have, however, already ruled out the possibility of agreeing to any changes in their power purchase contracts being demanded by Pakistan's textile lobby and some political parties ostensibly to lower electricity tariffs. This uncertainty is said to be causing serious concerns in our financial sector since the outcome, either way, will have a significant impact on prospective CPEC and

non-CPEC investment flows from China, which, along with Hong Kong, has been Pakistan's largest direct foreign investor for years. Last year, it accounted for nearly half of the total foreign investment flows of \$1.9bn. Outstanding dues of \$1.8bn owed by the government to Chinese power companies are keeping others from bringing in investments.

People such as former State Bank deputy governor Murtaza Syed have opposed debt relief from China because Pakistan's debt problem is not a Chinese debt trap and "cannot solve our debt problems on its own. China is only one part of the larger pie". According to him, Pakistan needs debt relief from all its major creditors, including multilateral lenders, bond-holders, the Paris Club and China. With Pakistan facing severe debt stress, it is crucial that the external debt problem be analysed holistically. Beijing may want to know if Islamabad's other international creditors are prepared to extend similar deals to the latter before it takes a decision on the debt relief request. That said, China has indeed been supporting Pakistan to stay solvent and avert a sovereign default in more ways than one for the last several years. While we keep our fingers crossed for a favourable outcome of the current debt relief effort, the question is: does the debt-stressed government have an alternative plan to cope with the situation in case the request is rejected?

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Modi's jingoism

ANY hopes of a thaw in Pakistan-India relations should swiftly be put to rest after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's problematic comments in the disputed Ladakh region.

Addressing an event to mark the anniversary of the Kargil war on Friday, Mr Modi used the occasion to lambast Pakistan, trotting out the tired old trope of 'terrorism' in an attempt to burnish his nationalistic credentials. If such words had been used on the campaign trail, it would have been unfortunate yet understandable.

But the Indian leader's eagerness to indulge in Pakistan-bashing so early into his third term can only be construed as the ruling BJP's aversion to the idea of

establishing better ties with this country. The Indian prime minister accused Pakistan of trying to stay relevant through “terrorism” and “proxy war”. He said that Pakistan had “not learnt any lessons” from the past, while adding boasts and threats aimed at this country.

Perhaps the direct trigger for Mr Modi’s undiplomatic and highly inflammatory outburst is the situation in occupied Kashmir, where there have been a number of recent attacks targeting Indian forces. According to one tally, at least 12 Indian soldiers have been killed in the occupied region this year so far.

However, India has no one to blame but itself for unrest in the disputed territory. India has claimed that its controversial step of stripping held Kashmir of its special constitutional status five years ago has brought peace and development to the region. If that is the case, why does India maintain over 100,000 troops in this geographically small region? The fact is that, instead of carrying forward the tripartite dialogue involving Pakistan and the Kashmiris to peacefully resolve the Kashmir question, the Modi dispensation has sought to unilaterally change ‘facts on the ground’, even though the region continues to be seen as a disputed territory as per international consensus.

Responding to India’s tirade, the Foreign Office has said that while Pakistan is ready to defend itself, “it remains committed to promoting peace” in the region. Practically, this means that the deep freeze in relations that took hold in August 2019 will continue until India decides to approach Pakistan with respect and the desire to make peace. Sabre-rattling aside, India should avoid any misadventures, as Pakistan can and will defend itself. When New Delhi feels that it is ready for peace, it is welcome to call Islamabad.

The blueprint for peace already exists, whether in the shape of confidence-building measures, or the Musharraf-era scheme for a resolution to the Kashmir dispute. All these measures can be discussed and fine-tuned, leading to a just resolution. But first, Delhi must stop demonising Pakistan, and show a willingness for peace.

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Gun control

GUNFIRE filled the rarefied air of Karachi's upmarket DHA on late Thursday night as a clash between two groups from the Bugti clan left five dead and two critically injured. A case was registered on behalf of the state, which the police believe, will convey "a strict message to both sides that such an act is not acceptable". It also prevents the groups from reaching a compromise. But the bloodbath was led by two tribal overlords: Fahad, a nephew of the late Baloch chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti, and his cousin, Ali Haider. The question then is: can the state bell such powerful cats?

Although accompanied by much shock and outrage, the bloody episode is a case study in the dark side of privilege: the sociopolitical compulsions to accumulate weapons backfire. The rule for peace and safety is clear — guns do not curtail crime. Instead, they kill and have repeatedly failed society, especially the vulnerable. This country needs a culture that views weapons with disdain, an infrastructure that tracks firearms, makes gun use difficult and gets tough on gun-toting private security entourages and availability — in short, sweeping gun control procedures and elite compliance. It is absurd that possessing and brandishing illicit weapons is the preferred option to taking the legal course. The fact that the law enforcement is riddled with sycophants of feudal wealth and influence only ensures that little will change. For as long as unregulated cottage weapon industries, widespread trade and ownership of assault rifles and smuggling of vast caches of arms across the border flourish in this country, their spill-over effect will be felt by both the privileged and the poor. Finally, the powerful too have to extricate themselves from gun lobbies, make all firepower hard to acquire and less dangerous to use. At present, we are a most conducive venue for gun violence. This means more blood and tears.

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Diplomatic challenge

THE brewing conflict between the US and China is a matter that concerns most of the Global South, as many developing states maintain ties with both the top global economies.

For Pakistan, this situation is particularly complex, as ties with both states go back decades, and have economic as well as military dimensions. That is why a contingency plan is necessary, for if things worsen, Pakistan will have to make tough choices. Even now, there are indications that staying neutral in a potential clash is easier said than done.

For example, US diplomat Donald Lu was recently quoted as saying that the Biden administration had sought \$101m from Congress for Pakistan. He added that in terms of investment in Pakistan, “China is the past ... we [the US] are the future”. When the Foreign Office spokesperson was asked to comment, she said that Pakistan does not believe in zero-sum relationships, ties with both the US and China are important, and that “China is an all-weather strategic cooperative partner” of this country.

While cooperation and investment from all quarters are important, the US should know that \$101m is not exactly a princely sum that will convince Pakistan to change its geostrategic moorings. Indeed, balancing ties with the two global powers is not an easy task, but Pakistan must keep a few things in perspective while updating its foreign policy. Certainly, ties with the US should be deepened, but not at the cost of any other country.

Moreover, Pakistan’s primary focus should be its immediate vicinity. This means that ties should be improved with all neighbours — Iran, Afghanistan, China and even India, whenever it sheds its anti-Pakistan rhetoric. Also, trade and people-to-people ties should be improved with states in the larger neighbourhood. This includes Russia, the Central Asian states, as well as the Gulf countries. Across the world, regions that have integrated and formed trading blocs — Asean, the EU, Mercosur etc — have benefited.

Therefore, Pakistan must not isolate itself, and trade and talk to all its neighbours. What is most important is for Islamabad to formulate a foreign policy based on the national interest, and not on the whims of others, no matter how powerful they may be. Proactive economic diplomacy, and not merely foreign aid, is what is required to lift Pakistan out of the current bog of financial despair.

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Constitutional limits

THROUGHOUT Pakistan's turbulent history, coup-makers and strongmen have looked to the courts to provide legitimacy to their extra-constitutional forays.

Whenever the courts have obliged, these actions have been justified by the 'doctrine of necessity', that odious principle used to legitimise, for example, Ghulam Mohammad's dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, and later the Iskander Mirza-Ayub Khan military coup.

Today, as extreme political polarisation threatens Pakistan's fragile democracy, and unelected forces tighten their grip, people are wondering whether this doctrine will again be resurrected. In this regard, the remarks made by Supreme Court Justice Athar Minallah at a recent event in the US regarding the judiciary's role in protecting the constitutional order bear repeating.

Justice Minallah urged the courts to remain vigilant where defending the Constitution was concerned. He added that mistakes in this regard had been made by the higher judiciary in the past and that if the SC failed to protect the basic law, then "judges are committing misconduct".

These frank admissions and stark warnings should be heeded especially by state institutions. There can be no compromise when it comes to respecting the constitutional order, and their lordships have a duty to protect the document. It seemed that after the epic struggle between Gen Musharraf and justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, the 'doctrine of necessity' had been buried. Yet, as things have developed since, it is clear that this doctrine has multiple lives.

What gives one hope is the fact that conversations about protecting the constitutional order are taking place, even in a suffocating atmosphere.

Whether it is Justice Minallah's remarks, the Islamabad High Court judges' letter regarding interference by intelligence agencies in judicial affairs, or Justice Mansoor Ali Shah's comment about the need to create a 'firewall' around the judicial system, these hints from within the judiciary point to a will to resist unconstitutional moves.

As some observers have noted, an unambiguous institutional response is required; undemocratic forces cannot be allowed to exploit divisions within the judiciary. From their lordships in the SC to the magistrates and trial judges, the judiciary as an institution must pledge to uphold the constitutional framework, and refuse to entertain 'requests' from any quarter to subvert the democratic system.

As Justice Minallah suggested, those who fail to defend the Constitution must face the consequences of their actions. Pakistan's salvation lies in all institutions staying within their legal bounds, and letting civilian set-ups govern with freedom. Of course, there are still many pieces missing from this puzzle — a transparent electoral process, maturity and tolerance in political parties for each other, etc — but only if the democratic process is allowed to continue unhindered can the system correct itself.

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Passport backlog

THOUGH digitisation of the passport and CNIC application process has improved matters, bureaucratic lethargy is creating unacceptable delays in the issuance of these essential documents, particularly passports. As the director general of immigration and passports recently told the Senate Standing Committee on Interior, the current backlog of passports stands at 16.5m applications. The figure in May was 0.8m applications. Some observers have pointed out that the 16.5m figure seems unreasonably high, and could be the result of a typo. However, even a backlog of 0.8m applications is unacceptable. There have been rising public complaints that the passport issuance process, which is supposed to take 21 working days for the delivery of the document to the applicant, is now taking months. One reason seems to be logistical bottlenecks. For example, it was recently reported that passport officials had asked the FBR not to block consignments of printing ink, as this could lead to a "national crisis" causing further delay in the printing of passports. Last year, a shortage of lamination paper was blamed on the backlog of pending applications.

Shortages of ink, lamination paper, etc, do not happen overnight; it is very likely that inefficiency and the lack of internal checks in the department concerned have resulted in the massive backlog. The interior minister, under whose domain

the issuance of passports lies, has reportedly 'taken notice' of the crisis. Yet, much more needs to be done to clear the backlog swiftly. Business trips, students' academic calendars, people wanting to travel abroad for medical reasons, as well as family visits have all been disturbed because of these inordinate delays. When a citizen submits a passport application — urgent or normal — they expect to receive their document within the stipulated period. People cannot be expected to wait indefinitely for their travel document just because officialdom has — as usual — failed to live up to its end of the bargain.

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Re-profiling loans

JUST when we thought that the new \$7bn IMF bailout was within our grasp, the finance minister surprised the nation by revealing that Pakistan had to get its bilateral debt from three of its close allies 're-profiled' for the next three to five years before the lender approved the lifeline deal next month. Speaking at a news conference on his return from China on Sunday, Muhammad Aurangzeb told the media that Islamabad had already asked its three main creditors, including China, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to re-profile their loans amounting collectively to \$12bn for up to five years for more stable planning of Pakistan's external financing under the IMF's fresh 37-month Extended Fund Facility. "Between now and the IMF board meeting, we have to ensure confirmation of external financing from friendly bilateral partners," he said.

As a report in the paper pointed out, Pakistan has "a peculiar financial arrangement" with the countries mentioned — consisting of loans and deposits that can be renewed annually as Pakistan is unable to repay the money because of the dollar crunch. They "form a major part of the IMF programme". Pakistan owes \$5bn to Saudi Arabia, \$4bn to China and \$3bn to the UAE. Will these creditors agree to the request for extending the maturity period of these loans? The finance minister is quite hopeful, although others are not. He says he is in contact with his counterparts in these countries for the rollover of loans for an extended period of time, and claims that he has their assurances of support that would help Pakistan plug the external financing gap. Even if these countries agree and we secure the IMF dollars, it will not solve our deep-seated problems. Pakistan is in a fix due to its inability to earn enough export revenues and attract

non-debt-creating flows, such as FDI, to pay its import bills and finance its growth. It is a shame that a country of 240m finds itself on the brink of insolvency and is forced to knock on door after door for bailouts because its elites have become addicted to living luxurious and subsidised lives on borrowed money. The sad thing is that they are not ready to change even in the face of Armageddon. Something has to change — and soon — before the economy collapses under its own weight.

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Summer of protests

PAKISTAN is seeing some seismic disruptions in its social order. Recent developments in Balochistan, KP and Islamabad depict a society in flux, one which is facing severe, intense internal pressures due to tensions between the state and its people. All three areas have recently witnessed significant turmoil, and, in each case, those making decisions at the top have appeared out of their depth when dealing with the troubles. As a result, the country's challenges, instead of being contained, now seem to be expanding.

Consider the ongoing unrest in Balochistan. When Mahrang Baloch had marched to Islamabad last winter to peacefully demand the whereabouts of missing persons, she was met with scorn and treated in the crudest way possible. The Baloch people, from all walks of life, have now rallied around her, and the state is finding it difficult to cope with the outpouring of sympathy for her cause. Out of desperation, it is responding with even more violence, thereby stoking anger in the province to precarious levels.

Then consider Bannu, which recently saw an uprising due to the federal government's failure to separate national security from politics. The locals and the armed forces, who both want the land rid of militancy, found themselves facing off instead due to the erosion of trust between them. Violence and unnecessary bloodshed followed, which have added to the pre-existing tensions between KP and the centre. Much damage had already been done by the time it was clarified that the people of Bannu need not fear any large-scale military operation. One wonders if matters would have unfolded differently if the federal

government had heeded multiple calls to take the provincial political leadership into confidence.

Then there is Islamabad, where the state has taken several contradictory positions in recent days. Days before the JI protest, an important artery in the federal capital was recently seized by the TLP, and its sudden decision to protest the war in Palestine was entertained till matters were settled with talks. Apparently not satisfied with the nuisance it had caused, the party then issued a death warrant for the chief justice. Though condemnations have been issued and a case registered, it is evident that the state's 'soft touch' in dealing with the TLP has emboldened it enough that it feels it can cross unthinkable lines.

On the other hand, the campaign to suppress the PTI continues apace, even though the party has repeatedly asserted that it only wants to protest peacefully. This endorsement of double standards for 'favoured' and 'disfavoured' social groups is antagonistic and may provoke more people to take extreme positions. From Gwadar to Islamabad, there is a need to urgently rethink the policies that have been chosen. Instead of solving problems, they are catalysing societal breakdown.

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Mountain feats

THERE has been a flurry of activity and new records set on the summit of the 'savage mountain' this summer. On Sunday, Frenchman Benjamin Vedrines reached the top of K2 in record time — just under 11 hours — and that too without oxygen. His feat came days after Polish aviators Sebastian Kawa and Sebastian Kot Lampart became the first in the world to fly a glider aircraft over the world's second-highest mountain. And on Monday, there were local celebrations when Sultana Bibi became the third woman from Pakistan to successfully scale K2 after Samina Baig and Naila Kiani. Also, Anum Uzair, following in Naila Kiani's footsteps, became the second woman from Pakistan to summit Broad Peak on the same range as K2. These feats are a boost for aspiring female mountaineers, and showcase Pakistan's potential of producing top climbers. But there was also news of two Japanese climbers Kazuya Hiraide and Kenro Nakajima suffering a hazardous fall on the mountain; no movement

from the two men was detected. The veteran climbers were aiming to become the second team to summit K2 from its perilous western face. There were successful rescue missions, however, with the Pakistan Army bringing back six foreign climbers who had suffered altitude sickness at the base camp, a week after three other climbers were saved.

After a record number of climbers came to Pakistan last year, the north is once again attracting mountaineers. But while there is a need for more facilities, the influx of climbers is threatening the fragile mountain ecosystem. With more climbers, more waste is inevitable. Heroes like Sajid Ali Sadpara, the son of the fallen Ali Sadpara — who died on K2 — bring down all the waste at the end of the climbing season to keep the environmental balance intact. But more must be done to achieve a balance so that commercialisation of Pakistan's northern reaches does not harm the environment.

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SBP's rate cut

THE second consecutive rate cut by the SBP underscores the fact that the central bank is relatively bullish on a slower but stable recovery, expecting the economy to build upon the gains of last year's stabilisation policies. Its decision to cut its policy rate by 100bpc, on top of an earlier reduction of 150bpc in June, to 19.5pc seems to have been driven by declining inflation, a narrowing current account deficit, the build-up of reserves despite substantial debt and other repayments, and the conclusion of a preliminary agreement with the IMF for a \$7bn loan. The SBP is hopeful that its reserves will grow from above \$9bn to \$13bn by the end of this financial year on the back of a manageable current account and anticipated foreign official and private flows. Monetary authorities also feel that the accumulation of reserves has created space for further rate reductions to support growth while keeping inflation in check as "the monetary policy stance still remains sufficiently stringent to steer inflation towards the medium-term target of 5pc-7pc". However, as also cautioned by the bank in the policy statement, the continuation of monetary easing is contingent on fiscal consolidation, realisation of planned external flows and structural reforms addressing the economy's underlying weaknesses.

Hours before the policy announcement, Fitch upgraded Pakistan's sovereign credit rating by a notch from 'CCC' to 'CCC+', citing easing external funding risks, improvements in the current account, etc. The new Fitch rating means that the danger of Pakistan defaulting is over for now but significant risks remain. Yet the improved credit rating can help Pakistan raise international debt to shore up its reserves and support further reduction in borrowing costs through Eurobonds and Panda bonds, though investors might demand higher returns. The two developments are seen as positive signs of economic stabilisation. Nonetheless, we have a long way to go before the economy is back on a faster growth trajectory. With the economy billed to remain fragile and in low growth mode due to the implementation of the stabilisation policy, the next three years will not be easy for the people. Our policymakers may rejoice over the IMF loan and a better credit rating. But they must understand that there is no more room left for them to backtrack on their pledge to reform.

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Extremism unbound

THE state finally seems to have woken up from its slumber and, alarmed by the threats made against the country's top judge, has initiated action against the suspects.

On Monday, several federal ministers denounced the shocking threats made against the chief justice by clerics belonging to the TLP, and promised that such incitement to violence would not be allowed. The controversy stems from the recent Supreme Court judgement in the Mubarak Sani case, which has been misinterpreted by extremist elements to forward their dangerous agenda. On a deeper level, aside from the deplorable threat, the matter reflects the existential danger extremist forces pose to the nation, and the weakness of the state before these outfits. At least two TLP men have reportedly been held; hundreds more have been booked for inciting violence.

The reason that Pakistan stands at this perilous juncture today is that for decades, the state has pursued suicidal policies where extremist groups are concerned. Those at the helm have either looked away as jihadi, sectarian and extremist groups have proliferated, or in some cases have actively encouraged

such violent outfits. Arguably, in no other Muslim country are vigilantes and extremists allowed such freedom to operate. But in Pakistan, these outfits can effectively blackmail the state, and issue death warrants against the highest officials of the land. The state either meekly asks them to desist, or takes belated action after these groups cross 'red lines'.

On the other hand, protests by political parties or marginalised groups are met with the full force of the law. Unless firm action is taken against extremist groups — as envisioned under the National Action Plan — the day may not be too distant when these outfits have the power to set the nation alight, using emotive slogans to misguide radicalised sections of the populace.

The state's primary responsibility here is to bring all those responsible for incitement to deadly violence to justice, and in the long term shut down the outfits fuelling extremism in society. Making one or two arrests is not enough; wider action is needed. Moreover, security for the chief justice should be beefed up.

The ulema also have a major responsibility to restore sanity. Though the Council of Islamic Ideology has condemned the death threats, established scholars, particularly those belonging to the Barelvi school, need to denounce such violent vigilantism. There is religious and legal consensus about the finality of prophethood. Therefore, semi-literate clerics cannot be allowed to exploit this sensitive issue and create further anarchy in society.

The nation has lost Salmaan Taseer and countless others to assassins and raging mobs motivated by spurious accusations of blasphemy unless those who control the levers of state act with enthusiasm, the forces of darkness may be further emboldened.

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