

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of March, 2016

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Qadri's execution: the deeper malaise

There should be a reluctance to mention the two names together. One man, Salmaan Taseer, the late governor of Punjab, was a towering champion of human rights and a historic defender of the marginalised.

Few in contemporary Pakistan have come close to demonstrating the bravery and principles that Taseer embodied.

The other man, Mumtaz Qadri, an assassin, an individual who violated his oath to protect and serve, embodies everything that has gone wrong with state and society in recent years.

Read: [Taseer's killer Mumtaz Qadri hanged](#)

Qadri was a criminal and a murderer and the day he was convicted under the country's anti-terrorism laws, justice was served. Nothing further was going to be gained by putting Qadri to death. Capital punishment has no place in a modern state and a humane society — and that is what Pakistan must aspire to be.

Worrying as it is that the state is determined to keep executing individuals on death row, the national reaction to Qadri's execution — while a unique case perhaps — demonstrates how far society itself has drifted from the ideals on which this country was founded.

Pakistan is not an extremist society — but extremists find it all too easy to try and project their influence over society.

The supporters of Qadri who took to the streets yesterday, vandalised property, forcibly closed markets and caused a huge loss of work hours nationally by denying many people access to their workplaces were clearly not many in number.

Mostly, it appeared that the security apparatus stood back rather than challenge the protesters, a tactic presumably meant to avoid creating flashpoints. But there is a number that must not be forgotten: one. All it took was one man, Qadri, to act on his violent convictions to plunge the nation into a crisis five years ago. On the streets of Pakistan yesterday, there was a frighteningly larger number than one.

On the other side, Salmaan Taseer too was just one man — and he was the rare ray of light and inspiration that the protesters want to make sure never manifests itself again.

Simply, this country needs more Salmaan Taseers and no more violent monsters. Today, as Qadri is buried, the country has a question it must ask itself: what creates the monsters in our midst and how can it be stopped? In truth, the answer is not yet known.

There are ideas mooted — deradicalisation, counter-extremism, etc — but none have been fleshed out as yet. Qadri is gone, but what of the thousands who, in this age of Zarb-i-Azb, intelligence-based operations and NAP, have felt confident enough to spill out into the streets and threaten violence against the state? Where the law is violated, the justice system should take its course — but what happens when the mind itself is

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broken and twisted? How are those minds to be saved and the rest of society protected from them? Some deep, urgent thinking is needed.

Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2016

Another Oscar

FOR Pakistan, it was a moment to be proud of, and for Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy herself, it was nothing less than a triumph: on Sunday night, after a glittering Los Angeles ceremony, she once again brought home the coveted Oscar.

The win — she won another Academy Award in 2012, again for a film that highlights a pressing social issue in Pakistan — was in the category of Best Documentary-Short Subject, for her 2015 film *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*.

The documentary follows the experiences of Saba Qaiser, who was 18 when she was shot under the pretext of ‘honour’, yet lived and spoke out against this pernicious crime. Both the subject of the documentary and its director deserve to be commended.

Ms Chinoy has indeed established herself amongst the ranks of those Pakistani filmmakers, from Mushtaq Gazdar to Samar Minallah and Sabiha Sumar to name just a few, who have used their camera to highlight issues that society tends to paper over, and in some cases, even justify.

There is no doubt that Ms Chinoy’s film has brought the evil of honour killing in Pakistan into the international spotlight.

After the documentary was screened at Prime Minister House last week, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif vowed that a renewed effort would be made to stamp out honour killings. Yet more than words will be required for this goal to be achieved.

Recent years have seen some successes in tightening the legal noose around those who perpetrate this form of violence. But beyond that, what is needed are successful prosecutions that can send out the signal that the country’s judicial system will under no circumstances tolerate this crime.

Beyond that, society itself has to be civilised and awareness levels raised across the board so that such antediluvian notions of pride and honour are recognised as appalling transgressions that go against people’s basic rights.

This crime has, after all, been reported from virtually all sections of society, regardless of education or income levels.

To end honour killings, in addition to taking on the more obvious challenges, Pakistan must alter the perceptions and discourse around gender disparity, as well as narratives of empowerment.

Given that such crimes now and then involve the Pakistani diaspora, it not merely the fact that ours is a developing country that is to blame; society itself needs a mirror to be held up to it.

Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2016

Fishermen's plight

THE Indo-Pakistan relationship is notoriously unpredictable and susceptible to the mood swings of both establishments.

In this world of high politics and deft diplomacy, the plight of fishermen of one state caught in the other country's waters is particularly miserable, and hardly figures on officialdom's list of priorities.

As reported in this paper, 20 Indian fishermen were arrested over the weekend by the Maritime Security Agency for fishing in Pakistani waters.

Their vessels have also been seized. On Feb 20, 88 Indians had similarly been scooped up by the MSA. As per the Fishermen's Cooperative Society, the exchange and release of arrested fishermen has been halted by both countries.

The organisation says that 150 Indian fishermen are currently in Pakistani jails, while 50 Pakistanis are incarcerated in India.

While other issues that aggravate the Indo-Pakistan relationship may be more difficult to resolve, the problem of fishermen straying into the other country's waters can be addressed if both states display a spirit of humanity and compassion.

The maritime frontiers are obviously not clearly marked, and it is easy to stray into foreign waters. If fishermen from one country do inadvertently cross over into the other's territorial

waters, they should simply be warned and allowed to head back, instead of being rounded up and dumped in jail.

There should be a bilateral protocol to immediately deal with such situations whenever they arise. Instead, whenever required, the fishermen are released by the respective administrations as a sign of 'goodwill'.

These individuals usually belong to very humble backgrounds, and often their boats — which are also confiscated — are hardly seaworthy by the time they are released.

As there is currently some progress on the bilateral front, the issue of fishermen should also be added to the agenda for discussion.

Islamabad and New Delhi must both work to reduce human misery and the crossing of maritime frontiers by fishermen should be treated as a mistake, not a crime, and handled accordingly.

Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2016

Crackdown on extremism

THE fight against extremism needs to be stepped up — not soon, but now. In an acknowledgement of that urgency, the interior ministry has announced a host of measures to be taken against extremists, many of the steps being designed to prevent terror suspects from organising, communicating, travelling and funding potential terror acts.

While the specific steps mooted may have an impact on the margins and may prevent some individuals from drifting back into the embrace of extremism, the new measures have left some fundamental questions unanswered.

Why, for example, is the state, and the interior ministry in particular, always so eager to boast about any step it dreams up in the fight against militancy, but is always reluctant to identify the specific individuals against whom the measures have been or will be applied?

Often times, the difference between mere public relations and actual, valuable counter-terrorism and counter-extremism measures taken up by the state is difficult to establish.

Both before NAP was mooted and since, the state does not appear interested in genuine transparency. Numbers are frequently offered up, but most are scarcely credible.

The unprecedented crackdown that the state claims it has conducted on extremists countrywide is allegedly reflected in the tens of thousands of individuals who have been detained by the state.

Yet, those mass detentions do not appear to have spurred mass action in the courts by relatives of the alleged extremists.

Are they ghost numbers that the government frequently reports? Or if the individuals are real, do they belong to extremist networks where it is a settled part of the cat-and-mouse game with the state that occasional arrests and short-term detentions are the price for long-term freedom?

It is perhaps the greatest present-day mystery: an alleged massive, unprecedented crackdown on extremists of every hue nationally has resulted in scarcely a peep from the extremists and their backers.

What is always missing is a basic map of extremism in the country. Which are the groups involved? How are they organised? How are they funded? Who are the leaders? How do the organisational structures cut across provinces and perhaps even the borders of the country?

Nothing has been established publicly, not even a simple, up-to-date list of proscribed groups and the individuals who comprise it. Even where specific measures are announced — such as those by Nisar Ali Khan on Monday — there are questions.

Take a look: [Govt to tighten noose around members of banned outfits](#)

Barring individuals affiliated with proscribed groups from having a driving licence or acquiring a SIM is unlikely to prevent those individuals from driving or using mobile phones.

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Perhaps the sum of the measures announced previously and on Monday may have some impact on the margins, but extremism is a problem that is beyond the capability of a single ministry — or even a single government, at the centre or in the provinces — to address.

The country may have NAP, but it still lacks national action in a meaningful sense.

Published in Dawn, March 2nd, 2016

Census postponed

THE inevitable has happened. At the last CCI meeting, the four chief ministers and the prime minister sat down and unanimously agreed that the census needs to be delayed, citing an array of reasons but mainly attributing the decision to the lack of availability of army personnel for escort and security duties.

The failure to set a new date suggests the delay could be indefinite. Whatever reasons they may have cited, it is quite clear that none of the participants had the will to push for the census to be held.

Also read: [CCI postpones population census](#)

The status quo appears to suit their interests much better; disruptions in the foundation of the political system caused by

the findings of a new census are a headache they would all rather avoid.

So we have a variety of reasons being offered up, with Balochistan and Sindh arguing that the presence of large numbers of Afghan migrants and refugees could skew the ethnic ratios in their provinces, and the federal government saying that so long as Operation Zarb-i-Azb is on, the availability of troops will continue to be a challenge.

All of these problems were known well in advance, and the fact that they should be invoked on the first day of March, the very month when the census was due to take place, shows the lethargy and reluctance with which the political parties, particularly the ruling party, has approached this important matter.

The delay in recognising the logistical challenges posed by the census exercise is central here. Memories of 2011 are now coming back, when the previous government at least managed to get a housing census done before the exercise went off the rails.

But back then too, delays in calling the CCI and arranging one-on-one meetings between the prime minister and various chief ministers were manifest signs of a lack of will to see the exercise through.

This time around, despite the fact that this government is far less encumbered by tensions with other branches of the state, the same lethargy in holding the consultations required to overcome the logistical challenges posed by the census are in full view.

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Had the reasons for a postponement been given a few months ago, they might well have cut some ice. But at the last minute they sound like nothing but excuses in order to wiggle out from under a commitment clearly given in haste and without any forethought.

Published in Dawn, March 2nd, 2016

Forgotten Yemen

LATER this month, the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen will have completed its first year.

But far from restoring any semblance of order in the impoverished Arab state, the foreign intervention has aggravated a humanitarian disaster that has hit Yemen's people very hard.

What was a civil war has been transformed into a larger regional tussle, with the Riyadh-backed government battling to regain control of the country from the Houthi rebel faction said to be backed by Iran.

Take a look: [Air strike on Yemen market kills 30](#)

Taking advantage of the chaos, the local branches of Al Qaeda and the militant Islamic State group have further entrenched themselves in this forsaken corner of the Arabian Peninsula.

While some voices of concern have been raised about the humanitarian plight, largely the world seems to have forgotten Yemen and its people. Among those critical of the military action in Yemen have been members of the European Parliament: last month, lawmakers called for an EU-wide arms embargo of Saudi Arabia due to its bombing campaign.

The coalition has been accused of repeatedly targeting civilians in schools, markets and hospitals. Earlier, the UN also criticised Riyadh and its allies for "widespread and systematic" targeting of civilians.

The humanitarian situation is by all accounts dire. Millions of Yemenis have been displaced or are food insecure, while half of all deaths in the military campaign have been of civilians.

The destructive foreign military intervention has been an abject failure and should be wound up without delay. Instead of fuelling the fire, regional powers — namely Saudi Arabia and Iran — must urge their Yemeni allies to lay down their arms and work for a political solution to the civil war.

All efforts should be made to rehabilitate the Yemeni people. Unless the conflict is peacefully resolved, it may spill over into Saudi Arabia itself, should the Houthis decide to march into the kingdom from their northern strongholds.

For regional stability and for the sake of the Yemeni people, efforts to broker a lasting peace must be made by all sides.

Published in Dawn, March 2nd, 2016

Iranian elections

WHILE conflict is roiling large parts of the Middle East, Iran has emerged as among the few stable states in a region known as a ‘shatterbelt’.

Among signs of stability in the Islamic Republic is the continuation of the political process.

The recently held elections for two key Iranian institutions — the Majles or parliament, and the Majles-i-Khobregan, or Assembly of Experts, which oversees the work of the Supreme Leader — have thrown up some interesting results.

Take a look: [Hardliners lose seats on Iran’s top clerical body](#)

It appears that the reformist/pragmatist camp within Iranian politics, allied with President Hassan Rouhani, has made significant gains.

Though the conservative bloc dominated the outgoing Majles and has captured around the same number of seats as the reformists as per the latest figures, the reformists have managed to claw back considerable space in parliament.

The reformist camp appears to have adopted a more cautious approach, choosing not to rock the boat. As for the Assembly of Experts, some leading conservative figures, such as Ayatollah Mesbah-Yezdi, considered close to former president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, have lost their seats. While 60 seats will most likely need a run-off, the reformists appear to have triumphed in Tehran.

In the rural heartland of Iran the conservatives continue to hold sway.

Though some, particularly in the West, have been critical of the Iranian system — many reformist candidates were blocked from running by the establishment — the fact is that despite the curbs, with the Iranian revolution now in its fourth decade, the system continues to evolve.

Like any other political system, the left- and right-wing forces are constantly jostling for political power in Iran. What is welcome is that the democratic process continues, unlike some of the autocracies in the region.

Many conservatives had criticised the landmark nuclear deal piloted last year by Mr Rouhani. Thus the election results seem to be a public endorsement — the turnout was around 60pc — of the Iranian president’s policies.

Also, the reformist boycott of the 2012 parliamentary polls, in hindsight, seems to have been a mistake. Iranians should be left to chart their own future and their choices must be respected.

With newfound allies in the Majles, Mr Rouhani may now have a freer hand to pursue his policy of engaging the West while also attempting to mend fences with Iran’s Arab neighbours, namely the Gulf states.

With civil war, terrorism and failing states surrounding Iran, the Islamic Republic’s leadership will have to chart a careful course.

Published in Dawn, March 3rd, 2016

Post is another country

IT is never too difficult to acquire workers on lower than acceptable wages and much easier to exploit employees who exist outside the public focus.

Pakistan's postal service is often considered worthy of posthumous tributes.

Short of that it is placed in a past that was altogether another country, where those who brought people their mail and money orders were not only visible but also commanded respect. That era has gone; yet there are thousands who continue to languish in the willy-nilly employment of the old service.

Also read: [16,000 underpaid staff on Pakistan Post's payroll](#)

According to shocking information provided in the National Assembly on Tuesday, the Pakistan Post Office Department has some 16,000 souls working for it for remunerations that are at best nominal.

Some of them draw as little as Rs650 per month, which means that those in the Rs2,500-monthly bracket must consider themselves members of a privileged club, even though the minimum wage in the country is Rs13,000. The MNA instrumental in bringing this up has rightly called it an insult.

It would appear that some kind of cover for this strange state of affairs is sought by labelling these 16,000 as 'additional' staff whereas more than 30,000 others on the department's payroll

have comparatively better pay packages. This is no justification.

Everyone knew that this was not a priority area, but the lifting of the lid now has led to the discovery of just how deep is the erosion in Pakistan Post.

Having to perform under officers who would rather work in fancied positions in other government departments, the post is a lame, unwanted department that, by all evidence, has been left to die.

With its unjust pay structure, the department is said to spend almost Rs80 out of Rs100 on staff salaries. That's too huge a proportion and speaks of just how lacking in imagination those at its helm have been.

It is they who need to come out of the past and invent and innovate to restore respect and rewards for everyone associated with the department.

Published in Dawn, March 3rd, 2016

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Published in Dawn, March 3rd, 2016

Pak-US ties: a familiar pattern

THE Pakistan-US Strategic Dialogue was conceived at a time when bilateral ties were in trouble and the two states were trying to reset their relationship and its tone in order to address regional security issues.

Six years on, including a three-year hiatus between 2010 and 2013, and six meetings later, the strategic dialogue has settled into a pattern. That pattern is of signalling stability in the broader Pakistan-US relationship — including incremental progress on soft-power items and projects — in order to focus on the security aspects of the relationship.

The sixth meeting has continued the pattern. A lengthy joint statement issued in Washington, D.C. covered topics ranging from ‘expanding trade and accelerating economic growth’ to ‘education, science and technology’ and from reaffirming US support for democracy in Pakistan to ‘continued cooperation in energy’.

Several of the items in the dialogue baskets can have significant marginal benefits for Pakistan. US assistance in the electricity sector, for example, can add to the production of more efficient and relatively cheaper power.

Similarly, cooperation in the education sector, particularly if the Pakistani government desires to see 10,000 PhDs trained in the US by 2025, could significantly change the higher education landscape in the country.

Yet, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the strategic dialogue exists in order for the US to signal that it is committed to engaging Pakistan over the medium and long term — a signal that allows work to be done in the core areas of counter-terrorism, nuclear issues and regional peace processes. Indeed, reading the joint statement in reverse chronology gives a better sense of the key issues in the bilateral relationship: regional cooperation; defence and security cooperation; continued cooperation on law enforcement and countering terrorism; and strategic stability.

Perhaps the greatest convergence in the American and Pakistani positions in the security realm is on the Afghanistan issue.

This may be less because Pakistan has convinced the US of the wisdom of its approach to Afghanistan and more because the Obama administration appears to have no real interest in or policy for Afghanistan anymore.

Anything that prevents a meltdown in Afghanistan before the end of the Obama administration next January appears to be the American baseline.

On Pakistan’s internal fight against militancy there seems mostly positive support, though suggestions continue about Pakistan’s need to broaden the fight to include anti-India and anti-Afghanistan militants.

On the nuclear issue, the US is still pushing for change in the Pakistani posture, but perhaps recognises that the India-specificity of Pakistan’s nuclear programme makes changes unlikely and extremely difficult.

Overall, the sixth strategic dialogue confirms a familiar understanding of Pakistan-US ties: neither the US nor Pakistan is truly looking for a strategic partnership, but both sides understand the need to build and sustain a significant, security-centric relationship.

Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2016

Sherani's remarks

THERE are few things as predictable in the country as the reaction of the religious right to progressive causes, especially the empowerment and protection of women.

When the regressive is confronted by the progressive, a meltdown is inevitable. Continuing that peculiar tradition is Mohammad Khan Sherani, chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology and champion of many a dubious cause.

He has claimed that not only is the recent pro-women legislation passed by the Punjab government against the law and Sharia, but that the Punjab Assembly could attract the application of Article 6 of the Constitution for approving it.

Also read: [‘Article 6 applicable against Punjab Assembly’](#)

Treason, Mr Sherani apparently believes, is an attempt to give some protection to women who are abused and denied their basic rights under the Constitution. The absurdity of the claim

is perhaps only exceeded by the dangerous idea buried within it — what Mr Sherani and his ilk really appear to be looking for is a veto over the people of Pakistan themselves.

The new Punjab law is particularly important because it does not simply criminalise attacks on women, but also seeks to provide a mechanism for enforcement and create an enabling environment for women to report crimes committed against them.

Be it in the home, the workplace or in public spaces, women who are harassed, attacked or threatened have been unable to get justice because of the anti-women bent of the law-enforcement and judicial systems.

And where women have been brave enough in the past to press for justice in the face of ugly challenges, they have often been left vulnerable to the excesses of their tormentors and persecutors.

While the efficacy of the law will only be known once women in communities across the province turn to it for protection and justice, the reaction of Mr Sherani and his supporters already suggests its great potential.

The rule of thumb here is that the more intense the opposition to a progressive law, the more likely it is that the law will be able to effect genuine social change.

Yet, as the legislative framework and social system improve, the time has come to directly challenge the religious right's outsized influence and to reject its attempted strangulation of Pakistani society.

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Mr Sherani's relevance on the national stage is linked to his chairmanship of a body that is irrelevant in the parliamentary scheme of things. Perhaps it is time to take away Mr Sherani's bully pulpit.

Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2016

Cricket collapse

AS Pakistan makes an early exit from Asia Cup T-20, it is not too difficult to understand why it always has more than its fair share of cricket's glorious uncertainties.

It is the way we play the game — by habit or by choice — even if others have proven that it is possible to polish skills and perfect methods and work scientifically towards consistency.

Also read: [Asia Cup disaster: Afridi's job is safe, PCB chairman declares](#)

Bangladesh was only a minnow the big boys toyed with at will on the cricket ground until not too long ago. Now they are a side to reckon with and certainly an outfit talented enough to be a source of unease for Pakistani fans after the emphatic win on Wednesday.

The Bangladeshis have come a long way and their body language — particularly against Pakistan — in recent times reflects a confidence in their own abilities.

Quite visibly they are out to fight and often end up as deserving winners. They are not waiting for a freak bowler or a fluke innings by a batsman to get them through. They appear to be individuals making up a team and quite enjoy the proceedings.

There are plenty of reasons to go on proudly celebrating the rise of Bangladesh as a serious cricketing contender in the neighbourhood.

The sentiment hailing the coming of age of the underdog is, however, tempered by the disturbing sight of Pakistan slipping deeper into the abyss of collapses and blunders that frequently lead to disasters.

This is a time when it is difficult to maintain restraint and be logical, so painful has been the performances by Pakistani players who have done, and who can do, much better than their recent performance.

If only they could curb the tendency to fake the individual swagger. Much before a star is born, there has to be some kind of order. There has to be a genuine process instead of whimsical selections that result in chaotic performances by individuals. The Pakistan team has not lost. The team never turned up.

Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2016

An Oscar for reality

THOSE criticising film-maker Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy for ‘damaging Pakistan’s image’ in her Oscar-winning documentary on ‘honour’ killings in Pakistan ought to watch the movie that won the award for best picture.

That movie, *Spotlight*, is about the Boston Globe investigation that unearthed the sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic Church, which became such a big affair that it was compared to the Reformation as the single largest challenge faced by the Church in centuries.

Yet nobody argues that the movie should not have been made because it damaged the image of the Church or of the countries where the abuse took place.

Artists and intellectuals are under no obligation to project any ‘image’ of the country deemed acceptable by anybody else. Their only obligation is to be truthful to their own conscience.

This preoccupation with projecting the ‘right’ image of the country betrays a shallowness of mind that prizes appearances over the truth.

The image of the country is not as important as its reality. Artists and intellectuals cannot be expected to choose their subject matter with an eye to promoting anything other than the truth as they perceive it in their hearts and minds.

The unfortunate fact is that honour killings, and all other forms of violence against women find widespread acceptance in our

culture and need to be highlighted vigorously in order to be countered.

By raising the issue, Ms Chinoy’s work has put momentum behind efforts to pass legislation that would give the victims of these crimes greater protection and more options to deal with their distressing circumstances.

The higher profile also raises general awareness of the problem and helps people understand that despite the ‘justifications’ that are presented for these criminal acts, the latter can and should be countered.

In that sense, the work of Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, and of many others like her, contributes towards diminishing the scale of the problem. And that is far more important than projecting a favourable image.

Published in Dawn, March 5th, 2016

Altaf in the spotlight

A relatively dull news day was livened up on Thursday when former Karachi nazim Mustafa Kamal unleashed a salvo of bombastic ‘revelations’ during a news conference upon his return to the city from abroad.

Mr Kamal wasted little time in launching one devastating verbal attack after another targeted at his former leader, MQM supremo Altaf Hussain.

The emotional, high-voltage event was part-rant, part-confessional, part-political manifesto as the former nazim, along with another former top MQM man, Anis Kaimkhani, announced the launch of a new, as yet unnamed political party.

The press talk was filled with some very serious claims: that the MQM has allegedly received funds from Indian intelligence; that Mr Hussain has not been in his senses while addressing the party cadre; that the Muttahida supremo has amassed wealth and property through dubious means abroad.

A shell-shocked MQM responded with the line that this was part of a “conspiracy to divide” the party.

The former Karachi nazim’s mysterious arrival has unleashed a flood of speculation about why he has returned — and why now — and whether he was reading from a script written elsewhere.

After all, of recent the MQM has been on the wrong side of the security establishment, especially after the law-enforcement

operation in Karachi picked up pace. Is Mr Kamal’s arrival another step towards implementing the ‘minus-Altaf’ formula to wean the Muttahida’s ‘non-militant’ cadre away from the London-based leader?

The establishment is believed to have engineered a split in the party in the past as well, when Afaq Ahmed broke away to form the Haqiqi.

However, today, the Haqiqi is a non-entity, while the MQM still dominates urban Sindh’s electoral landscape. Also, the alleged RAW link is an old one, often trotted out, though the state has still not proved this in court.

But what makes Thursday’s episode particularly damaging is that the allegations came from a former insider. Mustafa Kamal was no ordinary MQM worker.

He was one of the rising stars in the party, considered by many as a dynamic mayor who pushed his version of development in the Sindh capital with passion. And while at the city’s helm, he must have been privy to the MQM’s modus operandi, including its well-earned reputation for strong-arm tactics. So why the split?

While the establishment may or may not be behind this high drama, there is little doubt that internally the MQM is in a crisis.

Along with the party’s troubles with the state here, Altaf Hussain faces legal issues in the UK and is said to be in ill health.

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Is the party prepared to address the serious allegations that continue to be made against it by various quarters, as well as undertake some soul-searching and dispel the image of being an organisation that tolerates violence?

The Muttahida leadership should furnish answers soon to its vote bank and to the public at large.

Published in Dawn, March 5th, 2016

Sartaj Aziz's frankness

SARTAJ Aziz, adviser to the prime minister on foreign affairs, is no amateur or wide-eyed newcomer to foreign policy. So when Mr Aziz decides to speak frankly to a US think-tank audience about the leverage that the Pakistani state has over the Afghan Taliban, it is hoped that a great deal of thought went into the revelations.

To be sure, what Mr Aziz has claimed — that sections of the Afghan Taliban leadership reside in Pakistan and that Pakistan has nudged those leaders to the negotiating table by threatening to restrict their movement, withholding access to medical facilities and clamping down on family life — is neither surprising nor new.

Indeed, the leverage that Mr Aziz described is in line with what American officials in particular demanded that Pakistan use in early 2014, when the push for talks with the President Ashraf

Ghani-led Afghan government was first made. But the question remains: why now?

First, however, Mr Aziz's candour ought to be welcomed. For years Pakistan has clung publicly to an unrealistic, untrue and untenable position — that the Afghan Taliban leadership is predominantly based inside Afghanistan and that the Afghan government was shifting blame for its failures to limit the Taliban's activities onto Pakistan.

Second, the full range of Mr Aziz's words in Washington needs to be considered. The foreign adviser stressed that both in the past and in the present, Pakistan's influence with the Taliban has its limits — that, effectively, the Afghan Taliban do what is in their own interests and Pakistan cannot dictate policies to them.

Perhaps, then, Mr Aziz was trying to correct the historical record while simultaneously trying to impress on interlocutors — in Afghanistan, the US and China — the real-world limits of Pakistani influence with the Taliban.

That approach has a possible dual benefit: it prevents the Afghan government from automatically blaming Pakistan and puts the onus on Kabul to make talks successful.

What remains to be seen is the extent to which the army-led security establishment here backs Mr Aziz in his risky approach. Silence in the coming days and weeks will be interpreted as an implicit endorsement of the foreign adviser's stance. That would be welcome on two levels.

First, it would suggest that the military and civilian sides of the state are in fact able to work together. Second, it would indicate that the old culture of secrecy and denial in the ranks of the military leadership may be changing.

Published in Dawn, March 5th, 2016

Green Pakistan

THE prime minister's initiative to plant 100m trees across the country over the next five years under the Green Pakistan programme is a welcome step. Too much of our national conversation is dominated by politics and talk of mega projects, so an ambitious programme centred on a green initiative comes as a breath of fresh air. As it is, we have missed our target for increasing forest cover to 6pc by 2015, and by the looks of it, that target will remain elusive for many more years to come. In addition, coastal mangroves, non-timber forests in the mountainous areas and the preservation of biodiversity are also important goals that need to be either added to the programme, or addressed through similarly muscular plans.

But it is hard to escape the feeling that the programme has been launched on somewhat capricious grounds. It takes its inspiration from the Great Green Wall of China, a project launched to halt the growth of the Gobi desert. That programme was launched in 1978 and will continue till 2050, and is possibly the largest ecological engineering project in the

world today, seeing over 259,000 square kilometres of arid land brought under tree cover since its inception. Another Great Green Wall project is under way in Africa, through donor support, to plant a belt of trees on the southern fringe of the Sahara desert to serve as a natural barrier to its expansion. Green walls are used for these purposes for containing growing desertification where the line between arid and arable land is in sharp relief.

Desertification in Pakistan is a much more complex process, and the programme as envisioned by the prime minister is not designed to hem the desert in. It is simply a massive tree plantation drive to preserve and better manage the forest and wildlife resources of the country. That is a laudable objective, and the programme deserves to be pursued strenuously. But it would be better if it can be dovetailed with other, existing programmes that seek to increase tree cover and preserve biodiversity. Some programmes already in play include the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, or REDD+, under UN auspices, as well as the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility. Merely transplanting ideas from another country to address ecological issues will not work, for the simple reason that the ecology of the two countries can be very different. The Green Pakistan Programme contains a few other dimensions that make it more than just a massive tree plantation drive, such as regular stocktaking of forests and their degradation. But for the initiative to have a meaningful impact on the ecology of Pakistan, it will need to be aligned with a broader set of programmes and build on the resources made available by REDD+ and FCPF. Let's hope the programme grows bigger in the years to come.

Violence against media

REPORTING on trouble spots such as Balochistan or the operation against extremists in the northwest has often brought threats, even violence to the country's media organisations and their workers. But this past week brought to light a new dimension of the issue that renders the field even more treacherous for media persons and their organisations. On Friday, towns and cities across the country saw protests organised by various religious organisations against the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, the self-confessed killer of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. Some of these demonstrations and sit-ins turned violent, with the ire reserved mainly for representatives of the news media. The worst incident occurred in Hyderabad, where an angry mob descended on the Press Club and set fire to furniture, computers, and other equipment, and assaulted journalists and staff. In Lahore and Karachi, the offices of electronic news organisations came under attack; in other places where protesters gathered, DSNG vans and media staff were pelted with stones or roughed up. Over half a dozen media people were injured, with their equipment burnt or destroyed. The reason? News organisations were exercising their right of editorial judgement and making their own decisions about the extent to which they wanted to cover the protests or the man on whom they centred. Indeed, the same reason caused protesters to physically assault a couple of media men in Karachi on the day that Qadri's execution took place.

Where the protesters turned violent in their effort to dictate to the media, the state on its part too did not refrain from making the attempt. On Tuesday, when Qadri's burial was scheduled and his supporters started travelling towards Rawalpindi where

the funeral was to be held, Pemra tweeted an advisory asking channels to "[...] refrain from inciting sectarianism, hatred or violence through shows [...]" etc. While this had an effect on some of the channels, the fact remains that the authorities were presumptuous enough to assume that this country's media freedoms, won at such hard cost, could very easily be eroded. While the violence against media persons is deserving of the strongest condemnation, the state must shoulder its share of censure as well. Media organisations should, meanwhile, continue to stand fast against any attempt to influence their output, and ensure that criticism cannot be levelled against them through remaining impartial, honest, and operating in the context of the highest ideals of journalism.

Published in Dawn, March 6th, 2016

Cricket security

THE staging of the much-awaited Pakistan-India World T20 game in Dharamsala on March 19 has snowballed into a major crisis amid threats of disruption from Hindu extremists besides stiff opposition from the authorities in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh who have refused to provide security for the match citing a January attack on an Indian army base as the reason.

The Pakistan Cricket Board has asked for security assurances from the Indian government, and the authorities here have reportedly constituted a security team that will be sent to India

to assess security measures before the players are given the final go-ahead for participation in the International Cricket Council event.

While diplomatic tensions have prevented a bilateral series between the two archrivals for over three years, the current circumstances have put the onus on the Indian government and the Indian cricket board — BCCI — as hosts of the mega event, to ensure the smooth organisation of the match.

An objective review of Pakistan-India cricket over the past many decades shows that matches held in India are prone to interventions by political and other forces that have jeopardised tours by Pakistan.

In fact, the unease and animosity that surround the matches between the two countries have often overshadowed the significance of the competition itself. These instances have caused resentment among Pakistani players and officials.

Having said that, the PCB's faltering stance on India's rather aggressive posture leaves a lot to be desired as well. A constant state of indecision reigns at the PCB on such occasions, something that has justifiably earned the ire of critics and former players in the country.

Believing them to be sufficiently embittered by the events of the past few months, one had expected PCB officials to pre-empt the emerging scenario in India and to unequivocally lay down their terms — before both the ICC and the BCCI — for the team's participation in the World T20.

Their belated onslaught, therefore, does not guarantee a favourable result at the moment.

Published in Dawn, March 6th, 2016

Afghan peace obstacles

The road to a peace settlement in Afghanistan is likely to be a rough one and the Afghan Taliban have provided yet another example of why.

Ostensibly rejecting what were believed to be imminent talks with the Afghan government, the Mansour Akhtar faction of the Taliban have returned to familiar preconditions: withdrawal of all foreign troops; removing Taliban leaders from international blacklists, which impeded travel; and the release of Taliban prisoners.

Also read: [Taliban refusal puts talks in jeopardy](#)

The familiarity of those demands suggest that the likelihood of talks has not evaporated, but that the Taliban are trying to win some concessions that would give them a political and military advantage while they pursue their strategy of fighting and talking.

The relatively restrained reaction of the Afghan government appears to indicate that talks will restart soon — President Ashraf Ghani addressed the opening of parliament yesterday

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and saved his strongest words for elements of the militant Islamic State group in Afghanistan.

Similarly, a video conference between Mr Ghani and President Barack Obama on Friday yielded a White House readout that spoke in positive terms about the reconciliation process.

The US president is unlikely to express support for a process that was on the verge of collapse. What the Taliban demands may do, however, is exacerbate tensions inside the Quadrilateral Coordination Group scheduled to meet in Islamabad soon.

The Afghan government has wanted Pakistan to take stronger action against Pakistan-based Taliban factions that are reluctant to engage in talks.

Pakistan has resisted the Afghan government demands on the sensible grounds that to exclude certain groups from talks at the outset would undermine an eventual, broad-based political settlement.

Yet, Taliban intransigence does present a problem for Pakistan – and the QCG by extension. Having last week acknowledged the presence of Taliban leaders in Pakistan and outlined the leverage that the Pakistani state has over the Taliban, the government and the security establishment will come under pressure in the QCG.

It may come down to the American and Chinese representatives in the QCG to try and keep the situation from spiralling out of control.

Perhaps what will be needed is a bit of calm perspective from Afghan and Pakistani officials, difficult as that may be.

As Mr Ghani has told The Hindu newspaper, “We have no other hope for peace” — a reference to the QCG-guided peace process. Similarly, Pakistan must consider that the cost of not doing its utmost to nudge the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table could result in a regional security meltdown.

Published in Dawn, March 7th, 2016

Meaningful reform

IT is not uncommon to hear the term ‘education emergency’ used to describe the state of learning in Pakistan. However, the state’s efforts at dealing with this emergency are mixed at best.

Take some of the results highlighted in the Annual Status of Education Report 2015, launched recently in Lahore, about the state of learning in Punjab.

Take a look: [ASER 2015: public schools improve enrolment](#)

While enrolment in public schools in Pakistan’s most populous and supposedly best educated province is up, learning outcomes are still not satisfactory. For example, only 60pc of surveyed students in class V could read English sentences meant for class II learners. The figure is up slightly from 2014

(when it was 57pc) which shows that while work is being done, there are still miles to go.

Expectedly, the figures from Punjab showed that private schools are performing better than state institutions.

Compared to Punjab, Balochistan (considered the worst performing province) — as reflected in the Aser report released for that province earlier — has even more depressing figures, indicating a wide chasm between the two federating units. Looking at figures nationally, though most students are enrolled in government schools, it is private institutions that lead both where school facilities and learning outcomes are concerned.

Whether it is teacher attendance, the presence of usable water, or usable toilets, private schools outperform their government-run counterparts.

Do the above findings mean that the government should surrender its constitutionally mandated duty to educate Pakistan's young to the private sector? Not in the least.

While many private-sector institutions have done a commendable job — and it could be argued that the situation would be even more miserable if these schools were not educating our children — the state cannot be let off the hook for neglecting the education sector.

The solution may be twofold; first is the problem of administration and infrastructure. Simply put, children will not learn much if teachers don't show up or if schools lack basic facilities such as toilets and furniture.

Secondly, there is the issue of curriculum content. As many experts have pointed out, unless critical thinking is encouraged instead of rote learning, and unless the curriculum is constantly reviewed and updated, children will learn little even if we were to achieve near universal enrolment.

NGOs and education activists have done a fine job of collecting and analysing data related to the education sector. It is now the state's job to take these recommendations on board and initiate meaningful reform for the long term.

Published in Dawn, March 7th, 2016

Turkish media in danger

IT is unfortunate that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan should follow the example of many other leaders in modern history to combine populism with strong authoritarian tendencies.

On Friday, the Turkish government virtually seized the popular opposition daily Zaman by appointing state administrators to run the paper following a court order. Zaman and its sister publications, including one in English, belong to Fethullah Gulen, who Mr Erdogan once admired but who he now considers his *bête noire*.

Not just that, the editor and Ankara bureau chief of the country's most prestigious daily, Cumhuriyet, that doesn't

belong to the Gulen group, were arrested last November for publishing a story that claimed the government was supplying arms to anti-regime dissidents in Syria.

The action against Cumhuriyet came in the wake of Mr Erodgan's electoral triumph when his AKP won a majority in parliament.

But, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015 was the worst year for the media when the government arrested 15 journalists on various charges, including insulting the president. Overall, some 1,800 have been booked for insulting the president, and they include journalists, university professors, a student and a former Miss Turkey.

What adds to the opposition's fear is Mr Erdogan's proposal to change the present parliamentary constitution into a presidential form, and enact laws by decree, appointing and dismissing cabinet ministers.

Take a look: [Turkish authorities seize control of newspaper](#)

His supporters say that the proposed constitution would provide a balance in the powers of the president and the prime minister, both to be elected directly. But the opposition and Turkey's vibrant media see a bleak future for Turkish democracy if Mr Erdogan arms himself with sweeping powers.

That a leader who has given Turkey stability, raised its per capita income and made it the world's 15th biggest economy should suffer from paranoia is indeed a tragedy as much for the country as for himself.

Mr Erdogan should draw heart from his achievements and show a spirit of tolerance and accommodation instead of hounding the opposition, the judiciary and the media.

Published in Dawn, March 7th, 2016

International Women's Day

EVERY year on March 8, International Women's Day is an opportunity for the global community to come together and celebrate the many achievements by women in various fields, and reflect upon what more needs to be done.

In Pakistan, over the past few years, there has been some forward movement on the legislative front with a slew of pro-women laws that, in theory at least, improved the status of women by criminalising various forms of gender-based violence.

Laws have been enacted or amendments made in existing legislation to address acid attacks, honour killings and sexual harassment.

Three of the four provinces have passed laws to protect women against domestic violence, be it physical or otherwise. Increasingly, there are instances of the state apparatus enforcing legislation, such as the rescue of a nine-year-old girl by police last week from being given in marriage to settle a dispute.

At the same time, there is no shortage of regressive forces whose antediluvian ideas are premised on the subjugation of women; and they have consistently sought to undermine the precious gains made in women's rights.

Time and again, they have demonstrated their wilful and illogical disdain for the principles of humanity and even the law itself, such as declaring a minimum age for marriage as being against Islam. More recently, the religious parties have been fulminating against the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act, seeing it as a 'conspiracy' to 'destroy' the family unit.

The suffering of women in violent, abusive marriages is of no consequence to them as long as the façade of an 'intact' family is maintained.

For all their outrageous claims, blatant misogyny is nevertheless expected from such quarters. It is the more obvious manifestation of what is a bigger challenge — the deep vein of chauvinism in a society that objectifies and diminishes women and thwarts their aspirations, even if a large part of it rejects many forms of outright violence against them.

The hostility directed at what should be Pakistani icons — Mukhtar Mai, Malala, among them — is telling. The weight of gender-based historical prejudices and culturally ingrained values remains intact in Pakistan, even as increasing numbers of women find the courage to defy them.

This social conditioning does not only emanate from the pulpit; it can be found in the home, in the classroom, at the workplace and on the street.

It is this mindset that regards anything much more than basic education for women a luxury; denies women the right to have a career, exercise agency in their choice of a life partner and become a mother at a time of their choosing; and it is this sexism that places less value on women in the workplace. Society — even educated segments — needs to examine its closely held biases, and be more proactive in making Pakistan a less hostile place to be a woman.

Published in Dawn, March 8th, 2016

Charsadda bombing

NEARLY two months after militants staged a deadly attack targeting Bacha Khan University in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Charsadda district, the area once again witnessed terrorist violence on Monday.

A suicide bomber targeted a court building in the Shabqadar locality, resulting in a high number of fatalities. The Jamaatul Ahrar faction of the banned TTP has claimed responsibility for the atrocity; among the 'justifications' for the attack is revenge for the execution of Mumtaz Qadri last week, as well as criticism of the country's justice system.

The unfortunate incident indicates two things: firstly, despite all the supposed successes of the fight against militancy and the National Action Plan, gaping holes still exist which allow insurgents to unleash horrific violence.

Secondly, the rhetoric of mainstream religious groups in the aftermath of Qadri's execution is now being employed by banned outfits to further their agenda. Both these aspects need to be addressed to further hone the counterterrorism effort in this country.

The area attacked on Monday is quite close to Fata's Mohmand Agency. This agency happens to be the stronghold of the Jamaatul Ahrar, which was known in its earlier avatar as TTP Mohmand.

Despite the state's actions militants remain active in the area and are involved in various illegal and terrorist activities, including extortion and targeted killings, affecting the surrounding regions — even up till Peshawar.

The attack on the court building, as well as the earlier BKU assault, reiterates the vulnerability of areas located close to zones where militants have harboured influence, or continue to do so.

The state must do a better job of not only protecting such regions, but getting to the root of the problem and disrupting what remains of militant networks. Where the 'justification' of the attack is concerned, the militants have picked the very same issue that most of Pakistan's religious parties are currently agitating about: the execution of Mumtaz Qadri for the murder of Salmaan Taseer.

Whatever the religious right's feelings about Qadri, they must realise that by threatening to launch a protest movement in memory of the executed convict, they are only strengthening the militant right's hand.

This presents a very dangerous, unpredictable scenario. Those with cooler heads within the parties of the religious right — and there are quite a few seasoned politicians in this group — should tone down the rhetoric so that it does not aggravate the situation to the point where radical elements use it to justify their unconscionable crimes.

Published in Dawn, March 8th, 2016

Banks' profitability

THE latest data released by the State Bank on the performance of banks paints a mixed picture, but the most important number to emerge from it is the continued outlandish profits being made in the sector.

By itself there is nothing wrong with commercial enterprises running a profit, but if these are being made without discharging the core functions that are expected from the enterprise, then there can be cause for concern.

The data shows that profits of the banking sector rose by 22pc in the year 2015, coming in at Rs199bn. The returns on equity rose to 25.8pc despite slowdown in the interest income.

Large-scale retirements in some longer-term PIBs that are scheduled this year could help bring interest income down further, but until then the banks will continue on an easy ride.

Earnings are also highly concentrated in the top five banks that eat up 62pc of the total earnings of the banking sector. The figure is somewhat reduced from last year, when it was 66pc, but it nevertheless presents a serious problem in the sector, along with the reluctance of banks to move into private-sector lending.

Overall one might be tempted to see a silver lining in the data by pointing to the growth in advances to the private sector and the reduction in the concentration of earnings, but the fact remains that the highly skewed nature of banking activity points towards a deeper, structural malaise.

The sector is run by a few large banks and derives most of its earnings from lending to the government that serves to plug holes in the fiscal framework. Whatever movements there may be in the data pointing to a shift away from this pattern they are too slow to be seen as a sign of self-correction.

The regulator and the government need to look for more options to wean the banks away from outlandish returns resulting from little to no effort. No recovery worth its name will happen without this.

Published in Dawn, March 8th, 2016

More powers for Rangers?

THE paramilitary Rangers, who have been leading the ongoing law-enforcement operation in Karachi, have made clear their desire to have extended the special policing powers granted to them temporarily, for at least a year.

This emerged during the Supreme Court proceedings held in the city on Monday, looking into the implementation of the Karachi suo motu judgement.

The paramilitary force told the bench that the Sindh government was attempting to clip its wings, and implored the court to expand the Rangers' powers to include setting up their own 'police stations', register FIRs and submit charge-sheets in court — moves opposed by Sindh on Tuesday.

These powers, if granted, would effectively enable the Rangers to encroach upon the police's powers. In a democratic dispensation where the civilian side of the state should have the upper hand, giving such powers to a paramilitary force is decidedly ill-advised.

Unfortunately, it is also a fact that a politicised and largely inept police force, overseen by an ineffective provincial government in Sindh —especially where law and order is concerned — has created the space for the Rangers to move in and claim more powers.

Before the Rangers-led operation began in Karachi in September 2013, and picked up pace in 2015, the law and order situation in the metropolis was abysmal.

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It is still far from perfect, yet the gains made are undeniable. For example, as per one figure quoted in the media, last year there were over 850 targeted killings in the city; the figure for 2014 was more than 1,800.

Other crimes, such as extortion and kidnapping, also appear to be down, though street crime levels remain largely unaffected.

The Rangers have done a commendable job in making the city's streets safer, and it is fair to ask that until the force moved in and was given the mandate to clean up the city, why was the police force failing so miserably to keep the peace?

The answers lie in the fact that the police force, rather than being an independent unit governed solely by the law and taking across-the-board action against criminals and terrorists, is beholden to its political masters — a handicap the Rangers do not have.

Although the Rangers have justly been accused of overstepping their mandate and tolerating extrajudicial methods, by and large their presence has been beneficial to peace in Karachi.

Yet permanently militarising law enforcement and sidelining the police is not a long-term solution. In democratic societies, the police are the lead unit when it comes to enforcing the law. But for this, the force in Sindh would need operational independence and freedom from political diktat.

Are there any serious attempts being made by the Sindh government to attempt reforms along these lines?

The Rangers may be required to establish peace in the short term. But a permanent solution demands a depoliticised and effective police force.

Published in Dawn, March 9th, 2016

Indus Waters Treaty

THE Senate resolution asking the government to 'revisit' the Indus Waters Treaty with India is bizarre.

What is even more confusing is the eagerness with which the resolution was supported by senators from the PPP, who have had many opportunities in power to do exactly that, but had made no mention of it until now.

It appears the senators are either not aware what 'revisiting' the treaty would entail or are not serious about what they are saying.

Either way the resolution does not cast the Senate in a positive light at a time when its chairman is trying to get the government to take resolutions more seriously. In fact, there ought to have been more homework before launching the vote for a resolution.

The PPP's Karim Ahmed Khwaja has done enough work on water issues in Pakistan. He should know that the treaty took a

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decade to negotiate, and has held sway for more than half a century even as ties deteriorated between the two signatories.

Revisiting this treaty could open a Pandora's box for Pakistan, and may not work to its advantage given India's far greater autonomy of action today as compared to the years following Partition, when the treaty was negotiated.

What must also be realised is that Pakistan's water woes are more a result of domestic realities than anything connected with the treaty.

Agriculture accounts for the bulk of freshwater utilisation in Pakistan, and the problems are linked more to the entitlements regime that govern water allocations, as well as wasteful farm practices. Hardly any effort has been made to rectify these or build more reservoirs.

It would have been better if the senators had come to the session with ideas on how to improve entitlements and utilisation practices. And if revisiting the treaty was still deemed necessary after this, the least one would have expected was more information.

What legal options does Pakistan have to force India to 'revisit' the treaty? What would we seek to get out of this process? And what leverage do we have to obtain compliance with our terms?

The hapless minister of state for water and power tried to point out these issues, but the chair sent the resolution for a vote before they could be addressed.

As a result, the situation ended up looking a little absurd, with the Senate holding a bombastic resolution in its hands but without a clue about what to do next.

Published in Dawn, March 9th, 2016

Schools on strike

IN Punjab yesterday and today, thousands of students missed school for a reason that is rather unusual: the school administrations have gone on 'strike' in the attempt to force, they claim, the provincial government to negotiate with them.

At issue is the Punjab Private Educational Institutions (Promotion and Regulation) Amendment Bill 2015, the formulation of which was provided impetus by protests last year against what parents called private schools' unfettered ability to raise fees by whatever margin they deemed fit.

Now it is the private schools that are protesting, amongst other matters against the cap the law has put on an annual fee raise of more than 5pc.

They also refer to the additional financial burden already imposed on them under the head of the beefed-up security required under the government's guidelines post the Army Public School massacre.

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On the face of it, the matter is simple: there can be little argument that private schools cannot be allowed to operate as per their own conscience.

Sadly, this sphere of work has, for many owners, become a business like any other — a source of enrichment, where clients are free to take their business elsewhere if they don't like the terms.

But education, especially in a country with such abysmal literacy and knowledge levels as Pakistan, must be in the context of nobler and less pecuniary concerns.

Private schooling operates almost as a cartel, or so it seems to parents who feel bereft of choice. This is the micro view. The macro view lies in examining why such parents feel themselves to be a hostage population: plainly, it is because of the shambles the state has made of public-sector education.

Having absolved itself of its constitutional responsibility to educate, the state now finds itself having to regulate a private sector that is putting up resistance. Would it not make better sense to drastically improve standards in public-sector schools and return them to the status they once enjoyed?

Published in Dawn, March 9th, 2016

Shahbaz Taseer freed

THE return of Shahbaz Taseer to his family after spending four and a half years in captivity has sent a wave of optimism across the country.

The kidnapping, that took place some months after the assassination of Mr Taseer's father Salmaan Taseer in 2011, had raised several questions about the motives and identity of the kidnappers.

Meanwhile, one can only imagine the relief and joy of the Taseer family and hope for a similar outcome for Ali Haider Gilani — the son of former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani — who was kidnapped in 2013.

Considering that both Mr Taseer and Mr Gilani are scions of families with clout in the corridors of power, one wonders what the plight of common citizens who have undergone a similar ordeal must be.

After all, there are hundreds of other families in the country waiting to be reunited with their loved ones. This moment affords an opportunity to stress the importance of energising all efforts for their recovery.

Meanwhile, speculation continues in the case of Mr Taseer regarding his recovery. The earliest statements given by the Balochistan police and Frontier Corps conflict with reports given by locals in Kuchlak about the circumstances of Mr Taseer's recovery.

Locals say Mr Taseer walked into a restaurant, had a meal, paid for it and asked for a phone to be able to make a call, implying that he had already been released by his captors. But police and Frontier Corps speak of a 'raid' at a local hotel, during which they found the premises to be empty with only Shahbaz Taseer inside who identified himself to them.

This kind of confusion doesn't inspire confidence in the account of the law enforcers, and should be cleared up at the earliest.

There are also questions about whether the recovery, or release, of Shahbaz Taseer might be linked with an earlier search operation that was conducted in Kuchlak on Feb 25, and during which around 30 Afghans were taken into custody, as well as similar search operations in that area a few days earlier. Did intelligence acquired from one of those taken into captivity lead to Mr Taseer's recovery?

The circumstances surrounding his abduction also remain shrouded in mystery. Unless there is clarity, speculation is bound to be rife.

For instance, some media reports claim the abduction was the handiwork of a small Lahore-based cell of college-educated youth with loose ties to militant groups, who also 'freelance' as organised criminals.

In the absence of more authoritative information about the episode, various reports will undoubtedly continue to circulate in this fashion.

The authorities should do their best to prevent that and brief the public about the episode at the earliest.

Published in Dawn, March 10th, 2016

Cooperation with India

CONFIRMING what was reported in the Indian media, the interior minister and the prime minister's adviser on foreign affairs have acknowledged that Pakistan did warn Indian authorities of a possible terrorist strike on Indian soil following an illegal border crossing by militants from Pakistan.

The kind of intelligence sharing that was revealed last week and that led to a state of high alert in Gujarat, India, is precisely what the Pak-India relationship needs more of.

It was timely, relevant and cooperative. Important too is the militant identity of the men who are believed to have crossed the border illegally — not just the out-of-favour Jaish-e-Mohammad, but the hitherto sacrosanct Lashkar-e-Taiba as well.

While neither Nisar Ali Khan nor Sartaj Aziz dwelled on particular actions that may be taken against the banned Lashkar, it is worth noting that the interior minister once again suggested that some activists of the Jamaatud Dawa, a spin-off of the Lashkar, have been found using the name of the militant Islamic State group.

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Perhaps the distance between all anti-India non-state actors and the state itself is set to grow.

If that is indeed the case — that the Lashkar and its affiliates’ forays against India will henceforth be discouraged and anti-India groups will face closer scrutiny — then perhaps it is also time for the prosecution to resume proceedings against those linked to the Mumbai attacks.

What happened in November 2008 poisoned the bilateral relationship far more than Pakistan acknowledged or even appears to have realised.

Not just the bilateral relationship, but Pakistan’s international standing was in jeopardy. When cities are attacked like Paris was last November, the memory of Mumbai is still invoked in many parts of the world, including among many allies of Pakistan.

The reluctance to prosecute the Mumbai suspects has also undeniably boosted the resistance of India’s hawks to engaging Pakistan. While India can and should help Pakistan where necessary — the imminent trip of Pakistani investigators to India to probe the Pathankot incident will be an important precedent — Pakistan too must be resourceful and inventive in its prosecution of anti-India militants.

Timely sharing of intelligence with India, investigating and prosecuting any Pakistani militants involved in staging the Pathankot attack, and resuming and rapidly concluding the Mumbai-related trials would send a powerful message on the anti-terror front.

Not only would Pakistan’s seriousness of purpose in an across-the-board fight against terrorism be communicated, it would also clear the path for a full-fledged re-engagement with India.

India should help rather than impede that possibility.

Published in Dawn, March 10th, 2016

Displacing Palestinians

GIVEN Israel’s track record, there is nothing surprising about the latest UN report which speaks of the “alarming” rate at which the Likud government has stepped up its demolition of Palestinian homes.

As Robert Piper, the UN coordinator for Palestinian territories, wrote in response to a query, the number of Palestinian homes destroyed by Israel in the first nine weeks of the current year has overtaken the total figure for last year.

Those homes and structures, including a school, were built by international donors, and as a Norwegian official involved with the project said “tens of millions of dollars of donor assistance” were at risk of demolition.

The eventual aim behind these demolitions is to deny the Palestinians the right to a state of their own on their land.

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Against this background, the State Department's reaction last week was commendable. Reacting to the spike in demolition activity, the department spokesman said such acts call "into question the Israeli government's commitment to [the] two-state solution".

The truth is that in utter disregard of denunciation by the UN and world opinion, Israel has continued its Lebensraum policy by ejecting Palestinians from their ancestral homes and building more and more settlements, which the International Court of Justice has already declared illegal.

Israel has annexed the Golan Heights, which belong to Syria, and the much-publicised 'disengagement' from the Gaza Strip is a hoax, for it continues to control its air, land and sea exits.

As for the West Bank, which it calls Judea and Samaria, it aims at changing the territory's Arab-Islamic character by razing Palestinian homes and by nibbling at Arab territory. The number of Jewish settlers on the West Bank now stands at 800,000.

Will American Vice President Joe Biden's coming visit to Israel make a dent in the Likud government's hard-line policy?

Let us note, this is an American election year. Which means none of the hopefuls in the race for the White House will say a word that could annoy America's powerful Israel lobby.

Published in Dawn, March 10th, 2016

Baloch insurgency

AT the time of Sanaullah Zehri's ascension to the chief ministership of Balochistan it was not known what tack the new government would take.

Would Mr Zehri, a tribal chieftain with vast influence pursue reconciliation as the core goal of his new administration or would he continue the policies of the army-led security establishment?

Nearly three months into the new Balochistan administration, it appears that Mr Zehri is not serious about reconciliation and engaging the disaffected Baloch in dialogue. Perhaps the clearest sign of that is the frequency and intensity with which his government has boasted of the killing of Baloch separatists.

Consider the tone of the news conference held by a spokesperson of the Balochistan government on Wednesday to announce the death of a separatist militant. There was no attempt made to reach out to separatists, only a matter-of-fact announcement of the death of a wanted militant. Balochistan needs new direction.

Clearly, the previous provincial government, led by Abdul Malik Baloch, had not achieved great success on the reconciliation front. By the end of his term, Dr Baloch had all but given up on the possibility of a meaningful breakthrough in talks with separatists and militants.

The former chief minister had made some serious efforts, including travelling abroad and invoking the possibility of

convening a grand jirga to encourage Suleman Dawood, the Khan of Kalat, to return to Pakistan, but none of his attempts were able to override the security establishment's determination to crush the low-level Baloch insurgency.

If anything, CPEC and the vast investments it may bring to Balochistan have created a new determination to use military force to quell the insurgency.

As ever, the superior might of the security forces is likely to succeed — but perhaps at the political and social cost of alienating the Baloch population.

What Mr Zehri and his team need to do is create the space to engage the separatists. Partly that is a matter of will, but mostly it is a matter of priorities.

The tone and tenor of the new administration has drifted away from reconciliation and towards economic matters — an old approach. It is true that Balochistan's dismal socioeconomic indicators need serious attention.

But it never has been an either-or scenario. Both policies should be pursued simultaneously.

Arguably, the core of the continuing insurgency in Balochistan is a sense of socioeconomic deprivation.

If those fears are addressed, the intensity of the insurgency is sure to lessen vastly. Successive governments in Balochistan have failed to change the security establishment's hard-line views.

Perhaps a solution lies in the Islamabad-Rawalpindi relationship. The prime minister has both the status and political space to tackle hard matters. Moreover, it is a PML-N government that is at the helm of political affairs in Balochistan. Surely, that creates greater responsibilities in the province.

Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2016

Taxing CPEC

A ROUND of negotiations between China and Pakistan has gone into overtime on the issue of granting tax exemptions to interest income earned by Chinese banks that lend to projects in Pakistan.

Recent reports say the government wants to tap this revenue stream but the Chinese government wants it to be covered by a clause in the Avoidance of Double Taxation Treaty between both countries.

At the moment, interest income earned by foreign banks lending in Pakistan is subject to tax on a case by case basis, depending on whether the home country of the bank in question has a double taxation treaty with Pakistan, and if that treaty covers interest income.

So perhaps the demand from the Chinese government is not entirely unreasonable, but the moment does provide a glimpse

into the kind of strings that come attached with the massive investments under CPEC.

In the recent past, the Chinese have also demanded special protections from exposure to the circular debt in the power sector through a revolving facility funded by the government.

In fact, the agreements, wherever some of their details are known, are riddled with such clauses. In other places, the Chinese investors want payments settled in dollars, or want to use Chinese labour to instal their equipment, which must be purchased from Chinese suppliers.

It is this fine print that needs to be disclosed more completely, because this is where the real costs and benefits of the investments lie.

Without knowing these details, it is impossible to say whether the investments will be of any meaningful benefit in the long run, or amount to little more than importing a service.

All through these projects, the role of the government is central. From land acquisition to setting the tariffs to providing safeguards against payment default or insurance for the debt, the costs take many forms and if not negotiated properly can leave the country saddled with payment obligations that will become known only when it is too late.

Granting such protections across the board in these projects could create a special class of investors in the country that is largely isolated from the larger economy and does not share its rhythms and risks. The government is weakening its own hand in these negotiations by keeping these agreements in the dark.

Relief for victims of terror

THE Punjab Civilian Victims of Terrorism (Relief and Rehabilitation) Ordinance 2016, which was promulgated on March 7, seeks to evolve a system for providing assistance to civilians hit by terrorism.

Thus far, the beneficiaries of compensation were dependent on the chief minister's discretion — Punjab has come across as a generous and resourceful province on this particular count.

In recent times, unfortunately, there have been quite a number of cases in the province where life and property have been affected by acts of terrorism.

Also read: [New law provides for funds, healthcare to civilian terrorism victims](#)

These incidents must have been the reason for the new ordinance which envisages the setting up of a civilian victims fund and the presence of specially assigned officials to aid in the processing of compensation claims.

The time frame, if strictly adhered to, should ensure assistance within 45 days of the occurrence of an act of terror. The assessing “officials are to communicate, preferably within 30 days of an act of terrorism, to the government details of the act and those of the civilian victims to initiate the process of assistance” — and “the government shall, within 15 days of receiving this communication and under intimation to the notified officers, transfer the requisite grant...”.

The ordinance and the system it proposes to instal must remove some of the confusion surrounding the provision of assistance to victims of terrorism.

It strives to keep things simple by coming up with a list of possible damage and fixes amounts of compensation based on the severity of the loss, subject to a later revision according to the circumstances.

But whereas there are so many positives to be hoped for from the new law its real test lies in whether it can remain free from the bureaucratic muddle that is generally thought to be present in all kinds of arrangements where citizens ask for relief through often petty government officials.

Pakistanis affected by terrorism have often been heard complaining about the second jolt that they receive by a government delaying assistance to them. This ordinance must guarantee no less than a perfect score for Punjab if it is to win popular trust and if it is to be seen as a model.

Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2016

MQM in flux

These are indeed interesting times for the MQM. For one, the maelstrom unleashed by former Karachi nazim and party stalwart Mustafa Kamal after his return to the city last week refuses to die down.

Up till now, Mr Kamal has managed to convince a number of MQM leaders — including two Sindh Assembly members — to join his fledgling, unnamed party.

While none of the defectors can be considered big names in the party's pecking order, the fact that lawmakers are joining Mustafa Kamal's caravan points to an internal crisis in the Muttahida.

Read: [*Two more MQM dissidents join Mustafa Kamal's party*](#)

All those who have pledged their support to the former city nazim, such as Waseem Aftab and Sagheer Ahmed, have had similar plaints: that the party, particularly its supremo, Altaf Hussain, has used workers for nefarious purposes, including indulging in a number of serious crimes.

Of course, the Muttahida leadership has dismissed the defectors and the various accusations as part of a grand conspiracy against the party, pointing the finger at elements within the security establishment.

Allied to the string of defections have been calls for a judicial commission to investigate the allegations made by Mustafa

Kamal and others, specifically related to the MQM's purported links to Indian intelligence.

The PTI has been leading the calls for a judicial probe. However, the state has been proceeding cautiously in this regard; rather than corner the MQM, the federal interior minister has dismissed calls for a judicial probe, saying instead that a committee has been formed to look into the claims.

As far as the defections from the MQM are concerned, it is fair to ask what — or who — is fuelling this phenomenon.

If the MQM's version regarding the involvement of the establishment's hand is to be believed, then a few things need to be considered.

For one, the Muttahida has run a well-oiled electoral machine in urban Sindh for decades, and even when its militant wing was facing the heat of the security forces, it managed to maintain its electoral relevance.

So unless the split within the ranks of the MQM is 'natural' and the dissidence genuine, it is difficult to see Mr Kamal dislodging the Muttahida at the ballot box, especially if the perception that a minus-Altaf formula is being engineered from elsewhere persists.

Moreover, some of those standing with Mr Kamal have had links to MQM bodies such as the Karachi Tanzeemi Committee, which has earned a dubious reputation for itself. How will he dispel the notion of the pot calling the kettle black?

As for accusations regarding the MQM's controversial activities, such as the alleged RAW link, if the state or any party has solid evidence in this regard, they should produce it and prove it in court. Otherwise, the whole spectacle will be little more than a media trial.

For its part, the MQM must clearly address these serious allegations instead of simply brushing them aside.

Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2016

Pricing CNG

IN the midst of a rather chaotic Senate session, the petroleum minister managed to get an important word in edgewise when he said that his ministry is actively pursuing a proposal to deregulate the CNG sector.

One important result of this proposal would be an end to the role played by government in setting the price of CNG at pumps across the country.

The proposal is in its advanced stages, according to the minister's announcement, with a summary already sent to the ECC for approval. If the government is at all serious about increasing the role of imported gas in our economy in the years to come, it ought to pass the proposal quickly, provided all other details are sound.

In principle, price reform in the gas sector is essential to enable imported gas to play a bigger role since the subsidised price of the vital fuel creates too many distortions to enable greater private-sector participation in gas imports.

More than a year ago, the minister petroleum gave a news conference with CNG-sector stakeholders announcing the creation of a new mechanism whereby an association of pump owners would be able to import LNG themselves through spot market purchases from international markets.

But such a mechanism could not work in the presence of subsidised domestic gas, and controlled prices at the pumps.

The entire gas sector needs to move towards a more market-oriented pricing regime, and CNG is a good place to start. Pump owners should buy their gas from SSGC or SNGPL at a price linked to international spot prices and be able to sell at whatever price they wish.

For guaranteed supplies, they can always buy their gas from international markets and ensure continuous supplies.

A mechanism of this sort will have multiple benefits. It will inaugurate the first market pricing of gas in our country, while at the same time creating a new stakeholder in the LNG import business.

Eventually, this pricing reform can be extended to other large gas consumers too, with industry being next in line, followed by fertiliser and power.

The current era of low oil prices provides a perfect window in which to implement gas-pricing reforms since the disruptive impact of the new prices will be minimal.

The ECC should carefully vet the details of the proposal, but in principle it is sound and deserves expeditious approval.

Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2016

Tragedy in Thar

IT is difficult to say what level of outrageous tragedy is needed to shake this state and its machinery out of its stupor. For months now, the Thar desert in Sindh has been in the headlines.

From a severe shortage of potable water in the drought-hit area to the insufficiency of access to basic medical facilities that can cater to the needs of a population that is already burdened by poverty, to the deaths of some 250 children due to malnutrition and disease, Thar has seen much devastation.

Take a look: [Human rights commission expresses concern over Thar situation](#)

Yet report after report of the people's plight has failed to cause much concern in administrative circles.

On Thursday, the National Commission for Human Rights and the Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research became the latest organisations to point out that the government's apathy had caused the situation in the desert to reach alarming proportions.

Their teams visited a number of villages in the area and held meetings with government officials and NGO representatives, following which, among other examples, they pointed to the fact that despite the deaths, no serious effort had been made to fill the posts of over 300 doctors that have been lying vacant for years in various hospitals. No amount of censure is enough for the government's callous approach.

Talking to journalists at the Thar Press Club, members of NCHR and Piler stressed on the need to formulate a comprehensive policy to save Thar from further devastation, noting that the area has seen the displacement of people on a large scale.

Retired justice Ali Nawaz Chowhan also gave the assurance that the team would submit a detailed report to the prime minister, the National Assembly, the Senate and the Sindh Assembly.

Will that be enough to induce the state to show some mercy to communities that are already amongst the most marginalised in the country? For the families of the five children who died over the past two days alone, this would be a case of too little, too late.

Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2016

Saudi 'Thunder'

THE prime minister and army chief have just wrapped up a visit to Saudi Arabia which saw them witness the 'North Thunder' military exercises. Held under the kingdom's aegis, the exercises saw troops from 20 Muslim states, including Pakistan, come together for war games in Hafar al-Batin, a town located close to the Iraqi border. The drill reportedly involved thousands of troops and equipment taking part in exercises ostensibly meant to sharpen counterterrorism skills. However, considering the fractured state of the Middle Eastern chessboard and the nature of the Saudi-led coalition, there is some speculation about the 'real' intent of the exercises. After all, considering that the manoeuvres were explicitly designed to cement "Islamic and Arab unity", the fact that Iraq and Syria, which fall under both categorisations, and Iran, which qualifies under the first, were not invited is fuelling speculation. Those with knowledge of the affair say "all aspects" of cooperation were discussed by the Pakistani leadership with their Saudi counterparts. But there are troubling accounts in the Saudi media by analysts who say the drill was also designed to send a message to those who 'interfere' in the affairs of others — a veiled reference to Iran.

Ever since the Saudi-led coalition was announced last year, Islamabad has appeared to maintain strategic ambiguity about what role this country will play in this alliance, even though Sartaj Aziz has told parliament that Pakistan will not commit ground troops to the coalition. It appears that participation in such exercises is designed to reassure the Saudis of Pakistan's overall commitment; after all, defence cooperation between Islamabad and Riyadh goes back decades and joint military

exercises are not new. However, participating in war games is one thing; committing Pakistani troops to a coalition that may invade a sovereign state is entirely another. Should this grouping be used as a vehicle to invade Syria, then Pakistan must be quite clear about where it stands.

The civil and military leadership did the right thing by resisting Saudi pressure to join the Yemeni conflict. That ruinous war has achieved very little, while aggravating the humanitarian situation in that impoverished country. As for Syria, things appear calm at this point, with the ceasefire holding. We hope this paves the way for a permanent, negotiated end to that brutal conflict. However, should things go awry and hostilities resume, and if the Saudis and their allies decided to intervene militarily in Syria, Pakistan will have to make a decision. When, and if, that time comes, this country must keep the people and parliament in the loop and not become part of any exercise that would not only violate the sovereignty of another country, but also affect the security and stability of this country, along with putting our troops in the middle of a devastating, open-ended civil war.

Published in Dawn, March 13th, 2016

Child abuse law

THE passage by the Senate on Friday of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, 2015 has finally put in place some much-needed sanctions against child abuse in Pakistan. The bill, which was passed by the National Assembly in December, raises the age of criminal responsibility from seven to 10 years of age, and brings in a number of important changes to the Pakistan Penal Code by taking a broader view of acts that constitute child abuse. Among the various components of the bill, sexual assault of minors is punishable by seven years' incarceration, whereas earlier only rape was criminalised. Similarly, child pornography, which did not previously find a mention in the PPC, is now punishable by a seven-year prison term and a fine of Rs700,000. Child trafficking within the country has also been recognised as a criminal act; earlier, traffickers only attracted sanctions if they removed children from the country.

In a country where around 40pc of the population constitutes under-18s, these changes to the law were long overdue, not to mention legally required as per our international obligations. After all, Pakistan has been a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child since 1990, but its laws were woefully, shamefully inadequate in protecting minors from sexual abuse whether at the hands of predatory adults or older children. This was highlighted time and again in the media through stories of children violated in the home, in the school/madrasah or on the street. However, as is the wont of societies that are reactive rather than proactive, it took a particularly horrific case — that of the child abuse in Kasur district — to shock the country into acting against the

paedophiles amongst us. In that instance, it emerged over the course of a few weeks in August 2015 that scores of minors — perhaps as many as 200-plus — had been sexually abused for years and their ordeal filmed in order to blackmail them and their families. While it is encouraging that there is now legislation in place to deal specifically with crimes against minors, there must be, as always, steps taken to ensure implementation of the law as well as awareness of the issue to make it easier for children themselves to recognise sexual abuse and report it. Maintaining a prudish silence on such matters only leaves our children vulnerable to those who would perpetrate unspeakable acts of brutality against them.

Published in Dawn, March 13th, 2016

Cricket tensions

AFTER the tension-filled events of the past two weeks, the focus has finally shifted to cricket itself with the Pakistani men's and women's teams flying out to India on Saturday for the ICC World T20. Needless to say, players and officials on both sides of the border, and millions of fans, must have heaved a sigh of relief following the recent events that witnessed allegations and counter-statements from Indian and Pakistani politicians. This clearly took the shine off a tournament that will see all the top cricketing nations competing. The episode has exposed the growing influence of external elements, especially in India, that seem hell-bent on exploiting public sentiments to thwart the recent efforts for

better relations between the two countries. Cricket's popular appeal has often been used by rulers in Pakistan and India to iron out diplomatic tensions. But the current situation astonishingly saw politicians and cricket officials from both sides swept along by the events instead of controlling them. From the beginning, the Indian authorities and the ICC ought to have shown greater determination to create a congenial atmosphere for the teams and tournament. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

For a genuine fan, cricket itself could be the casualty here. The inflamed passions of the Himachal Pradesh chief minister and Shiv Sena miscreants notwithstanding, every single seat at the 25,000-capacity stadium at Dharamsala had been sold out a month in advance. Pakistani authorities, concerned for the safety of their players, thankfully presented their terms to both India and the ICC. Their efforts have duly paid off with the contentious game at Dharamsala being shifted to Kolkata, besides the pledging of security assurances by the Indian authorities. The challenges for the Pakistan team in India today are likely to be far greater compared to a decade ago. And cricketering performances by Shahid Afridi and his men in New Zealand, and more recently in the Asia Cup, have left much to be desired. However, they can silence their detractors by doing well at the ICC World T20.

Published in Dawn, March 13th, 2016

Rebuilding Malakand

IT has been more than half a decade since a massive military operation was undertaken in Malakand division to restore the writ of the state there. But the job of rebuilding the division remains unfinished.

A damage and needs assessment carried out by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank said Rs68.7bn would be required for the rebuilding exercise, of which the federal government had pledged to provide Rs17bn and the rest was to come from donors, both multilateral and bilateral.

Of this, only Rs2bn have been released thus far, and repeated attempts by the Senate Standing Committee on Finance to get answers from the finance ministry have produced no acceptable response.

In a series of hearings where the standing committee has been looking into this affair, the latest one on Friday, the finance ministry has pledged little more than to seek out answers and revert in the future.

This is patently unacceptable. Dealing with the aftermath of conflict is a major responsibility, and the lack of action in Malakand casts a cloud over the question of the displaced people from Fata as well. That job is also stuck in partial limbo.

The government has reiterated its pledge to repatriate all IDPs this year, but thus far the resources for their rehabilitation are

nowhere in sight, nor has anyone seen a damage and needs assessment for Fata.

Only last month, the apex committee of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa complained of the slow disbursement of funds for the exercise, where reportedly only 15pc to 20pc of the allocated funds had been released.

Procedural issues were cited as a big reason for the delay, while a summary to streamline some of these bottlenecks in the matter of housing reconstruction have awaited approval from the prime minister since December. But if the experience of Malakand is anything to go by, the displaced families are more likely to be provided grants to facilitate their return and then left to their own devices.

The problem is a big one and significantly impacts the return to normalcy following intense conflict. The government should either provide a reason for the delays and difficulties it is experiencing, or it should release the funds.

The hearings under way in the Senate provide a good forum to do this, and rather than hide behind vague answers, the finance ministry should take advantage of the hearings to put its point of view out in the open.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2016

Sindh Police in turmoil

ALLEGATIONS of illegal appointments, misallocations of police funds, a tug of war between the courts and the Sindh government, a new provincial police chief installed by the federal government to replace the previous chief under investigation — the recent turmoil in the Sindh Police epitomises much that has gone wrong with law enforcement in Karachi and the province generally.

The problems are both short term and long term. While the PPP government in Sindh has not done itself any favours and is perceived to select senior police officers on the basis of loyalty rather than professional competence, the provincial set-up is being interfered in unduly by federal elements.

For its part, the PML-N government in Islamabad may say that intervention became inevitable after the Supreme Court appeared to suggest that the ousted police chief is prima facie guilty of allegations that NAB is set to investigate.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the hidden hand of the army-led security establishment is likely adding to all the chaos and confusion.

It has long been an open secret that police appointments in Sindh have been heavily politicised affairs. The province has been bedevilled by the twin problem of an under-resourced police force and a politicised one.

But the main culprits in Sindh's miserable law-enforcement history, the PPP and the MQM, may well respond that the situation is no different in the other provinces.

Indeed, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab's police forces are hardly models of professionalism and depoliticisation.

Yet, in the decline of Karachi and the overall thrust of policing in the rest of Sindh there is ample evidence that the emphasis of successive PPP governments in Sindh has been on controlling the police rather than letting them get on with their job.

One of the allegations against the ousted IG, Ghulam Hyder Jamali, was the shocking police attack on supporters of Zulfiqar Mirza inside the Sindh High Court. Even Mr Jamali would perhaps struggle to suggest that the incident was purely a policing decision and not a political one.

The bigger and longer-term problem is that none of the provincial governments appear interested in true police reforms. While Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has touted its so-called police reforms, lasting administrative and legal changes have not been made.

The true test of police reforms lies in creating a system where the police can work with and not work for whichever government happens to be in power.

Sindh, caught in a vice applied by forces at the centre, may not be in a position to enact meaningful reforms at this moment —

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though paradoxically the province may need reforms most urgently.

Yet, why is police reforms not an issue for the PML-N government in Punjab? Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif presides over arguably the most stable province in the country — should that not be reason to effect real reforms?

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2016

Mischief-making syllabi

THE passage of almost three decades has provided ample time for this country to recognise the disservices done to it by the Zia dictatorship.

As such, it is unfortunate that even now, in ways big and small, we continue to suffer from that regime's divisive and backward-looking tactics and policies.

Consider, for example, the Grade 12 sociology textbooks that are being taught in Punjab. The issue was raised in the Senate on Friday by Senator Mir Kabir: the Baloch have been disparaged in the textbook, with words such as “uncivilised” being used for them.

Also read: [Describing Baloch as ‘uncivilised’ in textbook irks Senators](#)

Senate Chairman Raza Rabbani said that this syllabus had been prepared under an ordinance promulgated during Gen Zia's days in power. It really is nothing less than “stabbing the nation in the back”, as the Leader of the House Raja Zafarul Haq commented.

And especially in the context of the legitimate grievances the people of the province have long held against the state, that such commentary remains on the books goes a long way towards revealing the priorities of successive leaderships.

While this piece of mischief must immediately be rectified, it provides good reason to look into curriculum reform in general. It is well known that portions of texts being used to ‘educate’ the young in the country carry prevarications and obfuscations if not downright misinformation; some texts are laced with troubling views; and others can be seen as divisive.

Even the text that came under fire in the Senate contains other problematic statements: as pointed out by Mr Rabbani, the book teaches students the ‘benefits’ of dictatorship, and while the break-up of the country is dealt with in one paragraph, there is no mention at all of the long struggle for democracy this country undertook.

There can be little argument that students raised on antediluvian syllabi will make for a poor future.

Even as the prime minister promises to put every child in school, his government needs to ensure that the schooling being provided is worth having.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2016

Extremism on campuses

SOMETHING is rotten in the state of higher education in the country. A familiar set of circumstances — students belonging to different unions attacking each other, triggering disciplinary action by university authorities — has yielded an extraordinary confession.

A student of Punjab University allegedly not only told university authorities at a disciplinary hearing that he considers slain Taliban chieftains Nek Muhammad and Baitullah Mehsud to be his leaders, but that he intends to avenge their deaths in drone strikes.

Revealingly, Attique Afridi, the student now in custody of the intelligence apparatus, is believed to be associated with the Pakhtun Educational Development Movement — a PU student association, alongside a Baloch group, that clashed with the Islami Jamiat-i-Tulaba, the student union more commonly associated with religious extremism on public campuses.

The roots of extremist links in universities, both public and private, appear to have spread far and wide.

Long rumoured, but mostly ignored, the problem of militancy and extremism among university students may be coming to the fore for a complex set of reasons.

The relentless pressure on the banned TTP and other anti-state militant outfits has likely created a vacuum that new breeds of militancy will try and fill.

In addition, the turmoil in the Middle East, the rise of the militant Islamic State group and a growing online culture where hate material and militant propaganda have vastly proliferated, have probably worked to attract a growing number of university students to extremist fare and militancy.

Certainly, the problem is not new — Omar Sheikh remains one of the most notorious private-school educated militants in the country's history — and is not confined to public campuses. Indeed, private universities may be more vulnerable to creeping extremism and militancy on campus because most have no experience of monitoring or handling extremist organisations on campus, among teachers or students.

Combating extremism and militancy on campuses will prove a formidable challenge. For one, the state itself appears to have underestimated the problem.

The National Action Plan drawn up in December 2014 rightly identified the need to reform and modernise madressahs, but there was no mention of universities in the mainstream.

In addition, the higher-education landscape is heavily fractured, with the provinces trying to assert their rights under the 18th Amendment, the centre failing to embrace a new role as coordinator among the federating units, and private universities having mushroomed in recent years with no adequate regulatory structure.

But those challenges only underscore the need for urgency. Recent history has demonstrated how militancy and extremism can metastasise quickly, so while the problems on campuses

today are real, they still appear to be confined to relatively small sections of the student population.

Action taken now — concerted, meaningful action across the provinces that balances the concerns of security with the rights of students — could help avoid a terrible societal unravelling. Extremism on campuses is an addressable problem.

Published in Dawn, March 15th, 2016

Miners' deaths

MONTH after month, a series of grisly headlines work their way across our news pages and disappear into that pit of indifference where many tragic tales lie buried in anonymous graves.

The headlines announce the death of a certain number of miners in a coal mine following an accident. Those who have seen the inside of a mine know that this is among the worst ways for a human being to die.

The lucky ones are those who are killed instantly or who manage to make their way out. For those left inside, death comes either through slow asphyxiation in a darkness we cannot even imagine, or worse still, being buried alive in a grave hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of feet below the surface, a situation where chances of a rescue are remote.

The latest such deaths occurred in a mine in Orakzai on Saturday, when an explosion down below caused a landslide that killed at least eight people and left many others among the 27 who were pulled out alive, injured. There is no mystery behind why mining accidents occur so often in Pakistan.

The industry is run by informal contractors who cut costs to the point of sending their workers down into mineshafts that are highly insecure. Here the miners are made to work with their shovels and pickaxes, and use lanterns to light up their surroundings.

If the pickaxe hits a methane bubble inside the coal seam, an explosion results causing the shaft to cave in, all too often resulting in tragedy.

At a time when the government is making big plans to increase its reliance on coal for power generation, and is talking about the volume of investments it has mobilised in the coal sector, it is imperative that more be done to ensure that the coal miners are given better working conditions, with a special focus on the enforcement of safety regulations.

Coal is dirty business, and given the conditions under which it is mined in Pakistan, it has also proved itself to be a deadly business on several occasions; in fact, it is among the deadliest occupations anywhere.

The government should ensure that its bragging rights on coal are not measured in megawatts alone, but also in terms of bringing down the numbers of lives lost in the process of mining this fuel. This can only be done if safety is given precedence.

Ankara targeted again

IF it were in their power, militants would turn Turkey into another Iraq or Syria. On Sunday, Ankara was targeted for the third time in five months when an area close to the diplomatic enclave was bombed, leaving at least 34 dead, though there was no official word yet about who could be behind the atrocity.

This year there have been six blasts, including one in the capital city a month ago when the car bombing of a military convoy killed 28 people.

The crime was claimed by the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, a breakaway group of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

However, there is little doubt which militant group was behind the January carnage in Istanbul when a suicide bomber exploded himself in Sultanahmet, killing 10 people, eight of them foreign tourists, prompting Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to pledge Turkey would not "backtrack in its struggle against" the militant Islamic State group.

There is no doubt Ankara is facing one of the worst crises in decades because there are no signs yet of all parties to the Syrian conflict agreeing on a common peace formula. Most unfortunately, the ceasefire with the PKK stands shattered.

On top of all this is the flood of Syria refugees, 2.5 million of whom Turkey has accommodated. Ankara now has to listen to European grievances and halt the refugees' exodus to Europe —

a tough and highly unpleasant task in the midst of the grave humanitarian crisis in Turkey's underbelly.

There is no quick-fix solution. Turkey has to renew efforts to seek a ceasefire with the PKK and mobilise all its resources to strengthen Mr Davutoglu's resolve to crush IS terrorism.

Focusing on the Kurds is taking the attention away from the threat that is the IS. Above all, the AKP-led government must try to be more tolerant of criticism and soften the authoritarian tendencies often seen in its policies.

Without a national consensus and a placid domestic scene a determined fight against terrorism is inconceivable.

Published in Dawn, March 15th, 2016

After the operation

OPERATION Zarb-i-Azb may have been an urgently needed military operation, but it was also obvious at the time of its launch that it would be the apogee of counter-insurgency operations in Fata.

Once Zarb-i-Azb would be completed, militarily the clear-and-hold phases across all seven agencies would have little further to go. Now, the country appears to be at a stage where the military is turning its attention to what comes after clear and

hold — in fashionable counter-insurgency parlance, that should be the build-and-transfer stages.

Adjusting for local realities that would mean the mass resettlement of IDPs, Fata reforms and the rehabilitation of a civilian administrative apparatus that can focus on socioeconomic needs to bolster the security that the military has provided.

Yet, as Zarb-i-Azb comes to an operational close — with the capture of major heights and strategic passes in North Waziristan, large-scale fighting will likely end in the region — there are several questions that need to be asked.

First though, the bravery and courage of the soldiers and military personnel who risked their lives for the country's safety and security should be warmly applauded.

What, however, about the numbers of alleged militants killed in the final, Shawal phase of the operation so far?

The figure provided by the ISPR, 207 militants killed, is small for an area that has proved so difficult to capture.

Have many more militants done what they have done before in other regions ie melted away into adjoining areas? If so, where have they gone? And what is the military's plan to progressively stamp out the last militant sanctuaries?

The morphing of Zarb-i-Azb from a counter-insurgency operation in Fata into a broader counter-terrorism agenda across the country ought also to be questioned.

The fight against militancy was always going to be a long one and there is a great deal of interconnectedness between militancy in Fata and terrorism in the rest of Pakistan, but specific operations do need closure.

The fate of North Waziristan should be clear and separate from the very different nature of counter-terrorism and intelligence-led operations that are continuing across the country.

Closure also provides a relatively straightforward way to assess military claims. Rah-i-Raast (Swat), Rah-i-Nijaat (South Waziristan), Operation Thunder (Mohmand Agency), Khyber-I and Khyber-II were each launched and eventually concluded, allowing the claims of military success to be tested against realities on the ground.

Similarly, Zarb-i-Azb and its conclusion would allow Fata and its residents to turn their attention fully to reconstruction, resettlement and political reforms.

For all the sacrifices made by the residents of Fata and the military, the gains are far from permanent.

Fata cannot simply return to its pre-insurgency way of life. Yet, meaningful reforms and socioeconomic uplift become all the more difficult in the face of an open-ended military operation, even if just in name.

Published in Dawn, March 16th, 2016

SBP questions

THE corporate sector has a few questions to answer after the State Bank pointed out that it is sitting on a pool of investible resources that could be as large as Rs3.7tr.

Moreover, the central bank also pointed out that corporate entities are putting money in government securities instead of real economic activities, preferring the risk-free route of lending to government rather than pursuing profits through investing activities.

The numbers given by the State Bank during an event at the Pakistan Stock Exchange are truly massive.

According to its analysis of non-financial listed companies, the net surplus on corporate balance sheets is as large as Rs446bn, which when combined with equity and leverage capacity, yields a pool of investible resources that is almost 14pc of the total GDP.

Considering that the security situation has improved, reserves are at record highs, inflation is low and set to remain low for the foreseeable future, the economy has stabilised, and there are “no major risks in sight” (in the words of the State Bank governor), why is this money sitting around?

Or worse, why is it being ploughed into government securities rather than finding its way into the economy?

This is a good question, but unfortunately, there are some equally good answers. The investment environment is tainted

by the growth of an undocumented sector, which is fuelled by a massive and growing pool of tax-evaded wealth.

It is overshadowed by the speculative returns in real estate and the runaway growth of the trading economy where Chinese goods have flooded the market.

It is hamstrung by a weak policy framework driven by whimsical changes in policies and a non-transparent tax regime.

The State Bank is aware of these weaknesses since it has alluded to at least some of them in its annual report.

However, the governor’s words at the PSX clearly indicate that the resources to fuel future growth are available in generous quantities. All that is required is to tap them.

But that will not happen on its own; gentle goading from the State Bank can help but not create the will to invest. That can only happen when the government moves beyond stabilisation in its thinking on the economy, and is ready to undertake the reforms necessary to provide a stable 10-year horizon for investors. This is not rocket science, and it is not too late to start working on it now.

Published in Dawn, March 16th, 2016

Syria peace talks

AS the Syrian civil war completed its fifth year on Tuesday, a number of interlinked events have raised faint hopes that one of the Middle East's most devastating modern conflicts could be wound down at the negotiating table.

A shaky ceasefire that went into effect at the end of February is holding, while peace talks are currently under way in Geneva under the UN's aegis. Moreover, Russia has started pulling out its troops and aircraft from the Syrian theatre; Moscow intervened in the conflict in September to shore up Bashar al-Assad's forces.

Indeed, the Russian intervention has been a game-changer, with Moscow's air power helping Damascus regain the upper hand in the civil war.

Meanwhile in Geneva, we should not expect miracles; the Syrian regime and the Western-backed rebels are poles apart on many matters, primarily the fate of Mr Assad.

The opposition wants the Syrian strongman out of the picture immediately, while Damascus has termed the president a "red line".

As noted by the UN envoy to Syria, such rhetoric is part of the negotiations process. What is important is that both sides — the Syrian government and the moderate opposition — find some middle ground and take the peace process forward.

Should both sides stick to rigid positions, it is more than likely the bloodbath will resume. In this matter, the respective sides' external backers — Russia and Iran in the government's case, the Western states, Turkey and the Gulf Arabs in the rebels' case — should urge their Syrian allies to make compromises.

Moreover, the exclusion of the Syrian Kurds from the peace process may be counterproductive. The Kurds, apart from the Syrian forces and their allied militias, are one of the most effective fighting forces countering the militant Islamic State group and other extremists.

All parties in Geneva should remember that groups like IS and Al Nusra continue to hold considerable swathes of

Syrian territory, and should the peace process succeed, a new challenge will await them — that of dislodging the militants.

Published in Dawn, March 16th, 2016

State vs clerics

The religious right in the country is once again in a state of fervent agitation. Ostensibly, this is because the Punjab Assembly recently passed a historic women's rights law.

Yet, other provinces have passed similar, arguably more robust, laws in recent times and there has been little outcry. The difference this time may be the straits the religious right has found itself in and its urgent need to put pressure on the federal government — the PML-N — to reverse policies that have caused it to lose ground in the public arena.

Read: [Religious parties denounce law protecting women from abuse as 'un-Islamic'](#)

The signs are several. The conference convened by the Jamaat-i-Islami in Mansoorah on Tuesday saw many speakers veer away from the Punjab law and condemn the hanging of Mumtaz Qadri and the clampdown on the activities of the Tableeghi Jamaat.

More remarkably, in attendance were avowed anti-democrats like Hafiz Saeed, whose interest in parliamentary democracy is nil. The constellation of ignominy that gathered in Mansoorah clearly has wider goals than simply nullification of a pro-women law.

The recent fulminations of Fazlur Rehman, the JUI-F chief, give an indication of what those wider goals may be.

In evoking the spectre of a PNA-style opposition alliance, the maulana appears to be seeking unity of the religious right so as to put concerted pressure on the centre, with the intention of either bringing down the federal government or aggressively increasing the public space for the religious right and its extremist partners.

Behind those grand schemes lies a harsh reality: the JUI-F and its political and extremist cohorts face an existential crisis.

The National Action Plan made explicit for the first time the need to combat religiously motivated militancy and also called for the regulation of the sprawling network of madressahs across the country.

In truth, however, the slow collision between the state and religious right had already begun. The infamous outburst of Munawar Hassan in November 2013, in which the former JI chief condemned Pakistani soldiers drawing a sharp response from the military, may have set the parameters of conflict and dissent.

See: [Cleric comes out in support of women's protection bill](#)

What remains to be seen is how firm the PML-N will stand in this ideological conflict between the forces of regression and those on the right side of history.

Pakistan must return to the vision of its founding father and become the progressive, modern and thoroughly democratic country that the Quaid wanted it to be.

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Thus far, the PML-N has surprised with its willingness to dabble in more progressive and forward-thinking politics.

Yet, its mettle has not truly been tested. The Punjab Assembly is little more than a rubber stamp for the Sharif family's pet projects. The hanging of Mumtaz Qadri was cleared by the courts.

Now comes the real baptism of fire — stand firm and stand tall against the religious right and the PML-N will earn itself a place in history. Crumble now and history will be less forgiving.

Published in Dawn, March 17th, 2016

Peshawar bus bombing

SOON after the military high command announced on Monday that Operation Zarb-i-Azb was being wound down in Fata, terrorists struck Peshawar as a timed device exploded in a bus carrying government employees.

As per reports, the banned Lashkar-i-Islam's supremo Mangal Bagh claimed responsibility for yesterday's atrocity; the militant leader 'justified' the bombing because of the recent ratification of death sentences by the army chief of convicts linked to the proscribed TTP, as well as the armed forces' overall efforts against militancy.

So while the army leadership is talking of wrapping up combat operations in the tribal belt, there is no reason to assume that the challenge of fighting terrorism in the rest of the country is over.

After all, while LI claimed Wednesday's attack (this is the first act of militant violence claimed by the group after a lengthy period), the TTP's Jamaatul Ahrar was responsible for the bombing which targeted courts in Charsadda last week. This shows that though the militants might be scattered or on the run, they have not lost their ability to wreak havoc on society.

Those familiar with the area say there is no proper clearance of who is boarding buses meant for government employees headed to Peshawar from the districts.

This situation needs to be addressed so that vehicles carrying state employees are properly checked for explosives and no unconcerned person is able to board them.

Coming to the larger problem of militancy, the military announced after the corps commanders' conference that intelligence-based operations would be intensified countrywide.

After destroying the militants' infrastructure and bases, this is among the best ways to proceed in order to root out extremist fighters and their sympathisers across Pakistan and prevent further acts of terrorism.

For this, the military must work in tandem with the civilian law-enforcement and intelligence agencies, as they have an ear to the ground in the cities and towns. We must not delude

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ourselves by assuming that victory against militancy is near; by all indications, this will be a long war.

For decades, we let the monster of religious militancy grow. Neutralising it will not be a short-term exercise.

Gains have indeed been made in the counterterrorism effort, with the soldiers, and ordinary men, women and children of the country paying a price in blood. But the goal of a terrorism-free country will only be realised if the state continues to counter militancy and extremism with commitment.

Published in Dawn, March 17th, 2016

Tax amnesty fails

AFTER two extensions and almost eight months of negotiations, the time has come for the government to act on the ‘dead’ in ‘deadline’ for its tax amnesty scheme, which it would prefer to call a ‘Voluntary Tax Compliance Scheme’.

The finance minister had optimistically harboured the hope of netting almost one million new taxpayers as a result of this scheme, coupled with a tax on bank transactions of non-filers.

Yet today, as the second deadline expires, the total number of traders who have availed of its provisions is only slightly above 5,000.

A more dismal showing would be difficult to find. Leaders of the trader community argue that netting one million traders can take many months and the scheme should be extended till June 30, the end of the fiscal year. But leaving such a long and indeterminate timeline open for so long will not help.

It is apparent that the traders are treating the extensions as a permanent state of affairs, and their strategy is to indefinitely demand extensions until the government tires of the exercise. It is time to send a tough signal that this will not happen.

The continuous extensions have sent a distorted signal to the traders. They have increasingly resorted to using cash and other innovative forms of promissory notes as a means to settle their transactions, in the hopes that the government will eventually yield in its determination to clamp down on them.

This resort to cash can only last so long as the expectation persists that the government will soon tire of its resolve and repeal the withholding tax altogether.

In reality though, the trader community cannot persist for very long outside the formal payments system and once they understand that the withholding tax is here to stay, and is only going to get steeper in days to come, their behaviour will change.

The nature and volume of the transactions that take place in the trading economy cannot last for very long outside the banking system. It is time to signal the necessary resolve to this famously recalcitrant community that the good old days of accumulating wealth outside the tax net are over.

The government should restore the withholding tax to 0.6pc of daily turnover above Rs50,000 on all bank transactions of non-filers once the new deadline expires, with a signal that the amount could rise to 1pc in the next budget.

Published in Dawn, March 17th, 2016

Confronting MQM's past

FROM being a political force claiming to represent urban Sindh's Urdu speakers, the MQM has tried to transform itself into a national player.

However, while it has made its mark in Pakistan's politics and has sent many members of the urban middle class to the legislatures, it has been unable to shed its reputation for using strong-arm tactics, especially where control of Karachi is concerned.

Many of the demons in the Muttahida's closet were dragged out into public view by party dissident and former Karachi mayor Mustafa Kamal when he returned to the city earlier this month.

Mr Kamal launched a number of devastating salvos primarily targeted at MQM supremo Altaf Hussain, accusing him of working with RAW and misleading the party cadre.

The Muttahida leadership has blamed elements within the establishment for engineering the split. This may be possible as the establishment was also believed to have been instrumental in carving out the Afaq Ahmed-led Haqiqi faction from the MQM in the early '90s. However, then, as well as now, many of the dissidents could hardly be considered 'clean', as Afaq Ahmed and many of his cohorts were believed to have been involved in violence while still attached to the mother party.

In Mustafa Kamal's case, a number of individuals linked to his unnamed party have had less than immaculate records, associated as they were with the Karachi Tanzeemi Committee, considered the Muttahida's enforcement arm. This brings us to the key issue: that of the MQM's association with and acceptance of violence.

The Muttahida for long has played the victim card, claiming its cadres have faced the oppressive might of the state, during the infamous operations of the '90s, and more recently, for example when the paramilitary Rangers went marching into Nine-Zero, the MQM's headquarters, last year. Some of these complaints may be valid.

Yet what the MQM leadership is not talking about is the fact that until the state took action, the party controlled Karachi with an iron grip, through its shadowy militant wing. The city's residents have not forgotten when Karachi used to shut down almost completely on the MQM's calls for days of 'mourning' or protest.

It would not be incorrect to say that the party led the way in introducing gun culture to urban Sindh's politics, as well as the politics of ethnic division. And accusations that the party

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thrived on extortion are equally hard to dismiss, while the MQM tolerated little dissent — internal or external.

The political wing of the MQM needs to acknowledge these sordid facts and admit that condoning violence was ill-advised. This should be followed by a permanent break with those who wield the gun within its ranks.

Local polls in Sindh have shown that even without the coercive force of party militants, the MQM can perform well at the ballot box.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2016

Musharraf's latest coup

It has proved, in the end, to be a damp squib. What once began as a historic treason trial, either radically altering the civil-military imbalance or shaking the foundations of democracy in the country, is now all but over in name.

A sheepish Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan told the media last night that his government will allow retired Gen Pervez Musharraf to travel abroad on the latter's firm assurance that he will return to Pakistan after several weeks. Not even the interior minister could pretend that Mr Musharraf's return is likely.

Instead, Mr Khan tried to explain why his government's hands were tied. Never mind that the Supreme Court itself had made clear that both the federal government and the special tribunal were well within their rights to prohibit Mr Musharraf from travelling abroad.

The government had tried to pass the buck to the Supreme Court and when the Supreme Court returned it firmly, the PML-N apparently had nothing left to offer. Surrender has come rather meekly.

There remains the possibility that Mr Musharraf may in fact return to Pakistan. But even if he does, the government has surely already signalled the end of its prosecution of the former dictator.

If the fate of Mr Musharraf seems relatively clear now, there are two other questions that remain to be answered. First, what was Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif thinking when he decided to pursue Mr Musharraf for treason?

From the very outset, there appeared to be no real strategy. In choosing to go after Mr Musharraf for the November 2007 emergency and not the 1999 coup, perhaps the prime minister was trying to make the overtly personal seem less so. In addition, there may have been legal advice that the original coup of Mr Musharraf was later sanctified by parliament and therefore more difficult to prosecute.

Yet, none of that could resolve the obvious political contradiction: if the first coup was not worthy of prosecution, then what did a short-lived imposition of emergency matter,

especially if it led to the eventual ouster of Mr Musharraf and the reinstatement of Iftikhar Chaudhry?

Pakistan needs a reckoning with its military past. But justice must be done transparently, rationally and for the greater good. Prime Minister Sharif's prosecution of Mr Musharraf always seemed more in line with persecution.

Second, what now of the civil-military imbalance? Increasingly, it appears that the prime minister has accepted the de facto normalisation of military control as the price for democratic continuity.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2016

Futures markets

THE powers of the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan have been strengthened as a result of the new Futures Markets Bill just passed by the National Assembly, but such a move will be useless if the regulator lacks the will to actually use the new provisions of the law.

The new law allows the regulator to cancel the licence of brokers who fail to maintain adequate liquidity to discharge their obligations on the settlement date of their contracts, amongst other things. In reality, everyone knows that the power of the big brokers permeates the regulator and inhibits

the use of such penal clauses, even in cases involving far more serious breaches of the law.

When a former chairman of the SECP, acting more autonomously, served large numbers of notices to clients for insider trading, for instance, he found himself engulfed in adverse rumours to the extent that the continuation of his tenure was effected.

The futures market in Pakistan is very small, and not likely to grow simply as a result of this law. Most trading is concentrated in more bread-and-butter stocks, with a particular focus on a small number of energy scrips.

For the futures market to genuinely grow, upgrading the regulatory framework is only a small step, albeit an important one. There must be a wider demand for broadening the capital markets in the country, driven largely by the investor community themselves.

Thus far, this community has preferred to stick to the status quo rather than venture out into innovative new products, such as commodity futures which were introduced many years ago. There is no reason to believe that the new law will change this.

As a start, the government can follow up on the new legislation by appointing people at the SECP who are serious about cleansing the stock market of all kinds of dealings that serve to swindle investors, than standing by the actions of the regulator when the inevitable reaction arrives.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2016

Pak-India peace process

THE imminent trip by a Pakistani investigation team to India is both necessary and history-making. The Pathankot air force base attack in early January was a grim episode that could have yet again derailed dialogue between Pakistan and India.

It goes to the credit of the governments of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif that the Pathankot attack did not cause the rupture that it could have and both governments have kept the channels of communication open.

Yet, nearly three months will have passed since the attack by the time the Pakistani investigation team arrives in India later this month.

In the meantime, the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue both countries so boldly agreed to late last year has all but stalled. It is time for that process to begin and, therefore, it is disappointing that a meeting on the sidelines of a Saarc summit in Nepal between Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz and Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj did not go far beyond talk of the Pathankot probe.

Resumption of dialogue — or, technically, the start of the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue — hinges on two things. In administrative terms, the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan must meet to determine a schedule for meetings of the various dialogue sub-groups and determine how a first round of talks will move ahead.

So far, the two governments appear reluctant to announce a date for the foreign secretaries' meeting, suggesting a link to progress on the Pakistani side of the Pathankot investigation.

In political terms, Mr Modi and Mr Sharif will need to invest their time and capital in dialogue — both to ensure that it restarts and, subsequently, to nudge bureaucratic negotiations towards results. Thus far, both leaders have only demonstrated a willingness to take risks in meeting each other — but not the willingness or confidence to actually move dialogue forward. That must change.

Necessary and welcome as prime ministerial interactions are, they must go beyond tentative ideas. When Mr Modi and Mr Sharif next meet, the emphasis must be on substance. Regional hopes for peace could soon turn to a familiar disillusionment if the two prime ministers reduce their meetings to desultory photo ops.

Perhaps what India needs to recognise is that dialogue should not hinge on any single issue, especially if that issue is a militant attack meant to derail dialogue.

Moreover, the terrorism threat in the region can only be combated by joint action by Pakistan and India — and dialogue alone offers the opportunity to create a robust framework for joint action against militancy and terrorism.

Yet, Pakistan needs to acknowledge the centrality of terrorism to India's concerns about its relationship with Pakistan. The recent sharing of intelligence with the Indian national security adviser by Pakistan was a positive step. Faster action on the

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Pathankot and Mumbai attacks would send a stronger signal yet.

Published in Dawn, March 19th, 2016

Auto policy, finally

AFTER a number of failed beginnings, the ECC has finally approved an auto policy that could kick-start a round of fresh investments in this vital sector which has seen a large boom in the past year.

The new policy aims to break the years' long pattern of wrestling between the government and the auto giants, by providing incentives for fresh entrants to come into the market.

Since the late 1980s, Pakistan's auto sector has been dominated by three assemblers, who have had to be pushed into making investments to localise the manufacture of components and spares, keep prices competitive, maintain output to keep pace with demand, and introduce new models on a regular basis.

The auto makers have their own point of view in all this, particularly of late when they claim, with merit to their case, that a large and growing cash economy has turned new cars into a speculative product, creating a secondary market of sorts where 'own' money dominates.

The government has done the right thing to emphasise on new entrants in the market above anything else. This is the best way to inject some fresh energy into the auto sector where booming sales are catching the eyes of other manufacturers.

The sector could use some healthy competition, and the policy pursued by previous government since the expiration of the last auto policy in 2012 to promote competition by encouraging imports of used cars, was counterproductive.

A stable horizon for the next five years in terms of tariffs applicable to the new entrants and imported cars will do more to encourage investment than ad hoc changes in the tariffs of used cars.

Ad hoc moves of the sort that have been used since 2012 have hurt investment and introduced distortions in the behaviour of auto makers.

The new policy gives them a stable environment, and even though they are likely to make a fuss about the preferential treatment that new entrants will be given, at least they will know that their comfort zone is about to be disrupted.

Hopefully, this will spur a little more energy in the sector, which is sitting on massive cash reserves ready to invest, as pointed out by the State Bank at the start of the week.

Now that a policy has been announced, and competition may well be on the horizon, they have every reason to invest rather than hoard their cash.

Published in Dawn, March 19th, 2016

Attacks on journalists

ON Wednesday, the courts in Karak district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, awarded life imprisonment and a fine of Rs5 million to one of the men accused of gunning down in cold blood journalist Ayub Khattak on Oct 11, 2013.

While grief cannot be assuaged, that the long wait for justice — nearly two years in this case — is finally over and the murderer is behind bars may bring much-needed closure to the family of Mr Khattak.

The circumstances of his death say much about the dangerous terrain journalists in this country must traverse in the pursuit of their duties.

Mr Khattak had been a reporter for the daily Karak Times and had published a story regarding drug smuggling and the sale of illicit substances in the area, as a result of which police action was initiated.

According to the counsel for the complainant, after delivering several death threats, the defendants intercepted Mr Khattak's motorcycle that day and shot him dead at point-blank range.

If the circumstances of the killing tell a story, so does that of the sentencing. That the trial took two years to wind through the justice system is regrettable enough.

But even more of an indictment is found in the fact that Mr Khattak's case is only the third one in the country's history

where the killers of journalists have been identified, apprehended and convicted.

Since 2000, well over 100 journalists and media workers have been killed in Pakistan in the course of their duties. But trial and conviction has been achieved only in the cases of Daniel Pearl and Wali Khan Babar, and now in the case of Mr Khattak.

No wonder, then, that those who would harass and intimidate journalists — be they criminals, militants or even elements within the state apparatus — operate with brazen impunity.

The situation must be rectified, urgently. It is imperative that the state vigorously pursue all cases where media workers have been targeted, thereby sending out the signal that tactics of intimidation will not be tolerated.

Published in Dawn, March 19th, 2016

Transparency in national matters

THE meetings are preceded by photo-ops and followed by press releases. The optics suggest a congenial atmosphere. The public statements emphasise the ground that was covered and endlessly reiterate vows to make Pakistan safe and secure again. And yet, very little is in fact known about what transpires in meetings between the political and military leaderships of the country. Friday produced yet another example of a meeting at the Prime Minister's Office at which military and security matters were discussed, but nothing shared about the specifics of decisions taken. Instead, there were the usual platitudes about satisfaction with the progress of military operations in Fata and rooting out terrorism from the country. Clearly, not every meeting must result in new and far-reaching decisions taken. Frequent and sustained consultation between the political and military leaderships also augurs well for national stability. But when decisions are taken, the country needs to be informed about what they are — allowing for necessary discretion when sharing operational information, for example.

Consider the cryptic description of 'issues related to the military' that were discussed on Friday. Were they service matters that required the executive's authority? Or were they, as has been speculated recently, connected to weapons purchases that the military is considering? On the issue of military purchases, there is an additional reason for more information and some semblance of transparency: new military hardware tends to be prohibitively expensive and can involve

significant national budgetary outlay. Given the stress and strains on military hardware in recent years with large-scale operations in Fata, maintenance, replenishment and upgradations are inevitable and should be seriously attended to. Pakistan's soldiers need and deserve the best possible equipment within the reach of national resources. Yet, there will inevitably be trade-offs: the acquisition of which hardware is prioritised and why should be known to the country. The experience across the world suggests that when such decisions are made in secrecy, controversy and scandal inevitably follow. The military needs to be more forthcoming with the country about what it considers to be necessary and why when it comes to defence hardware needs.

The PML-N government, however, is also to blame for the present opaque state of affairs. The prime minister himself appears to have no interest in his parliamentary responsibilities, which includes informing the country's elected representatives of key decisions being made by the government. Rare is the parliamentary session in which Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is in attendance and that lack of interest appears to have infected his cabinet colleagues. The interior minister is an advocate of greater parliamentary scrutiny, but does little when it comes to the practice of sharing meaningful information with elected representatives. The slew of NAP-related numbers frequently spouted has not enhanced anyone's understanding of state policies and the actions being taken. Surely, a little more transparency is both needed and wanted.

Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2016

Rain-related deaths

A TRAGEDY that could have been prevented is a tragedy compounded. What else can be said of the lives lost in various towns and villages of Azad Kashmir as the weekend drew near? Several parts in the north have been experiencing torrential rain in recent days — a spell that had been forecast by the Meteorological Department. And, as unfortunately happens every year, the heavy downpour triggered landslides and rockfalls in the mountains of AJK and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as well as the collapse of homes. The pain of those who have lost loved ones does not bear thinking of, particularly given that most of the communities in the area find it hard to make ends meet and have little state support even in times of difficulty. Considering that this is a cycle of rain-related disaster that manifests itself every year, in one part of the country or another, it would be logical to expect the state to put out warnings during the period when rain is expected, with teams helping shore up houses, clearing drainage channels and so on. But again and again, it is the lack of preparedness and the authorities' incapacity in the context of disaster management that is exposed.

Where Pakistan is doing very little to mitigate the effects of natural disaster, it is also ignoring and failing to regulate activities that are bound to worsen the impact of it. Take, for example, the unregulated construction of homes and substandard building materials that are in common use in towns and villages across the country. There is little effort on the part of the government to either make people aware of the dangers, or to spread awareness about which materials are better suited where, or even to have a role in creating housing

for the poor, particularly in the rural areas. Then, there is the issue of illegal tree felling. While Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is working on its ambitious and admirable Billion Tree Tsunami project, in its backyard of the Galiyat, the timber mafia operates with impunity. It has been known for a long time that generally in Pakistan, deforestation is occurring at an alarming pace. In both these examples, the government — whether federal or provincial — has a role to play in reducing the level of death and destruction. Unfortunately, it seems to prefer inaction. As the Met department forecasts further rains, sadly enough we may see more tragedy.

Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2016

Kurdish 'federal region'

EVEN though all sides to the Syrian conflict have condemned it, the declaration of a 'federal region' by Kurdish fighters is a move fraught with dangerous consequences for the entire region. The Kurdish fighters have been in control of a strip of Syrian territory along the Turkish border, and this has served to strengthen Ankara's certitude in its policy, for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government sees the multilateral Syrian conflict only through its Kurdish prism. Syrian Kurds have been living in that country for ages and had no separatist ambitions. The degeneration of the Arab Spring into a debilitating civil war and the entry of non-Syrian militants into the country provided an opportunity for battle-hardened Kurds from outside Syria — as those from Iraq and south-eastern

Turkey — to enter the conflict and make their presence felt. Their morale went up when they liberated Kobane from the militant Islamic State group and made Ankara uncomfortable.

The ‘declaration’ comes at a time when the negotiators at Geneva are having a tough time, and even though a peace formula is yet to be worked out, the ceasefire is by and large holding. At such a time, a unilateral declaration by the Kurdish group, which claims that Arabs, Turkmen and Assyrians in northern Syria are part of it, will only complicate matters and pose a threat to Syria’s territorial integrity. With Kurdistan in Iraq already having autonomous status, a Kurdish ‘federal region’ in Syria will serve to strengthen separatist tendencies among Kurds in Iran and Turkey and make Ankara’s handling of the insurgency in its east much more difficult. The recent bomb blast in the Turkish capital has made Turkey step up its bombing of Kurdish targets, thus reducing the chances of a peaceful solution to the 40-year-old insurgency. The condemnation of the ‘federal region’ move by the government and Syrian opposition is not enough; what all sides should realise is that only an overall peace settlement acceptable to all sides will pre-empt the creation of such a region.

Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2016

Perception of democracy

CHIEF Justice of Pakistan Anwar Zaheer Jamali appears to be growing into his job as the senior-most judge in the country. That entails developing a judicial philosophy that implements the letter of the Constitution and, for now, encouraging democratic institutional development.

On that crucial latter issue, Chief Justice Jamali has indicated a deeper understanding of what has ailed Pakistan over the decades.

Speaking at a tribute to the late Hafeez Pirzada, one of the architects of the 1973 Constitution, Chief Justice Jamali suggested that the frequent impositions of martial law had left a majority of the population unaware of the spirit of democracy and that has contributed to lawlessness in the country.

In a week in which retired Gen Pervez Musharraf left the country perhaps never to return, Chief Justice Jamali’s comments are particularly poignant. While electoral democracy is becoming the new norm in the country, is the country really moving towards full-fledged democracy and rule of law?

Perhaps it is worth reflecting on the past that Chief Justice Jamali referred to. The several impositions of martial law — under Mr Musharraf the nomenclature was changed, but the impact was the same — did not just interrupt democracy, it made democracy seem optional.

The damage caused by the perception that democracy is optional, that if the system is not producing desirable results in

the short term it ought to be replaced by something else, has proved more long-lasting than the dictatorships themselves.

Its effects can be seen everywhere. In Karachi, an operation that began with the narrow purpose of fighting crime and militancy has morphed into an attack on the political structure of the nation's most populous city.

The denizens of Karachi want peace and their party of choice, but peace and democracy are being offered as mutually exclusive options.

At the centre, eight years into a seemingly strong transition to democracy, the sharing of power between the military and the civilians is tilting in the wrong direction. In Fata, the military has absolute control.

Balochistan is effectively one big no-go area. While the reasons vary, everywhere the effect is the same: democracy may be desired, but it is seen as optional — by elements of the state and sometimes by the people themselves.

Changing that will require not just time, but purposeful effort by democratic elements. An obvious path from the lawlessness that Chief Justice Jamali identified to lawfulness would be fundamental reforms in the delivery of justice.

A civilian-led effort — a joint effort by elected representatives and the judiciary — to reform a broken judicial system would have far-reaching effects.

At its core, Pakistan's problem remains one of the rule of law — justice for all, equally, timely and in a transparent manner.

The rules must be fair, but they must be clear — and justice certain. That would foster the public's belief in the fundamentality of democracy and circumscribe the actions of state institutions.

The country's elected representatives have made a great deal of progress by internalising the need for democratic continuity and accepting the electorate's verdict. But a true national spirit of democracy will only come with the rule of law.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2016

CPEC and water

THE warning from the governor of Balochistan regarding the risks that the depleting water resources of his province pose to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor needs to be taken seriously.

It has been many decades now that Balochistan's water table has been falling, and some of the numbers reported recently on the gap between water requirements and availability for the provincial capital of Quetta are truly alarming.

One project — Mangi dam — is in its earliest stages of development; it is supposed to help plug less than half of this reported gap, but outside of Quetta city, the problem of falling groundwater tables afflicts all regions to the point where tube wells have become a large cottage industry, numbering as

many as 15,000 in the province according to some estimates given by officials from the provincial power distribution company. Tube wells also account for the bulk of unpaid dues of the power utility.

In every way, the depletion of freshwater resources in the province, in the face of a growing population, is a disaster in slow motion in Balochistan, to the point where the influx of migrants to Quetta is now often ascribed to people moving on account of the depleted water reserves in their home district.

Much of the province's irrigated agriculture relies on tube wells which have seen runaway growth since the late 1980s.

Today, the problem of groundwater pumping and falling water tables has become so acute that the subsidies provided on electricity for tube wells is reportedly larger than the cost of building the dam and its water conveyance system for Quetta.

Almost half the livelihoods in the province are dependent on agriculture according to World Bank estimates, and water depletion in irrigated areas will increase the threat to the sustainability of these livelihoods in the years to come.

The water crisis in Balochistan is widespread, it is real and it is growing. In the midst of this reality, the government sounds a little disconnected when it touts the roads, power plants and industrial estates as the prime benefits that the province of Balochistan will derive from the bouquet of CPEC projects.

Was enhancing water capacity in the province, whether through increasing storage or superior utilisation techniques, even considered a possible benefit to tap for the province when

the menu of CPEC projects was decided upon? Going by the governor's warning, the answer appears to be in the negative.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2016

'Hand-to-mouth' MNAs

It is our turn to put our hands to our mouth — in disbelief. The members of the National Assembly say they are forced to live on an — almost — shoestring budget.

In a session reported in this paper on Friday, they [pointed out the few peanuts](#) they are given for the exalted job they are expected to do.

As one member came up with an impromptu breakdown of the various heads under which he had to pay every month it became abundantly clear that his was not the best career option out there. Clearly, professionals in other walks have been comparatively better at establishing their worth.

In bringing up the issue, an old rule was broken. The principle was that while workers were always within their rights to ask for higher wages, it did not become them to question what a fellow worker was being paid.

Examine: [Minister 'helpless' to ensure NA attendance](#)

During this debate about an upward revision of MNAs' salaries, attention was drawn to the higher pays given to members of the provincial assemblies — with special mention of the riches being made by those sitting in the privileged Balochistan Assembly.

The speaker of the National Assembly, who sounded quite sympathetic to the cause of the members of the house, was quoted as questioning the gap between the salaries of the MNAs and MPAs. But perhaps, for the satisfaction of his own colleagues he needed to be specific that when he talked about bringing the salaries of the provincial and national lawmakers at par with each other, he wasn't talking, God forbid, about rationalising the MPAs' pay, bringing it down to the level of that of the MNAs.

Nor should anyone use the debate to nurse notions that the MPAs were in any way inferior to those sitting in the national parliament. The best answer will be to pay the lawmakers according to the market and then keep a close eye on them to ensure that they are performing and are not taking undue advantage of their position.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2016

Waiting to go back home

IT is talked up as a core goal in Fata. The army chief is known to focus on the issue. The political government vows it will get it done. And the newly appointed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governor has said that it is his foremost priority.

The return of IDPs to Fata is, of course, of vital importance to the stability of the tribal region. But there is a very human dimension to that need: the denizens of Fata have sacrificed so much more than the average citizen and to them the state owes a very special responsibility.

Indeed, embedded in the military's preferred acronym for the displaced people of Fata — TDPs — is the promise that exile will be temporary. Yet, despite the military's urgency and the political government's vows of facilitation, the en masse return of IDPs to Fata does not appear to be occurring.

Perhaps it is time that the state revisited its strategy.

What, for example, are the reasons for the high return of IDPs to Khyber Agency (90pc) and the exceedingly low rate of return to South Waziristan Agency (15pc)? The military operation in South Waziristan began more than six years ago, while Khyber has seen two major operations in the last couple of years alone.

Part of the answer is surely South Waziristan sharing a border with North Waziristan — until the latter is fully cleared of militants, the security threat to the former remains. In addition, after years of living in cities and towns across the country, the

IDPs of South Waziristan may have found jobs and started new lives, which has slowed the pace of return.

But Orakzai Agency and Kurram Agency also have exceedingly high numbers of displaced people — two-thirds of registered IDPs are yet to return to the two agencies. Is it only a question of resources — to rehabilitate the physical infrastructure and kick-start local economies — or is there something more that the IDPs are looking for?

Perhaps a survey should be conducted to understand the needs of IDPs rather than have state officials simply determine on their own what conditions are needed for their return.

Too often, state policy has little connection to the needs of the citizenry and that problem may well be magnified when it comes to Fata.

Given the experience of other agencies, it should not be assumed that IDPs from North Waziristan will return home from Afghanistan and various parts of Pakistan once major military operations are concluded.

Resettlement packages — a combination of financial incentives and physical infrastructure — may need to be complemented by immediate steps for the overhaul of the administrative and political systems of Fata.

Given that most IDPs are registered and the military and Fata administration have some contact with them, it should not be impossible to determine from the people themselves what they need to go back to their homes.

PPP's reality

PPP CHAIRMAN Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has asked his party workers to prepare for the 2018 general election. He has personally kicked off this preparatory phase with an attack on the PML-N.

The PPP is unhappy about retired Gen Pervez Musharraf's shift abroad, joining the chorus that it is bent on reminding those at the helm of their vows to make the former military ruler face a fair trial.

There has been a sprinkling of PPP protests where Mr Musharraf's departure from Pakistan was the topic but which were essentially rallies where Bilawal Bhutto Zardari was trying to gauge the mood of the people as well as get a sense of just how much strength there is in the party ranks at the moment.

This will surely be followed by other causes that the PPP would want to urgently pursue in order to rediscover that elusive route back to where it was one of the two major parties in the country.

The PPP chairman knows his party is not quite the formidable outfit it used to be: he talks more of a rescue attempt when he refers to the lost glory that has to be recaptured. It has been reduced to almost nothingness in major parts of the country outside Sindh.

Even in Sindh it has come under tremendous pressure. Not only has it been criticised severely for its performance in

government in the province, it faces a greater burden on account of the issues it is forced to take up with regard to the Rangers' operation in Karachi.

It is obvious how tough the task is, especially given that it is not as yet certain how much leeway Bilawal Bhutto Zardari will be allowed by his father and other mentors, some of whom he could so happily do without.

Many still wish to see Benazir Bhutto's son free himself and act as a sovereign. And if that is a complicated course to follow, consider that the first signs of change will come when speeches by the PPP leader mention the future more than the past, however glorious it may have been.

The meeting where he asked party workers to prepare for the 2018 polls was laced with the same recycled ideas; for instance, a 'permanent' committee was formed to oversee the death anniversary events of Ms Bhutto and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. One thing the young heir to the two leaders needs to do is to focus on the future — permanently.

Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2016

Women's cricket win

BY beating India in the crucial WorldT20 clash at New Delhi on Saturday, the national women's cricket team has achieved new heights.

While their male counterparts have continued to struggle, inexplicably falling short of taming the Indian cricket teams in all ICC events since 1992, Sana Mir's charges have quite commendably held their nerve to pull off a sensational victory over their rivals.

Their victory is made special when one takes into account the many odds stacked against them in the run-up to the high-voltage clash.

They include: curtailed training sessions, an injury to all-rounder Javeria Khan, defeat in the opening game against the West Indies, and the five-match winning streak of Mithali Raj's team against Pakistan.

But, overcoming such obstacles, the Pakistani team, after winning the toss, surprised everyone by putting their formidable opponents in to bat, restricting them at 96. The rest, of course, is history.

A quick look at the recent graph of the team shows their pragmatic approach and faith in their own abilities to do well. They have grown in confidence and stature in international cricket.

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The fact that the national women's team today is ranked sixth in ICC rankings, with four of its players featuring among the top 20, amply reflects the great strides they have made.

The current Pakistan Cricket Board members, for once, must be praised for taking several initiatives to boost women's cricket. Recently, in what could be termed as a landmark move, as many as 22 women players were offered central contracts by the PCB.

Having said that, the players still lack dedicated cricket grounds, nor do they have cricket clubs where their talents can be nurtured. Besides that, cultural and social values are a major hindrance among women taking up sports as a career in this country.

Pakistan's women cricketers have a few more competitive games lined up at the World T20, and an impressive performance at the event will hopefully ensure a better future for all sportswomen in the country.

Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2016

Mud-slinging again

A JOINT session of parliament convened by the government primarily to circumvent a defiant, opposition-dominated Senate on the future of PIA is an occasion that raises a number of legislative and democracy-related issues.

While the government is within its rights to pass legislation through a joint session of parliament, is it really setting a desirable, democracy-enhancing precedent?

For its part, could the opposition have avoided a joint session had it not played politics with the PIA issue?

Surely, the PML-N's position is not wholly unreasonable and some of the opposition's concerns could be accommodated in compromise legislation.

Moreover, with anti-rape and anti-honour killing laws to be considered by the joint session, among several other pieces of legislation, did the government and the opposition not have a chance to burnish the reputation of parliament?

Yet, none of those issues appeared to be on the minds of the country's elected representatives when the joint session began on Monday evening. Instead, the legal fate of retired Gen Pervez Musharraf was what the PPP and the PTI wanted to discuss.

To be sure, the opposition leaders were on point when they suggested that parliament should have been taken into confidence on the decision to let Mr Musharraf travel abroad.

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What the former army chief stands accused of is overthrowing the Constitution, which is the original achievement of parliament and a document that parliament alone can modify.

Therefore, a treason trial of Mr Musharraf was not simply a case of the government versus an individual, but the very definition of the national interest. Parliament should be the forum where such decisions are announced, not press conferences by the interior minister.

Yet, when Leader of the Opposition Khursheed Shah and the PTI's Shah Mehmood Qureshi lambasted the government for its handling of the Musharraf affair, it was fairly clear that the opposition parties were more interested in politics than the state of democracy in the country.

Knowing that the government has been embarrassed by the Musharraf departure, the two leading opposition parties in parliament thought it fit to turn the political knife rather than focus on legislative matters.

Predictably, the PML-N proved no better in its response. Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan once again lashed out at the PPP and used a familiar crude rhetoric to attack the previous government for not taking Mr Musharraf to the courts.

Yet, the exit of Mr Musharraf is a clear indictment of the PML-N's brain trust and its strategic decision-making: at no stage did it appear that the PML-N leadership was in a position to see a treason trial through to its conclusion.

Moreover, in his eagerness to respond to the opposition's taunts, the interior minister appears to have forgotten the

purpose of the joint session — legislation. At the height of the PTI sit-in, the interior minister nearly derailed a joint session with his unparliamentary behaviour. It appears he has not learned any lessons.

Published in Dawn, March 23rd, 2016

Escaping from the law

ONE of the leading causes of lawlessness in the country is the lack of effectiveness of the law-enforcement and criminal justice systems, both interlinked.

Cases routinely go on for abnormally long periods, and much of this is due to lacklustre investigation and prosecution efforts.

As recently reported in this paper, Supreme Court Justice Amir Hani Muslim, monitoring judge of the anti-terrorism courts in Sindh, expressed his displeasure over the fact that there were over 1,600 absconders in 456 cases in Karachi's ATCs.

Many of these individuals were said to be involved in "heinous and terrorism cases", with some reportedly linked to political parties, and others to criminal gangs.

The number of absconders in other courts is even larger. Some of the absconders were out on bail, while others had not been arrested yet. Justice Muslim was rightly critical of the police for failing to apprehend the individuals.

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It is an unsettling thought that persons accused of being involved in violence or acts of terrorism are at liberty.

While some political parties have accused the state of victimising their workers — and politically motivated cases are not unknown in Pakistan — the fact remains that if there is solid evidence linking political workers to crime, then they should face justice.

Of course, the police bear primary responsibility for tracking down absconders and making sure they appear in court. In this age of technology and scientific advancement, it is totally unacceptable that law enforcers in Pakistan's largest city are unable to produce 1,600 individuals wanted in such serious cases in court.

The Sindh police must make a greater effort to track down these suspects and bring them to court, so that their cases can be resolved without delay.

As for absconders with political links, parties must also play a greater role in ensuring errant members face the justice system. It is difficult to argue with the fact that individuals wanted in sensitive cases can pose a threat to public safety.

We have examples in our midst where militants that have escaped from custody have gone on to perpetrate horrific violence.

If suspects are not tried and prosecuted, this will only provide further space for extrajudicial methods, as well as parallel systems such as the military courts.

There are no short cuts to overhauling the law-enforcement and criminal justice systems; among the first requirements is producing suspects in court and concluding trials within a reasonable period.

Published in Dawn, March 23rd, 2016

Pak-India travel regime

AT the highest quarters in both Pakistan and India, it is recognised that despite the weight of history, unless there is peace, development and prosperity in the region will be hard to achieve.

This is the lofty rhetoric. But reality in the down-to-earth details, where it affects ordinary citizens, has different implications.

These relate to pettiness. Nowhere is this more evident than in the visa and travel regimes on both sides. Earlier, India was in the news, when it denied permission to some Pakistan High Commission officials to visit Kolkata to attend the World T-20 Pakistan-India match.

Given that these officials were already in India, it would have been reasonable to expect the courtesy to be extended; but it was not to be. Pakistani officialdom is not much better.

As reported yesterday, an Indian theatre group that was to arrive in Karachi for participation in the International Theatre and Music Festival at the National Academy of the Performing Arts, which receives funding from the federal government, is encountering last-minute delays in receiving visas.

Their performance, scheduled for tonight, has been cancelled pending resolution of the issue.

These are only the most recent of the countless examples where Pakistan and India score points against each other through their travel regimes.

What chances are there for the normalisation of ties when even people such as sports fans, theatre persons, musicians, etc, cannot be tolerated?

For the government to outright deny visas would be unfortunate enough. But much like the fishermen from each other's territory that Pakistan and India routinely arrest and hold hostage to politics, travel to and within both countries has become a game of stringing applicants along, with meaningless bureaucratic hurdles put down wherever possible.

Further, if persons highly visible in the public domain, such as diplomats and cultural representatives, are treated in this manner, the run-around given to the ordinary can only be imagined. It is time for rationalisation. Pakistan and India cannot continue to pay lip-service to the normalisation of ties while indulging in such pettiness.

Published in Dawn, March 23rd, 2016

Brussels attack

BRUSSELS, a European capital so traumatised by its connections to last November's Paris attacks, has itself come under attack in the most shocking of ways.

European society, particularly at the very heart of the EU, prides itself on its openness and interconnectedness and its symbols of those core values that the attackers sought to undermine with mass-casualty terror attacks in a crowded airport and a busy subway station.

Europe will surely rebound, but gaping holes in its defences have raised questions about how quickly it will recover.

Not only are two of the suspected attackers, brothers Khalid and Ibrahim el-Bakraoui, believed to be linked to the Paris attacks, including helping Salah Abdeslam evade capture, but were known previously to Belgian authorities because of their criminal record.

Clearly, Belgium's, and perhaps more generally much of Europe's, internal defence, intelligence and law-enforcement apparatuses will need to be overhauled.

Less clear is what can be done about the radicalisation among sections of European-born immigrant populations.

Marginalisation from mainstream society, high unemployment and informal social networks that have been penetrated by a radical version of Islam are not issues that are easily tackled.

The capture last week of Salah Abdeslam produced fresh hints about the scale of the problem in Belgium in particular — Abdeslam allegedly evaded capture in his hometown by tapping into a network of supporters and well-wishers who were willing to offer shelter to a suspected mass murderer.

Turning that situation around while staying true to the core values of European state and society is an unprecedented challenge.

Moreover, Europe's problems will be compounded by a possible rise in xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in the wake of such attacks among significant sections of the population. Whether or not the militant Islamic State group is able to pull off more large-scale attacks, Europe is set for a long and painful readjustment.

Here in Pakistan, there are warning signs about the lure of IS and its modus operandi that ought to be heeded. The Paris and Brussels attacks have confirmed what was already thought to be a serious challenge for Europe — its citizens travelling to Syria to become part of IS and returning home more dangerous and radicalised than ever.

Pakistan, with its porous borders and known militant hotbeds, is already believed to have seen several of its citizens travel to Syria to join IS and some of those citizens have returned home.

With the state so focused on its fight against the banned TTP, does it have the resources to track emerging threats?

Online radicalisation poses an even more complex problem with no physical connection to known militant outfits required

and many an educated mind here open to being seduced by religious radicalism.

Pakistan has already suffered the horrors of Al Qaeda, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and the TTP; IS and groups inspired by its brand of militancy need to be fought before they can metastasise into a national threat.

Published in Dawn, March 24th, 2016

Death penalty

IT is depressing to note that the number of executions carried out since Peshawar's Army Public School tragedy in December 2014 now stands at over 350.

The data on executions was given by the deputy attorney general to the Supreme Court in the context of a petition seeking the swift disposal of appeals filed by over 7,000 prisoners on death row.

While the death penalty has been on the books for years, Pakistan had been maintaining an informal moratorium on executions, especially during the tenure of the last PPP government.

Unfortunately, the APS tragedy, horrific and devastating though it was, led to the evaporation of this restraint by the PML-N government, and since then, there has been a rush to

execute convicts — the majority of them not linked to acts of terrorism.

But while we may have some knowledge of the number of executions, there is little information about those who were executed — especially the ones found guilty by the military courts set up shortly after the Peshawar tragedy.

The workings of the military courts are far from transparent, and several questions have been raised about the crimes that were committed, the particulars of the criminal, the nature of the trial, the appeals process, etc.

Meanwhile, controversy has also arisen over the civilian legal system where death sentences are pronounced on the basis of flimsy evidence and poor investigation.

This paper opposes the death penalty on grounds of principle. Even in the worst cases of crime, terrorism or militancy, it is sufficient that the perpetrators be tried and sentenced to a life behind bars. This should serve as a warning and a deterrent.

And where militants are concerned, as has been argued frequently, the threat of execution carries little weight with those already prepared to die.

Study after study internationally has shown that the death penalty does not bring down crime; it only brutalises society. Back when the moratorium was lifted, it seemed more a move to slake the thirst for vengeance after the APS tragedy rather than achieve any success against terrorism.

And in Pakistan’s case, with investigation, prosecution and justice systems that are notoriously inefficient and overloaded, the risk of travesties of justice has always been high.

Reason must prevail, and the country must not continue its descent into a vortex where inhumanity is the norm, and where there is danger of many an innocent life being snuffed out.

Published in Dawn, March 24th, 2016

Taxing high-tech

OUR economy was never famous for high technology and even in services as a whole the largest export is ‘military services’.

This basically comprises reimbursements under the Coalition Support Funds which are oddly classified as an export. But in recent years, software exports and the IT industry more generally had begun to show signs of vitality, although not of the kind that would indicate that it is on the verge of any major boom.

Then the inevitable happened and the government imposed an 8pc tax on the sector which more or less muzzled growth.

The first six months of the current fiscal year show software exports down from the corresponding period last year, and industry representatives are saying they can easily relocate to Dubai.

Software exports have been tax-exempt in Pakistan, a practice that is not uncommon around the world. If Pakistan is to move away from cotton as a mainstay of its economy, then the government will need to find a way to look at high-tech industries as more than just revenue cows.

The pattern of swooping down with revenue demands on any sector that shows signs of vitality is a common one in this country. Such ad hoc measures help keep our economy perpetually stuck in bread-and-butter industries.

It is sad to see military services as our top services export. A few years ago, the telecom sector was targeted with a very large tax liability that turned out to be more or less frivolous.

Such cases are common, but due care needs to be taken that signs of vitality in high-tech industries are not choked off through them.

It is true that some fraudulent elements have availed themselves of the tax exemptions traditionally enjoyed by the IT sector, and the answer to that is greater oversight, not blanket new taxes for everybody.

The software industry attracts some of our finest entrepreneurial talent. Government policies ought to be designed to encourage their enterprise, and not milk it for revenue.

Published in Dawn, March 24th, 2016

Pakistan Day speech

THE Pakistan Day parade may have followed a Cold War template — showcase military might and defence prowess first and later throw in some cultural imagery — but it was the president's speech that drew the attention.

Mamnoon Hussain is not and will likely never be a great orator or even a memorable president. His value to the PML-N, and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in particular, appears to lie largely in his willingness to remain in the background and only take centre stage to deliver whatever message has been approved for him.

And so, on Pakistan Day, Mr Hussain delivered a speech that appeared to be an amalgam of the political and military leaderships' vision for the country.

Perhaps most interesting was the fact that the president did not simply cling to the old trope of a militarily strong Pakistan that will defeat its enemies. Instead, Mr Hussain offered a more nuanced view and a balanced appraisal.

On the external front, the president's speech offered two sensible clarifications: Pakistan is not interested in an arms race and the country's nuclear programme is also informed by a need to devote the maximum resources to development and the well-being of the population.

While India was not mentioned by name, it did appear that Mr Hussain was signalling a change in attitude, if not in substance yet, to the neighbour to the East.

Where once the impulse was to boast of Pakistan's military strength and equality with India, now a more humble and sensible approach focused on the needs of Pakistan's own citizens is evident.

Consider also the president's articulation of the "new enemy" that is terrorism and extremism inside Pakistan.

Taken together — the threat from the old enemy, India, being put in context while the threat from the new enemy, terrorism and extremism, being taken seriously — suggests that the Pakistani state may at long last have begun to adjust its approach to national security by focusing on the real needs of its people rather than the perceived threat from India.

Yet, welcome as the change in at least rhetoric is, there is still a long way to go for state policy to truly reflect the realities of Pakistan in the 21st century.

Consider that the emerging confidence — or perhaps more accurately, equanimity — on India has come after what is believed to be years of aggressive expansion of the nuclear programme.

Moreover, as internal security needs have vastly escalated, there has been little attempt to rationalise overall security expenditures and create more space for development needs.

While the recognition of new realities is an important first step, it does not automatically follow that institution choices will reflect those changes.

Pakistan Day is a reminder of a vision for this country that once was. If Pakistan is ever to live up to those ideals, all institutions must focus on the needs of the people first.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2016

Trade policy

THE three-year Strategic Trade Policy Framework for 2015-2018 announced by the Nawaz Sharif government has everything but a strategy and a framework.

It makes many wonder as to why the announcement was held up for nine months if it was just going to be a rehash of incoherent and random proposals, mostly borrowed from previous policies.

When the government began to formulate the new policy framework to make it easier for businessmen to import and export, stakeholders believed that it would be different from the last one and address the bigger issues affecting Pakistan's foreign trade and its export competitiveness.

Some even thought that the new trade policy might provide the stakeholders an umbrella structure required to integrate the country's economy into the global supply chain. Instead, we have got a hodgepodge of raw ideas in the name of a strategic framework.

Perhaps the stakeholders were wrong in their assessment of our policymakers' commitment and ability to produce a document offering innovative ideas that could help this country become a reliable link in the global trade regime and realise its true economic potential

Apart from its excessive focus on setting an ambitious target, the framework doesn't explain how the government plans to increase exports by almost half — from \$24bn to \$35bn by 2018.

The very idea that giving annual cash handouts of Rs6bn (on new investment and technological upgradation) to industries like pharmaceuticals, leather, sports goods, surgical instruments, etc and rice farmers will push exports even a little bit in such a small period of time is preposterous.

The commerce minister who had claimed so at the time of the launch of the framework appears to be cut off from reality. Nor does anyone actually believe that the government will deliver on its promises.

Pakistan's share in the global markets is declining by a little less than 2pc every year, and the trend will continue to hold without the government addressing the real issues: high cost of doing business, market access and competitiveness.

Indeed, the framework pledges to resolve these issues, but it doesn't elaborate on what route the government plans to take to achieve its goals. The previous policy failed to achieve its targets.

The fate of the new one will not be any different unless an independent umbrella authority is created to facilitate international trade, coordinate with the relevant ministries and put the country on the path of export-led growth and integrate its economy into the global supply chain.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2016

Holi holiday

THE ineptitude of some elements within the Sindh government was reflected in the fact that an unnecessary controversy was created over observing a public holiday on Holi in the province on Thursday.

Last week, the Sindh government had declared a public holiday in the province to observe the occasion celebrated by members of the Hindu community — indeed a progressive and welcome step.

However, the provincial labour and human resources department on Wednesday said the holiday was 'only' for Hindu workers, until the chief secretary stepped in and cleared the air by withdrawing the notification, while the Sindh administration reiterated that the holiday was for everyone. This clearly reflects a lack of coordination within the provincial government.

The back and forth between government departments resulted in plenty of confusion about whether or not schools and workplaces would be open on Thursday. This inattention needs to be investigated to ensure such incidents do not happen again.

Beyond the controversy, the Sindh government should be commended for announcing a public holiday on Holi. While it is true that too many holidays should not be encouraged — and the country already has plenty, along with unannounced shutdowns — when it comes to major occasions of religious minorities, exceptions can be made.

Celebrating Holi, Diwali or Easter on a provincial or national scale sends the right message — that minorities are equal citizens of Pakistan and that the state respects and celebrates their traditions.

Considering the high levels of intolerance and polarisation in society, such inclusive messages are essential, especially when they emanate from official quarters, and when the whole nation observes the occasion along with members of the respective religious communities.

There was reportedly some resistance from certain officials representing private schools, but by and large there appeared to be little opposition to the Sindh government's announcement of a public holiday.

Recognising the minorities' culture and traditions and celebrating them on a national scale are important symbolic steps that can help create a more tolerant and inclusive society.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2016

Accountability debate

POLITICIANS squabbling over accountability and trading accusations has become a familiar parliamentary game once again.

On Thursday, perhaps encouraged by the antics of their more senior colleagues in recent days, parliament's 'Young Turks' decided to excoriate the National Accountability Bureau.

A junior PPP MNA, Imran Zafar Leghari, initiated a so-called debate in the National Assembly by tearing into NAB for its activities in Sindh.

While nothing specific was said or asked, Mr Leghari saw fit to brand NAB as little more than a powerful blackmailing organisation. That prompted a lament from the PTI's controversial young MNA Murad Saeed along the lines of collusion between the PML-N and PPP — a variation of the long-standing PTI accusation that somehow the PML-N and PPP have rigged the political system to their own advantage.

Smarting from a reference to the allegedly rigged 2002 election, former prime minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali waded in only to go further back in history and remind the Assembly of the tit-for-tat accountability between the PPP and PML-N in the 1990s.

Perhaps Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid was more even-handed in his criticism and grudging praise of NAB, but the minister's comments ultimately only underscored the desultoriness of the debate in parliament.

Nowhere was there any discussion of the meaningful aspects of accountability or how to create a more transparent, but powerful accountability body.

Unhappily, that appears to suit all parties at the moment. For the PPP, attacking the accountability bureau helps deflect attention from the endless stream of corruption allegations in Sindh.

For the PTI, whose anti-corruption mantra has not quite translated into robust legislative measures in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or meaningful suggestions in parliament, attacking the PML-N remains the priority and perhaps only goal.

For the PML-N, troubled by a reinvigorated NAB — sections of which appear more responsive to the demands of other institutions than of the political government — the recent focus has been on undermining the body's credibility in the public arena.

Both in its present phase of activity and its history and structure, NAB is a deeply flawed organisation. The perception that accountability investigations are either being guided by hidden hands or that NAB is flexing its muscles in a populist manner has grown in recent months.

Reform and restructuring are needed — or perhaps an entirely new organisation needs to be sanctioned by parliament. Yet, parliament appears paralysed.

The accusations traded in parliament on Thursday perhaps reflect a dismal reality: having failed for years to take

accountability reforms seriously, politicians have ceded space to non-democratic elements. It is still not too late to salvage the situation.

Across-the-board accountability, for all institutions, equally and transparently can be effected.

The political class will be strengthened by such a move as it will suggest willingness for corrupt elements to be purged from within its ranks. But is parliament willing and able to act in an enlightened manner?

Published in Dawn, March 26th, 2016

‘Pilgrimage’ to AIPAC

A NEWS agency used perhaps the most appropriate word when it said that Donald Trump, too, would make a ‘pilgrimage’ to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee to counter what his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, had said at the same forum earlier.

Before this all-important ‘pilgrimage’ to the AIPAC, the Republican demagogue had said in a talk show what in America, especially in an election year, amounts to blasphemy — that the US should be neutral on the Arab-Israeli issue.

Ms Clinton had amends to make as well, for the Israel lobby is angry with the White House's Democratic incumbent over the

Iran nuclear deal. The Democratic hopeful lambasted Mr Trump for his remarks, said the US couldn't be neutral on the Arab-Israeli issue, declared "we must take our alliance to the next level", and demanded that the US arm the Israeli military "with the most sophisticated defence technology".

In turn, when Mr Trump finally spoke at the AIPAC, he did an even better job at winning over hearts and minds there and was cheered when he said President "Obama may be the worst thing to ever happen to Israel, believe me, believe me".

As always, there is stiff competition between the two parties regarding who bends over backwards more to please and impress the AIPAC — the AIPAC with its media and money; the AIPAC with many in Congress in its pocket; the AIPAC whose allegedly chosen neo-cons run American policy in the Middle East.

No wonder, an American veto is always there to pre-empt any Security Council resolution that censures Israel for its war crimes and crimes against humanity — now in Lebanon, now in Gaza.

The cumulative effect of Washington's categorical support to the Jewish state has led to a widespread distrust of America among the Palestinian and Arab peoples, fuelling anger in Muslim populations and providing fodder to extremist groups to promote violence and their own anti-West agenda.

Israel has also cleverly used 9/11 to delegitimise the Palestinian people's struggle for freedom and has, with America's tacit approval, continued building settlements on the West Bank with a view to annexing it.

As a result, America's participation in any 'war on terror' invites scepticism if not ridicule in the Middle East. Only the future can tell whether any American president will show the same courage in dealing with the Palestinian question as President Obama did on the Iranian deal.

Published in Dawn, March 26th, 2016

Stalled devolution

DESPITE all the talk of devolution and empowering the federating units, when it comes to devolving power to the third tier, our political parties are notoriously territorial.

Take the example of Sindh, where the ruling PPP seems to be in no mood to have empowered municipal bodies in place in the province's urban centres, particularly Karachi.

During Tuesday's Sindh Assembly session, the PPP used its majority in the house to vote down a motion introduced by an MQM member to give oversight of the Lyari Development Authority to the city mayor instead of provincial ministers.

A similar bill related to the Karachi Development Authority was also rejected in the house. As one senior Muttahida lawmaker put it, preventing the devolution of powers to the local bodies was in violation of the Constitution's Article 140-A.

The Sindh government, especially under the PPP's successive provincial administrations starting from 2008, has steadily chipped away at the powers of the local bodies.

PPP leaders, critical of Musharraf-era LG laws, have said provincial oversight of civic affairs is necessary to maintain a 'balance of power' between the province and local governments.

While there can be little argument with the fact that all levels of government — from the federal to the ward and union council level — need checks and balances, there is no justification for the micromanagement of city and town affairs by the provincial administration.

The provinces have been vocal — in most instances rightly — about perceived interference by the centre in provincial affairs. Therefore, how can interference in municipal affairs by provincial officials be justified? Blocking laws that try to empower elected municipal leaders is akin to punishing the people.

The PPP should reconsider its attitude, especially considering the party's struggle for devolution.

On the MQM's part, it is strange why the party has suspended its cleanliness drive in Karachi in protest over "state atrocities and raids and arrests". Why should its public service efforts suffer due to the perceived high-handedness of the state?

Published in Dawn, March 26th, 2016

India must explain

WHEN foreign spies are caught, a slew of questions inevitably follows. However, this much is already clear: India's initial response to the Pakistani claims has been unsatisfactory and it does appear that the Indian national apprehended in Balochistan was in Pakistan illegally and for unlawful purposes. For years now, as the Pakistani state has struggled to end the low-level insurgency in Balochistan and contended with other forms of militancy in the province, the government has claimed that the separatists and sundry militants in Balochistan have received external support. The finger of blame pointed at India has been insistent, but the evidence — at least that brought in the public domain — has been lacking. The capture of the alleged Indian spy has changed all of that. It is not only India that needs to answer serious questions here; Iran, which hosted the alleged spy, needs to investigate — and explain — the matter at its end. The national security adviser should be mobilised to make clear Pakistan's concerns and demand assurances about non-interference.

What is particularly troubling about the capture of the alleged spy is that the Indian national was operating on Pakistani soil just as the state here is working to demonstrate its commitment to fighting terrorism of all stripes. From the relative openness with which the possible involvement of Pakistani nationals in the Pathankot attack has been acknowledged, to the commitment to pursue a probe against those involved in the attack, to the alacrity with which intelligence was shared with India recently to warn of a potential cross-border assault by non-state actors, Pakistan is not just changing international perceptions about the state, but perhaps security policy too.

Surely, that is a process in which India should partner Pakistan to achieve the stable and prosperous region that both countries have long desired. But the policy confusion on the part of the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi only appears to be continuing. Mr Modi and his national security and foreign policy teams seem unsure whether they want to engage Pakistan or rebuff it. The doubts about policy cohesion in India look set to continue.

For its part, while Pakistan must vigorously pursue the matter of the Indian spy with the Indian government, the state must remain mindful of two things. First, the matter must be handled professionally, lawfully and soberly — or else there's a risk of inflaming anti-India sentiment and creating fresh space for extremist elements here. Second, the Pathankot investigation and dialogue with India should be kept on track. An Indian spy captured on Pakistan soil in an area wracked by a long-running insurgency is a very serious problem. Yet, just as India should not make dialogue hostage to a single issue, Pakistan should deal with the matter of the alleged spy in its proper context.

Published in Dawn, March 27th, 2016

World T20 debacle

THE Pakistanis are out of the ICC World T20. A poor campaign has thus come to the inglorious end it deserved. Early this month, with all the pre-tour security jitters put to rest after assurances from the Indian government at the start of the high-profile event, the players were required to focus on cricket and win three games out of the scheduled four to bag a spot in the semi-finals. Instead, they failed to measure up, winning just one game against the beleaguered Bangladesh side and losing three. The hard truth is that Pakistan did not have the wherewithal — in terms of temperament or tactics — to do well. Either batting first or chasing the target, the Greenshirts never displayed the required gumption. There seemed to be no game plan; what one saw was defensiveness followed by panic. The batting was thoughtless, the bowling wavered and the fielding was atrocious. Skipper Afridi, under fire for his own sketchy form and batting order blunders, fell short of motivating his teammates. Pakistan's dressing room, too, appeared restive despite the presence of half a dozen coaches as rumours of internal strife and bloated egos became rampant.

Up until the beginning of the new millennium, Pakistan's cricket team, while living up to their reputation of being mercurial and unpredictable, could still produce match-winners such as Younis Khan, Misbah-ul-Haq, Mohammad Aamir, Saeed Ajmal, Mohammad Asif and others. Regretfully, the cupboard appears quite bare today. The game suffers as it is bereft of competent administrators and professional, match-winning players who were once the fulcrum of Pakistan's batting and bowling. As most critics would agree, the 15 representing Pakistan at the ICC World T20 were perhaps the

best available in the country, give or take a few. Distressingly though, their best was not good enough. Players such as Ahmed Shehzad, Sharjeel Khan, Umer Akmal, Wahab Riaz, Mohammad Irfan and Khalid Lateef are indeed skilful but they lack the temperament and the mental strength to win pressure games at this level. That is the challenge they need to take on instead of moaning and groaning about the lack of cricket at home and the alleged discrimination of selectors and coaches. In the end, there is not much that the PCB administration and tour management did right in this campaign. And since they don't seem to have an effective remedy for the many ills plaguing Pakistan cricket, the situation warrants an overhaul.

Published in Dawn, March 27th, 2016

Erdogan's war on media

ISN'T President Recep Tayyip Erdogan — with full respect to him — debasing himself by being a complainant in a case that involves one of democracy's fundamental principles: media freedom? On Friday, a Turkish court ordered that two of Turkey's leading journalists, Can Dundar, editor-in-chief of daily Cumhuriyet, and Erdem Gul, its Ankara bureau chief, be tried in camera and agreed to have the president as a complainant. The two have been accused of espionage because they published a report that said Turkish intelligence agencies were sending arms to Syria under cover of humanitarian aid, though the government says the trucks were carrying relief goods for ethnic Turkmen. According to President Erdogan, the

report was part of an attempt to undermine the country's international standing. The court accepted the prosecutors' plea that evidence to be produced in court involved state secrets.

There is no denying President Erdogan's popularity. The fact that the November re-election gave his Justice and Development Party (AKP) an absolute majority in parliament testifies to a popular approval of his economic policies, which have given the Turks a higher standard of living and made Turkey the world's 15th largest economy. These assets should help the president develop greater confidence in his ability to stand dissent. Instead, his policies over the years have been characterised by strong authoritarian tendencies, with the media and judiciary coming under intense state pressure. Earlier this month, the state took over Zaman, its sister publication Today's Zaman and news agency Cihan. Seen in the light of the crackdown on Cumhuriyet the world wouldn't be wrong if it considered the AKP regime as waging war on Turkey's vibrant media. There is no doubt Turkey needs political stability more than ever before, especially because of the Syrian civil war and a spate of terror attacks in Istanbul and Ankara. But political stability is not incompatible with freedom of expression. If the Cumhuriyet journalists have violated any laws, they must be given an open, fair trial.

Published in Dawn, March 27th, 2016

