

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of August & September 2017

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All in the family

There is the letter of the law and there is good politics. There is recovering from a legal blow and there is doubling down on mistakes. There are the Sharifs and there is good sense.

In the days since Nawaz Sharif's judicial ouster, the PML-N has hunkered down and devised a new political strategy: the rule of the Sharifs as far as the eye can see and potentially beyond. Or, as Saad Rafique has boasted, remove one Sharif and the party will bring a second, third and fourth Sharif to replace him.

It is a political party's right to choose its leader and in the controversial circumstances of Mr Sharif's dismissal, it was inevitable that the ousted prime minister's preferences would dominate the succession question. But the utter myopia of the Sharifs is dismaying and politically worrying.

Three decisions the PML-N has had to make since Mr Sharif's ouster and not one of them has been necessary or wise. The first is to instal Shahid Khaqan Abbasi as a stopgap prime minister. Why? Mr Abbasi and many of his colleagues in the erstwhile federal cabinet are perfectly capable of running the government until the general election scheduled for next year.

After all, the PML-N never ceases to remind the nation of its governance credentials and experienced team. The only, and obvious, disqualification of Mr Abbasi and his colleagues for being a PML-N prime minister for a day longer than necessary is that their surnames are not Sharif.

In the 70th year of the country's existence, the party that usurped the name of the party of Mohammad Ali Jinnah is a nepotistic disgrace. The decision to summarily elevate the younger Sharif brother from Punjab to the centre is also politically problematic.

Shahbaz Sharif's desire to play a role at the federal level has been well known in political circles for many years. But he was thwarted — and denied federal executive experience that could have proved useful today — because of his brother's determination to remain prime minister and not have the distraction of a potential rival power centre in the federal capital.

He has been an MNA before, in 1990, but when he is likely sworn in as one again two months from now, it will be to a vastly different parliament and power structure in Islamabad. In truth, Shahbaz Sharif as prime minister is a political experiment that could spectacularly backfire.

Finally, there is the truly unsettling possibility of Hamza Sharif discarding his MNA robes and returning to the Punjab Assembly to take over from his father. Like the House of Saud, the House of Sharifs appears to be preparing for an intergenerational transfer of power.

Perhaps the only temporary grace is that Maryam Nawaz is not part of the immediate succession plans, though that may change. Truly, the Sharifs have morphed into something worse than the Bhuttos.

Militants in prison

INERTIA followed by a flurry of action, and back to inertia again — that is usually the cycle in Pakistan, but such an approach does not address systemic shortcomings. Sindh's prison department is currently going through an 'action' phase, triggered by the escape of two militants belonging to the banned Lashkar-i-Jhangvi from Karachi's Central Prison in June. This entails shifting a number of 'high-profile' inmates lodged in the province's largest jail to other detention facilities elsewhere in Sindh. In the first phase, around 20 undertrials and convicts affiliated with banned outfits have been moved to Sukkur and Hyderabad jails on the advice of intelligence and law-enforcement agencies. The development is not surprising. A CTD inquiry into June's audacious escape at the Central Prison revealed shocking details of how militants — including some of those convicted of multiple heinous crimes — were practically running the facility, having intimidated or bribed the prison staff into submission.

The perils of detaining in one location large numbers of violent extremists — who inevitably have resourceful and well-organised accomplices on the outside — have been illustrated several times. In April 2012, the Pakistani Taliban stormed Bannu jail in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and freed some 400 prisoners. In July 2013, a similar

assault on the Dera Ismail Khan prison allowed 175 inmates to escape. There have also been attempts to spring prisoners that have come within a hair's breadth of succeeding. For instance, early last year, a group of militants was allegedly on the verge of executing a daring plan to set free around 100 high-profile prisoners in Hyderabad prison, including Omar Saeed Shaikh, convicted of Daniel Pearl's murder. Scattering dangerous inmates among several jails thus makes sense, and has been resorted to several times before. But this is a piecemeal, ad hoc tactic that does little to tackle the endemic problems that plague the prison system. Sindh's Rs1.5bn project for a high-security jail are still on paper, an inexplicable delay considering the number of violent criminals incarcerated in the province, especially in Karachi. Indeed, in Pakistan at present there is only one high-security prison, which is in Sahiwal. Aside from infrastructure, jail reforms, both in terms of security protocols and the selection, training and pay scales of personnel, are sorely needed to institute long-term change. Only that can keep dangerous individuals behind bars, where the state has placed them so that it can fulfil its duty to secure people's lives and property.

Politicising Haj

THE Gulf Cooperation Council was formed by the sheikhdoms of the region in the early 1980s to ward off the perceived Iranian threat following the events of 1979. But today, the GCC resembles a house of cards and appears to be imploding as the 'quartet' — consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and non-GCC member Egypt — has no plans to go slow on its campaign targeting Qatar. It has been nearly two months since the quartet snapped diplomatic ties with Doha for its alleged support of "terrorism and extremism". There seems to be no let-up in the war of words as on Sunday, the Saudi foreign minister was quoted as saying that Qatar's criticism of Riyadh's Haj policies was tantamount to "a declaration of war". The Saudis accuse Qatar of calling for internationalising the annual pilgrimage; Doha denies this, saying its criticism was directed at Riyadh's 'politicisation' of Haj. Apparently, the Saudis have made it more difficult for Qatari pilgrims to fly in, in addition to the blockade of Doha by the quartet that is already in place. Foreign ministers of the four states spearheading the campaign against Qatar also said on Sunday they are willing to have dialogue with Doha if it "stops

its support and financing of terrorism”. Among the demands is for Qatar to rein in its flagship Al Jazeera network, as well as downgrade ties with Iran.

While these states have used nebulous terms such as “terrorism and extremism” with reference to Qatar, it is quite clear that were Doha to accept the demands, it would seriously compromise its sovereignty. Instead of tough-talking sound bites, it would be better for the four states to communicate their concerns to Qatar through diplomatic channels. Also, Haj should remain above politics, sect and nationalism. It is a religious obligation that should not be used as a card by either side for political point-scoring. Whatever political differences states might have, no nationality or school of thought should find its access blocked where the annual pilgrimage is concerned.

New PM’s challenge

THE country has a new prime minister, four days after the last one was removed, but there is still a great deal of uncertainty over the government because there is likely to be a third prime minister by the end of next month. The first change the PML-N had no option but to make; however, the second change, the elevation of Shahbaz Sharif to the National Assembly and straight thereafter to the Prime Minister’s Office, is for internal PML-N reasons. An unnecessary and unwise two-step succession, it is nevertheless important to have some continuity in government. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi claimed in his acceptance speech yesterday that he intends to use his time in office productively, but the party ought to consider at least two interim measures: consulting Shahbaz Sharif on cabinet selection and major decisions that may have to be taken until his election.

The PML-N has continued with its opaque decision-making tradition and avoided any public discussion about the federal cabinet, but the first order of business for a prime minister is usually to select his cabinet. Much needs to change from the practices of the ousted Mr Sharif if the cabinet is to be rejuvenated and empowered. The only aspect in which Mr Sharif’s cabinet represented something of a gain over previous cabinets was its smaller size, though that was arguably a reflection of his desire to centralise power in the Prime Minister’s Office. The Sharif cabinet was otherwise a study in unaccountability and poor management. In four years, the only cabinet turnover that occurred was when members were forced out

for reasons that Mr Sharif was unable to prevent. Perhaps the most puzzling decision was to not have a foreign minister, a move that caused unnecessary disruption to the management of Pakistan's external relations and the workings of the Foreign Office. Prime Minister Abbasi and Shahbaz Sharif should work together to overhaul the cabinet, improve its performance and provide some continuity between now and September.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Abbasi received sensible advice from losing PPP candidate Naveed Qamar in the National Assembly.

Mr Qamar suggested that if Mr Abbasi is serious about getting some work done in his short spell in office, he should focus on only a few areas of policy and make parliament a hub of activity again. Perhaps the key for Mr Abbasi is to work with the younger Sharif brother to draw up a set of policy and legislative priorities for the rest of the parliamentary term. It may have to be a modest set of proposals, but it could be effective if drawn up pragmatically between the second and third prime ministers of this parliament. The PML-N has indicated that it does not want to dwell too much on the reasons for Nawaz Sharif's ouster, but the party should focus on improving on his performance in office.

IS footprint

AS the militant Islamic State group faces setbacks in its 'heartland' of Iraq and Syria, the terrorist outfit will seek to establish itself in ungoverned spaces elsewhere. Afghanistan — long suffering from conflict — seems to be an ideal location for the self-proclaimed 'caliphate' to put down roots. On Monday, a suicide bomber blew himself up near the Iraqi embassy in Kabul; fortunately, there were no mass casualties, unlike earlier attacks by the group in Afghanistan. The group first appeared on the Afghan radar in 2015 and has jostled for space and influence with the hard-line Afghan Taliban. American military officials say there may be around 1,000 IS fighters active in Afghanistan. Due to a long, porous border and a complicated relationship, often Afghanistan's militancy problems spill over into Pakistan; the case of IS is no different, as the militant group's fighters are believed to be concentrated in Afghan provinces bordering Pakistan.

This country, of course, has an ambiguous history where acknowledging IS's presence is concerned. While officialdom has mostly remained tight-lipped about the presence of IS in Pakistan, rarely does a day go by without reports of militants belonging to the outfit being killed or captured appearing in the media. For example, as reported in this paper on Tuesday, police claimed to have killed two IS fighters in a Karachi 'encounter'. The suspects were believed to be involved in the killings of police officers, as well as targeted sectarian murders. Around 12 suspected militants killed in Balochistan's Mastung area in June were also believed to be associated with IS. In fact, parts of upper Sindh — especially along the Balochistan border — are said to be an area of concern as IS sympathisers are reportedly active in the region. Transnational militancy is a nebulous phenomenon; it does not recognise borders or national sovereignty. That is why it is imperative that Pakistan and Afghanistan work together to neutralise the threat of IS in both countries. This may be difficult to achieve, given the often tense relations that prevail between Islamabad and Kabul. But as IS and militants sympathetic to its ideology have shown elsewhere, if a vacuum is left — as was the case in Syria and Iraq — IS will move in very quickly to fill it. That is something neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan can afford. Therefore, a joint policy to counter IS is the only way forward.

What's in a name?

IT sounds like something out of an Orwellian dystopia: regulations that dictate that if someone were to refer to a location by anything other than its formal, state-sanctioned name, he or she would become liable to a month in prison or a fine of hundreds of thousands of rupees. So, for example, if one were to "intentionally or negligently" talk about having to catch a flight from the Islamabad airport instead of the Benazir Bhutto International Airport, its approved name, upon the complaint of a deputy commissioner or any other public servant authorised by a naming committee, one would risk winding up with a record. This is the suggestion contained in the proposed Public Places (Names) Act, 2017, that the federal government has introduced to regulate the naming of public places that come under its purview — installations such as airports and similar infrastructure. The intended law aims to name locations after prominent personalities, and comments have recently been sought from the interior ministry and the National History and

Heritage Division of the Capital Administration and Development Division, referring to Islamabad.

The prescription of fines and jail terms is patently ridiculous, and it is ardently hoped that Pakistan is not a place where such penalties for trivialities are considered seriously. That said, codifying policy to regulate the naming of places — be they roads or intersections or antiquities, in Islamabad or elsewhere — is not unreasonable. As it stands, city governments, the provinces (after the 18th Amendment) and the centre variously hold the power to do so. But matters are highly arbitrary, and efforts are largely absent to set up systems whereby citizens or civil society representatives can present proposals. The past has seen the renaming of locations across cities to blot out not just colonial legacies but also other aspects of our multicultural heritage and history. Even so, the collective cultural subconsciousness runs deep. Given its status, Islamabad could potentially lead the way in promoting inclusiveness, liberalism and diversity, instead of going in the other direction.

Fears for the economy

THE amber lights were already flashing and now, with a change of prime ministers, the political uncertainty hanging over the economy has been exacerbated. The assessments of credit ratings agencies are not definitive, but a downward change tends to reflect investor skittishness based on similar assessments by IFIs and a country's own financial institutions. Following the ouster of Nawaz Sharif, Moody's Investors Service has warned: "If heightened political uncertainty and strife among the various branches of government disrupt the administration's economic and fiscal agenda, macroeconomic stability and the government's access to external finance could be impaired, weighing on Pakistan's credit profile." In July, Moody's had affirmed Pakistan's B3 rating and maintained a stable outlook — with important caveats. "Any material widening of the fiscal deficit, renewed weakening of the external payments position, loss of multilateral/bilateral financial support, or significant escalation in political tensions would also weigh on Pakistan's credit profile," it warned.

The problem for Pakistan is that the government continues to cling to a story of economic success and macro stability, while the consensus among economy

watchers outside government is that Pakistan is on the verge of a familiar unravelling if urgent corrections are not made. The list of challenges is by now well known: pressure on the fiscal and external accounts; a build-up of circular debt in the power sector; an over-valued rupee; and CPEC projects creating potentially unsustainable debt liabilities. Mr Sharif, with his keen interest in road-building and electricity projects, had virtually turned over the handling of the economy to his finance minister, Ishaq Dar. Mr Dar used his *carte blanche* to gut financial institutions and regulators in a misguided quest to force unquestioned obedience to his economic prescriptions. The approach has only succeeded in leaving the country with weakened financial institutions at a time when the finance ministry needs some frank advice and genuine assistance in managing the tricky period ahead.

There is, however, at least a glimmer of hope. The new prime minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, is an economic heavyweight in the context of the previous cabinet. Mr Abbasi's potential successor, Shahbaz Sharif, is familiar with the CPEC projects and the electricity sector. If Mr Dar is given the finance portfolio again, his prescriptions should be challenged on merit and the prime minister should exert his influence to persuade Mr Dar to adjust course. Mr Abbasi has already warned that the revenue base is too narrow — a basic factor in the sustained and large fiscal deficit. Perhaps Mr Abbasi or the younger Sharif should also have the courage to address an overvalued rupee and policies that have allowed the external account to come under extreme pressure. Whatever path they choose — and the options are not many — it should be clear that business as usual is not an option. The government must not leave course correction to the caretaker or successor government.

Turkish coup trial

TURKEY last year successfully fended off a military coup, preventing a group of rogue officers from toppling the AKP-led government. Considering the country's history of frequent military interventions, the Turkish administration's victory over the coup-makers was seen as a success for democracy. However, in the months since, there has been an air of vindictiveness in Turkey, with the government moving seemingly against all its opponents and not just those who were believed

to be involved in the coup. On Tuesday, nearly 500 people went on trial on charges connected to the coup. Before the trials began, President Erdogan's administration had initiated a thorough 'cleansing' of the system, with mass arrests and imprisonments. Those rounded up include not only army men involved in the plot, but also teachers, police personnel, judges and journalists. The Turkish state seems to be using the opportunity to crack down on all dissent, and has blamed the attempted coup on exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen, a charge Mr Gulen has denied.

Undoubtedly, those involved in trying to topple a democratically elected government must be held accountable. The message must be clear that military intervention will not be tolerated. Therefore, those officers and troops, as well as their facilitators, should be tried with transparency. However, including all opponents of Mr Erdogan and the AKP and terming them 'enemies of the state' is ill advised. Granted the AKP has won multiple elections in Turkey, proof that many of the country's citizens approve of its governance. It is also true that many common citizens took to the streets last year while the coup was under way to defend the administration. However, this must not mean that the party uses its popularity to erode democratic norms and adopt an authoritarian course. Tarring political opponents of the administration, as well as critics such as journalists and academics, with the same brush as the coup-plotters is a dangerous move and in fact imperils Turkish democracy. The trials must continue with due process and those involved in last year's coup must be punished. But Mr Erdogan and his administration need to think twice about alienating opposition groups. Tolerating dissent is part and parcel of the democratic system, while the AKP leadership should remember it was this lack of tolerance for democracy and dissent that helped past military coup-makers, and their civilian supporters, send elected governments packing. The world will be watching Turkey's coup trial closely.

Young doctors on strike

ANOTHER woman is reported to have fallen victim to the long-running dispute between the Punjab government and the Young Doctors Association, who suspended emergency treatment at the Services Hospital in Lahore on Tuesday to demand a pay raise and the reversal of the new policy for postgraduate training.

The patient's family claims the striking doctors refused to treat her. The doctors contend she was already dead when brought to the hospital. It is difficult to say what actually transpired without a transparent investigation into the incident to determine the facts. But what is certain is that the dispute has lingered for far too long and caused far too much suffering for the thousands of poor patients who have nowhere to turn to in their moment of need but the shoddy public healthcare system.

The ongoing row between the government and doctors has manifested itself in different forms since 2010: suspension of treatment at public hospital emergencies — often resulting in deaths of patients — clashes between the doctors and the police, fistfights between the patients' attendants and the striking doctors and so on. The repeated closure of emergency services in Punjab has led many to question whether doctors have a right to deny treatment to patients, especially during urgent situations. The top priority for a doctor — notwithstanding his or her bitterness about pay scales or for any other reason — should be the wellbeing of the patient. Those signing up for a degree in medicine must recognise that a patient's life has to take precedence over everything else. Those in need of immediate medical attention should never find themselves without access to it. Conversely, the government also needs to acknowledge the frustration of the young doctors and the fact that they have families to support and are entitled to opportunities for their professional advancement. Coercive action on either side will achieve nothing. Both the parties will have to sit together to find an amicable, lasting solution to the dispute for the sake of the hapless patients.

Parliament's failure

CHAIRMAN of the Senate Raza Rabbani has warned in the past that the failure of elected representatives and political parties to give parliament its due would undermine democracy. Now, in a speech in Quetta on Wednesday, Mr Rabbani has warned that democracy itself is under attack from other institutions of the state. Mr Rabbani's hard-hitting remarks may cause ripples of discontent in certain quarters, but it remains to be seen if the real targets of his speech — mainstream political leaders — will be moved by the chairman's warning, which is both sensible and necessary. There is no simple democratic equation that will carry Pakistan towards its ultimate goal of a stable constitutional democracy in which civilian

supremacy is reflected by a strong parliament with all other institutions operating strictly within the letter and spirit of the Constitution. What has long been clear is that it is the civilians themselves who need to raise the performance bar; encroachments in the civilian domain can only be repelled if the civilians act from a position of relative strength.

Unhappily, the record of parliament this term has been rather poor when it comes to both challenging encroachments in the civilian domain and strengthening the political order. Two examples can illustrate the problems. In extending the duration of military courts for civilian terrorism suspects via the 23rd Amendment to the Constitution, parliament explicitly sanctioned a continuing distortion of the constitutional and legal order. All political parties fell meekly in line, the military winning virtually all the concessions it had demanded. And Mr Rabbani himself presided over the Senate session in which the amendment was approved, despite earlier suggesting he would not do so in protest. The great travesty of the 23rd Amendment is that it came more than two years after the 21st Amendment, which established military courts for civilian suspects for the first time. In two years, parliament did nothing to take up judicial reforms. Blame for that particular failure must lie solely with parliament itself.

The recent ouster of Nawaz Sharif on narrow judicial grounds may be a lamentable decision, but there too a failure of parliament can be identified, one that has spanned two parliaments. Mr Sharif's case went to the Supreme Court for a decision because the existing accountability framework has virtually no credibility. With civilian institutions and regulators gutted and parliament having failed to overhaul an effective accountability set-up despite promises by the last PPP government and the current PML-N government, there ought to be little surprise that large sections of the public view politicians and politics with such disdain. If civilian supremacy is ever to be established, the civilians will need to gain in credibility with the public. A genuine accountability machine that steps up the fight against corruption could be a good starting point. Doing nothing is no longer a democratic option.

Rampaging lawyers

IT would seem that after the lawyers' movement managed to achieve its objective — the restoration of then chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry — the black coats have become a law unto themselves. On Wednesday, a group of young advocates barged into the courtroom of no less than the Lahore High Court chief justice, Syed Mansoor Ali Shah, where a five-member bench was about to resume hearing a contempt of court case against some of their colleagues, and created a commotion, shouting slogans against the judges present. The gravity of the charges against the lawyers on trial can scarcely be disputed. On July 24, the LHC bar association president, along with some other lawyers, had ransacked and vandalised a judge's court. The two principal accused did not appear in court, despite assurances given to the bench by other senior bar members at the previous hearing.

To state the obvious, practitioners of the legal profession are sworn to upholding the law, not take it into their own hands. However, a number of black coats — enough to tarnish the image of their profession — have time and again demonstrated their utter contempt for the law. Even aside from the shameful spectacle in 2011 of scores of them showering rose petals on the man who had recently murdered the Punjab governor, they have shown no restraint in resorting to out-and-out thuggery to get their way both inside the court and outside. A few weeks ago, an LHC courtroom was the scene of a brawl when a group of advocates attacked the opposing counsel. And in what has become a regular occurrence, the bench has often been the target of the black coats' ire. Members of the judiciary have been locked inside their courtrooms, intimidated during proceedings, and threatened with physical violence. It is indicative of the reputation lawyers have acquired that, in Wednesday's incident, the policemen deputed to guard the courtroom — members of a force that otherwise often has no qualms in thrashing demonstrators — refused to intervene. Recognising the threat that some members of the bar pose to the administration of justice, the LHC chief justice on his first day in office announced several measures to rein them in. However, it seems these have not deterred the fascistic elements in the legal profession. Perhaps it is time for the Supreme Court to take notice, suspend the licences of the offending lawyers, and restore the dignity of the court.

Spiritual guidance

Political leaders in this country often seem to lack confidence in their own destiny and powers of decision-making.

Consider, for example, the fact that from the highest echelons of society downwards, there is a large section of the citizenry that, because of various interpretations of the term 'spiritual guidance', prefers to put its faith in individuals who have dubbed themselves 'healers', 'men of miracles', astrologers and suchlike.

It was not so long ago that former president Asif Ali Zardari arrived at an accountability court in Islamabad accompanied by his spiritual mentor, Pir Mohammed Ijaz. Former PPP prime ministers Raja Parvez Ashraf and the late Benazir Bhutto have also been amongst our luminaries known for their willingness to abide by the dictates of favoured spiritual guides. Even the recently disqualified Nawaz Sharif, despite his reputation as a hard-nosed businessman, is believed to have taken this path.

Among other leaders who are members of this community is PTI chief Imran Khan. On Tuesday, he did not consider a National Assembly session important enough to attend. Instead, it emerged that he had travelled all the way to Pakpattan to meet his spiritual patron, Bushra Bibi, also known as Ms Pinki.

The wife of Khawar Farid Maneka — Mr Khan is said to have a spiritual bond with the Maneka clan — is known in the area as a pir, or faith healer, and is said to have 'predicted' PTI stalwart Jehangir Tareen's win ahead of a by-poll in 2015.

While restraints cannot really be placed on where individuals choose to put their faith, it can certainly be argued that in a country beset by illiteracy and superstition, where the populace is vulnerable to falling prey to false claims, those in the public limelight need to lead by example. This includes keeping themselves grounded in the real world.

If even the educated elites cannot consistently do this, is it any wonder that gullibility is such a problem among the poor and uneducated segments of society?

Musharraf's rantings

AS Pakistan's only living ex-military dictator, retired Gen Pervez Musharraf has emerged as a spokesman for that small but significant club in the country's history. Now, with the political downfall of Mr Musharraf's bitter foe Nawaz Sharif, the former dictator has made one gleeful comment after another against civilian politicians in recent days. Much of it has been easy to ignore as the rantings of an individual who has failed to accept his present-day marginal political relevance. But in typical Musharrafian style, the former dictator has gone too far. In a shocking interview to BBC Urdu from his base in self-exile, Mr Musharraf has defended not just his record in office, but that of generals Zia and Ayub too. Mercifully, even for Mr Musharraf, a defence of Gen Yahya Khan's record may have been a step too far. Still, the brazen defence of two extremely damaging military dictatorships in the country's history and a sweeping denunciation of all civilian governments are extraordinary. Mr Musharraf may be unapologetic, but he is also terribly wrong.

The devastation wrought by military regimes can be gauged by a straightforward metric that even Mr Musharraf can understand: most have left office in humiliation and in the immediate aftermath of each dictatorship, there has been a consensus in the country that a return to civilian rule is necessary (in Gen Ayub's case, the extraordinary political circumstances somewhat delayed the inevitable). In Mr Musharraf's case, he has further humiliated himself by relying on his parent organisation to save him from serious legal trouble and escaping the country on a medical pretext. With his nemesis out of political office, perhaps Mr Musharraf should test his own theory of the Pakistani people's preference for military dictators over civilian leaders by returning to Pakistan and bravely facing whatever the courts have in store for him. Surely, the same courts that have delivered justice in the eyes of Mr Musharraf in the case of Mr Sharif will do what is right by a ruler who is loved by the people, as Mr Musharraf's argument suggests.

The contrast between a former dictator's cowardly words spoken from exile and the searing remarks by legendary pro-democracy advocate Asma Jahangir on Pakistani soil could not be more damning. Ms Jahangir, whose principled and outspoken stand on democratic values and principles have made her a national treasure, has once again publicly asked the kind of questions that few else dare. Her central question — why do only civilian politicians face accountability in Pakistan? — is answered by the arrogance and utter foolishness of Mr Musharraf's

remarks. Indeed, Mr Musharraf's very freedom today is because of an ongoing distortion in the constitutional scheme of things. The selective and self-serving understanding of responsibilities under the Constitution is at the heart of those distortions. Perhaps the present military leadership ought to consider publicly distancing itself from Mr Musharraf's remarks.

Talk to Tehran

WITH Hassan Rouhani sworn in for his second term as Iran's president on Thursday, the assumption that the Islamic Republic will continue with its pragmatic approach where foreign policy is concerned has grown stronger. While relations between Iran and its Western geopolitical adversaries were at dangerously low levels before his first presidency, Mr Rouhani was hailed for pushing through with the 2015 nuclear deal after taking office, an agreement almost universally acknowledged as a masterstroke of modern diplomacy and one that arguably prevented a new conflagration in the Middle East. He reiterated his pragmatic line during Thursday's ceremony, vowing to end Iran's isolation while observing that the nuclear deal "is a sign of Iran's goodwill on the international stage". However, there were also clear signals emanating from Tehran that any confrontational measures would be responded to in kind. Speaking with reference to recent sanctions imposed on Iran by the US concerning its ballistic missiles programme, the Iranian deputy foreign minister told state TV that the American move was a "violation" of the nuclear deal, adding that "we will react appropriately".

Without doubt, the Middle East is amongst the most volatile regions of the world currently, beset by terrorism, war and geopolitical feuds. It is also true that in this 'shatterbelt', Iran has emerged as a major player, with relative internal stability, while also projecting its power externally through proxies and direct intervention. Such a situation — particularly Iran's growing regional influence — has perturbed the US, especially since Donald Trump moved into the White House. It has also drawn harsh reactions from America's regional allies, with Saudi Arabia and Israel leading the chorus of discontent. However, whatever differences the US or regional states may have with Iran, these should be handled through dialogue. Sanctions, war talk and threats will hardly get Tehran to yield; if anything, it will make hardliners within the Iranian establishment toughen their stance even more. There

is an opportunity for the US and its allies to engage Iran under President Rouhani. Instead of adopting a hostile approach, let Washington discuss its differences frankly with Tehran. However, it is unlikely this will happen anytime soon as senior officials within the Trump camp — most notably Secretary of State Tillerson — have called for regime change in Tehran. It would be wise for the US to discard this fantasy and deal with the reality of an emergent Iran, and to engage it in dialogue.

Police problems

ON Police Martyrs Day yesterday, this newspaper carried a saddening account of a member of the force. A young graduate in Karachi spoke of how his father, a policeman, was gunned down last month in an attack on a police vehicle — a mode of attack that has become more frequent in recent years in the city. His family lives in police quarters, which they would have had to vacate if no one among them was employed by the force. So real-world concerns dictated that this young man give up his academic trajectory and take the job offered to him as compensation for the death of his father in the line of duty. How much of a sop this is on part of the state is exposed by the fact that he can only be enlisted as a constable — his father's position — regardless of his qualifications.

His is a story that has been repeated hundreds of times. Since September 2013, Karachi has lost 313 policemen, whether in targeted killings, militant attacks or encounters with criminal networks. An outsider might observe, though, that there is curiously little public sympathy for the sacrifices borne by the beat cop fraternity. Where on the one hand the state's system of compensation is woefully inadequate, on the other the common man regards members of the police force with suspicion. Such state negligence and public attitudes have left police personnel deeply demoralised. But the other side of the picture must also be highlighted — there is no dearth of corruption on a varying scale in police ranks, besides there are allegations of excessive use of force. The challenge must be taken up by those higher up in the hierarchy — training and investment in human resource are desperately needed to ensure a strong, disciplined and honest police force, and not just in Karachi. Efforts to reform the police have been sporadic and piecemeal,

and have done little to increase the citizenry's faith in the force. This trust deficit must be bridged.

Formation of new power ministry

THE new prime minister has wasted no time in merging two vital ministries into a single Ministry of Energy, something that the PML-N had promised it would do in its election manifesto of 2013.

The water and power ministry has been bifurcated, and its power wing is now to be merged with the petroleum ministry. The idea is an old one, and builds on an earlier generation of reforms under which the mammoth Wapda was bifurcated into separate water and power wings almost a decade ago.

Since at least 2010, if not earlier, while the PPP government struggled with the power crisis, the proposal would be raised anew, always to be shelved. Even the PML-N promised to implement the idea, but strangely waited till the last year of its rule to actually implement it.

Technically, the idea is sound and all those who have advocated it or examined it have concluded that it can help streamline the functioning of the power sector by bringing fuel supply and other operational issues under unified supervision. But the timing and the speed at which the proposal has now been implemented suggest that priorities other than the smooth functioning of the power sector may be at play.

A clue is provided in the prime minister's own words, where he said that the completion of ongoing projects was a crucial priority for him. With both ministries whose approvals are key to the speedy implementation of ongoing projects in the power sector now working directly under the new prime minister, as well as the latter's retention of the Planning Commission portfolio — meaning his personal oversight of all matters related to CPEC — it appears that the commencement of commercial operations in all power projects will now be the government's top priority.

The linchpin here is finance.

Without the required cash flows, the power sector can chug along for a brief period before sputtering to a halt. Streamlining the operations is fine, but the dividends that this can yield are ultimately constrained by the availability of financial resources.

Besides, aiming for the completion of the projects as a political strategy carries substantial technical risks as well as the potential for locking the sector into a high-cost growth path. The repeated technical outages being experienced at the new power plants recently inaugurated or started for test runs in southern Punjab make this clear.

The case of the Nandipur power plant stands as a supreme testimony to the waste and inefficiency that haste of this sort can lead to in power-sector projects.

The new prime minister has a tougher job than he might realise in ensuring that the projects he has to now hustle down the timeline to completion remain financially and technically viable at the end of the process. In addition, ensuring availability of fuel supply without depleting reserves will add to his challenges.

Gulalai's allegations

THE allegations by MNA and now former PTI member, Ayesha Gulalai, of sexual harassment by Imran Khan have caused no less than a political earthquake. Coming so soon after the Panama Papers verdict, this development has divided a polarised public further along partisan lines. It has also exposed the deep vein of misogyny that permeates all socioeconomic segments of Pakistani society. From the outset, there has only been one prudent course of action in the matter, and that is to determine the veracity, or otherwise, of Ms Gulalai's claims through a credible investigation, which is the right of any woman alleging sexual harassment. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's call on Friday for the formation of a special committee — something that Mr Khan has welcomed — to undertake this task is therefore a step in the right direction. Having an in-camera probe will also preserve the dignity of both the accuser and the accused: while allowing one to present her evidence without fear of further public censure, it will give the other the chance to speak freely in his defence.

One could argue that Ms Gulalai would have strengthened her case had she first lodged a formal complaint with the party, rather than going to the media. That said, the reaction to her allegations from a large segment of the public has been despicable. Threats of violence have been hurled at her on social media with such vehemence that the MNA has expressed fears for her life. Even the PTI spokesman plumbed the depths of indecency with his remarks about Ms Gulalai and her family. However, the invective is especially jarring when it comes from women, in particular those belonging to the PTI, whose enthusiastic participation at its rallies has given it an image of a woman-friendly party. A group of PTI female lawmakers has gone so far as to say that their former colleague will be dealt with by a jirga, a proven instrument of women's subjugation, before being tried in court — and all before her 'guilt' has even been proved. Such a stance illustrates how women themselves internalise a patriarchal society's misogynistic narrative, and thereby unwittingly perpetrate it. Moreover, although the incident has assumed a political colour because of the individuals involved, it also illustrates why victims of sexual harassment, and worse, are reluctant to go public. Only those with extreme fortitude would be able to endure the disbelief their claims evoke and the character assassination they are subjected to.

Intra-Kashmir trade

IT is a rare bright spot in the otherwise dismal state of bilateral relations, particularly when it comes to the disputed Kashmir region. Small-scale, barter-based trade across the LoC will not transform the economic prospects of the region, but it is essential to keeping ties across the LoC alive and helps sustain a constituency for peace. So the blockade of trade by India following allegations of Pakistani consignments across the LoC containing narcotics was a blow. However, better sense appears to have prevailed relatively quickly as New Delhi, at the urging of the chief minister of J&K and traders in the region, has decided to reopen a trade route shut on July 21 by Aug 8. While India has yet to provide proof of the allegations of narcotics smuggling and a reduction in the number of trucks that will be allowed across the LoC has been negotiated, the timing is propitious — a week before independence celebrations in both countries. Footage of the two sides meeting on a bridge in the disputed Kashmir region for talks was a welcome sight.

The resumption of trade is also a welcome reminder of how effective intra-Kashmir confidence-building measures can be. The trade scheme that will resume was launched in 2008 and has quickly become very popular in the region because it has promoted economic interdependence in what ought to be one market. Indeed, in the few talks that have been held between the two countries since then, intra-Kashmir CBMs have always been flagged as the most likely area in which further progress can be achieved relatively quickly. There is no sign yet that India and Pakistan are seeking to resume dialogue, but the Kashmir trade ought to be protected. The Indian allegations of narcotics smuggling have highlighted a problem that ought to be addressed. Trade should not be suspended merely on the basis of allegations and a system should be put in place to address problems on both sides as they arise.

New lessons for Nawaz Sharif

The judicial ouster of an elected prime minister in controversial circumstances was always likely to generate political uncertainty. But as Nawaz Sharif prepares to return to Lahore via the GT Road and an unseemly war of words continues between the PTI and PML-N, the political landscape is beginning to appear dangerously unsettled.

Much may depend on the course that Mr Sharif decides to take in the days and weeks ahead. At least in words, the ousted prime minister has been circumspect and seemingly focused on democratic continuity and stability.

Speaking to media representatives on Saturday, Mr Sharif did not lash out at the verdict against him and expressed a willingness to engage in dialogue with all political parties, including the PML-N's opponents. The Charter of Democracy signed by Mr Sharif and Benazir Bhutto in 2006 was also referenced.

Yet, Mr Sharif's imminent return to Lahore is shaping up to be an intensely political episode in which the PML-N may try and flaunt its street power. Given that the PML-N is in power in Punjab, there is unlikely to be serious violence, but clashes with PTI supporters cannot be ruled out. The PML-N leadership should send a firm and unambiguous message to its supporters to avoid any incendiary words or

actions, and the Punjab government ought to give assurances to opposition parties that peaceful rival protests or gatherings will be allowed.

Just as Imran Khan's historic October 2011 rally in Lahore was the start of an extended election campaign, Nawaz Sharif's GT Road journey to the city may mark the beginning of the PML-N's next campaign. With all parties emphasising that democracy must stay on track and elections must be held, common sense ought to prevail on all sides.

Mr Sharif has spoken of lessons learned from his 1999 ouster. He may want to consider learning some new lessons from his latest ouster. In the PTI, the PML-N has faced a hostile opponent intent on capturing power.

But the PML-N, as Mr Sharif's comments on Saturday suggest, has been more keen to pat itself on the back for not resorting to offensive politics rather than genuinely engaging the political opposition. The isolationist tendencies of Mr Sharif have meant that parliament has been ignored and both friends and potential allies have been kept at arm's length – unless the PML-N is in trouble and needs their support.

It is strange that Mr Sharif appears to have a clear-eyed understanding of what can sustain democracy in Pakistan but has been unable to bring himself to practise it. Politics, however, should be forward-looking. Mr Sharif has yet another chance to demonstrate that he and the PML-N can put the good of the system ahead of personal and party ambition.

CPEC security costs

THE inevitable is now slowly coming to pass. Costs that were not originally part of the tariffs granted to CPEC power projects are being passed to consumers, starting with the added cost of security. When Nepra, the power regulator, first took suo motu notice of a summary approved by the Economic Coordination Committee, which approved the “issuance of a policy directive to Nepra to allow 1pc of the capital cost” of all CPEC projects to pay for security expenses, it appeared that the idea was to examine the legality of such a “policy directive”, as well as the merits of bundling security costs into the tariff. But in the decision released on Thursday, it turns out Nepra was only going through the motions with the intention of bowing to the demands of the ECC. Not only was notice of the matter taken under peculiar circumstances, but the reasoning employed in the determination also shows that something fundamental has changed in the relationship between the regulator and the government.

First of all, deciding such an important matter under a suo motu hearing without requiring the government to submit a proper petition calls for some explanation. Second, when it was suggested during the hearing that the provision of security was the government’s responsibility and should not be charged from the consumers, Nepra responded by saying such costs would be met from public funds in any case, so why not bundle them into the tariffs granted to the respective projects. This is truly extraordinary reasoning on the regulator’s part, and implies that the protection of consumer interest, which ought to be Nepra’s priority, has now been sacrificed at the altar of bureaucratic self-interest. Third, the determination argues that the measure does not entail special treatment for IPPs coming under the CPEC umbrella since the implementation agreements of the others also allow for security costs to be part of the tariff. This is disingenuous, because the determination twice makes reference to the CPEC security force, and the mechanism for the payment clearly shows the costs in question relate to it, and this force is not there for the protection of all IPPs. This determination has opened the door to new large-scale escalations in the cost of CPEC power projects in the years to come, something for which the public should now brace itself.

Texts of hate

EVEN as they prepare to celebrate the 70th anniversary of their birth, Pakistan and India may want to reflect on why they have not been able to live as amicable neighbours. Both nations saw triumph and tragedy in 1947 — colonial rule was at an end, but the bloody events of Partition are seared in the subcontinent's memory, a legacy that should have taught them to cherish freedom and to promote peace. Instead, the decades have been marked by conflict and tensions, recriminations and threats. The tendency on both sides to constantly paint the other in an unfavourable light has not helped. Perhaps one example of this is contained in some of the textbooks used by students in both countries. As a recent news story points out, students on both sides of the border are getting a skewed version of history, at times even bare-faced lies. For instance, there is little mention of Gandhi's contribution to the independence struggle in history textbooks here, while Indian students are told that the Muslim League sided with the British colonisers.

Given such an education in the history of the subcontinent, what is the younger generation to think? Should we be surprised if biases against the 'other' creep in? True, there have been occasions at a people-to-people level where such gloom has been dispelled — joint cultural initiatives for instance, or the warm reception of Indian cricket fans in Lahore some years ago, indicating that common interests can promote friendship. But there can be little hope for lasting amicability unless the two states come to terms with their past and acknowledge the facts of history. As long as Pakistan and India continue to raise successive generations that are formally taught from early schooling onwards to be suspicious of the other rather than courageously delve into uncomfortable truths, the grounds for unthinking animosity will only grow more robust. The process towards rectification will take time, but cleaning up the textbooks is a long overdue first step.

New FM's options

IN the more than four years since the country last had a foreign minister, much has changed on the external front. India, Afghanistan and the US have had significant elections and leaderships changes. CPEC is an acronym that did not exist before. The Syrian civil war became even more complex and turned into an epochal humanitarian catastrophe. Iran and Saudi Arabia have clashed. And the Gulf has been thrown into upheaval. Bewilderingly, long after it became apparent that Nawaz Sharif had no special purpose in retaining the foreign minister's portfolio for himself, the former prime minister refused to appoint a full-time foreign minister. Meanwhile, with two rival power centres installed in the Foreign Office, foreign adviser Sartaj Aziz and special assistant to the prime minister Tariq Fatemi, the institutional linchpin for civilian input in external affairs was allowed to drift and descend into infighting.

The arrival of Khawaja Asif, an experienced politician with an uncouth side, in the Foreign Office could help reverse the unfortunate trend of the past four years. If Foreign Minister Asif takes the job seriously and is not too distracted by pandering domestically and politically to his party boss, Mr Sharif, he can help inject some much-needed purpose and direction into his new portfolio. But that is very much an open question, especially after Mr Asif chose to speak to the media from his constituency in Sialkot for the first time as foreign minister and not from the much more recognisable, more appropriate setting of the Foreign Office. Certainly, his Twitter account since a change in portfolios suggests a preoccupation with domestic politics rather than a deep interest in the complexities of Pakistan's foreign policy challenges. More promising was the thrust of Mr Asif's comments in Sialkot: recognising the centrality of India and Afghanistan to Pakistani foreign policy and national security, and arguing for a reciprocal relationship of trust and cooperation.

The PML-N government, for all its weaknesses in the foreign policy and national security domains, and with the existence of a serious civil-military imbalance, has consistently offered peaceful cooperation with India and Afghanistan in all areas. Perhaps the Indian and Afghan governments are sceptical of the Pakistani civilian government's ability to negotiate or deliver on matters of importance to those countries, but each of the three countries independently recognises that long-term peace and stability can only come about through dialogue. Given that reality, Mr

Asif should work with his ministry, in consultation with other ministries and institutions, to draw up a statement of policy on India and Afghanistan that is sensible and pragmatic. The Pakistani parliament may be into its final year, but a fresh push towards regional dialogue could help lay the foundation for future breakthroughs. The foreign minister has a choice: treat his new portfolio with the disdain Nawaz Sharif did or use its potential to achieve a modicum of diplomatic success.

Missing in Sindh

AN all-too-familiar and sinister pattern is beginning to repeat itself in Sindh. The past few weeks have seen increasing agitation against enforced disappearances of political activists in the province. On Thursday, Punhal Sario, the leader of the recently formed Voice for Missing Persons of Sindh, was also picked up from Hyderabad by — according to an eyewitness — around a dozen men in police commando uniforms. Then on Saturday, some family members of the self-exiled separatist leader of the banned Jeay Sindh Muttahida Mahaz, Shafi Burfat, were whisked away from their residence. A number of demonstrations by civil society groups were taken out on Sunday from various cities in the province, such as Sukkur, Jacobabad, Mirpurkhas, Badin, Umerkot and Mithi to protest the rising incidence of forced disappearances, among them those of rights activists, journalists, writers etc, allegedly at the hands of intelligence personnel.

Even a single case of enforced disappearance is one too many, but when those protesting the abductions, and the family members of the missing, are themselves disappeared, it is an even more ominous development. It speaks of an increasingly authoritarian state accountable to no one but itself and willing to go to any lengths to crush all dissent. Balochistan has long been a theatre for abductions by state-affiliated elements. While the security situation in the province makes verification of such cases extremely difficult, it can be said with some certainty that enforced disappearance has been used as a tool of state repression to counter nationalist sentiment in the area. More recently, the war against terrorism has provided a pretext for carrying out enforced disappearances in the rest of the country as well, with the highest incidence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It is a measure of the impunity with which the state operates that it continues on this course despite a Commission

of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances having been set up by the government on the orders of the Supreme Court. The result, far from containing unrest, has only created bitterness among those who have been affected and is a boon to separatist propaganda. Inexplicably enough, there exists legislation — some recently enacted — that enables law enforcement to arrest, investigate and prosecute those suspected of being engaged in seditious acts. Why then do such self-destructive tactics remain in practice? Is the state blinded by its own power?

Fuel supply choke points

THE power plants being erected by the government as an urgent priority may choke on fuel supply constraints once they are fired up. Oil-handling capacity at the ports is severely limited as oil imports continue rising, mainly due to growing vehicular activity. Once the power plants begin operations, this is expected to rise further, and there is no indication that the government has commissioned the creation of the appropriate fuel storage infrastructure in order to deal with growing requirements. Not only that, the new power plants are also diversifying the fuel mix, which, while good financially, creates challenges in terms of the fuel-handling infrastructure from the port to the point of consumption.

A report in the petroleum ministry sheds some light on the magnitude of the problems facing the fuel supply chain, particularly due to poor storage capacity, whether at the port or upcountry. By 2020, when the new power plants are supposed to be running at full capacity, capacity constraints will also bite at the oil-handling stage, creating a serious bottleneck for the smooth operation of additional power capacity. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi will face these challenges at a crucial time, precisely when output is required to help secure votes. At that time, it will also be remembered that he was the petroleum minister while the additional power capacity was commissioned, and questions may well arise why his ministry did not take the steps required to expand fuel-handling and storage capacity in line with the growth plans being implemented by the government. Now that Mr Abbasi is prime minister, and, by the looks of it not just an interim one, he has all the powers he needs to revisit the projects being implemented, and ask if all the other ancillary arrangements required for their smooth inauguration, such

as fiscal, forex and fuel supply, have been made. Perhaps he can start from the very ministry he has been leading all these years.

Fears of violence at road show

Today, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif will begin a journey from Islamabad to Lahore that could in some way determine the trajectory of politics in the country in the short term and possibly beyond.

The stakes are high for a number of actors. For Mr Sharif, personal validation awaits as he seeks to prove that the Supreme Court judgement notwithstanding, he remains personally popular with the PML-N base. The GT Road is the core of the Sharif support base and a large turnout along the route will likely be personally satisfying for Mr Sharif and politically advantageous.

For the PML-N, the goal will be to whip up political support for the party ahead of the by-election in NA-120, where a dominant performance by the party may help quell rumours about dissent in the ranks. The PML-N has yet to announce its candidate for the seat Mr Sharif has been forced to relinquish and such uncertainty may sustain rumours and speculation.

For the political rivals of the Sharifs and the PML-N, the GT Road spectacle will be a moment to heap further pressure on the beleaguered Sharif family. With the Supreme Court having declared him ineligible for elected office and the ECP now seeking the removal of the former prime minister as official head of the PML-N, Mr Sharif's rivals have already denounced the Islamabad-Lahore journey as anti-democratic and against the spirit of the law.

In the zero-sum game of electoral politics — consolidation in support for one side is the denial of gains to the other — the political opposition has little choice but to oppose the GT Road show. Where the political opposition does have a choice, and hopefully will choose correctly, is in the tactics it uses to try and prevent the PML-N from gaining a political advantage.

With potential spoilers having arrived and some of the PML-N's most determined opponents seemingly in a fighting mood, the spectre of violence has returned to

Pakistani politics. Whatever the stakes, sensible politics must prevail and violence of any kind rejected. All sides have vowed that their main priority is the continuation of the democratic process; their words and actions must reflect that commitment.

The key to maintaining peace and not allowing politics to descend into violence may be the Punjab government and the police force in the province. The first priority must be to keep the participants in rallies — of all groups and parties — safe, especially from the ever-present threat of militant attacks. After that, fair rules must apply to who can assemble where and the police hierarchy in the province must coordinate with all sides.

The Punjab government is not known for its neutrality in the execution of its responsibilities to the public, but misguided partiality could trigger unpredictable consequences. All sides must respect the law.

Palestine forgotten

PALESTINE usually only makes news when a fresh bout of violence breaks out in this occupied Arab land. The latest example was the furore over the placement of metal detectors by Israel outside the Al Aqsa mosque — a flashpoint where the slightest provocation can ignite widespread unrest. On Monday, King Abdullah of Jordan visited Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. While Arab leaders meet their Palestinian counterparts regularly in different cities, this was the first time the Jordanian monarch visited Palestine in five years. It is a welcome step and more such visits to Palestine must take place to remind the world that the Palestinians and their plight have not been forgotten. However, fissures within the Palestinian camp also need to be addressed to form a united front against the Israeli occupation and to secure the Palestinian people's legitimate rights. In this regard, Mahmoud Abbas's recent statement to step up sanctions on Gaza — ruled by Fatah's rival Hamas — is unfortunate. While many states recognise the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority based in the West Bank as the 'genuine leadership' of the Palestinians, Hamas has been running Gaza's affairs since it took over the tiny coastal strip in 2007 after winning Palestinian elections in 2005.

Whatever Fatah's differences with the Islamist Hamas, it must be asked what increasing sanctions — in effect punishing Gaza's people — will achieve. The PA

in the past has also reportedly asked Israel to cut off Gaza's electricity; as it is, the strip barely gets a few hours of electricity a day. It has been a decade since Israel enforced a blockade of Gaza, supported by Egypt. These cruel measures, far from weakening Hamas, are only adding to the miseries of Gaza's two million people. As a UN official, speaking after the launch of a report on Gaza's plight last month said, the strip's crisis is a "manmade political situation". What is particularly sad is that the Palestinians' own countrymen, as well as some of their Arab 'brothers', are responsible for their plight. It is time the cruel blockade of Gaza was lifted before the enclave becomes 'unliveable' in the words of the UN report. Fatah and Hamas must resolve their differences at the negotiating table; collective punishment of Gaza's people is unacceptable. Indeed, the plight of the Palestinians becomes all the more desperate when a brutal Israeli occupation is supplemented by the cruel actions of their own leaders.

The JuD's new clothes

THE run-up to elections usually produces some strange bedfellows who come together out of political expediency. Sometimes, however, a new iteration of an old entity emerges on the electoral landscape. Enter the Milli Muslim League, a vehicle whereby the Jamaatud Dawa plans to venture into mainstream politics. Its formation was announced on Monday by JuD and MML representatives who pledged to implement the ideology of Pakistan in accordance with the 1973 Constitution and the vision of the Quaid-i-Azam and Allama Iqbal. Defining their objectives for the country, the MML president hit all the expected talking points: corruption of the political leadership, deliberate fanning of sectarian and ethnic tensions, the country's direction towards liberalism and secularism, etc. He also touched upon the work being carried out by the JuD's charitable arm.

According to the law, any group or association of people has the right to form a political party. In fact, a democratic system gains vitality when the electorate has a number of options to choose from. However, a political party launched by the JuD comes with a considerable degree of baggage, a questionable pedigree of sorts. For the JuD is on the government watch list under Schedule II of the Anti Terrorism Act, and its own predecessor, the Lashkar-e-Taiba — now banned — is associated with jihadist adventurism across the border, including operations such as the Mumbai attacks in 2008. It should also be noted that the LeT was an

obdurate opponent of democracy, deeming it incompatible with Islam, and Monday's meeting with the press also indicated MML's ambivalence about the Constitution. For all these reasons, even if one disregards the laudatory references to LeT chief Hafiz Saeed — notwithstanding his omission from the new party's leadership — on the same occasion, the MML should be emphatic in its repudiation of militancy. There are several examples globally of former militant outfits evolving into political entities, such as the Irish Republican Army: if the JuD indeed wants a change in direction, it is to be welcomed.

Vulnerable power sector

WITH the spotlight on the political theatre under way on GT Road, there is a growing danger that the more mundane matter of running the affairs of state will be left to drift. Given the intense passions these days, this might come across as a trite observation to most, yet it could have far graver implications than any of the showmanship on display. Already the signs are that the power sector is accumulating circular debt faster than at any time in the previous three years. Figures reported recently suggest it could have touched Rs800bn, with the bulk of the accumulation coming in the last seven to eight months alone. To some extent, the timeline coincides with the start of the ruling party's court-related troubles, but there are other events within the water and power sector that could have played an equally significant role. Beyond this, the fiscal framework and the external sector are showing growing vulnerabilities that could send consequences cascading through the economy precisely at a time when the planned handover of power to an interim government is supposed to take place.

The vulnerabilities in question are not minor ones. Taken together, they could choke the power system, cause a disorderly plunge in the exchange rate, aggravate inflation and destabilise financial markets. The second round of consequences could spark a large-scale dollarisation of savings as well as capital flight. All of these have happened in the past as the incumbent government neared the end of its term and those at the helm lost their focus in the midst of the political storms. In each case, we saw large-scale load-shedding and rapid depletion of the reserves, followed by the authorities approaching the IMF and the onset of years of adjustment. That story is now set to repeat itself, and its basic elements are already beginning to appear.

It is imperative at this time that the focus on governance is not lost, and that the cabinet lets the party deal with the political storms. The prime minister has kept the crucial power ministry as well as planning — charged with CPEC coordination — under his control. This places a heavy burden on him to ensure that the crucial power system remains operational in spite of stresses on the fiscal framework and the reserves. If he and his cabinet are sucked too deep into the politics of the moment, it will raise the likelihood of the system being left to its own devices and allowed to drift in a dangerous direction. For the ruling party, this carries the additional danger of impacting its electoral chances once polling gets under way. If once again the elections are held amidst massive load-shedding and rapidly depleting reserves, it could well impact the choices made by the electorate at the polls.

Karachi bank heists

OVER the past few days, there has been a spate of armed robberies targeting banks in Karachi. On Wednesday, a bank in the city's congested Kharadar area was looted, reportedly only a short distance from a police post. A day earlier, criminals had struck a bank off Shahrah-i-Quaideen; sadly, when the bank manager, a father of three, tried to put up resistance, he was shot dead by the culprits. Nine banks have been robbed in the megacity since the year began, with at least four of the heists occurring within the last one month alone. These grim facts illustrate that while the law-enforcement operation that began in the metropolis in September 2013 has brought down the number of militant attacks, other crimes — particularly bank robberies and muggings — still remain a challenge.

There has been the usual official reaction to the spike in bank robberies. The Sindh chief minister has sought a 'security audit' of banks, the provincial police chief has sought reports, while some police officials have been suspended for negligence. While these sorts of measures are usually announced after a major crime, law enforcers in Sindh, particularly in its teeming capital, need to come up with an out-of-the-box strategy to tackle the menace of bank heists and other violent crimes. Police officials often complain that banks have been negligent and have not

followed standard operating procedures. In many ways, this criticism is justified; some banks, to cut corners, are indeed lax about their security. For example, security guards are often ill-trained and not capable of resisting armed attackers. However, the fact remains that protecting banks and all other public and private institutions is, ultimately, the job of the police. There should be increased patrolling by police units to respond to any emergency situation. Moreover, in case of a robbery, the police must respond as soon as possible and not arrive after the culprits have escaped. In many past robberies, it has been reported that the culprits emptied the bank within a few minutes, while the police were slow to respond. While these measures can be used to tackle robberies as they happen, a more calibrated response is needed to bust the gangs involved in this racket. For this, specialised units, such as the Counter-Terrorism Department, can be tasked with tracking down and neutralising gangs involved in bank robberies.

Transgender rights

AFTER a long campaign by members of the community themselves and some activists, transgender rights in Pakistan have of late emerged from obscurity. Following on the heels of the issuance of the first third-gender passport in Pakistan in June, two bills were introduced on Tuesday by a JUI-F MNA, Naeema Kishwar Khan, aimed at codifying the rights of transgenders. One of the bills proposes amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code. It includes a loose definition of the term 'transgender' and stipulates sanctions for depriving such persons from inheriting property, unlawfully evicting them from any premises or denying them entry to educational institutions. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2017, includes measures such as official recognition of an individual's identity as they perceive it, and protection from harassment and discrimination.

Logically speaking, the Constitution should have been enough to guarantee transgenders the rights granted to each and every Pakistani. Not so in this cultural milieu, however, where gender determines much of how an individual's life plays out, and what society owes to him/her. In such an environment, transgenders are by definition at a disadvantage. Ironically, not so long ago, eunuchs or transsexuals — a term that falls under the transgender umbrella — enjoyed an elevated status in the royal courts of undivided India. Over time however, in a cruel inversion of

fate, they were reduced to a wretched existence, pandering to the fetishes of society that dehumanised and treated them with contempt. There have been a number of instances of horrific abuse against them, of rape, battery and other kinds of violence met with indifference or even ridicule by those in a position to help. The proposed legislation on the anvil is, therefore, sadly enough, much needed. But, as honour killings demonstrate, the law is insufficient in itself to eradicate social evils or change cultural behaviour. State and society both have to be proactive in bringing transgenders into the mainstream through opportunities in education and employment.

Why not call a snap election?

Once again, governance is taking a back seat to politics.

As Nawaz Sharif travels down the GT Road from Islamabad to Lahore, the PML-N, its leadership, the cabinet and the party's parliamentarians appear to have only one thing on their minds: pleasing the PML-N boss by doing whatever they can to maximise the public turnout along his route to his Raiwind home.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has cut a lonely figure in Islamabad, seemingly left alone to steer the ship of government at a critical moment in the country's history.

Given the controversial circumstances in which Mr Sharif has been judicially ousted from the prime ministership, it is inevitable that the PML-N will seek to demonstrate support for its leader and his continuing popularity with the party's electoral base. What is unnecessary, undesirable and faintly undemocratic is for the party in government at the centre and in Punjab to seemingly abandon all governance priorities to cheer on Mr Sharif.

The former prime minister is also wrong in how he has cast his journey to Lahore. Roadside gatherings, speeches in city centres and slow-moving convoys are not the people's court or the people's verdict. The only people's court is a general election. That option is within easy reach of Mr Sharif and the PML-N.

The party commands a majority in the National Assembly and has the right to seek the dissolution of parliament and an early election. At the moment, Mr Sharif appears to want to have his cake and eat it too. He wants the PML-N to complete the parliamentary term as the governing party while at the same time acting as an opposition party outside parliament and in the streets of Punjab. Perhaps that is to the party's political advantage, but what is good for the PML-N is not always good for the country.

Two governments, in Islamabad and in Lahore, that are effectively paralysed because Mr Sharif wants a big political show to mark his return to Lahore is sending the wrong message. Federal ministers, some with new portfolios, others new altogether, desperately trying to impress their political boss with theatrics and gaudy roadshows is sending the wrong message. A ruling party that is in politics-only mode is sending the wrong message.

An alternative, and more sensible, approach by the PML-N would have been to set up a political committee to manage Mr Sharif's return to Lahore and wall it off from the federal cabinet and provincial government. A federal cabinet diligently serving in Islamabad and a provincial government hard at work on the people's affairs in Lahore while Mr Sharif travelled through the PML-N's political heartland was administratively possible, politically manageable and democratically acceptable.

If the PML-N is happy to let politics eclipse the demands of governance, then it should go all the way and call a snap election. Enough of this political circus.

Jinnah's address

IT is the greatest leader's greatest speech.

Seventy years ago today, Mohammad Ali Jinnah took to the floor of the Constituent Assembly as its first elected president and delivered the iconic lines, "You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place or worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the state."

He added: "We are starting in the days where there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state."

Seventy years later, Mr Jinnah's founding vision and direction for the country have yet to be realised. Indeed, an argument can be made that this nation has drifted further than ever from the one that he had envisioned. The founding father had warned that the "first duty of a government is to maintain law and order, so that the life, property and religious beliefs of its subjects are fully protected by the state", but society itself has fallen prey to extremism and an infrastructure of hate.

Most worryingly, Mr Jinnah's vision of a secular, constitutional democratic state focused on the welfare and material good of its people has itself fallen victim to hate and distortion. The very word 'secular' is considered taboo by large sections of the polity. Democracy, too, is yet to be meaningfully accepted, with elected governments always vulnerable to undemocratic pressure and attack.

What would Mr Jinnah make of the sight of yet another ousted elected prime minister travelling down the fabled GT Road as political uncertainty and turmoil swirl across the political landscape again? Surely, as Mr Jinnah exhorted in his Aug 11 speech, some of the responsibility for the upheaval and drift from the country's founding ideals lies with the political class too.

Bribery and corruption, black-marketing, nepotism and jobbery — all ills that Mr Jinnah identified as fundamental impediments to a democratic, fair and just society fall in the domain of civilian control. The failure to address fundamental social

inequalities is nearly at par with the crimes against democracy the country has suffered. It may take several more decades before a Pakistan more in line with Mr Jinnah's aspirations can be established.

PCB's new chief

WITH the approval of a number of former players and ex-cricket administrators, Najam Sethi is all set to run the affairs of the Pakistan Cricket Board as its chairman. This is an improvement on the earlier arrangement in which he was, for all practical purposes, in charge of the game but without the cricket chief's tag. No stranger to controversy, he would assert he has won the post on the strength of the good work he has done to lift Pakistan out of the hole it had been thrown into. His credentials received a boost after the recent Pakistani victory in the Champions Trophy which, the expert view held, had been made possible after the successful experiment of the Pakistan Super League under Mr Sethi's command. The PSL, held in the Gulf, and then the Champions Trophy, were proof that grim circumstances did not necessarily rule out positive events. He brings to the job a certain kind of enterprise, even a brand of cheerfulness. He may have some issues — including a tendency to take up more than one job at a time and resort to the use of journalistic licence to overstate matters — but a large number of those who are familiar with PCB affairs are willing to allow him a shot at running the board without hindrance.

It's been a tough journey that has taken Mr Sethi to the coveted position. The path ahead is going to be much tougher to navigate. The new chairman is given to making promises and predictions. He must remember that even the first signs of a struggle to deliver on his promises could result in flak from fans whose expectations are always very high. Ensuring the return of international cricket to Pakistan and reform of the domestic structure are a huge task. In addition, there is much work to be done regarding the uplift of women's cricket in the country. This is also a challenge that the PCB under Mr Sethi should not neglect.

Time to talk democracy

A dialogue on democracy among the institutions of the state has been proposed before and will likely be proposed again. The idea is certainly a welcome one — democratic institutions engaging other institutions of state and branches of government — but much depends on how seriously the various centres of power approach such an exercise.

Chairman of the Senate Raza Rabbani has tried to use the constitutional platform he has been elected to for bringing attention to a twin democratic deficit in the country: the national political leadership's lack of interest in making parliament an effective and functional core of the democratic project, and the lack of dialogue among the branches of government and within the institutions of the executive.

Now, in the wake of Nawaz Sharif's ouster and with a strident debate in the Senate on the issue, Mr Rabbani has proposed inviting the military and judicial leaderships to parliament for a dialogue on democracy and possibly drawing up a new, inter-institutional consensus on the different branches of government and power centres remaining within their respective constitutional domains.

The Senate debate that led to Mr Rabbani's proposal, however, demonstrated the difficulty of the task. A core reason for the democratic deficit in the country is the willingness of politicians to seek the undemocratic assistance of other institutions of state and attack each other whenever they sense political vulnerability.

PPP senators excoriating the PML-N for repeated anti-democratic attacks against the PPP over the decades may be right, but they have conveniently sidestepped their own mistakes. The judicially manoeuvred removal of Shahbaz Sharif from the Punjab chief ministership nearly a decade ago was a significant mistake by the PPP. It brought Nawaz Sharif into the streets of Punjab and resulted in campaigns that undermined the PPP's position.

Meanwhile, the PML-N's belated realisation that Articles 62 and 63 of the Constitution ought to be amended reeks of political self-interest. And Mr Sharif's journey down GT Road appears to be more about his own political fate than any grand scheme to strengthen the democratic order.

Consider also the role of the various opposition parties at the moment. Having sensed the PML-N's political vulnerability in Punjab and seeking to counter any

advantage that may accrue to the PML-N because of Mr Sharif's GT Road rally, the opposition's focus is on the PML-N and Mr Sharif. Few appear concerned that the institutional balance of power has tilted further against parliament and fewer still appear to have time for Mr Rabbani's long-term considerations.

Indeed, there are voices in the media and the political class that appear to be exhorting the courts and the military to take further action against Mr Sharif and his party. The possibility of institutions potentially ganging up against democracy is as depressing as the realisation that some so-called democrats are hoping for that eventuality.

Climate catastrophe

ACCORDING to the annual State of the Climate report, 2016 set the grimmest records for climate change as a series of earth-shattering events in slow motion got under way. The year saw the highest air and sea surface temperatures since the industrial age began, as well as the highest concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Resultantly, we have seen an alarming acceleration in the melting of Arctic ice cover as glaciers the size of entire countries break off from the ice mass and float off into the waters. The highest-ever sea levels have been recorded as well as the most extensive drought in the world. In fact, 12pc of the earth's land mass saw a drought in any given month. These are realities that should be of concern to even the staunchest denier of climate change because the consequences will be supremely indifferent to humanity's political differences and bickering.

An anthropomorphic tragedy of apocalyptic proportions is now unfolding before our very eyes, but is struggling to find a place in the news flow and public awareness because it must compete with the more immediate realities of conflict and deprivation. But the storms that are coming our way will not struggle to make their presence known. Rising sea levels will lay waste to coastal cities around the world, while drought will eat up food supply and devastate agriculture. The growing numbers of climate refugees will overwhelm settled states where people might think they have escaped the effects of the unfolding disaster. Now more than ever, it is essential that leaders around the world recognise the coming disaster and join hands to do whatever it takes to reduce CO₂ emissions in a coordinated push, as

well as aggressively promote renewable energy technologies. Yet the world is moving in the opposite direction after eight years of a promising start towards an accord to limit emissions. In the US, the country that should provide the lead, the president has not only abandoned his predecessor's work towards the Paris Accord but is trying to backpedal on the advances in renewable energy too. Pakistan may feel helpless in this massive global drama, but there is much for the government here to take stock of as well. For one, coal-fired power plants must not be presented as the panacea to all our energy problems. Overall, the need for a more mature environmental policy is becoming increasingly felt and must be addressed.

Beacon of light

IN the wake of her death on Thursday, Dr Ruth Pfau has been widely mourned and lavishly laurelled. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has announced a state funeral for her, saying that, "The entire nation is indebted to [her]...." This is just as it ought to be, though there is irony in the fact that the pomp and splendour that accompany state funerals will be quite a contrast to the life of remarkable humility that Dr Pfau led. A German citizen who visited Karachi in 1960 on her way to India, she was so affected by the wretchedness of the condition of leprosy sufferers — the most marginalised section of society especially at a time when it was believed that leprosy was highly contagious — that she was unable to turn away from them. She set up the Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre for patients' care, where in the early 1980s nearly 20,000 leprosy patients were under treatment in the country. In 1996, the World Health Organisation declared that the disease had been controlled in Pakistan, and last year saw merely 531 patients under treatment.

In dwelling on Dr Pfau's trajectory, a parallel that comes to mind is Abdul Sattar Edhi, who passed away last year and was the first citizen in a quarter of a century to be given a state funeral. But there are several other such disciples to humanitarianism that should have been similarly honoured. Dutch nun Gertrude Lemmens, for example, started her mission in pre-Partition India and continued in Pakistan till her death in 2000. Her legacy is the Darul Sukun, which started out as a home for the mentally unstable but soon became a lifesaving shelter for all in need, from orphans to the aged. Even now, in different spheres, there are many

who have dedicated themselves to helping those for whom no comfort is forthcoming. Such figures ought to be a source of inspiration in a country where even a cursory look around shows that there are few beacons in the darkness.

GT Road journey: to what end?

LARGE crowds, fiery speeches and a professed desire to return to his home in Lahore aside, Nawaz Sharif's journey down GT Road has not revealed a sustainable or credible political strategy. Was Mr Sharif merely venting to a sympathetic audience, the PML-N base, or does he have a programme in mind that can help stabilise the democratic order in the country? Mr Sharif has drawn criticism for his increasingly blunt attacks against the superior judiciary, and more specifically the Supreme Court judgement that ousted him from the prime ministership last month, but there is substance to his allegations. Few independent and credible jurists regard the specific reason given by the court for Mr Sharif's disqualification as having set a good precedent that will survive the test of time. Moreover, as Mr Sharif railed at his various rallies along GT Road, the overall history of a judiciary that has ruled against elected governments but never against military dictatorships is a sign of questionable democratic priorities.

Yet, Mr Sharif's arguments are weakened by the reality that he and his children are to face accountability trials under the supervision of the Supreme Court. Is, then, the belated public commentary by Mr Sharif about the ills of the judiciary merely a way to put pressure ahead of trials that could lead to the imprisonment of Sharif family members? Curious also is Mr Sharif's reticence when it comes to addressing the role of the military in periods of democratic upheaval in the country. The ousted prime minister has largely limited himself to attacking his former nemesis, Pervez Musharraf, or making historical references to the role of the military in undermining democracy. In the present-day context, Mr Sharif has only made vague allusions and indirect references. That too raises a question: is Mr Sharif simply hoping to cut a deal with the military leadership rather than truly wanting to correct the civil-military imbalance?

The decision to nominate Mr Sharif's wife, Kulsum Nawaz, as the PML-N candidate in the NA-120 by-election is also a confusing choice. Ms Nawaz demonstrated formidable political skills during her tenure as PML-N president between 1999 and

2002, steering the party through existential danger and helping win Mr Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif their freedom. But is Ms Nawaz returning to politics simply to ensure that control of the PML-N will eventually pass from Mr Sharif to their daughter Maryam? If so, it would be a disservice to the very cause of democracy that the PML-N claims it is trying to serve by highlighting the institutional biases in the country. The fever pitch that the PML-N has taken politics to in recent days is unsustainable if indeed elections will only be held at the end of the current parliamentary term. Is Mr Sharif simply playing to the PML-N gallery with no real plan in mind?

Tax directory

THE latest tax directory released with fanfare shows that some progress has been made towards increasing the revenue base of the state, but that growth is still very small and much of the incremental revenue has come from squeezing those who are already in the net. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar has rightly boasted of a 72pc increase in tax collection by the FBR since his tenure began. But a closer look reveals a slightly less glittering reality. There are three levels that one needs to look at in order to understand the tax effort of the present government. The number of people who have a National Tax Number has gone up. But amongst those, the number who are filing returns is less than a quarter. The more meaningful task would be to determine how many of those who are filing their returns are actually declaring a tax liability. And, how many of those who are seen to be enjoying lavish lifestyles are still declaring paltry amounts of income and contributing negligible tax amounts.

Publication of the directory is a positive step, and there is little doubt that it has helped encourage a culture of compliance in the country. But the publication also reveals the extent of evasion that takes place as people every year see insignificant contributions being made by those who live in luxury. Less than half of the registered companies in the country are actually mentioned in the directory, meaning even for the corporate world, evasion is not difficult and the absence of compliance carries no major cost. This remains the case despite strenuous insistence by the government that it is penalising non-filers of tax returns, whereas in reality the steps it has taken to encourage the filing of returns have had the effect

of simply legalising noncompliance by attaching a meagre penalty to remaining outside the net. Treating documentation steps as revenue measures will necessarily produce this effect. The effort to get those who have NTN numbers to file returns must be stepped up, and getting people to declare their incomes in line with their visible expenditures needs to be ensured on top of this. A culture of compliance will only flourish when stigma, in addition to cost, is attached to being a nonfiler of income tax returns, or to declaring paltry amounts while living lavish lifestyles. Until then, the directory will spur little more than gossip.

First autism centre

INSTITUTIONAL support for children with special needs is one hallmark of a civilised society. Pakistan, in particular Sindh, took a further step in that direction with the country's first autism centre at its special education complex in Karachi. Awareness about autism remains low in our part of the world even though it is globally one of the fastest-growing developmental disabilities, which makes this a much-needed initiative. Studies in the West indicate that since the 1990s, there has been a 172pc increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism. According to studies conducted by a local NGO, there are around 350,000 autistic children in Pakistan — or one in 66, a figure that should be a cause for concern.

Autism spectrum disorder affects how people process information and relate to others. It encompasses a range of symptoms with each case manifesting some or more of them which determines where they lie on the spectrum. The condition can be difficult to diagnose: there is no blood test, brain scan or any other medical test to that end, and doctors must rely on observations of a child's behaviour to arrive at a diagnosis. By then, families of autistic children have often been through the wringer because they cannot understand his or her behaviour and have no idea how to deal with it. Even more tragically, the absence of early intervention makes autistic individuals more vulnerable to bullying, loneliness, and even to dropping out of school. That prevents them from meeting their full potential, particularly unfortunate because many among those with high-functioning autism have above average intelligence. In Pakistani society, the stigma associated with mental disorders in general exacerbates these difficulties. Given the scale of the problem, medical curriculums should incorporate a thorough understanding of autism, and

disability laws must be amended to include the condition. Budget allocation for resources devoted to those with developmental disorders such as autism must be enhanced. The recently opened institute should be but one among many.

The first 70 years & the journey ahead

SEVENTY years old today, Pakistan is a country that has achieved much. Yet, there is an undeniable need for introspection and forward thinking. With Balochistan bleeding once again, this time from a suicide bomber targeting military personnel in Quetta, the country will celebrate another Independence Day with the sombre realisation that the long fight against militancy is nowhere close to an end. The geographically largest, least populated, most heavily militarised province in the country, Balochistan is also a symbol of the complexity of the militant threat to Pakistan and the difficulty in combating it. The existing strategy to fight militancy and secure Balochistan from a range of internal and external security threats has not worked. Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa may be right that the Quetta attack was an attempt to mar a celebratory mood in the country, but that does not explain why militants continue to operate seemingly with impunity in Balochistan. Indeed, from the last years of retired Gen Pervez Musharraf, all army chiefs have gone to Balochistan and vowed to establish peace in the province. None has succeeded.

Undeniably, the problems of today are rooted in the mistakes of the past. The rise of extremism and the spread of militancy are linked to the many wrong choices the country has made in its first seven decades of existence. Externally, a national security and foreign policy agenda that is alarmist and mired in self-serving notions of a Pakistan surrounded by enemies has helped nurture policies that have wrought great harm and limited the country's prospects of economic growth. Internally, the unwillingness to recognise that a secular, constitutional, democratic path is the only route to social stability and cohesion has allowed virulent and hateful ideologies to flourish. It is a measure of the denial in which policymakers have cloaked themselves in that to even suggest a connection between Pakistan's own choices and its struggles today is considered unpatriotic and draws allegations of anti-Pakistan agendas. Without an honest diagnosis of the problems that continue to plague Pakistan's security and foreign policies, a true turnaround in the fortunes of the country is unlikely.

Institutionally, too, there is an imbalanced and weak landscape. The ongoing tussle between Nawaz Sharif's PML-N and state institutions, including the superior judiciary and the military leadership, is a direct result of institutions interfering in each other's domains. Mr Sharif himself is acting in a self-serving manner with the belated realisation that the Constitution needs to be further cleansed. There is great irony in that claim; the PML-N has not once but twice amended the Constitution during the current parliament to create fundamentally anti-democratic military courts. The Constitution can and should be scrubbed clean of all anti-democratic distortions, but no amount of legislative tinkering will matter if the politicians do not embrace the ethos of democracy. Mr Sharif has now awakened to alleged miscarriages of justice, but where was the concern for reform of the justice system in the past four years? Indeed, a year of evasive responses and shifting explanations in the Panama Papers matter by the Sharif family hardly suggest that public accountability and a better quality of justice were at the heart of his political endeavours.

Certainly, the picture is not all bleak. Despite significant historical setbacks and profound ongoing challenges, there have been some successes. The polity has drifted towards polarisation, but there is undoubtedly more political participation and a greater interest in debating issues of public importance than there has been in a generation. Women's rights have progressed and more progressive legislation than ever has been passed by the various assemblies. CPEC is a generational opportunity, and macroeconomic stability though built on shaky foundations, has created the space for significant reforms. A vibrant middle class can act as an engine of economic growth via the services sector and help reverse the tide of extremism. Perhaps most importantly, Pakistan has established itself as an irreversible reality and can now turn to the task of unlocking and increasing its potential. Institutions may be weak, but the demand for change is strong. The population may be large, but it can be a springboard to economic and social progress. The country may be half the size it was in 1947, but from reforms in Gilgit-Baltistan to Fata, the path now being chosen is one of greater integration. More than 70 years ago, Pakistan was nearly an impossible dream. It became possible because of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. It is time the nation fulfilled Mr Jinnah's dream of a more inclusive, more progressive, more peaceful and more successful Pakistan.

The search for economic direction

SEVENTY years into its life, Pakistan's economy has seen many changes. Yet, it still remains without direction. When it was born, the country had no productive base to speak of; it had a diminutive agricultural sector, practically no industry, and a shipping fleet so small that the founder of the new nation, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, had to use his personal contacts in the Parsi community in Karachi to arrange for vessels in some cases. Power generation was less than a megawatt, while the water infrastructure, other than a few canals and barrages, was largely nonexistent. The fact that today we have one of the world's largest cotton crops and textile sectors, generate more than 90bn units of electricity every year, and have big industrial hubs in sectors ranging from automobile and cement to fertiliser to oil and gas are a testament to a long journey that often goes unappreciated — considering the flood of criticism that we unleash on what are our own accomplishments. With no inheritance to build on, today Pakistan has a functioning fiscal apparatus, industrial base, financial system and water and energy supply chain, all of which were built practically from scratch. This is no mean feat, and it is worth taking stock of the distance travelled over the years.

But so much remains to be done that once we have finished a review of our journey thus far, we must marvel at how fast the challenges have multiplied, and the ways in which history has repeated itself. It was a superpower's war that helped us build the very first foreign exchange reserves with which Pakistan began its first Five-Year Plan in the early 1950s. And throughout our existence, our role in superpower conflicts has been critical to the building of the vital stocks of foreign exchange with which to carry out our external trade. Pakistan also began its career as an economy deeply integrated with its neighbours, particularly India. But in 1965, those links with India were severed and have not been restored to this day, making our region one of the least integrated in the world. We have seen boom years followed by cycles of bust, yet have refused to learn the single-most vital lesson that each repetition of the cycle carries for us: mobilise the resources to pay for our own growth, or risk seeing the country fall into a state of dependence that affords only fleeting glimpses of prosperity. To this day, we lurch from boom to bust as if stuck in a time warp.

Thus far, Pakistan has accomplished much in its journey, but each new challenge has opened up a dozen more challenges, making a future direction critical for the country. With industrialisation, for instance, came the heightened demand for energy. For more energy more exports were required, for exports more productivity, and for productivity education was needed. Only a trajectory that puts the country on a sustainable growth path, one whose costs can be met with the resources that growth itself generates, can help us break out of this 70-year-long cycle of boom and bust. Unfortunately, seven decades on, that direction continues to elude us.

Personal rivalry weakens democracy

POLITICS in Pakistan has never been for the faint-hearted. But as Nawaz Sharif turns to his base for political validation and Imran Khan tries to capitalise on the judicial ouster of Mr Sharif, there is an increasingly evident personal animosity between the two men that bodes ill for democratic stability. Both leaders need to urgently reassess the rhetoric they are using and help steer the political process back towards the path of stability and continuity. Mr Sharif appears to be directing his anger at his latest dismissal from office in an unfortunate direction. While the ousted prime minister has talked of a social programme and tweaks to the Constitution, much of it has the sound of half-formed, off-the-cuff ideas. But Mr Sharif's anger at the judiciary and the PML-N's political opponents, Mr Khan in particular, has been more caustic, direct and unsettling. Emotionalism is not a substitute for political strategy and can be dangerous when it displaces governance priorities.

Mr Khan, of course, has made a career of targeting so-called status quo politics and his aggressive rhetoric has worked to the PTI's advantage, transforming the party from an also-ran to the second-largest vote-getter in the country. To the extent that Mr Khan's strategy has helped carry accountability of public officials to the centre of the national political discourse, his success is also that of the country. There is no doubt that Pakistan needs a programme of public accountability that is across the board, fair and impartial. Where Mr Khan may be committing a disservice to democracy, however, is in his political fixation with Mr Sharif. After Mr Sharif's disqualification by the Supreme Court, Mr Khan spoke sensibly in distancing himself from the perception of a personal war against Mr Sharif. It's not

personal, it's about the country, Mr Khan effectively said of his opposition to Mr Sharif. But as it has become clear that Mr Sharif is not willing to accept a lower political profile, Mr Khan has increased the intensity of his attacks against his long-term political rival.

The memory of the 1990s, when the Sharifs and the Bhuttos attacked each other politically in very personal and aggressive terms, and what that eventually led to — another military dictatorship — ought to give both Mr Sharif and Mr Khan pause today. The PML-N boss has spoken of his desire for constitutional improvement; the PTI boss has reiterated his demand for sweeping accountability — the right forum to merge those two, not dissimilar platforms is parliament. The PML-N has the parliamentary numbers and the PTI the public support to agree on a democracy-improving raft of structural changes. And while that may be an unlikely outcome, both sides should dwell on how the anti-democrats are the likeliest beneficiaries of conflict among democrats. Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan should recognise that they can only remain political contenders if the democratic system continues.

The Kashmir question

Each year when Pakistan and India celebrate their independence, anxiety takes over the minds of many. It relates to the escalation of conflict in Kashmir that continues to be occupied by India 70 years after the British left the subcontinent.

There has been no let up; reports from the valley capture the pain and frustration of a people who have been fighting the agents of oppression. The resolve to be free of Indian tyranny has not diminished; if anything, apprehensions are all the more pronounced this time because of heightened tensions in IJK since New Delhi upped the ante last year with the killing of Burhan Wani.

Anger and defiance are at their height — a result of the killing and humiliation of ordinary Kashmiris, the use of civilians as human shields and of tactics such as firing pellet guns (that have blinded hundreds) to quell the protests. Indeed, some of the images of the uprising are iconic — from stone-throwing schoolgirls to crowds carrying the bodies of victims of Indian aggression draped in Pakistani flags.

Many prominent Indians, too, have criticised the rights violations in the held territory, in contrast to the general reluctance in India to debate the issue.

It is in India's interest to take a step back to assess the possible consequences of its actions — an increase in the intensity of Kashmiri anger, enhanced attacks by militants against Indian targets and international condemnation. It must listen to Kashmiri grievances.

At another level, the resumption of talks on Kashmir between India and Pakistan — and, with the inclusion of the Kashmiri political leadership — seems to be a distant dream.

It is true that India has many complaints against Pakistan, including the agonisingly slow process of bringing to justice those who allegedly committed the Mumbai atrocity. But how long should Kashmiris be made to suffer for all that is not right in Pakistan-India ties?

This is about an occupied land. The problem has to be resolved with active participation of the people under occupation. Their desires have to be respected and they must be allowed to express them directly.

Kashmir cannot be looked at through the lens of a territorial dispute alone; there has been too much bloodletting. Seventy years is a long time for anyone to realise that a people as determined as Kashmiris cannot forever be denied their rights.

Karachi van tragedy

THE tragedy that took place in Karachi on Sunday is an awful reminder that Pakistan's roads need cleaning up, that the law is not enforced and that society lacks awareness of even basic safety standards. Six people were burned to death when the van in which they were travelling suddenly exploded in flames. Two families had rented the vehicle for a trip to Hawkesbay beach. Some 11 persons were seated in the van and they stopped near the zoo to pick up more people. Hearing an odd noise from the engine, the driver stopped. According to the police, the battery had caught fire while there was also a gas leak from the CNG tank; even as some of the occupants poured water on the fire, the van exploded into a fireball. The six persons still in the vehicle were unable to open the door — typically this sort of vehicle has a sliding door — and were killed. As per the latest reports, a charge of manslaughter has been registered against the driver and the van's owner. Both of them are in custody. Initial investigations show that the driver was under the influence of narcotics.

Regarding the culpability of these persons, the law will take its own course. However, the fact remains that while there are regulations on the books about vehicle safety and maintenance standards, especially those that are used for public transport, they are rarely, if ever, enforced. This is obvious from a cursory glance at the traffic on any of the country's roads. Patently unfit vehicles of all sorts are in use, with the traffic police helpless in enforcing the law amidst the chaos that reigns supreme. Even so, the onus cannot be placed solely on the authorities; it is obvious that citizens themselves, including owners, operators and passengers of vehicles, remain unconcerned about their own and others' safety. In terms of traffic safety, Pakistan is in a double bind, and it is difficult to see light at the end of the tunnel.

The way of democracy

THE presidency was rightly returned to the status of a constitutionally ceremonial office by the 18th Amendment, but under President Mamnoon Hussain the office has drifted towards something undesirable: irrelevancy. As a symbol of the federation, the president, acting on the advice of the political government, can say and do things that help promote harmony and better integration among the constituent units of the country. Unhappily, given Mr Hussain's apparent political temperament and the desire of his political patron, Nawaz Sharif, to have a silent figurehead, the president has virtually disappeared from the national discourse. The annual speech by the president to mark the beginning of the parliamentary year, which used to be a highly anticipated, somewhat charged event, has under Mr Hussain become unremarkable and uninteresting. But on Aug 14, a different kind of speech was delivered by Mr Hussain.

Possibly at the behest of Mr Sharif or perhaps because Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's office did not issue any guidelines, Mr Hussain appeared relatively free to speak his mind. It was not as forthright a speech as could have been hoped for, but the president has raised an important point: when the people of the country have repeatedly and emphatically expressed a desire for a parliamentary form of democracy — as evidenced by the healthy and increasing participation in parliamentary elections — then why does it appear that every few years a debate is reopened about a so-called right kind of democratic system for Pakistan? Undoubtedly, the political class in the country is flawed and can be myopic and self-serving. But the political system is something bigger than and separate to the politicians who seek the public's vote. Surely, to arrive at a better quality of candidate and more substantive system, continuity of the basic democratic framework is necessary. There is hardly likely to be a better quality of public servant if every decade or so an argument erupts again, mostly at the urging of anti-democratic forces in the country, about what system of democracy the country needs.

Indeed, the parliamentary system of democracy serves well the important and essential diversity in the country. Parliament, divided into two houses to prevent majoritarianism from taking root and requiring diverse political forces to cooperate, helps produce a democratic consensus that can survive the test of time. The presidential system or military dictatorship achieves the opposite because it is

rooted in an authoritarianism about what is good for the people and the state. The president could have gone further in his assessment of the democratic deficit in the country. The demand for a better quality of democracy while frequently tinkering with the foundations of democracy is itself anti-democratic. If there are undemocratic forces at work today, the political class and the custodians of democracy should have the courage to publicly identify them.

Sri Lanka's support

THE Sri Lankan Cricket Board has paved the way for a resumption of international cricket in Pakistan by agreeing to a visit by the Sri Lankan team to this country where it would play at least one T20 in Lahore next month. Deprived of international cricket at home since the last eight years, fans view this development as a sign of hope that Pakistan will once again start hosting foreign teams. Sri Lankan cricket chief Thilanga Sumathipala's announcement of the islanders' short tour to Pakistan carried a message for the entire cricketing world. He spoke of improved security and playing conditions in Pakistan — approved by the SLC's professional assessment team. He also asked for support from Asian cricketing nations for Pakistan. However, there is some irony in the fact that it was the Sri Lankan team back in 2009 that was the unfortunate target of a terror attack in Lahore. It was this incident which effectively put a halt to international cricket activity in the country. The Sri Lanka tour, though, will still depend largely on how a planned series between Pakistan and a World XI side pans out early next month.

A number of factors have contributed to the recent change of heart from the cricket powers that be to seriously consider bringing Pakistan back into the fold as the host of international matches. The staging of the Pakistan Super League final in Lahore in March, featuring as many as nine foreign players, was the first step in this direction. Soon afterwards, the International Cricket Council, showing support for Pakistan playing the host, initiated talks of a World XI travelling to Lahore. Pakistan's magnificent show at the Champions Trophy in England in June was another contributing factor. As Sarfraz Ahmed's men astounded the world by lifting the coveted trophy after beating the leading sides including South Africa, England and India, critics and experts were convinced that abundant talent still existed in Pakistan and that it was capable of making remarkable progress despite the lull in international activity there. Credit must also be given to the newly elected PCB

chairman Najam Sethi who fought his case in the recent Asian Cricket Council meeting to first get the Under-19 Asia Cup shifted out of India to Malaysia, and later to convince the SLC top brass to make a firm commitment to the T20 fixture in Pakistan.

Economic deficits

NOW that the dust is beginning to settle from the political situation created by the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, and work resumes after Independence Day celebrations, it is time to once again focus on the gaping deficits that plague the economy. It has become somewhat routine for people to remain riveted to a political crisis in Islamabad while the country slides towards a virtual emergency. We saw it happen in the closing months of the Musharraf regime, as well as the last few months of the PPP government. That history is now in danger of repeating itself as once more the same economic deficits threaten to choke the nascent growth rates achieved after a decade-long slump, as well as the power system, with the circular debt continuing its upward trajectory.

There are three directions from where a potential economic crisis could arrive. The circular debt has the potential to shut down the power system, regardless of the new generation capacity added to the system in previous years. The external sector deficit can administer a shock to the economy if the situation necessitates a sudden devaluation of the exchange rate, followed by a hurried approach to the IMF which will administer its standard stabilisation policy. And the fiscal situation can spiral out of control if political compulsions are allowed to be in the driving seat, severely constraining the room to manage the power system, besides fuelling inflation and hiking up levels of public debt. In transitions past, a mixture of these three elements worked together to send the economy into the emergency room even as the capital remained in thrall to a political drama. It is worth bearing in mind that regardless of who is running the country, the problems remain the same and each crisis looks increasingly like the previous one. At some point, sanity needs to prevail, at least just enough to allow crucial decision-making to continue without being shackled to the political noise.

The decline in labour export

GIVEN the realities unfolding in the Middle East, it should not be surprising that the number of workers going from Pakistan to that region has dropped. What is surprising, however, is how large the drop is according to the latest data reported for the period January to June 2017. During that time, Pakistan sent just over 77,000 workers to Saudi Arabia, whereas the figure for the preceding year was more than 462,000. This is a staggering fall, indeed, and must be examined more closely to determine what is behind it. Saudi Arabia is the single largest employer of Pakistani labour in the Middle East, and the largest country of origin for remittances from that region too. Therefore, such massive changes in a core aspect of our economic relationship should be taken note of.

One could argue that this drop is due to large-scale cuts in the kingdom's budget, as oil prices remain low. It could also be the result of a conscious policy choice in the kingdom to recruit labour from countries other than Pakistan, something that can only be known after similar data from other states such as India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines becomes available. These two scenarios pose very different challenges for Pakistan. If the kingdom is simply cutting back on its labour recruitment from abroad, then remittances in Pakistan are surely under a growing cloud, since other oil producers are likely to follow suit, and lower Middle Eastern employment will further depress foreign inflows. This is the first year in over a decade that remittances actually went down, and if the declines are to pick up speed in the months to come, this would have clear implications for our external sector and debt sustainability.

The second possibility — a deliberate effort to recruit fewer people from Pakistan — is even more worrying. Already we saw a crisis-like situation late last year when a large number of unpaid Pakistani workers were agitating in the kingdom for back wages, and were ultimately flown home. By the close of 2016, reports emerged that more than 39,000 workers had been sent home in four months. The government of Pakistan was quite powerless to help its citizens in the kingdom, and while the then prime minister went to Saudi Arabia for talks regarding the Saudi-led military alliance, he was unable to even raise the issue of the workers and their back pay. Now data has emerged suggesting that that episode was followed by a massive slump in new recruitment. It is clear that the situation is continuing to develop, and will keep growing in the wrong direction, unless more

light is shed on what lies behind this startling decline. Far too much revolves around the relationship between Pakistani labour and Middle Eastern capital for the matter to be left unaddressed.

Pervasive gun culture

IT is telling that several members of the federal cabinet have opposed Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's proposal that a ban be placed on the issuance of licences for prohibited and automatic weapons. The objections came primarily from cabinet members who hail either from Balochistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; both have a provincial-tribal culture of valuing guns. (Still, it must be said that the majority of those who spoke on the issue were in favour of the ban). This country is awash with weapons that are easily obtainable and that range from small firearms to automatic weapons to even those that are prohibited. There are many arguments to be made for this being one of the reasons contributing to the high crime levels in the country, especially in cities like Karachi. But there is another factor that must be considered as well: over the years, a disturbing and unseemly gun culture has built up, particularly in political and feudal circles, where the number of guards accompanying a VIP and the size of the weapons these men wield — often right in the citizen's face — is taken as a measure of their importance. Apart from this being a dangerous trend, it is also reminiscent of the crassest banana-republic traditions — something that one wishes would have been beneath the dignity of our political and other elites to emulate.

Pakistan needs to drastically reduce the number of weapons on its streets, and the example ought to be set by the elites. The prime minister's initiative deserves being taken forward. Regarding the suspension of licences, on Tuesday, he constituted a committee to further deliberate on the matter so that a consensus could be reached. It can only be hoped that such a consensus is forward-looking and aims to counter the gun culture, and not to perpetuate it. While it must be acknowledged that there is some truth to the objections of cabinet members that rampant crime and terrorism render the citizenry insecure, and that is why some individuals want to carry arms, the underlying goal must not be forgotten. The larger task is to nurture conditions that lead to a significant drop in crime and acts of terrorism. There have been earlier initiatives to clamp down on the gun culture, such as

people being asked to turn in their weapons to the police. If pursued, this, too, could carry dividends.

Yemen cholera outbreak

IT is, by all means, a grim figure. According to the World Health Organisation, the number of cholera cases in war-torn Yemen has crossed half a million. Some 2,000 people have died due to the highly contagious waterborne disease since an outbreak was reported in April. This is only one of the many unfortunate statistics coming out of Yemen, a country that has been ripped apart by a war now in its third year. The Yemeni people — amongst the poorest in the Arab world — have to face bombings as well as starvation as the infrastructure in their country lies in a state of shambles. While a power struggle had long been brewing between the Houthi rebels — who captured the capital Sana'a in late 2014 — and their local opponents, the situation was exacerbated when Saudi Arabia intervened in the Yemeni conflict in March 2015. Since then, Yemen's condition has gone from bad to worse, with none of the belligerents willing to budge. The Yemeni people have had to bear the brunt of these power struggles, and the cholera epidemic is only the latest of their multiple miseries. As the WHO chief observed, "thousands of people are sick, but there are not enough hospitals, not enough medicines, not enough clean water. ..."

Ideally, all sides involved in the Yemeni conflict should agree to put down their guns and negotiate a political solution for the sake of the country's beleaguered population. Some Arab media have reported that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman — the power behind the throne and architect of the Yemen war — wants to exit from the quagmire. We hope such reports are true; if this is indeed the case, back-channel efforts to talk to the Houthis should be initiated so that the war can be wound down and a power-sharing agreement reached. Should the conflict grind on, the human catastrophe that is painfully unfolding in Yemen will only get worse and a whole generation of Yemenis will be confronted with more death and destruction.

Unjustified US action against Hizb

Six weeks after it designated Syed Salahuddin, a Pakistan-based but IJK-born and raised Kashmiri leader, as a global terrorist, the US has taken another disturbing step to politically and diplomatically align itself with India.

In a move seemingly designed to coincide with India's Independence Day, the US State Department declared the Hizbul Mujahideen a Foreign Terrorist Organisation and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.

The designations, according to the State Department, "seek to deny HM [Hizbul Mujahideen] the resources it needs to carry out terrorist attacks. Among other consequences, all of HM's property and interests in property subject to US jurisdiction are blocked, and US persons are generally prohibited from engaging in any transactions with the group".

Given that the Hizb is a separatist organisation focused on India-held Kashmir, it is not clear how disruptive the US actions will be in practice.

So why has the US taken this extravagant new step? A straightforward explanation has been offered in the Indian media itself. As argued in an opinion piece in The Indian Express, "For New Delhi, the US designation is strategic and political. While Pakistan has been pushing hard to project 'Indian atrocities' in the Kashmir Valley, the latest designation of the Hizbul, and the earlier US declaration of Syed Salahuddin as a global terrorist (during Modi's visit to the US) makes a political point at global level. It shows where the White House stands on the ongoing unrest in J&K; clearly, the Trump administration stands with New Delhi".

In other words, the US is trying to help India defeat Pakistan's rightful stance on the Kashmir dispute and divert the eyes of the world from the atrocities being committed by the Indian security forces against the Kashmiris. That is wrong, disturbing and dangerous. Once again, an inexperienced Trump administration appears to be choosing a path abroad that is destabilising and rooted in ignorance.

The myopia of the new US approach on IJK poses a significant diplomatic challenge for Pakistan. The country's year-long efforts to win sympathy for the plight of the people of IJK, who continue to bravely protest in the face of violent

repression by India, and emphasise the need for dialogue on the Kashmir dispute have not gained much support internationally.

The growing economic importance of India for many countries, and for the US India's rivalry with China have helped Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pursue a ruthless strategy in IHK. But the cause of the people of Kashmir is just and Pakistan's stance on the dispute principled.

An urgent diplomatic outreach to the US must be attempted. The Trump administration needs to understand Pakistan's diplomatic red lines and how protecting and promoting the cause of the people of Kashmir is one of them.

Accountability tussle

IN Pakistan, accountability is a loaded term, often translating into the hounding of political opponents. But while accountability bodies in the country are in dire need of reform to make them strong and truly independent, it makes little sense to do away with them altogether. Unfortunately, the PPP-led Sindh government passed a controversial new law recently that has eliminated the National Accountability Bureau's jurisdiction over provincial bodies and officials. The PPP's move has put it on a collision course with the opposition, the centre and now the courts. On Wednesday, while hearing petitions against the repeal of the National Accountability Ordinance, the Sindh High Court ordered NAB to continue its investigations in the province "till further orders". Opposition parties in the Sindh Assembly, including the MQM-P, PML-F and PTI, as well as members of civil society, had gone to court against the province's new accountability law. The opposition accuses the PPP of bulldozing the law through the provincial legislature to protect those within its ranks facing corruption allegations; the PPP disagrees, saying the National Accountability Ordinance 1999 Sindh Repeal Bill, 2017, is supposed to improve the accountability process in the province.

Indeed, over the decades, the accountability process across Pakistan has been flawed, with little transparency and few long-lasting results. While political parties should be aiming to plug the holes and reform the structure of accountability to truly root out corruption, this has not been the case. The PPP's record of

governance, even if 'well-meaning', has been poor, especially in Sindh, and a number of the party's leading lights face charges of corruption. Of course, other mainstream parties have a track record that is not very different. Yet the effort to eliminate NAB's jurisdiction in Sindh and replace it with a body subservient to the provincial government sends the wrong message. Also, the claims of some PPP leaders that the PTI-led government in KP has set up an accountability commission are a tad misleading; while such a commission has indeed been formed, NAB still has the power to investigate provincial bodies and individuals in KP. Instead of eliminating NAB from Sindh and strengthening assertions that it seeks to rescue its party men from the federal body's clutches, the PPP should rethink its decision and work to reform the accountability structure in a meaningful fashion.

Paying for failure

ONE more time a proposal is on the cards that would take the cost of state failure in particular areas and pass it on to the public. This is becoming standard in the power sector, where the practice is euphemistically called 'full cost recovery', and now it is being applied to the petroleum sector. For years, it has been a requirement for all oil-marketing companies to maintain stocks of up to 21 days so that the country could have a strategic reserve as well as synaptic protections in its petroleum supply chain to prevent mishaps like the 2015 petrol crisis. But the cost of maintaining such a reserve, which is standard practice in most countries, is very high and oil-marketing companies have been reluctant to invest their money in this priority, even though it is part of their licence obligation and the government has in the past opened up a revenue stream for the sector through the 'deemed duty'.

But now that the former petroleum minister has become prime minister, we hear that the margins of oil-marketing companies could be revised upward, and a surcharge imposed on consumers to help generate the funds to build this reserve. This proposal must be resisted by all parliamentary parties as well as the media. It is not the consumer's obligation to pay for this reserve, it is the marketing companies and refineries that have to share this cost. For years, the government tried to coax the marketing companies and refineries into complying, but failed. The matter even went to court, resulting in the famous Bhagwandas Commission report, which detailed the profits made by licensees while refusing to pay for the

cost of the reserve. This urge, which seems to have become a reflex for the PML-N rulers, to pass on all costs of its failure to consumers must be defeated so that the government realises once and for all that there is no path forward except that of reform and strong governance.

Questionable CCI composition

THE reconstitution of the Council of Common Interests may be a prime ministerial prerogative, but the sudden change in the membership of the CCI and the decision to issue the notification from the Prime Minister's Office instead of the presidency are unusual and troubling. The eight-member council, headed by the prime minister and including the chief ministers of the four provinces, is constitutionally mandated to "formulate and regulate policies in relation to matters in Part II of the Federal Legislative List". The CCI list of subjects is wide and significant, and includes: the census; electricity; mineral, oil and natural gas; electricity; major ports; federal regulatory authorities; supervision and management of public debt; national planning and national economic coordination. Suffice it to say the CCI was largely ignored during former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's tenure and that the arrival of Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi had created an expectation that a more efficient and inclusive style of management would be introduced.

Yet, the change in the composition of the CCI suggests that the PML-N is more interested in politics and centralising power than genuinely addressing inter-provincial matters ahead of the next general election. By eliminating two federal ministers on the CCI from KP and Balochistan and replacing them with ministers from Punjab, the CCI now has four members from Punjab and six belonging to the PML-N. To be sure, replacing the federal ministers for overseas Pakistanis and religious affairs with the federal ministers for industries and finance may be a sensible change from the perspective of the CCI's responsibilities. But Mr Abbasi ought to have paid attention to the resultant arithmetic — four members from Punjab in the CCI at a time when a Punjab-dominated party is in power at the centre will send an unsettling message to the numerically smaller provinces.

The potential for inter-provincial discord is also significant because of the major issues that the CCI is set to address — approval of the national census results; a national water policy; allocation of gas to domestic consumers. With a general

election scheduled for next year, major CCI decisions along provincial or politically partisan lines could cause fresh strains among the constituent units of the federation. An ongoing dispute between the three numerically smaller provinces, Sindh, KP and Balochistan on one side and Punjab and the PML-N federal government on the other, over CCI approval of LNG imports, which the PML-N is relying on heavily to address the energy crisis in the country, is an example of the problems that partisan decision-making can create. If Prime Minister Abbasi and the PML-N do not have ulterior motives in revamping the CCI, there was no need to do so in an abrupt, surreptitious manner. The CCI does need to be made more active and effective, but Mr Abbasi's approach may not be the right way ahead.

Attacks in Spain

EUROPE is, yet again, the theatre of a terrorist attack, with Spain as the target this time around. The country, until now, had appeared comparatively safe from such incidents, having last experienced a terrorist attack in 2004, when near simultaneous explosions on board four commuter trains heading towards Madrid killed around 190 people and injured over 2,000. Not any longer. On Thursday, a white van careened into crowds strolling along Las Ramblas, Barcelona's pedestrian street that is popular with locals and tourists alike. At least 13 were killed and more than 100 injured. Then, a few hours later, a car carrying multiple attackers rammed into people in Cambrils, a city 120km from Barcelona, which resulted in injuries to six. Police shot the assailants dead before they could cause more carnage. The militant Islamic State group has claimed that the first attack, in connection with which a number of arrests have been made, was carried out by its 'soldiers'.

The wave of terrorist attacks in Europe, which began in mid-2014 with a shooting inside the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium, illustrates how events in one part of an interconnected world have an impact elsewhere. The situation in the Middle East, where the civil war in Syria and Iraq provided the crucible for IS to evolve, has drawn Europe inexorably into its ambit. For one, France which is in the forefront of the war against IS has been repeatedly targeted by terrorists linked to that outfit. Secondly, hundreds of citizens from various European countries also joined the group. There was thus always the risk that these individuals would turn

on their own countries, a fear realised in its entirety after the terrorist organisation began to crumble under the weight of coalition-backed military assaults and the fighters began returning home. In fact, IS's leadership urged its 'soldiers' to carry out attacks in their own countries using low-tech means including knives, vehicles, etc in the absence of access to explosives or firearms. Vehicle attacks such as the recent ones in Spain have thus spiked of late, and they are equally terrifying because they are so difficult to pre-empt. Thus even in the twilight of its territorial existence, IS continues to wreak a trail of destruction across Europe, not to mention many other regions of the world. Nothing so devastatingly illustrates that the fight against extremist ideologies cannot be won by military force alone.

Concrete jungle

ONCE known as the city of gardens and famous for the abundance of its trees, Lahore now stands sadly diminished. Over the years, the development plans drawn up by its administrators have caused — the planners might say 'necessitated' — lush public lawns to be vanquished, green belts to be turned into rivers of poured concrete, and hundreds of trees to be cut down. Some years ago, the tree-felling that occurred as Canal Road was widened remained in the headlines for months as environmental activists protested justifiably. Now, the matter is in the news again as citizens, led by the Lahore Bachao Tehreek, rail against the chopping down of dozens of mature trees in the name of widening a service road in the central — and once incredibly beautiful — area of Gulberg, facing Jail Road. This, as Tehreek activist Imrana Tiwana has pointed out, irreversibly changes the character of the city, quite aside from the significant environmental consequences. The Traffic Engineering and Planning Agency, on its part, insists that given that the roads surrounding this strip have already been widened (that exercise also involved the culling of trees), the action currently being taken was inevitable if the goal was to prevent future traffic snarls. A flashpoint that seems to be in the making is an upcoming Lahore Development Authority project that comprises one 26-storey and two 19-storey towers in the area.

City administrators once announced their attention to 'turn Lahore into a Dubai', and many years ago, mature indigenous trees along Main Boulevard and elsewhere were chopped down to be replaced with desert palms. This anecdote adequately encapsulates the city authorities' attitude towards 'development'. While

it is true that cities everywhere expand and new ways have to be found to manage traffic, across the world there are examples where this has been achieved in an eco-friendly fashion mindful of aesthetics and heritage. Lahore will not stop growing; do city managers believe that the concrete and tarmacadam can endlessly be laid down?

Rudderless PML-N

IT is a near perfect storm for the PML-N. Its leader, Nawaz Sharif, has been ousted from the prime minister's office and barred from officially leading the party. There is an election scheduled for next year and a fierce electoral fight with the PTI is on the cards. Meanwhile, Mr Sharif's determination to keep control of the party while questioning the role of state institutions in undermining democracy in the country has likely created an acute dilemma for a number of party leaders: stay loyal to Mr Sharif, whose political future is uncertain, and risk an uncertain political future for themselves, or seek other political options, preferably a less strained relationship with the military-led establishment? The war of words that has broken out between former PML-N cabinet colleagues Pervaiz Rashid and Nisar Ali Khan is a remarkable indication of the tensions inside the PML-N.

The problem for the PML-N is that it has a leader who has clashed frequently with institutions, but neither its core supporter nor party member has traditionally sought confrontation. Indeed, in Mr Sharif's increasingly unvarnished criticism of the judiciary and implicit denunciations of the military establishment's historical political role in the country, there are two reactions discernible within the PML-N: apprehension and excitement. The excitement would suggest the possibility of a seemingly impossible evolution of a party created by the establishment into a genuine force for democratic good. The apprehension would suggest that a patronage-based PML-N political network is focused on self-preservation and concerned about the possibility of being shut out from the political system because of Mr Sharif's intransigence. At one level, it is healthy that there is a debate of any kind taking place within a political party. Virtually all political parties are run in dictatorial fashion by their leaders and debate is often explicitly discouraged. At another level, the debate within the PML-N reflects the deep distortions in the political and democratic systems of the country.

What is obvious is that the PML-N needs to decide on a clear, democratic strategy soon. The party appears to have almost forgotten that it is, in fact, still running the federal government. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has brought fresh energy to his unexpected new job, but a bloated cabinet suggests no real governance direction. Meanwhile, figures such as Chaudhry Nisar should make clear their political intentions. If elements within a political party want to leave or create a new party, that is not inherently undemocratic. But if such possibilities are being entertained to align themselves with state institutions that constitutionally should remain outside the political sphere, then the democratic process will surely suffer. At the moment, there is no one in the PML-N, including Mr Sharif, who appears to have clarity about the kind of party that the PML-N ought to be and the political direction it should carry itself in. That needs to change.

Combating dengue

PESHAWAR is threatened with a serious dengue outbreak. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has called an emergency meeting on Monday to decide what measures can immediately be taken to control the problem. The emergency is confirmed by figures which say some 831 people have tested positive for dengue over the last few weeks at the Khyber Teaching Hospital in Peshawar alone. It is no surprise that the authorities have identified areas used for the large-scale trade of vehicular tyres as a source of the dengue virus. There are also other nurseries of dengue larva that need to be quickly identified. Five dengue deaths have been reported over the last few weeks and there have been calls for the government to move fast and well beyond its focus on localities used excessively and without sufficient caution for the sale of tyres.

Pakistan, unfortunately, has had more than its fair share of the dengue scare in recent years. The most prominent example, both in terms of the severity of the threat and the robustness of the counter effort, is provided by Punjab, in particular Lahore. The experience here tells us that the war against dengue has to be intense and without letup. There has to be greater urgency shown in the official work in Peshawar apart from running fumigation campaigns and standard awareness drives. The country has learnt a lot from others, most of all from Sri Lanka, about how to tackle dengue. The Punjab government has especially benefited from

Lankan help after its terrifying experience with the illness in 2011-12 — the time when many areas in KP were also hit by the virus. To give credit where it's due, Punjab benefited greatly because it was in the charge of an 'overactive' chief minister. Mr Shahbaz Sharif went after dengue like a man possessed, enacting new laws to prevent the formation of dengue larva nurseries, educating doctors in how to treat dengue patients after a series of deaths initially blamed on the shock caused by the virus, etc. The confidence of doctors treating dengue patients in Punjab has increased over time, but more than that, the plan has to be made effective at the prevention stage. Obviously, the authorities in KP would be aware of the value of the Lahore experience. They must not be hesitant in demanding all and any help they think can be provided by Punjab.

Umar Akmal saga

THE recent unpleasant episode involving Pakistan cricket's talented but, unfortunately, undisciplined batsman Umar Akmal and head coach Mickey Arthur has snowballed into a major row over the past week. The batsman, after having accused the coach of using harsh words against him at the National Cricket Academy, went straight to the media to lambast him. That earned the ire of the Pakistan Cricket Board which issued the player a show-cause notice on Thursday. However, the PCB's statement on Friday to refute the allegation against the coach and to condemn Umar Akmal's actions was not needed. Observers correctly point out that the board should have waited for Umar's reply instead of immediately supporting Mickey Arthur. Since his international debut back in 2009, Umar has been involved in many a controversy both on and off the field, and his coaches and captains have often disapproved of his behaviour. Having said that, the absence of uniformity in enforcing the disciplinary code in domestic cricket as well as during international tours has allowed erratic players to believe they can get away with committing offences.

Pakistan cricket has had several players on the national team who have either flouted the rules or triggered a row. Saeed Ahmed, Sarfraz Nawaz, Shoaib Akhtar, Ahmed Shehzad, etc have all had their run-ins with the authorities, often facing flak for their actions, or going scot-free. The credit, though, must go to their skippers and the PCB bosses whose wisdom and discreet handling of the situation

prevented matters from getting out of hand. There is no doubt that Umar crossed the line by approaching the media and posting a series of nasty tweets for which he ought to be cautioned or penalised. On the other hand, PCB, as the governing body of the game, would be well advised to instal a disciplinary committee to deal with the complaints and problems of players as well as officials rather than going public with such issues.

Fata reform on the back burner

WAR-ravaged Fata deserves better. Last week, in a meeting with MNAs from Fata, Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi pledged to visit the tribal areas soon and announced that “change in Fata is a must and the status quo must end”. But it is the PML-N government itself that has perpetuated the status quo in Fata by refusing to prioritise legislative, political, financial and administrative change in the region. As a report in this newspaper yesterday has revealed, the special committee to supervise implementation of the recommendations of the Sartaj Aziz-led Fata reforms committee has not held a single meeting in eight months and some members have not received formal notification of their nomination to the committee.

Meanwhile, the differences between the government and its political allies have continued. After the immediate merger of Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was opposed for parochial political reasons by the PML-N’s allies, a period of so-called mainstreaming was agreed upon with the eventual goal of considering a merger. But the mainstreaming plan, which the special committee that has not convened in eight months was meant to help steer, has also stalled, and the vast, new financial commitments that will have to be made to the region have yet to be delineated. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif’s disinterest in the process was almost inexplicable, until it is considered that he consistently showed very little appetite for a long fight against extremism, terrorism and militancy. It is almost as if the PML-N supremo wanted to be prime minister on his own terms and to address his self-identified priorities, rather than address the security and humanitarian emergencies in the country that his job demanded.

In more than a decade of military operations in Fata, it has always been clear that long-term stability and peace in the region would depend on ending Fata’s

anachronistic system of governance. But as major counter-insurgency operations were being carried out, it was unrealistic to expect simultaneous governance reforms. In large swaths of Fata, however, the clear and hold phases of counter-insurgency have continue for such long stretches that further delay in governance reform may threaten to unravel the gains made so far. The resilience of the people of Fata and the bravery of the security personnel have helped bring a modicum of stability to the region. With neighbouring Afghanistan suffering from enduring uncertainty, the fate of Fata should not be allowed to slip back into the hands of militant and terrorist networks operating in the region. The government must act on its own plan.

Whistleblowers bill

A DEMOCRATIC system gives the people the means to elect their representatives, but it does not always have adequate mechanisms of accountability that are intrinsic to a democracy. The passage in the National Assembly on Thursday of the Public Interest Disclosures Bill, 2017, which provides protection to whistleblowers in matters of public interest, goes some way to address this shortcoming. After passage by the Senate, the law will apply to the entire country. The proposed legislation covers disclosures relating to, firstly: “wilful misuse of power or wilful misuse of discretion by virtue of which substantial loss is caused to the government or substantial wrongful gain to the public servant or to third party” and secondly: “commission of or an attempt to commit an offence of corruption ... as defined in the NAB Ordinance 1999... .” It thus brings both federal and provincial government employees within its ambit. However, the bill also defines exemptions whereby the disclosure of certain categories of information will not afford the whistleblower any protection. Among these is information likely to “prejudicially” affect Pakistan’s sovereignty and integrity, its security, strategic and economic interests, impede the investigation, apprehension or prosecution of offenders, or if it does not involve an issue of public interest.

Whistleblowers are the secret weapon of the public interest. They have in recent years been responsible for some of the biggest exposés that have set off alarm bells across the globe, forced policy changes, and made some heads roll. Bradley Manning’s and Edward Snowden’s leaks were largely related to classified or

sensitive government data, revealing US military and diplomatic communications in the first instance and intrusive global surveillance programmes in the second. The largest exposé by far, however, which had a commensurate public interest dimension, was the Panama Papers. Comprising an unprecedented 11.5m files that revealed private financial information about thousands of wealthy individuals, it has since had deleterious effects on large numbers of public officials. The continuing reverberations in Pakistan from that episode are there for all to see. That brings us to another issue: whistleblowers are often the bane of governments. It can also take a great deal of courage for individuals to lay bare malfeasance by those who can use the state apparatus to punish whistleblowers by ruining their lives and careers. With even right to information being given short shrift in this country, how thoroughly will the law to protect whistleblowers be implemented?

Orphan city

Given the utter urban chaos that is Karachi, it sounds like a dream: green open spaces and parks, roads free of encroachments and easy parking, neat sidewalks, a coherent traffic management system, improved civic administration services, new water and sewerage lines, the restoration of heritage buildings and much more.

These are just a few of the facets of the World Bank-funded Karachi Neighbourhood Improvement Project that the Sindh government has chalked out in order to transform the metropolis into a 'beautiful' city. The Rs10bn project, of which the provincial government's share is Rs12m, is comprised of multiple components that are to be covered over the next decade.

All this good news was made public by Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah on Friday, as he presided over a meeting at CM House while directing the city commissioner to start removing encroachments from the downtown Saddar area so that work could start within a month.

"This is the most important project [...]", he is reported as having said, "[...] I would request each and every Karachiite to support it and own it".

This is a telling statement indeed. Truth be told, this city's sad reality is that while millions walk its streets, work its mechanisms and call it home, no one — least of all the provincial government — really feels a sense of ownership in it or cares much for its fate in terms of civic infrastructure and amenities.

While elsewhere in the country many examples are available where citizens and provincial governments have collaborated to improve conditions, Sialkot airport being a case in point, Karachi must perennially seek external help — because, we must assume, no one body or group has enough of a stake to be anything other than largely ineffectual.

Even for a most basic requirement such as cleaning up the garbage that is piled up on the streets, city authorities have brought in Chinese support. Now, with this World Bank loan, the city managers have only further demonstrated their deficiencies.

No need to give funds to MPs

IT is a nonsensical practice that ought to have ended years ago. Instead, in an election year and in the midst of a deeply polarising and politicised ouster of a prime minister, the PML-N government has already disbursed the entirety of so-called parliamentary development funds. It is not just that the sum is significant, Rs30bn, but also what it suggests regarding the government's priorities. In almost all cases, there is little point in delving into the details — the amounts are explicitly allocated by the government as patronage. Vague attempts to try and align the parliamentarians' priorities on so-called development schemes with the overall developmental spending plans of the government make no difference when MPs are first in the disbursement queue and most large-scale developmental projects remain underfunded.

The problem of wasteful expenditure is all the more acute when the entire democratic process itself is under pressure because of alleged corruption by the country's elected representatives. Successive governments and prime ministers have discovered that it is politically easier to disburse relatively small amounts to individual MPs, which they use for small-scale, so-called development schemes that hardly last, than to resist the unjust demands of their parliamentary base. But the willingness to fiscally indulge MPs has a cost beyond the constituencies where some of the spending eventually materialises. Tens of millions of rupees allocated to individual parliamentarians is the very symbol of a wasteful government with distorted, patronage-driven spending priorities. If governments assume that is the cost of doing business, necessary expenditures to keep the wheels of politics oiled, they ought to consider the impact outside the narrow constituency- and patronage-driven models they cling to. Rs30bn spent on parliamentarians' whims may bring fleeting loyalty and winning vote counts in legislative battles, but that money also undermines the overall public support for the democratic project.

From a governance perspective, too, the egregious public spending on MPs' demands is deeply troubling. Routinely, year after year, government after government, the annual development spending budgeted for is wildly unrealistic. So too are budgeted expenditures, with the numbers often artificially and deliberately suppressed. The net result is that by the end of the first quarter of the fiscal year, the unrealistic projections force the government to scale back developmental spending. In the current financial year, important long-term projects

are already being ignored, as highlighted in a report in this newspaper yesterday, while MPs' annual allocations have already been disbursed before the end of the first quarter of the fiscal year. The PML-N, like all governments before it, routinely pledges to put core development spending at the centre of its of budgetary priorities, but invariably fails to do so. If some of the Rs30bn released to MPs can be clawed back, it should be. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi should also pledge to make no further allocations to ridiculous and wasteful parliamentary schemes.

Rajanpur gangsters

IN April 2016, a clean-up operation was carried out in the kutchha area of the Rajanpur district in Punjab which supposedly uprooted the notorious Chotoo gang from the lawless stretch along the Indus River. There were many who warned at the time that this was not quite the end. Fears remained and many of the gangsters who had fled in the wake of action which involved the military quietly returned to this troubled part of southern Punjab, and eventually to their old ways. In the last six weeks alone, there have been at least four murders blamed on one or the other splinter group of the erstwhile Chotoo gang. Two of the casualties were policemen, who were again targeted on Sunday when seven of them were kidnapped before being released under unclear circumstances. Some reports said the policemen had been recovered after a crackdown ordered by the Punjab chief minister. In what is not unusual in such instances, there were also rumours of a deal. In the end, the police officials vehemently denied that the captive law enforcers had been swapped with gangsters in police custody; yet it was clear that in some ways, the criminals in the kutchha area, vanquished with so much fanfare last year, were dictating terms to those responsible for law and order.

The kutchha areas are a real challenge to govern at all times given the natural cover they provide for those looking to hide after committing a crime. The stretch is even more difficult to penetrate when the Indus is at its annual peak as it is these days. On the other hand, the police are not at all equipped to deal with these elements, the remnants, so to speak, of the Chotoo gang, whose numbers, according to some estimates by local journalists, could run into the 40s or 50s. They are not your usual criminals but hardened combat-happy souls whose removal

necessitated help from the army last year. Once again, there are voices calling out for the military to augment the police's law-enforcement apparatus for decisive and hopefully final action against the criminals who are regrouping in the area. The ultimate answer to the problem will have to be a police force which is crafted in accordance with the particular demands of the place. Being ill-equipped cannot be a permanent excuse for inaction.

Drug shortage

CONGENITAL adrenal hyperplasia — a group of conditions affecting the adrenal glands — may be a rare disease, but it is one of the most common types of genetic disorders, exacerbated in Pakistan by the high rate of consanguineous marriages. In infants, symptoms present as vomiting, dehydration, poor feeding and weight loss. Another symptom, one that may explain why so many cases go undiagnosed for years due to stigma, is ambiguous genitalia. Not only is there a lack of awareness among most parents, many paediatricians often misdiagnose CAH in its early stages. Compounding the health and psychosocial issues for those born with CAH is another grievous fact — the medicines required for lifelong management of this disorder are practically unavailable in the market here. This, despite the fact that one of these drugs, hydrocortisone, is listed as an essential medicine by WHO and the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan.

This drug shortage, like many others of late, once again boils down to a long-standing pricing dispute between Drap and local pharmaceutical manufacturers. In its 2015 pricing policy, Drap refers to a class of pharmaceuticals exempt from the price regime: orphan drugs. As in other countries, an orphan drug policy devises incentive mechanisms for local production of medicines required for treating rare, or 'orphaned', diseases. Assuming that producing hydrocortisone tablets — rather than its more commonly used ointment — is cost prohibitive given the relatively low prevalence of CAH, the drug ought to fall under this category. Yet, in the two years since the pricing policy was announced, Drap has failed to define an orphan drug policy. And so a drug that ought to be easily accessible — both in price and availability — is instead being smuggled into the country, with no quality assurance and skyrocketing prices during periods of uncertain supply. The inefficiency of Drap and the general apathy of the Ministry of National Health

Services, particularly regarding awareness and prevention of hereditary diseases, must be immediately corrected.

Pakistan's new regional challenge

The question that bedevilled the last two American presidents appears to have bewildered the latest one too: what should the US do about Afghanistan?

After months of internal debate, President Donald Trump has unveiled his administration's strategy in Afghanistan; it is a mixture of the familiar, the tested and the failed. There are some important differences to the strategy former president Barack Obama had pursued.

There will be no timeline for an exit by US troops in Afghanistan. There will be looser rules of engagement for US troops, which will likely lead to more civilian casualties and fresh political turmoil. There will be an increase in covert operations, presaging an increase in tensions with Pakistan over tactical matters. And the possibility of dialogue with the Afghan Taliban has been discarded for the foreseeable future, once again exposing Pakistan to the US mantra of 'do more' without a sense that a political settlement is at hand.

For Pakistan, the challenge will be twofold: to not react emotionally to the American president's invitation, unreasonable though it is, to India to have a greater role in Afghanistan; and to continue to focus on the national priority of progressively reducing the space for all manner of militancy, terrorism and extremism in the region.

It will not be easy. Mr Trump's speech underlined that there will be no reset in relations with Pakistan; that the trend evident since the final years of the Bush administration will continue; and that ties will remain firmly transactional, with all the possibilities of misunderstanding, frustration and disconsolateness on both sides. Certainly, Pakistan will not be able to simply ignore the demands of a US president who is an avowed isolationist with a fierce desire to see America's perceived enemies defeated.

Perhaps the best-case scenario for Pakistan would be to continue to push for common sense and reciprocal cooperation with Afghanistan. The banned TTP and other anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan and the perception that the Afghan intelligence network may be sympathetic to such groups are problems that can be addressed. Meanwhile, the fight against IS is a unifying factor for all actors in Afghanistan and the region.

Pakistan must also recognise that the American and Afghan focus on the Haqqani network and Pakistan's alleged ties to the group is a problem that won't go away. Better, then, to identify areas of potential cooperation with Afghanistan and the US than to allow matters to further unravel.

Now that another US administration has announced its strategy in Afghanistan, there is unlikely to be an immediate course correction. But US policymakers ought to consider that a fundamental mistake they continue to make in Afghanistan is to regard what is essentially a civil war as a counterterrorism problem. The wrong prism cannot produce the right solution.

Violent lawyers

WHAT lines can capture the impact of the ugly scenes that played out outside the Lahore High Court on Monday? What can one say when the edifice of justice is attacked by those who are meant to uphold the law, and who have, ironically enough, been trained to present their arguments in a civilised way? Unfortunately, given the growing propensity of the legal community to resort to violence, the lawyers' charge on the court premises was almost inevitable. There are many angles to the unfolding story. There are many who believe that the confrontation between the bar and the bench could have been better handled. There is also an opinion that had a more prominent member of the legal community been involved in the row, the action taken might have been less strict than it has been in the case of the president of the Multan bar who is the subject of contempt proceedings that have brought the confrontation to an altogether new level. The office-bearer has drawn both applause and ire for offering free tuition to those who want to avoid arrest on court orders; and yet, his role may ultimately be incidental considering

the size of the conflict between the bench and the bar. Something had to give finally. There had to be someone providing the stimulus.

The focus may now be shifted from the brawl to the effort to revive a functioning relationship between the judiciary and the lawyers. This is where some brave decisions have to be taken and precedents set. The lawyers are polarised and they are prone to acting as a gang that has no qualms about intimidating members of the bench routinely, terrorising junior judicial officers and even putting pressure on the senior ones — all in pursuit of rulings of their choice. The feeling is that these lawyers could have perhaps have been helped in a more constructive way by a judiciary which does not have a history of succumbing to the politics of the day. After the dust settles, a return of the bar to old values has to coincide with a process where the judiciary is seen to be above any kind of bias and politics. The sooner the legal circles are able to initiate this process the better it will be for everyone concerned. The people are fast losing whatever hope they had been left with.

Risk of malaria

THE arrival of the monsoon in many parts of Pakistan is a harbinger of various diseases, particularly malaria. Around 14,000 cases of this mosquito-borne disease have already been reported in Sindh so far this year. Predictably enough, given that pools of stagnant rainwater are the perfect incubator for mosquito larvae, provincial health officials have warned that malaria incidence rates will spike in the weeks ahead. As far as officialdom is concerned though, matters are improving. As per their figures, the cases reported last year — more than 30,000 — were 14,000 less than those recorded in 2015. Independent experts, however, dispute these figures. According to them, given the appalling hygiene conditions in urban centres as well as rural areas, an increase in malaria cases is inevitable.

According to WHO, vector-borne diseases such as dengue, chikungunya, etc kill an estimated one million people annually. The risk would be much reduced if certain safety precautions were followed, both by the government and people themselves. At the moment, KP is in the grip of a dengue epidemic, with upward of 4,000 suspected cases. The Punjab government, which acquired expertise in tackling the disease after the province was hit by a devastating dengue epidemic during 2011-2012, is sharing its know-how with KP in dealing with the health

emergency. Sindh could learn much from Punjab's example. The latter won its battle against dengue through sheer energy and persistence. In contrast, the response by the Sindh government to health crises, even predictable ones like malaria, is slow and plodding, reactive rather than proactive. Pakistan's health authorities have reported over 1,000 cases of chikungunya in Karachi since December 2016; such outbreaks of debilitating diseases are bound to rise. It may be impossible to completely eradicate vector-borne infections, especially in areas with high population density, but cleaning up an environment that breeds all manner of diseases, is certainly not.

RAI bill: a way out of the darkness

DEMOCRACY dies in the darkness — the new motto of The Washington Post is also an easy aphorism for governments struggling to identify the right balance between transparency and secrecy. In what may prove to be a significant victory for transparency and accountability of public authorities, the Senate on Tuesday unanimously approved the Right of Access to Information Bill, 2017. The National Assembly, too, will have to approve the bill before it can become law, but unanimous approval in the upper house suggests that a giant step forward has been taken. The key will be for parliament to not yield to the objections of public authorities that may fear what a true and substantive right to information regime may achieve for the cause of democracy and public accountability.

The provincial experience with RTI laws has revealed many flaws. Too many exemptions, especially in vague and blanket terms, for public officials seeking to shield information from the public; cumbersome application processes and few public awareness programmes; and an appeals process that favours public officials rather than the common folk seeking to access information. In the Senate, which has a number of members skilled in legislation, governance and public affairs, the approach to drafting the RAI Bill appears to have been a more sensible, public-minded one: start with the principle that maximum information is a public good; keep exemptions to a minimum; and put in place a responsive appeals process. If the law is not watered down in the National Assembly and if the new RTI regime at the federal level is made known to the public through sustained awareness-creation, it could go some way to address the unnecessary opacity of government.

The desperate need for a meaningful RTI regime at the federal level can be gauged from the fact that the Freedom of Information Ordinance, 2002, which the new law would seek to replace, is largely unheard of in the public domain. Indeed, the FIO 2002 quickly emerged as a law designed more to continue the suppression of information than its greater dissemination. The range of subjects designated as public record in the Senate bill indicates its scope and potential effectiveness: policies and guidelines, the disposal of property, the expenditure of public body, performance, duties, functions, grant of licences, benefits, privileges and contracts. In theory, an individual will not only be able to determine a public official's duties but could also demand information pertaining to the execution of those responsibilities. Strong RTI laws have in several developing nations helped strengthen citizens' rights, expose corruption and improve governance. Ahead of a general election and at a time the national discourse is focused on corruption in government, a new RTI law can to some extent demonstrate that parliament does act in the public interest.

Ashura clash probe

IN Pakistan, sometimes a small spark can be enough to ignite religious or sectarian passions on a wide scale. This is especially true in the age of social media, 24/7 coverage and fake news. Perhaps aware of these fault lines, miscreants seek to spread trouble by either staging incidents, or playing up mishaps. This seems to be the case where the 2013 Ashura violence in Rawalpindi is concerned. The day saw a number of killings as well as arson and protests. The situation spiralled out of control when a mourning procession passed by a mosque; apparently, controversial remarks were made from the pulpit, which ignited the situation. The garrison city was put under curfew and the army had to step in to restore order. While earlier the impression created was of a sectarian clash between mourners belonging to the Shia community and Sunni worshippers inside the mosque, the ISPR recently painted a different picture of the day's events. According to the head of the military's media wing, the violence was staged by the banned TTP and the events were engineered to rupture "sectarian fault lines". Maj-Gen Asif Ghafoor stated that "both the mosque and the terrorists who attacked and set fire to it belonged to the same sect". As per the details, the militants had donned black

clothes to appear as mourners and came prepared with weapons and incendiary material.

The security forces deserve kudos for unmasking the perpetrators behind the 2013 violence. However, the details that have emerged should also make all stakeholders ponder over the events and help formulate SOPs for how to handle such a situation in future. Ulema belonging to all sects must work to calm things down in case religiously sensitive issues emerge. Unfortunately, many of those behind the pulpit have often worked up zealous mobs instead of calling for calm. Also, security agencies must keep a strict watch over religious events to ensure that troublemakers don't mix with ordinary citizens to incite violence. Working with the communities concerned and tracking suspicious individuals can help in this regard. The media, too, has a responsibility to be very careful when reporting religiously sensitive incidents. While communal differences are nothing new, there is little doubt that militants will try to use such misunderstandings to fan the flames of division. That is why such elements must be isolated, while the state and society should remain on guard.

Rain deaths in Karachi

NEVER are the shamefully dilapidated infrastructure and inadequate municipal functions in Pakistan's largest city as exposed as they are during the rains. For that is when the daily aggravations its citizens struggle through suddenly become compressed within a short span of time. The downpour in various parts of Karachi since Monday night has claimed around 20 lives, mostly as a result of electrocution and house collapse. Low-lying areas have been inundated, while the gusty winds have brought down a number of billboards, uprooted trees and electric poles, disrupting power supply in some places. The rain — recorded at a maximum of 41mm by Monday night — also caused mayhem at the city's vegetable and cattle markets.

Thunderstorms of this magnitude can test the resources of even the most well-administered urban centre — let alone a chaotic metropolis of 20m like Karachi where the authorities show little inclination for governance or the provision of facilities that are the citizens' right. The city was thus utterly ill prepared to deal with this week's deluge. Its residents would hardly have been surprised to learn

that their hometown has been recently ranked (by the research and analysis division of The Economist Group) among the 10 least livable cities in the world. What other outcome was possible in a situation where the provincial government has rendered municipal authorities impotent and handed third-tier governance powers to entities under its control? What can one say when residents of a city which contributes 95pc of Sindh's tax revenues and whose formal economy generates between 20-25pc of the country's GDP are at risk of death during a rainstorm? Even while requirements such as that for low-income housing, public-sector health facilities, garbage disposal etc are ignored, work proceeds apace on initiatives that, while making fortunes for some powerful individuals, are destroying Karachi's environment and exacerbating its ethnic and socioeconomic fault lines. It seems that Pakistan's financial heart has been left to its own devices, not to mention the machinations of a predatory state.

Minus-Pakistan formula?

An uncharacteristically stern response by the National Security Committee to US President Donald Trump's so-called South Asia strategy is a worrying indication of the strategic chasm between Pakistan and the US.

With words and phrases such as "outrightly rejected", "scapegoat", "grave challenge", "Afghan war cannot be fought in Pakistan" and "India cannot be a net provider of security" sprinkled across the statement, the NSC has conveyed its unhappiness, perhaps even alarm, at the Trump strategy.

Nominally headed by the prime minister, the overwhelming military presence at yesterday's meeting suggests that the statement is a true reflection of the national security apparatus's grave concerns. Pakistan's concerns over the Trump strategy are unsurprising; the strategy has almost universally been declared to be unrealistic and flawed.

From the NSC response, two key concerns of Pakistan can be gleaned. First, the Trump strategy appears to be an endorsement of perpetual war in Afghanistan, when it has long been clear that only "a politically negotiated outcome", in the NSC's words, can work.

Second, the so-called South Asia strategy puts the onus on Pakistan to act without offering to address any of this country's regional security concerns. Specifically, the Trump administration's silence on anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan and its encouragement of India to play a greater role in Afghanistan amount to a puzzling disregard of Pakistan's concerns. Why is Pakistan expected to act first to advance other powers' interests and only then its own?

Merely labelling something a South Asia strategy does not automatically make it so. Indeed, it is Pakistan that appears to be seeking a true regional solution with its articulation of specific concerns, while the US approach amounts to something akin to a minus-Pakistan formula for peace. Because the US approach is wildly unrealistic, it is also dangerous.

Nevertheless, Pakistan must strive to avoid a strategic collision with the world's only superpower. The US president's obvious discomfort with a U-turn from his campaign pledge to extricate the US from Afghanistan presents an opportunity. A true regional approach to the Afghan question necessarily includes Iran, China and Russia, countries that Mr Trump all but ignored in his strategy.

For Pakistan, the challenge will be to pull together the diplomatic heft of those countries to cobble together a reasonable alternative to America's latest approach. Regional ought to mean regional — a path to peace that allows Afghanistan peace and stability and balances the interests of outside powers in the immediate vicinity.

Surely, helping develop a regional consensus and encouraging the US to reconsider its own flawed approach is a better alternative than the dismal possibility of endless war in Afghanistan and the severing of even a transactional relationship between Pakistan and the US.

Poisoned water

FOR decades it has been known that the drinking water of large populations across South Asia contains dangerous levels of arsenic, but now a new study has established that even in Pakistan the number of people exposed could be as high as 60m. Arsenic is a naturally occurring element, but many deeper aquifers are free from it, and much of the clay that forms the surface across many parts of South Asia has been naturally cleansed of it over a long period of time due to the passage of large amounts of water across the subcontinent every year. The fact that it is now being found in dangerous quantities could well be connected to the growing amount of effluent that vends its own way into informal industrial clusters around the country. Whether found in agricultural chemicals or leather tanneries or dyes, arsenic once in the water supply will naturally leach into ground water. The deadliest avenue for its entry into the human body is through drinking water, which can carry it in quantities large enough to do serious health damage.

Now scientists from the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology tell us that after testing water from 1,200 wells around the country, from depths ranging from three to 70 metres, they found that almost two-thirds of them contained arsenic beyond 10 micrograms per litre, which WHO has recommended as the maximum permissible level. In many areas along the Indus, they found people consuming water with almost 200 micrograms of arsenic, while 50m to 60m people could be drinking water containing 50 micrograms of the deadly element. Arsenic poisoning can lead to skin lesions, cardiovascular disease and cancer. It can also interfere with cognitive development. In short, the problem is vast and the public health risks it poses are serious. The good news is that it is relatively easy these days to treat water to remove arsenic. Usually a simple reverse osmosis filter can do the job, even the ones that are attached to individual taps at home. But for this to be a proper solution, the provincial governments need to pay more attention to water contamination from industrial and agricultural chemicals, and then ensure that filters are regularly replaced in treatment plants. This is by no means a difficult target, and the authorities must make it a priority.

‘Triple talaq’ outlawed

MUSLIM women in India have reason to rejoice, for they have won the battle against the regressive practice of the ‘triple talaq’ which the country’s Supreme Court has ruled as being ‘unconstitutional’. According to this custom, a man could divorce his wife by merely repeating the word ‘talaq’ (divorce) three times. In a digital age, even text messages and Whatsapp have been used to effect such an ‘instant’ divorce. This licence to capriciousness has been the cause of untold misery and financial hardship for women, a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads in the marital relationship. Women divorced in this way have often had to contend with straitened circumstances overnight, sometimes even with the loss of their children’s custody. It was a particularly cruel way of allowing men to control women and keep them constantly in fear of losing the security that marriage provides in a conservative society.

Not surprisingly, the practice of triple talaq — which many Islamic scholars say is not mentioned in the Holy Quran and is banned in most Muslim countries, including Pakistan — has many champions among Muslim men in India. While maintaining that the practice is ‘evil’, they nonetheless want to retain it based on spurious arguments about the fundamental right to practise religion. Curiously, such men have no qualms in embracing modern technology like smartphones — whereby they sometimes pronounce instant divorce — even as they cling to outmoded traditions where it suits them. The Muslim religious lobby in India has responded with fury to the court’s ruling, declaring that as far as they are concerned the status quo remains. To counter this defiance, there must be an extensive awareness campaign to spread the word that the triple talaq stands outlawed. We in Pakistan could also do with a similar campaign, for in some backward areas here, this mode of divorce continues to be seen as valid. In fact, women in this country generally have little awareness of the fine print in their nikahnama. It is about time that changed.

Electoral reforms at last

BETTER late than never and better several improvements than none — the Electoral Reforms Bill, 2017, approved by the National Assembly this week is a significant step in the right direction, but it should not be seen as the end of the road to free and fair elections. While the bill has rightly been crafted with a long-term outlook, an expeditious passage of the bill through the Senate will address at least two short-term controversies: allowing the Election Commission of Pakistan to implement the revamped electoral laws ahead of the next general election and perhaps creating a time frame in which constituencies can be demarcated on the basis of the latest national census. The first responsibility should be to hold a general election on the basis of the most up-to-date data available on the electorate. Two other significant changes going forward are the unification of eight different electoral laws — which added unnecessary layers of confusion for candidates — and the direction to the ECP to finalise an election manual six months ahead of a general election, giving all sides involved in holding and contesting elections much-needed certainty about the process.

The push to ensure greater female participation in elections is also a highly laudable move. It remains to be seen how the specific rules designed to prevent women from casting their vote freely in elections will work in practice — regressive elements in society can be surprisingly adept in circumventing rules designed to limit their influence — but at least the right message has been sent. A healthy democracy must necessarily have electoral participation from all eligible elements of society and greater participation by women in the democratic process is surely to the benefit of a progressive society. With a significant number of minor and major changes to the electoral process envisaged, the full impact of the bill will take some time to assess. But there are already some shortcomings that ought to be addressed eventually.

Two of the PTI's major demands, voting rights for overseas Pakistanis and electronic balloting, have gone unmet. That may have less to do with the political rivalry between the PML-N and PTI and, more likely, be a result of, for now, administrative operational problems. But the demands should eventually be met because it would be good politics and create a more comprehensive, transparent electoral process. Campaign finance reform is another area that has been effectively ignored, with grossly unrealistic spending limits being marginally

increased and no thought given to how to create a more level playing field for all candidates. Finally, there is the issue that hangs fire: constitutional reform of the qualification and disqualification criteria for candidates and parliamentarians. Reform is necessary, but the government must not make it about a single individual. Careful thought and wide-ranging consultation will be required.

Growing deficit

FEW can imagine the stakes when the external deficit of the country begins to grow at an accelerating pace. It is becoming increasingly urgent that wider awareness about this phenomenon be created. Latest data for July shows the current account deficit tripled from the same month last year, rising to \$2bn in a single month. This is the fastest monthly growth seen in this crucial indicator for many years, and if the pace is to continue into the future, it could send the country to the IMF far sooner than what most analysts believe. This has been a regrettable trend in Pakistan's economy for the past quarter century at least, regardless of which government is in power. The current account is crucial to monitor because it measures the country's trade numbers and remittances, and once it goes into deficit for a lengthy period of time, the foreign exchange reserves run out and the country is forced to go to the IMF to borrow more, and undergo a long period of stabilisation during which growth is restrained, inflation rises and the exchange rate has to be devalued. Since 2013, the current account has been moving progressively into deficit, and the size of the deficits is getting larger and larger with each passing year.

Without the above context, the July data by itself would not mean much. The constantly growing size of the deficit is now straining the reserves to an alarming level, and the country is faced with two choices: either devalue the currency now or borrow more from abroad. Given the aversion of the present government to undertake devaluation, it leaves only the second option. Continuing with the status quo without any active steps means drifting towards the IMF, which is a far more disorderly outcome than any of the other two. Borrowing from abroad is going to be more complicated because the growing current account deficit means a diminished debt service capacity, something foreign lenders will price into the risk premium they will demand, as well as the increasingly strained relations with the

US, which has crucial leverage over the health of Pakistan's debt profile. Whatever may be our feelings towards the situation unfolding on the external front, a cold and sober view is required of the emerging vulnerabilities before taking a decision on any course of action.

Return from the dead

A BIZARRE episode unfolded at the Rangers' headquarters in Karachi on Thursday. A man, Mohammed Yusuf, said to be an activist of MQM-London (as the faction still loyal to Altaf Hussain is known) was paraded before the media by the Rangers. However, while criminals and suspects are routinely brought before the cameras by security agencies, what made this particular incident odd was that Mr Yusuf had been declared dead by his party. According to the Sindh Rangers' spokesperson, the MQM-L had alleged that the paramilitary force had picked up, tortured, killed and dumped the body of their worker. To give things an even more surreal twist, Mr Yusuf's family 'confirmed' his death and held his soym. As per the Rangers, the MQM-L also claimed that the body of their supporter had been buried by the Edhi Foundation as an unclaimed one. In reality, the paramilitary force said, the man had gone underground and later, surrendered himself to the Rangers.

There are a few lessons to be derived from this strange tale. Firstly, despite the apparent 'resurrection' of the MQM-L man, there are very real cases of torture, staged encounters and extrajudicial killings involving various security agencies across the country. Therefore, while this case may be an exception, calls for the security establishment to be more transparent when dealing with suspects still stand. Whether it is religious or ethnic militants or those accused of crime, all suspects must be brought before a court of law and tried transparently. Having said that, it is also true — as this case has proved — that some parties issue false claims to gain sympathy. The MQM-L needs to explain how it 'confirmed' Mr Yusuf's death when the man was clearly alive. If parties start to cry wolf, they will lose sympathy for their cause and their claims will not be taken seriously. While enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings are an unfortunate reality in Pakistan, false claims and fake news spread by parties will do little to counter these methods.

Census results raise questions

AFTER a prolonged delay, the census exercise is finally over and the first provisional results have popped a number of surprises. The population growth rate has actually increased by 30pc since the 1998 census, and the implications are truly alarming. The country's total population now stands at more than 200m; with a growth rate of 2.4pc it will double again in less than 30 years if the growth rate continues unabated. This flies in the face of repeated assertions that the growth rate has been reduced to 1.89pc as stated in successive Economic Survey documents. "Increasing population growth raises the dependency ratio and puts pressure on education, health system and food supply", the last Survey noted after announcing that the total population was 199m.

But now, the figure of 207.77m for the total population means the population growth rate has been far higher than what the authorities estimated and used as the basis for their population welfare programmes and to plan service delivery. The figure is staggering, and is an even larger challenge — almost at the level of an emergency — for our policymakers as the country's ability to feed, house, clothe and provide opportunities for this enormous mass of humanity simply cannot keep pace with the increase. Since the last 1998 census, it was assumed that the population growth rate had come down to 1.8pc — a figure that was heralded at the time as a huge success. That assumption now stands reversed, presenting the authorities with a hard task in making family planning policies, and aiming for a sharp decline in infant mortality rates. Above all, it means the Rs8bn that the government has been allocating for population welfare programmes in recent years will need to be increased dramatically, and the design and delivery of the programmes themselves strengthened, if the emergency is not to swamp us in the foreseeable future.

Beyond the aggregate numbers, the details given in the provisional data bring further surprises, leading some to allege 'number fudging' at this early stage. Whereas the reflex to attack the credibility of the data needs to be resisted at this point, it is critical that the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics move quickly to make the full, disaggregated data available to independent researchers. The surprises are there in many indicators. For example, Punjab's population share has fallen sharply, that of Sindh has risen marginally, while KP and Balochistan have surged, rising by 1.3pc and 0.9pc respectively. These are enormous increases, and they

defy research that has shown fertility and birth rates coming down across the country in the 19 years since the last census. They also beg the question of where this additional population has come from since both provinces, KP in particular, have seen large out-migration in these years. Have the fertility rates been much higher than originally thought, or has in-migration been even higher? Even the urban-rural proportions beg an explanation. The last census changed the definition of an urban area to mean those areas presided over by municipal or metropolitan corporations, which resulted in large swathes of peri-urban settlements around cities falling outside the definition of urban. That census famously underestimated the urban population of the country, leading to massive distortions in all those policies that rely on this distinction, from property taxation regimes to planning for urban service delivery, as well as allocations from the centre for rural-based industries.

It is not known what definition of an urban area the latest census has used, but if the last definition hasn't been changed, then once more large swathes of urban populations have not been counted as such. The provisional estimate for Karachi's population, which reportedly has come in at 16.5m, is far too low to be credible, considering it would take a growth rate lower than the national one to keep the total population figure at this level in 2017. Either Karachi has seen drastic reductions in fertility rates or in-migration has fallen since 1998 — both beggar belief. The PBS ought to make it a priority to release the disaggregated data so the more granular details of the result can be tested against the prevailing research. Until that happens, no policy decisions should be based on the census data, while attacks on its integrity should also be resisted.

Ex-PM must stop assailing institutions

NAWAZ Sharif wants to have his cake and eat it too.

He wants to have his party's government in power and yet behave as if he is in the opposition. He wants to talk about strengthening institutions and democracy while relentlessly attacking the very institutions of democracy. This must stop.

The speech Mr Sharif gave to an audience of lawyers on Friday was unwise and unacceptable. It is clear that the Supreme Court judgement which ousted Mr Sharif from the prime ministership is flawed and controversial.

Mr Sharif is rightly aggrieved and some of the questions he raised on Friday are pertinent to his family's continuing legal difficulties.

A superior court judge monitoring a trial court's proceedings against a defendant who the superior court has already declared to be unfit to hold public office appears to violate the principles of justice and due process.

Yet, Mr Sharif's broadsides against the judiciary and dark allusions to threats against the democratic order are counterproductive.

Beyond the venting of personal grievances in public, it is not clear that the former prime minister has a strategy to strengthen the democratic order. A month since his ouster, the most Mr Sharif and his inner circle have been able to suggest is the need for a constitutional amendment to the qualification and disqualification criteria of parliamentarians.

While clarity is needed on the matter, the PML-N's motives hardly appear to be altruistic. Indeed, the suggestion that a constitutional amendment be applied retrospectively to allow Mr Sharif to once again participate in electoral politics indicates that the PML-N continues to misjudge the national mood and is willing to deepen the political crisis simply to save its own leader.

A person-specific constitutional amendment would be the very antithesis of democracy, as were earlier stipulations barring Mr Sharif and Benazir Bhutto from becoming prime minister again.

There is an obvious path that the PML-N could take that would be democratic and help dispel the air of crisis: a snap election. Dissolve parliament and go to the voter for a fresh mandate with a manifesto outlining the constitutional, legislative and institutional changes that the PML-N intends to bring in order to deepen democracy in the country.

Admittedly, with detailed census results yet to be released and an important electoral reforms package still to become law, a snap election under current rules and with existing constituencies would not be ideal, but at least the vote would be a referendum of sorts on the PML-N and its plans for the democratic order. Another path, one that the Supreme Court itself may want to consider, is to convene the full court for a review of the judgement against Mr Sharif.

While there may be technical objections to such a move, surely the voice of the full court should be heard in the matter. What is clear is that the current situation is unsustainable. Mr Sharif and his PML-N cannot talk like they are in the opposition while running the government and the superior judiciary cannot ignore the genuine legal concerns that have been raised.

Pakistan and US must talk

As the senior-most American military commander in Afghanistan tasked with implementing the US administration's latest strategy in the country, Gen John Nicholson was likely to have tough words for Pakistan.

In an interview with Tolo News, Gen Nicholson has reiterated a familiar US talking point on Pakistan: Afghan Taliban leaders continue to allegedly enjoy sanctuary and freedom of movement inside Pakistan.

More promisingly, the American general added that the issue of alleged Pakistan-based militant sanctuaries is "being addressed in private between the US government and the Pakistani government". If that is the case – if behind-the-scenes talks are indeed continuing rather than the US simply hectoring Pakistan – it suggests a pragmatism on both sides that has not been in evidence in public recently.

Indeed, the decision to postpone Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif's talks with his American counterpart, Rex Tillerson, in the US and embark on visits to China, Russia and Turkey first suggests a typically knee-jerk diplomatic reaction.

Mr Asif's mission as determined by the National Security Committee is to win support for Pakistan's official position on Afghanistan – that there can only be a

political settlement with the Afghan Taliban for long-term peace – and Pakistan's concerns of regional destabilisation that the Trump administration's so-called South Asia strategy will likely cause.

Direct talks with the US, especially at the highest diplomatic levels, could have sent a signal that Pakistan is interested in finding solutions to problems rather than just complaining to third countries about perceived American unreasonableness.

Today, a senior bureaucrat from the US State Department was expected to visit Pakistan in a previously unannounced trip. Instead, Pakistan has chosen to further signal its displeasure by cancelling the visit of the US acting assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, perhaps an unnecessary move.

The new US policy is certainly unfair in its characterisation of the Afghan war, with its readiness to heap blame on Pakistan and its willingness to draw India deeper into Afghanistan without addressing the competing interests of several other regional powers.

However, US President Donald Trump is clearly uncomfortable with having had to bow to the advice of the American defence and national-security apparatus and that may help create the space for a continuing and pragmatic bilateral engagement with the US. As army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa has rightly argued, Pakistan is not seeking America's largesse, but its fair understanding of a complex regional situation.

While the strategic chasm between the US and Pakistan on Afghanistan is now public and undeniable, there is still space and time for constructive dialogue. The starting point must be a realisation on both sides that absolute positions are neither helpful nor workable.

A strategic rupture is in neither the US nor Pakistan's interest.

The Davis affair

LIKE all good mysteries, the Raymond Davis episode has not given up its secrets easily. However, because the issue involves some of the highest policymaking circles in the country, not to mention US-Pakistan security relations, the lack of clarity provides fodder for undesirable speculation. On Friday, Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif set the cat among the pigeons when he said in the Senate that the PPP-led federal government at the time had paid the blood money that made it possible for Mr Davis to leave Pakistan, scot-free, despite having shot dead two men in Lahore in January 2011. Describing the episode as shameful and embarrassing for the nation, Mr Asif added that if asked by parliament he would support an investigation into the US citizen's release. A case for investigation can certainly be made, and parliament should direct that it be undertaken. So far, there are few details that can be definitively accepted as fact. And Mr Davis' account — sanitised no doubt by US government censors — which came out in the form of a book a few months ago, did not do much to clear up the confusion and inconsistencies, including what he was doing in Pakistan in the first place.

Indeed, Mr Asif's assertion — entirely unwarranted unless backed by evidence — about the payment of blood money itself illustrates the need to air the laundry. For the murkiness surrounding the issue makes it convenient for anyone to twist its details to suit their narrative. The outcome of the case was deeply unpopular and rightfully so, because it enabled Mr Davis to evade accountability for his crime, which in its immediate aftermath resulted in the death of an innocent bystander as well. But let us also not forget that the state, for its own reasons, had in the weeks leading up to the trial gone into overdrive to whip up public sentiment against Mr Davis and the manner in which the highest levels of the US government were trying to protect him. The swift denouement left everyone, including parliament, stunned. Only last month, perhaps prompted by the publication of Mr Davis's book, a petition was filed in the Islamabad High Court asking it to determine whether the source of the blood money was the US government, Mr Davis himself, or some other party. What is there to prevent a light being shone on the episode, unless it will reveal some uncomfortable truths?

Women entrepreneurs

THE latest scheme by the State Bank to encourage credit provision for women entrepreneurs is a welcome move and should be followed up with further action. That follow-up action can come from strengthening the initiative as lessons are learnt from its implementation, as well as launching further schemes that specifically try to reach women. For the moment, though, the priority should be to raise awareness about the existence of the scheme, and it should be understood that commercial banks through whom it will operate may be reluctant to help get the word out. Towards this end, perhaps some non-monetary incentive can be announced for banks that lead the way in signing up women entrepreneurs for the scheme, perhaps through an award or other marketing aid. Raising awareness and going out of the way to get applications under the scheme will be crucial to its success.

Assistance also needs to be provided for new women entrepreneurs who have ideas for a business but need mentoring to be able to properly implement them. The scheme has a ceiling of Rs1.5m per loan over a maximum period of five years, at a fixed rate of 5pc, which means it is targeting small ideas for the moment. This is fine and an improvement from the years when extended credit and financial support to women entrepreneurs from underserved areas was left to microfinance banks only. But a road map for promoting inclusive growth should see higher ceilings in times to come as well as longer periods. Also, loans for buying assets, eg housing loans, should be developed specifically targeting women from underserved areas in the initial phase. It needs to be understood that promoting inclusive growth will take more than a few schemes in the long run. It may sound difficult but in due course far more attention needs to be given to this important objective to make it a structural part of our economic thinking.

Business with China

Slowly but surely a crucial realisation is setting in amongst the business community here that dealing with their Chinese counterparts is not going to be easy.

The rhetoric coming from the Pakistani government had made the relationship sound like it was some sort of family affair. But those sections of the business community who have tried to build commercial ties with their counterparts in China are finding out that, over there, profits come first and sentiment second.

One thing the business community has noticed is that their Chinese counterparts prefer dealing with the government rather than building private-sector partnerships, according to a report published on Monday in this paper that presented the opinions of a range of Pakistani businesses that have, or are seeking to build, ties with Chinese enterprises. They have noticed that the Chinese do not negotiate very much. They lay down their terms, and expect them to be fully met.

This realisation is only the beginning of what the rest of the country needs to learn about the growing economic relationship with China. The Chinese government has provided some diplomatic support to Pakistan at crucial junctures, even now as relations with post 9/11 US take yet another nosedive. But business is business, and when it comes to economic cooperation and partnering, all countries look out first and foremost for their own interests.

The question that needs to be asked with increasing urgency is this: is our government doing the same when it engages with the growing number of Chinese delegations landing in the country to build the framework under which Chinese investment will come pouring into Pakistan?

Ever since the CPEC enterprise got under way, calls have been growing for more transparency in its execution. By now, there ought to be no further doubts that the CPEC enterprise goes far beyond roads and power plants, and is, in fact, about creating the right environment for Chinese investment to acquire large stakes in Pakistan's economy.

This is a positive development undoubtedly, but it is also important to ask how far the government is going to protect Pakistan's economic interests.

There is a need to learn this important lesson from the Chinese government. Only greater transparency with more information being shared through the online portals created by the government for disseminating CPEC-related news can address this concern.

Answers to questions like what sort of dispute-resolution mechanism will govern the partnerships envisioned under CPEC, and what investments are being prepared for which areas, will help dispel the growing anxieties.

It would be a sad but necessary end to the euphoria that has greeted the arrival of CPEC if the government were to learn the same lesson that the business community is busy learning these days, that in matters of business, brotherly relations have no role to play.

Overseas treatment

IT is often said that our ruling elite lives in a bubble, insulated from the troubles of the common man. The Pakistan Medical Association is seeking to burst that bubble, at least to some extent. To that end, it has asked the Supreme Court chief justice to take suo motu notice of the politicians, bureaucrats and their families seeking medical treatment abroad at public expense, and restrict them from doing so. The PMA has also decided to write to the national and provincial assemblies demanding legislation requiring politicians and bureaucrats to obtain treatment at public-sector hospitals. The issue is once again in the spotlight because of Kulsoom Nawaz's visit to the UK for medical examination after she was diagnosed with lymphoma, a disease for which treatment is available in Pakistan.

The difference between the haves and the have-nots in Pakistani society is particularly highlighted when politicians jet off to foreign shores for medical treatment, often for even minor ailments. Meanwhile, the plight of the people at overcrowded, underfunded government hospitals is pitiable. They throng the OPDs from the early hours in the hope of getting a medical consultation; the quality of treatment can be questionable, even downright appalling; admitted patients can

find themselves sharing a bed with another patient and if they are from out of town, their families sometimes have little choice but to sleep on the pavement outside. Were it not for patient welfare associations, generous donors and selfless medical professionals, there would not have been any pockets of better care in this dismal situation at all. If the people's representatives and the bureaucrats that implement their policies are not moved and ashamed by this state of affairs, then it is only fitting they get a dose of the same. Restrictions on accessing medical facilities outside Pakistan would also have another benefit, for they would close one avenue for government officials to evade court proceedings by taking the plea of requiring treatment abroad. Exceptions can possibly be made, after proper verification, in cases where a particular treatment is not locally available, and if treatment is nevertheless sought in the private sector, it should be at personal expense. In such a scenario, one can be sure that public-sector hospitals and related facilities such as laboratories will see a dramatic improvement. After all, our ruling elites believe they have a right to the best. The fact is, so do the people over whom they rule.

Policing Karachi

IN today's world where technology plays such an important role in creating conditions conducive to security and in helping solve crimes, it sounds like an idea with huge potential. The Sindh government is gearing up to launch a video surveillance project in Karachi that will involve the installation of 10,000 high-definition cameras across the city, so that footage can be used in the investigation of crime and the breakdown of law and order. This is part of its so called Safe City project, which involves building public safety by improving the provincial government's capacity to respond in a variety of situations ranging from emergencies to traffic accidents and crime. At an estimated cost of Rs10bn, the new cameras are to be installed at 2,000 locations that have been identified after feedback from the police, intelligence agencies and the Counter-Terrorism Department.

Certainly, improved security is a desperate need in this city. Not only are crime rates sky-high, the violence is of myriad types and ranges from street crime to gang violence to rivalries between political parties. That said, a project of this nature has been implemented before but there has been little identifiable benefit. The Sindh police currently operate some 2,000 cameras that have been being installed since

2008 through various departments. Admittedly, these are only two-megapixel cameras (that are to be replaced by the high-definition ones), but some benefit from their use would have been a reasonable expectation. The new project may help in increasing the capacity of law enforcement but it must not be forgotten that technology is only as good as the hands in which it is put. Further, bringing some sort of order to the ocean of chaos and crime that is Karachi involves many other steps being taken as well, from reducing the number of weapons on the streets to improving socioeconomic indexes to developing the city's tattered infrastructure. It can only be hoped that these aspects also command at least a part of the Sindh government's attention.

Urbanising Pakistan

HE more detailed census data being revealed by the authorities is throwing up further puzzling trends that need to be examined closely. The population of Karachi, for instance, has been reported at 14.9m, a figure that has baffled many who believed it ought to have been much higher. For almost a decade now, it had been argued that Karachi's population was around 20m — although the estimate may not have been based on a comprehensive population count, a number of factors such in-migration led many to infer that this was a realistic figure. It is unfortunate though that many politicians are throwing numbers around as if they have counted all the people themselves; for example, Farooq Sattar of the MQM-P has claimed that Karachi's population "cannot be less than 30m". If we were to take that contention seriously, it would be interesting to see what sort of in-migration and fertility rates would be required to go from 9.3m in 1998 to 30m in 2017. The same is the case with much of the chatter from other political parties.

As the figures now being revealed show, Karachi's population appears less than expected because two important districts that are integral parts of the city have not been counted: Malir and Korangi. The larger figure for Karachi division is 16.05m which includes the supposedly 'rural' population of the two districts mentioned above. The definition used for urban Karachi has excluded these districts. On the other hand, the definition used for urban Lahore has seen the inflating of the size of the urban population. This is the main reason why the urban populations of Sindh and Punjab appear out of sync with what people were expecting. Instead of rejecting the results out of hand and alleging large-scale undercounting (in Sindh's

case), it would be better to make a sound argument for why the new figure does not seem accurate.

What is even more puzzling are the provincial shares of the total population. The way Sindh has stayed constant, despite massive in-migration in the long intercensal period, invites questions. Even in the last census, the provincial shares had remained broadly the same over the intercensal period, leading many to claim that the numbers had been adjusted to ensure that no corresponding adjustment in the seat shares in parliament should be undertaken. This time, too, the total population share has not moved for Sindh, while the share of the rural population has increased markedly by more than 50pc. This is in sharp contrast to Punjab, where rural population grew by far less than the national average. These divergent outcomes need more focus. Changing definitions cannot explain most of this divergence, so a clearer picture is required from demographers and researchers.

Anti-US atmosphere

Pakistan's diplomatic battles with the US must not be fought in the streets of the country.

There is certainly reason to be gravely concerned by US President Donald Trump's so-called South Asia strategy: it more or less casts Pakistan in the role of regional villain; ignores all of the country's justifiable security concerns; and recklessly threatens to exacerbate regional tensions by seeking a larger role for India in Afghanistan with no mention of China, Iran or Russia.

But faced with American pressure or unreasonableness, the temptation in security circles in Pakistan is often to respond more unreasonably. Perhaps most damaging is the mobilising of Pakistani public opinion against America; casting the US as a bully that wants nothing more than to damage, undermine and humiliate Pakistan.

That may have short-term benefits — an angry civil society, media and public can act as a legitimate buffer against American demands — but it is to the long-term detriment of the true national interest. Most obviously, it limits the state's ability to

have a frank and open dialogue with the US, and makes necessary adjustments to controversial policies on both sides more difficult to achieve.

The Raymond Davis episode and the Salala incident in 2011 demonstrated the damage that the reckless mobilisation of domestic public opinion in the myopic pursuit of national security goals can inflict. What may have been conceived as a legitimate expression of public unhappiness with an arrogant superpower was quickly hijacked by the ultra right and soon the state was under pressure to sever ties altogether with the US.

The creation of the Difa-i-Pakistan Council after the Salala incident exemplified the problem. The DPC's virulent anti-Americanism threatened to morph into uncontrollable anger against the Pakistani state and a demand for the overthrow of the existing constitutional, democratic order in the country. The bilateral relationship with the US was somewhat stabilised eventually, but the DPC continued to exist and, in the latest crisis, has once again emerged to preach its agenda of isolation and regressiveness.

In the messy reality of the region, there is an undeniable fact: given Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan, tumbling towards a rupture in ties with the most important external actor in that country, the US, in no way serves this country.

Governments and states certainly need the support of their publics in the pursuit of external policies, but the Pakistani state should be careful lest it becomes hostage to its own domestic propaganda.

Shelter homes for women

SHELTER homes do not require legislation to be set up. They do, however, require recognition of the fact that domestic violence is a very real phenomenon. The Supreme Court on Monday ordered the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government to reopen four women's crisis centres in the province that were closed in 2010 (when there was an ANP-led government in KP). It thereby upheld the Peshawar High Court's verdict in the matter against which the provincial government had appealed to the apex court. The presiding judge of the Supreme Court bench pointed out that the PTI-led government was not meeting its obligations towards women, even though it claimed to be the party with the largest female presence. Granted, crisis centres also need funds, the lack of which the KP government cited as being the reason for it being unable to reopen them. Nevertheless, the question is one of priorities. Incidentally almost exactly four years ago, the Peshawar High Court had ordered the same, a directive evidently not complied with.

In recent years, there has been legislation against domestic violence enacted in the country which makes it mandatory for such homes to be established. KP so far remains the only province to have not passed any law in this connection. Women in that province are thus particularly disadvantaged where their protection is concerned. It is not enough to have laws against physical assault in the Pakistan Penal Code: domestic violence is a very specific crime with multiple aspects, including emotional and mental torture, withholding of finances, etc. For many women, leaving home is the only recourse to escape from an intolerable existence. At the same time, they do not always have other family members willing to take them in. For a woman in such a situation, the availability of legal aid, often free, can only help so far, for what is she to do when she has nowhere to go? The government, which is constitutionally bound to protect her, must step up to fulfil its duty.

A controversial verdict

A cataclysmic event in the country's history appears to have ended with a whimper in court.

Nearly a decade since Benazir Bhutto's tragic assassination, an anti-terrorism court has delivered its questionable verdict in a case that was controversially investigated and prosecuted.

Five suspects accused of involvement in the planning and execution of the attack on Bhutto in Rawalpindi on Dec 27, 2007, have been acquitted; two senior police officers responsible for protecting her on that fateful day and, later, securing the site of the attack for evidentiary purposes have been convicted; and former military dictator and then president retired Gen Pervez Musharraf has been declared an absconder in the case.

It is a thoroughly unsatisfactory conclusion to a case that raised more questions than it purported to answer.

While criticism has been directed at the court, the problem originated with a weak prosecution.

The possibility that the state may appeal the verdict should be considered seriously, and this time the state should assemble a stronger case that is scrupulously backed up by evidence and the law.

The Bhutto assassination consisted of a number of tragedies wrapped into a single traumatic episode.

Surely, a broken criminal judicial and policing system must bear a great deal of the blame for the failure to identify and punish the architects of the former prime minister's assassination.

Similarly, the Musharraf regime ought to be held accountable for appearing to use Bhutto's security as a negotiating tool in the political deal-making that was being attempted at the time. But there is another inescapable fact: the PPP won power in 2008, manoeuvred Mr Musharraf out of office and then proceeded to do virtually

nothing to try and identify and hold accountable the perpetrators of Bhutto's murder.

The party and its sympathisers argue that the responsibility to sustain a nascent transition to democracy forced the PPP government to make unpleasant choices. While that may be true — the Asif Zardari-led PPP was under pressure on many fronts — it is also the case that the PPP itself opted to relegate the murder of its iconic leader to the bottom of its list of governance priorities.

Notions of self-survival and having to make unpleasant compromises tend to characterise politicians' accounts of their time in office. But Bhutto was no ordinary leader and her death should never have been treated as merely another dark chapter in the history of a country that has seen many such incidents.

The PPP government owed it to the nation, its own party and its assassinated leader to identify and prosecute those responsible for her death. The laments of PPP leaders today may be real, but so was their conscious decision to turn their back on their slain leader for the sake of power and public office.

It is a heartbreaking disgrace to the memory of one of the country's greatest leaders.

Mind of a killer

The JIT report of Mufti Shakir's interrogation in Karachi's Central Prison in March 2014 offers a chilling insight into the mindset of a violent extremist, while the events that followed illustrate the terrible failings of our criminal justice system.

Mufti Shakir was arrested on suspicion of having masterminded the bombing that had killed Sindh's counterterrorism chief Chaudhry Aslam in January that year.

During his interrogation — which included the confession that he had also murdered 10 policemen and an army soldier — Mufti Shakir claimed he had offered to undertake the suicide mission against SP Aslam himself. However, a Lashkar-i-Jhangvi accomplice dissuaded him, saying that as a 'religious scholar' his skills as a preacher were too important to be sacrificed.

So Mufti Shakir, says the JIT report, mentally prepared a 25-year-old named Naimatullah over the course of a week for the task. The success of the operation was a huge morale booster for the many extremist groups fighting the state and, conversely, a major setback for law-enforcement authorities.

If given credence, the account confirms in several ways what is thus far known about the ‘traditional’ path to militancy for many in the ‘90s: poverty, a madressah education with a lack of any substantial formal schooling, and a family with equally hard-line religious beliefs.

To this country’s enduring misfortune, there were at the time numerous jihadi outfits that young men with extremist mindsets could join and where their inclination to violence would be nurtured and given an outlet. Having worked his way through several of them, Mufti Shakir joined the TTP in 2012. As a ‘commander’ he proceeded to radicalise the next generation of recruits — such as the young man who was cannon fodder in the elimination of SP Aslam.

With his violent past and clear potential for further mayhem, not to mention the findings of the JIT report, it can scarcely be comprehended how this high-level militant managed to get bail. The abject failure by investigative authorities to build a prosecutable case against him has had deadly consequences.

It is believed that having fled to Afghanistan where he is running a training camp for militants, Mufti Shakir has since dispatched operatives to target police officials in Karachi. The confluence of single-minded militants and a criminal justice system whose weaknesses defy belief amounts to a scenario in which it will be near impossible for Pakistan to win its battle against terrorism.

Musharraf's remarks

IF retired Gen Pervez Musharraf is unable to resist commenting on Pakistani politics and his time in office, politicians are unable to resist responding to Musharrafian provocations, large or small. On Wednesday, the Senate resounded with speeches denouncing the former military dictator after he spoke yet again, carelessly and glibly, in the media about the A.Q. Khan nuclear proliferation saga that became public on the general's watch. The former army chief's comments were neither wholly new nor surprising. The episode was deeply humiliating for the country and personally embarrassing for Mr Musharraf, who had cast himself then as a strongman in total control and alone in a position to put the country on the path of progress and good global standing. Unhappily, greater considerations of the national good continue to escape Mr Musharraf, who speaks in an off-the-cuff manner about issues that could have unpleasant ramifications for the country he once led.

Certainly, a more open and frank national conversation on a dark chapter in the country's history is needed. In one sense, the state's claims that it has tightened the safety and security of the nuclear complex to world-class standards that make accidents or deliberate mischief unlikely in the extreme is borne out by the fact that there have been no publicly known incidents of attempted proliferation since the network was dismantled. Surely, given the hostility and suspicion with which the Pakistani nuclear programme is viewed by much of the outside world, if there had been a breakdown in safety and security measures it would have been used to heap further pressure on Pakistan. But the senators' fulminations on Wednesday point to an uncomfortable reality: the political class is unwilling and unable to seek greater input on nuclear matters; at most, the issue is used as a means to politically attack perceived opponents. Nuclear safety and security are matters of national security and should be treated as such, but that should not preclude civilian input.

Extremists on campuses

A shocking attack that missed its target but claimed the lives of at least two others on Eid day in Karachi has revealed a dangerous and apparently growing dimension of militancy in the country.

Sindh MPA Khawaja Izharul Hassan, a senior leader of a faction of the MQM, survived the audacious attempt on his life on Saturday, but the alleged mastermind escaped the scene of the attack.

Believed to have been injured in the attack, the militant belonging to a new outfit, Ansarul Sharia Pakistan, was quickly identified by the Sindh police: Abdul Karim Sarosh Siddiqui, a former student of the University of Karachi.

The involvement in militancy of young individuals from the mainstream-education system is not a new phenomenon. Saad Aziz of the Safoora Goth carnage was a student of the Institute of Business Administration, Karachi, while Noreen Leghari, an MBBS student of Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences, Hyderabad, has been implicated in ties with the militant Islamic State group.

What is clear is that the higher education system in the country remains thoroughly ill equipped to either curb extremism among students or identify individuals before they are able to go on to commit violent crimes. In the wake of the latest Karachi attack, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Shah has claimed that a security audit and verification system will be introduced in the province to try and identify students with militant and terrorist leanings. That may be a welcome move, but it will need to be carefully implemented.

The blunt instrument of the state should not be used against young people who may simply have an educational interest in different ideologies or want to practise a different kind of politics to what the state condones. The focus must be narrow and precise: religiously inspired militants who are on the path of violence against state and society, be they so-called lone wolves or part of an established network of militancy.

The measures that need to be taken cannot be limited to the campus either. The physical and online networks of jihad must be monitored more closely. After more

than a decade of fighting militancy, why is it still relatively easy for individuals seeking to join militant groups to do so?

Surely, as the militancy evolves, the state's response in fighting it must evolve too. Finally, there is the original reality ie madressah networks through which a great deal of recruitment and facilitation of militancy occurs. The emergence of a new challenge does not mean long-standing threats can be ignored. More effort is needed on all fronts.

Rohingya exodus

THERE seems to be no escape from the cycle of violence and persecution the Rohingya suffer in Myanmar. In a tragedy last week, children were among the 17 people found dead after their boats capsized while they were trying to flee Myanmar and reach Bangladesh. The UN says that nearly 90,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh after violence broke out in Myanmar recently. Clashes have broken out a number of times over the past few years between the Buddhist majority in Myanmar and the Rohingya who are Muslim. The latest cycle of violence was apparently triggered when Rohingya militants launched attacks on police which left 12 security personnel dead. The response from the state as well as Buddhist mobs has been brutal, with Rohingya villages reportedly being torched. In the rush to flee the violence, a number of people have died in the waters between Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Rohingya — described by the UN as the world's most persecuted minority — lead a miserable existence in Myanmar, with the state refusing to recognise them as citizens and insisting they are 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh. They have few rights, while a renewed wave of Buddhist nationalism has helped fuel violent attacks against them. In fact, former UN head Kofi Annan warned that if ethnic tensions are not addressed in Myanmar, there is a "real risk" of radicalisation. The attacks by militants on police, and the subsequent crackdown by the state and mobs, surely point to growing radicalisation on all sides.

In the immediate term, to prevent more tragedies such as incidents of drowning, Bangladesh must allow in those fleeing persecution and violence in Myanmar and not turn them back. Not only is blocking the access of those who are escaping death and injury inhumane, it also contravenes international conventions. While it

is true that Bangladesh already hosts hundreds of thousands of displaced Rohingyas, allowing them to drown in the sea or return to face violence is unacceptable. The international community should come forward to lend Dhaka a hand in caring for the Rohingya refugees. However, the only long-term solution to the Rohingyas' misery is for Myanmar to treat them humanely and with respect. While the debate about the community being genuine 'sons of the soil' may be inconclusive, compassion and humanity demand that they be treated as individuals with fundamental human rights. The world needs to put more pressure on Myanmar to stop its excesses.

Missing empathy

ON the surface, it would appear that Pakistan's political elites hold only contempt for those in whose name they rule — those who must learn that, to adapt George Orwell's searing words, all men are equal, but some men are more equal than others. Yet reflection reveals worse: a flint-hearted cynicism that makes these power brokers use to their advantage anything that might give their self-interest a fillip, regardless of notions of justice, humanity, empathy or even shame. These past weeks have presented enough evidence: last Thursday, a Rawalpindi anti-terrorism court finally delivered a judgement in the case of the 2007 murder of former prime minister and PPP leader Benazir Bhutto. The PPP was in government for five years after the 2008 elections, yet failed to pursue the case with any meaningful vigour. As the ATC proceedings slowed, party representatives stopped showing up altogether — even when the court started conducting day-to-day hearings. Not a single PPP representative was present outside Adiala Jail when the operative paragraph of the verdict was read out — this, from a party that has lost, over the course of years, so many of its supporters, as well as leaders, to the fight against anti-democratic forces.

But it is not just the PPP. After his recent disqualification, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif undertook a procession designed to demonstrate his popularity. As this spectacle was under way, in the Lalamusa vicinity, vehicles in his cavalcade struck and killed first an elderly man, and then a young boy — the latter, tragically, being crushed by following vehicles too — and failed even to stop. The PML-N leader, who proclaims such empathy with the masses, never bothered to visit the child's parents. And the party — against all norms of humanity, decency and

humility — had the temerity to hijack the family's grief by proclaiming the child a 'martyr' to the PML-N cause. So easily is the hypocrisy of our political elites exposed. Perhaps it is time they stopped pretending.

BRICS declaration

The message is uniform from friend and foe alike: Pakistan's tolerance for externally oriented militant groups is no longer acceptable and a serious national effort needs to be made if the country is to remain on the right side of international opinion.

The significance of the BRICS declaration that included a condemnation of violence in Afghanistan and a specific mention of the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad should not be underestimated.

The presence of India in the five-nation bloc clearly influenced the language of the declaration in implicitly pointing towards Pakistan, but China, Russia, Brazil and South Africa will only have added their voices to the growing chorus of concern because of genuine considerations of their own.

Pakistan must not make the mistake of dismissing the signal from the world's leading emerging economies. It does not appear to be an aberration and cannot simply be ascribed to overwrought allegations and concerns of India, Afghanistan and the US.

In truth, while Pakistan has made significant strides in the domestic fight against militancy, there is a contradiction at the heart of the country's efforts to fight militancy, terrorism and extremism: an unwillingness to acknowledge that past policies, and an ongoing selective approach to fighting militancy, have contributed to the problem.

Without an honest reckoning with the past, the reorientation of the state from one that supported jihad under the umbrella of the Cold War to one that recognises the great cost that it inflicted on Pakistan's economy, society and standing in the global community cannot be complete. And without recognising that Pakistan's record in

fighting militancy, terrorism and extremism at home has been patchy and inadequate, greater success is likely to prove elusive.

The bewildering aspect of the state's anti-militancy strategy is that it continues to pursue perfunctory measures such as banning militant groups without any real determination to shut down the operations of those groups in various guises. The only real attempt at drawing up a comprehensive anti-militancy strategy is the flawed National Action Plan, which has been implemented poorly and without uniformity.

Certainly, some outside allegations by India, Afghanistan and the US either seek to place excessive blame on Pakistan or are meant to try and dissuade the latter from pursuing its legitimate security interests. It is also the case that the important gains Pakistan has made in its fight against militancy often go unacknowledged and unappreciated.

But on this there must be clarity: Pakistan's fight against militancy is its own fight for its own long-term peace and prosperity. Too often external criticism has been used by the state to deflect and deny legitimate critiques of its anti-militancy policy.

The BRICS declaration suggests an international trend that Pakistan cannot afford to ignore. The domestic fight against militancy must be made smarter, harder and more purposeful.

Depleting reserves

IT is no secret that Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves have been on an accelerating downward glide path since hitting a peak in October 2016, as the current account deficit widens almost every month. What is still open to conjecture, however, is how much further this trajectory has to go before reaching its logical conclusion: the IMF. The government is assuring us that matters will never come to that since the depletion of the reserves is driven by the import of machinery which once installed will help reverse the tide. That explanation is cutting less and less ice with the passage of time for a variety of reasons. For one thing, empirically it can be demonstrated that the decline in reserves is due to more than just the import of machinery. For another, there is no indication that the machinery being

imported will actually help boost the country's foreign exchange earning capacity, and whether it will do so in time to avert a depletion of the reserves and the return to a balance-of-payments crisis that necessitates yet another international bailout. The debate outside government circles is not whether Pakistan will need a bailout at some point in the near future but when that moment will arrive.

With reserves now hovering around import cover barely sufficient for three months, every downward movement takes us towards the danger zone. In 2008, Pakistan went to the IMF with reserves sufficient for barely two months of imports, and in 2013 that figure was 1.7 months, according to World Bank data. As the declines pick up, it is worth bearing in mind that in both those years, Pakistan was perceived as a vital ally in the war against terrorism by the White House. That perception played a critical role in getting money disbursed quickly, and without most of the truly difficult preconditions that could accompany such a bailout in the absence of good ties in Washington. It would be a mistake to find comfort in the thought that we have other powerful friends now, who could be seen as providers of a bailout. Thus far, there is no indication whatsoever that China is in the business of underwriting macroeconomic stability in smaller countries, and that is unlikely to change in the near future. Pakistan's external-sector weakness should not be ignored for much longer because it has ramifications far beyond macroeconomics.

Sindh IG's complaints cell

THE fact that police in Sindh acts as a handmaiden of a corrupt and power-hungry ruling elite is one that citizens have long had to live with. The response to the complaint cell set up recently by IG Sindh A.D. Khawaja gives some idea of the extent to which people in the province suffer from the law enforcers' excesses. As reported in this paper, more than 450 complaints across the province have been received in the two weeks since the cell was established to investigate alleged misuse of authority and financial corruption by police. Given that awareness about this mechanism is not yet widespread, this is likely only the tip of the iceberg. The complaints, received through text messages, phone calls, faxes and emails, implicated officers across the spectrum, from constables to SSPs, and — according to staff manning the cell — have been forwarded to the relevant authorities for investigation.

The deluge of complaints is scarcely surprising when one considers that the law-enforcement agency functions under an outdated law dating from 1861. Aside from a plethora of shortcomings, this colonial piece of legislation mentions neither the police's duties to the community nor even the term 'custodial torture'. Instead, it envisages the force as a body entirely unaccountable to the people it is policing. With the promulgation of the Police Order 2002, it seemed that the police would finally evolve along more modern lines. Aside from measures against politicisation of the force, it encouraged police-community cooperation and mandated the setting up of public safety commissions to prevent violation of fundamental rights by police, including "rape, death or serious injury to anyone in police custody". However, after the 18th Amendment, the PPP-led Sindh government revived the Police Act 1861. A complaint cell is thus a welcome step to bridge the gap between the people and the police. That said, the Sindh government's deliberate and ill-intentioned curtailment of the IG's powers may mean that the public's voice remains a cry in the wilderness.

Anti-extremism efforts falter

DESPITE the grandstanding from officialdom, anti-extremism is little more than a buzzword in Pakistan. For while everyone acknowledges the importance of countering extremism, no one in authority appears willing to actually undertake the task — at least not in a coherent and consistent manner. Let alone a strategy, even the fundamental question of jurisdiction remains unresolved. On Tuesday, the National Assembly Standing Committee on Defence referred a bill proposing anti-extremism measures to the Cabinet Secretariat to decide whether it fell within the domain of the defence ministry or that of the interior. The bill, introduced by a PML-N legislator, suggests that a body be set up specifically to identify the factors likely to give rise to violent extremism, identify those most at risk of being influenced by radicalisation, and formulate policies targeted at the youth to raise awareness of the perils that extremism poses to the country.

That we are still fumbling at the starting line of what should have by now been a sustained campaign is not only dispiriting but downright alarming. Religious extremism has been percolating through this society since decades, becoming increasingly blatant over time. At best, it has divided society along the lines of faith; at worst, it has been the impetus for committing murder in the name of God. Acts

of terrible violence — targeted killings, lynchings and bombings, etc — have claimed tens of thousands of lives. It was not until the massacre of more than 130 children in Peshawar in December 2014 that the state came up with a plan to tackle terrorism. However, without being supplemented by a holistic strategy — the much-vaunted ‘counter-narrative’ — to weed out bigotry and intolerance from society, the 20-point National Action Plan was a laundry list at best. Even that has not been properly implemented. For instance, Nacta — the organisation responsible for crafting a counterterrorism policy — has not been strengthened as stipulated; it remains a moribund entity. For all intents and purposes, NAP is now little more than a reminder of a brief period when there was collective political resolve to push back against violent extremism.

Instead, perversely enough, the state has muzzled voices of reason, ‘disappeared’ individuals with views critical of the establishment, and demonised those professing ‘secular’ opinions. In other words, progressive ideas that should have been allowed space have been further marginalised. It is hardly surprising that despite the success of the military operations against terrorist groups, almost every day continues to bring forth evidence that Pakistan’s slide towards obscurantism continues unchecked. Violent extremism is no longer the preserve of the poor and uneducated segment of society: as recent examples show, even university-educated youth are becoming agents of terror. With the growing disquiet in the global community over Pakistan’s militancy problem, the country’s standing in the world is compromised — and no amount of bombast can change that.

North Korea crisis

EVEN the remote prospect of nuclear war is a chilling thought. However, the dangerous escalation between North Korea and the United States — both nuclear-armed states — shows no sign of abating. The root of the conflict lies in the Korean War that ended in 1953, which left the Korean peninsula divided between the communist North and capitalist South. Today, over two decades since the end of the Cold War, the seeds of conflict remain in this troubled peninsula. The latest crisis has been triggered by a series of provocative actions by Pyongyang. Last month, the North threatened to fire missiles at the US Pacific territory of Guam; this was followed by an even more troubling move in late August when Pyongyang fired a ballistic missile over the Japanese island of Hokkaido. On Sunday, the North

claimed to have tested a hydrogen bomb. While all these moves by the isolationist regime are indeed troubling, the response of the US — Pyongyang's primary foe — has hardly been measured. For example, the US president has threatened the North with "fire and fury" should it attack America.

Aside from the fact that the relationship between Pyongyang and Washington has been characterised by decades of mutual hostility, at this time both states are headed by men who regularly indulge in provocative bluster. For example, Kim Jong-un, North Korea's current strongman, termed his country's intercontinental ballistic missiles a "gift for the American [expletive]" on America's independence day. Mr Trump, hardly known for his subtle language, has said that "talking" to the North is not the answer, and that "they only understand one thing" alluding to the use of force. One tends to differ with Mr Trump; talking is indeed the answer to this crisis, as the alternative is far more horrific. Even South Korea, a staunch American ally and the state that arguably has most to lose in case of war, has differed with Washington's approach and called for "peaceful denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula". All stakeholders, especially the North and the US, must first stop issuing threats against each other. Second, saner minds on all sides must resist the march towards war. China and Russia have influence over the North, which they should use to urge Pyongyang to climb down. On the other side, cooler minds within the US establishment need to prevent their country from getting involved in another disastrous conflict.

A brave journalist falls

TUESDAY'S murder of Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh in Bangalore could have two outcomes. The death at the hands of suspected Hindutva militants, who shot her several times at the doorstep of her home at close range, could become one more screwdriver turn in the coffin of free media in the world's largest democracy. Or her brave writings could set off a long-delayed popular showdown against growing assaults on civil liberties and free speech under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Civil society groups such as Not In My Name have already fanned out across India raising their voices against Hindutva lynch squads. Lankesh's death triggered large protests in different parts of the country. 'I am Gauri Lankesh' placards came up overnight and the Congress government in Karnataka has ordered a dragnet for the killers.

Initially an English-medium journalist with leading newspapers, Lankesh migrated to writing and publishing in her native Kannada in the footsteps of her late father P. Lankesh. Like him, she began to publish a weekly, which she named after herself. Gauri Lankesh Patrike inevitably became a lightning rod with Hindutva groups who saw in her a formidable challenger. They attacked the journalist as an anti-Hindu Maoist sympathiser while she saw herself as a practising devotee of India's secular constitution. Belonging to the Lingayat community of Shiva mystics common in southern India, the 55-year-old social activist worked to dissociate her people from the larger Hindu identity, which she described as a body of exploitative hierarchies ranged against women and minorities. She bonded with Dalit icon B.R. Ambedkar's criticism of Hinduism. As such, she stood for solidarity with religious minorities and support for the lowest ranks in India's caste heap. One of her last pieces was about the plight of Rohingya Muslims, refugees from Myanmar shunned by India as a threat to its security. Days before her death, Lankesh had nudged her supporters to not be cowed by Hindutva. "Intolerant voices find strength in our silence," she had cajoled them.

Scrutiny of students unacceptable

A dangerous proposal, rightly opposed by Senate Chairman Raza Rabbani in a letter to the VC of the Karachi University, has been floated to encourage all universities to start sharing student records with intelligence agencies as part of an effort to counter the presence of extremist elements and ideas in these institutions.

The idea was debated after the attempted assassination of a senior political figure in Karachi by a former student of KU.

Any inroads that extremist and militant groups can make into universities and student bodies is a serious matter and must be countered vigorously. But opening up scrutiny of all student records to security and intelligence agencies will do little to help in the matter.

First, the records are not likely to contain anything that will help identify any radicalisation of students taking place. Second, the security forces have little idea

of what to look for as signs of incipient radicalisation that might be contained in the records.

The idea takes us back to the Ayub Khan days when student groups were almost uniformly viewed with suspicion and state surveillance of campus life had a stifling impact on education. Today, too, opening up campuses to the invasive gaze of security and intelligence agencies will have the same result.

The reach of the agencies will go far beyond the admissions database, which has little more than what the Nadra database contains. Instead, if the agencies start asking about papers and examination records of individual students, library borrowing records, CCTV footage, as well as the teachers' 'candid' assessment of potential radicals in their classrooms, the damage done to the educational process could be irreparable. Such scrutiny would be a dangerous precedent, especially considering there is already a track record of using access to such records for purposes other than pursuing terrorists.

There is little doubt, however, that universities and institutes of higher education have a role to play in the effort to counter the spread of violent ideas and groups in our society. But that role is best served through the central pillar upon which any university is built: the curriculum.

All higher education curricula should cultivate the critical thinking faculties of their students. Such critical thinking comes from exposure to history and its contentious details, the enormous diversity of the human race, the millennia-long conversation amongst philosophers, the complex arrangements of society, economy and polity through which social life articulates itself, and much more.

It is this exposure, and the deep appreciation of the complexities of life that it breeds, along with the suspicion of anyone who claims to have simple answers to all questions, that are blooming in the minds of the youth — that is the most potent endowment universities can confer upon their students. This is where the faculty should focus their energies.

IG's powers restored

A DECISIVE blow has been struck against the politicisation of the police in Sindh. Ruling on a petition filed by civil rights campaigners against the PPP government's notification for the removal of A.D. Khowaja from his post as the province's top police official, the Sindh High Court ordered that the incumbent would continue as inspector general, Sindh. Neither can he be removed until at least three years after his appointment in March this year. In fact, the court held that the provincial government cannot remove the IG without compelling reasons, and restored to Mr Khowaja his powers over postings and transfers within the police department that the PPP government had withdrawn from him in June. Equally significant, it directed the Sindh government to enact rules ensuring the IG's autonomy of command and independence of operation. Meanwhile, no transfers and postings of police personnel are to take place without the IG's order. In short, the court's verdict goes to the heart of the issue: the independence of the police force.

Aside from KP, where reforms have brought sweeping changes, political interference in the workings of the police is to some degree institutionalised in Pakistan. State functionaries and political heavyweights are accustomed to using the police as an instrument to advance their interests and protect their 'investments'. The result is a corrupt and compromised police force that abets and profits from criminal wrongdoing; loyalty to those in power counts for more than competence and qualifications, and duty to the public falls by the wayside. That largely explains why Sindh's political elite decided it needed to dispense with the services of a police chief considered more upright than most. One of the reasons that Mr Khowaja incurred the wrath of the Sindh government was that he took steps to make the recruitment process more merit-based and transparent, a vital component in building an effective law-enforcement agency. When the PPP's attempt to have him removed — being a federal appointee, the IG can only be removed by the centre — met with failure, possibly because of pressure from the security establishment on the Nawaz Sharif government, it proceeded to try and render him powerless. The Sindh government's Machiavellian efforts to sideline the IG have been dealt a humiliating defeat. For the people, however, the verdict gives reason to hope that the long overdue process of police reforms can now get under way.

New CEO for PIA

THE beleaguered state-owned airline may have a new chief executive officer after a gruelling search, but the problems remain the same. The airline's top management has previously been shaken by resignations amidst messy attempts to prepare the airline for privatisation — something billed as a search for a 'strategic investor' — and sackings in the face of allegations of corruption. The unceremonious departure of some in the management has cast a shadow on the new chief, and pulling the airline out from under this shadow will be his primary challenge. The new chief himself is far too young and inexperienced to be a driver of any significant change, particularly considering that the energies of the top management are largely exhausted in dealing with the ailing carrier's creditors. Couple this with the fact that with less than a year remaining for its term to end, the government is pressing ahead with its plans to conduct a divestment of a substantial chunk of its shareholding, mostly to shore up reserves and the fiscal framework — undoubtedly, the new chief has his work cut out for him.

The first big plan for the airline's future sank the fortunes of his predecessors, but perhaps the new chief can successfully navigate his way through to implementing plan B: the sale of shares. However, in order to lift the share price of the airline to any meaningful level, some sort of long-term prospect for its return to profitability will be required. Prospective investors are less likely to be impressed with the PIA roadshow, whenever it gets going, if all they can see is a beaming face at the top with all the dysfunctions intact beneath. They will want to ask about the big plan to tackle the growing debt burden and mounting losses, as well as when an independent and professional management will be brought in. How will revenues be raised and costs curtailed? The new chief best start penning his answers to these queries now.

Time to reset foreign ties

Necessary and desirable, a reset of foreign policy is possible — if the government approaches the issue sensibly, cooperatively and with a genuine intent to effect change.

Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif has spoken candidly and persuasively about the key flaws in Pakistan's foreign policy and the need for change. In truth, since the end of the Afghan war of the 1980s, the country's foreign policy has been characterised by ad hoc decision-making and an excessive militarisation of national and security interests.

Relations with neighbouring countries other than China have ranged from relatively cool to outright hostile, while the inconsistency in ties with the US is yet again on full display. Foreign policy experts would be hard-pressed to find an overarching constructive theme in Pakistan's ties with the outside world; a logical trade and regional connectivity agenda has languished as security fears have dominated.

If a new foreign policy vision is to be developed, the principles underpinning the country's approach to the outside world need to be fleshed out cooperatively across national institutions. In theory, the government's approach of having the Foreign Office initiate proposals that will be debated by the National Security Committee and approved by parliament is sound.

It contains the possibility of frank civil-military dialogue and a joint institutional response to the country's challenges on the external front. But much will depend on how meaningful the engagement is on both sides.

Experience suggests that sweeping public criticism of the military establishment's worldview triggers reactionary condemnation of the civilians' perceived lack of seriousness in matters of national security. The Constitution requires and democracy demands that civilians lead policy debates, a reality that must be acknowledged by the military establishment. In return, the civilians should demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding of national security and foreign policy considerations and accept that military input on policy matters can be helpful.

There is also a very real constraint: time. Having wasted four years by refusing to appoint a full-time foreign minister and failing to strengthen the civilian institutions that could develop a new approach on the external front, the PML-N government must now move swiftly.

Army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's message on Defence Day recently in which he rightly asserted that the state must have a monopoly over violence — an implicit rejection of all non-state militant groups — can be combined with Foreign Minister Asif's admission of past failures by the state to form a new platform for Pakistan's engagement with the outside world.

The platform must be an unequivocal rejection of any form of militancy and a firm commitment to regional cooperation and trade. Certainly, Pakistan's desire for peaceful relations with, for example, India will not be immediately reciprocated or easily achieved. Nevertheless, a foreign policy reset is a necessity for Pakistan.

Ending load-shedding

ONE has lost count of the number of times government officials have set a date for the end of load-shedding in the country; in fact, people can be forgiven their scepticism when they hear, once again, the minister of state for water and power assert that the government will announce an end to load-shedding in November. It is not clear whether he means that the announcement will be made then, or that load-shedding itself will disappear in November. Either way, it is likely that the minister has jumped the gun. Power generation has increased in the past year, and he is right to point out that the threshold of 20,000MW has been crossed for the first time. But ending load-shedding is not about what peak power generation can hit. It is about straightening out the financials of power pricing, improving recoveries and strengthening transmission and distribution. Various government officials, from the last prime minister to the new one, as well as Punjab's chief minister, have gleefully been cutting ribbons to inaugurate new power projects all year, but we are still waiting to see how far the governance of the power system has been improved. That is the lynchpin, and until that happens, no amount of incremental megawatts will help.

The minister should now be asked where our future plans for reform of the power sector stand. The last we heard the government was in the mood to bulldoze the power regulator, Nepra, and parcel out some of its crucial powers to the provincial governments and keep some for itself. More than raw megawatts, what matters here is the shape of the power sector that the government has in mind for the future. In the late 1990s, a set of reforms was being advanced that was transparent and that was supposed to be the framework for meeting future power needs. But this time we have no idea about what kind of a road map the government is following, and how much thinking has gone into preparing it. It seems to be a short-term push; adding a large amount of megawatts is the only thinking in town at the moment, and anything that stands in the way will be brushed aside. The minister owes the country an explanation about where things are headed in the power sector beyond the additional new generation capacity.

Removal of encroachments

IF anything rivals the chaos of traffic across the country, it is the endless line of encroachments and blockades on the same roads on which the vehicles ply. From large cities such as Karachi to smaller towns, often even rural settlements, everyone, it would appear, wants to appropriate some part of the street for themselves. Anti-encroachment drives have produced mixed results, and in many instances, the illegalities return as soon as the authorities' attention is diverted. Now the traffic police in Lahore have launched a programme that tries to reimagine the way in which encroachments and illegal parking lots on the city's roads can be dealt with. Launched on July 31, the One Week, One Road initiative involves eight of the department's better qualified wardens who have been chosen to form two squads to visit various areas in the city to select one road where encroachments are to be cleared, engage with traders and shopkeepers to brainstorm ideas on how deficiencies can be rectified, and prepare assessments of the roads in the context of the availability (or absence) of traffic signals, street lights, U-turns, etc. On Thursday, Lahore Chief Traffic Officer Rai Ijaz told the media that earlier the Mughalpura Link Road and Allama Iqbal Road — both extremely high-density thoroughfares — had been cleared of encroachments and illegal parking lots. Now, he said, Queen's Road and Bund Road — where obstructions to the free flow of traffic are often of legendary proportions — are being focused on, and warning notices have been sent to 148 shopkeepers.

One must hope that the Lahore initiative is successful; if the authorities are able to find a sustainable solution to one of the country's most pressing problems, more power to them. Engaging with the encroachers, rather than simply razing their means of livelihood, and addressing issues such as the shortage of legal parking lots, may be the key to this solution. Other city administrations must look on with interest, for if it works, the programme can be replicated in their jurisdictions.

Will draconian press law go ahead?

IT is shocking and must not be allowed to become law. The Pakistan Print Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance, a draft of which has become public, is a sinister law that regards the press and the public's right to information as threats to the state. Although the Press Council of Pakistan has said that no "repressive laws" were being prepared, the draft is said to have been under discussion by its members. If the inconceivable is permitted to come into existence, the Pakistan Print Media Regulatory Authority will abolish any semblance of press freedom in the country, reducing the media and the public that relies on it for information to virtual dependence on state propaganda and official, biased versions of news, information, analysis and opinion. Lest that appear to be hyperbole, some of the measures in the draft ordinance should be considered. The granting of publishing licences that will need to be renewed annually would effectively give the state the power to kill off publications it does not approve of. The possibility of jail terms for journalists and publishers and raids on the offices of publications deemed to violate the authority's rules and edicts is nakedly coercive. Stacking the new authority with two-thirds of members from outside the media and granting the state the power to select the non-media members is akin to imposing state control. Perhaps most damningly, the utter secrecy in which the proposed law has been drafted speaks to the malicious intent of those behind the move.

What is truly dispiriting is that the law has been drafted on the watch of a democratically elected government, nearly a decade since the transition to democracy began and which was meant to deliver genuine democratic progress. The PPMRA draft ordinance, instead, hearkens back to the darkest days of military rule, going so far back as to evoke memories of Gen Ayub Khan's Press and Publication Ordinance, 1960. Certainly, while media freedom can and should never

be taken for granted, the media and the public have had a legitimate expectation that after the depths of the dictatorship of Gen Zia, a return to the darkest days of media censorship and control of the public would not be so blithely championed by the state itself. The government has failed in its democratic duty by allowing the PPMRA draft to even come into existence. It can now dispel doubts about its anti-press, anti-democratic intentions by publicly renouncing the possibility of introducing a new press law. The existing regulatory framework is durable and reasonable and there is no need for wholesale change. Hopefully, the government is moving towards rectifying its mistake: the information minister has spoken of an inquiry into the drafting of the ordinance.

This newspaper has vigorously defended media freedom as well as argued for a responsible media. The public is served best only by a combination of a media free from state coercion and one that exercises its freedom in the public interest. Where media abuses are discernible, this newspaper has been forthright in its criticism and urged more responsible journalism. But there can be no doubt that the proposed law is sweeping in scope and malicious in intent. The media must unite to oppose the PPMRA Ordinance if the idea is not dropped.

Reforms in gas sector

AT long last we are hearing of an initiative to bring about deeper structural reforms in the gas sector which is in dire need of them for many years now. The prime minister is pushing a plan to unbundle the gas distribution companies into multiple entities, presumably in an attempt to debottleneck transmission and distribution, and bring down gas losses. The move may go some way towards achieving its goals, but in the absence of wider reforms, particularly in pricing, it will be little more than cosmetic. The gas sector needs price reforms on a priority basis — for too long have we been squandering this precious and scarce resource under the illusion that its abundant endowment will last forever. From 2010 onwards, that illusion has begun to fade with growing intensity, and unless our consumption patterns change, debottlenecking the supply chain will not help.

Pricing reform in gas is becoming even more urgent given the country's growing reliance on imported LNG. The price difference between imported and domestic gas is now turning into a reality that will further unbalance our industry as it

proceeds. Our economy has five main sectors that are the largest claimants of natural gas: domestic consumers, fertiliser, vehicular, textiles and other industry, and power generation. One of these sectors — vehicular — was told a few years ago to arrange all its supplies through imported LNG, and the result was the near total closure of the entire sector due to the large price differential between domestic and imported gas. The time is approaching when other sectors will also need to be told to arrange their own supplies from imported LNG; the effects will be similarly devastating. The power sector is best suited to absorb the incremental cost of imported gas because fuel cost is a pass-through item in its pricing structure. But textiles and fertiliser will be devastated if shifted to imported gas for their feedstock and captive power plants. Our fertiliser industry is competitive only because of the low price at which it gets domestic gas for feedstock; it will become uncompetitive compared to imported fertiliser if this changes. Getting gas to consumers is an area where reforms are needed, but the government needs to focus on pricing reforms too so that industry doesn't have to absorb the coming shock in one sudden move.

Ending money laundering

It might be heartening to see that Pakistan ranked 46th in a list of 146 countries that present money-laundering/terrorism-financing risks to the world. Given the type of headlines coming out of the country, one could intuit that Pakistan would rank a lot higher ie the level of risk it would present would be much more. The better-than-expected ranking owes largely to the efforts of regulatory authorities and political parties to put in place a risk-management framework over the years to match international standards in most cases. Pakistan has a functional Financial Monitoring Unit, and State Bank guidelines for banks to conduct their diligence on foreign transactions are regularly updated using input from international regulators. Recently passed legislation, such as the anti-benami transaction law, as well as the anti-money-laundering act, also provide the authorities with many of the powers they need to interdict illicit financial flows.

Yet large-scale problems persist. A fairly robust framework, both legislative and regulatory, to counter money laundering and terror financing, is the reason why Pakistan's ranking is not higher. But the big problem now in Pakistan is the lack of will to use the tools that this framework provides the authorities with in order to clamp down on these practices. The fact that the country's power elite, from all

walks of life, uses channels through which illicit financial flows travel, makes it difficult for those tasked with interdiction to do their job. Rooting out the problem and improving Pakistan's ranking further would depend more on will than updating the laws and framework. This is a long-haul job; part of it must entail punishing those apprehended, and part of it delegitimising illicit flows as far as possible. Given the will and the right reforms to encourage formalisation of the economy, Pakistan can improve its position further.

Land grabbing with impunity

IT is ironic that while law-enforcement agencies pursue militants, another category of criminals has been for years operating with total impunity in the country. A report in this paper yesterday revealed that land grabbers in Sindh have been convicted in only five cases since 2010 — a fact all the more shocking because an anti-encroachment court and a special force in Karachi were established that year for conducting speedy trials of land grabbers and retrieving public property by demolishing illegal structures. So far, a mere 10 cases of land encroachment in Karachi have been registered this year: judging by the record, one can well imagine what the outcome is likely to be.

However, Pakistan's largest city is not the only one where land grabbing is taking place. With the rise of the middle class and the subsequent boom in the requirement for residential accommodation — especially that ultimate symbol of upward social mobility, the 'gated community' — construction has become a bigger business than ever before in this country. In the process, the regulation of land has fallen victim to avaricious vested interests. Relevant authorities — rather than implementing zoning laws, safeguarding government land and green spaces, and ensuring that areas for low-cost housing are utilised for that purpose — are complicit in the wholesale plunder of land. They place their services at the disposal of powerful segments of the ruling elite, both civilian and otherwise, and corrupt development authorities to construct lavish housing complexes and expand existing neighbourhoods. The police, of course, are a vital cog in this thriving racket, using force, or the threat of force, to compel people into giving up their land.

The human cost of such criminal wrongdoing is enormous. When master plans are violated, the urban poor are squeezed to the fringes of cities and farmers in rural

areas are forced off their land and deprived of their livelihood. Moreover, because the government has paid no heed to its duty to provide affordable housing to a growing population, the vacuum has been filled by another breed of land grabber in the informal sector — again in collusion with formal authorities — who has made a profitable business of supplying land for lower-income housing. Mushrooming on the outskirts of urban centres, these localities are magnets for those involved in drug smuggling, gunrunning etc. Then there is the environmental cost exacted by encroaching on protected land and natural drainage channels. Huge tracts of forest land outside Rawalpindi have been devoured by land grabbers while the once spectacular natural setting of Bani Gala in Islamabad has been similarly encroached on. Illegal construction on storm water drains prevents rainwater from exiting populated areas, resulting in urban flooding like that experienced in Karachi recently. Until the laws against land grabbing are strictly applied to whoever engages in it, we are allowing rapacious elements to compromise our future.

Hazara killings

IN the violence against civilians in the country, the repeated targeting of Hazaras in Balochistan stands out as a particularly grim failure of the state. On Sunday, yet another family of the Shia community was targeted in Kuchlak as they were travelling to Quetta. Four individuals, including a child, were killed in the attack. What followed is also distressingly predictable: the assailants rode off on a motorcycle unimpeded; security forces arrived at the scene after the gunmen had fled; and hasty search operations in the immediate aftermath of the killing failed to lead to the attackers. Meanwhile, the Hazara people have been left to mourn more deaths in a seemingly never-ending descent into fear and terror. To be sure, the vast physical expanse of Balochistan and the sparse population of the province mean that protecting all the people all the time would challenge even the best-resourced, most-committed security forces in the world. But there have been several such incidents in Balochistan; they are clearly linked to a flawed security policy in the region and the failure of the political leadership. The Hazaras, as indeed the general population in Balochistan, will not be safe until the state changes its approach to security in the region.

Yet, delay in long-term changes should not stand in the way of short-term improvements where possible. The enemies of the Hazara people are a relatively

narrow band of militants on the militancy spectrum. Among the groups likely to attack the Hazaras, active militants are estimated to be relatively small. So while there is no possibility of physically protecting every Hazara, the state can use its significant intelligence and security apparatuses to identify and progressively shut down groups targeting the community. Further, while the state has pointed repeatedly at external sponsors of militancy being responsible for terrorism in Balochistan, the networks used are invariably local. So is preventing violence against Hazaras not a priority for the state, or are lessons that ought to be learned not being learned because there is little accountability? Finally, the Balochistan government, weak and sidelined as it may be in security matters, needs to take a stand. When it comes to the Hazaras, there has long been a suspicion that the political class is indifferent to their plight. The provincial government needs to demonstrate empathy and concern for all its people.

Dangerous waters

IT is a tragedy that has sadly become so ubiquitous that at least in the public consciousness, it barely registers anymore, the numbers simply adding up on the grim stats sheet. The past one month has been particularly bad, with upwards of 30 people drowning in the stormy waters off Karachi's beaches. The latest incident occurred on Saturday evening on Sandspit beach, when a total of 12 people died after going into the deep while attempting to save a child who had been sucked into a whirlpool. According to the police, the picnickers had repeatedly been asked by police and lifeguards to not swim so far. And the city mayor, Waseem Akhtar, said that at least 30 lifeguards jumped in to go to the swimmers' rescue, but were unsuccessful in their attempts. He added that Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, under which swimming in the sea in this rough monsoon season is banned, was already in place but the administration faced difficulties in implementing it.

The situation is indicative of how law enforcers and even rescue workers often find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place where issues of public safety are concerned. It is their job to make sure that citizens don't put themselves or others in danger. But when they resort to the high-handed measures that often become necessary given the people's propensity to indulge in risky pursuits, the guardians expose themselves to criticism and admonishment. Recent experience

has shown that, realistically, the only way to prevent people from entering the water during the dangerous season is to prevent large numbers from getting to the beaches in the first place. When this has been done, however, there has been justified resentment, for healthy recreational opportunities are also a right. The only answer lies in a cross-media, mass-scale public awareness campaign so that the hive mind is flooded with the knowledge of just how dangerous the sea can be. Citizens must be educated on how to protect themselves too.

More engagement for regional peace

PRIME MINISTER Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif have reiterated the need for what ought to be the only sensible approach of the outside world to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Cooperation, not coercion, is the path to regional peace and stability, and Pakistan cannot be bullied or threatened into addressing the outside world's concerns before protecting its legitimate security interests. In an interview with a wire service, Mr Abbasi has spoken of the self-defeating US approach of restricting aid to Pakistan to try and force this country to 'do more' in the regional fight against militancy. As Mr Abbasi has rightly stated, "We are fighting the war against terror, anything that degrades our effort will only hurt the US effort. What does it achieve?" The so-called South Asia strategy of the administration of President Donald Trump disproportionately blames Pakistan for failures that originate in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan will not be won by Kabul and the latter's foreign allies until they recognise that competing regional interests cannot be aligned by force.

The overall political response by the Pakistani government to the US also indicates a sensible and desirable approach to dealing with a superpower that is making unreasonable demands of the country. If Pakistani and US interests do not necessarily align in the region, the answer must be greater diplomatic, political and military engagement, not less. Shrill denunciations of the US and the manipulation of public sentiment against it will only limit the state's ability to engage with the Trump administration and the Afghan government, a scenario that can only benefit anti-peace elements in the region. To be sure, a mindless ratcheting up of pressure on Pakistan by the US will trigger some degree of angry reaction in the country; no sovereign power or people can respond well to aggression by a superpower that

is patently misguided in its understanding of the region and the policies it is pursuing.

Foreign Minister Asif's regional diplomacy has also echoed the message of Mr Abbasi: a genuine regional approach to Afghanistan's problems and recognition that rivalries outside Afghanistan are affecting peace and stability. In Tehran, the second of three countries that Mr Asif is to visit as per the directions of the National Security Committee, the foreign minister held high-level meetings in a fairly positive atmosphere. In recent times, Pakistan-Iran tensions have escalated and complicated the necessary task of bilateral and regional cooperation. Just as Iran must recognise Pakistan's legitimate concerns, the latter should address Tehran's concerns. Iran itself has experienced fresh tensions with the US while India is pushing for closer cooperation for the sake of Afghan trade. Pakistan must steer a careful course and work to identify areas of cooperation with Iran.

No fire safety

TWO recent events have illustrated the need for the strict enforcement of fire safety codes in this country. Lack of enforcement of such regulations puts lives at risk. On Sunday, the Awami Markaz building in Islamabad was gutted. As reported, it turned out that the high-rise was without a Capital Development Authority completion certificate, the document that certifies compliance with the requisite fire and safety codes. Meanwhile, on Monday, activists and families of Karachi's Baldia factory victims observed the fifth anniversary of the blaze, considered the worst industrial accident in the country's history. Around 260 people perished in the fire. While it is suspected that the tragedy was the result of a deliberate act of arson (even after five years the case is still in the pre-trial stage), the inferno nevertheless illustrated in a painful fashion how large industrial units flout fire and safety regulations. As speakers at a memorial pointed out, there were reportedly no emergency exits in the factory while the structure also lacked fire alarms.

Where the Islamabad blaze is concerned, several structures in the federal capital, including malls, office buildings and hotels, also lack CDA completion certificates, as a government official told this paper. This situation is untenable. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people often congregate inside such buildings. The fact that such structures lack the requisite certificates is unacceptable and the CDA must ensure

that all buildings in the capital are adhering to the relevant safety codes. Also, the lesson from the Baldia tragedy must not be lost on us; how many more structures like Ali Enterprises, as the factory was called, exist in Karachi and the nation's other cities? And has the state, specifically the civic bodies and provincial governments, considered surveying large structures, especially high-rises, to confirm whether they are following safety regulations? Considering the large number of multistorey structures sprouting up across the country, specifically in Karachi, has the state made an effort to ensure that these structures have proper fire escapes and firefighting systems in place? The answers to these questions would not inspire confidence. In fact, the Sindh Building Control Authority recently announced a ban on high-rises after the provincial high court called for such measures. It is a fact that the city lacks the equipment to fight blazes beyond a certain number of floors. Yet we continue to ignore fire safety regulations at our own peril.

Review of anti-NAB law

THE PPP government in Sindh is apparently backpedalling, albeit tentatively, on a law it had recently enacted and defended vociferously as being in the interest of 'true' accountability. Designed to do away with NAB's jurisdiction in Sindh, the National Accountability Ordinance 1999 Sindh Repeal Bill was bulldozed through by the PPP legislators in the provincial assembly on July 3 amidst noisy protests from the opposition. The party's majority in the legislature meant that it could enact the legislation despite the Sindh governor's refusal to assent to it. Nevertheless the pressure has been mounting, with various political parties and NGOs filing petitions against the move. On Monday, at the beginning of a hearing into these petitions, the PPP government informed the Sindh High Court that it would review the law.

Notwithstanding its claims that the NAB Ordinance was a 'black' law that disproportionately targeted the PPP, the Sindh government's move smacked of naked self-interest and self-preservation. Its very timing was suspect, coming as it did a few days after NAB announced it was expanding the scope of its investigation into alleged corruption in various departments of Sindh. Not only that, but the assembly session in which the bill was passed was hastily summoned a month in advance of when it was due. However, with the recent judgement in the provincial

IG's case going against it, the past few days have demonstrated to the PPP that a majority in the assembly does not always translate into a carte blanche and that it may be on shaky ground in this case as well. The PPP may have objections to the NAB law as it is being applied in Sindh, but it would have been more credible to suggest improvements in its working rather than moving to replace it with rubber-stamp bodies that would do the government's bidding. With its reputation for governance and fiscal probity in tatters, the Sindh government does not have many takers for its plaint of victimisation in the name of accountability.

Return of cricket

PAKISTAN cricket's agonising eight and a half years of isolation effectively ended this week with three T20 international series being played between a high-profile World XI and the Pakistan team at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium. It was an exciting moment for millions of home fans as well as Pakistanis abroad when Sarfraz Ahmed's men first entered the field on Tuesday to take on the star-studded World XI. For once, the result of the game didn't matter for the players had assembled for a much larger cause — the rebirth of Pakistan cricket. Deservedly, the occasion made sporting headlines internationally while in Lahore, everything came to a standstill, including the campaign for the NA-120 polls, as people celebrated by either thronging to the stadium or watching the players on television. The negative impact of isolation for a cricket-crazy nation like Pakistan has been wide-ranging — no surprise when we consider that the cricketing bond shuns cultural, ethnic and sectarian differences. But after a long period in the wilderness, following the 2009 terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore, there are high hopes now that the game is staging a comeback.

Pakistan was forced to play all its home series in the UAE since the incident as all foreign teams refused to play here. The Pakistan Cricket Board, the richest sports body in Pakistan, felt the financial crunch and had to shelve several plans besides downsizing staff. While domestic cricket continued on home turf, the PCB launched the Pakistan Super League in Dubai and Sharjah, which was a clear indication of how the cricket board and the government viewed the security situation in Pakistan.

All of that, however, is suddenly a thing of the past. A World XI comprising well-known current and ex-players from seven Test-playing countries is here and doing well at the Gaddafi Stadium. This series will be followed by a T20 game against Sri Lanka in October and another three-match T20 series against the West Indies in November. More importantly, the otherwise indifferent world cricket governing body, the ICC, has softened its stance towards Pakistan and that could mean the resumption of full-fledged international activity here. Sustained efforts must be made by the authorities to ensure that the stadiums are full and that Pakistan once again becomes the vibrant cricket-playing nation it used to be and regularly hosts foreign teams on its soil.

Minimum wage

IN recent years, with a rhetorical flourish in the federal budget speech, the finance minister has announced an increase in the minimum monthly wage for unskilled labour. It now stands at Rs15,000 per month. The federal decision puts pressure on the provinces to also raise the minimum monthly wage for unskilled labour. But reality is very different to what the government presents. The International Labour Organisation in a report on minimum-wage setting in the garment industry in Pakistan has called for the repeal of the Unskilled Minimum Wage Ordinance, 1969, and the ratification of the Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, 1970. The aim is to update the legal framework in line with the 18th Amendment devolution and empower provincial minimum wage boards to set wages on the basis of specific criteria that put the welfare of unskilled labour at the centre of wage decisions. The garment industry, a significant employer of unskilled labour in the country, typifies the problem of labour exploitation. According to labour activists, the monthly average wage for unskilled males is Rs10,000 to Rs11,000, while for women it hovers around Rs7,500. Perhaps as little as 10pc of the unskilled labour force is paid the federally mandated minimum wage of Rs15,000.

Yet, as the ILO report clarifies and labour activists have long campaigned, the problem is not merely at the level of minimum wage implementation but also in determining what the figure should be. The Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research advocates a living wage of Rs31,000 while the ILO has recommended a reference wage of approximately Rs25,000 — both significantly higher than the politically determined Rs15,000 that the federal government touts

as an achievement and which is barely enforced. The path to positive change is relatively clear: empower provincial minimum wage boards; define clearly the purpose in and criteria for setting a minimum wage; and eliminate exclusions that remove, for example, agricultural workers from the ambit of minimum wage laws. But meaningful change will also depend on a change in the mindset of policymakers. Unskilled minimum wage workers are some of the most vulnerable of economic agents, their labour vital to producing significant wealth for their employers but their legal rights and social status allowing for massive exploitation. Rather than thinking simply in terms of state handouts to the economically vulnerable, should the state not ensure that hardworking individuals are compensated fairly and justly for the value of their labour?

Police brutality

TO gauge which sector of society has any power, it can be instructive to witness the attitude of the police towards them. On Tuesday, law-enforcement personnel meted out brutal and humiliating treatment to a large number of teachers staging a demonstration outside the Karachi Press Club for non-payment of their salaries since 2012. According to the protesters, 7,500 teachers are affected but the government has persistently turned a deaf ear to their pleas. The participants, including some women, who belonged to Karachi and several other districts of Sindh, were not taking the law into their own hands and damaging property or posing a threat to people. In fact, they were doing nothing more menacing than holding placards demanding that the government release the teachers' long-standing dues and salaries. The police, however, in a wholly disproportionate and ham-fisted response, resorted to baton charge and water cannons to disperse them. The images that emerged from that encounter are disgraceful, showing teachers manhandled, dragged by their legs, with their clothes ripped.

Police in this country at various times have unleashed brute force on different segments of the population seeking their rights, even when the people have done so through means compatible with democracy. Their reaction in this instance as well violates the inherent right of the public to agitate for their rights peacefully. Law-enforcement personnel, however, have not even spared Lady Health Workers demanding overdue salaries; nor even blind people pressing for employment rights under the disability quota. In the present instance, regardless of whether there

were irregularities committed in the teachers' recruitment — and certainly the education department has been no slouch in violating the rules — the Sindh government must find a way to address the genuine concerns of the protesting teachers. They should not have to pay the price for the dereliction of duty by the authorities concerned. Meanwhile, such reprehensible behaviour on the part of the police merely reinforces the image of them as an insensitive force without empathy for the public.

Steep rise in unaccounted for gas

IT is an arcane term from the world of natural gas distribution, but its effects hit us all in silent ways. Gas that is pumped into the distribution system and then disappears, due either to leaks, theft or even measurement errors, is considered unaccounted for, and the higher its quantity, the poorer the condition of the distribution system. Pakistan has seen its unaccounted for gas, or UFG, rise steeply over the past decade and a half, as the country leaned more heavily on natural gas as its primary fuel, with the financial losses being borne by the state-owned companies in charge of distribution. In the decade and half from 2001 till 2015, UFG losses doubled in Pakistan, going up from 7pc to 15pc. Today, the quantity of gas that goes missing from the system is as high as one billion cubic feet, more than double the quantity imported in the form of LNG. This is a staggering amount, and much of the country's growing gas deficit can be bridged if it is brought down.

But that is unlikely to happen, as a report carried by this newspaper makes abundantly clear. Successive governments have tried, and failed, to control the growing losses of natural gas in the transmission and distribution system. And all of them have toyed with the idea of eventually accepting the fact that these losses will never be plugged, and bundling the cost of this loss into the gas tariff and passing it on to the consumer. It has always been a bad idea, yet today it appears to be closer to fruition than at anytime in the recent past. Reportedly, the new prime minister is very keen on it since it presents a quick and easy way to fix the bleeding losses of the two state-owned gas distribution companies.

Commercially, it might make sense to quickly restore profitability to state-owned companies, but ethically it is a highly dubious practice to make paying consumers

foot the bill that thieves and ineptitude leave behind. On top of that, it is also bad policy, because it quietly rewards the ineptitude of the state-owned companies, as well as the massive political interference in their operations that are responsible for a large part of these losses. The gas regulator has long resisted the idea of raising the benchmark of what is considered 'acceptable' UFG, currently at 5pc. A report by a private consultant has come to the same conclusion. But it looks like pressure is mounting on the regulator to lift this benchmark to 7.5pc, and thereby pass the cost on to paying consumers. It would be fitting and proper for the regulator to publicly, and noisily, resist this pressure. The reason why UFG is so high is government ineptitude, and there is no justification for passing this cost on to consumers.

Barbaric murders

EVEN in the annals of 'honour' killing, these will be counted as particularly barbaric murders. Two teenagers, 15-year-old Bakht Taj and 17-year-old Ghani Rehman, were electrocuted to death by their families for having eloped from their homes in Karachi's Ibrahim Hyderi area. However, before they could approach someone to get married, they were tracked down by their families, who belong to a sub-clan of the Mohmand tribe, and brought back. A jirga of tribal elders ordered that the children be put to death for having flouted the traditional code of honour. Allegedly, the father and uncle of the girl and the boy held them down and repeatedly gave them electric shocks until they died. After an informant told police about the crime, bodies of the deceased were exhumed on Wednesday; a forensic analysis found that they bore signs of electrocution and torture.

The crime of honour killing — whatever the means of murder — has a particular horror attached to it: the savagery is twice compounded for being committed by one's own family. It can seem even more shocking when such an act takes place not in some lawless tribal region or rural backwater, but in a bustling, comparatively modern metropolis. However, that should not be cause for surprise. People, especially migrants, who belong to an extremely conservative social milieu are more likely to try and preserve their cultural values fiercely than be influenced by their (new) environment. As the present case shows, they retain even the informal instruments of 'justice' that exist back home. The real issue then, is of changing mindsets in which antediluvian notions of honour demand the taking of a life or the

handing over young girls as compensation. Nevertheless, there is evidence of an intergenerational conflict taking place in this society with younger people, more exposed to outside influences through the media and the internet, wanting to break free of the straitjacket of tradition imposed on them by their elders. The state must demonstrate that honour killing has no place in society. Although the crime inexcusably remains compoundable, amendments to the law have enhanced the maximum punishment to imprisonment for life, ie 25 years, while the minimum — even in case of a compromise — cannot be less than 10 years behind bars. The murderers in the recent case and the jirga participants should be held accountable. The law of the land must prevail over archaic tribal codes.

Ejection of MSF

INCREASINGLY, a disturbing trend has emerged: that of the state's suspicions regarding international, and on occasion local, organisations involved in humanitarian work. In certain areas, such as pockets of Balochistan, INGO workers have been ejected in their entirety, prevented from doing whatever good work they achieved in the past. The latest casualty is the world-renowned medical humanitarian organisation, Médecins Sans Frontières, also known as Doctors Without Borders. On Wednesday, it was told to wind up its operations and exit from its base in two health facilities in Kurram Agency because the authorities, for reasons yet to be disclosed, refused to renew the no-objection certificate that pertains to its operations in this area. MSF is now to pull out after a 14-year stint of providing medical services in a region that is amongst the most underdeveloped in the country.

Here, precisely, lies the crux of the problem. This is a country where the needs and rights of the citizenry, especially those unfortunate enough to reside off the beaten path, go routinely — some might say criminally — unmet. Millions subsist in abject poverty without access to basics such as potable water, access to healthcare, educational opportunities, or interventions that might lead to a more viable future. The state has historically been characterised by its many sins of omission and neglect. In such a situation, to arbitrarily force a halt to the operations of humanitarian organisations that are willing to go and help where the state is not is not just highly irresponsible but also speaks volumes for the scant concern the authorities have — their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding — for

citizens of this country. Making matters difficult or forcing out organisations such as MSF or Save the Children means further victimisation of the people. It is difficult to understand such an exclusionary policy, one that has deprived hundreds of people of humanitarian care, unless an answer is to be found in the state's paranoia and fear of organisations that work independently.

The path ahead for Sharifs & court

AN emphatic Supreme Court judgement disqualifying former prime minister Nawaz Sharif from holding public office was unlikely to be modified in a review by the very same bench that had disqualified him. With the court's rejection of the review petitions filed by the Sharifs, attention is likely to switch to the next phase of the family's legal saga: the NAB references and accountability trials that will be monitored by the Supreme Court. But before that, Sunday's by-election contest for Mr Sharif's vacant Lahore seat will likely attract fresh scrutiny of the PML-N's political strategy, which has veered from virtual confrontation with state institutions to passive cooperation since Mr Sharif's ouster. The sensible path from a democratic perspective for the PML-N would be to continue to keep the electoral process on track while the Sharifs contest the allegations against them in the courts.

While the Supreme Court verdict against Mr Sharif was disappointing from a strictly legal perspective, the PML-N supremo and the party leadership should recognise that, democratically, there is no other option but to stay within the confines of the legal and electoral systems and continue to try and improve them. While there may be justifiable apprehensions about the fairness of trials in accountability courts that are to be monitored by a Supreme Court which has already moved against the family, the allegations against the Sharifs are serious and a complete accountability process is necessary. If the Sharif family can present an adequate record of the legal accumulation of the wealth and assets the family possesses, it will undoubtedly strengthen the PML-N politically. With a general election scheduled next year, there is much at stake. The PML-N must recognise that the democratic process is greater than the legal woes of the family that leads it.

Just as clearly, however, other institutions, particularly the judiciary, need to demonstrate that faith in the constitutional democratic process is justified. The

allegations against the Sharifs are serious, which makes it all the more important the judiciary scrupulously adheres to the very highest standards of justice. The ambiguity surrounding the terms of Mr Sharif's ouster — is it for life or a specified period? — is unwelcome and it should be clarified with firm legal reasoning in the detailed review judgement. Moreover, the court should try and address concerns about the violation of due process by the oversight mechanism that it has approved for the accountability trials of the Sharif family. Just as Mr Sharif and his family deserve no special treatment under the law, the law must ensure that the standards of justice applied are fair and consistent. As events since Mr Sharif's ouster have underlined, the judicial and democratic processes themselves are under scrutiny and must be proved to be fair.

Kachhi canal

AT least on the surface, it appears that for the first time in many years, the government has undertaken a step in Balochistan that may actually redound to the benefit of the Baloch people. On Thursday, the prime minister inaugurated the 363-kilometre Kachhi canal project in Dera Bugti's Sui tehsil. The project, costing Rs80bn, is expected to irrigate some 72,000 acres of barren land in the tehsil in its first phase; its second and third phases are planned to extend across the Kachhi plain and beyond it to the Jhal Magsi, Bolan and Naseerabad districts. On the occasion, the prime minister said that the project would change the destiny of the people in the Dera Bugti area, adding that Balochistan will become the country's richest province.

It is heartening that a part of the long-deprived province is to benefit from the waters of the Indus via the new canal, enabling it to draw its rightful share from what is the lifeblood of agriculture in this country. Another means of livelihood will thus become available to the people of Dera Bugti, for whom the Sui gas field is among very limited sources of steady income. Those who undertake seasonal migration to work as farm labour in other parts of Balochistan or in Sindh at harvest time should be able to lead a less peripatetic existence. With the land becoming cultivable, not only would the production of food grain and other crops increase but land values will also register a rise. However, it is instructive to look at the fine print. With the canal originating from Taunsa barrage in Punjab, it tracks its way through that province for most of its length: of 363km in the first phase, only 81km

lies in Balochistan; and there are no projected dates for when phases two and three will even commence. Also, given that the project is to provide irrigation water supply to 713,000 acres of land, it means that only one-tenth of the objective has so far been met. And although at 6,000 cusecs, the discharge capacity of the Kachhi canal is far more than that of the PAT feeder or the Kirthar canal, being a lower riparian region has its disadvantages. For valid reasons, disillusionment with the state runs high among the Baloch. To ensure that the project bears out its promise and ameliorates some of this disaffection, it must progress beyond the initial stage.

Publications law

THE framing of laws and the ambit of their application is always a delicate balancing act. After the media managed to see off the threat posed by a draft law targeting the press, another, albeit somewhat less worrisome, challenge has come up. It appears that the draft Sindh Press, Newspapers, News Agencies and Books Act, 2017, has been approved by the chief minister and will now be scrutinised by the law ministry and then sent to the provincial cabinet for further perusal. The subject had been devolved to the provinces when the Concurrent List was abolished after the passage of the 18th Amendment. While there might be some justification for the move to regulate certain processes, for example the registration of newspapers, news agencies and printing presses, and to collate circulation figures so that the rates of government ads can be settled upon, and ensure there are no overlaps in names and titles, there are certain provisions, including penalties that are cause for concern.

To begin with, the draft legislation appears to be heading into the realm of checking published content. For example, a newspaper's declaration may be cancelled, for a number of technical reasons — if it carries “photostat material, [and] copies from other newspapers, including editorial [sic]”. Then, in addition to editors, it also, needlessly, holds individuals in charge of the pages responsible for any contraventions, prescribing either fines or jail terms as penalty. These debatable provisions are also worded loosely, lending themselves to abuse in the future — a point that ought to resonate deeply in a country that has been through long periods of draconian censorship. Surely, there is no need to embed such articles in legislation related to procedural matters when there is no dearth of laws, like those

related to hate speech, incitement to violence, etc, that are similarly intended. The draft at hand needs more careful perusal, as well as consultation with stakeholders, before it is passed into law.

Pak-US-Afghan cooperation is key

THE tripartite military talks held in Kabul between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US earlier in the week are a sensible development for at least three reasons. First, the high-level Pakistani delegation led by DGMO Maj-Gen Sahir Shamshad Mirza demonstrated that the military establishment is indeed seeking continued engagement with Afghanistan and the US in the latest phase of the fraught trilateral relationship. President Donald Trump's truculent words against Pakistan have caused consternation in policymaking circles and there is a danger that emotionalism could supplant rational decision-making. Yet, the perilous security situation and a seemingly permanent US military presence in Afghanistan are strong reasons for the three countries to continue with talks and cooperation. Suspending dialogue or whipping up domestic public sentiment against the US will only narrow Pakistan's policy choices going forward.

Second, the dialogue between the military leaders is important because of the emphasis on border management. A great deal of the friction between them is because of militant sanctuaries on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border. Pakistan's long-term aim of strengthening border controls, curbing the informal flow of people across the frontier and coordinating with security forces on the other side will necessarily make it more difficult for militants on either side of the border to cross over at will. In the meantime, if military dialogue can include intelligence-sharing for the identification and elimination of sanctuaries that all sides agree need to be tackled as a priority, it may help create the space necessary for deeper political engagement and a restarting of dialogue inside Afghanistan. For Pakistan, that will also mean greater coordination and policy dialogue between the civilian and military arms of the state. Given that it is Pakistan's official position that there can be no military solution in Afghanistan, the state's diplomatic and political arms will necessarily have to play a role in the establishment of long-term regional peace.

Third, the tripartite talks rightly identified action against the militant Islamic State group as a common goal of all three countries. Indeed, if there is one issue on which all groups inside Afghanistan and all external actors agree, it is the need to prevent IS from gaining space in the region. Not only is the group a common enemy that military cooperation is necessary against, cracking down jointly on the IS may help address some of the mistrust and suspicion that is preventing greater collaborative efforts in the region. Finally, the first drone strike in Fata since Mr Trump's declaration of his administration's strategy in Afghanistan is an early test of the likelihood of cooperation. If the strike was conducted with Pakistan's knowledge, it would indicate pragmatic cooperation; if it was unilateral, the US may be sowing more trouble for itself in the region.

All set at 120

THE voters of NA-120 will deliver the finale to a crucial electoral race today.

Much significance has been attached to the result of the by-poll by not only the PML-N and PTI, seen as the two main contenders, but other contestants as well. The PML-N's Kulsoom Nawaz is contesting the seat vacated by the long-dominating party chief Nawaz Sharif.

Consequently, even a sharp decline let alone an upset loss in the ratio of votes in comparison to the PML-N's past performance in the constituency would be put down to the court ruling that disqualified Mr Sharif.

The outcome will also determine the value of the presence of Maryam Nawaz, who has spearheaded the PML-N drive, and it will once again highlight the dent caused to the PTI by the absence from the campaign of Imran Khan because of certain laws.

The PTI has to come up with a good enough show in today's balloting to press its credentials as a replacement for the troubled PML-N, a situation similar to what the PPP encountered previously. The PPP is contesting the NA-120 seat more in the hope of awakening its cadres from a state of inactivity following the party's failure to maintain its popularity in Punjab.

On a quieter level, by fielding its candidate, this is exactly what the Jamaat-i-Islami is perhaps seeking to do, i.e. add some verve and purpose to the dull existence of its workers — just as some other right-wing or so-called religion-based parties are trying to assert themselves as new entrants in the political arena.

Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah and Milli Muslim League are testing the waters enthusiastically.

They might not as yet be strong enough to tilt the balance in favour of this party or that, but there is no doubt that their commitment to entering mainstream Pakistani politics will have a long-lasting influence on the democratic processes in the country.

For now, these groups are suspect in the eyes of many as mere imposters hiding behind a democratic façade; they are doing so, especially in the case of MML, by flaunting the many resources at their disposal.

Together, these parties provide a glimpse of the possible shape of politics in the country in the coming days. Whatever the outcome, the impact of the results will be huge. The trends provided by NA-120 will go a long way in defining the policies of the players in the electoral race.

ECP vs Imran Khan

IF Imran Khan and the PTI are guilty of not treating the Election Commission of Pakistan with the respect it deserves, the ECP is guilty of overreacting by demanding the arrest of Mr Khan and his forcible appearance before the commission later this month. The tussle between the ECP and Mr Khan is rooted in an attempt by a former party member to have the PTI supremo disqualified from holding public office because of illegal foreign funds that the party allegedly received. The PTI leader responded to the petition before the commission in a shabby manner, triggering contempt of court proceedings by an ECP tribunal under its jurisdiction as a high court. Now, a seemingly exasperated ECP has escalated matters by issuing an order for Mr Khan's arrest to force him to appear before the tribunal holding the contempt of court proceedings. It is an unnecessary move by the ECP, though it is hoped that the PTI and Mr Khan will do the sensible thing and voluntarily appear before the tribunal later this month.

Perhaps the ECP is seeking to lay down a marker ahead of the next general election, which likely will be held under a new regime of electoral rules and practices that aim to significantly enhance the powers of the commission. However, the ECP needs to demonstrate not only that it is willing to be tough but that it is also capable of being scrupulously fair. The PTI's strong reaction to the disqualification petition against Mr Khan is understandable, given that it has the potential to knock out Mr Khan from electoral politics ahead of a general election that the party likely views as its greatest opportunity to win power at the federal level. But the PTI must also recognise that it has a tendency to be dismissive of the law and political norms — while endlessly demanding better standards of conduct from its political rivals. If the party and Mr Khan have done nothing wrong, they have nothing to fear from the ECP.

Ex-minister's imprudent remarks

FORMER interior minister Nisar Ali Khan's seemingly ongoing quest to criticise the PML-N from inside the party has stepped up further with an extraordinary attack on Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif. The bitter rivalry between the two PML-N leaders is well known, but what sets apart Chaudhry Nisar's latest attack on the foreign minister is that it centres on a fundamental policy issue involving the country's future. Foreign Minister Asif spoke candidly and courageously in recognising the country's failed security policies of the past and the need for greater action against militant groups that continue to operate with impunity in the country. Now Chaudhry Nisar has responded to the foreign minister's assertions in a manner illustrative of the deep denial that some sections of the state and political leadership continue to be in.

According to the former interior minister, the real problem of the country is the outside world's desire to cast Pakistan as irresponsible and a spoiler of peace in the region rather than the fact that the continued existence of militant groups in the country undermines the peace, security and prosperity of the people here. What is worrisome about Chaudhry Nisar's assertion is that until less than two months ago, he was leading the interior ministry which has a central role to play in counterterrorism efforts across the country. If Chaudhry Nisar is revealing his ideological preferences, one may well ask if he was the right person to have led the ministry tasked with ensuring law and order in the country. If he is simply trying to settle political scores with the foreign minister, he is doing a disservice to the government and the country by appearing to undermine a vital national security and foreign policy debate.

Indeed, the disaffected politician appears more concerned with staying in the headlines than doing what is right by the country. An earlier assertion that he was aware of a security threat to Pakistan that even Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi does not know about was shocking. Ought the former interior minister not to have shared that information with the prime minister or his successor in the interior ministry? Similarly, there can be legitimate disagreements over the suitability of Khawaja Asif to run the foreign ministry and how to respond to US, Indian or Afghan criticism of this country. Perhaps Chaudhry Nisar's aim is to deflect attention away from the militancy debate because it will reflect poorly on his record as interior minister. But petty political infighting should not be allowed to

undermine debates that are vital to the future peace, security and prosperity of the Pakistani people.

Vector-borne danger

IT is unfortunate that parts of the country, particularly Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, are currently suffering from various vector-borne diseases, specifically chikungunya, malaria and dengue. A number of deaths have been reported while those infected run into the thousands. Chikungunya struck Sindh for the first time in a major way last year; this year, the situation is even worse. Though chikungunya is not lethal, it causes severe pain, especially in the joints, and thus has a debilitating effect on a person's mobility and productivity. As reported in this paper on Saturday, Sindh health department officials say that so far this year, over 4,000 cases of the illness have emerged in the province, with Karachi reporting the highest number of patients (over 3,000) while Tharparkar has also been badly affected. Elsewhere in Sindh, malaria is claiming a large number of patients; officials say around 14,000 cases of the disease have been reported this year. Where dengue is concerned, the number of cases this year in Karachi has gone down. However the situation in KP is quite different. Over 20 dengue victims have died in the province, while the number of suspected patients is over 1,600. Reports indicate that coordination between government departments is weak in KP, while in Karachi insufficient fumigation of city areas is said to be a key reason fuelling the chikungunya outbreak.

There are various ways to control the spread of these mosquito-borne diseases; it should be stressed that maintaining a hygienic environment tops the list, as this eliminates the breeding grounds of mosquitoes and other insects. A few months ago, the Karachi mayor said on record that the insanitary conditions prevailing in the metropolis were responsible for the spread of chikungunya. Unfortunately, the provincial and local authorities have failed miserably in maintaining a hygienic environment in Karachi and other parts of Sindh. Overflowing gutters and heaps of garbage testify to this unfortunate reality. Cleaning up the mess, along with carrying out fumigation, is essential to control the spread of vector-borne diseases in Sindh, KP and other affected areas. Moreover, people need to be educated about how to keep their homes clean and remove stagnant water to prevent mosquito breeding grounds from emerging within homes. Failing to take these

steps will only add to the gravity of the public health situation and may well lead to even more lethal and debilitating mosquito-borne illnesses.

Prize for local NGO

GIVEN the sorry state of conservation in Pakistan, where the authorities themselves issue permits for the hunting of endangered species such as the houbara bustard, it is easy to become depressed about the status of our natural surroundings. True, a number of both local and international organisations are doing their best to help the country's diverse flora and fauna flourish. But the level of awareness and concern of state and society is fairly low. Under such circumstances, one of the better pieces of news recently was that a local NGO, the Baltistan Wildlife Conservation and Development Organisation, has become the first entity in Pakistan to win the prestigious Equator Prize. It is among 15 entities from around the world to have achieved the honour this year. The prize was launched by the United Nations Equator Initiative in 2002, in order to showcase global community efforts to relieve poverty through conservation and the sustainable use of biodiversity. The BWCDO works with 17 villages in Baltistan to protect the endangered snow leopard, which is hunted down by villagers to protect their livestock. The BWCDO has found a solution in running insurance schemes and financial compensation against livestock losses resulting from snow leopard attacks.

The dedication of the workers of this NGO is exemplary, and while being celebrated ought to also provide reason to note that well thought-out initiatives and interventions can work. There is much to be done in Pakistan in terms of halting the various kinds of serious damage inflicted on the country's biodiversity and reversing the trajectory. Whether it is the snow leopards of the north or the mangrove forests of the coast, the scale of the challenge is immense. With recent developments such as the spotting of sperm and blue whales off the Pakistan coastline in the past few days — in what appears to be a first for our waters — there are chances that the task may grow in magnitude. The country should not be found wanting.

The task after by-election

A RELATIVELY close by-election result in NA-120 suggests that both the PML-N and PTI have much work to do ahead of the general election scheduled for next year. Of concern to both parties should be the less-than-expected turnout considering that the by-election was seen as a mini referendum on the Sharif family and the PTI's signature anti-corruption politics. A single by-election is not a good measure of overall voter sentiment, but the NA-120 poll could prove to be a bellwether of Punjab's voting behaviour next year. For the PML-N, there are some positives. Kulsum Nawaz's victory in a campaign organised and run by her daughter Maryam suggests that the Sharif brand still has considerable electoral appeal in the wake of Nawaz Sharif's ouster on corruption charges. Maryam Nawaz ran a steady campaign on her mother's behalf and made no major missteps.

What is unclear is whether the dampened enthusiasm in NA-120 for the PML-N is because of the Sharif family's legal woes or the absence of local issues in the campaign. Maryam Nawaz's speeches tended to focus on perceived national achievements of the PML-N and alleged conspiracies against her family rather than on issues of service delivery and governance in NA-120. The Sharif family is also hampered by a clear split between Shahbaz Sharif and his son Hamza on one side and Ms Nawaz and her father on the other. ECP rules restrict ministers from campaigning on behalf of candidates, but the near invisibility of the Punjab government and allies of Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif for the entirety of the contest suggest all is not well at the top of the PML-N hierarchy. With a general election less than a year away, the Sharifs will need to determine relatively soon who will lead the party into the polls.

For the PTI, there are more encouraging signs. A candidate, apparently well liked in the constituency and focused on local matters in her campaign, appeared to combine well with the overall PTI message of the by-election as a referendum against corruption and continued Sharif rule in Punjab. It confirms the adage that politics is local — without a strong candidate with ties to local communities, grand themes at the national level do not necessarily have much traction with voters. But the PTI should also note that while it is capable of narrowing the gap between itself and the PML-N, the latter continues to win more often than it does. With the PML-N potentially wracked by uncertainty over who will lead the party, the 2018 election

could be the PTI's greatest opportunity yet. But the PTI may need to return to its roots as a party of genuine change rather than continue with the powerful sloganeering at the top by Imran Khan allied with so-called electables.

Palestinian unity

GOOD news rarely emerges from Palestine, with the usual reports documenting one atrocity or another by the Israeli regime against the Palestinian people. Unfortunately, intra-Palestinian squabbling — particularly between Fatah that runs the West Bank, and Hamas which controls Gaza — has hurt the Palestinians further as both parties have fought for control over the limited areas the Arabs themselves run. This has resulted in two Palestinian Bantustans separated by a domineering and brutal Israeli regime in between. However, on Sunday it emerged that Hamas, that has been ruling Gaza since 2007 after a violent split with Fatah, is willing to cede control of the coastal territory to a Palestinian unity government. In the words of one Fatah official, “this step will enhance the unity of the Palestinians and end ugly division”.

Indeed, Palestinian unity is a prerequisite for the Arabs to successfully pursue their legitimate case for a viable and free state. Without such unity, Israel can employ the oldest trick in the book — divide and rule — keeping the Arabs locked in a vicious circle of violence and misery. But the establishment of a unity government will not be easy, as much mistrust exists between Hamas and Fatah. In fact, it was differences over an election that Hamas had won in 2006 that led to fissures within the Palestinian camp. Both parties need to initiate confidence-building measures for the sake of their people and look beyond short-term goals of consolidating power. The prime objective at the moment should be to improve the lives of the people, particularly those residing in Gaza described as a giant open-air prison. Hamas, Fatah and other Palestinian parties must work to improve the health and education indicators in their areas, as well as work on civic infrastructure. As the UN has pointed out, if the present conditions persist, Gaza may be “unliveable” by 2020. There must also be tolerance for each other's mandate and no further power grabs. Unity is necessary for all parties to pursue the only long-term goal that can alleviate the miseries of the Palestinian people: an independent Arab state where people can live with dignity and freedom — basic rights the Israeli occupiers have denied the Palestinians for nearly seven decades. The global community,

especially the Arab and Muslim states, must lend their full support to the Palestinian unity government.

Young migrants

SUCH desperation that even a hazardous foray into the unknown seems a chance worth taking is a reality for many Pakistanis. Harrowing Journeys, a Unicef-IOM report released this week, looks at the circumstances that drive children and young people to make their way to Europe as migrants and refugees along the dangerous Eastern Mediterranean and Central Mediterranean routes. Of those who took the former route, the report interviewed 4,811. Between 14 and 25 years of age, 44pc among them were Afghans; 17pc Pakistanis; 15pc Syrians and 6pc Iraqis. Others in this category were mainly from the Middle East. Those who took recourse to the Central Mediterranean route were more evenly divided, and included mainly nationals from several African countries. For both categories however, Italy and Germany were the most favoured intended destinations.

Among the findings in the first category, the one that leaps off the page is that of the four countries at the top of the list, Pakistan is the only nation that is not at war. A further breakdown reveals that 9pc of the Pakistani migrants were uneducated, 26pc had primary education while 59pc were educated up to secondary level. Individuals with higher qualifications comprised only 5pc of the total. These findings illustrate how the state is failing young Pakistanis, specifically young males who are expected to provide for their families. With the exception perhaps of Baloch youth fleeing their insurgency-hit province or persecuted religious minorities, the Pakistanis in the survey are likely to have undertaken their arduous journey for economic reasons. It is interesting that a large majority of them have a secondary education, indicating perhaps the limited opportunities that exist for gainful employment in Pakistan's semi-skilled sectors. Their arduous journey in search of better opportunities is fraught with many risks, especially if they are travelling alone which renders them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. That these young people take such a gamble with their life is a sad reflection on the state of governance in Pakistan.

Bringing militants into the mainstream

In the long term, the by-election result may be remembered most for the candidates who finished third and fourth.

The resurgence of the religious ultra-right in politics ought to be a matter of concern for state and society, with two new parties capturing 11pc of the overall vote cast in NA-120. The parties, which did not exist at the time of the last general election, owe their creation to two different radical ideologies.

Labbaik Ya Rasulallah is a Barelvi grouping that campaigned against the PML-N government for executing convicted murderer Mumtaz Qadri, while the Milli Muslim League has been created from the ranks of the Lashkar-e-Taiba/Jamaatud Dawa/Falah-i-Insaniyat network and endorses the worldview of Hafiz Saeed.

While the MML could not formally participate in the poll because of a technicality, the organisation's candidate campaigned brazenly as an independent, and the ECP found itself unable to take action against it for flaunting its ties to a banned group. The two radical campaigns bode ill for next year's general election.

If sections of the state are willing to experiment with the so-called mainstreaming of militant groups that have not taken up arms against the Pakistani state, democratic institutions must ensure that the terms of engagement are precise and democratic. The current approach of testing by stealth the viability of mainstreaming militant groups is unacceptable.

The MML attempted to participate in the by-election as if the usual rules applicable to normal political parties did not apply to it. In fact, in the case of MML and similar groupings that may emerge, special rules need to apply.

To begin with, there must be a clear and public denunciation of terrorism, militancy and extremism, and recognition that the constitutional democratic process is inviolable. The political process in the country cannot be distorted for the sake of an untested and unproven theory of mainstreaming that sections of the state may be willing to experiment with.

Such groups, if they can be permitted to be part of the democratic process at all, must be regularly audited by the state and the reviews made public. The NA-120 saw mosques being used as campaign centres by the LYR and MML. The ECP should review its rules governing such activities and local law enforcement must regularly monitor mosques, madressahs and social welfare centres that are used for political activities to ensure that violent ideologies and extremism are not promoted.

The democratic process is open and accommodating to a wide range of political thought; but that openness cannot extend to groups that may want to use it to destroy the rule of law, the Constitution and democracy in Pakistan. There needs to be a clear policy for militants willing to renounce militancy, but funnelling them secretly into the democratic process cannot be the right one.

Delayed water policy

THE fact that the country is awaiting the approval of the water policy a decade and a half since it was first drafted speaks volumes for our lack of priorities. From its inception, Pakistan's water resources in the form of the Indus river system were identified as the country's biggest natural endowment upon which the first generation of the power infrastructure was to be built and the agrarian economy nourished. The building of the two large dams, as well as their attendant canal management infrastructure and associated power houses, gave the economy the great leap it needed to kick-start industrialisation and attain food security. But then, we saw wastage through poor farm water management, failure to build further storages and unregulated extraction of groundwater.

At the root of all this wastage is the absence of a pricing regime for water. Around the world, authorities have learned that the best way to signal the preciousness of water to its consumers, as well as manage its allocation among different categories of consumers, is through pricing. At the moment, water is perceived as a free resource by most agrarian communities, except for those who have to run tube wells to extract it. Even the latter realise only the cost of running the tube well, which itself benefits from a subsidy on power, and not that of the water itself. The country badly needs a water policy, and given the rapid approach of the consequences of climate change, this requirement is becoming more and more

urgent. Yet, for several years, successive governments have been deliberating over a draft water policy, without any result. Then when matters were finally moving and a national water policy had finally been agreed upon by the four provinces and the federal government, the new prime minister decided to send it back to his newly formed Ministry of Water Resources for further input. It is true that important policies should receive wide input before being finalised, but given that we have been deliberating this matter for over a decade, and the provincial and federal governments had reached an agreement, one is left puzzled as to what the new ministry with old faces is going to add to it. The process of its passage should not be delayed any further.

Polio continues

WITH the start of a national immunisation drive against polio on Monday, there is reason to ponder how efforts to eradicate the disease, instead of taking on an urgency, are in slow-burner mode. The campaign to immunise every last child, as is the motto of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, cannot be said to have slowed down. Indeed, in recent years, new and significant challenges have been tackled, from the problem of parents refusing vaccination for their children, to armed attacks, often fatal, against many polio workers and their security detail. Even so, the continued circulation of the virus and its intermittent emergence now seem to be viewed with a degree of ennui, even disillusionment where chances of success are concerned. For a country that remains one of only three — the others being Afghanistan and Nigeria — in the world that are classified as ‘polio-endemic’, this approach is deeply unsettling and highlights our tendency to become resigned to a situation when it persists for long enough; at the very least, our efforts lose momentum as in this battle against polio

As an illustration of this, consider the fact that early this month, after a 20-month hiatus, Karachi saw a new case of a seven-month-old baby diagnosed with polio. His parents, refugees from Afghanistan, are said to have consistently refused to have their child vaccinated. It was also the fourth case reported from across the country this year. On Sept 14, presiding over a task force for polio eradication in Karachi, the Sindh chief minister spoke of how this one case had undone all the previous hard work to make the city polio-free. While the acknowledgement is necessary, the fact is that Pakistan keeps arriving at this juncture over and over

again, and is caught in a loop. The spread of polio is, perhaps, no longer uncontrolled, but neither are we close to eradicating the crippling virus. New strategies are needed on an emergency footing.

Trump's mindless bellicosity at UN

THE apprehension was justified. US President Donald Trump's disregard for institutions and fondness for reckless rhetoric meant that his maiden appearance at the annual UN General Assembly was a closely watched affair. Would the most isolationist and unilateralist of American presidents in modern history attack the UN itself, a favourite target of conservatives in the US, for the alleged wastefulness and anti-Americanism of the organisation? Or would Mr Trump directly attack UN member states that have earned his ire for various reasons? The US president chose to spare the UN for now from direct verbal attack, but in his extraordinary threats against North Korea, Iran and Venezuela he undermined the very principles and values on which the UN was created. It was a grim day for diplomacy and global cooperation. A pattern of the nine-month-old presidency of Mr Trump is for him to say wild, deeply unsettling things before his cabinet and the White House staff try and walk back some of the most damaging comments. But this time, the damage will be harder to contain and perhaps permanent.

To be sure, the UN is a cumbersome, frustrating organisation where global ideals and national interests routinely clash. For instance, year after year, decade after decade, Pakistan patiently reiterates its desire to have UN resolutions pertaining to the Kashmir dispute implemented. But the UN is also a vital organisation for a range of humanitarian interventions and is a global platform from which legally binding measures can be taken to advance global security. While Mr Trump may not care to understand or accept that, it is nevertheless shocking when he threatens to obliterate an entire country from the speakers' rostrum in the UN General Assembly, as he did North Korea on Tuesday. Historians scrambled to find another example of a UN member state, a superpower in this case, threatening to annihilate another member state, an impoverished nation of 25m people. The bellicose rhetoric against Venezuela was also unnerving as the US president only seems to recognise the sovereignty of nations when it suits him. The problems in Venezuela are manifestly deep, urgent and complex, but the Trump

administration's stance on the country has the potential to unnerve an entire continent.

On Iran, Mr Trump's hard-line position has doubtless cheered up many conservatives in the US, but they have not been able to provide any proof of Iran violating the nuclear deal painstakingly negotiated by the P5+1. That deal was never meant to be a panacea nor was it supposed to address all of the global community's concerns about Iran. So for Mr Trump to mindlessly attack Iran in bad faith is to send a signal that the US cannot be trusted to engage other countries responsibly or honourably. Mr Trump may not care about his behaviour, but the world certainly has to.

Invisible abuse

THE death on Saturday of a teenager who worked as domestic help in an upscale housing locality in Karachi continues to throw up distressing questions. The 17-year-old was found hanging from a fan in the home of her employers who claimed that she had committed suicide. This assertion was upheld by the first post-mortem carried out by a medico-legal officer at a large public-sector facility. The family of the girl, however, maintained that it could not have been suicide, and launched a demonstration against the police until the authorities ordered a second post-mortem. Consequently, it emerged on Tuesday that the child had been strangled to death. The four-member medical board, which included an additional police surgeon, also found marks of torture on the body, and has sent samples for chemical analysis so that it can be ascertained whether, as the family alleges, she was also sexually assaulted. Meanwhile, an FIR has been lodged under the clauses of the Pakistan Penal Code relating to premeditated murder, and the child's employers have obtained pre-arrest interim bail.

The law must now take its course and a thorough investigation should be carried out. Additionally, it is important to find out why the first autopsy produced an inaccurate report. There may have been technical deficiencies, but given Pakistani society's realities, another deeply disturbing dimension cannot be overlooked: those who work as domestic labour in this country are among the poorest of the poor, with rights only on the statute books, and next to no capacity at all to seek justice — particularly since such workers tend overwhelmingly to be women and

children. This category of persons, because of social custom and their own powerlessness as society's most vulnerable members, must toil on, often in conditions that resemble modern-day slavery than a situation with proper terms of employment. They suffer high levels of abuse that rarely come to light. In recent years, however, several cases from across the country have emerged where domestic help — mostly children — have been abused to the point of death. It is tragic that only torture or death makes it to the news; abuse that does not prove fatal or falls short of torture is simply accepted. Laws regarding labour workforce rights must be extended to this unrepresented though numerically large section of the population. Further, some sort of enforcement and redressal system must be devised immediately.

Muharram security

WHILE Muharram is a time of mourning and reflection, in this age of rampant militancy and sectarianism, the month also poses a significant security challenge to the state. Particularly during the first 10 days of Muharram, thousands of people nationwide congregate in mosques, imambargahs and other venues to participate in majalis and other religious activities, while mourning processions are also taken out. With such a large number of people gathering in public places and on the move across towns and cities, militants and extremists are constantly looking for opportunities to exploit the situation. Every year, a few days before the start of Muharram, the state comes alive and swings into action, rounding up suspected hatemongers, hosting meetings of 'peace committees' featuring clerics of various persuasions, and taking other steps to ensure the mourning period passes off without incident. Over the past few days, the administrations of various areas have been taking such measures. As reported on Wednesday, two suspected militants belonging to the banned sectarian outfit Lashkar-i-Jhangvi were arrested in Karachi by the Counter-Terrorism Department. Meanwhile, the entry of nine clerics has been banned by the Gilgit-Baltistan administration.

All these steps are par for the course. However, the administration also needs to keep an eye on individuals on the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act. This watch list contains the names of individuals suspected of involvement in extremist activities. But as reported from Rawalpindi the other day, 14 individuals on the Fourth Schedule have been "found missing", whereas the police are supposed to

keep track of their movements. To ensure a peaceful Muharram, such individuals must be monitored closely. Moreover, at the first sign of trouble, rabble-rousers and hatemongers must be apprehended and prosecuted to send a strong message that the state will not tolerate such mischief at this sensitive time. Members of various communities must also work with the government to ensure religious events are observed without incident.

Time for a new finance minister

WITH Finance Minister Ishaq Dar facing legal challenges along with the Sharifs, it is becoming increasingly clear that he will have to tackle some difficult questions in the days to come. Even though he has not spoken publicly in recent days, it is fair to surmise that the action taken by the National Accountability Bureau is seen by him as a politically motivated witch-hunt. That is, after all, how Maryam Nawaz has described the ongoing proceedings, and there is little reason to believe that Mr Dar disagrees with this view. Whatever may be one's take on the political developments, one thing has now become certain: Mr Dar needs to step down as finance minister. This is not only because he is now hobbled by legal entanglements. Even more importantly, it is high time Pakistan had a finance minister who is willing and able to acknowledge that the economy is in a downward spiral and that if urgent corrective action is not undertaken, the country will find itself in a crisis very soon.

Mr Dar has prided himself on his track record of restoring growth and the level of the foreign exchange reserves. To some extent, he is correct. But the positive aspects are limited, and Pakistan now needs a finance minister who is more forward-looking, rather than constantly harking back to a rapidly receding moment of respite. Whatever turnaround in the fortunes of the economy that we have seen in the past four years is now falling apart, rapidly, as the current account deficit continues to climb, reserves decline, and the growth momentum is increasingly revealed to be highly patchy and thinly layered. The structural bottlenecks that have constricted the economy remain in place; in any case, it was always a matter of time before reality caught up with rhetoric. Now that this is fast happening, the country must have a finance minister who is unfettered by political and legal entanglements of the sort that Mr Dar is caught in.

A finance minister is now required who comes in with a limited mandate. Whoever it is should begin his or her brief term by first acknowledging the downward spiral that the economy is in, and outline a credible action plan. That action plan should seek to shore up reserves, allow the exchange rate to adjust, address the growing circular debt in the power sector, and plug the fiscal framework to restrain the deficit. In short, the country needs a finance minister who can embark on a policy course that leads gently towards macroeconomic adjustment, even if this comes at the cost of growth. It is now abundantly clear that Mr Dar is not that person, and he should step down from his position.

Regional diplomacy

PRIME MINISTER Shahid Khaqan Abbasi meeting US Vice President Mike Pence on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly; Afghan President Ashraf Ghani urging dialogue in his speech at the UNGA; and army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa meeting the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan — this flurry of interactions and comments on the region are encouraging and should be sustained. The differences between the US and Afghanistan on one side and Pakistan on the other are deep. The so-called South Asia strategy of the Trump administration has triggered alarm in Pakistan and it remains to be seen what, if any, punitive measures beyond the further curtailment of economic assistance to Pakistan the US may attempt. Pakistan has rightly pressed the issue of anti-Pakistan sanctuaries in Afghanistan and the incendiary US invitation to India to deepen its involvement in Afghanistan, but it must also pay heed to some of the legitimate demands of the latter. Mr Ghani's speech urged regional cooperation against extremism, which must be taken seriously by Pakistan. The contours and breadth of proposed dialogue between the two countries must not become a sticking point at this stage; it is more important for dialogue to be continued before it is expanded to include all areas of mutual concern.

There is also a vital parallel process that must be taken up seriously inside Pakistan: a reassessment of its national security and foreign policies in light of past mistakes and current challenges. After initial sensible critiques by senior government ministers and some parliamentarians, a familiar pattern seems to be reasserting itself: a desire to hit back at the outside world's criticism rather than to engage with Pakistan's international partners constructively. Moreover, while

some diplomacy needs to be conducted behind closed doors, the debate about national policies should be an open process. Parliament's resolution rejecting sending Pakistani troops to Yemen is a process worth emulating. A clear statement after extensive debate among institutions on Pakistan's interests in the region and the terms on which it can engage Afghanistan and India for peace and stability could provide the uniformity of direction that institutions appear to be lacking at the moment. A seemingly endless war in Afghanistan should not be mistaken for Pakistan being able to endlessly delay major policy reassessments. Mr Trump's South Asia strategy is deeply flawed, but it can become a starting point for Pakistan offering one of its own.

Felling of mangroves

CITIZENS were left disappointed when, at a recent public hearing on the environmental costs of a planned LNG import terminal at Hafeez Island in Chara Chan Waddio Creek in the Port Qasim area, state representatives failed to come up with satisfactory answers to some pertinent questions. On Wednesday, the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency had scheduled its second consultation on the project; the first had been declared void by Sepa, although one of the major points of contention that had come up even then was the chopping down of nearly 900 mangrove trees. On Wednesday, as lawyers and activists specifically and repeatedly asked if a no-objection certificate was required from the forest department over the felling of this species of trees, whose entire cover in Sindh was declared protected in 2010, officials of both the department and Sepa were found wanting in their response. At the heart of the matter is the project's environmental impact assessment conducted by Global Environmental Management Services. Reportedly, those representing the state were able to present only vague answers to specific questions, even though the issue had come up before. In fact, one forest department representative was not able to explain what the government meant by 'protected status' — though he did admit that the mangrove was a protected species.

If this is the level of knowledge of the issue amongst those tasked with guarding the environment, the future can only be contemplated with despair. Pakistan is currently in a phase where infrastructure is generally being developed at an accelerated pace as a result of international and domestic investment. From metro

lines to CPEC to the LNG terminal that was under discussion on Wednesday, across the country interventions are taking place which, if not monitored carefully and without bias, can have an adverse impact on the environment — crucially, an impact that will be near impossible to reverse. It is high time the authorities stirred themselves into action.

Losing international arbitration

Another setback awaits the country as an international arbitration court has ruled that the government engaged in an act of ‘expropriation’ against the assets of a foreign investor when the Supreme Court took action against Karkey Karadeniz, the Turkish firm that was contracted to set up a rental power plant by the previous government.

Reportedly, the damages that have been awarded by the court are around \$700m; some reports say the amount is much higher while the government insists it is much lower without disclosing the actual figure. In fact, the attorney general’s office has gone out of its way to veil the adverse award in silence, giving its first pronouncement on it only when the matter was in the news.

Whatever the size of the award, it is fair to assume that it will be substantial. And this judgement is likely to be followed up by another, even larger, award in the Reko Diq case which is also winding its way through the arbitration process of the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes, the World Bank arm that gave the Karkey award.

It is still likely that Karkey will settle out of court rather than go through the arduous process of recovery. Nevertheless, the award should be a jolt to all those who seek to interfere in the country’s international commitments. For many years now, the global community has been tightening the protections that foreign investors can avail themselves of through arbitrary actions. Toying with the stakes acquired by foreign investors must be avoided.

Pakistan’s domestic politics is famously turbulent, and the first question any foreign investor asks is whether the present government will be in a position to deliver on the commitments it has entered into, and what is the likelihood that whoever comes

into power next will try to reverse or otherwise alter the contractual terms governing long-term investments. Potential investors in the LNG sector, to take one example, are asking themselves exactly these questions as they consider entering into a long-term supply contract with Pakistan.

The political parties need to come to an understanding that they will keep foreign investors out of their own disputes. More importantly, the judicial community needs to understand that tampering with the understandings underpinning long-term foreign investments in the country carries enormous risks and costs, and can backfire resulting in a severely detrimental impact on the country.

One cannot emphasise enough the importance of treating investments, whether foreign or domestic, with due care, both at the time of signing and when delivering on the deal. There must be a limit to how far people are willing to go to settle scores arising from domestic politics. Otherwise, the country stands to pay a huge price, and nobody wins.

Musharraf vs Zardari

THE slanging match between the PPP and former military dictator retired Gen Pervez Musharraf over the assassination of Benazir Bhutto has taken its ugliest turn yet with Mr Musharraf accusing Asif Zardari of responsibility for the deaths of Benazir and her brother Murtaza Bhutto. The lurid accusations have received lurid coverage, allowing an absconding former dictator another turn in the national spotlight that he so evidently craves. Unhappily, the PPP has allowed itself to become part of an unseemly public spectacle by immediately hitting back at Mr Musharraf rather than focusing on the tragedy of the assassination in December 2007 and the fact that no one has been held responsible for the actions that led up to it. While political assassinations have stained this country's past, Benazir Bhutto was an iconic leader of the modern era — the investigation and trials relating to her murder ought to have been conducted with clarity and purpose rather than hastily and seemingly with an intent to obfuscate. The recent anti-terrorism court verdicts relating to the assassination were deeply problematic and appear to have raised further questions rather than answer any meaningful ones.

For example, if the investigations and prosecutions were poorly managed, then who was responsible for those lapses? Five terrorism suspects accused of direct involvement in the plot to assassinate her have been exonerated, but the judgement has offered little insight into whether they were wrongly implicated or some other troubling chain of events occurred during the investigation and prosecution phases. Two senior police officers have been convicted in the case and they may bear personal responsibility for their actions, but it is inconceivable that they acted alone in the manner the court has suggested. Who instructed the police officers to behave in the unprofessional manner that they did? Moreover, while Mr Musharraf has been declared an absconder in the case, there is no clarity on what specific charges a trial against him can be attempted — assuming the self-exiled former dictator ever returns to Pakistan to face them. Now Mr Musharraf's ugly remarks threaten to eclipse the fact that the greatest tragedy of the modern era in the country remains unsolved. No country can stride confidently towards a democratic, constitutional, rule-of-law future if its greatest leaders are cut down in shocking circumstances that are never fully revealed to the public. The PPP should focus on seeking out the truth and getting justice.

Overreaction to posters

THE issue over the 'Free Balochistan' posters put up in an area of Geneva some weeks ago apparently by Baloch separatists has been dialled up a notch. A day after Senate chairman Mian Raza Rabbani — a legislator otherwise known for a considered approach to various issues — demanded that the Swiss ambassador to Pakistan be expelled, the upper house on Thursday suspended its Pakistan-Switzerland friendship group for an indefinite period. Tempers have been running high in parliament even since the matter came to light a few days when Pakistan's permanent representative to the UN drew the attention of his Swiss counterpart to the display of the offending banners, and asked that the matter be investigated. Legislators in Pakistan have alleged that the Swiss government, by allowing its soil to be used by Baloch separatists to instigate violence in Pakistan, is acting in violation of UN Security Council resolutions to curtail the activities of terrorist groups.

Surely our rulers cannot believe that anything can be achieved by this brouhaha, which has the potential to earn Pakistan the derision of the international

community. Freedom of speech is a legally protected right in many Western countries; it forms the bedrock of their society and politics. The Swiss government cannot bend the law to its will, or make exceptions at its convenience for those who protest loudly. Perhaps that is where our legislators' bewilderment at such 'inaction' comes in, because they are so accustomed to curtailing the right to freedom of speech in Pakistan whenever it suits them. Also, many organisations — however legitimate the state's reasons for banning them, given their record of violence against innocent civilians in this country — are not on the UN list of designated terrorist groups. Switzerland is thus not violating international law in the matter. Instead of reacting in a fit of pique, and creating unnecessary rifts with a friendly country, Pakistan would do better to let this matter subside quietly.

War of words at UN is not the answer

An unnecessary and excessive attack by Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj against Pakistan at the UN General Assembly has drawn strong criticism from Pakistan. Ms Swaraj's bizarre taunt and allegation marked a rhetorical escalation in India's seemingly renewed quest to try and put pressure on Pakistan regionally and globally.

Almost certainly, the escalation is linked to US President Donald Trump's so-called South Asia strategy, which casts Pakistan as a spoiler of regional peace and improbably suggests that a greater role for India in Afghanistan may help stabilise that country. The Indian foreign minister's Trumpian rhetoric indicates that India is in no mood to engage in dialogue with Pakistan and will continue to try and deflect the world's attention from the oppression of the Kashmiri people in India-held Kashmir.

Nevertheless, Ms Swaraj's diatribe could have been met by a more measured response than the one given by Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN Maleeha Lodhi, especially considering the thoughtful and principled position that Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi took on India and the Kashmir dispute during his own speech at the UNGA earlier.

While technically, the right of response was in the UN, perhaps a more appropriate reply could have come from the Foreign Office or foreign minister. The role of the

UN permanent representative is to determinedly keep the attention of the UN and the world on the issues that Pakistan wants to highlight.

A sober and categorical response to Ms Swaraj's speech would have kept the focus on India's atrocities in IHK and the need for the world to do more to help the suffering of the Kashmiri people. Instead, an opportunity has been lost and the outside world will likely see the squabbling as yet another instance of how Pakistan and India prefer to trade insults rather than address common problems.

Indeed, for Pakistan, foreign policy and national security challenges are multiplying. If not handled carefully, an economic downturn could combine with a foreign policy crisis, leaving Pakistan acutely vulnerable to US-led international pressure.

Perhaps the greatest disservice to the oppressed people of IHK is for Pakistan to try and highlight their plight without improving its own credibility in matters of militancy in the eyes of the global community. It is far too easy for the outside world to disregard Pakistan's principled and rightful objections to India's approach to IHK and the overall Kashmir dispute because Pakistan is widely perceived to be unacceptably tolerant of certain kinds of non-state actors.

The stealthy mainstreaming of banned groups is the latest example of misguided policy. A war of words with India may please nationalist sentiment, but it may also cause further damage to Pakistan's legitimate interests.

Funds for Fata

THE World Bank on Friday approved an additional \$114m earmarked for Fata's 326,000 temporarily displaced families. This contribution to the tribal areas' ongoing emergency recovery project augments the bank's initial outlay of \$75m in August 2015. Under the original project, funds were sufficient for 120,000 displaced families from North and South Waziristan, Orakzai, Kurram and Khyber agencies. More funds should provide relief to the authorities that have before them the gargantuan task of repatriating and rehabilitating an estimated 3.2m people, half of whom are children in need of humanitarian assistance according to Unicef. While more money for services such as health, water and sanitation is an incentive

for families to return, there are reports that monetary help is slow to get to those in need, if not irregular. Aid for returnees includes an early recovery package with two cash grants and child wellness grants provided in three instalments of Rs2,500 each. While a one-time cash grant of Rs35,000 and livelihood support aid of Rs16,000 are attractive propositions in the present, limited educational and economic opportunities must be remedied with the future in mind.

Considering the colossal damage to infrastructure and livelihood in Fata, the IDPs' reluctance to return is not surprising. Even after the military operation, safety concerns had been cited as one reason for not returning, with many apprehensive on account of both security forces' long-term presence and the possibility of the resurgence of militants. Recently, a Dawn report quoted locals contradicting military figures (92pc) for returnees, stating that only 60pc to 70pc of families had returned to their villages. Earlier this year, a Unicef assessment mission found that 60pc of residents in North Waziristan lacked water, hygiene and sanitation facilities, and 70pc had no clean drinking water. Handing out money to Fata returnees is a short-term measure. Without sustained stability and socioeconomic interventions, families in the scarred tribal areas don't stand a chance. For starters, consider how the lack of education has had serious implications for Fata's youth over the decades. While rebuilding is the government's responsibility — and partly that of the military that has a stake in the region — transparency is imperative in fund disbursement and utilisation. This is perhaps the last opportunity to provide stability to a generation that is all too familiar with militancy, drones and destruction. Failing them is not an option.

Sea of sewage

In recent weeks, the residents of Karachi have been noticing that the waters of the Indian Ocean have been especially filthy. At Seaview, the beach most easily accessible to citizens, the waters have taken on a dark, oily tinge, a viscosity that is not that of normal seawater even by the standards of this metropolis with its glaringly insufficient trash disposal infrastructure. The speculation was that it must be an oil slick. On Thursday, matters were clarified. At a seminar on 'Awareness on sea pollution and sea litter' organised by the National Institute of Oceanography in Karachi, researchers said that what residents were actually seeing was sewage, directly flushed out into the sea from a major drain in the city that had been clogged

but was now unblocked because of the recent rains in the city. Scientist Dr Nuzhat Khan told participants that a 3km area of the coastline had been affected. She pointed out that marine pollution was a serious issue and that from Korangi Fish Harbour to Port Qasim, it was possible to even see cow dung from Cattle Colony floating in the waters.

Paint this nauseating picture into the snapshot we already have and the outlook appears grim indeed. Some two years ago, Sindh administration sources concluded that at least 8,000 tonnes of solid waste is either dumped or ends up in just the Karachi harbour every day. This includes waste from chemical, textile, plastics and the thousands of other industrial units in the city that operate pretty much independently of regulation and monitoring. In addition, there is the waste generated by a vast city of over 20m people; given that Karachi's infrastructure is tattered to say the very least, by some accounts about 350 gallons of raw sewage and untreated industrial waste flow into the sea each day. Are the relevant government agencies concerned? Perhaps they need to spend a day at the beach.

Ex-PM's return: the right decision

UMOUR and speculation, fuelled in part by contradictory messages from the PML-N itself, have been put to rest for now with Nawaz Sharif's return to Pakistan. Today, according to Mr Sharif's spokesperson, the disqualified former prime minister will appear in an accountability court inquiring into allegations of corruption against the Sharif family. Also to appear, after several weeks outside the country, is Finance Minister Ishaq Dar. The PML-N leadership is doing the right thing. Controversial as Mr Sharif's ouster from the prime ministership has been, and unusual as it may be for the Supreme Court to monitor trial court proceedings, the allegations against the Sharif family are serious and the defence offered so far has been inadequate. A year and a half since the Panama Papers were revealed and almost a year since formal proceedings, ultimately leading to Mr Sharif's disqualification, began in the apex court, the public is no closer to knowing the size of the Sharif fortune or how it has been accumulated over the decades.

In a modern democratic polity, elected representatives must be able to demonstrate a standard of conduct that is not only lawful but better than what is expected of the average citizen. It is a small price to pay for the high honour of

exercising power on behalf of the people. In practical terms, for the Sharif family that means facing the accountability trials and acquitting themselves both in the court of law and public opinion. As a first step, it is necessary for Mr Sharif to be in the country and attend accountability court hearings as required by the law. His return to Pakistan is also an encouraging contrast to others who have fled the country on some pretext or the other and have, from their base abroad, tried to destabilise politics in the country. Former military dictator Pervez Musharraf is among the individuals who continue to consider themselves above the law.

What the PML-N needs to quickly clarify is what official role Mr Sharif will have in the party while he is still facing corruption proceedings. Tweaking the law via parliament to allow Mr Sharif to return as head of the PML-N was inadvisable. As has been demonstrated in the past, laws introduced to specifically damage or help certain individuals undermine the rule of law rather than promote it. Former prime minister Sharif should clarify his intentions publicly to the nation and remove the uncertainty that is hanging over the government and the PML-N. Perhaps Mr Sharif should recognise that since his ouster in late July, the government has been able to function relatively smoothly and that the principal tension in the PML-N is between his side of the family and that of his brother. Now is not the time for unnecessary defiance.

Report on census

VIRTUALLY all countries conduct censuses, often at 10-year and a few even at five-year intervals. International practices for undertaking this vital exercise are thus well established. An objective and independent assessment of the Sixth Population and Housing Census in Pakistan to gauge adherence to these tried and tested procedures is thus a valuable metric of credibility and transparency. A report based on observations by a mission from the UNFPA — which contributed \$12m and also provided technical support to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics responsible for the census — notes several glaring departures from these best practices. During the enumeration process, six teams comprising international and national observers visited 246 census blocks and observed 537 interviews selected on a random basis in all the provinces.

As with any census, this exercise — for the sake of accuracy that will subsequently impact socioeconomic planning on macro and micro levels and which also has a bearing on the politically fraught issue of resource sharing — should have taken everyone living in the country into account. Judging by the observations in the UNFPA report, Census 2017 has not done so. In order to ensure the people's full participation, a formal publicity campaign is critical, not only to educate them on the importance of the exercise, but also instil in them the confidence that the data collected will not be used against them in any way. This was not done. Data confidentiality also ensures integrity of the results. Although the report notes the value of army personnel for security purposes, it expresses serious reservations about the collection of data by them, which it says amounted "to a parallel census and is not internationally acceptable". Moreover, the uniformed officers accompanying the enumerators were verifying the respondents' CNIC information with Nadra, a measure described by the report as a breach of confidentiality. This also prompts the question why CNICs were being sought at all, when as per PBS's own assertion, the lack of one did not preclude exclusion from the census — which is as it should be. In any case, the presence of army personnel would have deterred most illegal aliens — accustomed to being rounded up by law enforcement — from participating in the exercise. The UNFPA document also records that residents in refugee villages were not counted, thereby breaching "the principle of universality". For an exercise held almost one decade after it was due, these are deeply troubling negatives.

Killing labourers

WITH increasing fatalities in the stone-crushing and mining industry, the Supreme Court has been petitioned by a human rights activist to intervene to protect workers. It has been asked to constitute a task force with provincial representation ensuring workers are protected from silicosis — an incurable lung disease caused by long-term exposure to silica dust in the mining, sandblasting and rock-drilling industries. Drawing up preventive strategies for controlling and eliminating silicosis, including the monitoring of factories, is included as a potential task for this commission. This is not the first time that the court has been approached on the issue. In 2014, when the Public Lawyers Front filed a petition in the Lahore High Court after 18 cases of silicosis deaths were reported in Gujranwala, the apex court took up the matter. But the case continues and little action seems to have been

taken to curb the menace. However well-meaning this latest intervention, progress will remain stalled without a functional labour inspection system, better regulation of industries and protective legislation.

The oldest known environmental lung disease, silicosis results in respiratory failure leading to eventual death. Unaware of the repercussions of crushing stones without protective gear, quarry workers must be informed through media campaigns of the dangers. For many trapped in poverty and debt who endure the adverse effects of silica dust in exchange for meagre sums of money, these risks might not even matter. This is why such inhumane exploitation by factory owners given their desire for profit is criminal and offenders should be severely punished. Most stone-crushing factories are not even registered or government regulated. More significantly, it is only when we see the political will to enact legislation and health and safety measures being implemented by the government through a national plan for safety within factories that the exploitation and death of workers will end.

Another round of water talks fails

THE running dispute between Pakistan and India over two hydroelectric power stations on the Jhelum and the Chenab rivers is now at risk of running into a treacherous fork in the road, and potentially endangering the Indus Waters Treaty. The waters of both rivers belong to Pakistan under the treaty, but India has the right to use the stream flow to generate electricity, provided there is no storage and diversion. Based on this scheme, Pakistan objected to the technical designs of two projects India is building, Kishenganga and Ratle, and when India refused to accept the design modifications that were sought, it approached the World Bank to set up a court of arbitration to decide on the matter. At the same time, India approached the bank to ask for the appointment of a “neutral expert”, also provided for under the treaty framework. The bank initially moved to set up both forums, but then in December last year, announced that it would “pause” the process for fear that both forums might yield a different outcome, further complicating an already tangled issue.

On the face of things, Pakistan’s request for a court of arbitration sounds reasonable. The treaty provides for such a court in the event of a “dispute”, and a

neutral expert in the event of “differences” between the two parties. The dispute is highly technical in nature, but if successive rounds of efforts to bridge the different views both sides have on the technical parameters of the two projects in question have failed, then it is reasonable to surmise that the matter has graduated to the level of a dispute. The World Bank is continuing to hope for an amicable outcome, even after the latest round of talks held in Washington, D.C. this month collapsed, but it has been over one year since the two parties have been engaged to seek an outcome without any result. A choice may become unavoidable in the near future.

The Pakistani government may well be entitled to ask for a court of arbitration, but its track record in such arbitrations has not been very good. In the case of the Baglihar dam, for example, an ambiguous ‘victory’ was claimed by both parties, but the decision of the neutral expert certainly played a role in opening the way for more hydropower projects on the western rivers. Asking for a court of arbitration runs its own risks today, should Pakistan fail to make its case with the force required to obtain a clear verdict in its favour. It is, therefore, worth both countries’ while to heed the words of the World Bank, and work in earnest to reach an amicable settlement under its guidance. Allowing angry energies from other festering disputes between both countries to be channelled into the treaty’s dispute-resolution mechanisms hurts the interests of both countries.

Rise of right wing

GERMAN Chancellor Angela Merkel has won a historic fourth term, but the country’s politics has been reordered in a way that could have profound consequences for a liberal democratic world order. While Germany’s multiparty system renders impossible an easy understanding of the country’s politics, the worst performance since 1949 of Ms Merkel’s CDU and its sister Bavarian party, the CSU, appears to have opened the door of the German parliament to the far right for the first time since the 1950s. The rise of the xenophobic Alternative for Germany party, which campaigned ferociously against Ms Merkel’s pro-immigration policies — forcing the German chancellor to reassess her stance on immigration despite presiding over an economy that is one of Europe’s strongest — is the real story of the German election. Where Emmanuel Macron’s twin decisive victories in France earlier this year, the presidential election in May and the legislative elections in June, had seemed to suggest that the rise of populism,

nationalism and anti-immigration in Western democracies may have stalled, the German election has reasserted its importance. Certainly, the vast majority of Germans have clearly repudiated the AfD and the politics of hate it stands for and the five other major parties in the new German parliament will likely work to limit its influence, but the threats to a liberal democratic world order are serious and unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

Worrying too is the rise of authoritarian figures in many parts of the world. US President Donald Trump, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Turkish President Recep Erdogan, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban are a diverse group with very different agendas and politics — but all appear to believe in strong states that are bristling with military power directed at perceived external enemies. At the start of her first term as chancellor nearly 12 years ago, Ms Merkel may not have imagined she would win four consecutive terms and certainly could not have expected to become the de facto leader of progressive Western thought in a changing world order. The financial crisis of 2008 and a wave of refugees from a dangerously unstable Middle East appear to have triggered latent impulses in the politics of many countries. With her progressive agenda, Ms Merkel must resist that tide and help re-establish the world's belief in more inclusive, people-oriented systems of governance. It will not be easy, but Ms Merkel's resolve and personal standing may help.

Dying forests

IT was a fitting opening for a distressing piece of writing: death on a large scale, but not of the sort that Pakistan has come to associate with the unfortunate land of Balochistan. The report, published in this newspaper on Tuesday, chronicles how the *Pinus halepensis* species, otherwise known as the Quetta pine tree, is dying out in the province. The word for it in botany is 'dieback', a condition where branches or shoots start dying from the tip of the tree, heading inwards and downwards. It can be caused by viruses, bacteria, fungi or even certain environmental conditions. In the case of Balochistan's majestic pine forests — at one time amongst the world's largest — the decimation seems to be the result of an unfortunate convergence of a variety of factors. These include climate change and its consequences, overgrazing and the felling of trees for fuel, a sinking water table, and the growing practice of using wastewater — which is loaded with toxins — for irrigation purposes. As a result, these ancient forests, many of them hundreds of years old, are slowly, silently, inexorably dying.

Given the irreversibility of this situation, there are many aspects to mourn. Shall we dwell upon the increasing unavailability and expensiveness of the delicate pine nut, once sourced from the country's largest province in such abundance? Or shall the residents of the province recall the distinctive sound the wind once made as it whistled through the pine needles, an experience fewer and fewer among the younger generation are having a chance to savour? Perhaps the mourning must be cumulative, for Balochistan together with other parts of the country, is continuing to lose its rich biodiversity. Unfortunately, across Pakistan, a rich natural inheritance is being squandered — from the markhor and snow leopards in the icy north to the mangroves and marine life along the coastline, despite some conservation efforts. Have we even the will to genuinely attempt a pushback?

The path to peace in Balochistan

NATIONAL Party President Hasil Bizenjo has reiterated his party's sensible belief that the only path to resolving Balochistan's issues is political dialogue. A central committee meeting of the NP in Quetta has also called for the return to Pakistan of tribal leaders in exile and suggested that their path back to the country is being blocked by elements hostile to peace here. Taken together, the NP's statements suggest that a long-standing militarised approach to Balochistan's political problems continues to dominate. If peace in the province is to be achieved, that approach must change. The unhappy reality of Balochistan is that a long-running low-level Baloch insurgency has been treated by the security establishment as merely a byproduct of other regional security challenges. At various times, an insurgency rooted in political grievances of some Baloch has been cast as externally sponsored to destabilise Pakistan or retard economic growth in the province and the country.

With the advent of CPEC, the strategic importance of Balochistan to the state has been further elevated. While undoubtedly important to the economic future of the country, CPEC projects in Balochistan have drawn persistent criticism from Baloch leaders and activists for not doing enough for the Baloch people directly. That familiar pattern — of Balochistan's strategic significance being deliberately held above the socioeconomic needs and political rights of the people of Balochistan — also needs to change. The long-running Baloch insurgency continues primarily because it feeds off the legitimate grievances of many Baloch people. While it is possible that some Baloch separatists have sought the assistance of outside powers, a proxy war between rival states is not the primary reason that swathes of Baloch areas remain in turmoil and have become virtual no-go areas for the rest of the country. The militarised approach to security in Balochistan, rather than a broader view that encompasses socioeconomic progress and political rights, has become a fundamental part of the problem and cannot be part of the solution for the province.

Certainly, the Baloch separatists and leaders in exile must also reconsider their own strategies. The suffering that a decade and a half of insurgency and counter-insurgency has inflicted on the Baloch people is significant and undeniable. While on the fringes of the insurgency there may be no room for any kind of compromise with the Pakistani state, it still does appear that the majority of the Baloch prefer a

political settlement inside the framework and Constitution of the Pakistani state. If sections of the state have taken an uncompromising line on Balochistan, the separatists and their leaders in exile have exacerbated the problem by their own inflexibility and intransigence. However, the comments made by the NP suggest that a fresh opening for peace may be at hand. The separatists who are willing to talk must be urgently engaged in dialogue.

Failing our children

THE falling quality of education over the years has exposed the state's unforgivable negligence. Despite increasing education budgets, the government has been slow to tackle the gargantuan crisis in schools with specific fast-track interventions. Documenting this sorry state of affairs, the latest Annual Status of Education Report highlights the fact that only 52pc of fifth grade students can read in Urdu, Sindhi and Pashto; 46pc are able to read in English; and 48pc able to do two-digit division sums — a skill taught in grade two. Boys continue to outperform girls in reading and arithmetic. This is attributed to the lack of trained teachers and high dropout rates, especially in villages where 54pc of schools lack toilets and most are some distance away from home — a significant factor in families' refusal to send their daughters to school. Meanwhile, teacher absenteeism has also contributed to the high dropout rate. With such abysmal learning scores and conditions, a shift in priorities is needed urgently. It would make much better sense for the state to focus on learning outcomes, transport options and quality teaching rather than on simply building more schools. Ensuring high standards of education is just as important as enrolling more children.

Teaching skills are critical to human development. This could not be more relevant in the case of Sindh that has the poorest learning scores, despite an increase in overall student enrolment by 2pc. Reading scores in the fifth grade dropped to 37pc in 2016 (from 45pc in 2015); only 25pc of students could do a two-digit division sum in 2016. Enrolment figures are up but that is hardly reassuring when we consider that children hardly get an education when they go to school. There may be no dearth of policies but low levels of implementation exacerbate the crisis. Referring to Sindh's challenges, experts explain that the bureaucracy around financial disbursements to public schools has so many tiers that plans are shelved when budgets lapse. With its work cut out for it, the government should swing into

action. Reforms need a monitoring period: the 9,000-teacher recruitment plan and teacher mentoring policy are a start. But much more is needed. With unexecuted policies thwarting performance, reminders are due that our poor progress towards meeting the SDGs will keep us from achieving the promise of education for all.

Saudi women drivers

CHANGE comes to the desert kingdom slower than the shifting of a sand dune, particularly when it involves women. By that standard, the last few days in Saudi Arabia have been no less than historic — although undoubtedly some of the old guard may prefer to describe them as calamitous. On Saturday, at a musical concert, part of an unprecedented lineup of festivities to celebrate Saudi National Day, women were allowed for the first time into Riyadh's King Fahd International Stadium as spectators. The weekend extravaganza also saw men and women dancing in the streets, a stunning departure from the strict rules of segregation sometimes enforced on pain of death in the citadel of Wahabism. That has been followed by a royal decree on Tuesday announcing that women will be allowed to drive from June 2018, making the kingdom the last country on earth to permit women behind the wheel.

The unofficial ban on driving is one of the most demeaning restrictions placed on Saudi women. It is about infantilising them, depriving them of agency and making them dependent on men — often unrelated men who are in their employ as drivers, which defeats the absurd morality 'justification' — to accomplish the simple tasks that constitute daily life. In a world where women are flying fighter jets, even in Muslim countries such as Pakistan, not to allow them to take the wheel is an anachronism that earned the kingdom international opprobrium. Moreover, it is at odds with the more forward-looking Saudi Arabia that the government is promoting through its Vision 2030 plan. To that end perhaps, there have been some tentative steps to empower women. For instance, they were given the right of franchise in municipal elections in 2015; they were even allowed to stand as candidates, albeit with major caveats. However, while the wheels of change have begun to move surprisingly fast, there is a fair distance to go before women in Saudi Arabia can take even partial control of their journey.