

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of April, 2016*

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**Contents**

Ceding more space..... 6  
Divisive curricula ..... 7  
OIC and science ..... 8  
Ghani’s challenges ..... 9  
Tourism in the north ..... 10  
Autism awareness ..... 11  
Nuclear summit..... 12  
Cricket mess ..... 13  
Pak-Iran concerns..... 13  
Fighting terrorism together ..... 14  
HRCF report ..... 15  
Balochistan’s security..... 16  
Panama Papers ..... 17  
Rain tragedy ..... 18  
A glorious win..... 19  
Allegations against PM’s family ..... 20  
Reforming cricket..... 21  
A new women’s bill? ..... 22  
Sustainable development ..... 23  
Bangladesh law ..... 24  
Save biodiversity ..... 25  
PIA accord ..... 26  
JuD ‘courts’ ..... 27

Execution figures..... 28  
Pak-India peace: one step back..... 29  
Customs Act in Pata ..... 30  
Karachi by-elections ..... 31  
Punjab operation ..... 32  
Rape victims ..... 33  
Doctors’ strike ..... 34  
Consensus on an economic agenda ..... 35  
MBBS degree..... 36  
PTI demand and PID..... 37  
Investigating scams ..... 37  
Imran’s double role ..... 39  
Pricey textbooks..... 40  
Ethics committees ..... 41  
CIA and torture..... 42  
Stuff of farce..... 43  
Air power in Punjab..... 44  
Land records..... 45  
Border management ..... 45  
Cybercrime bill ..... 46  
Balochistan’s tragedy..... 47  
Hockey flop ..... 48  
Dialogue with India ..... 49  
Political ailments ..... 50

Mustafa Kamal’s call .....	51	KP lawmaker’s murder .....	74
OIC: a house divided .....	52	US pressure once again .....	75
LG hurdle lifted .....	53	Climate agreement.....	76
Injectable polio vaccine .....	54	Medieval punishments.....	77
Panama inquiry .....	55	Rallies of little importance .....	78
Deported Pakistanis .....	56	Backlog of cases .....	79
Wedding excesses.....	57	Drug shortage.....	80
Consensus document.....	58	Bangladesh killings .....	81
Bank of Khyber tussle.....	59	Taking on the timber mafia.....	82
Organ donation .....	60	Doctors’ strike .....	83
Greed of land developers.....	61	Pak-India dialogue.....	84
Taliban offensive .....	62	Accountability powers .....	85
Police reforms .....	63	Women in JI shura.....	86
Army chief’s view .....	64	Probing Panama .....	87
Loadshedding plan .....	65	Ban on ‘Maalik’ .....	88
Kasur child abuse .....	66	More seats for women.....	89
Attack on polio security team.....	67	Fata reforms.....	90
US-Saudi tensions .....	68	Another ‘confession’ .....	91
Neglect of heritage .....	69	Lessons from Chernobyl.....	92
Army dismissals.....	70		
Asset declarations.....	71		
Heatwave preparations.....	72		
Prime minister’s speeches .....	73		
Violence in Okara .....	74		

## Ceding more space

THE protest may be over, but its effects could be insidious and long-lasting.

The funeral of Mumtaz Qadri was a warning sign that the government did not heed. With a mammoth crowd turning out to mourn late Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer's assassin, the politics of the religious right had been infused with dramatic and unexpected energy.

It was an opportunity that was never going to be given up easily. So when the next opportunity came — a chehllum remembrance — the protesters were ready, while the government appeared oblivious to the obvious.

Consider what the PML-N federal government has referred to as goodwill: facilitating a public gathering on public property to mourn a man sentenced under the country's anti-terrorism laws.

In a better world, the mourners, who were clearly indifferent to the religious demands of mourning, would be prosecuted for their actions. In Pakistan, they were allowed to run amok.

What followed was even more dispiriting. The violent protesters were given implicit legitimacy by the government via a lengthy set of negotiations. What should have happened is that the government, having failed to stop the protesters from gathering outside, should have given a straightforward and immediate ultimatum to leave.

What did happen was the government chose to listen to the demands of the protesters who had caused extensive damage to public property.

Extraordinarily, members of the cabinet, including de facto prime minister Ishaq Dar, met the protest leaders and negotiated with them. Even more extraordinarily, several of the demands appear to have been agreed to.

The limp denials by the government that any agreement was signed have been contradicted by an admission that several assurances were given.

According to the protest leaders, the government has, among other things, agreed to not review the blasphemy laws — thereby abandoning its legislative prerogative — and to review anti-terrorism watch lists — thereby giving up its executive prerogative.

In return, all the protesters had to do was to agree to disperse. Surrender by the state has never looked more tawdry and dismal.

From here, the problem will likely grow. The religious right, after suffering a series of setbacks over the past 15 months, has now secured a major victory.

The veneration of Mumtaz Qadri has also created a template for further gains. A burgeoning shrine at his grave site and further religious occasions to mark his execution amount to space and opportunity for further gains to be wrested.

If the state does not forge some clarity and recognise its fundamental responsibilities, more losses are likely.

Surely, as protesting government employees, teachers no less, learned in Karachi, after being baton-charged and water-cannoned, the state has both the will and ability to disperse protesters.

Protest is a fundamental, constitutional right. But the manner of protest must be within the bounds of the law. Clearly, the protesters gathered outside parliament thought otherwise.

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## Divisive curricula

WHATEVER the opinion of the state on the matter, the question remains: is enough being done to turn Pakistan away from the trajectory of extremism and prejudice that has nearly proved its undoing?

Formulating an answer to that question would have to begin by delving into how the younger generation of Pakistanis is being raised, and the ideas that are being imparted to impressionable young minds, especially in the classroom.

Sadly enough, the news here is depressing. Wednesday saw a seminar organised jointly in Karachi by the National Commission for Justice and Peace, and the Pakistan Institute of

Labour and Research, concerning a survey of the curricula in all four provinces.

The NCJP analysed some 70 textbooks, including those of the compulsory Urdu and Islamiyat, as well as of optional subjects. It found that on the whole, despite efforts by Punjab and Sindh to improve the quality of information, there were still too many examples of content that could be considered divisive and of portions amounting to hate speech.

Consider, for example, that Hindus are portrayed as ‘enemies’, while Christians are portrayed as ‘agents’ of the West. The narrative on Partition seems to entirely overlook the fact that atrocities were committed by all parties during the crisis, and that there was no community whose hands were entirely clean, or that did not suffer.

What is equally depressing is that the report carried only 25pc of the NCJP’s findings, for, as the project coordinator pointed out, “sharing the remaining portion may just anger some people so much that they may want to eliminate us”.

The adage that those who don’t learn from the past are doomed to repeat it has become clichéd for good reason.

Pakistan has reason enough to rue the course it has chosen to take, and, unless there is course correction, the country will soon run out of time to choose a different future.

Curricula reform has to be undertaken on an urgent basis. Consider that following the National Action Plan, two provinces took the initiative of adding to textbooks a few lines

April 2016

about heroes of faiths other than Islam (Punjab) and Jinnah's speech promoting the rights of minorities (Sindh).

Even so, according to the NCJP, the problematic portions were not removed. If the country's leadership is at all serious about turning the currently bleak national situation around, it must start by cleaning up textbooks. Bad education simply defeats the purpose.

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## OIC and science

CRITICS often refer to the OIC (the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) as 'Oh, I see' — a rather cynical way of lampooning the organisation for its failure to make its presence felt globally.

Given the Muslim world's many handicaps, especially its backwardness in science and technology and the dearth of democratic institutions, the OIC's absence in the current situation in the Middle East can be understood.

What cannot be understood or forgiven is the member-states' gross neglect of meaningful cooperation in the non-political and non-military spheres. Perhaps the developed world will not allow Muslim countries — Pakistan being an exception — to develop nuclear muscles.

The unanimity shown by the P5+1 in Iran's case is a fair indication of the world powers' sensitivity to a Muslim finger on the nuclear trigger. But military muscles aren't the only way of ticking — Japan and Germany being prime examples.

On Wednesday, President Mamnoon Hussain hoped that Comstech's 10-year plan would help improve standards of living in the Muslim world. Let's note, Comstech, an OIC committee on scientific and technological cooperation, was formed in 1981. Has it achieved any results during the last three decades and a half?

With so much money in the hands of oil powers, and with scientific talent in countries like Pakistan, Turkey and Malaysia, a lot could have been achieved if Comstech had been active.

Very few science institutes of international repute have been established, nor is there evidence that the current level of cooperation among member-states will produce results. This reflects adversely less on Comstech and more on Muslim governments worldwide.

Terrorism has, of course, made all Muslim countries reorder their priorities, but even before this monster had raised its ugly head, the OIC and its various committees, including Comstech, did nothing to prove that they were serious about their aim — "building indigenous capabilities of member-states" in science and technology.

The funds and talent are there; it is the Muslim leaderships' inability to grasp the importance of this essential ingredient of civilisation that is lacking.



## Ghani's challenges

AFGHAN President Ashraf Ghani is a man under pressure. While the famously temperamental technocrat-turned-politician has tried to project an air of confidence as president, occasional frustration — and possibly fear — makes itself apparent.

In an interview with the BBC, Mr Ghani railed against fellow Afghans who are choosing to flee to Europe and argued that for Afghanistan to be a country, its countrymen should not abandon it.

As the BBC itself noted, Mr Ghani's comments are likely to further erode his already plummeting popularity: Afghans are unlikely to be impressed by a leader who is looking for scapegoats instead of addressing growing political problems.

While the Taliban insurgency and attempts to restart peace talks have dominated the news, the problems in Afghanistan are increasingly complex.

Last month, the outgoing UN envoy in Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, identified five issues threatening the very survival of the Afghan state: a fragile economy, with low growth and high unemployment; the intensifying Taliban insurgency; fractious elites; pressures on foreign aid; an uncertain reconciliation process.

Perhaps the one factor that is in the immediate control of the Afghan politicians is the political process.

Indeed, had the national unity government demonstrated even a modicum of efficiency and competence, the Afghan state could have pushed through some necessary political and administrative reforms.

Instead, the struggle for dominance between rival camps led by President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah has all but brought governance to a halt.

The situation has escalated to the point that it is unclear if a September deadline for parliamentary elections and a constitutional assembly to ratify changes in the political structure matters anymore — the government could collapse before that deadline.

Perhaps, though, the growing speculation about state collapse will force the Afghan leadership to make the necessary adjustments before it is too late.

While the national unity government is deeply flawed, the problem was not completely of the Afghans' making.

The US — having made errors over and over again in Afghanistan over the last decade — somehow thought that the way to salvage a flawed election and demonstrate that Afghanistan is headed in the right direction was to force an alliance that no one inside Afghanistan wanted.

So just when Afghanistan needed a strong, unified political leadership to deal with the economic and security threats and handle external relations adroitly, it was given a weak, fractious leadership to try and fix the country's problems.

If the background is dismal, the future need not be. Much will depend on how Mr Ghani navigates the months ahead. Progress on reconciliation paired with resolving some intra-administration tensions would send a message of political rejuvenation.

That could create the space for dealing with the more intractable economic and security problems of Afghanistan. First, however, Mr Ghani must resist the temptation to lash out — there is simply too much at stake for raw emotion at this point.

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## Tourism in the north

WITH the security situation having deteriorated in Pakistan over the past decade and a half, many could be forgiven for having lost count of the freedoms that they once enjoyed, and indeed the opportunities they once had.

In terms of some of these liberties, their absence is brought to mind now only because of their being restored. Consider, for example, Tuesday's decision by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial home and tribal affairs department that foreign tourists would no longer be required to obtain a no-objection certificate to visit the seven districts of Malakand division.

A letter sent to the tourism secretary and the provincial police chief stated that the area was no longer a restricted zone.

The NOC requirement was imposed as far back as 2010 following the launch of a military operation against militants holding sway in the Swat valley, and made more stringent the next year after the killing of Osama bin Laden by US Navy SEALs in Abbottabad.

As reported, the letter says that the Pakistan Association of Tour Operators should be facilitated in organising tours for tourists.

This looks very well on paper, and certainly there is a case to be made for encouraging tourism traffic in the north which, until disrupted by growing militancy, had been a prime source of income for the communities belonging to the area.

However, the provincial and federal governments both must recognise the fact that if this trade is to be revived, much more will be needed than good intentions and paperwork. That the NOC requirement has been lifted is a step forward; yet necessary to the cause is also a return to normalcy on other fronts.

This includes a civilian set-up taking charge and ownership of what has for many years been the domain of the army, and a resumption of the trajectory that the tourism circuit in Pakistan's north once enjoyed.

There is no argument that the northern areas of the country are potentially prime tourism destinations — indeed, people thronged to them in the past.

But reviving this will be a matter of working with communities, quite apart from defeating the spectre of militancy.

Here lies the challenge for a Pakistan that claims to be making gains in countering extremism and militancy: has it the wherewithal to take matters back to how they once were? There is much good to be mined if it has the resolve.

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## Autism awareness

GENERALLY, persons living with mental or physical disabilities find very little support from the state or society in Pakistan. This applies equally to those living with autism, a neurological condition characterised by difficulty in communication.

In fact, when it comes to autism, there is very little by way of data or awareness about the condition in this country. While prevalence rates are not available, as per some NGOs there may be up to 350,000 children with autism in Pakistan.

Today, as we observe World Autism Awareness Day, it would be a good idea to remind the state that this neurological condition needs to be placed on the national health agenda in order to lend support to families with autistic children and individuals living with the condition.

While the state has lagged behind in providing even basic health services, autism hardly even registers on the official radar as a health issue. In fact, activists say that even many doctors are not aware of or misdiagnose the condition, while most hospitals are not equipped to deal with children with autism, which can range from severe to mild.

While some parents in urban areas have formed NGOs and self-help groups, there is very little information on autism prevalence in rural and remote areas.

In fact, as some activists point out, autistic children are often believed to be 'possessed' by those not aware of the medical condition, which can lead to such youngsters being ridiculed or shunned.

Instead of pitying, or worse, ignoring children with autism, the state and society must make efforts to rehabilitate them and unlock their hidden potential. Work has been done in India and Bangladesh on providing support to autistic children, so it would be worthwhile to learn from these regional states.

Social media has also helped bring people together to form support networks. The health authorities should encourage support groups working for autism awareness, while they should lay down the legal and physical infrastructure that can help address this vital health concern.

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## Nuclear summit

US PRESIDENT Barack Obama came into office with a vision for Global Zero — setting the world onto a path free of nuclear weapons eventually. Lofty as that goal was — or perhaps precisely because it was so lofty — it was quickly and severely tested and soon discarded in all but name. Tellingly, the US Republican party's likely presidential candidate, Donald Trump, stirred up a nuclear hornet's nest just as world leaders gathered for the Nuclear Security Summit, a project of President Obama launched in 2010 that seeks to secure the world's nuclear supplies from terrorist threats and slots into the wider goal of an eventually nuclear weapons-free world. It appears that the narrow, though critical, purpose of the NSS remains an easier subject to address than whether states — and which states — should possess nuclear weapons at all. But even that narrow purpose has been undermined by multiple countries, perhaps most egregiously by Russia, which has the second largest nuclear arsenal in the world and which chose to boycott the summit.

Yet, for all the challenges that the NSS and Global Zero movements face, the NSS at least should not be allowed to disintegrate after President Obama leaves office. While nuclear terrorism remains a remote possibility, the fallout of a possible attack is terrifying enough to demand the focus of the world's nuclear powers, civilian and military. Surely, as President Obama noted, there are terrorist groups in this world that would be both willing to use and eager to acquire any kind of nuclear material that could be fashioned into a bomb. Even as the threat should not be exaggerated — the nuclear spectre can and has been used in the past to justify grossly wrong

decisions, as the Iraq war demonstrated — the need for vigilance should not be downplayed. In four summits over six years, countries with nuclear wherewithal have identified many areas in which cooperation and better security could help further diminish security threats. That process should continue and other world leaders should step up to fill the gap that will be left by President Obama's departure.

Inevitably, when the issue of nuclear security is debated, the Pakistan-India equation cannot be ignored. The importance that both countries have attached to the NSS initiative can be gauged from the fact that prime ministerial delegations were to have been in attendance. By all accounts, Pakistan has been helpful and cooperative in the NSS process — something that has also been acknowledged by international powers. Yet, technical as the issue of security under discussion may have been, there is another, indirect aspect to the security debate: the larger India's and Pakistan's nuclear programmes grow, the more the threats surrounding them will increase. Pakistan has explicitly and consistently maintained that its nuclear programme is India-specific. If India were to rationalise its own military posture and capabilities, surely Pakistan would follow.

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## Cricket mess

OF late, the ‘gentleman’s game’ of cricket has been in the headlines for all the wrong reasons in Pakistan. As the past week has shown, both players and officials have contributed in no small measure to the crisis that besets the game today. While a probe is surely on the cards and heads set to roll following the national team’s dismal performance at the Asia Cup and ICC World T20, the series of events that unfolded in the aftermath of the defeat have plunged Pakistan cricket into an even deeper quagmire. Leaked reports, allegations, counter-allegations, the unbecoming conduct of the head coach and captain, coupled with the cricket bosses’ many administrative goof-ups, have provided juicy fodder for the rumour mill. It has led to fans and experts clamouring for a change of policy and personnel at the Pakistan Cricket Board. From the outset, the PCB’s in-house fact-finding committee probing the World T20 flop had caused doubts to be raised about its impartiality in outlining the key reasons for the disaster and focusing on the real culprits. For those who know the game, it shouldn’t be difficult to identify those responsible for the results. With Pakistan’s downward spiral in the limited-over games now a good 20 months old, one wouldn’t even need a day to point out the blundering players and officials who failed to deliver during this period.

Skipper Shahid Afridi, head coach Waqar Younis, manager Intikhab Alam, bowling coach Mushtaq Ahmed, batting coach Grant Flower and erratic players such as Ahmed Shehzad, Umer Akmal, Wahab Riaz, Shoaib Malik and a few others have been chiefly responsible for Pakistan’s inglorious performance at the mega events. However, the Pakistan cricket

team’s unending woes on the field have been compounded by the glaring management deficiencies of chairman Shaharyar Khan, executive committee head Najam Sethi and chief selector Haroon Rasheed. None of these high-profile men have proved themselves worthy of the challenge. Lacking clarity of vision and decisiveness of action, they have allowed Pakistan cricket to drift into mediocrity, the shameful episodes of the leaking of the manager’s and coach’s reports being the last straw. The continuing unrest in the country is a perfect metaphor for Pakistan cricket. And with a patron completely oblivious to the challenges confronting the game and ad hocism being the order of the day at PCB, it is going to take nothing short of a miracle to retrieve the shambolic situation.

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## Pak-Iran concerns

THE allegation that Indian spy Kul Bhushan Jadhav was based out of the Iranian port city of Chabahar has put a cloud over the Islamabad-Tehran relationship. In fact, the affair has overshadowed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani’s visit to Pakistan last month. However, it is welcome that both governments appear to be handling the affair maturely and without acrimony. On Friday, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar met the Iranian ambassador in Islamabad as both officials pledged to cooperate on security matters. As reported, the Jadhav affair was discussed and both officials sounded positive about the meeting. Earlier, the Iranian embassy had been

critical of media coverage of the spy drama, particularly of what it termed as “undignified comments” in the Pakistani press, which it claimed were hurting bilateral ties.

Whenever sensitive bilateral issues emerge, the best way to handle them is through frank and constructive diplomacy rather than emotional public tirades. In this case, Islamabad and Tehran have handled the matter well. In fact, even the Indo-Pak relationship has shown signs of maturity of late. The Jadhav incident and the Pathankot attack before it have largely been handled in a sober fashion by both sides, apart from a few jingoistic outbursts. This, rather than sabre-rattling, is a much more progressive way to conduct foreign policy. The details that have emerged in the aftermath of the Jadhav affair are very serious and Iranian authorities need to follow up on the leads given by their Pakistani counterparts to ensure their soil is not being used by elements to destabilise this country. Whether it is Tehran’s concerns of militant groups such as Jundullah or Jaishul Adl allegedly finding refuge in Balochistan, or Islamabad’s reservations that RAW may be using Iranian territory for anti-Pakistan operations, both sides must realise that until they satisfy each other’s security concerns, regional connectivity and improved economic ties will remain a pipe dream. Security cooperation between Tehran and Islamabad should continue and any elements — whether non-state actors or third parties — using one country’s soil against the other must be uprooted.

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## Fighting terrorism together

THERE are moments when the obvious needs to be restated. Terrorism is a national threat, the gravest and most immediate danger to the safety and security of Pakistan.

Terrorism is not about one province. It is not about one political party. And it is certainly not for one institution alone to fight. Yet, all of those rather obvious realities appear to be lost on both the PML-N government and the army leadership.

Last week was an opportunity for the political and civilian leaderships to stand united and speak as one to the nation. Instead, disarray was witnessed and secret late-night meetings were held.

The nation knows little about what was discussed and even less about why it had to be a secret when Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan met Gen Raheel Sharif. All that is known is that the two have acted as intermediaries in the past when their boss, Nawaz Sharif, is locked in tension with the military leadership.

Yet, to focus on civil-military difference is to overlook the immediate threat: terrorism in Punjab, which Jamaatul Ahrar has vowed to continue and that other militant organisations in the province are surely looking to participate in.

To fight terrorism in Punjab effectively and urgently, both the military and the political class will have to cast aside narrow institutional interests.



With the military, it has become evident that it would rather do more than less, everywhere and in every domain. That is problematic. From military courts to extraordinary powers of arrest and detention to controlling the rehabilitation and reforms process, the military has crowded out the civilian side of the state.

While the marginalisation of the civilians is explained as an unfortunate necessity because of the need for speed and the lack of will and capacity among civilians, it has a pernicious effect. The militarisation of security policy will be to the long-term detriment of the fight against militancy.

But what of the political class as a whole and the PML-N in particular? Zarb-i-Azb and the National Action Plan injected no urgency in civilian counter-terrorism capacity building. Nacta was left to languish, legislative reforms were ignored and judicial overhaul left in limbo.

It is not just the federal government, but the provinces too that have been unable to come out of their myopia. Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are indifferent to policing reforms, while Balochistan is mired in fighting separatists.

Meanwhile, parliament is caught in legislative paralysis — a joint session to try and privatise PIA can be held, but no party wants to debate security policy or overhaul legislative codes. Bizarrely, the PML-N is set to review anti-terrorism rules at the behest of pro-Mumtaz Qadri protesters.

The military may be encroaching, but it is the civilians who are abdicating.

## HRCP report

AS Pakistan struggles to free itself from the scourges of militancy, terrorism and extremism that have characterised the past decade and a half, a reckoning of the cost is beginning to take shape.

On Friday, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan released its annual report for 2015, and a between-the-lines reading offers fair food for thought.

On the positive side, partly perhaps as result of the National Action Plan being implemented over the past year (the plan itself was formulated after the grotesque outrage that was the massacre at Peshawar's Army Public School in December 2014), there has been a decline in the number of incidents of terrorism in the country.

The HRCP records 18 suicide attacks over the course of the year past, a 31pc decline as compared to 2014.

Similarly, the figure for the number of people who have died as a result of violence has also shown a 40pc decrease.

After this, though, the reading becomes grimmer: for example, 58 incidents of sectarian violence were reported during 2015, and mob assaults against religious minorities showed an increase.

Most worryingly in terms of the future course that Pakistan is beginning to set, some 2,108 men and seven women were

killed during police ‘encounters’, a euphemism that masks out-and-out extra-judicial killings.

Given the traumatic experience of recent years, this country needs to think long and hard about where it wants to take itself from here.

The choice lies in either taking the easy way out — carrying out extra-judicial killings, implementing the death penalty and allowing closed-door military courts to try persons, including civilians and juveniles, in terrorism-related offences — or having the steel to think of the long term and urgently strengthen the judicial and police prosecution systems.

Without the moral authority of due process, the country is likely to find itself in the midst of a blowback that might prove even harder to counter than the current travails.

Much commitment has been professed by those in positions of political authority to plug the loopholes in Pakistan’s notoriously sluggish justice system, but evidence on the ground is largely noticeable by its absence.

Contrast this with the reality that unless justice is done, and seen to be done in a fair, transparent and accountable manner, the ranks of those who are disillusioned by the state, and who may be tempted to take up arms against it, can only swell.

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## Balochistan’s security

WHILE Balochistan Chief Minister Nawab Sanaullah Zehri’s claim that there is no military operation going on in his province may be technically correct, few will believe that any institution other than the army calls the shots where security policy in Balochistan is concerned.

Addressing the provincial assembly on Friday, Nawab Zehri said it was the Frontier Corps and provincial security forces that were conducting “targeted operations” in the province.

Interestingly, just below the story quoting the chief minister in this paper’s Saturday edition was a report citing the Balochistan home minister in which he said 92 militants had been killed in the past four months, while elsewhere on the pages it was stated that two separatist militants had been killed in Kalat in an operation conducted by “Frontier Corps and intelligence agencies”.

Let us be under no illusion: when it comes to Balochistan’s security affairs, the military is very much in charge, as both FC and the intelligence apparatus take their cue from the army. So instead of being in a state of denial, the Balochistan chief minister should tell the public what is actually going on.

Both sectarian and separatist militancy have apparently come down in the province, while reports of ‘encounters’ and shootouts continue to trickle in.

While the need to pacify Balochistan is undeniable, we must also ask the security establishment what is being done to



address the political problems of Balochistan. What has become of the process to bring in the ‘angry Baloch’ from the cold?

This process was continuing apace under former chief minister Abdul Malik Baloch, but has considerably slowed down under Nawab Zehri’s watch.

At the heart of Balochistan’s problems is the political disenchantment of the separatists. While a security clampdown can produce short-term results, the long-term development of Balochistan depends on a political solution, so that separatists cannot exploit what are in many cases genuine grievances.

The provincial chief minister would do well to give a detailed briefing of where the process of political reconciliation stands.

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## Panama Papers

The bombshell has been met with a predictable and swift response. No wrong has been committed and no illegality has been revealed in the so-called Panama Papers, according to the Sharif family itself and government spokespersons who have been activated to defend against the allegations.

In matters of finance and taxation, snap judgements, particularly exonerations, are difficult to make. Whether Pakistani or international laws have been violated through the use of elaborate and secretive offshore companies and banking channels will be known in due course — at least in the international arena.

Inside Pakistan, with the government controlling the tax authority and most of the relevant investigatory bodies, it is unlikely in the extreme that anything untoward will be discovered concerning the prime minister’s family and its financial dealings.

Those implicated in the Panama Papers outside the Sharif family will also likely benefit — few government investigators, with the exception of perhaps NAB, will want the issue to linger in the public domain.

Even if no crime has been committed, the Panama Papers are an indictment of the ruling elite. The collective — the people — delegates the right to make decisions to elected representatives in order to maximise the greater good. But Pakistan’s ruling class is addicted to protecting its own interests and erecting formidable barriers to entry from outside.

Why, it must be asked, do Pakistan's rich feature so many politicians? The empires they have built suggest a visionary prowess, but only when it comes to their personal wealth and never when it comes to managing the country's affairs.

Rupee billionaires many times over, many of Pakistan's leaders seem desperately unable to recreate that magic when they manage public monies and steer public organisations.

The big players in the private sector are little better, always looking for state handouts and competition-eroding state interventions. Pakistan's rich appear to have perfected the art of reverse redistribution — take from the needy and give to the greedy.

That is the real, and double, tragedy of a self-interested elite. Not only do they hold Pakistan back from realising its economic potential, they impose an ongoing cost on everyone else.

What the Panama Papers reveal are elaborate schemes to avoid taxation and, likely, hide corruption money. That imposes an unjust cost on society. Because Pakistan's elite avoid direct taxation, the tax structure is skewed towards indirect taxes. And indirect taxes, such as on essential foodstuffs, fuel and basic utilities, put a disproportionate burden on the very people the elected elite are meant to be representing.

So when the Sharif family denies it has done anything illegal, what should be asked of them is, for every rupee of tax avoidance, who is picking up the cost? Surely, the first family should be setting the opposite example and leading on tax

compliance. Raiwind is a palatial residence — are spectacular apartments in London necessary too?

*Published in Dawn, April 5th, 2016*

## Rain tragedy

IT has been less than three weeks since torrential rains — the onset of which had been predicted by the Met department — triggered flash floods, mudslides and landslides that resulted in the deaths of several people in Azad Kashmir and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

As usual, the government rushed into panic mode after the tragedy; clearly, it had done nothing to study the ways and means in which the disaster could have been mitigated. Now, here we are again with headline news discussing the 60 or so lives that were lost within the course of a single Sunday in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, again as a result of heavy rains, flash floods and landslides.

In addition, the weekend downpour — 24mm of rain within 24 hours were recorded in Peshawar — wreaked havoc on the infrastructure in the area, washing away roads and bridges, leaving key arteries choked, and causing massive power failure in significant swathes of Malakand.

This scenario and various similar iterations play themselves out year after year with distressing regularity; and yet, Pakistan

seems simply unable to learn, despite the presence of a complex and often overlapping network of disaster management authorities.

True, many of the mountainous areas where heavy rain can trigger landslides and flash floods are hard to access. But for the same reason, it is precisely in such areas where there is a need to invest in long-term damage control and mitigation measures. Were Pakistan to find in itself the will to do this, it would in fact be doing itself a double favour.

On the one hand, there is a need to protect vulnerable communities from climate-related disaster; on the other, there is the reality of climate change. It is estimated that this country is amongst those that stand to be most adversely affected by global warming. Besides, it faces looming water shortages in the future. That could sound the death knell for a largely agriculture-based economy.

A solution that has been mooted often but not taken up in any seriousness is the creation of small reservoirs in all areas, from the north to the south, where excess levels of rain are regularly experienced. But for this to happen, the country's administration should be willing to learn. Can it? Another predicted climate event is coming up: a heatwave in the south.

Thousands of people died in the one that occurred last year. Here is the state's opportunity to prove its mettle.

*Published in Dawn, April 5th, 2016*

## A glorious win

IT was awe-inspiring. That is perhaps the best way to describe the West Indies' magnificent triumph in the WorldT20 on Sunday — a well-deserved win.

Clearly, the West Indies have evolved from a team that had until not too long ago been turning in lacklustre performances to one of the most dangerous sides in the world.

The West Indies' mid-tournament surge astounded their worst critics and caught off guard formidable opponents such as South Africa, India and England in the final stages of the mega event.

Skipper Darren Sammy's leadership and his post-final speech epitomised the passion which drives the West Indies as a force today.

His words were matched by the brilliance of Marlon Samuels and Carlos Brathwaite who managed an almost impossible victory to send the 50,000-strong crowd into raptures at Eden Gardens in Kolkata.

It wasn't England's day on Sunday despite a valiant half-century by their best batsman Joe Root as the West Indies became the first ever team to win two World T20 titles.

Despite their history of cricketing success in the 1970s and 1980s, the West Indies experienced some bleak times during the past decade or so, especially in Tests and ODIs. Their top-

April 2016

order batting was either too brittle or too adventurous while the bowling was merely a shadow of its former self.

The fragile temperaments of the players was another issue. However, the step-motherly treatment of the team by the West Indies Cricket Board was the most detrimental factor of all.

It was no different this time as Darren Sammy's men embarked upon the World T20 campaign — without any moral or financial support from the WICB.

But rather than busting their morale it created greater conviction in the dressing room as they brought the world to their feet with not just one but two grand trophies to their name — the West Indies women's team won the Women's World T20 title at the same venue earlier on Sunday. This should turn the tide for West Indies cricket.

*Published in Dawn, April 5th, 2016*

## Allegations against PM's family

AS the Panama Papers ricochet around the world, triggering political crises in countries far and wide and engulfing politicians in scandal, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his PML-N have been unable to suppress the outcry in Pakistan.

In this age of leaks in the era of digital journalism and social media, mere denials appear to be no longer an option — the torrent of accusations overwhelming whatever weak denials and exculpatory evidence is offered.

Ostensibly bowing to this post-modern political crises, rooted in the oldest of sins — corruption — Prime Minister Sharif has announced that a judicial commission will be formed to investigate the allegations of financial chicanery and corruption by his family.

While a welcome step, in financial matters the devil is usually in the details, and the prime minister left a great deal unexplained about the scope and powers of the judicial commission.

A quick and immediate contrast can be made with the judicial commission formed to investigate the allegations of electoral fraud in the 2013 general election. In that case there was a validated overall election result that was subsequently challenged on various grounds by the PTI.

There the onus was on the PTI and other allegedly aggrieved parties to furnish reasonable proof for a general election, which had been validated by the Election Commission of Pakistan, to be declared null and void. In the case of the Panama Papers, the documentary trail has come as a bolt from the blue.

The accusers are not partisan political actors inside Pakistan; their allegations are made on the basis of leaked internal documents of a global firm that nobody, not even the Sharifs, are denying as fake.

So, for any commission, judicial or otherwise, to conduct a meaningful inquiry it would have to be proactive and have wide powers of investigation and subpoena. Inside Pakistan, the commission should have the authority to investigate the finances and assets of the Sharif family.

Outside Pakistan, the Sharif family members residing abroad should volunteer to assist the commission in any way the latter deems necessary. Pakistan deserves a prime minister whose personal finances are beyond reproach.

Yet, the matter goes far beyond one individual and one family. Across Pakistan, public servants and the politically connected elite routinely flout tax laws. In some cases, the crimes are almost seen as a badge of honour — to be able to live extravagantly and pay next to nothing to national coffers is seen as a sign of success. That culture must change.

As the national response to the Panama Papers have underlined and as the PTI's success with the electorate first proved, Pakistanis are tired of business as usual when it comes to politics and their leaders.

The cynical politics of old is being challenged by an aspirational, rule-of-law politics of a new generation. Pakistan's leaders must catch up with the desires of its people or risk being cast aside.

*Published in Dawn, April 6th, 2016*

## Reforming cricket

DESPITE all the crises and controversies the game in Pakistan has had to endure during the past week, it seems that the powers that be in cricket are once again ready to hoodwink the nation by effecting mere cosmetic changes rather than carrying out a post-mortem.

While the blundering skipper Shahid Afridi and head coach Waqar Younis have resigned in the aftermath of the World T20 debacle in India, it is indeed ironic that none of the top cricket board officials have shown the willingness to step down, not even to announce an overhaul.

In the latest move, the selection committee has been dispensed with, while a two-man team comprising ex-skipper Rameez Raja and Wasim Akram have been formed to look for a new coach — preferably a foreigner.

There is also a preposterous report doing the rounds that the next cricket team camp could be overseen by Pakistan Army personnel.

The harsh truth is that the PCB needs to put its own house in order first. The leak of confidential reports by Waqar Younis and manager Intikhab Alam itself calls for desperate measures.

Many critics argue that the leak could well have been a deliberate move to pit certain players and officials against each other and eliminate their chances of future board appointments.

Besides, several news conferences have had players and officials recklessly airing their opinion, showing the deplorable lack of discipline in cricketing ranks. Such events have put the top two PCB bosses — Chairman Shaharyar Khan and Executive Committee head Najam Sethi — under the spotlight.

A number of ex-players and critics have cited a confused chain of command as causing the most damage to the game in recent months, with the two men often operating on different levels altogether on key issues. In real terms, Pakistan is languishing at a dismal eighth and seventh spot in the ICC ODI and T20 rankings respectively after a series of inglorious campaigns in world cricket.

It is true that Pakistan's case has been made worse by the threat of terrorism, which means there are no home series — and this has consequently hampered the development of the game.

If only the PCB had a robust governance system in place instead of ad hocism, if only it had invested in a proper domestic structure with player academies, sports medicine, excellent coaching and a competent marketing team, the situation would have been much better, despite the country's adverse circumstances.

## A new women's bill?

AFTER weeks of protesting against the newly passed Punjab women's protection law, a consortium of religious parties has apparently decided to take the parliamentary route.

The consortium announced that a 'new' women's protection bill, which the ulema are said to be working on, would be tabled in the National Assembly and the Senate.

Previously, a 24-member steering committee of religious leaders had termed the Punjab law un-Islamic and an instrument of 'the West's agenda'. The move shows maturity of mind and will translate into praise for the religious parties for taking the democratic route of debate and consensus.

What is also welcome is that members from 35 religious parties that participated in Mansoor's recent Nizam-i-Mustafa conference have decided to abandon their plans to put pressure on the government by holding sit-ins and causing political disruption. Instead, select religious party leaders led by the JUI-F have agreed to form a joint committee at the behest of Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif to work towards a consensus on the women's protection law in Punjab as well.

At a time when little is being done to counter the toxic, extremist narrative prevailing in the country, this change in attitude is welcome.

But will the religious parties agree to accept parliament's decision at the centre and in Punjab? After all, when political parties — in government or in opposition, right-wing or

otherwise — present a draft law, it is the majority vote in parliament that decides the final status of the bill.

And parliament's prerogative must not be defied to damage democratic institutions, even if certain parties disagree with select clauses in the bill.

When the contents of both the new National Assembly and Senate bill and the provincial women's protection bill are scrutinised and debated, the majority's decision will prevail.

At that juncture, bullying noises to shun democratic processes will simply be seen as political point-scoring, and nothing to do with protecting women's rights. Hopefully, the religious parties realise that no attempt should be made to thwart parliamentary consensus.

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## Sustainable development

NOT infrequently, those who are in positions of administering to the country's needs make observations that leave many wondering whether he or she is indulging in outright falsification, or living in ignorance of Pakistan's ground realities.

Consider, for example, what the minister for planning, Ahsan Iqbal, had to say on Sunday at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in Bangkok. He observed that the level of priority afforded to the Sustainable Development Goals was such that it would "enable us to join the league of upper-middle class countries" by the target year.

Among other talk of progress towards the SDG agenda, he added that Pakistan aimed to achieve universal primary enrolment by 2018. The forum at which he was speaking was held to discuss the region's priorities for the implementation of the 2030 agenda, set by the UN in September last year in a global follow-up to the 2000 to 2015 Millennium Development Goals plan — most of which Pakistan missed.

The SDGs constitute a second push for the world to fight endemic global issues on 17 goals, including ending poverty, hunger, inequality and injustice, tackling climate change, and achieving universal education.

These are lofty aims, but the realities are daunting. Take the case of education, and the rosy prospect of universal enrolment held out by the minister. The good intentions are there: Article 25-A of the Constitution requires the state to provide free and



compulsory education to every child between the ages of five and 16.

Yet study after study has shown that the state of this sector is largely abysmal; to quote just one, carried out by leading education campaigner Alif Ailaan, we are currently in the grip of an “education crisis of unprecedented proportions”, with 25 million boys and girls out of school — nearly half of all children in the country.

Even where children go to school, the quality of education and infrastructure is poor, staff absenteeism is rife, and corporal punishment rampant. The situation in the context of other SDGs shows similarly large gaps between good intentions and actual deeds.

Where hunger is concerned, alarm bells were rung years ago over the levels of malnutrition prevailing in large parts of the country.

The push for gender equality has included pieces of legislation that may prove advantageous, such as specifically criminalising ‘honour’ killings, domestic abuse and sexual harassment at the workplace — but the terrain traversed by the country’s women remains overwhelmingly hostile.

What the country needs urgently is for the political and administrative classes to come together and make development a real priority rather than a talking point.

The track record for this sector in general and the MDGs in particular has been one of plans, committees and overlaps, with

very little achieved on the ground. Unless this mindset changes, sustainable development will prove elusive.

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## Bangladesh law

WHEN nationalist fervour is whipped up for narrow political ends, historical facts can be moulded as per the official line.

In today’s Bangladesh, the Awami League government appears to be doing exactly that, especially where the tragic events of 1971 are concerned.

As highlighted in a write-up published recently in The New York Times, Bangladesh is preparing a law that would make it impossible to question the number of deaths that occurred in the nine months between Operation Searchlight and the fall of Dhaka.

Dubbed the Liberation War Denial Crimes Act and inspired by Europe’s Holocaust denial laws, the legislation, as has been pointed out, would “hinder free speech and stifle legitimate historical research”.

For example, in Bangladesh the state — since the times of Sheikh Mujib — has claimed that three million people perished during the separation of East Pakistan. Yet, as scholars point



April 2016

out, figures range anywhere from 300,000 to three million killed.

Whether it is the separation of East Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh, or the Holocaust, laws that disallow legitimate scholarly inquiry into these painful episodes only work to strengthen the official line and close the door for alternative interpretations.

Questioning the number of deaths, or other historical details, should not, and must not, take away from the monstrosity of the crimes committed; they can, in fact, help create a clearer picture of what really happened.

History must not be moulded to fit political narratives; instead, it must reflect the truth supported by evidence.

The Bangladeshi state should reconsider passing this clearly controversial law.

Unfortunately, the current government in Dhaka seems intent on mining the tragedy of 1971 for political capital, rather than to arrive at any sort of closure. For example, the International Crimes Tribunals set up by the state to probe ‘genocide’ and ‘crimes against humanity’ have already sentenced four men to death for their roles in the war, even though global rights groups have questioned the transparency of the trials.

Instead of pursuing the politics of vendetta, the Bangladesh government should encourage an honest appraisal of the past. For that matter, Pakistan has also done little to probe the tragedy and apportion blame for the separation of the erstwhile

East Wing, the Hamoodur Rahman Commission notwithstanding.

Both Islamabad and Dhaka need to learn the lessons their common, painful past has to offer and move forward to heal the wounds and build a new relationship.

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## Save biodiversity

MARINE biologists studying the effects of climate change, ocean acidification and oxygen depletion — caused by overfishing and pollution — have often pointed out that depletion of the ecosystem is dangerous for various fish species.

Consider this: how essential is seaweed, that is known as the ‘tree’ of the coastal ecosystem?

A nutrient-rich seafood it mitigates oxygen depletion. So, when local fishing communities are trained in conserving marine biodiversity to recognise certain species of seafood as vital for the ocean, their contributions become invaluable.

This was in evidence recently, when a large rhomboid squid caught alive was later released by fishermen in the eastern part of Gwadar district in Balochistan.

Although a rare species found in tropical waters and weighing about 30kg, the fisherman responsible for releasing the squid said he did not sell it for a few hundred rupees.

Clearly, he appreciated the marine creature's role in the ecosystem of offshore waters. One of 50 fishermen trained by the WWF-Pakistan to protect coastal ecosystems, he understands the implications of a stable food chain.

If such vigilance had been exercised in previous years, perhaps the fate of the endangered blue whale washed up on Karachi's coastal shoreline might have been less unfortunate.

In August 2014, a dead 67-foot blue whale had local fishermen scouring its stomach to find its ambergris — the candle-like, rock solid and waxy substance produced in the intestines of the male sperm whales and highly valuable in perfumeries and pharmaceuticals.

Quite clearly, the 'sea gold' that the whale yielded held monetary attractions for them. With 90pc of the ocean threatened by overfishing and 3.5 billion people globally dependent on the oceans for their primary food consumption, conservationists and organisations such as WWF-Pakistan do a commendable job.

But surely, with government help larger numbers of coastal communities could be motivated. Investing in coastal communities to preserve essential fish stocks, while adopting safer zones and methods to increase economic profitability, would also mitigate the effects of climate change.

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## PIA accord

AFTER months of wrangling over the fate of PIA, a special parliamentary committee in Islamabad finally made a significant breakthrough on Wednesday when the government and opposition agreed on a draft (after revisions) of the PIAC (Conversion) Bill 2016.

For some time, it had seemed that an accord might be very long in coming, given the government's ham-fisted tactics and the opposition parties' tendency to exploit such situations for political mileage.

Matters are still not entirely settled, with the opposition linking their vote to the withdrawal of termination of employment notices issued to a dozen PIA workers blamed for bringing the airline's operations to a halt in February.

They demand that this issue be settled during the joint sitting of parliament scheduled for April 11. But the fact that an agreement has been reached is encouraging in itself, and shows that consensus-building is possible.

This ought to have been the route taken by the government from the outset, rather than trying to push through a midnight ordinance, sparking off a strike, and then attempting to railroad the bill through the legislature.

Having come this far, some questions naturally arise. If the bill will not allow strategic divestment, or management control to pass on to a private entity, what exactly is its purpose?

Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, who brokered the accord, should use the occasion of the April 11 vote on the bill to lay out in detail what the government's plans for PIA really are.

There is no space for rhetoric regarding the government's good intentions about restoring the national carrier to its lost glory. He needs to make clear what the targets are going forward, exactly what the road map is, and how this bill is useful and necessary to get there.

Otherwise, the government will risk divestment of shares just to raise money; and without any strategic changes in management, it will be business as usual at PIA. Divestment must not be an exercise to buy some more time and push the tough decisions on restructuring the corporation further into the future.

There is no doubt that something has to give within PIA as it is managed and organised at the moment. And while it is good that both the government and opposition can see this, it is also true that they seem to be only focusing on setting and meeting conditions.

They need to get beyond this point and start to agree on what must be done by the airline to ensure that its days of sinking into losses are permanently left behind.

After all, PIA is not the only state-owned behemoth that has been running into epic losses, with an uncertain future. The Pakistan Steel Mills and Pakistan Railways are also examples.

Tough decisions and consensus-building are needed immediately to address the problem.

## JuD 'courts'

A BROKEN judicial system is always likely to attract novel, even unconstitutional, quasi-fixes.

With the superior judiciary and the legislative seemingly in denial about the need for root-and-branch overhaul of the judicial system, both state and society are finding alternatives that include parallel 'judicial' forums.

The 21st Amendment-created military courts are an ad hoc — and constitutionally ugly — response to the military's anti-terrorism priorities.

Now, a questionable section of civil society is creating its own solutions.

As reported in this newspaper yesterday, Jamaatud Dawa has established fledgling 'courts' in its headquarters in Lahore, from where summonses are being sent to citizens by self-appointed judges and their assistants.

Of course, because this is JuD and perhaps because it is easier to do, the self-styled courts are operating under a religious veneer.

That particular trick appears to have worked as a senior Lahore police officer — tasked with fighting terrorism in the provincial capital — was quoted in this newspaper's story claiming to have no knowledge of these new so-called courts, though he did suggest that the Punjab police would act if

citizens were to approach them with complaints and/or evidence of the illegal and manifestly ill-intentioned courts.

Apparently, Punjab's officialdom is too busy combating militancy to have the time to find and shut down illegal courts operating in the heart of the province.

Quite simply, the JuD experiment needs to be shut down immediately, with no caveats and no possibility of quiet resurrection once the furore dies down. In a preposterous world where such obvious principles need to be explained, it is easy enough to offer a straightforward refutation of the JuD's official defence/explanation.

Arbitration services, especially in an institutionalised manner, cannot be provided by anyone who wants to.

While civil arbitration has found a niche in Pakistan in complex contractual disputes, the rules are internationally set, backed up by local law, and practitioners are duly licensed and accredited.

But even if JuD has predictably denied the claims, there is a problem with its official explanation — what is the scope of this so-called and thoroughly illegal arbitration?

Will the JuD courts — and they are styled as courts — hear any matter, criminal or civil?

But that is to wade into the thicket and examine the minutiae. No courts, none whatsoever, other than those constitutionally created by the state — that is the only principle that matters here.

The Lahore experiment needs to be shut down immediately.

*Published in Dawn, April 8th, 2016*

## Execution figures

ACCORDING to troubling details released recently by rights group Amnesty International, there was a 54pc increase in executions globally in 2015.

Pakistan, it turns out, is amongst the top executioners in the world; 326 people were put to death last year in the country.

This means that Pakistan is behind only China and Iran when it comes to the number of people executed by the state each year.

While China does not release figures, Amnesty claims that the People's Republic executes thousands every year. This grim reality is cause for concern.

As campaigners have pointed out, most of those executed in Pakistan were not convicted for terror-related crimes.

This is significant because it was the APS, Peshawar tragedy in December 2014 that resulted in the lifting of the moratorium on executions. In sending so many convicts to their death, Pakistan has shown it has no plans to follow in the footsteps of the 140 states that have abolished the death penalty in law or in practice.

This paper opposes the death penalty on ethical grounds. Besides, it is clear that executions are not deterring the militants.

The Easter Sunday park massacre in Lahore, as well as many other acts of terrorism that have been carried out since the moratorium was lifted, show that militants are least concerned about facing the hangman — this is hardly surprising when they are prepared to kill and be killed for their ‘cause’.

There are serious issues of transparency and due process where Pakistan’s criminal justice system is concerned.

‘Confessions’ are extracted through torture and there is poor legal representation for the accused. The flaws in our investigation and prosecution systems are well known.

Should such a questionable system decide on matters of life and death? There is no doubt that militants and other criminals committing violent deeds must be punished, but a life behind bars should be sufficient penalty.

If the state cannot abolish the death penalty, at least it can restore the moratorium on executions.

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## Pak-India peace: one step back

High Commissioner to India Abdul Basit has spoken plainly, but sensibly about the state of Pak-India relations.

As Mr Basit acknowledged, the dialogue process is effectively suspended, the fallout from the Pathankot attack having derailed plans for a rapid resumption of talks.

Perhaps if tragic events had not intervened and prevented Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from travelling to the US, a prime ministerial meeting with Narendra Modi could have been a catalyst to the resumption of dialogue.

Instead, now the Pathankot investigation and new demands for a reciprocal visit to Pakistan by Indian investigators threaten to further entangle the two sides.

Editorial: [Pak-India peace process](#)

The good news is that both Mr Sharif and Mr Modi have proven that they are willing to take risks and can do the unexpected. The bad news is that the bilateral relationship is slipping back into a familiar and unwelcome pattern: going round in circles.

For dialogue to resume, the foreign secretaries need to meet and the political leaderships of both countries need to provide the necessary impetus.

Inside Pakistan, Prime Minister Sharif has clearly lost some of the momentum he had created on the India front.

From furious debate over the role of Indian spies inside Pakistan to the constant reassertion that the Kashmir dispute must be the centrepiece of any talks around which all other issues must resolve, the political environment inside Pakistan is not dialogue-enhancing at the moment. Yet, as Mr Basit said in New Delhi, there is a national consensus here that a normal and peaceful relationship with India is desirable.

Examine: [\*'Pakistan has backtracked on NIA visit'\*](#)

The key for Mr Sharif will be to find space for bilateral dialogue while reassuring the security establishment and hawkish elements in society that he intends to pursue talks on the basis of equality.

The mutual interests of India and Pakistan are many — the political leadership here needs to do a better job of finding a way of articulating that through its policy and public relations, too.

Over in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi needs to re-embrace the inescapable logic of dialogue.

Having baulked at talks for over a year after taking office, Mr Modi appeared to recognise the futility of his approach. Not talking to Pakistan was never going to address India's self-confessed immediate concern — terrorism.

If that was true in the lengthy wake of the Mumbai attacks, it is doubly true of Pathankot.

Pakistan has demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to investigate the roots of the attack inside this country and to address India's concerns.

The Pathankot investigation can be accommodated inside the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue and the 10 bundles of that dialogue can begin to move.

No one expects an overnight solution to the Kashmir dispute or for terrorism to be defeated immediately. But not talking now only puts off the day peace can be realised — and allows spoilers to appear.

*Published in Dawn, April 9th, 2016*

## Customs Act in Pata

CONTROVERSY is brewing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over the application of the Customs Act in the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas.

While the law had been extended to Pata in 1975, it was not being enforced — until the KP governor issued a notification on March 28 for the implementation of the law in the region.

However, this decision has galvanised a wide variety of forces, all united in their opposition to the law's enforcement in Pata.

Leading the chorus of opposition is the PTI-led KP government itself; according to a special assistant to the provincial chief minister, the administration has decided to revoke the law, while KP's finance minister, who belongs to the Jamaat-i-Islami, has also been vocal in his opposition.

Even the ANP has been critical of the idea of enforcing the law in Pata. But rather than getting carried away by emotions, or worse, pandering to vested interests, political forces in KP must realise what is at stake here.

One argument being made is that Pata — particularly Malakand — is not ready for more taxation because it has suffered from terrorism as well as natural calamities.

Yet owing to the non-enforcement of the Customs Act, Fata and Pata have become havens for smugglers. For example, as pointed out in this paper, there are thousands of non-custom paid vehicles operating in both tribal regions.

Not only does this facilitate tax evasion, it also creates opportunities for criminals and militants who can use such vehicles to commit acts of terrorism.

In fact, it was after the APS Peshawar attack in 2014 that the apex committee decided to enforce the law in Pata.

The state should stand firm on enforcing the Customs Act in Fata and Pata to crack down on tax evasion and criminality.

Looking at the larger picture, the controversy also raises questions about the mainstreaming of the tribal areas. Instead

of using colonial tools to govern Fata and Pata, both regions need to be brought into the national mainstream.

It was the alienation of the local populations, as well as a flawed justice system and the absence of fundamental rights, that spurred on extremist movements in both Malakand and the tribal areas.

In other words, there should be a single set of laws for the entire country, with fundamental rights for all citizens, while vacuums that allow criminality to thrive must be quickly filled by the presence of the state.

*Published in Dawn, April 9th, 2016*

## **Karachi by-elections**

FOR a city inured to violence, much of it stemming from political differences, Thursday's by-elections for NA-245 and PS-115 in Karachi were certainly a departure from the norm.

As expected by many, the MQM won in both constituencies by extremely comfortable margins. Barring a few scuffles here and there, primarily between the workers of the MQM and MQM-H, no major incidents of violence were reported, a fact noted by the Rangers that have been carrying out a security operation in the city for more than two years now.



The margins by which the MQM won do indicate that although the party has been embroiled in several controversies in the recent past, it remains a force to be reckoned with in the metropolis. But that should not give the MQM room for complacency.

Indeed, there is one awkward figure that other contesting parties should also take note of: the voter turnout was abnormally low, with around 11pc of registered voters coming out in NA-245, and an even poorer showing of 9.2pc in PS-115.

Observers may cite several reasons for the low turnout during Thursday's by-poll: lacklustre campaigning — and the absence of the MQM's militant wing that has routinely been accused of intimidating city residents into voting and of attempting to steer the course of events on election day.

The reason for the poor turnout seems to lie in a different direction altogether — the MQM's appeal may not be as organic as the party likes to think.

The same is true for other political parties. Where Karachi is concerned, is no political party capable of winning the trust of the people?

Certainly, the poor turnout and the low numbers polled by losing candidates suggest that voters suffer from a degree of disillusionment when they realise the few options available to them.

The message is clear: political parties must do far more to engage with the voters, and be seen to be tackling the many

issues of governance that have been so glaringly neglected in the city.

*Published in Dawn, April 9th, 2016*

## Punjab operation

IT has all the hallmarks of a compromise. The operation against criminal elements hiding in a stretch of forested area in south Punjab has been billed as a historic first. Civilian law-enforcement agencies in coordination with paramilitary personnel have set out to eliminate the threat posed by criminal gangs in Rajanpur and adjoining districts. By official accounts, the fight will be fierce given that the criminal gangs have retreated to an inaccessible area and are believed to be well armed. Once the gangs have been defeated, the denizens of the affected region will surely see their security improve and local law enforcement will have fewer hazards to face. Yet, some perspective is necessary. The names of the groups that have been bandied about have no national recognition. Neither is there a clear link to militancy and terrorism that is being fought under the umbrella of Operation Zarb-i-Azb. So, it does appear to be a compromise between the political government and the military leadership.

It is also a compromise that Pakistan does not need. Punjab has a terrorism and militancy problem that is not just a threat to Punjab, but the country itself. The extremism threat in Punjab is perhaps even greater — shocking details this week of a



parallel judiciary operating in the provincial capital have given an indication of how far the problem has metastasised in the province. What the province needs — what Pakistan needs — is a counter-terrorism operation that is full-fledged, unflinching and across Punjab. And the operation must be civilian-led with maximum cooperation from the military. If, as the military appears to have recognised, the problem in Punjab is urgent and needs an immediate response, then the military leadership should also recognise its role in creating the political space necessary. But who leads the fight and what special powers the military and paramilitary personnel are given ought to be secondary to the goal of securing Pakistan.

Lost in the civil-military tug-of-war has been the effect on the morale of the civilian law-enforcement agencies. The military regards them as inferior, while the political government will not let them do their job — it is the worst of both worlds that civilian agencies face. The operation in Rajanpur is unlikely to fix that problem. Are the police and civilian intelligence agencies in urban Punjab and central and north Punjab being better prepared, and have their resources been boosted for a fight that is certain to erupt at some point? There is no indication of that at all. Each time the civilians and the military leadership disagree on an issue, there is a tendency to cast it as a parochial dispute between two sides. But when it is Pakistan's security at stake, all sides need to reflect on what the national interest truly means.

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## Rape victims

ACCORDING to a distressing news report on Friday, a young woman has accused her employer of raping and taking indecent photographs of her. She has alleged that she was also gang-raped by her employer and police personnel. Raped for eight months in Muzaffargarh district, she took the courageous step of approaching the Supreme Court — in the hope that other women would not have to suffer her ordeal. The statistics are troubling: in 2014, four women were raped in Pakistan everyday, according to War Against Rape. Although rape is clearly defined in Section 375 of the PPC as “a man having sexual intercourse with a woman against her will ...”, the state fails to examine institutional and structural failures. HRCP statistics for 2014 recount women and girls as victims of 597 gang rapes, while 828 were raped and 36 stripped in public. Why are the numbers of registered rape cases lower than those reported in hospitals? Women refuse to register police reports because they are judged on the basis of their alleged behavioural history. The horrors of rape are compounded with an inappropriate line of questioning by law-enforcement authorities, such as, what sort of clothes she was wearing when raped.

It's the constant shaming that feeds the history of rape impunity. With no forensic investigation, police do not immediately register a report leaving time for the victim to succumb to intimidation by the perpetrator, despite rape and gang rape being non-compoundable offences under the Protection of Women Act (Criminal Law Amendment), 2006. Medico-legal officers still use painful testing methods to verify the claims of a victim; DNA facilities are rare, and the need to

check for physical evidence disregarded. Judges and lawyers will negotiate out-of-court settlements. If women report sexual abuse, they are often disbelieved or seen as partially responsible. Societal stigma shames victims. Women are raped on the orders of illegal panchayats and jirgas. Mukhtar Mai's case in 2011 would perhaps have served as a deterrent, but only one of 14 alleged perpetrators accused of gang-raping her was convicted. Rape can only be addressed when perpetrators are prosecuted and shamed; and when victims are supported institutionally to name and shame. Presently, the police and judiciary appear to have failed the state as the protectors and arbiters of justice. Only when state institutions tackle the thinking that goes with violent patriarchal control over women will upward trends in crimes of violence dip.

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## Doctors' strike

A CONFRONTATION between the administration and the Young Doctors' Association in Balochistan is continuing and threatens to affect the anti-polio campaign in the province, besides adding to the miseries of patients. The situation turned ugly on Thursday when protesting doctors were baton-charged by police and faced tear-gas shelling in Quetta. The YDA says several doctors were injured in the melee. Originally, the medics had been protesting for higher pay and other demands. OPDs in the provincial capital have been severely affected

while the YDA has said it will boycott the polio eradication campaign.

Doctors do have a right to demonstrate and press for their legitimate demands, and similar protests have been seen in other parts of the country over the past few years. But these protests should not come at the cost of patients. As it is, Balochistan's health infrastructure is far from satisfactory, so when healthcare providers go on strike, the people's miseries are compounded. People come to Quetta's public hospitals from various parts of the province for medical care, and it is totally unacceptable to deprive them of medical facilities, leaving them with no option but to turn to private, more expensive, clinics — or even quacks for those who have few resources. Meanwhile, any attempt at boycotting the polio campaign must be roundly censured, especially in light of the country's recent successes on this front. Though the crippling disease has still not been eradicated, recorded cases are down compared to last year, which makes it all the more important that no pauses or disruptions occur in the campaign. At the same time, police action against the doctors was unjustified, and Balochistan's administration must take to task those officials who used force against the protesting medics. The provincial government should address the legitimate demands of the YDA and work swiftly to end the impasse. Both parties should realise that the welfare of the public must be kept paramount, and that there should be no disruptions whatsoever in the country's polio eradication campaign.

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## Consensus on an economic agenda

AFTER Finance Minister Ishaq Dar's musing on a so-called charter of the economy, the IMF has added its voice for the creation of a national consensus on a 'core economic agenda'.

In the IMF's reckoning, the core agenda should cover four areas: tax revenues, with an emphasis on a wider and fairer system; revamping public-sector enterprises; energy reforms; and improving the national business climate.

Unsurprisingly, the IMF's formulation hews closely to the agenda it tried to implement via the three-year fund programme that will come to an end this year — a programme that has achieved very little beyond the macro stabilisation that has been embraced by the PML-N government.

Yet, simply because it is IMF advocacy does not make the prescription wrong. Mr Dar, too, was right when he suggested a charter of the economy — though drafting a meaningful charter would be extremely complicated given that economic policies cannot and should not be static.

Perhaps what the federal government could do, however, is begin to create the conditions that make taking up an economic charter easier in the years ahead.

At the moment, economic policy is too closely controlled by Mr Dar himself — even inside the PML-N. As de facto prime

minister, Mr Dar has a veto over virtually all major economic decisions.

If that changes — if policies advocated by other ministries are allowed to be debated and their implementation not made conditional on Mr Dar's approval — it would contribute to the creation of a climate where the contours of overall policy can be shaped by policy experts and not be subject to the whims of one individual. That inclusive process could be extended to other major economic exercises, particularly the federal budget and longer-term frameworks within which the budgets are set.

Once again, the process is so tightly controlled by the finance ministry that parliament is often asked to sign off on numbers it has little understanding of. If parliament — meaning not just the elected government of the day, but opposition parties too — is made part of the decision-making process, trust can be built.

The tax system illustrates the problem well. In principle, the tax system is unfair and it needs to be restructured in favour of having a greater proportion of direct taxes. But while most political parties would agree that tax revenues need to be boosted, none have felt the need to embrace specific policy positions backed up reliable numbers. That leaves the details of tax reforms, the few that are attempted, to be worked out between the government of the day and (usually) the IMF. Drawing parliament into the budget process could help change that. What are the numbers and what are the options?

Ministerial transparency and openness with parliament could help encourage parliamentarians to think about economic policy as more than mere politics and put forward more

responsible suggestions. The road will be a long one, but political trust is built slowly.

An economic charter will only be as useful as the political willingness to abide by it. As the charter of democracy has shown, repeated mistakes can lead to a willingness to change.

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## MBBS degree

THE Punjab government has recently moved towards resolving a long-simmering issue by awarding the MBBS degree to those medical students who have worked for a specific period in the rural areas.

The response to the decision has been cautious so far but one strain of the debate has questioned the element of pressure. Service in the rural or remote areas has to be voluntary and beneficial to all involved.

The doctors trained and raised here — young or mid-career — would rather leave the country and serve in demanding, but well-paid, positions in foreign lands than attempt to work in Pakistan's rural parts that lack even basic medical facilities.

It is obvious that the bias against the rural parts is not peculiar to doctors or hospitals or the healthcare sector in general. The neglect of these areas is obvious in all aspects.

Since healthcare is such a basic need, it is all the more painful to see the authorities paying the rural areas less attention and so many doctors not prepared to tend to the ailments of people living there.

What adds to the worries is the uneasy belief that the scheme which envisages mandatory time in the districts is not going to bring relief. The authorities may arm-twist a few into serving in these areas but the doctors will not have their heart in their work.

Perhaps a more reasonable answer was explored by the Punjab chapter of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan some time ago. It proposed an incentive-based system.

Doctors attempting FCPS Part-II were given extra marks for working in villages when they appeared in the provincial service commission exam. It was up to the candidates whether they wanted to take the option or not — unlike the mandatory term fixed by the Punjab government for MBBS students now. Having said that, the key here is overall improvement in the health infrastructure in the districts.

An effort must be made to raise standards at rural hospitals to match those of medical outlets in the cities.

The government must re-examine its decision and work out a better plan to motivate doctors to serve in these areas.

A good step in this direction would be to balance its investment and development targets so that the gap between the rural and urban parts is plugged to a large extent. It is time the provincial government spent time away from the comforts of Lahore.

## PTI demand and PID

FOR all the challenges in the way, it is heartening to know that endeavours to strengthen democracy have not stalled.

For example, last week, the Press Information Department in Islamabad made modest history by allowing the PTI to hold a news conference on its premises.

It had so far functioned almost exclusively as the propaganda arm of the government of the day, giving the party in power a slight edge in terms of being able to disseminate its own version of events — and widely, since PID events are usually telecast live by PTV.

That the floor was given over to a party in the opposition is a healthy sign that PID and its sisters PTV and Radio Pakistan — which have similarly been used by the ruling party of the day to further its own agenda — are institutions of the state, and not of the government.

If this is a step forward, the fact that PTV did not cover this particular press conference is a step back. Pakistan needs to break from its legacy of authoritarian governance, and opening up PID, PTV and Radio Pakistan is one way of doing this.

Parties in the opposition are as much part of the structure of governance as those in power, which requires that the institutions under discussion here function ideally as extensions of parliament.

That said, though, it must be acknowledged that there are privileges a party is entitled to after winning elections and forming a government that are not available to the other parties — which is why the demand made by the PTI on Friday, that party chairman Imran Khan be allocated airtime on PTV to “address the nation”, borders on the ridiculous. PTV and Radio Pakistan should certainly convey the pronouncements of all those in parliament in an even-handed manner — at the moment, they are guilty of coverage skewed towards the ruling party, and this needs to change.

But addresses to the nation cannot be made by simply anyone, and certainly not with the weight of a state institution behind it.

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## Investigating scams

BEFORE the Panama Papers, there was the ephedrine scam. And before the ephedrine scam, there was the Haj scandal. And before the Haj scandal, there was the Ogra scam.

Each one of those scams touched high office — cabinet ministers and even prime ministers — but none of the allegations of corruption has led to the conviction of any of the principal accused.

A special report in this newspaper yesterday has shed light on why shocking allegations of vast corruption have not led to jail sentences or disqualifications from public office.

The reasons are familiar, but depressing: botched investigations, poorly gathered evidence, lacklustre prosecutions and a judicial system that seems to favour endless delay.

The state appears to have inverted the judicial process: the higher the office in which corruption and misdeeds are alleged, the less competent and effective investigations and prosecutions seem to be.

It is perhaps for that reason that the PML-N feels so aggrieved by the latest accusations.

The Panama Papers do not directly suggest that any illegalities have been committed by the Sharif family and the prime minister himself has called for the creation of an inquiry commission to be headed by a retired Supreme Court justice.

But the Ogra, Haj and ephedrine scams have contributed to that overall culture of impunity where politicians see every allegation of corruption and other misdeeds as an attempt to undermine democracy itself.

Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. There are unquestionably, without an iota of doubt, corrupt politicians and public officials in this country. To identify them and prosecute them is to improve the democratic system, not undermine it.

With the Ogra and ephedrine scams, both PPP prime ministers and a prime ministerial candidate in the last parliament have been accused of corruption on an epic scale. If the head itself is rotten, the body can never even begin to cleanse itself.

The inquiry commission that Mr Sharif has pledged to create could be a turning point.

While the government will likely do its best to keep the commission's mandate as narrow as possible and will be looking to install a retired justice who is not a maverick to head the commission, a combination of events may create space for real political change.

Because the Panama Papers are continuing to make waves internationally, and because they have caused so much consternation inside Pakistan already, the inquiry commission will have the moral and political space to make sweeping recommendations.

With the country's politicians unwilling to lead on reforms, and the judicial system not in a shape to do so, perhaps ad-hoc interventions, such as by an inquiry commission, can push the cause of change and transformation forward.

Democratic evolution demands that political legitimacy be drawn not just from elections, but a scrupulous adherence to ethical standards above that of the average citizen.

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## Imran's double role

IN the wake of the Panama scandal, Imran Khan has once again declared his intent to cast his net to catch Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

This time, to the relief of federal ministers, police, administrative officials, journalists and others in Islamabad, the PTI chief has in mind a sit-in outside the Sharifs' Raiwind estate in Lahore.

Since this would mean taking the battle deep into Sharif turf it is very likely that the PML-N cadre, especially its more belligerent elements, will target areas where Mr Khan commands influence.

Already, Mr Khan's Shaukat Khanum Hospital is under attack. While no doubt this has earned him some sympathy, it is not surprising that divisions within the ranks of the party have only drawn ridicule.

But more importantly, the PTI leader, who has pledged to dislodge the prime minister and his 'corrupt' team, is going to be asked some probing questions about his own performance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

These questions are given currency by the emergency situation in the province brought about by the recent flash floods and other rain-related accidents.

Mr Khan is not your usual Pakistani leader opposing the government. He already wields substantial power. In KP, his

party has been trying to set a new precedent in governance for the last three years.

It is not as if Mr Khan has helped form a government which he now patronises and controls from behind the scenes. He is very visible and does visit the province in times of distress — even if his decision to celebrate the party's Foundation Day at a time when the KP is in the grip of an emergency caused by nature is debatable.

It is well known that the PTI's debut performance in government is being closely monitored by those who have taken upon themselves the task of forecasting the party's future. But the party chief must heed a reminder.

Mr Khan — more than his party, his chief minister, ministers or other officials in KP — must display an ability to lead from the front, as he generally does when he finds causes to champion as a politician from the opposition camp.

He needs to put up a good show while at the helm in KP, which is quite adept at voting out — with a shrug — parties that do not perform well while in government. It is a delicate situation and Mr Khan must not lose his balance.

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## Pricey textbooks

IN this age of tight budgets and high costs of living, something as basic as education is slipping beyond the reach of many.

As reported in this paper recently, the cost of textbooks and notebooks has risen considerably.

A survey of the market in Karachi has shown that there has been a rise of between 15pc and 25pc in the cost of schoolbooks for private educational institutions this year. Those with knowledge of the market say the price of government schoolbooks will also likely go up.

In fact, this has become an annual trend. But the pressure this puts on domestic budgets is considerable, as parents also have to spend substantial sums on other school-related items such as uniforms, stationery etc, which do not come cheap — and most of the time for more than one child.

With private schools being criticised for hiking fees every year, the attendant increase in the cost of books is too much for many parents to bear.

As has been pointed out in the report, some parents have to resort to paying for their children's books in instalments. And if the price hike were not bad enough, some course books are in short supply.

Unfortunately, it appears that there is little regulation of the education sector, which is why it has turned, in many respects, into a business with those involved milking the parents.

Surely, the publishers of textbooks and notebooks can reduce their profit margins so that when it comes to essential books parents can buy them without concern.

Books also need to be published in sufficient numbers so that there is no short supply when the school year begins. And the state should ask the publishers to explain what fuels annual hikes in textbook prices.

Perhaps the issue boils down to the fact that since the state has neglected the education sector for decades, the private sector, driven by profit, has moved in. This is the sad reality despite the fact that free and compulsory education is the constitutional right of every child in Pakistan.

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## Ethics committees

IT is an ostensibly well-meaning, even a high-minded idea: the creation of ethics committees in both houses of parliament to scrutinise the assets and wealth of elected representatives from the very beginning of their political careers.

In presenting his proposal, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan has likely tried to grab the moral high ground while so many other politicians, inside the PML-N and outside, are struggling to address the accusations and recriminations over corruption and ill-gotten wealth.

Yet, an ethics committee would only help sidestep the real problems. Why, for example, are the investigation and law-enforcement agencies that fall under the purview of the interior ministry not capable of doing the task? The unhappy truth is that they simply cannot be trusted.

Beholden to and controlled by the minister of the day as the various agencies are, no institution that reports to a political leader can produce a fair and independent investigation of politicians.

When it comes to committees that are run by elected representatives themselves, the track record is even more abysmal.

The interior minister would be quite familiar with the workings of the Public Accounts Committee, which he chaired for three years in the previous parliament. While Chaudhry Nisar routinely claimed great successes in identifying and

eliminating corruption in public spending, few others shared the then-leader of the opposition's perspective.

Surely, when it comes to parliamentarians scrutinising themselves, the record would be even worse.

With virtually all parliamentarians thought to hide their true wealth to at least some degree, why would any parliamentarian want to see a colleague, even if belonging to a rival political party, exposed?

Once the hammer falls on others, it would be only a matter of time before the favour is returned — in that scenario, an ethics committee would likely go the way of all other parliamentary committees in becoming a platform for noise and accusations, but no real results.

Where the interior minister may have made a more relevant suggestion is in mentioning the scope of what an assets probe should look like.

As is widely known, to avoid taxation and embarrassing political disclosures, elected representatives routinely register the ownership of assets such as homes and luxury vehicles in the name of family members, employees or political associates.

What should be probed is beneficial use — the homes, vehicles and offices that politicians use should be publicly disclosed along with their real ownership.

Similarly, when it comes to lifestyles and election campaigns, the expenditures should be publicly declared.

But none of that will matter so long as there is no independent agency to investigate and publicly declare its findings.

There the focus should be on empowering the existing structures instead of creating new organisations. Perhaps the interior minister can lead the way by showing that investigations by his own ministry can be conducted independently.

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## CIA and torture

THE campaign against transglobal terrorism, especially after the events of 9/11, has led many states down a path where fundamental rights have been sacrificed at the altar of ‘national security’.

While the challenges posed by militancy are considerable, this cannot justify the abdication of fundamental principles, especially when states that claim to uphold human rights start using methods that are little different to those employed by militants.

The US, mainly due to its global military reach, has been at the centre of this storm, which is why CIA chief John Brennan’s recent comments about torture are welcome.

Mr Brennan told an American media outlet that he would not allow torture of terror suspects even if ordered by the next US president. This comes in the wake of comments by Republican front-runners Donald Trump and Ted Cruz in which they justified methods such as waterboarding.

The CIA chief’s words indicate a bold stance, but will he be able to live up to them?

After all, the agency’s record on torture is not very good, and the US establishment seemed fine with the practice until Barack Obama entered the White House for the first time in 2009.

In fact, under George W. Bush’s watch, especially following 9/11, torture apparently became part of standard operating procedure where the shadowy world of America’s espionage operations was concerned.

The horrors unleashed in gulags such as Bagram, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay are today not hidden from anyone.

The term ‘rendition’ today is mostly associated with the torture of terror suspects at ‘black sites’ spread across the world.

Unfortunately, the US, which is quick to lecture others about human rights, has applied one standard inside its borders, and totally another when it comes to ‘interrogating’ torture suspects beyond its borders.

Such hypocrisy gives authoritarian regimes across the world the licence to use similarly brutal methods when dealing with their own insurgents, as well as other critics of the state.

April 2016

Besides being morally reprehensible, torture is not exactly useful either; as a US Senate Intelligence Committee report found, hardly any valuable information was uncovered from tortured detainees.

Simply put, torture is unacceptable under any circumstances, especially by states that claim to honour human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We hope the CIA stands by its word and that in future the US, as well as all other states, use only legal and humane tools to gather information and intelligence.

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## Stuff of farce

AS the judges, lawyers and others who work at the Anti-Terrorism Court-II in Clifton, Karachi, go to work in the coming days, they might be forgiven for thinking privately that no matter what their work environment, there, but by the grace of God, could have lain a scene of destruction.

Thankfully, given that everyone on the premises remained mostly unharmed, and the damage to infrastructure was not significant either, it is possible to make light of an incident that could so easily have turned into a tragedy. As things stand, the story belongs to the genre of comedic fiction.

On Monday, a lawyer and a policeman got into an argument. The former insisted that the latter did not have the expertise to understand how a hand grenade, allegedly recovered from his client, functioned.

The policeman stiffened, informing the court that he was a retired soldier, and, when further goaded by the lawyer about how a detonator worked, proceeded to pull the pin out and set off the charge. It seems the policeman was under the impression that the detonator had been defused.

Obviously, he was proved wrong as the roomful of people who were left cowering in the courtroom would confirm.

Having said that, pause to think of what could have ensued had the part involved not been a detonator but the grenade itself.

It is sobering indeed to think of such explosives in the hands of obviously untrained persons; and worse, those who by the very nature of their jobs are expected to have at least basic working knowledge of dangerous materials.

This is a country that has spent more than a decade fighting on the front line of terror and militancy; moreover, the incident occurred in a city where the rates of violent crime are such that the police force should have by now been honed into a lean, mean force. Clearly, such expectations are wishful thinking.

Citizens can legitimately wonder, what real chances are there of winning this war?

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## Air power in Punjab

IF the beginning was odd enough — a massive civilian-cum-paramilitary operation in the farthest reaches of south Punjab against an unheard-of gang of criminals — the intended denouement is a shocking and terrifying operation. Air strikes by military helicopters have been threatened against the criminals, who along with their families have retreated to a decades-old hideout in a small riverine island. Somehow, the combined might of the Punjab police, the counter-terrorism department and Rangers has neither the operational capacity nor the required patience to locate and capture criminals who have retreated to a hideout surrounded by water and from which there is no escape. The sheer monstrosity of the decision to use air power cannot be overstated. This is Punjab, the richest and best-resourced province in the country. The targets have their families — women and children — with them. This is supposed to be the beginning of a sustained push against militants in Punjab. Has the state lost its collective mind?

The militarisation of law-enforcement and counter-terrorism operations not only has profound complications going forward, but raises fresh questions about the state's use of disproportionate violence in other regions. In Fata, the use of air power has been portrayed by the military as not only a significant component of counter-insurgency warfare, but a signal of the state's deadliness of purpose. Yet, with no independent reporting possible from the war zones, it is not known whether air power has been used prudently. Nor is the damage caused by air strikes known — the only casualties ever reported are of militants, while 'collateral damage' is officially

non-existent. Similarly, in Balochistan the scale and scope of so-called intelligence-based operations is never known. When remote areas are pounded by heavy munitions or so-called targeted operations are conducted, it is only the death count of alleged militants and nominal casualties suffered by security personnel that are reported. The stunning audacity of security personnel involved in the Rajanpur operation gives pause — if air strikes can be contemplated in Punjab, what is being done in areas under the de facto control of the security services?

The very fact that gangs of regional criminals are able to defy the might of the Punjab law-enforcement apparatus gives an indication of how entrenched criminals, terrorists and militants are in the province. Punjab needs a province-wide operation — south, central, north; rural and urban — and it needs to be led by the civilian apparatus with maximum cooperation from the military. But counter-terrorism should not be militarised. To deploy indiscriminate force against a very specific threat would be immoral and, more pragmatically, counterproductive. At stake is a war of ideas — what kind of Pakistan is state and society trying to build versus the millenarian wretchedness of the militants. Pakistan must win the fight against militancy, but how it does so will matter. Air strikes in a battle against criminals should be an obvious red line.

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## Land records

PAKISTAN is a country where land provides not just a source of livelihood in an agricultural economy but is also considered a family's most solid asset. Yet for decades, the records of possession and establishing ownership have been governed by archaic and inconvenient colonial-era systems, hinged at the most basic level on the office of the patwari, or the keeper of (manual) records. As a group, patwaris are as notorious for the latha on which they record land details as they are for their tendency to indulge in corruption and extortion. This background is key to understanding the significance of the step taken over recent years in computerising land records province by province. Once the process is complete, the number of people that the exercise will benefit will be very high. An advertising campaign currently being run by the Sindh Board of Revenue, for example, concerns the launching of a computerised land record facility. It refers to 4.5 million entries of land records, seven million landowners, and 27 service centres in each district headquarters. It boasts of being able to issue for a small fee the required record on paper that has security features, through a database integrated with that of Nadra, the national database authority. A similar project was initiated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as far back as 2013, and the initial entries have more or less been completed. Punjab too recently completed the first steps of the process, and the Land Records Management Information System has been up and running for a while. Only in Balochistan, it seems, has little progress been made on this front.

People using these facilities have reported some glitches, such as inconsistencies over demarcations, overlaps in titles etc.

These, however, were only to be expected and, in fact, throw into starker focus the very need for the project of computerisation in the first place. The first step to controlling chaos is to put records down in a manner that can be cross-referenced; over time, as people report errors and inconsistencies, the record will eventually be straightened out and the process simplified — much as the functioning of Nadra has been smoothened over the years. The provincial governments that have undertaken the effort deserve commendation, holding out the hope as they are of a time when the patwari becomes a relic of the past and when obtaining land records is no longer a prohibitively difficult process.

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## Border management

PEOPLE have been making the crossing at Torkham for centuries. However, in this age of transnational security threats, some sort of border management is essential. As demonstrated by the tragedy on Tuesday, border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan at this spot are anything but orderly. After authorities tightened verification procedures, an Afghan woman and a child lost their lives reportedly due to suffocation at the border crossing. Chaotic scenes at this location are nothing new, and the tragedy underscores the need for a well-organised and smooth border management system at Torkham.

Thousands of people cross the Pak-Afghan border at Torkham daily; although the authorities here have no reliable figures. As per the 'right of easement' granted to the divided tribes living along the Durand Line, some groups, such as the Shinwaris, are exempt from visa formalities. But even otherwise, Afghans who have business links with Pakistan or who want to meet relatives or visit health facilities in Peshawar also cross over regularly. Some get in with relative ease after greasing the palms of border officials as they do not possess proper documents. This chaotic state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue as it poses significant security risks to Pakistan. For example, some of the militants involved in the Bacha Khan University attack apparently crossed over from Torkham undetected. The problem has also been brought up at the apex committee level. A rahdari (route permit) system has been introduced but is not being utilised to its full potential. For those who frequently cross the border, this card can be a workable solution, as through it the state will have the data of those entering and leaving the country. It can facilitate regular travellers as they will not have to apply for a visa each time they want to visit Pakistan, while allowing the state to spot undesirable elements. For the sake of security, the state needs to modernise and improve the border management system at Torkham without delay.

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## Cybercrime bill

After much back and forth, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill 2015 was passed by the National Assembly on Wednesday.

How open to scrutiny the okaying of the proposed legislation was, and perhaps how interested lawmakers are in this piece of legal drafting, can be gauged from the fact that of the 342 members of the house, only 30 members were present.

Now that it has been passed by the lower house of parliament, it is still not free from controversy.

Critics continue to warn that while some of the reservations against the harshest penalties and clauses in the proposed legislation have been tweaked, there is still far too much that can make mischief, be used to curb free speech and dissent, and turn transgressions stemming from the lack of awareness into offences punishable by long jail terms and heavy fines.

Read: [\*Why Pakistan's cybercrime bill is a dangerous farce\*](#)

Continuing criticism of the bill through its various iterations has been that it has been framed/written by individuals unfamiliar with the myriad ramifications and realities of the digital world.

Thus, as pointed out by PPP MNA Shazia Marri, Clause 22 criminalises 'spamming', or "sending messages without the recipient's permission".



While the amended version of the clause is somewhat improved, it can nevertheless be used, she argues, to impose a three-month jail sentence for simply sending a text.

Similarly, IT expert Salman Ansari continues to point out that definitions in the draft bill are vague, yet the punishments are harsh. And indeed, what is the public to make of, for example, a sentence of up to three years' imprisonment and a hefty fine for "creating a website for negative purposes"?

There is no argument that hate speech has become a pressing problem, whether online or otherwise.

Yet, anyone even slightly familiar with the ways in which dissent was suffocated in Pakistan in earlier decades will accept that creating disputes and spreading hatred on the basis of religion or sectarianism are broad enough to be mischievously interpreted.

It is indisputable that the country needs a framework of laws regulating cyber activity, where the problematic use of technology ranges anywhere from playing a role in militancy and terrorism, to no less agonising transgressions against individuals, such as data theft, blackmail and account hacking.

Yet Pakistan's track record in regulating the online world has so far been ham-fisted and has betrayed a lack of understanding about how it works; witness the crude move against YouTube.

This requires that legislation in this area be subjected to the very highest levels of scrutiny.

Further, when and if the bill becomes law, it will become the basic building block on which other pieces of legislations and amendments are raised. Pakistan needs to take the time to get it right. The draft is to be debated in the Senate. There is still time to address the problems.

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## Balochistan's tragedy

THERE is the official narrative on Balochistan, the one propagated by the security establishment and the state, and then there is what appears to be the real story from the province — a grim chronology of deaths and disappearances.

Tragically, among civil society organisations and the media, there are few voices that narrate anything other than what the security establishment is peddling.

Consider that on a day that army chief Gen Raheel Sharif dominated the Balochistan-related headlines with allegations about Indian interference in the province, there was another, far less publicised tale being told elsewhere.

The courageous Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, which has consistently shone a light on state excesses, was discussing unverified reports of civilian casualties in an operation in Mastung — though for political and public relations purposes the term 'military operations' is avoided in Balochistan.



With few independently verified facts from large swathes of the province, the murkiness of Balochistan is virtually impenetrable. It could well be that the security forces were targeting active militants and allegations of multiple civilian casualties have been exaggerated.

But the questions the HRCP has raised are valid — and demand an honest answer.

There is little doubt that Balochistan poses a complex problem. Geographically vast; relatively sparsely populated; sharing a troubled border with two countries; geo-strategically vital; a region where this country's geopolitical past intersects with its geopolitical future; a base for militants, separatists, sectarian militants and transnational insurrectionists — that only begins to cover the security problems in the province.

Balochistan has also been blighted by a political leadership that has considered it easier to cut deals with Islamabad than to represent its own people's aspirations and needs.

Yet, none of that should diminish the original and continuing problem in Balochistan: a disaffected section of the Baloch population, which feels alienated from the Pakistani state and has used violence to draw attention to many valid and continuing grievances.

But there is a more fundamental principle also at stake here. In fighting anti-state violence, the state should never use disproportionate violence and should always, in every instance, take every possible measure to ensure that civilians are never targeted. If morality does not satisfy, then perhaps pragmatic arguments will.

The fight and longest-running insurgency in Balochistan feed off stories of excess and repression by the state. Just because the rest of Pakistan does not hear the tales of excess, it does not mean the disaffected Baloch do not either.

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## Hockey flop

THE sad performance of the Pakistan hockey team at the ongoing Azlan Shah Cup has embarrassed the nation yet again.

The team has witnessed successive drubbing at the hands of Australia, New Zealand, India and even Malaysia, with only a solitary win in the opening clash against the lowly ranked Canada in the seven-team contest.

In fact, the thumping 1-5 defeat inflicted by India pretty much vindicates the Indian media's claims earlier that India's top-notch players were absent from the hockey finals at the South Asian Games in Guwahati last February which Pakistan narrowly won.

Sport can sometimes be cruel. Unexpected bad luck can play havoc with a player's or a team's progress.

But the Pakistan team had no such excuse for defeat as its approach to the game during the event was unstructured throughout.

The players failed to show any spark in defence and attack, and their lacklustre performance exposed their ill-preparedness.

The Azlan Shah Cup debacle, which comes on the heels of the national team's ignominious disqualification for the World Cup 2014 and the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio, rankles even more in the backdrop of Pakistan's impressive past record at the Malaysian event which saw the team emerging as title winner thrice besides being runner-up on six other occasions.

During its glory days Pakistan was to hockey what West Indies was to cricket in the 1970s. Since then, however, incompetent and allegedly corrupt regimes at the Pakistan Hockey Federation have seen the game slipping.

In fact, the overall decline is due to a combination of factors such as maladministration, internal politics, lack of funds and missing infrastructure.

Besides the ostrich-like attitude of those in control has also hurt Pakistan hockey that, like cricket, needs to be liberated from the clutches of unelected power-brokers.

A command structure that is competent, democratic and transparent in its functioning and gives primacy to the raising of standards and the welfare of players must be put in place to revive the national game's fortunes.

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## Dialogue with India

THE Foreign Office may be technically correct — dialogue with India is not officially suspended — but it is certainly in limbo. In trying to quell the controversy created by the high commissioner to India Abdul Basit's remarks last week that in his opinion dialogue with New Delhi stood suspended, the Foreign Office has perhaps unwittingly confirmed that the government is itself unsure about how to proceed with dialogue.

In the Pakistan-India dialogue equation, there are three power centres that always need to be considered. One of those power centres, the political government in Pakistan, is caught in the maelstrom of the Panama Papers and had already struggled to convert Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's boldness on India into policy actions.

The other of those power centres inside Pakistan, the army leadership, is busy raking up allegations of Indian interference inside this country — suggesting it is in no mood to countenance wide-ranging dialogue envisaged under the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue.

The third of those power centres, the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, appears unable to make up its mind whether it wants to engage or ignore Pakistan.

The specifics may be new, but the historical pattern fits well. An India-centric Pakistani state dominated by the army and a Pakistan-obsessed Indian security establishment do not make for willing or effective dialogue partners.

April 2016

And when political visionaries have appeared on either side, they have been unable to build peace constituencies strong enough to resist the hawks. Yet, the logic of peace is irresistible.

A secure and stable Pakistan and an India that wants to join the league of world powers cannot be realised without a long-term peace settlement between the two countries.

Simply, Pakistan is too big for India to ignore and India is too big for Pakistan to fight.

Across mainstream political parties in Pakistan, there is a consensus that peace with India is necessary to unlock the socio-economic potential of this country.

Unhappily, the civilian consensus in Pakistan also has the fewest tools available to it to press its policy case. In part, that is the fault of the civilians: rather than build institutions, they have relied on individuals trying to use the force of their personality or political capital to force change.

Inevitably, they have been rebuffed by the institutional strength of the hawks.

There has also been a lack of planning. When Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif negotiated the terms of resuming dialogue with India, perhaps there should have been greater emphasis on the need to ensure that dialogue would be uninterrupted and uninterruptible.

If a cross-border attack were to happen, as it did in Pathankot, what would be the process to ensure that the post-Mumbai

attacks fiasco would not be repeated and what guarantees would India give Pakistan that it would not effectively pull the plug on wider dialogue?

Civilians in Pakistan need to learn that good intentions can pave a road to nowhere.

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## Political ailments

Call it politics-itis. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has caught it.

Earlier, PPP supremo Asif Ali Zardari caught it. Former president Pervez Musharraf is a chronic sufferer.

It strikes at the worst possible time — just when political leaders are facing serious political trouble. And it has a most unfortunate cure: travel abroad; far away from the only place in the world those leaders swear they would rather be — Pakistan.

Read: [Zardari is not meeting PM Nawaz in London, Bilawal says](#)

Perhaps Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has some genuine medical concerns. An individual his age and with his job demands is likely to have something or the other stutter or flutter.

Mr Zardari may no longer be burdened with public office, but, as he reminds the nation at every opportunity he gets, his body has suffered a great deal in his decades-long struggle for democracy.

Mr Musharraf is perhaps the most puzzling case for his doctors — the more unwell he is, the better he looks.

Consider the unverified pictures of Mr Musharraf circulating soon after he left the country recently for urgent and serious medical care. The former president looked in fine fettle and was surely the envy of medical patients across the world.

It is possible to jest endlessly about our politicians' medical woes. But there is a serious aspect to this.

If Prime Minister Sharif is unwell enough to be unprecedentedly photographed by his daughter, Maryam Nawaz Sharif, receiving his mother's blessings before leaving for London, then surely the country needs to be given a medical update by Mr Sharif's doctors about the prime minister's health.

To underline the obvious: the health of the prime minister is a legitimate matter of public concern.

Take a look: [Imran Khan, Chaudhry Nisar depart for UK](#)

Consider also that the prime minister's family itself and the PML-N government have tried to reap a public-relations advantage from Mr Sharif's illness by publicising a tender moment between mother and son.

If Mr Sharif's medical condition or illness can be used to try and deflect speculation about the real reason for his visit to London in the wake of the Panama Papers' revelations, then surely a credible medical statement should be issued by the medical team that is treating him in London.

Moreover, as the PML-N has made clear, Mr Sharif's trip to London is open-ended and will depend on the medical advice of his doctors. If the country is to believe that it is in fact medical advice, and not political, legal or financial advice, that has taken Mr Sharif to London, then the advice should be made public.

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## Mustafa Kamal's call

THE demand by former Karachi nazim and Pak Sarzameen Party chief Mustafa Kamal for a ban on his erstwhile party, the MQM, is thoroughly undemocratic.

Whatever the Muttahida's sins, it is unacceptable in a democratic dispensation for blanket bans to be slapped on political parties. Mr Kamal made the demand in Karachi on Thursday, repeating allegations he had made earlier regarding the MQM leadership's suspected links with RAW.

His demand seems to have been fuelled by frustration as Mr Kamal has been unable to attract any first-tier leaders from the

Muttahida to his new party, welcoming instead sidelined figures and minor players.

The MQM has earned quite a reputation for itself over the decades, where the use of muscle power and violence is concerned. It is also true that claims of the party being ‘anti-state’ have been around for a long time; but no government has proved these charges in court.

Additionally, branding groups ‘anti-state’ is an old tactic the establishment has used for those whose politics it disagrees with or dislikes. And the fact that the Muttahida has two wings — a political one and a militant wing — is hardly a secret; this must have been known to Mr Kamal when he was an MQM stalwart.

So while the state can and should take action against MQM members involved in illegal activities, banning the party is no solution, simply because — warts and all — the MQM remains the dominant political force in urban Sindh even after its militants have been neutralised to a large extent.

If Mustafa Kamal wants to challenge this reality, he must prove his mettle at the ballot box instead of wishing the Muttahida away.

Moreover, many of those that have joined the PSP, as well as those being courted by it, have shadowy reputations linked to their time as MQM members. So there is clearly an element of hypocrisy here.

Bans on politicians and parties are a reminder of autocratic rule in Pakistan and have no place in the current political system.

## OIC: a house divided

THE statement issued at the recently concluded Organisation of Islamic Cooperation summit in Istanbul is unprecedented for the harsh, undiplomatic tone used for a member state. Buried in between rhetoric about Palestine and Kashmir in the lengthy statement is a scathing attack on Iran, as the document deplores “Iran’s interference in the internal affairs of the states of the region. ...” as well as the Islamic Republic’s “continued support for terrorism”. Hezbollah, Tehran’s Lebanese ally, is also not spared “for conducting terrorist activities in Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen”. For a moment, it appears as if these verbal assaults have come from a more traditional foe of Iran, such as Israel, instead of from within the OIC. This development, unfortunately, reflects the deep polarisation that is today threatening to tear the Muslim world apart.

There is little doubt that the acrimonious content of the statement is a reflection of the ongoing Saudi-Iranian feud. For long, the Saudis have dominated the OIC (the latter is headquartered in Jeddah), yet perhaps rarely has the organisation been used to lambaste a member state in this fashion. Iranian displeasure was indicated by the fact that President Rouhani did not attend the closing meeting. Indeed, the Iranian role in parts of the Middle East is questionable, with Tehran and Hezbollah providing critical support to Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad’s regime. But where the Syrian imbroglio is concerned, no one’s hands are clean: along with the Iranians, the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs, Turkey and the West have all used the unfortunate country as a proxy battlefield, backing different militant groups. So calling out Iran on this count is a tad hypocritical. The fact is the Saudi-

Iranian rivalry is playing out across the battlefields of the Middle East. Which is why it is particularly unfortunate that the platform of the OIC — meant to promote unity within the Muslim bloc — is being used to issue inflammatory statements.

The portents are not good. If this is the level of trust among the world's major Muslim powers, then possibilities of further sectarian fragmentation are considerable. It would be interesting to hear what, if any, Pakistan's input was on this strongly worded statement. In the recent past, Pakistan has tried to act as a bridge between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While it should continue to maintain cordial links with both sides, under no circumstances should Pakistan be drawn into the partisan politics of the Muslim world. As for the OIC, in its nearly five-decade existence the organisation has achieved hardly anything of substance in any field — political, economic, cultural — and has served as little more than a talk shop for the Muslim world's princes, potentates and rulers. Sadly, by allowing itself to be used in intra-Muslim bilateral and geopolitical disputes, the OIC risks losing whatever relevance it retains.

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## LG hurdle lifted

WITH legal hurdles now hopefully out of the way, Sindh can look forward to functioning elected local governments. Though the third and final phase of the much-delayed LG polls was wrapped up last December in the province, legal wrangling has prevented the indirect election of mayors, deputy mayors, chairmen etc from taking place. In January, the PPP-led Sindh government changed the mode of balloting so that the mayoral elections would be held through a show of hands instead of a secret ballot. However, the Supreme Court ruled on Friday that the mayoral elections should be held by a secret ballot, and within 60 days. The case was brought to the apex court by the Sindh government when it challenged a Sindh High Court order also calling for a secret ballot. A legal adviser to the Sindh government has said the administration may file a review petition.

For over five years, Sindh, along with other provinces, was without an elected third tier of government, mainly because the parties running the provincial set-ups tried their best to delay LG polls. This was due mainly to the fear of alternative power structures emerging. Had it not been for the judiciary's pressure, LG polls might have been delayed indefinitely. Despite the elections, Sindh's rulers have tried to perpetuate this postponement. The reason for the PPP's reluctance to conclude the process is apparently that the party does not want the MQM to further consolidate itself in Sindh's urban areas; the Muttahida had dominated the local polls in Karachi and Hyderabad. Yet delaying the formation of elected local bodies out of fear that political rivals will benefit is both unconstitutional and undemocratic. Sindh's major cities, as



well as towns in the province's interior, have all suffered due to the absence of elected and responsive local bodies. For example, the civic infrastructure is in a shambles, while facilities are lacking. While local governments should not function as totally independent actors and there must be checks and balances in place, micromanagement of civic affairs by provincial officials and bureaucrats is unacceptable; directly elected representatives of the people should be free to run civic affairs. Instead of resorting to more litigation — as some have hinted — and further delaying the process, the Sindh government must respect the orders of the Supreme Court and the choices of the people and not create any more hurdles in the mayoral elections.

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## Injectable polio vaccine

ALTHOUGH decades of effort have passed in the pursuit of polio eradication, Pakistan has still not managed to achieve the goal. There has been renewed global focus on this country of late, and perhaps prompted by the need to not just take action but to be seen to be taking it, there have recently been some attempts to rise to the challenge.

Given that refusals to let the vaccine be administered to children had been allowed to grow into such a significant problem, Pakistan felt it necessary to take the harsh step of making such responses an offence deserving of arrest.

Meanwhile, last August, the country put the injectable polio vaccine on its routine immunisation schedule. The first phase of the IPV drive has already been concluded in a few districts of Balochistan. And on Wednesday, the second phase of the drive was launched in 18 union councils of Balochistan's high-risk Killa Abdullah district, aiming to reach over 16,000 children.

To be sure, there are some advantages to the IPV. For one thing, it carries an inactive virus which means that there is no danger of the recipient contracting the vaccine-acquired polio paralysis (no matter how fractional the incidence of VAPP may be).

Second, it needs to be administered only once, removing the hurdle of the OPV that is given in phased follow-up doses that require each child to be vaccinated several times. This should be balanced, though, with the negatives, one being that the injection must be administered by a paramedic (as opposed to an untrained volunteer).

Given that the state has put its weight behind the IPV, we can only hope that time will produce encouraging results.

Also on Wednesday, Bill Gates — whose foundation has donated billions to fighting polio as well as other diseases — said at a moot in Doha that “with any luck”, polio would be eradicated in Pakistan and Afghanistan by 2017.

Though the ground realities dictate a measure of cynicism, we hope that his prediction will prove correct.

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## Panama inquiry

AN inquiry commission meant to probe the alleged hidden wealth and assets of the first family cannot have its terms of reference or its composition determined solely by government ministers who are beholden to the prime minister.

It does not matter what Finance Minister Ishaq Dar or the sundry other ministers tasked with bailing out their boss, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, have to say or claim about the independence and robustness of a potential commission.

It does not even matter what the specific terms of reference of the commission are if they are drawn up by a PML-N team alone.

There is no credibility that can flow from any commission whose very existence and purview are determined solely by government ministers and PML-N advisers who already declared their belief that no wrong whatsoever has been committed by any member of the first family.

While the first family has every right to defend itself against all allegations, scurrilous or otherwise, there is a higher principle at stake here.

If the transition to democracy, now in its eighth year, is to deliver a stronger, deeper and better quality of democracy, the bar must progressively be raised for civilian representatives.

It is simply not good enough for the first family and the PML-N leadership to hurl counter-accusations at other political leaders and parties.

The elected government is the chief custodian of the democratic project in the country. Its behaviour must not only be exemplary, but it must progressively improve the quality of democracy and the rule of law in the country for everyone.

At the moment, the PML-N is falling far short of even the lowest standards that ought to be set in this era of democratic continuity.

Consider how the discussion for an inquiry commission's mandate is being conducted — in secrecy, away from media scrutiny and with nothing other than government-friendly anonymous sources to divulge details.

Moreover, there are already questions being raised that potentially go beyond the scope of the Panama Papers.

The contrasting answers that the two sons of Prime Minister Sharif, Hussain and Hassan, have given 17 years apart — in 1999 and after the Panama Papers exploded internationally, respectively — when asked about the ownership of properties owned in London need to be explained.

Was the Sharif scion dissembling in 1999 when he claimed that he was living in a rented property?

At stake here are not just legal issues, but whether the first family believes it can lie to the Pakistani public when it comes to issues of national interest.

## Deported Pakistanis

IT is the state's fundamental obligation under Article 4 of the Constitution to accord protection of the law to a Pakistani citizen "wherever he may be". Regrettably, the state has a record of failing Pakistani citizens in need of consular and legal assistance abroad.

In fact, given the crisis of the 'irregular migration' routes taking Pakistani economic migrants to Europe, it is of concern that the government has not made public its repatriation policy for those who leave due to economic problems.

It has been more than a week since media reports outlined an agreement between Turkey and Pakistan to repatriate Pakistani migrants interned in the former country's detention facilities as part of a larger controversial deal between the EU and Turkey.

Forty-five Pakistani migrants after a dangerous journey across the Aegean Sea are back in Turkey facing detention, but whether our government is cognisant of the prison-like conditions in which they, along with another group of stranded Pakistanis, live is debatable. But detention in appalling conditions has not stopped the migrant influx.

Against this backdrop, the government must prioritise its obligations to vulnerable citizens threatened by border guards, arbitrary detention and collective expulsions.

For a sustained policy, a database of registered Pakistani migrants must be created with assistance from Pakistan's foreign missions in Europe and Turkey, so that documents can

be verified before repatriation — whether or not to prosecute at home is another matter.

Legal experts on migrant workers' cases in the Middle East say wilful ignorance by the bureaucratic machinery at Pakistan's foreign affairs and interior ministries implies state disinterest in protecting those detained abroad.

Around 2,000 Pakistanis languish in Saudi jails, according to Justice Project Pakistan, subject to notorious judicial systems.

Our government looks the other way, citing lack of capacity and oversight. Article 36 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations — of which Pakistan and Turkey are signatories — requires a nation arresting or detaining a foreign national to provide the latter consular access and to notify him or her of a detainee's right to such access.

If the Pakistani mission in Turkey believes local authorities are not cooperating, then Islamabad must approach Ankara for consular access for the detainees, especially in light of the warning of Pakistan's interior minister that deportees would be turned away unless they have proof of citizenship.

Leaving one's own citizens in needless limbo indicates not only the government's inability to provide economic opportunities at home but also its refusal to protect its own.

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## Wedding excesses

THE big, fat Pakistani wedding is an institution. Come wedding season, and it seems that the greatest shows on earth are being rolled out, defying all considerations of income and etiquette and quite often, taste.

On Thursday, the Punjab Assembly passed the Punjab Marriage Functions Act 2016 to curb excessive expenditure on weddings-related festivities that can disturb the peace in a neighbourhood and also consume scarce public resources.

To this end, the legislation bars the illumination of any public location, including parks, roads etc, other than the building where the nuptials are being held.

Fireworks are disallowed, as is the use of firearms to celebrate the event. The ban on serving more than one dish to guests, which has been in place for several years in the province, has been reiterated.

The law also prohibits the display of dowry.

Behind the glitter and lights of many a wedding in this country, often lie stories of debt and privation.

The adherence to cultural expectations and an attitude of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ which drives these excesses can leave families in penury for years.

Equally unfortunate is the fact that the lavishness of the nuptials is not only a determinant of social status and

‘respectability’: the size of the dowry that one gives to one’s daughter is seen as a sort of nebulous guarantor of the bride’s standing vis-à-vis her in-laws.

This has the related effect of reinforcing the patriarchal notion of daughters being a burden on their families, rather than productive members of society.

Although the legislation will undoubtedly fuel debate, as does any move to challenge societal norms, it is a step in the right direction.

As always of course, effective implementation is vital — as is the fact that the law must be applied across all socio-economic classes, or else it will be seen as an infringement on the cultural freedoms of only certain segments of society. Moreover, the other provinces would do well to legislate along similar lines.

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## Consensus document

FORTY-THREE years ago, with the country still suffering from the shock of dismemberment, the political class showed great maturity in coming together to create what remains a signature achievement of modern-day Pakistan: the Constitution.

Amended 21 times, suspended and violated on several occasions and still scarred by the insertions of dictator Ziaul Haq, the greatness of the 1973 Constitution, introduced by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's government, lies in its continuing ability to attract consensus.

As the foundational document of the state, the Constitution has achieved a finality where the earlier two constitutions could not — no one, not even an incoming dictator, has ever suggested that an entirely new Constitution be drawn up under any circumstances.

Achieving durability in a divided and complex polity is surely a major success and for that the people of Pakistan, and their elected representatives, deserve a lot of credit.

Yet, no polity can be wholly successful if it does not seek to continually improve on what has come before. The Constitution may have achieved longevity, but the democratic, constitutional and rule-of-law values that it seeks to promote are nowhere near in evidence as they should be.

It appears that even as Pakistanis aspire to a true democratic system of government, the major power centres and institutions

of state have not internalised meaningful democratic values. Be it the military, the political government or parliament, time and again self-interest appears to trump national interest.

Consider the role of the military. While outright coups may have mercifully become a thing of the past (at least for now), hasn't that progress come at the expense of exerting institutional control through other means?

Surely, if the choice is between a full-fledged coup and de facto military control of key national security and foreign policies, then the path to true, sustainable democracy remains a long one.

Ultimately, however, it is the political leadership and the public, via exerting pressure on the elected representatives, that are responsible for the creation of a state and society that is democratic, tolerant, inclusive and focused on the socio-economic needs of the population.

The constitutional history of a tug-of-war between elected civilians, and unelected dictators over the decades will only end in one of two ways: either the military leadership itself will learn to submit to civilian supremacy or the civilian leadership will learn to govern in a way that progressively enhances the space for civilians. The former is unlikely — though not impossible.

The latter, however, is where the nation's focus should be: creating a political leadership that is both capable and committed to enhancing the democratic project.

Forty-three years ago, from the ashes of defeat and utter chaos was raised a constitutional and democratic edifice that has proved durable and that won over the sceptics and critics. Surely, 43 years later, a better quality of democracy ought to be attainable.

*Published in Dawn, April 19th, 2016*

## Bank of Khyber tussle

AN entirely avoidable tussle at the Bank of Khyber has placed the PTI government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in an awkward position.

Since the bank is owned by the provincial government, the finance minister of KP appears to believe that he has a role in its internal decision-making.

The finance minister happens to belong to the Jamaat-e-Islami, which is a coalition partner of the PTI government. Recently, the minister went public with remarks that he was not consulted when the bank crafted its voluntary separation scheme.

The bank's management shot back in a lengthy advertisement, that appeared in most major newspapers, accusing the finance minister and his private secretary of "pressuring management with illegal recruitment", "profiting from inductions", using

bank resources to arrange political functions and "interference in the independence of the Board and other corporate matters".

This public exchange of allegations makes for an unseemly sight, and what is puzzling is that things should have come to this given that the finance secretary of the province sits on the board, which is chaired by the provincial additional chief secretary.

Given these channels of communication between the bank's top decision-making body and the political government that owns the bank, there should be no room for public spats of this sort. It appears the provincial government is working on different tracks.

The PTI has long championed the cause of reforming public-sector enterprises by granting the latter more autonomy under empowered boards, but now that one of its own enterprises is proceeding under those auspices, it finds itself facing political headwinds.

The moment presents the ruling party in the province with the awkward choice between its own board at the bank and its coalition partner in government.

Perhaps the bank management overreacted by taking out public advertisements against the finance minister, but the allegations levelled in those ads now need to be investigated.

In particular, the management should clarify further what is meant by "interference in the independence of the Board and other corporate matters".

April 2016

If the interference is restricted to hiring and promotions, and asking for resources to support political events, then it is easily dealt with. But if it extends to the core lending operations of the bank — such as grant of loans and write-offs — then it needs to be taken very seriously.

The last thing the country wants to see is another major corruption scandal.

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## Organ donation

THE scale of the tragedy is almost impossible to comprehend. In Pakistan, thousands wait every year for organ donations, but for the overwhelming majority, the wait is in vain.

At the moment, at just one facility, the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation in Karachi, there are over 250 people in need of organ donation.

Unfortunately, most are not likely to be extended a lifeline. What makes matters worse is that from the point of view of legality and medical and religious ethics, the issue of cadaveric donations is already settled.

The Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act was passed as far back as 2010, and there has been across-the-board consensus amongst medical practitioners and religious scholars

that once a patient has been declared brain-dead, the donation of his/her organs and tissues is not only allowed but is also regarded as constituting a noble act.

And yet, regrettably enough, it seems that since 1985, when organ transplantations started in the country, only five individuals have received cadaver donations.

These were the unfortunate realities discussed at the seminar ‘Deceased Organ Donation: Challenges and Solutions’, organised by the SIUT in Karachi on Saturday.

This facility is one of the very few that has over the years kept up the clarion call to normalise the idea of cadaveric donations in Pakistan.

So when it says that society remains unmoved — that doctors often do not declare brain death, or fail to talk to the family regarding their consent for organ donation, that the clergy hardly makes any effort to counter misconceptions, and that the media is not willing to rise above commercial interests and create awareness on the issue free of cost — it ought to be listened to.

Despite having the framework in place, Pakistan has so far not managed to change the societal mindset regarding the donation of organs, even cadaveric donations.

As the SIUT has pointed out, the medical, religious and media communities need to ensure that they are contributing to the goal.

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## Greed of land developers

In its outline the story might be familiar to many, but it is a chilling tale when the details are laid out clearly. Powerful land developers forcibly evict poor villagers from the lands they have been living and working on for generations.

On the vacated land, plush gated housing colonies are built, with special access to municipal services such as water and sewerage, and in some cases, there are special arrangements for the provision of uninterrupted electricity.

These enclaves of extreme privilege are packaged in a public relations blitz as ‘development schemes’, and sections within them are offered to middle- and lower-middle-class families as the perfect living space.

Laws are moulded to facilitate the enterprise by allowing government land to be sold for a pittance to these enterprises, with government agencies to bear the cost of building infrastructure within them, while the police forces detain those amongst the displaced who dare to protest, and threaten to implicate them in heinous crimes if they don’t acquiesce.

This story plays out with such regularity now that it has become routine. An investigative piece by this newspaper has [unearthed the details](#) in at least one case, that of Bahria Town Karachi, but allegations of similar wrongdoings have swirled around other large property development enterprises too.

In the DHA Valley scam in Islamabad, and the Elysium case which spans more than one city and involves the brothers of a former army chief, the investigations have not been concluded and charges have not been framed.

The rich and powerful have a way of surviving these scandals and the arms of justice have hardly ever been able to move against them.

In the case of Karachi, this slash-and-burn model of building elite enclaves is advancing in a city where more than half the population lives on less than 8pc of its land, in katchi abadis bereft of basic services such as water, sewerage and trash removal.

The energies of the state, meanwhile, are directed towards facilitating the acquisition of land by these developers.

Bahria Town owner Malik Riaz has reportedly even bragged, on numerous occasions, of the people in high offices whom he has bribed, famously saying that we would “have a heart attack” if he revealed the size of the largest bribe that has been paid to them.

These enterprises must be restrained. The focus of the state must return to where it belongs: providing housing for the poor, and not serving them with eviction notices.

The nexus among powerful individuals from all walks of life that these property development enterprises produce is a highly toxic ingredient in our politics, and unleashes forces that are destructive and serve to warp the priorities of rulers and



citizenry alike. And Mr Riaz and his ilk must be made to understand that giving a bribe is as wrong as accepting one.

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## Taliban offensive

A MAJOR bombing in Kabul with scores of casualties is an early warning that this year's fighting season in Afghanistan may be the bloodiest and most devastating yet. With peace talks already stuttering as the Quadrilateral Coordination Group scrambles to smooth over growing disagreements between the Afghan and Pakistani sides, a full-blown crisis may be brewing.

Unhappily, none of the three major state actors, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US, appear to have a clear sense of how to proceed.

The US seems to drift between disengagement and ad hoc diplomacy, such as when Secretary of State John Kerry visited Kabul recently to press the national unity government to show some unity and focus on governing.

Meanwhile, the Afghan government seems determined to prove that it can make a bad situation worse by endlessly feuding within.

As for Pakistan, despite nudging the Afghan Taliban to the negotiation table, there appears to be a strange complacency in official quarters about the possibility of Afghanistan imploding.

Perhaps the fourth side in the QCG, China, could be more assertive in using its influence. But Chinese foreign policy interventions are notoriously opaque and difficult to predict.

As ever, the focus may well come down to managing tensions in the near term. The Afghan government views attacks in Kabul as a red line of sorts and tends to ramp up the belligerence towards Pakistan whenever the Afghan capital is struck by the Taliban.

With the annual fighting season already fierce and widespread and political gridlock in Kabul likely to continue, Pakistan may become a convenient scapegoat.

Ill-advised as many of the Afghan government's verbal attacks on Pakistan may be, perhaps there is a need for Pakistani policymakers to work harder to achieve the long-term peace and stability that all state actors claim they want.

The reluctance of the Taliban to talk to the Afghan government may be rooted in power struggles within the Taliban, but what is in the latter's interest is not necessarily in Pakistan's.

In doing all that it can to help Afghans build peace and stability, the state here must be careful to avoid bringing the war in Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Yet, there is surely a great deal of space between preventing the Taliban from declaring war on Pakistan and pushing the Taliban to talk to the Afghan government. What influence Pakistan has, it should use — carefully, but use it, it must.

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## Police reforms

LED by the army, the Rajanpur operation against criminal gangs has shown up the severe shortcomings of Punjab's police force. Seven policemen were killed by criminal elements last week, while 24 were taken hostage.

Had the police been capable of meeting the challenge, the army might have taken a backseat. Indeed, for such an operation, law enforcement, and not military force, is the most effective tool. Instead, the absurdly weak police performance, that failed to control the agility of the criminal network, has raised several questions.

For instance, how did Punjab's riverine belt become a sanctuary for well-equipped outlaws in the Sharif heartland?

Was it powerful patronage, lack of an efficient criminal justice system, or the ineptitude of the provincial government that refused to touch criminal gangs? And why did four operations in the past fail to apprehend the gangsters?

Politicisation of the force is at the root of these problems, and the remedy lies in reforming the police structure through merit-based recruitment, investment in training and modernisation, bridging the institutional disconnect and addressing corruption.

While overall reform is essential, given the evolving tactics of various militant and criminal groups there is also a need to raise specialised police units. In recruiting for the latter, careful selection of police officers, training and incentives are needed.

According to former police officials, most anti-criminal operations, whether in Sindh or Punjab, have been undertaken by a mix of semi-trained or ill-trained policemen — no wonder the success rate in tackling crime has been low.

Elite police units must not be diverted from intelligence-led counter-terrorism operations to VIP security, or else they will lose their efficacy as was the case with Punjab's Elite Force in the 1990s. This is surely something to consider as the newly inducted Lahore Dolphin Force prepares to take on street crime.

In a time of specialised criminality, rethinking police structures is essential, but this must go hand in hand with regaining the public's trust through responsible and responsive policing that is absent in most provinces.

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## Army chief's view

Inevitable as it may have been, it is still a bad idea. With political controversy still swirling around the revelations in the Panama Papers, army chief Gen Raheel Sharif has contributed his — and, most likely, his institution's — view on the issue of accountability.

While the army chief and his PR managers would never be so gauche as to speak officially and plainly about the Panama Papers themselves, there is little doubt what Gen Sharif had in mind when he was [quoted as saying](#) that “across-the-board accountability is necessary for the solidarity, integrity and prosperity of Pakistan”.

Making the connection even more explicit, Gen Sharif linked the army-led fight against terrorism, militancy and extremism to the need to fight corruption. Unhappily, thinly veiled political statements by the military leadership appear to have become the new normal.

If Gen Sharif spoke in easy-to-decipher code, it will perhaps have come as a relief to the political class, especially the PML-N government, that his message was one of concern rather than frustration or a stark warning.

Seven months from his retirement, the army chief appears determined to keep a relentless focus on what he has made his core mission: Zarb-i-Azb and the subsequent expansion of counter-terrorism operations across Pakistan.

Yet, perhaps the army leadership may want to consider the effect of its political forays.

Leading the fight against militancy has meant on occasion having to persuade political leaderships of the necessity and logic of certain anti-militancy actions. Is the military making that core task that much more difficult for itself by venturing into political issues?

Read: [Civil, military heads resolve to continue operations in Punjab](#)

Accountability per se is not a political issue, but then the national conversation at the moment is about the excesses of elected leaders. Perhaps a better way to interject itself into that conversation would have been for the military to start the so-called across-the-board accountability process itself.

Surely in offering the military to greater financial scrutiny, a positive example would be set that politicians would be under legitimate pressure to follow.

Yet, where the military errs, the political class inflicts damage on itself — and the wider cause of democracy.

The Panama Papers' controversy has centred on two things: for the opposition, the ouster or hobbling of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his government; for the government, the need to tar as many others as possible with the same allegations about the use of offshore companies.

No one inside or outside parliament has thought to turn the conversation to structural change or reforms of the country's

creasing tax regime. Nor has there been any attempt to discuss how to make the business climate inside Pakistan more inviting, in a transparent but fair way, to discourage the need to stash money abroad.

On accountability itself, everyone, including politicians, agree that more of it must be done — but no politician seems interested in systemic solutions.

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## Loadshedding plan

THE plan to manage electricity during the peak summer months announced by the water and power ministry on Tuesday contains a dramatic new element.

This is the first time that the policy to increase loadshedding in areas where bill recoveries are low will be applied on a national level. The policy is a controversial one.

It has proven itself effective in improving the finances of those companies that have used it, such as K-Electric in Karachi.

However, it raises important fairness concerns because it penalises those living in high-loss areas who regularly pay their bills on time but suffer heightened loadshedding due to the delinquency of their neighbours.

From a purely commercial point of view, the policy is effective. But from a public interest point of view, it raises important questions.

The ministry is not a private entity working on a commercial basis alone. If it wants to embrace a measure to rectify power theft, it should do so in a more comprehensive manner than K-Electric, which pioneered the use of this policy.

First of all, the policy works best when billing is done through regular meter readings and not on a presumptive basis. The ministry should set a target for itself to have meter readings every month, to ensure that people are not receiving dubious bills.

Second, the policy should raise awareness about the consequences of non-payment in a far more aggressive manner than what the ministry currently has planned.

People need to know if they are living in high-loss areas or not; simply putting up a list in a substation office is not the way to inform them. There should be regular updates online so people can see which areas are high-loss and which ones are not.

The policy works best when people are widely aware of the reasons behind the loadshedding, and property and rental prices in high-loss areas are affected by it. By adopting this policy, and announcing it upfront, the ministry is venturing into new territory and it should be prepared to prove to the consumers that this is not just a revenue measure, but a policy designed to correct behaviours and discourage theft.

April 2016

In Karachi, where the policy has been in place for many years now, there is no evidence that it has affected the behaviour of consumers. Implementing such a policy on the national level for revenues alone would be a mistake.

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## Kasur child abuse

THE sentencing of two perpetrators in last year's Kasur child sexual abuse case to life imprisonment has set a long-awaited precedent.

Although the sentencing will not bring to a halt the activities of prolific pornography rings operating underground, reportedly with the collusion of a section of law-enforcement officers and political patrons, it has sent a strong message to those who perpetrate such abuse: the state will punish those found guilty.

At the time that the Kasur atrocity came to light, rape and sodomy were legally punishable; however, hundreds of pornographic videos of children had been circulated under the very nose of the district police. The Criminal Law Amendment Bill, 2016, that was passed last month by the Senate, is more specific.

The law criminalises child trafficking and pornography and cites punishment for sexual abusers of children.

The recent conviction is a reminder of the agony of over 280 children, aged between 10 and 15 years, who, for seven long years, were subjected to sexual abuse and videotaped.

They were too afraid to report on their abusers who extorted money from their families, or else sold the video clips.

Even after a crime of this nature, the authorities have yet to set up a national commission on child rights to monitor and coordinate legislative implementation. Being too ill equipped to crack down on abuse of this kind is simply not an option.

If specialised laws fill the statutory books, there is no excuse for not implementing them.

This was one case that mercifully came to light. With the law enforcers unwilling to go after those who sexually abuse young children — sometimes colluding with the perpetrators themselves — the extent of the crime can only be imagined.

How come our usually seething politicians have not worked harder to protect our children after the horrific events at Kasur? Surely, the government must reassess its commitment to the welfare and safety of its young population and focus on a national campaign that advocates for child rights.

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## Attack on polio security team

ATTACKS on anti-polio vaccinators and the security teams that now routinely accompany them are desperately wicked crimes.

Violent and immoral, such attacks leave no part of state or society unaffected: directly, through the casualties inflicted on anti-polio vaccine teams and security personnel and, indirectly, through jeopardising the health of the next generation, especially in neighbourhoods which are already chronically under-resourced and face significant health challenges.

What needs to be done — not just in Karachi, but elsewhere in the country too where there is still some resistance to vaccines — is to revisit standard operating procedure to reduce the risk of casualties when attacks do occur as well as dedicate more resources to intelligence-gathering on polio-specific threats.

From the repetitive nature of such attacks and the early evidence often pointing to a predictable set of security lapses and a familiar group of suspects, it appears that the war on polio can be waged with more precision and better security.

Yet, the sheer deadliness of the attack on Wednesday, the number of militants involved and the city in which it occurred raise a specific set of questions too.

Consider that the army has, via the Rangers, been leading a crackdown on militancy and crime in Karachi since September 2013.

The sheer scale of the security threats in Karachi and the vastness of the provincial metropolis ensured that quick solutions would not materialise.

But if action was necessary and inevitable, so was remaining focused on the original cause — combating terrorism and organised crime in the city.

Instead, the Karachi operation has long drifted into other domains ie alleged political crimes and corruption.

As with all security decisions, there is an inherent trade-off involved: combating one problem leaves fewer resources to fight another. And as with all security decisions, a balance must be maintained.

Surely, if a group of militants — eight in number, according to reports — can attack and kill seven on-duty policemen in broad daylight in two different spots and then simply melt away, the threat from militancy is not receiving the kind of sustained attention it needs to be given in Karachi.

Are the Rangers and the military-led intelligence agencies operating in the provincial capital too stretched for the good of the city they are trying to stabilise and secure?

Of course, the problem is compounded on the civilian side.

The deployment of under-training policemen on guard duties during anti-polio vaccination drives only underscores the desperate lack of investment in the Sindh police.

The PPP, which has been in power in the province since 2008, seems utterly indifferent to even basic responsibilities, be it on the security side or governance.

With the PPP more interested in sparring with the military over the Karachi operation and the military seemingly unable to work with the civilians, the danger is that the space for militancy in Karachi may be expanding once again.

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## US-Saudi tensions

THE chilly reception given to President Obama on his arrival in Riyadh is a sign of the growing rift between the US and Saudi Arabia.

The governor of Riyadh received the president while state television showed footage of the king receiving other leaders from GCC countries on the tarmac of the airport at the same time.

At issue is a bill making its way through Congress that would allow American citizens to sue the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for losses suffered during 9/11, and growing pressure on the Obama administration to authorise the release of 28 pages of the 9/11 commission report that have never been made public, purportedly because they contain details of possible links between the hijackers and the Saudi regime.

More dramatically, the kingdom has warned that if the bill is passed, it will consider withdrawing its investments in the United States, said to total \$750 billion, with more funds parked in US treasury bills.

Global financial markets have shrugged off that threat so far, which could send a shockwave through the global economy, if carried out by the Saudis.

But the weak position of the Saudi regime's fiscal health means it will suffer at least as much as the US economy — that fact considerably dilutes the probability of the threat being carried out.

Likewise the legislation under consideration in the US Congress that would allow US citizens to sue the Saudi regime for the 9/11 attacks is audacious, to say the least, and could open a Pandora's box if reciprocated by other countries.

The only reasonable step in this whole affair would be the one that calls for releasing the 28 classified pages of the 9/11 commission report. If it is true that these pages contain information that may implicate the Saudi government in the attacks, then this needs to be known by the rest of the world, which has suffered the consequences of 9/11 as well.

If not true, the matter needs to be laid to rest. The growing tensions between the two countries are unlikely to go away soon, especially since they are driven in large part by Saudi fears of a growing thaw in ties between Iran and America.



For Pakistan it would be a good idea to not wade too deep into the belligerence engulfing the Middle East, and to stay out of the rivalry evident between important players in the region.

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## Neglect of heritage

DESPITE being blessed with countless historical sites spanning different ages and civilisations, Sindh and Balochistan, for a variety of reasons, have largely failed to preserve their priceless heritage.

In the case of Sindh, there are frequent reports about the neglect of heritage. For example, as reported in this paper on Thursday, a Unesco team was in Thatta's Makli necropolis recently to survey a 15th-century tomb which had apparently been damaged when poorly qualified individuals tried to restore it.

If this were not enough, construction material had been dumped near the tomb. Makli has for long suffered from encroachments, while the condition of various other historical sites in Sindh is hardly any better.

For example, Chowkandi, in Karachi's outskirts, has been targeted by tomb raiders, while fresh burials have also reportedly occurred in the historic graveyard.

Moreover, as recent accounts point out, numerous sights of historical and cultural importance on the outer rim of the metropolis have been bulldozed, along with villages, to make way for 'development'.

As opposed to Sindh's unimpressive record in preserving heritage, KP has done a relatively better job of preserving at least the major sites, though smuggling of Gandhara-era artefacts remains a problem.

Yet in KP, despite the authorities' efforts, fears of militancy keep visitors away, with foreigners only showing up once in a blue moon.

Preservation of history has two major benefits: firstly, it shows that we value our heritage and are concerned about holding on to it.

On a more 'worldly' level, it can generate significant revenues for the state if both domestic and foreign tourists can be drawn to heritage sites.

While law and order is a genuine concern in Balochistan and KP, Sindh does not have a militancy problem.

Hence, if the Sindh administration had the vision and wherewithal to preserve the province's rich heritage, instead of remaining in a perpetual state of apathy, local heritage sites spread across the province could attract tourists.

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## Army dismissals

IT had all the potential of a public relations coup. A day after army chief Gen Raheel Sharif waded into the anti-corruption debate by calling for across-the-board accountability, he provided a compelling example of his commitment to the cause when it emerged that he had unprecedentedly dismissed from military service a three-star and a two-star general, three brigadiers and a colonel.

News of the dismissals was sure to dominate the political discourse — and it did. But there appeared to be a breakdown, perhaps deliberately so, when it came to the communications of the otherwise superbly well-oiled ISPR machine.

Rather than official comment, the media was given inaccurate early information by a clutch of unnamed military officials.

Even after clarification was offered about the number of officers acted against — earlier reports had suggested a larger number of officers had been found guilty of corruption — there were no details shared regarding the charges that the officers faced or the findings of the court.

Nevertheless, it is a beginning — the guilty being found guilty by their own institution suggests a new willingness to focus on professionalism and probity.

Consider that the officers involved were serving in a province where the military has insisted that a range of unprecedented threats — state and non-state, internal and external — are undermining the security and stability of the country itself.

With the vast security responsibilities that the military has arrogated to itself in Balochistan and the life-and-death policy and operational decisions that senior officers routinely make, the quality of officers serving in the province ought to be second to none and their reputations impeccable.

Perhaps GHQ ought to conduct a more wide-ranging probe about the various streams of corruption, both along the border and when dealing with local populations, that are widely rumoured in the province.

To fight external enemies and win over disaffected local populations, surely the military's reputation must be above reproach in every respect.

Inevitably, however, there are lessons here for the political leadership of the country. The military dominates the civil-military relationship for many reasons, historical and institutional.

But perhaps one of the greatest assets of the military is its understanding of the public mood — and willingness to align with it and exploit it. For weeks now, the fallout of the Panama Papers has dominated the political discourse in the country — and yet absolutely nothing whatsoever has been done to prove that the civilians are serious about combating corruption.

Meanwhile, an internal military investigation that appears to stretch back at least a year has suddenly been unveiled and offered as the centrepiece of the military's own efforts to cleanse itself.

The political class needs to understand that legitimacy does not just flow from elections — it also flows from the quality of democracy and governance that the politicians deliver.

Sadly, it is the military that time and again has demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of politics than the politicians themselves.

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## Asset declarations

THE asset declarations submitted by our political leadership can only be described as a joke. Consider the example of Nawaz Sharif. In the half decade between 2010 and 2015, his declared assets went from Rs166m to Rs2bn, representing more than a 10-fold increase.

At the same time, his taxes paid went from Rs2m to Rs2.6m in 2014, an increase of little more than one-third, which on a per-year basis is below inflation for these years.

There are very few countries in the world where an individual's assets can multiply by a factor of 10 while his or her taxable income increases at a rate that is below inflation; and there are even fewer where this feat can be achieved by a public figure like the prime minister.

At face value, the asset declarations tell a tale of a tax system so riddled with holes that one can become a billionaire without paying any meaningful taxes. And if the figures are not taken at face value, we are left to surmise that the asset declarations reveal only a fraction of what the reality is.

Even the best-case scenario reveals a severely defective system, with the prime minister as the emblem of its dysfunction.

But he is not alone on that perch. Imran Khan's assets also went from Rs33.3m in tax year 2014 to Rs1.31bn the next year, accounted for largely by a spike in the declared values of his twin residences at Bani Gala and Zaman Park, which he has valued at Rs750m and Rs220m respectively this year.

Meanwhile, his taxes paid went from Rs194,000 in tax year 2013 to Rs218,000 in 2014, revealing the absence of any clearly known sources of income. Yet Mr Khan can still enjoy the assets and lifestyle of a billionaire. The fact that this is even theoretically possible while staying within the law is a big problem.

And an even bigger problem is when you consider the incomes and assets that have not been revealed in such declarations, since the lifestyles of those on the list point to far larger sources of income, suggesting far bigger assets beneath the surface.

The list is a long one, and one is left wondering why we even bother going through this exercise year after year if both the tax authorities and the Election Commission are powerless to take any action.

## Heatwave preparations

THE heatwave that struck Karachi in June 2015 took a devastating toll on the city as around 1,300 lives were lost due to the extreme weather event.

As temperatures hovered in the mid-40s, victims succumbed to the effects of scorching heat and electricity breakdowns across the city's vast sprawl.

Health facilities were overwhelmed and morgues began to overflow. Last year, the administration seemed to be caught unawares.

Yet, as summer starts to kick in, there are signs that this time around, the state may be preparing itself to deal with a similar emergency situation. Some experts have forecast another hot summer for the country.

On Thursday, the Pakistan Meteorological Department warned of a heatwave that would affect Karachi at least till Sunday, with the mercury hitting 40°C. Indeed, in recent days, some parts of Sindh have seen even higher temperatures; for example, Dadu recorded 46°C last week.

While such high temperatures do occur during the summer months in Pakistan, last year's heatwave was particularly deadly for Karachi, as the highest number of fatalities occurred in the metropolis.

The city administration claims it is prepared for the heatwave, having set up numerous first response centres and other relief

facilities. Indeed, having learnt from last year's tragedy, the administration should not take any chances and ensure that functioning facilities are available in all major city neighbourhoods where heatwave victims can be taken for immediate help.

Moreover, a public information campaign should be launched to advise citizens on what to do in case of heatstroke, where to call for help and how to locate the nearest response centre.

Beyond Karachi, such centres should also be set up in towns across the province. If the state had been better prepared to deal with the event, many lives could have been saved during last year's heatwave.

Controlling extreme weather events is beyond man's ability, but mitigating the effects is certainly possible. Let us hope this time the government is better prepared.

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## Prime minister's speeches

IN the unfortunate political history of this country, there have been many ill-advised speeches to the nation by political and military leaders. But Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appears determined to set something of a record for civilian leaders who, flanked by the national flag and seated under a picture of the Quaid, have used national television to make personal and thoroughly un-statesmanlike speeches. Twice now in recent weeks, the prime minister has addressed the nation on television, leaving a host of unanswered and grim questions in his wake. The most obvious question is: whatever has happened to the platform of parliament? So unused is the prime minister's despatch box in the National Assembly that it appears that he is allergic to it. Never one to fail to remind his audience that he is a thrice-elected prime minister, Mr Sharif appears to hold the very chamber that has elected him as prime minister each time in the lowest regard.

Then there are the questions about the contents of his two most recent speeches. Mercifully, on Friday the prime minister did not at least return to his very personal anguish at the damage caused to his family businesses decades ago. Three weeks ago, the sad tale of a businessman trying to do good by his country and his good intentions being spurned by the republic was a bizarrely indulgent prime ministerial performance. But on Friday, there was no lack of other personal-political history and some rather astonishing attacks on political enemies. Alternating between innuendo and direct verbal assaults, Mr Sharif's comments would have been unseemly at a political rally. Made from the platform of an address-to-the-nation broadcast by state television and carried simultaneously by

news channels across the country, the speech was not just a political travesty — it transgressed the very norms of decent, democratic debate that the prime minister accused his political enemies of crossing.

Finally, there are the questions about what the prime minister should have said on Friday. To call for a judicial commission simply because that has been a section of the opposition's demand is an inadequate response. If the prime minister's actions are to match the tone and tenor of his words, there is an obvious thing that can and should be done: declare pre-emptively all his assets and those of his family, at home and abroad, and produce a detailed account of what was acquired when and where and through which proceeds. A full, detailed and scrupulously compiled declaration of assets — regardless of what the letter of the law requires in whichever jurisdictions, inside Pakistan and abroad — should surely not be above the elected prime minister of a democratic nation. Moreover, a full prime ministerial disclosure will force others to follow Mr Sharif's example, helping deliver the cleaner politics the prime minister says he wants.

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## Violence in Okara

MUCH as the powers that be may wish it was not so, sometimes the exploited classes will stand their ground. So it is with the Okara Military Farms, a saga that refuses to go away ever since it surfaced in the media about 15 years ago. The controversy centres on 17,000 acres in Punjab's 'canal colonies', and involves issues of patronage politics, state coercion and land rights that can be traced back to pre-Partition days when the British Indian Army — that acquired the area on lease in 1913 — refused to give ownership rights as promised to farmers working on the land. The Pakistan Army inherited this holdover from the British and continued along the earlier pattern, ie a 50-50 sharecropping arrangement with the farmers, without too much by way of defiance from the latter. However, in 2000, during Gen Musharraf's time — military governments are an ever-reliable catalyst for expansion of the khakis' economic interests — the authorities in Okara introduced a new system whereby tenant farmers had to pay rent in cash rather than in kind. This would, in effect, turn the sharecroppers, who had tilled the land for generations, into contract labour who could be evicted from the farms on short notice. That laid the foundations of a resistance movement led by a farmers' union called Anjuman-i-Mazareen-i-Punjab, which has repeatedly been countered by the state through brute force.

The state's actions this time around make it clear that it will spare no weapon at its disposal to crush the 'rebellion', even cynically using the pretext of the National Action Plan to justify preventing an AMP demonstration. Subsequently, 4,000 tenant farmers were booked on various charges, including

under the Anti-Terrorism Act, for allegedly blocking GT Road and causing injuries to policemen through aerial firing. There have also been dark murmurings by local authorities of 'no-go' areas in the vicinity. One would imagine that some recalcitrant farmers who refuse to give up their customary right to the land — and whose claim to that land by some accounts is stronger than that of the military, notwithstanding the latter's sense of entitlement — are a threat to the country's peace. It is all very well to counter militancy in its naked, violent manifestations, but it is equally important to address the socioeconomic distortions that have laid the groundwork for extremist tendencies in the first place. This is not the way to win the larger war.

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## KP lawmaker's murder

THE murder of PTI lawmaker Sardar Soran Singh in Buner on Friday highlights, once again, the dangers faced by members of minority communities in Pakistan, even those supposedly in positions of power. It also illustrates the precarious law and order situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where a lawmaker belonging to the ruling party can be gunned down with such relative ease. Singh is the fourth PTI legislator in the current KP Assembly to have been killed. It is, of course, true that many groups and communities located near the centres of militancy are at risk in KP and Fata. Those familiar with the area where the MPA was killed say militant groups remain



active there; a number of targeted killings have occurred in the recent past, including of workers belonging to the ANP. As for the Sikh community, others belonging to this religious group have been gunned down in Fata as well as in Peshawar. Singh's commitment to his country was quite evident as he refused to join members of his immediate family in India, preferring to stay in Pakistan.

Soran Singh's murder is reminiscent of the killing of federal minister Shahbaz Bhatti in 2011. While minorities face varying levels of discrimination in Pakistan, when a high-profile member of a non-Muslim religious group is murdered in cold blood, the psychological impact on minorities is devastating. And although, some say that Singh was not too bothered when it came to matters of personal safety, the KP government should have provided him with extra security detail considering the threats that existed in the area. Regrettably, it appears that the reaction of KP's ruling party to the killing has been muted, perhaps because everyone's attention is drawn to the commotion over corruption. We hope this case is not forgotten soon and that the perpetrators are caught and punished. In the long term, the lawmaker's murder shows that countrywide, the battle against militancy and violence is far from over.

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## US pressure once again

Immediately after the attack, it was clear that the deadly [Kabul bombing](#) last week would cause serious new strains in the always-fraying Pak-Afghan relationship.

With Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah quickly calling off a trip to Pakistan scheduled for early May and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani issuing a fierce condemnation of the bombing, the attack appears to have become perhaps the one issue on which the government in Kabul stands united — pressure on Pakistan will be ratcheted up.

Into that already tense environment, the US State Department has seen fit to pour fuel on fire by raking up allegations that Pakistan tolerated the Haqqani network, the assumption being that the latter was responsible for the Kabul bombing and that the state here either facilitated the bombing or generally aids the group.

Sound byte: [‘US considers Haqqani Network greatest threat in this region’](#)

Piling public pressure on Pakistan at the moment appears to be the preferred tactic — one that is breathtakingly removed from the broader needs of the region.

Contrast the Afghan and US allegations to the attempts Pakistan has made in recent weeks to substantiate its own long-standing complaints of regional interference inside the country.

An Indian spy has been arrested and the issue raised publicly with the Iranian government. In addition, the arrest in Chaman of an alleged Afghan intelligence operative has also occurred.

Leaving aside the issue of whether such steps are helpful or not to Pakistan's relationships with its neighbours, there is the straightforward matter of proof and substantiation.

Examine: ['US failed to remove Pak-Afghan tensions'](#)

Instead of lambasting Pakistan for alleged protection offered to groups that may have been involved in a bombing in Kabul, perhaps a trail of evidence should be shared with Pakistan, either publicly or in private.

After that, Pakistan should be encouraged to investigate such claims itself, as it has done following the Pathankot air base attack in India. None of that will be easy — for Afghanistan, the US or Pakistan — but surely there must be an attempt to find ways to get past blame games, accusations and recriminations, and to find solutions to long-running problems.

The US in particular appears to once again be directionless in its Afghan policy, especially the Pakistani dimension of it.

When talks with the Afghan Taliban seem to be moving ahead, the American criticisms of alleged Pakistani policy is muted.

But then, as soon as talks hit a road block, old allegations are trotted out again. It is a desperately unwise way to go about building trust in Afghanistan — after all, Pakistan has argued for much longer than either the Afghan or US governments that

a negotiated settlement is the only viable possibility for long-term stability in Afghanistan.

Also Read: [Operation Zarb-i-Azb disrupted Haqqani network: US general](#)

Surely, aspects of Pakistani behaviour have created mistrust and apprehensions in the region, but where is the sense in dredging up old allegations each time there is a setback in Afghanistan?'

*Published in Dawn, April 25th, 2016*

## Climate agreement

AS the monsoon season approaches, with the prospect of continuing ravages of nature, Pakistan has signed, at the UN headquarters, the climate agreement reached in Paris last year, and has agreed to do its bit in helping keep the global rise in temperatures below 2°C.

The good news is that we have an accord, and one that includes more countries than ever before. The bad news is that Pakistan had very little to bring to the negotiations, or to take away from them.

In effect, we have been little more than a sideshow in the whole affair. The only aspect of significance was that, earlier

on, there was a meeting between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan on the sidelines of the Paris summit.

Even the promise of that meeting has petered out with the rise in hostile rhetoric between the two countries.

Each monsoon season has brought a rising arc of destruction to Pakistan as the rains intensify and become increasingly difficult to forecast.

Last year, we saw an entire district ravaged by multiple glacial lake outburst floods in Chitral following a sudden downpour in the district that the Met office was not able to forecast. Then the cotton crop witnessed a massive failure, due at least in part to climatic factors.

Pakistan's susceptibility to changing weather patterns is disturbingly high, whether because of erosion of agricultural productivity or as a result of floods.

Every year since the massive flooding of 2010 has seen some sort of climate-related disaster. The country remains largely unprepared again this year with the monsoon season yet to start.

The weather forecasting infrastructure is outdated and some weather radars are reportedly not functional.

Forecasting techniques are also out of date, with the Met office struggling to provide even the minimal 48 hours' warning.

Given these vulnerabilities, it was surprising to see Pakistan bring a short one-page agenda to the climate deal proceedings,

and then deliver a dull speech, with no attempt at playing a leadership role.

The performance was further undermined by confusion over who exactly has the lead role in Pakistan — the Foreign Office, the Planning Commission or the Ministry of Climate Change? The government sent the interior minister, who did little more than make a few pro forma statements, to the signing ceremony.

For a front-line state, Pakistan should show far more robust action on climate change. We can only hope nature is kind to us this monsoon season.

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## Medieval punishments

THE 'punishment' was nothing short of horrific and is deserving of the strongest censure and action against those who ordered and administered it. Media reports have focused on an incident last week in which a landowner from Rahim Yar Khan, on the advice of a so-called faith healer, ordered four villagers — the youngest a 14-year-old girl — to walk on hot oil for alleged theft.

Burnt feet, they were told, would constitute a guilty verdict. The incident shows up the power games that plague feudalism and the subservience of the villagers, who, in this case, were

reportedly too terrified to even question the landlord's command.

Unfortunately, such medieval practices are not unknown in the country.

Practices such as aas aaf, a brutal form of punishment where the person is forced to walk on burning coal or hot oil, are not unknown in Sindh and Balochistan, and are carried out to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused. The kind of injury, trauma and mental torture that result can only be imagined.

Feudal structures — and attitudes — remain ingrained in society.

Averse to reforms, those who perpetrate these are too powerful to counter — even by law-enforcement officials who are often at the beck and call of the local influentials.

Given that many of those who are products of a culture that believes in regressive practices such as karo kari, swara and vani are elected to the assemblies, it is not surprising that parallel justice systems, such as jirgas, continue to thrive and deliver arbitrary 'verdicts'.

Indeed, no government has prioritised easy access to state institutions of justice or genuinely tried to raise awareness among the people about their rights in modern society. A clear message by the state is needed.

Legal instruments to outlaw barbaric acts must be implemented. If the police do their job to make arrests at the

right time, it will send a strong signal that impunity will not be tolerated — even at the expense of traditional practices.

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## Rallies of little importance

Political rally season is once again upon Pakistan. No one event or grievance appears to have precipitated the season this time, except perhaps for the age-old need of political parties to remain, or become, politically relevant.

The bungled response of the PML-N to the Panama Papers was perhaps the signal for the PTI leadership to return to what it does best: hold elaborate rallies that end with the promise of further rallies elsewhere.

Meanwhile, in Karachi, the party of sorts that Mustafa Kamal is trying to cobble together as a political alternative to the MQM, the party that made Mr Kamal famous, held its inaugural public event at a stone's throw from the Quaid's mausoleum.

Read: [\*PTI's foundation day event a crowd puller\*](#)

But Mr Kamal and his Pak Sarzameen Party already appear to have entangled themselves in a contradiction: how does a party of the self-professed middle class with no known political footprint arrange the funds for the professional and

sophisticated set-up on display at the Karachi rally? But such quaint concerns do not appear to worry Mr Kamal or his backers.

It is the struggle between the PTI and the PML-N, however, that will be the focus nationally in the weeks to come. Signs of the PTI switching to early campaign mode have meant that the PML-N is unwilling to be left behind.

Perhaps better sense will prevail and the federal government will not trigger a round of election-style rallies of its own in various parts of the country; but when it comes to the PML-N responding to the PTI, better sense rarely prevails.

As for the PTI, it is difficult to discern much of a strategy in its latest efforts to mobilise its supporters. While rallies help keep the PTI in the news and may reinforce the party's image as the leading opposition to the PML-N, the 2013 general election results suggested that what the party needs to do is improve its party structures at the local level to get out the vote on election day.

Organising rallies does the opposite of that, drawing political energy away from party-building and directing it to showy events, which have limited long-term political appeal.

What rally season demonstrates once again is that political parties are more keen to flex their political muscle than work on systemic solutions to the country's chronic problems.

The PTI has the choice to both organise rallies and press for real financial and transparency reforms inside parliament.

But there is no sign of the latter. Similarly, the PML-N rather than focusing simply on clearing Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's name could also use the Panama Papers disclosures to moot tax and financial reforms that would provide lasting benefits to state and society.

Sadly, political rallies are easier to organise than the hard work of legislative change and political reform. As ever, rally season will likely be high on noise and low on significance.

*Published in Dawn, April 26th, 2016*

## Backlog of cases

MEMBERS of the bench are not often given to displays of emotion, particularly in public, but rather tend towards sober self-restraint.

The absence of justice, however, can sometimes reduce a judge to tears, as evinced on Sunday when India's chief justice, T.S. Thakur, spoke at a conference in New Delhi attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as India's chief ministers and high court chief justices.

Speaking about the 'avalanche' of cases clogging up the ultra-lethargic Indian legal system — at the present rate of litigation, the criminal cases alone that are pending today will take 30 years to clear — the judge made an emotional appeal to Mr Modi for reforms to address the gridlock.

A major issue is the inadequate number of judges, resulting in crushing workloads of 2,600 cases per judge annually. Quite correctly, Chief Justice Thakur linked the resolution of the problem to the progress and development of the country.

Doubtless, many members of the bench in Pakistan can identify with the distress expressed by their counterpart on the other side of the border.

The numbers here, adjusting for population, are also fairly dire, although nowhere near the same extent. It is estimated that around two million cases remain pending in various courts across the country, especially at the lower court level.

Also in a similar vein, the judiciary in Pakistan too is considered largely responsible for this backlog whereas the efficiency of the judicial system depends on the entire legal apparatus — investigation, prosecution, etc — working together as a well-oiled machine.

Parliament's acquiescence in setting up military courts has further compromised public confidence in the legal system and perhaps delayed urgently needed reforms within.

While former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry did take concerted steps to clear the backlog, which included instituting double shifts daily for judges to preside over cases, the effort mainly remained confined to the higher judiciary, whereas it is the lower courts where much of the legal bottleneck accumulates.

The symbiotic link between progress and a functioning, accessible legal system has been demonstrated time and again.

Sometimes it is highlighted in instances of egregious rights violations committed in 'verdicts' given by parallel and informal 'justice' mechanisms.

Lest we forget, our recent history has also illustrated that dysfunctional or absent justice systems provide a convenient pretext for extremist elements, promising utopian visions of an equitable society, to expand their influence among angry, discontented populations.

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## Drug shortage

IT is unfortunate that the government has failed to address even a few of the numerous public health challenges that the country faces.

The sufferers are, of course, the people, in particular those who are financially underprivileged. Consider an issue that has been building up for years: the shortage of drugs on the market because of a stand-off between the government and the pharmaceutical industry.

The former wants to keep prices as low as possible — partly because taking an unpopular step and raising prices could have a negative impact on the electoral fortunes of the rulers.



Meanwhile, the pharmaceuticals maintain that given that prices are artificially being kept low, it is becoming unviable to manufacture and supply certain drugs. As reported by this paper yesterday, some 70 to 80 medicines, 50 of which are categorised as essential, are no longer available because of the federal government's failure to address the pricing issue.

Alarm has repeatedly been raised by health professionals and forums such as the human rights cell of the Supreme Court, but the response of the authorities including the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan has been to simply deny that the problem exists.

Apart from the immediate suffering of people in need of these medicines, the situation holds grave long-term implications as well.

Amongst the drugs that are no longer available, for example, are those required to treat complicated cases of TB.

This is already a serious public health issue, and the current crisis could exacerbate the problem of multi-drug resistant TB, creating a situation that will be even harder to rectify.

Similarly, the inexpensive folic acid — which is vital for the health of pregnant women and their unborn babies — has also disappeared from the market.

While the well-off can afford imported versions, for the majority of the population this raises the spectre of a generation whose in utero development has been compromised. And yet the authorities refuse to be awakened from their slumber. What will it take for them to take action?

## Bangladesh killings

EVENTS in Bangladesh do not augur well. The recent past has seen a number of horrifying killings in the country. The latest incident occurred on Monday when two people, one of them a leading gay rights campaigner, were hacked to death in an apartment in Dhaka, while a third was injured.

These murders came soon after the killing of a professor of English at the Rajshahi University, who was similarly set upon by men wielding machetes as he left home to go to work. And while affiliates of the militant Islamic State group claimed the killing which they said they carried out for the murdered man's 'call to atheism', the professor's colleagues say that he was neither an atheist, nor had he written anything controversial. That said, the role of religious extremism in this string of murders seems to have hardened into a pattern.

Over the last year, as many as four prominent bloggers who professed a secular ethos were hacked to death. Taken together, these attacks betray a deadly push against tolerance, plurality, and the freedoms of expression and religion in Bangladeshi society.

Unfortunately, matters are not helped by the political climate in the country, where the government is heading in the direction of intolerance and authoritarianism as it apprehends and executes political opponents after farcical trials.

Caught between the two sides — religiously motivated elements that have no qualms about killing for their beliefs and a government that is increasingly turning to repressive tactics

in order to stifle dissent — is the public and its fast-vanishing hopes of tolerance and democracy.

The task before Sheikh Hasina's government is clear: encourage freedom of thought and expression in the country while protecting the right to life of all its citizens, and refrain from contributing to the culture of intolerance by cracking down on political opponents.

Much like Pakistan — which has also experienced militancy and repressive tactics by rulers — Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. Only wise decisions by its political leadership can propel the country in the right direction.

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## Taking on the timber mafia

OF all the battles that Imran Khan has waged, the campaign against KP's timber mafia is the most crucial.

Given the tense political climate, the PTI chief could have indulged in one of his frequent verbal assaults against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the Panama Papers at the Pakistan Forest Institute in Peshawar on Monday.

After all, the relentless spotlight on the offshore accounts of Mr Sharif's family has put the prime minister on the back foot, leading him to deliver two national addresses on state TV.

Thankfully, Mr Khan only marginally touched on the controversy engulfing Mr Sharif, preferring to use the occasion to draw attention to a critical ecological issue: the depletion of the country's forest cover and his party's efforts against the timber mafia in the PTI-ruled province.

To its credit, the PTI is, so far, the only major party to have raised environmental issues at the national level.

The matter does not only concern trees and general greenery. In a period where climate-related disasters are striking the country harder and faster than ever before, it is strange that minimal attention is paid to the country's ecology. There is simply no interest in conserving the natural environment, and certainly no debate on the subject.

Trees and forest cover are not just about beautifying the landscape. The absence of tree cover in Karachi, for instance, contributed significantly to the large number of fatalities caused by last year's heatwave.

Trees play a vital role in safeguarding biodiversity, protecting hills from landslides and preventing water logging of irrigated land, and are considered 'lungs of the planet'.

Pakistan's forest cover is depleting fast, and the Ministry of Climate Change, which is supposed to oversee the annual tree plantation drives planned by the federal government around the monsoon season, cuts a very sorry figure before this reality.

Nor is the timber mafia just a collection of ragtag lumberjacks. They were known to be important financiers supporting the Swat Taliban, and remain a vast and totally unaccountable

group devouring the country's natural resource heritage like termites.

In KP, their strength is comparable to that of land grabbers. Mr Khan was right to flag this issue as a critical one for future generations and to try and inspire the fresh crop of future forestry officers, whose graduation ceremony he was addressing, to rise to the challenge before them.

Replacing the lost forest cover and fighting against those who demolish it is not an easy task.

It is a long battle that demands courage from the group of young officers if they are to stand up to the rapaciousness of the timber mafia.

It is about time that all our politicians recognised the grave implications of deforestation and took concerted action to stop practices that destroy the natural environment.

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## Doctors' strike

THERE are few uglier reflections of our collective failure to resolve an issue than the simmering row that has divided doctors and the government of Punjab for the past many years.

The long-running dispute continues to manifest itself in various situations. The latest incident resulted from a physical assault on doctors inside a government-run hospital in Sargodha. This led to the closing of outpatient departments in public hospitals all over the province.

In addition, emergency treatment was suspended in the Sargodha hospital where the attack took place as also at the General Hospital in Lahore which had been the site of a similar incident recently.

The strike exacerbated the woes of thousands of patients who now had no one to turn to in their moment of need. For the strikers, this would have meant successful action.

The goal of such an extreme protest is obviously to deliver a crippling blow to the system.

The striking doctors, no doubt agitating against a sinister trend that has seen medical staff assaulted by the patients' attendants, knew how vulnerable the system is. With them off duty, everything had to come tumbling down.

The major recipient of blame and criticism has once again been the government. However, it will be a gross exaggeration to

say that the young doctors' closure of operations had widespread sympathy.

Gone are the days when these doctors could draw support from the people and media. They have allowed their feud with the health authorities in Punjab to go on for too long for anyone's comfort.

There have been far too many crippling protests heaping misery on the suffering people.

Just as the provincial government stands exposed, and has been criticised for its inability to emerge from the unending meetings with a solution, tough questions are being asked of the forever angry young medics about how long they can stay away from their work.

They are accused of frequently allowing vested interests to hijack a movement which was originally aimed at securing a just service structure.

As the point-scoring math goes, this might please some government negotiators. In terms of healthcare at public hospitals the ongoing war spells disaster. It is once again at a stage that requires firefighters who could emerge from the ranks of the senior doctors; the latter — hopefully — enjoy the respect of both the young doctors and the government.

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## Pak-India dialogue

ONCE upon a time, a mere several months ago, a meeting between the foreign secretaries of Pakistan and India was meant to herald the start of the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue. That meeting has yet to take place.

Instead, the foreign secretaries, Aizaz Chaudhry and Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, met on the sidelines of an Afghanistan-focused conference in New Delhi and, from competing official accounts in Pakistan and India, sounded every bit the politicians that they are not meant to be.

Clearly, Mr Chaudhry and Mr Jaishankar were sent into the meeting with orders to take a tough line. Both men obliged, at least when it came to the public component of the meeting.

Perhaps they also discussed the possibility of getting started on the CBD and suggested ways to deal with the hurdles in the way of a full-fledged dialogue. But it is not an auspicious day for South Asia when the senior-most Foreign Office bureaucrats engage more in brinkmanship than diplomacy.

What the Delhi interaction suggests is that both Pakistan and India need to rethink their turn away from dialogue. Consider the Indian demands that Mr Jaishankar presented.

The focus on terrorism is neither new nor surprising, but what the Indian side appears to have forgotten is that the logic of combating terrorism means continuing to talk to Pakistan. It is likely because the Pathankot air base attack occurred after the

two countries had agreed to resume dialogue that Pakistan has extended unprecedented cooperation to India.

Dialogue offers incentives to respond to each other's concerns as well as opportunities to do so. More than a year of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's insistence about talking first and only about terrorism yielded nothing — it was only when he spoke unexpectedly and strongly in favour of dialogue that anti-terror cooperation between the two countries became a possibility. If Mr Modi was bold once, he should again embrace the irrefutable logic of dialogue.

On the Pakistani side, the hawkishness of the security establishment that is once again growing uncomfortably visible needs to be rethought.

The concerns about external interference in Balochistan have existed for many years and are unlikely to have been exacerbated only in recent months. And there are ways and means to address those concerns, diplomatically and through counter-intelligence.

Moreover, the capture of an Indian spy has given Pakistan leverage that it can use to address the matter at the level it deserves. Surely, as the Pakistani side insists, with fundamental disputes yet to be resolved, the bilateral relationship cannot be held hostage to a single issue.

There are also the events in India-held Kashmir of recent days. The severe and dangerously repressive steps that the Indian government is taking there ought to be the real focus right now of Pakistan's efforts to get New Delhi to be more responsive to legitimate concerns.

## Accountability powers

THE continuing controversy around the Panama Papers underscores the need for a more robust and independent accountability body.

NAB has lost whatever little credibility it had ever since political interference in its operations became manifest.

Perhaps that is why no one has suggested that it take the lead role in investigating the Panama leaks. Instead, despite the existence of several accountability mechanisms in addition to NAB, there are calls for a judicial commission to carry out the probe.

Given this lack of trust in NAB, Senator Raza Rabbani's call for a new accountability body deserves to be taken seriously. Such a body should be fashioned after the Election Commission of Pakistan, whose members are nominated on the basis of parliamentary consensus.

It should have autonomous judicial powers to arrest, investigate and prosecute public office holders,

whether elected or not, from all branches of state, including the military. Recent disclosures show that internal processes of accountability within each arm of the state have been unable to curb the menace of corruption.

For such a body to be effective, certain prerequisites would have to be met.

First, in their choice of nominees, the parliamentarians would do well to select those who are not likely to misuse their powers. Second, a clear mandate is essential, so that the accountability body doesn't run the risk of turning into a rogue institution — the political parties must decide on a legally sound definition of corruption.

Third, debate would be necessary on whether or not the body will have the power to unseat an elected legislator. This last action raises philosophical questions.

Whereas unelected bureaucrats and officials owe their position to a notification issued by the state, elected representatives owe theirs to the voters; ideally, in a democratic dispensation, only voters should be able to take that position away from them.

Creating a body where political influence does not dominate will be a tricky task, especially given the recent history of institutional overreach and a political environment marred by divisiveness.

Legislators will need to demarcate their own authority and work out a delicate compromise on the powers of the body.

Nevertheless, the frequency with which we hear of calls for judicial inquiries to investigate wrongdoing in politics shows that there is a need for a body that is endowed with wide-ranging autonomous powers but that does not impinge on the supremacy of parliament.

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## Women in JI shura

EVEN though it has come rather late, the Jamaat-i-Islami's decision to have women on its supreme consultative body, the shura, deserves to be welcomed.

Founded as far back as 1941, the JI had an all-male shura all these decades, despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of its leadership and cadres comes from the educated middle class with an urban background.

Unlike most religious parties and so-called 'secular' ones, the JI's leadership does not consist of feudal lords and rich businessmen often tainted by allegations of corruption.

Precisely for that reason (its fiery rhetoric apart), the Jamaat's activities are characterised by discipline, and the party's propaganda techniques and street agitation have a hue of their own.

For that reason — if we ignore the violence-prone activities of its student wing on some campuses, especially during the Zia era— the JI has been able, largely through political means, to secure a space for itself in the academia, media, trade unions, bureaucracy and the armed forces.

It also showed some spirit of ijtehad when its founder Maulana Maudoodi decided to support Fatima Jinnah against Ayub Khan in the presidential election half a century ago.

Yet women's role in the decision-making process all these decades had been conspicuous by its absence. On Tuesday,



however, 10 women attended the shura meeting to break the party leadership's male monopoly.

Women's inclusion in the shura marks the JI's recognition of women's ever-greater role worldwide in social and political domains. There have been positive changes even in conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia and some Gulf sheikhdoms.

The question is whether women's presence in the shura will make a difference to JI's policies on such gender issues as the age of marriage and the women's protection law in Punjab.

A split along gender lines is unlikely because it is the ideology prism through which all JI members look at national and foreign policy issues in a manner that shows lack of flexibility. Ultimately, this is reflected in the JI's vote bank.

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## Probing Panama

FOR those interested in knowing how any investigation of the Panama leaks is likely to be derailed eventually, look no further than the discussions at the hearing held by the Senate Standing Committee on Finance on Wednesday. The State Bank, represented by its deputy governor, claimed that a law from 1992 places "no restriction" on anybody to remit foreign exchange out of the country. A corporate lawyer echoed the same claim while adding that the leaked information was stolen and may be inadmissible in a court of law. Besides, the government had no means of obtaining the cooperation of authorities in other countries involved in the operations of these offshore entities. In short, by its own legislation to safeguard the foreign exchange regime, the government is now hamstrung to conduct any proper investigation into the origins of the funds that are apparently being transacted by the prime minister's family in the Panama Papers.

The argument points not only to the likely defence that will be mounted in the event of an investigation, but also to the reluctance of the State Bank to become involved in it. If and when an investigation does take place, those carrying it out could well find numerous such technicalities obstructing their path. And technicalities is really what this argument is built around. In the Asim Hussain investigation, for instance, the State Bank extended extraordinary cooperation to the Rangers, complying with demands to assist in furnishing detailed financial information in the absence of court orders or even the framing of formal charges against any of the accused. Clearly, where there is a will there is a way.

The legislation referred to in the hearing is the Protection of Economic Reforms Act of 1992. At the time, the act assured immunity to foreign currency account holders against any inquiries by tax authorities as to the source of funds, and any restrictions on the movement of money into and out of these accounts. But the argument that the provisions of that law can impede the investigation in the case of the Panama Papers is specious. That law was amended in 1999 to withdraw such immunities to citizens of Pakistan and only covers scrutiny by tax authorities. Those amendments have not been tested in a case such as the one being sought in this instance. Additionally, there are many other laws that are relevant too, such as the Anti Money Laundering Act of 2010, and the amended State Bank Act more recently. The fact that none of the senators were able to effectively engage the wily lawyer in a debate, along with the State Bank's wilful acquiescence, shows the standing committee's deficient will and capacity to deliberate this important matter, as well as the difficulties that will arise when crafting an actionable path forward.

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## Ban on 'Maalik'

FOR most observers outside Pakistan, it would appear an inexplicable set of events.

On Tuesday, the Sindh government considered imposing a ban on the film *Maalik* — which had since April 8 been being screened across the country — on the basis that it showed certain communities in Karachi in a 'derogatory manner' (read: ethnic stereotyping) which could lead to unrest, and that it portrayed the (fictitious) Sindh chief minister as corrupt.

Before the notification was formally issued, however, Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah intervened, saying that the matter should be taken up with the federal film censor board.

A day later, the federal government pulled the plug on the film across the country, first saying that it was 'uncertified', and later raising objections that it contained problematic portrayals of, for example, the police force.

However, given that the film had been issued a certificate for public viewing before it was screened, to those who know Pakistan and its history of civilian-military imbalance, a much simpler explanation is available: the film, with its portrayal of a tainted civilian governance system and its promotion of the armed forces, touched a raw nerve.

Perhaps already spooked by the stereotyping it is subjected to generally and in current times by the allegations flying around after the Panama leaks, the political leadership lashed out against a readily available target.

The state of Pakistan's ready willingness to resort to bans results more often than not in exposing the mindset of those in positions of leadership.

There is no doubt that space is rapidly shrinking in the country for the multiplicity of views. Further, are those in positions of authority, civilian or military, resorting to petty point-scoring?

This implication can be read into another incident that occurred on Wednesday: Indian filmmaker Kabir Khan, whose film *Phantom* was considered critical of Pakistan and banned here, and who had been granted a visa by the federal government, was surrounded by a group of 'protesters' as he arrived at the airport in Karachi.

How they knew the identity of one passenger out of hundreds, though, especially one who works behind the camera, remains a mystery.

The tussle between various powerbrokers in Pakistan may be old news, but it appears now to have reached the level where dominance of the narrative is being contested.

Sadly, this augurs ill for the freedom of expression and the plurality of viewpoints in the country.

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## More seats for women

GIVEN that patriarchal ideologies have largely defined political territory in Pakistan, and political parties have done little to promote women as candidates or to encourage them to vote, the Sindh Assembly's move to increase women's reserved seats in local government from 22 to 33pc is welcome. But while the amendment to the Sindh Local Government Act, 2013, will certainly enhance political inclusivity, one hopes that the usual bureaucratic lethargy will not keep the law department from formulating the 'rules of business' for this law — rules that guarantee implementation. Setting a timeline for framing rules is mandatory; without this, well-intentioned pro-women legislation would be pointless. Under Sindh's domestic violence law, for example, district committees to protect women victims have yet to be formed. Nevertheless, the Sindh Assembly's consensus on protective legislation aimed at women and children sets a precedent for other provincial legislatures. Indeed, the discriminatory attitude of certain assemblies that seem to have abdicated responsibility by not standing up to pressure from the conservative lobby is condemnable.

Suffice it to say that women with political ambitions have little or no agency unless backed by wealth, influence and political parties. Many argue that quotas initiated as an entry point for women are best kept intact because rigid cultural and economic barriers barring women from contesting elections are problematic. To ease out quotas, parties should give women tickets to contest for the general seats, while relentless lobbying across party lines, by women specifically, is needed for gender-inclusive laws. Before the next election, parties

must reform unfair gender discrimination ensuring selection practices are transparent. Many women are determined to drive political change. Consider Badam Zari from Bajaur Agency, the first-ever independent candidate contesting from the tribal areas for a National Assembly seat in 2013. She showed resilience despite cultural drawbacks. Parties must identify and allot tickets to female councillors with success at community projects — education, sanitation, water and healthcare. This is how women can spearhead wider socio-political change.

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## Fata reforms

THE mainstreaming of Fata — a catch-all phrase for political, administrative, judicial and legal reforms — is both desperately overdue and direly needed.

Now, with the drafting of a bill that seeks to repeal the infamous Frontier Crimes Regulation, the state may finally be coming closer to bringing the colonial anachronism into the modern era.

The draft of the new law, as reported in this newspaper on Thursday, would formally rescind the FCR, but elements of the old tribal system would be fused with the legal system prevalent in the rest of the country.

The extension of the jurisdiction of the Peshawar High Court to Fata would give the region something its people have long desired, but has always been denied: a judicial appeals process that does not leave the political agents in Fata as the ultimate arbiters of justice.

Yet, at the local level, the office of the political agent and the tribal jirga would continue to be influential and powerful.

Judicial reforms, however, are only a part of the complicated jigsaw that is Fata.

A historically neglected region ravaged by war for a decade and with an internally displaced population that will eventually return to an area with no real economy, Fata's challenges are manifold.

It is a sign of evolution in the state's thinking that the fundamental question is no longer whether Fata should be maintained as a buffer between Afghanistan and Pakistan proper, but whether it should be an autonomous region, ie a province on its own, or integrated into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Yet, the manner in which some of the decisions are being taken — almost a secret compact between the federal government and the security establishment — leaves a great deal to be desired. Too often parochial interests — political versus security-oriented views — appear to be dominating the debate.

Consider the pull and push over whether Fata should be its own province or integrated into KP. A fifth province would disrupt the evolved structures of the rest of the state — four provinces and the federal government — and change finely tuned

balances in resource distribution and representation in national bodies like the Senate and the Council of Common Interests.

Yet, a fifth province could jump-start the conversation about a more rational number of provinces to be created from the existing four. But such lofty ideas remain far from the ground.

The security establishment is known to favour the eventual merger of Fata into KP — perhaps in the belief that a separate Fata province could lead to Balochistan-style security problems eventually.

But merger with KP is being resisted by the Hazara faction of the PML-N because of the demographic shift it would herald for a combined province. Unhappily, narrow interests appear to be dominating the conversation on reforms so far rather than national, people-centric concerns.

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## Another ‘confession’

THE old, dog-eared playbook has apparently still not been discarded. Once again, an individual supposedly behind bars in secure custody has spoken on camera, his words conveniently stoking further the flames of the problems in which the MQM leadership currently finds itself engulfed.

This time around, it is Khalid Shamim — one of the suspects in the Imran Farooq murder case who is detained in Rawalpindi’s Adiala Jail — dilating on the back story behind the senior MQM leader’s assassination.

In the video aired on a TV channel on Thursday evening, which was largely addressed to erstwhile mayor and now leader of the newly minted Pak Sarzameen Party Mustafa Kamal, Shamim accused the MQM chief Altaf Hussain of ordering the hit.

According to him, Mr Hussain even voiced his satisfaction at the execution of the ‘job’ to Mr Kamal when the latter went to London to collect Mr Farooq’s body. In the video, Shamim also claimed that the MQM supremo had openly threatened the former mayor.

It is a little over a year ago that the ‘death cell confession’ video of MQM militant Saulat Mirza had emerged, and comparisons are inevitable. Clearly, the powers that be — those who have the wherewithal to film high-profile prisoners in high-security prisons — have learnt nothing.

If at all, this is an even more ham-handed attempt at steering the narrative, with the under-custody individual wearing a headphone, obviously reading from a script and slurring his words in places.

In the earlier instance, the recording of Saulat Mirza contained mostly statements he had already given to a JIT, a video of which was already in the public domain.

The timing of that leak was to discredit the MQM and underscore its alleged excesses, because by then the establishment had decided to act against it with full force.

The latest video too contains neither any earth-shattering revelation nor is it of legal value, given that the statement was not made before a magistrate. But with the money-laundering investigations against the MQM heating up in the UK, the objective on this occasion is perhaps to remind the public of the party's other alleged misdeeds.

Concurrently, the move could also prove helpful in maintaining pressure on the leader of what is perceived as the establishment's latest political proxy — the Pak Sarzameen Party — by highlighting his close past association with the beleaguered MQM chief. Old, Machiavellian habits certainly die hard.

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## Lessons from Chernobyl

IMAGINE in the modern age of burgeoning numbers, a human population forced to leave a vast tract of land — which is now the preserve of wild animals.

This has been the fate of the area affected by the April 26, 1986, catastrophe at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

Thirty years on, and after the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people, the site remains dangerous for humans because of the high levels of contamination; visuals available today have largely been captured by drones.

In terms of costs and casualties, Chernobyl was the world's worst nuclear power plant accident. And yet, the International Nuclear Event Scale lists two disasters at its maximum classification of a Level-7 event; the second was the one which occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan in 2011.

The 30-year anniversary of Chernobyl has occurred during the final stages of completion of a giant £1.2 billion steel-clad arch that has been designed to enclose the site of the stricken reactor and prevent further leaks over the next century.

The Ukrainian prime minister has said that lessons dictated by that tragedy should be heeded all over the world — never was a truer word spoken. Nuclear energy comes with severe and irreversible risks that must be factored into any plans for power plants, particularly in countries where safety regulations and emergency response capacities are low — such as Pakistan.



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Through licensed commercial nuclear power plants, Pakistan intends to generate some 40,000MW of electricity through nuclear power by 2050, according to the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission last year.

There is a nuclear power complex adjacent to Karachi. The idea of an accident is sobering indeed.

Given the country's current situation of chronic power shortages, nuclear power has been highlighted as the best way forward. This may well be true, but it should not be thought of as a long-term solution.

Accidents can and do happen, and in the case of nuclear energy the results can be catastrophic and generation-spanning. Pakistan must strive to develop its capacities beyond nuclear energy.

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