

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of August, 2015

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300 million Pakistanis

IT is a staggering prospect. As per a recent UN report, Pakistan is projected to have a population of over 300 million people by 2050.

Already, with an estimated population hovering around 190m, the country is among the world's top 10 most populous states. The fact that the population is so large — and that it is going to get even more crowded by the middle of the century — should make our rulers and policymakers urgently take notice.

Already, the state is unable to provide for its citizens; what will the situation be like when we hit 300 million souls?

Numerous valid questions pop up about how such a huge number of people can be sustained; primarily, how will we feed, educate, house and provide healthcare for all of them?

Also, large populations need impressive growth rates in order to create jobs — ensuring such rates is not something the Pakistani state can guarantee.

Large populations, if not cared for and purposefully engaged and employed, can easily become liabilities and create security issues. Hence if the 'population bomb' is to be defused, we need more effective policies to address population growth.

Experts note that the population growth rate has come down in Pakistan, but there is definite room for improvement. Firstly, we need a fair idea of how many people there actually are, as presently most planning is based on educated guesses.

It can only be hoped that next year's census goes through, and produces a proper picture. Secondly, efforts to educate the masses about family planning need a boost. Outdated 'cultural' norms — such as producing children until a male heir is born — particularly need to be addressed.

For this, it is essential to engage community leaders and ulema so that the cultural barriers that stand in the way of better family planning can be removed. The state should not necessarily be telling people how many children they can have; but it can surely point out the consequences of a rapidly growing population.

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Evicting the poor

THE Capital Development Authority (CDA) just bulldozed its own credibility by destroying a substantial portion of Afghan Basti, a katchi abadi in sector I-11 that is home to more than 8,000 people, most of whom are Pakistani citizens.

The action was heavy handed, involving armed police and paramilitary as well as heavy earth-moving machinery, which suggests the possible play of powerful vested interests in pushing the affair.

Currently, the debate is circling around the legality of the dwellings and the right of the residents to be on the land,

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considering it had been allotted to CDA employees as far back as 1990 but was never transferred.

Also read: [Slum-dwellers clash with authorities over Islamabad anti-encroachment drive](#)

Whatever side one takes in this debate, it cannot fail to be recognised that the action taken by the CDA was indefensibly heavy-handed, considering the residents were given three days' notice to vacate and proper compensation and relocation plans were not made, which is a requirement under the law.

The episode highlights how the question of affordable housing for the poor has fallen by the wayside as a powerful consortium of interests including politicians, bureaucrats, property developers and even the military have taken charge of shaping Pakistan's urban landscape.

Growing amounts of urban land is being eaten up by property developers and speculators, pushing the poor further and further towards the margins. The result is the mushrooming growth of katchi abadis, across Islamabad as well as the other cities.

The master plan for Islamabad — the development and implementation of which lies within the CDA's mandate — contains very little to cater for the needs of the poor.

The allocation of the authority's resources is also governed by misplaced priorities that favour large mega-projects such as roads, flyovers and interchanges over affordable, low-cost housing.

It cannot be denied that clean title of land should be a requirement before people take possession and build dwellings upon it, but it is equally important to note that not catering for low-cost and affordable housing for the poor creates the problem of squatter settlements.

The ballooning growth of katchi abadis certainly needs to be checked, but not through strong-arm means such as the ones employed in Afghan Basti on Thursday. It needs to be checked by adhering to a master plan that gives everyone a living space within the urban landscape.

Until that is done, the capital city would be well served without a repeat of Thursday's action.

Published in Dawn, August 1st, 2015

After Mullah Omar

THE circumstances of Mullah Omar's death may be an ongoing mystery, but other events on the Afghan Taliban front are already eclipsing the rather disturbing questions raised by the contradictory news of the circumstances surrounding Omar's death.

The Taliban have a new leader and two new deputy leaders and at least for now, the new leadership is trying to project a sense of unity and continuity. But whether those efforts will produce the results that Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour and his Haqqani-affiliated deputies, Haibatullah Akhunzada and Sirajuddin Haqqani, want is far from a settled matter.

In the weeks and months ahead, the field commanders and other strands of leadership within the Taliban shura will surely be heard from — and only then will it be clear if Mansour and his faction can maintain unity.

Already, though, there are troubling signs for the future of talks. Mansour has long been rumoured as being on relatively good terms with the Pakistani establishment, while the close relationship between the Haqqani network and Pakistan is an open secret.

Under Mullah Omar the Afghan Taliban had managed to maintain a sense of independence while simultaneously keeping the lines of communication with Pakistan open, a delicate balancing act that credibly allowed both sides to claim that theirs was no master-stooge relationship.

Now, with a seemingly much more Pak-aligned leadership — at least prima facie and at the moment — of the Afghan Taliban, how will that impact the support for talks inside the Afghan state and across the Taliban spectrum?

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has made it clear from the beginning of his term that he believed an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process could only materialise if Afghanistan and Pakistan improve the bilateral relationship.

But within the national unity government generally and within the Afghan security establishment in particular, there remains a great deal of mistrust and suspicion of Pakistan. Will President Ghani find himself under further pressure to reject the idea of talks and a peaceful solution?

Similarly, it is relatively clear now that there are several factions within the Afghan Taliban, even if they have long downplayed their differences to keep up the impression of a cohesive, and winning, Taliban.

If there were no factionalism, no one within the Taliban would have thought to try and hide the news of Mullah Omar's death.

Will Mullah Mansour really be able to rally all factions behind him, especially when it is not yet known to what extent external powers have manipulated their favourites into place and created new frictions?

Worryingly, the lessons of the post-Najibullah period appear to have not been learned and Afghanistan may be more on a knife edge today than it has been in over two decades.

Warlords fighting each other may pale in comparison to Afghan Taliban turning on each other.

Special Olympics gold

IF cricket gets a bit tiring with all its unpredictable ups and downs, spare some time to catch up on the proud triumphs Pakistani athletes have been scoring in the Special Olympics. For more than two decades, now, Pakistan's athletes participating in this event have been bringing home a rich haul of medals and this year too they have already won five medals as the games draw to a close. The event features athletes with intellectual disabilities such as autism who go through a rigorous training regimen lasting six months, during which they spend time away from the families for the first time and are taught the sport they will be competing in as well as basic activities of everyday life like getting dressed and washing hands. For the athletes themselves, the training and the opportunity to compete are often life-changing experiences that give them confidence.

The programme to select and groom special athletes from Pakistan is run by a dedicated core of professionals from the Special Olympics Pakistan (SOP) that has been training and preparing Pakistani athletes to participate in the global event for almost 20 years now. In one case, for instance, the 27-year-old swimmer Asim Zar used to be afraid of dipping his feet in the water at the start of his training, according to his parents. This year he bagged a gold medal in the 100m freestyle event, making his parents and his country proud. The shining

confidence with which these young Pakistanis have overcome enormous odds to win their triumphs is a source of inspiration for the entire country. They deserve to be received as heroes upon their return. The devotion with which the team at SOP has worked to groom these athletes and win these medals for Pakistan at an international sports event is also an inspiring example of what a small team of dedicated people can accomplish. Well done team Pakistan and welcome back!

Published in Dawn, August 2nd, 2015

Prosecutors' exodus

PAKISTAN'S decrepit criminal justice system has suffered another grievous blow. One hundred and fifty public prosecutors in Punjab have quit their jobs to take up posts in the judiciary, after they successfully passed the requisite tests conducted for 378 posts for civil judges in the lower courts. That leaves only 500 prosecutors available to the provincial prosecution department against a sanctioned strength of over 1,200. A few months ago, in a similar haemorrhage of desperately needed resources, 100 prosecutors — again in Punjab — left their jobs to become civil judges. And more are on course for a career move: a substantial number of prosecutors have applied for vacancies for additional district and sessions judges as well, examinations for which were to be held by the Lahore High Court from yesterday. Among the candidates were two prosecutors working in the Anti-Terrorism Courts in Rawalpindi.

Prosecutors are a vital cog in the justice machine; they ensure that evidence is properly collated and presented so that the case against the accused can be successfully prosecuted. In Pakistan, the legal system as a whole is broken, corrupt and inefficient, particularly at the lower court level. This is on account of multiple issues, including a lack of resources and training, while the rot in the prosecutorial sector also owes much to the fact that prosecutors have few reasons to consider their job as little more than a stepping stone to the greener pastures of the bench. But given the circumstances in which they work, can anyone really blame them? Treated as drudges rather than as professionals doing extremely important work, they have few facilities and meagre opportunities for career advancement. Moreover, threats from some of the dangerous individuals it is their job to prosecute are a constant occupational hazard. In 2013, the prosecutor in the Benazir Bhutto murder case was gunned down; some prosecutors have even sought asylum abroad. To add insult to injury, public prosecutors are paid a pittance of Rs33,000 a month — a fact that also contributes to corruption on the job. Compare that with Rs82,000 that a civil judge earns as monthly remuneration and the exodus from the prosecution department becomes understandable. All this means that the already formidable caseload of the remaining prosecutors will become heavier still, thereby inevitably compromising the quality of their work and the ability of the judicial system to send behind bars those who threaten the peace of society.

Published in Dawn, August 2nd, 2015

Time to move on

POPULAR political parties encompass various sets of opinion, each coming to the fore at its turn. There is a time for the belligerent, the acrimonious and the incorrigibly quarrelsome; once these have caused whatever impact is required of them, it is time for saner minds to take over and appear to save the day — for their parties, for national politics, and for the country as a whole. For the various outcomes of the process the PTI started back when it embarked upon its dharna, that time seems to have come.

Much muck has been thrown around over whether PTI lawmakers should be de-seated or not. It is time now for sober elements to step in and perform the task of reconciling everyone to a compromise. This is true for all parties to the dispute — the PTI, the PML-N, as well as those who have so far stuck to their plan of moving a resolution in the parliament seeking the disqualification of PTI members on technical grounds. Resolution is, by definition, to remedy a situation — not complicate and threaten further. Thus those behind the de-seating resolution must be careful to not take their advance against their common opponent too far — unless they want to risk being viewed as irresponsible elements looking for an answer to the issue through unravelling. The dangers of the drive getting out of hand are very much there; the point has been taken and it is time to move on.

There are a few obvious lines that need to be taken. The PTI must be a little more consistent and far more convincing in its expression of trust in evolving a system. It has been at the receiving end of an intense campaign to discredit it as a

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political party. A cool-headed analysis will, however, appreciate Imran Khan's contribution to accelerate the process of reform, including — significantly — in the manner in which the elections are organised. The PTI can — and ought to — take the confidence gained from these successes and invest its energies in effecting improvements wherever it can. The government, on the other hand, must set an example in how committed it is to not wasting time over frivolities and distractions that must be avoided in aid of the people and an urge to tackle their real issues. This is not to say that the PML-N's refrain against Mr Khan and his party for the 'wasteful' sit-in in Islamabad cannot be challenged. But a government which is so eager to point out the damage caused to the national economy by an obdurate opponent must show character when its gets the opportunity. De-seating must not distract; there are serious issues of the people awaiting the kind attention of the elected elite. The bickering has to stop and some real debate should be heard being conducted in its place.

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Monsoon havoc

AS monsoon rains continue to wreak havoc around the country, the Met department appears to have gone into panic mode.

For southern Sindh, the department issued two alerts over the past two weeks, warning of urban flooding when none materialised.

Since the flooding in Chitral triggered a series of glacial lake outbursts and flash floods with no alert from the Met department in mid-July, the department has been issuing an alert almost every day, seemingly at random. Playing it safe, it seems to feel that issuing regular alerts is the safest strategy.

Now the department has been caught off guard once again in the northern parts of the country, from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Gilgit-Baltistan.

For example, on the morning of July 30, the department issued an alert saying that a "severe weather system is likely to persist for next 3-4 days in GB and Chitral" with potential to trigger glacial lake outbursts. The alert was signed by the department's chief meteorologist.

Later the same day, the department issued another alert, signed by the deputy director forecasting, warning that glacial lake outbursts were possible given "clear sky conditions and high temperatures of [the] northern areas during next two days".

So in the morning they were talking of a persistent "severe weather system" producing heavy rainfall and in the evening

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they were warning of “clear sky conditions and high temperatures”, both scenarios flagged as carrying the possibility of glacial lake outbursts.

It would appear that the Met department is struggling to keep up. Instead of developing bureaucratic survival strategies, it – and the country – would perhaps be better served if it became more vociferous about the demand for improved forecasting capability.

This year so far, villagers in Chitral and residents of cities such as Nowshera have been left to their own devices as floods ravage their homes and fields.

In earlier years, it was other areas. It is outright pathetic that after five consecutive years of flooding, Pakistan is still walking blind into an increasingly dangerous monsoon season.

Published in Dawn, August 3rd, 2015

NLC and beyond

THE Supreme Court took aim at the National Accountability Bureau’s clear weaknesses last week, but the message was really to another institution — the military.

The NLC scam, in which allegedly unauthorised investments were made by senior management of the company, including senior retired army officers, in the stock exchange causing a multi-billion rupee loss over a decade ago should have been fully investigated by now — especially because the military leadership publicly, and controversially, pledged to do so citing that army law is applicable to the principal suspects, even though they had long been retired from the military in 2012.

Also read: [SC sees lack of cooperation by institutions as weakness of NAB](#)

But, as the state’s lawyers told the SC this week, the army had balked at even updating the NAB or the government and had turned away a former prosecutor general who had gone to GHQ in search of information.

The army may well have legal reasons for acting in the manner it has done in the NLC case all along — but what about a state institution’s duty to function transparently and to enforce accountability?

Consider also the wider context here. In Karachi, the military has accused the provincial leadership of corruption on a grand scale and the army-led Rangers have raided Sindh government

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offices in search of documents linked to alleged land grabs and sundry financial misdeeds of politicians and bureaucrats.

In doing so, the military has cast itself as a force for good battling corruption wherever it is found. Yet, when it comes to its internal investigations and disciplinary measures, the military is famously opaque.

The NLC scam is only one of many cases in which military officers, retired and serving, have been investigated by civilian authorities. In some cases, the military has even fought in civilian courts to have serious crimes being tried there against military personnel to be tried in the opaque military justice system.

Perhaps most infamously, following pressure on the political leadership of the country to create a new system of military courts, the 21st Amendment earlier this year has even allowed for civilians to be tried in military courts on terrorism-related charges.

It is rather remarkable, then, that the same institution is so set on shielding some of its own from very serious allegations of financial mismanagement. Surely, the military does not want to reinforce perceptions that one set of standards applies to everyone else and another to the military alone?

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Security advisers' meeting

IF Sartaz Aziz does travel to New Delhi later this month on the invitation of his Indian counterpart Ajit Doval, it would mark a few weeks of relatively well-managed tensions in the bilateral relationship.

After all, subsequent to the Gurdaspur attack, there was a sense that the Ufa joint statement may be jettisoned and India and Pakistan would resume their war of words.

Happily, better sense prevailed and both sides have avoided any serious verbal attacks at the highest political and security levels over Gurdaspur or the wider terrorism issue.

Also read: [India proposes security advisers' meeting](#)

Yet, that is also a measure of how low the expectations have fallen: simply avoiding a war of words in the days after a terrorist incident is surely not a stable way of carrying forward the bilateral relationship.

More is needed and it could start with the National Security Advisers' meeting.

Yet, with the NSA meeting too there multiple concerns. As reported in this newspaper yesterday, there have been rumblings within the Pakistani state that the Ufa format, wherein the NSAs are to discuss all issues connected to terrorism, has put Pakistan at some kind of disadvantage.

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Presumably, that implies disagreements between the political government and the security establishment or the lack of proper groundwork done for Ufa in the absence of a full-time foreign minister.

It hardly bodes well for seeking a breakthrough with a hawkish Indian government if the Pakistani stance is not the product of a consensus to begin with. But that is only the first hurdle.

The two states have long perfected the art of allowing high-level meetings to occur but nothing of substance to be decided. Even where there is some kind of roadmap decided – as Ufa suggests with a series of specific meetings to be held – the specifics of what is to be discussed is left open or broad enough to dampen expectations.

Complicating that already knotty situation is that the Pakistani side has also talked of the resumption of back-channel talks, suggesting that substantive issues can be kicked off the immediate agenda. Surely, a talks process that publicly focuses on Indian allegations of Pakistan-originating terrorism, but shoves the Kashmir dispute into the background, is doomed to fail.

What the bilateral relationship also needs is sustained interest and input from the top political leadership. Ufa put security front and centre, with meetings scheduled between the NSAs, the DGs of the Pakistan Rangers and the Indian BSF and two countries' DG Military Operations.

What, though, of the political component? Meetings between the two prime ministers in third countries on the sidelines of other summits are not enough.

The civilian component needs to be ramped up. Could part of the problem be the absence of a full-time foreign minister here?

If the Pak-India relationship is to move forward, perhaps Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif needs to re-think his foreign policy set-up first.

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Cricket triumph

Pakistan's remarkable victory in the two-match T20 series against hosts Sri Lanka reaffirms their status as the most unpredictable team in world cricket, especially in the limited overs format.

It was barely four months ago that the Pakistan cricket team had received a shock 0-3 ODI drubbing at the hands of lowly-ranked Bangladesh that was followed by deafening calls of overhaul from critics and fans alike.

But the emphatic manner of their victory over Sri Lanka, who are the reigning world T20 champions, is simply astounding and pretty much defies the laws of equilibrium.

No doubt, the turnaround has its reasons. Primarily, credit must be given to the national selectors for the induction of talented newcomers like Mukhtar Ahmed, Mohammad Rizwan, Imad Wasim and a few others whose enthusiasm in the field and the

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never-say-die approach clearly inspired the others to lift their game.

Adding to that were valuable contributions from comeback men including Shoaib Malik, Shahid Afridi, Umar Akmal, Sohail Tanvir and the marvellous Anwar Ali who, indeed, swung the pendulum Pakistan's way to bring joy to the entire nation.

Cricket is a team game but more often than not, in the past Pakistan cricket outfits have found it difficult to rise above disturbing factors like player-wrangling, injuries and poor governance to give their best on the field.

Thankfully, however, none of these factors reared their ugly head in the recent Sri Lanka series and the players remained focused on the immediate objective on hand, which was to win matches.

Yet, while it is important to whole-heartedly laud the overall faring of the Pakistan team in Sri Lanka, it is a fact that the hosts are still going through a rebuilding phase following the retirement of stalwarts such as Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara.

To face the formidable England side in the UAE in October could be a different proposition altogether and Pakistan will have to be at their best to win that contest.

Published in Dawn, August 4th, 2015

District universities

IN an exploratory letter sent to provincial governments and heads of public-sector universities, the HEC has asked for guidance on how universities can be established in every district of the country.

The initiative, though in the very early stages, is laudable but a few important caveats are worth bearing in mind. From where will the HEC find the teaching staff for such a large number of universities?

Primary and secondary schooling is the foundation upon which higher education is built, and for a country where large numbers of pupils drop out of school once they hit teenage years, an expanded higher education system is going to stand on a very weak footing.

Perhaps bringing higher education closer to the people can increase enrolment rates, but if the crop of incoming students has received poor quality education and university teachers are under qualified, the system can end up doing more harm than good.

Upgrading our primary and secondary school system is vital to building a quality higher education system in the country and moving towards the goals laid out in Vision 2025.

It is critical to keep in mind that education is not about quantity alone, but also quality. Increasing the number of universities can look like progress if one is simply counting the campuses,

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but weighing the quality of the graduates and the rigours of the curriculum is a bigger priority at the moment.

The HEC should be commended for taking an initiative to make education more accessible to the people, but it would be better if its efforts were matched by the provincial governments to reform their school systems to ensure that students are being adequately prepared for the challenges of a university education.

This raises a chicken and the egg problem. In order to have good quality schooling, you need well-qualified and trained teachers which can only come from a good quality higher education system. So improving the quality of education in Pakistan and making it more easily available for every citizen is a larger enterprise than what one institution alone can manage.

The HEC should supplement its initiative with a report detailing where in its opinion the secondary school curriculum is letting down its students, and make concrete suggestions for curricular reforms. That would help start a useful conversation in the country about all that is needed to improve the state of our public educational systems.

Published in Dawn, August 4th, 2015

Altaf Hussain's diatribe

FROM the irresponsible and the inadvisable to, now, the indefensible, Altaf Hussain's political career appears to be in self-destruct mode.

In recent months, the MQM supremo has railed against the crackdown against militant and criminal elements in his party and for that he has been roundly condemned. But if many of Mr Hussain's previous words were ill-advised and unnecessary, so was some of the harshest criticism that had been directed at him. Now, though, the MQM chief has gone too far.

Also read: [Pressure mounts for action against Altaf](#)

Perhaps Mr Hussain spoke out of desperation, perhaps he has finally cracked under pressure — but there is no justification for his diatribe over the weekend. Hyperbole and political rhetoric aside, to call upon outside powers to intervene militarily inside Pakistan — and rather astonishingly, for India to take notice too — against the state on behalf of the MQM and the mohajir community is preposterous.

The MQM leadership has tried to reinterpret and downplay what Mr Hussain said over the weekend, but so clear and direct were their leader's words that no amount of verbal or mental gymnastics can obfuscate them.

Sadly, the attempt by the MQM to once broaden its appeal and go beyond communal politics — to go from mohajir to muttahida — has come to a disastrous end. It may have

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happened under extreme pressure and the MQM leadership's claims of unlawful actions and extra-judicial violence by the state may have some truth to them, but the MQM has not handled the situation well at all.

Over the weekend, Mr Hussain could have, for example, called upon human rights organisations to examine his party's claims and speak up for it. In recent weeks and months, the MQM could have helped the state purge from the party's ranks the criminal and militant elements it is widely believed to be harbouring.

More generally, the MQM could have abided by a politics of inclusion instead of going into siege mode and trying to whip up communal tensions. As the legitimate and pre-eminent representative of the Urdu-speaking community in Sindh, the MQM has a responsibility to act as a bridge between communities and ethnicities.

The party's leader chose instead to try and light a fire under old perceived communal identities. It is a sad denouement.

As ever, when one politician behaves badly, others cannot seem to help but add to the tensions. Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif's rants — and they were rants — against Mr Hussain and the MQM were ugly and unnecessary.

As they took it upon themselves to decide who is a patriot and who is anti-Pakistan, they were echoed by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf when it submitted resolutions against Mr Hussain in the Punjab and Sindh assemblies. That is absurd as it is dangerous and such elements ought to know better.

Hopefully, tempers on all sides will cool down in the days ahead.

Published in Dawn, August 4th, 2015

Ban on plastic bags

IF there is anything that is a recurring motif of day-to-day life in Pakistan, it is the unsightly plastic bag — or 'shopper' as we refer to it colloquially.

Now the chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has ordered a ban, to come into effect in the province after two months, on the production and distribution of polythene bags because of their adverse impact on drainage systems and the environment as a whole.

In the interim, all existing stocks of plastic bags will be removed from markets and factories, and shopkeepers told to stop buying them and ensure early disposal of bags already purchased.

Also read: [Khattak orders ban on plastic bags](#)

An awareness campaign is also to be launched through the media and other available forums to educate the public about the consequences of using this non-biodegradable item, and the sanctions that will be incurred should anyone continue to

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utilise them beyond the grace period. The use of paper bags will be encouraged instead.

A 2004 study estimated that, based on figures available at the time, the number of plastic bags used in Pakistan every year would be an astounding 112 billion by 2015.

There is no doubt that the sooner this ubiquitous polluter of our waterways, sewage lines and shoreline is taken out of circulation, the better it will be.

Many an attempt has been made in the past to ban them, but to no avail — aside from the federal ban on black plastic bags — largely because of the authorities' lackadaisical, disorganised approach.

Every monsoon season in particular, when choked drainage lines create havoc in urban areas, the imperative need for action on this front is reiterated, and then promptly forgotten. However, enabling a gradual transition for both suppliers and consumers to switch to biodegradable paper bags — as long as they are made from recycled paper — is a sensible and environmentally sound measure that can viably be enforced, if the will to do so is there.

The other provinces too should take a leaf out of KP's book.

Published in Dawn, August 5th, 2015

Traders vs FBR

THE government is facing a growing storm of protest from the traders lobby against the implementation of a new withholding tax on all types of bank transactions by non-filers of tax returns.

Given that this is a matter of such vital importance, the state should stand its ground firmly and refuse to compromise further than the concessions already made.

The traders lobby presents a ramshackle front and many of their arguments make little sense: they argue that they are protesting on behalf of the people, that the measure is an imposition at the behest of foreign powers, and that they will withdraw their money from the banks and conduct all future transactions in cash instead.

Furthermore, the leadership of the traders is fractious and divided; three separate dates for a shutter-down strike were announced because the various factions could not fall in line behind a common leadership. The opposition to the government's move is unlikely to be able to sustain itself for very long.

The State Bank confirms that there is no appreciable decline in deposits in the month of July. Even if there is a small decline, it will be hard to attribute it to the withholding tax since the early weeks of July routinely see a drop in deposits which had been inflated in the closing days of June as the bank's financial year ends, as well as Eid withdrawals.

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Other than withdrawing their funds from the banking system – something the traders cannot do for very long – there is no other leverage that the protesting groups have over the government.

Their ranks are depleted now that Chambers of Commerce across the country cut a deal with the government early in July and withdrew their protest.

Karachi traders are largely ignoring the strike calls. Only a few bodies in Lahore are raising a furore, and even their leadership is internally divided.

With a shallow base, a narrow front and practically no leverage, the protesting parties should be easy to handle. The tax has exposed the true face of Pakistan's informal sector, and the practice of benami accounts to conduct business transactions.

Given the large costs that the lack of documentation imposes on those who are within the system, the government should stand firm on its resolve. If the tax forces a large number of fresh filings of tax returns, the government can claim success in a very important battle.

Published in Dawn, August 5th, 2015

Difficult, yet necessary

FOR over a decade now, the state has struggled with the issue of madressah reform. The matter gained prominence during the Musharraf era, when Pakistan's internal militancy problem and the changing geopolitical calculus forced the state to re-examine the role of seminaries.

The link between hard-line madressahs and sectarian and jihadi militancy began to be increasingly discussed, while in more recent times, in the aftermath of the Peshawar Army Public School massacre, madressah reform was given new vigour under the National Action Plan.

However, while efforts are being made by the state to register and regulate seminaries, the process overall remains cumbersome and seems to lack motivation.

For example, as reported in this paper, in Sindh the provincial government seems to be shifting responsibility on to the centre for failing to push forward the reforms process.

Provincial officials say Islamabad is delaying reforms by not issuing clear guidelines, apparently to prevent a backlash from religious parties. Yet it is also true that the Sindh administration has been slow in closing down unregistered madressahs — something that does not require the go-ahead from the federal capital.

It would be wrong to say that all madressahs preach terrorism and extremism. Yet enough of these institutions indulge in extremist indoctrination and play host to militants or their

sympathisers for the state to take action where their registration and monitoring is concerned.

For example, it was recently reported that 115 individuals linked to banned outfits were ‘teaching’ at madressahs in the Rawalpindi district. If this example of the garrison city is anything to go by, it can be well imagined how many militants or their sympathisers ‘teach’ at the thousands of madressahs spread out across this land.

Secondly, unregistered seminaries are a clear security risk, for the state has no reliable idea about the students or faculty at these institutions. Looking at two urban areas alone — Rawalpindi and Karachi — based on reported figures, it seems that there are 1,300 unregistered madressahs. Again, magnify this to the national level and it is not something that can be ignored by the government.

Madressah reform is difficult but not impossible. It is difficult because for decades, the state ignored and even encouraged the mushroom growth of seminaries for its own strategic ends.

Also, it is believed that the government fears a backlash from not only the mainstream religious parties, which have a power base within the madressahs, but more ominously from the militant groups which have a support network in hard-line seminaries.

Yet despite the difficulties, the state must march ahead with the reforms process. All madressahs must be registered and those found preaching hatred against any sect, religion or group, or providing fronts for banned outfits, must be closed down.

Does the state have the wherewithal to do what needs to be done on this crucial front?

Published in Dawn, August 5th, 2015

Hepatitis treatment

AMONG recent medical breakthroughs, few have created the kind of stir as has Sovaldi, the ‘miracle’ cure for hepatitis C which infects between 170-200 million people worldwide.

In Pakistan, there are an estimated 10-15 million sufferers, which translates into a considerable burden on the health and economic sectors. However, access to the drug is proving to be difficult because of a tightly regulated system that has been put in place for its distribution.

Take a look: [Hepatitis wonder drug inaccessible to patients](#)

Only one local pharmaceutical company has been given the go-ahead to sell the drug through an extremely limited number of distribution points in the country.

In Rawalpindi, for example, as per a recent report in this paper, only one chemist is authorised to sell it, that too on a prescription from a private clinic that charges Rs2,500 per patient.

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The rationale given for this extremely controlled regimen is to prevent the smuggling out of this highly coveted medication.

While the possibility of smuggling must be controlled through every means, the benefits of this medicine mean that risk must be balanced with need.

Sovaldi, produced by the US pharmaceutical giant Gilead, has several advantages over the older treatments for hepatitis C, including a shorter course of treatment in many cases, fewer side effects and a 90pc rate of cure.

While it was offered to Pakistan as a developing country at far lower rates than those in the West, the government did well to slash the price further, from Rs55,000 to Rs32,300 per bottle which contains medication for one month.

However, that is still too expensive for many patients, a large number of whom are from lower-income backgrounds.

Given that so many are in need of treatment, the procedure needs to be swiftly streamlined and publicised through the media so that patients do not suffer any further.

More medical professionals, specifically gastroenterologists in public hospitals, should be authorised to prescribe Sovaldi; and the health ministry needs to consider granting licences for the generic manufacture of the drug to bring costs down.

Published in Dawn, August 6th, 2015

IDPs' funding crunch

WITH national attention mostly preoccupied by security matters and political theatre, the plight of Fata's internally displaced persons is easily forgotten.

Yet the fact remains that hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the conflict in the tribal areas remain unable to return home, while there are indications that their ordeal may get tougher still.

As reported in this paper on Wednesday, UN agencies are likely to wind down relief activities for IDPs mainly due to a funding shortfall, along with restrictions on access to displaced persons placed on humanitarian workers — both local and foreign.

Attracting funds from the global community in these times of financial uncertainty is indeed tough, along with the fact that more 'high-profile' conflicts, such as Syria, are currently attracting the attention of the donor community.

In the Fata IDPs' case, while \$433m is required to fund relief programmes, the UN says only \$197m has been received. The fact that the state has restricted access — reportedly due to security concerns — to aid workers has also hampered efforts, as organisations are not able to independently verify the conditions.

In the meantime, only 4,000 out of over 100,000 displaced families, whose details have been verified, have been able to return to North Waziristan.

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The government hopes to send all IDPs home by the end of 2016. That is a long way away and the state must explain how it expects to sustain these people until then, especially if funds are short.

If donors have tightened their purse strings, then the state must do some creative maths and come up with the funds for the IDPs' upkeep and rehabilitation as these are Pakistani citizens and it is primarily the government's responsibility to care for them.

Secondly, the government must reconsider its policy of not giving access to IDPs to humanitarian workers. If it is unable to help IDPs, it must not create obstacles in the way of those who are in a position to provide help.

The displaced persons' food, shelter, health and education needs must be catered to until they are able to return to their native areas, while the conflict zones must be rebuilt to allow these people to start their lives anew.

The military may have done its job in largely clearing the tribal areas of militants. Now it is the state's job to ensure that the civilians displaced by the military operation are not left in the lurch.

Published in Dawn, August 6th, 2015

Supreme Court judgement

BOWING to the supremacy of parliament and express language of the Constitution, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has dismissed the challenges to the 18th and 21st Amendments.

Effectively, then, the new military court system designed to try civilian terrorism suspects in virtual secrecy and approved by a two-thirds majority of both houses of parliament in January will resume functioning. Prison sentences and even the death penalty handed down by such courts will, if upheld on appeal, be implemented.

The country is set to have a parallel judicial system for all intents and purposes until the sunset clause in the 21st Amendment expires in 2016. Yesterday was certainly bittersweet: the SC did the right thing in allowing the will of parliament to prevail, but it was the will of parliament itself that was flawed — no democratic system should ever have military courts in the manner and for the reasons they have been foisted on the country by the military leadership after the Peshawar carnage last December.

The judgment itself, nearly a thousand pages long and in two languages, will be closely examined in the days ahead and will have far-reaching implications for a range of issues, from the basic feature/basic structure doctrine to whether future amendments to the Constitution can be challenged in court.

None of that, though, will address a two-fold challenge that the country faces as a result of its elected representatives choosing the profoundly undemocratic path of military courts: reforming

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the criminal justice system on an urgent basis and ensuring that the life of the new military courts is not extended again for any reason whatsoever in 2016, when the sunset clause in the 21st Amendment will go into effect.

Unhappily, the law ministry seems uniquely ill-equipped — even in comparison to the lack of full-time, ministerial leadership and dysfunction in other key ministries such as foreign affairs and defence — to lead from the front.

The law minister, Pervaiz Rashid, is really the information minister given the additional portfolio because the prime minister is determined to retain Zahid Hamid, who the government has been ordered to indict on treason by the special court handling the Musharraf case, as a key legal adviser.

Mr Hamid, meanwhile, has been tasked with shepherding electoral reforms through parliament, while other special assistants of the prime minister deal with legislative matters on an ad hoc basis. It is hardly a recipe for any government to tackle the profoundly difficult job of criminal justice reform.

Nor is there any real pressure from or initiative within the superior judiciary to tackle administrative reforms of the lower courts. Quite simply, and very unhappily, criminal justice reform is not a priority for the government, the judiciary or parliament — which puts into doubt that the new system of military courts will in fact be disbanded in 2016.

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Ulema against polio

PARENTAL refusals continue to be a worrying factor in the drive against polio in Pakistan.

As reported in this paper yesterday, during the last vaccination campaign in Balochistan, parents of over 21,000 children refused to allow their offspring to be inoculated against the crippling disease. Of these, 21pc declined on religious grounds.

This was pointed out during a meeting in Quetta that provincial health officials held with prominent intellectuals and ulema.

Also read: [Religious leaders to defend polio fight](#)

With a vaccination drive scheduled to start soon in Balochistan, the religious leaders were asked to play a proactive role, particularly in the high-risk Quetta block, which includes Quetta, Pishin and Killa Abdullah districts.

Significantly, these areas were the most affected by polio last year in the province which recorded around 25 polio cases. The religious leaders present at the meeting reaffirmed their continued support for the polio eradication campaign.

However, the clergy needs to do far more than mouthing platitudes and giving reassurances. It has considerable sway over societal attitudes to education and healthcare, particularly in the country's more conservative areas.

Vaccination against polio is no exception. In fact, religious sentiment has been especially exploited on this issue by

extremists to derail the anti-polio effort, render the work of vaccinators exceedingly dangerous and even justify the murder of around 70 polio workers and members of their security detail since 2012.

Religious leaders can play a vital role to change the narrative and counter those peddling disinformation. However, the endeavour must be sustained and relentless enough to develop critical mass.

In 2013, hard-line cleric Maulana Samiul Haq issued a fatwa urging parents to have their children vaccinated against polio; he later appeared in a photo-op with PTI chief Imran Khan who administered anti-polio drops to his grandson.

Aside from dramatic visuals, such one-stop, flash-in-the-pan efforts achieve little of substance. Pakistan's clergy could look to the stunning success in polio eradication by India where ulema committees — including representatives of various Muslim sects as well as a doctor — were formed to address parental reservations regarding vaccination, reportedly found most often among Muslim communities.

The strategy is often cited as having played a definitive role in India's campaign.

Meanwhile, although authorities in Pakistan have even arrested parents/guardians for refusing to get their children inoculated against polio, they could perhaps — as a somewhat less draconian sanction — also consider linking the issuance or renewal of certain documents to parents allowing their children to be vaccinated.

A difficult decision

IT is the right decision, argued in the right manner, though perhaps the Supreme Court majority verdict written by Chief Justice Nasirul Mulk could have emphasised the undesirability of, effectively, a parallel court system where fundamental rights will be compromised.

On initial reading, the lengthy judgement handed down on Wednesday, including dissenting and additional notes and partly, for the first time, written in Urdu, underscores at least three things.

First, this is a court that values the opinions of individual justices rather than the awkward unanimity imposed by former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry.

Take a look: [Military courts get Supreme Court nod](#)

That the verdicts were split, with as many as six judges choosing to reject the majority's opinion on certain issues, adds to the richness and the rigour of the overall judgment.

Unanimous decisions suggest a monolith, which the court was never meant to be, and under the retired Mr Chaudhry the unanimity imposed by him tended to compromise the quality of full-court decisions.

Second, the SC has done away with dangerous notions of basic structure/basic features of the Constitution and reaffirmed the supremacy of the people and parliament. In doing so, one of the more troubling aspects of Mr Chaudhry's legacy has also

been done away with, for it was under Mr Chaudhry that the SC flirted with the idea of finding a hitherto unknown basic structure of the Constitution that was inviolable.

At the time of the first set of 18th Amendment hearings five years ago, judicial activism was at its peak and the Chaudhry-led court was determined to find a way of re-capturing the power to appoint superior court judges that the 18th Amendment had stripped away and handed to parliament.

But that narrow institutional interest of the court threatened to open the door to all manner of troubling consequences in the name of a basic structure/basic features doctrine.

Ever since the Objectives Resolution was made a substantive part of the Constitution by the Zia regime, those with the ambition of Islamising the state further have sought to argue that the Objectives Resolution has an overriding effect over the rest of the Constitution — a dangerous and patently undemocratic line of argument. Wednesday's majority judgement does much to put to rest that line of argument.

Third, the SC has re-affirmed, though in surprisingly soft and ambiguous language, its right to judicially review cases sent to military courts and seemingly allowed the right to appeal to the superior judiciary of those convicted in military courts.

Perhaps the majority was aware that judicial review and the right to appeal could effectively gut the new military court system, making it no different in impact to the anti-terrorism courts, and so chose to downplay concerns about aggressive judicial intervention. It does represent a missed opportunity for

rights enforcement, especially for an institution that ought to put rights at the centre of all that it does.

Published in Dawn, August 7th, 2015

Traffic crackdown

GRANTED that Karachi's traffic is frightful, but the state's plan to lock up violators in jail for up to two years is a tad extreme. As reported in this paper, from next week traffic police in the metropolis intends to punish those who violate traffic signals and the one-way rule, as well as transporters who ferry passengers on the rooftops of their vehicles, with jail sentences ranging from six months to two years. No doubt, the law of the jungle prevails on Karachi's roads, with motorists violating every rule in the book. It is not uncommon to see vehicles driving on the wrong side of the road on speedy thoroughfares, signals broken with reckless abandon and speed limits ignored with impunity. The results are deadly: one figure from 2013 shows that over 1,100 people died in road accidents, while there were over 33,000 injuries. Moreover, drivers' indiscipline causes gridlock and bottlenecks, resulting in wastage of time and fuel, as well as frayed nerves. So a fully-fledged campaign to make the city's roads safer is long overdue.

However, are stiff jail terms the best way to address Karachi's traffic woes? After all, there appears to be a better example of dealing with traffic chaos from another major city: Lahore. In

the Punjab capital, the traffic system has improved considerably due to the introduction of wardens. Though the system is not perfect, the wardens have considerably improved matters by handing down fines to errant motorists and — more importantly — not backing off even if bribes are offered. Hence, if the administration wants to clean up Karachi's traffic, it must ensure that officials enforce the rules already on the books and do not relent if attempts are made to grease palms or flaunt 'influence'. It would be a good idea to run regular traffic awareness campaigns and punish repeat offenders with hefty fines. Additionally, thinking in the longer term, the state must address infrastructural weaknesses — such as decrepit public transport and rampant encroachments — that add to Karachi's traffic chaos.

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Helicopter crash

AN expression of respect is due to those who lost their lives in the tragic helicopter crash near Mansehra on Thursday.

One of relief is in order for the narrow escape passengers in another Mi-17 helicopter, belonging to the PAF, had on the same day near Chitral.

Reaching out to an injured soldier in Gilgit, the army's medical team travelling in the helicopter that crashed near Mansehra was motivated by the noblest of all ideals: saving a human life

and alleviating human suffering. In their passing, they bring to fore the reality of how certain risks cannot be avoided and certain tasks can never be put off.

Know more: [Bodies of 12 army men sent to CMH for DNA test](#)

The incident, which came less than three months after the Mi-17 helicopter crash in Naltar near Gilgit, also highlighted the hectic times — replete with pressing, unavoidable, urgent jobs — that this country is passing through.

This entails plenty of activity, including urgent assignments for the Mi-17s, a model that had five accidents over the past decade until it met with two in a day on Thursday.

Back in May, the Mi-17 flew a select group of envoys to Pakistan on a mission aimed at opening up the country to the whole world.

The Naltar accident was blamed on a mechanical fault. Of Thursday's incidents, technical fault was again ascribed to the helicopter which crash-landed in Chitral whereas the weather was held responsible for the deadly plunge near Mansehra.

An inquiry should bring greater details about exactly what went wrong, and where, during the journey.

Prima facie, Pakistan's Mi-17 helicopters, made in Russia and refurbished with American help, are a case requiring some serious scrutiny and perhaps some fast improvement in hardware.

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Investigation must already be under way in the wake of the huge loss at Naltar.

The latest double blow must take the probe deeper and lead to comprehensive redress. No one — not even those who are taught to look the gravest danger in the eye — should be allowed to risk beyond what is absolutely necessary.

Published in Dawn, August 8th, 2015

Asghar Khan case

AS reported in this newspaper yesterday, the much-delayed, Supreme Court-ordered FIA investigation into the stealing of the 1990 general elections may be completed by year end.

If that does happen and the FIA investigation leads to a trial, as also required by the Supreme Court judgement in the Asghar Khan case, of former army chief Aslam Beg and former ISI chief Asad Durrani, it would be a history-setting precedent that would dwarf the NLC-related decision by the army this week.

For one, the punishment handed down to two retired army generals in the NLC scam is about a relatively straightforward corruption case.

Know more: [Asghar Khan case: FIA likely to complete report by end of December](#)

The Asghar Khan case and Mehrangate, though, were about the use of money to thwart a political party, the PPP, from returning to power and install in its place, via a fraudulent election, a coalition cobbled together by the military establishment. To put that on the historical and legal record — as the Supreme Court did in the Asghar Khan case in 2012 — and for it to lead to a trial under the law would heal many historical wounds.

If that were to happen under the present government of the original beneficiary of the scheme, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, it would send an even stronger signal that eventually the law will prevail in Pakistan.

Much is often made of the argument that to revisit past offences of the establishment would be to infuse fresh tensions into the present-day civil-military equation and put the democratic project under a cloud once again. But that is simply not true.

The Asghar Khan case did not lead to the heavens falling. More importantly, it was pursued by a Supreme Court that was fiercely critical of a civilian government, including sacking a prime minister. There was no partisan, political agenda, as has been argued in the Musharraf treason case. In addition, trials and punishment in matters concerning institutions have wider healing powers.

Consider how the NLC-related punishments have been widely hailed in Pakistan. The military has emerged as a stronger institution as a result, not weaker. Note also that when a week earlier the Supreme Court had excoriated the NAB for being unable to follow up the NLC scam with military investigators,

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the same reservations about civil-military tensions flaring up once again had been expressed. In the end, the military did the right thing.

It is also worth reiterating why the Asghar Khan case is so important, even 25 years after the event. What was done in 1990 arguably set the country up for a decade of political instability followed by another long spell of military rule.

Gen Aslam Beg (ret'd) in particular has shown no remorse for or understanding of his transgressions. And his actions were really against the people of Pakistan, for it was from them that was stolen who has the right to legitimately represent them.

Published in Dawn, August 8th, 2015

Sindh CM's objections

ONCE again, the Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah has made his displeasure known over raids being carried out by federal authorities — namely, NAB and the FIA — on government departments in the province.

Over 56,000 files, most of them relating to land records, were recently seized by the FIA in raids on the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation's land department. In a press conference on Thursday, Mr Shah alleged that NAB and FIA were exceeding their authority and violating the autonomy given to provinces under the 18th Amendment.

Take a look: [Qaim discontent with NAB, Rangers performance in Sindh](#)

The Sindh government, he said, had therefore decided to approach legal experts to counter the 'interference' from the federal agencies.

Back in June, after the Pakistan Rangers, Sindh — a federal paramilitary force — had raided the offices of the Sindh Building Control Authority in Karachi, it had provoked the usually unflappable Asif Zardari to lash out against the military, followed by a letter from the chief minister to the DG Rangers. In it, he accused the Rangers of acting beyond their mandate and criticised the actions as "unacceptable".

Granted, the wheels of 'accountability' — or at least the appearance of it — on the political front seem to be moving

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perceptibly faster in Sindh, both for the PPP and the MQM, than elsewhere in the country.

The chief minister had a valid point when it came to the Rangers, for the raid on the SBCA offices suggested the force was delving into the realm of white-collar crime which — despite the knock-on effects on crime as a whole — lies beyond its mandated purview of countering terrorism.

The provincial chief executive's recent protestations however, are an exercise in obfuscation and specious reasoning. Much as the Sindh government might wish it so, the 18th Amendment does not give the provincial dispensations carte blanche to conduct themselves as they wish (especially when an adverse wind is blowing through the corridors of power on the national level).

Corruption is indeed a provincial subject, but what has the Sindh government done to address it? Moreover, the contours of corruption do not necessarily begin and end within the provincial boundaries.

Questionable land transactions of the most brazen variety have been a feature during the current dispensation, with the billions of rupees raised from them being spirited out of the country.

Meanwhile, the provincial anti-corruption mechanism, such as it is, has served as little more than a lackey to corrupt elements within the government.

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Brutal gun culture

THE recent incident involving cricket ace Wasim Akram and an unnamed trigger-happy individual serves as a reminder of the brutal gun culture that prevails in Pakistan, especially its largest city. The legendary fast bowler was reportedly involved in an accident with another vehicle while on his way to Karachi's National Stadium on Thursday. According to Mr Akram, a vehicle deliberately rammed into his car. As an argument ensued, an individual from the other vehicle pulled out a gun and shot at Mr Akram's car. It is a relief that the sporting great was unharmed. Police say a suspect is in custody while the investigation continues.

Some estimates suggest there are between 18 to 20 million firearms in the possession of civilians in Pakistan. This is a frightening figure, and it is evident that millions of gun owners are not shy about flaunting their deadly toys. In Karachi, from 'influentials' with an armada of guards in tow down to the common mugger — all are armed to the teeth, and a neighbourhood argument or burglary can result in tragedy. Over the past few days there has been a spate of shooting incidents in the metropolis, including a botched robbery in which a leading lady doctor was murdered. The issue of regulating firearms is a joke, as the state has initiated many de-weaponisation drives with great fanfare, only to eventually lose steam. Government officials have themselves admitted that many purported gun licenses are faked, while others have been issued without proper verification. This is the state of the official licensing mechanism; on top of that, there are the countless illegal guns floating around. What is needed is a thorough, countrywide de-weaponisation campaign; ideally,

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only police and military personnel should carry guns, and there too they must use deadly force as a last resort. Law-enforcement agencies have done a reasonable job in reducing Karachi's violence in recent months. Street crime remains a problem, though. A similar effort is required to rid the city — and country — of guns.

Published in Dawn, August 9th, 2015

Saudi suicide attack

WHILE the occupation of territory within Iraq and Syria by the self-styled Islamic State sent shockwaves across the Middle East — if not the world — should the extremist movement gain a foothold in Saudi Arabia, the consequences would be even grimmer. And over the past few months we have witnessed IS expand its footprint within the kingdom in a devastating manner. On Thursday, a suicide bomber targeted a mosque in the city of Abha frequented by security men; at least 15 people have been confirmed dead while the attack has been described as the deadliest aimed at Saudi security personnel in recent years. Though the attack took place in a province that borders Yemen — where the Saudis are fighting the Houthi militia — it has been claimed by IS in an online statement. It seems that after targeting the kingdom's Shia minority, the group has turned its guns on the Saudi state. In May, IS suicide bombers attacked two Shia mosques in the Eastern Province in different incidents, while there have been a number of confrontations between the militants and security forces. That IS does not

intend to stop here is evident; it has urged young Saudis to carry out attacks and has promised to continue targeting the Saudi state.

Riyadh has been taking action against militants on its soil. Last month over 400 individuals with suspected links to IS were picked up in swoops. Yet clearly, the IS support base and militant pool in the kingdom remains, indicating that more needs to be done. The Saudis should not underestimate their foe, especially when there is a radicalised segment of the population with sympathies for the 'caliphate'. Though Riyadh has battled an Al Qaeda insurgency in the past, and emerged victorious, this time things are a little more complicated. For one, Saudi Arabia is involved in direct hostilities in Yemen, which has kept its security forces occupied, while its reported support to questionable militant groups in the Syrian civil war continues. Perhaps to address its internal militancy issue Saudi Arabia needs to disentangle itself from these regional conflicts and help the belligerents reach negotiated settlements. The fact is that IS seeks to bring down the Middle East's regimes and remake the region in its own image, which makes the outfit a threat to Saudi as well as regional security. Therefore, all regional states need to coordinate efforts to halt the expansion of this ruthless concern.

Published in Dawn, August 9th, 2015

Afghanistan: future uncertain

THE bloodiest 24 hours in Kabul in years suggest two things. One, the issue of who is to succeed Mullah Omar as leader of the Afghan Taliban is anything but settled. It could be that, as many observers have suggested, the weekend attacks in Kabul are the result of factionalism and a challenge to Mullah Akhtar Mansour. The Kabul attacks could also have been authorised by Mullah Mansour himself, possibly to demonstrate that he is not in the pocket of Pakistan or desperate to make peace with the Afghan state. Either way, the succession issue is far from settled. While it is still not clear quite who leaked news of Mullah Omar's death and why, it does seem that hiding Omar's death for two years has hurt Mullah Mansour's credibility. A new leader who hoodwinked his fellow militants in an attempt to make sure he inherited the leadership mantle is hardly the kind of figure who compares well to Mullah Omar.

The question for the Afghan government and the outside world, in particular Pakistan, is what next? The facts suggest a gloomy picture. The possibility of a dialogue process resuming, or starting anew, soon seems low. There are also a couple of months at least left of the principal fighting season this year, suggesting more military gains for the Taliban ahead. Worryingly for the Afghan state, it has already lost record numbers of soldiers and policemen in Taliban attacks this year. The government of President Ashraf Ghani is also hampered in its ability to regroup and reassess its security strategy because of internal political divisions. Parliament has yet to approve a defence minister. It is difficult to know whether and if the

Afghan Taliban will stay politically united or how long it will take for the present convulsions inside the insurgency to settle down.

For Pakistan, at least, the political goal should be to continue improving ties with the Afghan government, while the security goal should be to curb militant activity along the Durand Line. With the Afghan Taliban, the goal should be to reaffirm the state's preference for a negotiated settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government while simultaneously encouraging — and this will be a very fine balancing act — the Taliban to end internal rifts and unite behind the pro-peace faction without seeming to create a new Taliban leadership that is little more than a front for the Pakistani security establishment. Perhaps also the political leadership can try and contribute more to Afghan policy and take a more visible role. A visit to Kabul by the prime minister, for example, could send the right signal and would give the political leadership of both countries an opportunity to discuss how to move ahead. It should be obvious: security or foreign policy without major civilian input is hardly good for Pakistan or the region.

Published in Dawn, August 9th, 2015

Blogger's killing

IN 2013, 'Islamist' groups in Bangladesh circulated the names of 84 'atheist' bloggers in that country who they wanted to be tried for blasphemy.

Niladri Chattopadhyay Niloy, who was brutally killed at his home in Dhaka on Friday, was the fourth blogger on that list to suffer this fate.

All four killings have taken place this year and the masterminds remain unidentified. Unless something drastic is done to check the trend, a large number of people in Bangladesh remain exposed to what has the look of a well-coordinated effort to silence those who have been deemed guilty of crossing the line while expressing their opinion.

Also read: [Fourth secular blogger murdered in Bangladesh, says activist](#)

Many at home and away accuse the Bangladesh government of not realising just how serious the situation is. Mr Niloy had complained to the police that he had received threats but media reports say he had got no protection. Apparently his killers didn't have to spend too much time planning their act, either.

They approached his house posing as potential tenants, took him to a room, completed the hideous job, and disappeared.

Viewed against the background of the global protest the earlier incidents in which bloggers had been killed had caused, and given the promises made by Dhaka to stand by its avowed

secular ideals, this was far too easy an execution of a desire to exterminate the unwanted.

There would be some cautious voices counselling restraint on the part of the bloggers but these must be overwhelmed by the ultimate argument: everything that is said can be countered by words wherever necessary.

Violence is less equipped to control thoughts and opinion today than it ever was. There are so many convenient tools of expression available in the era of technology. Blog-spots are one option that a growing number employ as a very personal means to inform and comment.

They are too numerous and too firmly rooted in modern society. Debate might defeat them. Violence cannot attempt to silence them.

Published in Dawn, August 10th, 2015

Slum settlements

GIVEN the dismissive manner in which Pakistan regularly treat its millions of poor, it is somewhat encouraging that the issue of resettling and compensating the former residents of Islamabad's I-11 slum remains on the agenda.

There is no denying that grossly improper force was used by both the Capital Development Authority and the Islamabad police; and while the settlement may have been illegal in point of fact, this needed to have been balanced by the awareness that Afghan Basti had been allowed to be established — under the very nose of the authorities that recently demolished it — some two decades ago.

Further, there are clear policy directives regarding the forced re-settlement of people. Answers need to be provided, now, no less than the matter of redressing the grievances of the people rendered homeless — 18 of whom remain in Adiala jail on judicial remand, and many of whom held another protest in Islamabad yesterday.

The matter is being taken up by the Senate, with a resolution moved by the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party on today's agenda.

The resolution terms the forceful removal of the slum an “inappropriate act” and urges the government to formulate “appropriate strategy to evacuate the katchi abadi inhabitants and to facilitate them in their rehabilitation so that it becomes compatible with the [sic] international human rights law.”

As senators mull over the matter, they would do well to keep in mind the fact that the issue is not just about Islamabad or the slum settlement in I-11.

The same picture is repeated across the country's towns and cities, with illegal settlements springing up because not enough provision is made in zoning and city development plans for low-income housing.

It was estimated last year that the country faced a housing shortage of more than 7 million units; the gap increases every year by a minimum of 500,000, with the overwhelming majority of the demand gap pertaining to low-income households.

Those in positions of administrative power seem to forget that Pakistan is a poor country, which therefore requires that policymaking address the needs of the many millions that have neither clout nor, often, a voice. In the urban areas, the issue is only bound to worsen seeing that rapid urbanisation and the migration of people to urban areas is under way.

As the resolution moved in the Senate notes, housing is a basic human right. City planners need to ensure that the Afghan Basti debacle is not repeated as a result of their own myopia.

Published in Dawn, August 10th, 2015

Child abuse scandal

AS national outrage grows and the Punjab government scrambles to try and limit the political damage from the serial child abuse in Kasur district, at the fore once again is the gross disparity between the powerful and the weak and the politicisation of law enforcement.

The terrible events that occurred over — and this is the truly horrifying aspect — many years in rural Punjab were neither a secret nor hard to unearth.

Know more : [Accused says children abused in his presence](#)

On July 8, this newspaper published a news report about the very shocking events in the area that had finally forced police to act after the villagers' complaints and anger proved too much to ignore.

Headlined '[15 booked for sex abuse, extortion](#)', the report noted: "The gang, according to the FIRs, had recorded videos while sodomising young boys and raping girls and extorted millions of rupees as well as gold jewellery from villagers since 2009.

Reportedly, the entire village was aware of the alleged offence but no one dared report it to police as the suspects were allegedly influential."

Yet, the police only appeared to have acted under pressure from outraged locals in multiple villages around Hussain Khanwala who decided to protest publicly.

The July 8 report states, "On Saturday evening, hundreds of villagers from Rajiwala, Elowala, Bazeedpur, Kharapar, Choriwala, Nooriwala, Bhadian Usman, Ratnaiwala, Rangaywala, Bhagay, Jora, Nathaywala, and Mahalam gathered outside the Ganda Singh Police Station and demanded justice.

They even threatened with torching the houses of the suspects." Then last Tuesday, protesters in Kasur clashed with the police — leaving at least 15 protesters and policemen injured — demanding that the police investigation into the child abuse allegations ordered after the July protest be completed quickly.

The background is important because it puts into context the initial denials of the Punjab government and senior police officials over the weekend. Once the scandal became national news, Punjab officialdom's went into denial mode rather than be forthcoming about what was already known.

What should have happened? The horror in Kasur should have immediately led the Punjab government to revisit its entire law-enforcement strategy.

A sadistic criminal gang preying on hundreds of young boys and girls operating a stone's throw from the seat of provincial power and able to intimidate entire communities into keeping quiet for years — why is that even possible?

Nationally, it should have immediately stirred the kind of soul searching and calls for reforms that are now being suggested by politicians seemingly willing to use the Kasur scandal to attack the PML-N or to improve their own standing with the public by coming down harshly on the perpetrators.

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The real test though is what will happen when inevitably the news cycle moves on to the next topic. Will any of the politicians so eager to be heard from at the moment really do any of the hard work necessary to get reforms through?

Published in Dawn, August 10th, 2015

Film revival?

JUST a few years ago, anyone making the prediction would have been dismissed for building castles in the air: that cinemas across the country would be doing booming business and feeling confident in investing hard cash, large amounts of it, into infrastructure; that shows would be running to packed capacity with even a queue for tickets; and, what would have seemed most far-fetched of all, that audiences would be able to take their pick from new, locally made films for the silver screen, some of them of a quality to hold their own against imported fare.

Serendipitously enough, though, this magical moment seems to have come to pass. Over these Eid holidays past, so many new Pakistani films were scheduled to be released that the screening dates had to be phased.

Also read: [Must watch: Literary genius Manto comes to life in much-awaited biopic](#)

This is nothing short of a Phoenix-like rise from the ashes: the local film industry, which suffered sometimes justified criticism for poor quality from the late '80s onwards, was more or less declared comatose once the television landscape was liberalised and turned into a viable and paying profession.

Film studios in Lahore, once the hub of the local movie industry, fell deserted while the offices of entertainment television channels teemed with fresh entrants. From there to where we are now has been remarkable progress.

There is much that Pakistan's filmmakers can be proud of. From production quality to the range of subjects taken up, the variety and evidence of the potential to be mined is heartening.

Is it a revival of the industry, though? Unfortunately enough, it's too early to tell yet. There is one thing, though, that is bound to help, and that is for filmmakers and producers to put objectively assessed quality standards above all else.

In the months and years ahead, the film format will find itself tempted to steer in the direction of formulae that dominate the television screens – many of them mere variations on the soap opera.

Film must not take the same hidebound course.

Published in Dawn, August 11th, 2015

Victims of abuse

FROM a trickle to a flood, the horrific details of the child pornography case in Husain Khanwala village in Punjab's Kasur district are spilling out in the media.

Some facts remain to be ascertained: for example, how many victims there actually are, and what led to the racket being exposed now, several years after the alleged abuse first began to take place. What is clear is that a number of children, if not hundreds, were victims of this reprehensible crime.

According to news reports, these boys and girls – some younger than 14 years – were repeatedly preyed upon by a gang of paedophiles over a number of years and their sexual violation filmed.

Also read: [Kasur scandal: 'I thought of killing myself everyday'](#)

The perpetrators then blackmailed the victims and their families into paying them large sums of money in exchange for not making the videos public. Nevertheless, it is being reported that several such films are in circulation.

The outrage that the case has elicited in the country, particularly following what appeared as attempts by official quarters in the Punjab administration to either downplay it or deny it outright, has prompted the government to issue strong statements promising “exemplary punishment” for those found guilty.

Needless to say, there must be accountability. And not only of those who perpetrated these ghastly acts but also of those who, once again, illustrated how access to justice in this country is leveraged on influence and connections. However, overlooked amidst all the sensational coverage is the very real imperative for the victims' identities to be scrupulously protected.

These young people must have suffered profound psychological damage from the experiences they have endured. While it must be cathartic for them to be able to at last bring their tales of horror into the open and thereby have a chance at seeing their tormentors' punished, their long-term recovery can only be possible away from the glare of the media, in privacy, and with extended counselling.

In a society where child abuse has traditionally been a taboo subject, there is little understanding of this in the general public.

Nevertheless, one expects politicians to show some sensitivity and refrain from making political capital out of this tragedy by posing for photo ops with the victims.

The government, while doing all it can to get to the truth behind the whole sordid business and the speculation surrounding its details, must ensure that the victims' well-being is not lost in the din.

Long road ahead

THERE is a positive, mutually beneficial way to talk about terrorism-related issues.

Then there is seemingly the Pak-India state approach: the two sides ritualistically meet to discuss terror; they accuse each other of fomenting terrorism in the other's country; they present dossiers of evidence – often vague, rarely specific; and then, once the meeting is concluded, they boast to their domestic audiences of having put their best case forward in no uncertain terms.

The Pak-India approach achieves little and, worryingly, there are already signs that the upcoming meeting of national security advisors will follow the old template of talking past each other and achieving little.

Also read: [Pakistan says will not invite occupied Kashmir speaker to commonwealth conference](#)

It is possible to go into specifics of who is to blame and to what degree for each round that leads to nothing – if indeed the Aug 23 meeting produces nothing of substance.

The Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to appear tough on terrorism and Kashmir, but does not appear to have a firm grasp of the multi-dimensional policy issues as yet.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani state does not appear interested in ratcheting up tensions with India, even as it does not appear particularly keen to try and find avenues to peace.

The problem, as ever, remains the misplaced notion that the Pakistani and Indian states can carefully calibrate the tensions – or indeed low-level violence – in the region. They cannot.

On the Pakistani side, it is fairly evident that non-state actors can and have caused great convulsions through well-timed and frighteningly well-executed acts of violence.

The Peshawar carnage last December and the Mumbai attacks of 2008 are the foremost examples of what just a few fanatics can do. To believe that Zarb-i-Azb or Khyber-II or so-called intelligence-based operations in the cities have permanently and irreversibly damaged the militant complex is to be in denial of reality.

Militant elements and extremist groups remain worryingly well entrenched in society here and the long war against militancy and terrorism will take many years, perhaps even a generation, before it can be won.

On the Indian side, there appears to be a dangerous notion that Pakistan can be punished for its perceived support for anti-India, pro-Kashmir militant groups by fomenting violence in Fata, Balochistan, Karachi or other urban centres.

That misplaced notion is built on a denial of the legitimacy of Pak-India disputes, including Kashmir. Denial though is not just bad for the prospects of normalisation, but for stability too.

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The NSA meeting on Aug 23 needs to get beyond the familiar template of trading accusations and do what the Ufa joint statement suggested it is meant to do: “discuss all issues connected to terrorism”.

That would mean establishing a common, mutually acceptable and inclusive definition of terrorism; identifying ways to cooperate to pre-empt and investigate terror attacks; and addressing the long-term problems that fuel instability in the region.

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Obama’s ‘audacity’

PRESIDENT Barack Obama is being both candid and audacious — depending upon how you look at his statement that Benjamin Netanyahu is the only head of government to interfere in America’s foreign policy.

Asked in a TV interview if he could recall any other example where a foreign executive had done so, President Obama replied, “I do not recall a similar example.” In power for seven years, and now virtually at the end of his second term, President Obama has finally gone public with what no American president had the courage to say and annoy the powerful Israel lobby.

Know more: [Obama accuses Netanyahu of interfering in US foreign policy](#)

While he might not have been publicly insulted the way George Bush Jr. was by Ehud Olmert, President Obama must be well aware of Mr Netanyahu’s persistent defiance of his repeated pleas to Tel Aviv to stop settlement activity.

In his June 4, 2009 speech to the Muslim world, the president had called for a total halt to new settlements and an end to the expansion of the existing ones. Israel treated his call with contempt and has since then continued to do both.

Then on one of his visits to the US, Mr Netanyahu used what for American Congress and executive is a potent weapon — the America Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Standing on American soil he told the AIPAC that he categorically rejected a halt to settlement activity and said, “Jerusalem is not a settlement”.

Congress also cheered him and, according to NYT’s Thomas Friedman, the standing ovations he received were “bought and paid for by the Israel lobby.”

It is too early to say who will get the Democratic ticket, but from his party’s point of view, President Obama has done two wrongs — he is the man responsible for the Iran deal and he has publicly accused an Israeli prime minister of interfering in American affairs.

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For the two ‘crimes’ President Obama will have to fight harder to secure congressional approval of the Iran deal and ensure a Democratic victory next year.

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Doctors’ accountability

CASES of serious malpractice or negligence by doctors are becoming a routine phenomenon and patients lack a forum where complaints can be registered for sincere follow up.

Almost everybody knows someone who has suffered due to doctors’ poor treatment. In some cases it stems from a lack of competence, and in others outright greed as the doctor in question prescribes many expensive tests simply in order to make money out of the patient. In this context, it is encouraging to see the Lahore Consumer Court award massive damages to a senior doctor for negligence in treating a newborn infant who had to subsequently be flown to London for a liver transplant.

Take a look: [Liver damage: Consumer Court orders doctor to pay millions in damages](#)

Consumer courts have awarded damages to medical practitioners in the past too, but the size of the award — Rs46 million — makes this a landmark judgement. Although the case is likely to go into appeal, it nevertheless sends out a

positive signal to doctors that they ought to be careful when treating a patient and remember to put the patients’ health above their own pecuniary gains.

The fact that the case has been decided by the Consumer Court shows the limited avenues for redressal available to victims of malpractice or negligence.

The Punjab Healthcare Commission was set up after the case was registered in 2007, but to this day it is not clear how many cases the Commission has handled nor how many it has seen through to closure. For the other provinces, it is not clear where patients can lodge complaints and obtain redressal.

The Consumer Court is filling a vacuum in this case. The country badly needs a forum where patients can lodge complaints, and also a body that oversees the medical profession.

Leaving the application of standards to the professional bodies of doctors is no solution since they are more likely to close ranks around their peers rather than look out for the interests of the patients.

This failure of the medical profession is causing growing numbers of people to go abroad for even routine treatments, but this option is only available to those who can afford it — a select few.

It is becoming increasingly imperative that the power a doctor enjoys over his or her patients be exercised with due care. When they fail to do so, then doctors need to be held

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accountable for their failure to discharge their professional duties in an ethical manner.

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Ghani's remarks

THE wave of Taliban attacks across Afghanistan, and especially in Kabul, were always going to elicit strong condemnation from the Afghan government.

Rather worryingly though Afghan President Ashraf Ghani chose to [direct his anger at Pakistan](#), claiming that the massive attacks have been orchestrated from inside Pakistan and that the Pakistani security establishment has done little to stem the tide.

Much as it is possible to understand Mr Ghani and other Afghan officials' concerns about the grave instability inside Afghanistan, the anger directed towards Pakistan is hardly going to help matters. Perhaps Mr Ghani and his supporters ought to recall recent history.

Also read: [Abdullah Abdullah accuses Pakistan of helping Afghanistan's enemies](#)

Ahead of the first round of the Murree talks, there had been much talk of a growing understanding between the Pakistani and Afghan states. The mood in the short run-up to the second

round of talks was almost celebratory. Then, on the eve of the second round, it was the Afghan government itself that threw the talks into disarray by asserting that Mullah Omar had died two years ago in Karachi.

While Afghan officials claimed they only confirmed what had become known to a growing number of Afghan Taliban leaders, the fact is that it was Mr Ghani's own government that broke the news of Mullah Omar's death.

After that, it was almost inevitable that the talks would be thrown off course and that the succession issue would take centre-stage.

On that count at least, the Pakistani position has been relatively clear: discourage factionalism and help keep as much of the Afghan Taliban as possible under one central leadership. Surely, whatever Mr Ghani may claim and Afghan officials may believe, the security establishment here could not have wanted a bitter leadership struggle to have erupted inside the Taliban.

The Afghan president's frustration notwithstanding his present accusations mirror the anger and suspicion of earlier this year when he accused Pakistan of not delivering on what it had pledged — only for Pakistan to eventually in fact nudge the Taliban to the preliminary negotiating table.

Perhaps Mr Ghani ought to have waited until the senior Afghan political delegation visits Pakistan this week before raging against the Pakistani state. After all, by his own admission, Mr Ghani had only hours before his diatribe spoken to both Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and army chief Gen Raheel Sharif.

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It does appear that all sides are consolidating their respective bases first. President Ghani's diatribe was probably meant in part to appease hawks inside his government and the Afghan security apparatus.

The wave of Taliban attacks may be partly for the new leadership, or the leadership contenders, to establish their bonafides as genuine Taliban leaders and not mere power-hungry leaders.

And the Pakistani state's relative reticence may be to not cause the Taliban to fracture more and deeper than it needs to. A bit of patience in Kabul, however difficult, may help.

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Crash of 2008

YET another investigation report into a stock market crash has managed to deflect the critical question that plagues the country's financial markets.

That question is: how do you curb the power of a small group of large stockbrokers to manipulate the market and thereby create the conditions for periodic crashes?

The Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan has just completed its report into the crash of 2008, and the subsequent

decision to place a floor on all stocks, and claimed that the "main fault lies with the commission".

The SECP claimed that "the only but severe fault that triggered the 2008 stock market crisis was placing of floor in the Karachi Stock Exchange and the worst part was that it continued for 110 days." This assessment must be taken with a grain of salt.

It could equally be said that the decision to apply the floor was not a cause as much as a consequence of the crisis. The SECP has blamed the entire crisis on the single decision to place the floor, and attributed that decision to its own leadership at the time. Ascribing what was clearly a structural defect in the country's capital markets at the time to a single decision made by a small group of people smacks of evasion of deeper responsibility.

The SECP chairman says the investigators found no "concrete evidence" of the influence of brokers within its own decision-making at that time. He also said he does not wish "to waste energies on blame game and trying to see which broker made how much money in the process".

These are unfortunate statements. The role of big brokers to skew the pitch on which trading takes place has been documented. Any attempt to get at the influence that a small number of brokers have on the regulator and the capital markets would not be "wasted energies", but a very worthwhile exercise in unearthing the facts that could then inform the subsequent reform process.

One can only hope that the SECP releases the full report quickly so the public can make up its own mind whether or not

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a thorough effort has been made to get to the facts by the investigators. But going by the narrative released by the SECP thus far, it seems the brokers and the structural defects in the regulatory environment that create the incentives for manipulation are being given a clean chit.

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Sign of a course correction?

AT long last, and with one resounding voice, the representatives of the Pakistani people have spoken for the minorities of this country. In so doing, they may have taken a historic step towards a course correction for Pakistan's future.

On Tuesday, the National Assembly passed a resolution demanding that the views of Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah about the status of minorities in Pakistan, as articulated in his famous speech of Aug 11, 1947, be “regarded as a road map” in the years ahead. Moved by Kamran Michael, minister for ports and shipping, the resolution referred to Mr Jinnah's speech as “a beacon of light”.

Know more [NA adopts Quaid's vision about minorities](#)

Portions of that address, which were suppressed by some of the right-wing governments that followed, were recalled in the assembly including the unequivocal assurance by the nation's founder: “You may belong to any caste or creed — that has

nothing to do with the business of the state.” The resolution also reiterated the minorities' status as equal citizens.

In countries with a different past, the resolution may read like an assertion of the obvious; in Pakistan it is difficult to overplay its significance, both from the point of view of content and timing.

After independence, contrary to Mr Jinnah's words, the state lost little time in recasting faith — specifically the faith of the majority — as its *raison d'être*, and later, as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. A triumphalist narrative, especially from the '80s onwards, was deliberately nurtured through means both subtle and overt, and the minds of entire generations poisoned for short-sighted objectives.

The fallout within the country has been devastating, as witnessed in the lynching of blasphemy suspects, sectarian killings, the sacking of localities with minority populations, and the bombing of religious processions and places of worship, etc.

Although religious extremism has disproportionately affected minority communities, it has over time morphed into the bedrock of a vast terrorist network that the state is now battling to destroy. Efforts are being made to rein in some of the more reactionary elements in society.

The parliamentarians, to their credit, have taken the cue to push through the much-needed endorsement of Jinnah's speech from 68 years ago. The lack of opposition by members of religious parties in the assembly to what was clearly promotion of a

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secular point of view — unthinkable even a year ago — indicates that they too have picked up on the prevailing mood.

Nevertheless, for Aug 11, 2015 to be a defining moment, the resolution must form the basis for action. Politicians and the establishment need to take a far more categorical stand against religious extremists of all shades. For enduring change, school curricula should be purged of divisive, prejudiced material, the country's pluralistic heritage celebrated, and the blasphemy law revisited.

Only then perhaps will the words spoken by the founder of this nation so many years ago have any meaning.

Published in Dawn, August 13th, 2015

Police clean-up

CORRUPTION within the police force is a phenomenon that is difficult to completely eradicate; even from 'developed' countries, stories emerge of the misuse of the badge and the gun. However, in Pakistan, the issue is one of the main reasons behind rampant lawlessness. From shaking down motorists and bikers for not possessing documents all the way to complicity with criminal enterprises, black sheep within Pakistan's police forces ensure that the good work done by honest officers is eclipsed. Thus it must be welcomed that the Sindh police have identified 1,000 personnel reportedly involved in criminal activities. Intelligence agencies have aided the police in the

process. Officials within the force told this paper that "every policeman" was being probed for possible links to criminal activity.

Such stock-taking within the police force was long overdue and it is hoped that the allegedly corrupt personnel are investigated and punished as per the law. However, along with searching for bad eggs amongst personnel already inducted, it would make sense to screen out unwanted individuals at the time of hiring. The Special Branch does conduct background checks when individuals apply, yet clearly the process needs overhaul if 1,000 suspected corrupt cops are serving in the force. Perhaps the core problem is the politicisation of the force; politicians are known to dole out jobs to supporters regardless of merit or aptitude for the job. The result is that such political inductees are more concerned with serving their patrons instead of the citizenry, as well as making dirty money on the side. Therefore, the hiring process in the police department needs to be made completely transparent and merit-based, with only the most able individuals — with clean records — inducted into the force. Additionally, there needs to be a workable mechanism where members of the public can report the abuse of authority by policemen. Ignoring reforms of the hiring process will lead to the recurrence of the problem and the continued possibility of individuals with dubious backgrounds serving in this sensitive department.

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Up in smoke?

SOMETIMES the government has to be prodded into implementing its own eminently sensible decisions. Two civil society organisations have filed a petition at the Islamabad High Court demanding the government follow through on its decision to increase the size of pictorial warnings against the dangers of smoking on cigarette packs.

It has been six months since the National Health Services ministry announced that the size of the pictorial warning against smoking — required by law since 2009 — must be enhanced to cover 85pc of the pack rather than 40pc as required until then.

Despite the lapse of two grace periods of 60 days each after the statutory regulatory order came into effect on March 30, cigarette manufacturers in Pakistan have not complied. The civil society organisations in the forefront of the campaign to enforce the directive contend this is because the tobacco industry has brought pressure to bear on the ministry.

The causal link between smoking and a plethora of serious disease is an established fact, notwithstanding the tobacco industry's historically robust propaganda against it whenever and wherever attempts have been made to warn smokers.

Strong consumer protection and public health lobbies have prompted many countries to put in place measures to discourage smoking — including banning the practice in public spaces, levying prohibitive taxes on cigarettes and making conspicuous pictorial/text warnings on packs mandatory.

In a country with low literacy rates such as Pakistan, pictorial warnings have a particularly important role to play. The government must therefore not renege on its commitment to public health by pandering to powerful corporate interests.

In fact, it should take a far more proactive role on this issue. It must strictly enforce the law against smoking in public spaces and curb the smuggling of cigarettes into the country.

The latter is a serious issue, with even the smallest of roadside kiosks carrying dozens of packets that were never meant to be in the Pakistani market at all. The government needs to make smoking a less easily accessible habit.

Published in Dawn, August 14th, 2015

Falling exports

IT has been more than a year and a half now that exports have been falling consistently. Initially the government took the line that this is a temporary state of affairs, then argued that the declines have to do with falling commodity prices.

But the declines are continuing in spite of the fact that commodity prices bottomed out a while ago. The net result is a growth in the trade deficit, which stood at \$15 billion in 2013 and has grown to \$17bn at the end of fiscal year 2015.

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Today we have exporter associations sending out SOS messages and professional economists telling us that this is a disastrous state of affairs.

The fact that the situation is developing precisely at a time when the government is declaring victory in its efforts to turn the economy around, and basking in the approvals of international media, credit rating agencies and the IMF, simply shows the level of disconnect that has developed between economic policymakers and stakeholders, particularly those from the real sector of the economy.

Exporters typically point to the rising cost of doing business as the main reason, while more recent reports by economists have pointed towards an overvalued rupee.

The State Bank has pointed towards declining commodity prices, as well as growing competition from SE Asia and the IMF has flagged falling commodity prices, energy shortages and the exchange rate as the cause. The fact that such a wide spectrum of causes is being pointed to by different stakeholders — industry and creditors — shows the lack of any real understanding that exists regarding this crucial weakness in the economy.

This is surprising since the matter at hand is hardly so complex as to defy understanding, and the lack of comprehension creates policy weakness.

The government needs to take better stock of the downward trend in exports because it is a key employment creator as well as an earner of foreign exchange. Continuing inflows of foreign

exchange, through remittances and borrowing, are apparently creating a sense of complacency at the finance ministry.

The government is correct to note that it has stabilised a rapidly deteriorating economic situation at the time when it came into power, but it is now past the midpoint of its rule; more needs to be done to consolidate the gains and put the economy on a sustainable footing.

Plugging external deficits through borrowing, privatisation receipts and remittances is not the answer.

Published in Dawn, August 14th, 2015

MQM resignations

EVEN when compared to the recent string of errors and misjudgements by the MQM, the decision to quit parliament and the Sindh assembly stands out as a particularly unwise move.

The frustration and anger of the MQM leadership is apparent. There may in fact be some truth to the MQM allegations that the police and paramilitary crackdown on the party has led to unlawful actions against party members.

Illegal detentions and torture in custody are not unheard of in the country. But if that is really the reason why the MQM has

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decided to resign from the assemblies it surely does little or nothing to address the MQM's complaint.

Know more: [MQM lawmakers tender resignations](#)

The military-run operation against criminal elements in the MQM looks almost certain to continue. Once outside parliament and the Sindh assembly, the MQM will really have no platform from which to press its complaints. If anything, the party will be in an even worse position than it is right now.

Perhaps the MQM should also reflect on why it is unable to garner much public sympathy, especially outside its base.

The MQM is a legitimate political party with a genuine voter base, but the party does have a dark side. At various points in the party's history, its militant wing has virtually eclipsed the political side.

Altaf Hussain and senior party representatives have always denied all allegations of violence and extortion, but the denials are not really credible. The denizens of Karachi in particular are all too familiar with how the party has used violence and intimidation to perpetuate its control of the city.

Blanket denials did not convince anyone in the past and they are unlikely to now. Consider that at no point has the MQM actually helped or aided the state in its quest to track down and arrest those who have kept entire neighbourhoods in a state of fear for many years, perhaps even decades.

Yet, even with the MQM's non-cooperation and belligerence, it should not be allowed to needlessly destabilise national politics.

The federal government, possibly Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself, have done the right thing in not encouraging the speaker of the National Assembly to act immediately on the sudden move by MQM legislators. Just a week ago, it was the MQM that was trying to use its parliamentary prerogative to have the PTI ousted from parliament. That is hardly the sign of a party that finds assemblies to be pointless and irrelevant.

The sensible approach is the same one that was used to get the MQM to back down on its motion to unseat the PTI: reach out to the senior MQM leadership and Mr Hussain, offer to address their genuine complaints, adjust the operation in Sindh to eliminate abuses where found — and let the country put this unnecessary political crisis behind it.

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Military court trials

WITH the Supreme Court having accepted the constitutionality of military courts for civilian terrorism suspects, the army has wasted little time in restarting what will likely soon come to resemble a processing mill for death and life sentences being handed down.

What is particularly troubling is that the SC's recent judgement on the constitutionality of military courts — the 21st Amendment case — appears to have had no impact on either the form or substance of the military court decrees.

Know more: [Military courts announce death sentences of six convicts](#)

A majority of the apex court judges explicitly held that the new military court regime must provide a fair trial and adequate procedural safeguards, and that sentences handed down by military courts will be judicially reviewable by the high courts and the SC itself.

The ISPR press release on Thursday announcing the death sentences confirmed by the army chief for seven individuals does contain this sentence: “The convicts were given fair trial by following all the legal formalities and offering/providing them legal aid and defence counsels.”

But in the absence of absolutely any details of the trial, it is impossible to assess whether a reasonable and independent assessment would concur with the claim that a fair trial was provided.

Intriguingly, the ISPR press release makes no mention of the “hardcore terrorists” right to appeal to the high courts and the SC. Instead, there is simply this assertion: “The convicts have the right to file an appeal before the Military Court of Appeals.” That in and of itself does not violate the SC judgement, given that appeals to the high courts usually take place after appeals in other permissible forums have been exhausted.

But it is striking that there is no mention of what the SC explicitly asserted just a week ago. It does appear that the military is determined to maintain maximum control over the process by which civilians accused of terrorism are dealt with by the military courts.

There is certainly no denying the need to bring to justice the perpetrators of atrocities that have been committed against the people of Pakistan, in particular the APS massacre but all other acts of terrorism, too. But the ends of justice are always better served through transparency — the public needs being made privy to the course these trials take.

To protect the judicial officers, witnesses and prosecutors, names in the trial record can always be redacted. Similarly, where operational details may need to be protected, the record of the trial can be adjusted before releasing it to the public.

Simply naming individuals convicted and giving the barest details of the crimes they are accused of is not enough.

The state is seeking to take the lives of individuals in the name of the public at large — surely, at the very least, the public deserves to know details of the evidence presented and how the trials are conducted.

Published in Dawn, August 15th, 2015

Rescuing Iraq

A DAY after American General Raymond Odierno said Iraq's partition "might" be the only solution, a devastating truck-bombing of a Shia district in Baghdad left over 50 people dead, with more than 100 wounded.

With large chunks of Iraq's western territory occupied by the self-styled 'Islamic State', and the US-built, post-Saddam Iraqi army unable to recover it, the writ of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government seems confined to the capital, and that too shakily as shown by Thursday's atrocity.

Take a look: [IS truck bomb leaves at least 54 dead in Baghdad](#)

As always, it is civilians who have suffered most from the anarchy in Iraq, the fatalities for 2014 being over 17,000, which is almost double the figure for 2013 — over 9,000. With the monthly average for the current year being 1,500, it appears highly unlikely that the beleaguered Abadi government and its demoralised army will be able to reverse the trend.

The issue is Iraq's very survival and the grave consequences for the region if the country goes the way Gen Odierno suggests.

The trauma Iraq is going through began with the America-led invasion of 2003. There was no justification for it, for the UN mission led by Hans Blix had reported to the Security Council it had found no "smoking gun" — a reference to weapons of mass destruction.

The invasion was successful, the Baathist regime was overthrown and Saddam Hussein hanged. But peace in Iraq has remained out of reach, general elections notwithstanding.

The anarchy has enabled the IS to make Iraq the base of its operation and push into Syria as far as the Turkish border. Gen Odierno's warning must be taken seriously by regional powers, for Iraq's disintegration could trigger a chain-effect which could destabilise the Middle East, especially Turkey and Iran, both of which have large Kurdish and other minorities.

The regional powers must realise they have to act on their own to save Iraq because the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League have proved themselves to be lame ducks.

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Ceding space

EVENTS of national importance such as Independence Day or March 23 are marked by citizens in a variety of ways.

However, the appropriation of these occasions by extremist outfits is a troubling trend. While all groups should be allowed to freely express themselves, the line must be drawn when outfits believed to have links with militancy or that promote a violent worldview use national occasions and other platforms as a chance for a show of strength.

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The Jamaatud Dawa is one amongst a number of such groups: over the last few years the organisation — which, as per the government's own admission, is on the 'watch list' — has used national occasions to display its street power. This Independence Day was no different as JuD staged rallies in Lahore, Karachi and other cities under the banner of the 'ideology of Pakistan'.

Take a look: [Banned outfits operating under different names undermine state's credibility: Babar](#)

The Lahore event was addressed by JuD supremo Hafiz Saeed. Other groups, most notably the ASWJ, a reincarnation of the banned SSP, and some rebranded 'jihadi' outfits, have also used national occasions to show their street power and 'patriotism'.

In a related vein, lawmakers in the Senate on Wednesday raised the issue of banned outfits re-emerging with new names and identities, including that of 'charity' organisations.

As the PPP's Farhatullah Babar pointed out in the upper house, this puts a cloud over the state's counterterrorism efforts while the space given to extremist outfits also allows them to pressurise the government as well as parliament.

The JuD was specifically mentioned; for example the Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation, a group linked to Hafiz Saeed's organisation, is active in disaster areas, particularly the regions affected by the recent flooding. But if the state allows militant groups or their fronts to rebrand themselves and freely organise, counterterrorism efforts will not deliver lasting results.

Also, are these regular rallies and marches an indication that these groups wish to enter the political mainstream?

While some have contested polls, others have openly denounced democracy as being 'against the tenets of Islam'; there is thus a need for them to openly announce their intentions — if they wish to enter politics, they should explain what led to the change of heart.

Secondly, it is valid to criticise extremist groups for changing names and participating in philanthropic activities. But it is also true that politicians and civil society have helped cede space to these organisations by not taking the lead in relief efforts or charity work.

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Vigorous celebrations

AFTER many years Pakistanis, especially in Karachi, celebrated Independence Day with unusual vigour. It was heartening to see the outpouring of the festive spirit on this day that had been losing its lustre over the years as terrorism and rampant crime cast a pall of gloom over the city. Perhaps a sign of an uptick in residents' confidence in the security outlook, Karachi saw packed roads and loud motorbikes, with crowds gathered wherever possible. This may have irked a few, but the enthusiastic mood certainly succeeded in taking most along. It would be premature to say what the reasons were behind the

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exceptional fervour that the metropolis witnessed this year on Aug 14, but for now it's enough to simply note that the citizens' desire to celebrate is alive and well.

That said, it was a little disappointing to see all this energy spilling out on the streets with nowhere to go. The youth particularly have large reserves of enthusiasm, and it is a pity that much of it ends up dissipated through hormonally fuelled displays of bravado rather than being channelled through creative initiatives. In the future, perhaps the Karachi authorities could do more to arrange venues and events, to come up with a menu of fireworks displays and music concerts, along with that evergreen ingredient of patriotic revelry: food. Road blocks and bans on stunts are needed at times like these, but they need to be supplemented with other measures so as to not only impose penalties and restrictions, but also provide outlets for the energies that brim over on days like this. The public in Pakistan is starved for quality entertainment, for any occasion that gets them away from their TV screens and out on the streets to enjoy life in all its fullness, and national days like Independence Day provide the perfect occasion. May the festivities in Pakistan never diminish in days to come, and may there be many more occasions for the country to celebrate together.

Published in Dawn, August 16th, 2015

Trading with China

IN an informal chat with the media on Friday, the governor of the State Bank Pakistan floated an interesting proposal. He mentioned that Pakistan and China “should trade in their local currencies” to make the China Pakistan Economic Corridor more beneficial to both parties. The proposal is in line with some practices already being followed by China, in trade with Russia for instance. Suggestions for increasing the use of local currency in international trade have been made in many other forums as well; most recently they were heard in Ufa during the seventh BRICS summit. The suggestion is gaining ground as the strains on the dollar's dominance as a global currency mount. Pakistan is not a large enough trade partner with China to urge the latter into giving the proposal due consideration, but perhaps some of that famous goodwill that Pakistan enjoys in Beijing can be leveraged to bring some focus on the proposal.

China is Pakistan's second largest trade partner after the US, and the deficit in our total trade is less than half of what it is with the US. But this deficit means that a swap arrangement between the rupee and the yuan will be necessary to make the proposal work. It is also likely to encourage yet more imports from China, something that could have adverse consequences for local industry. Besides, there are some challenges to making the proposal a reality. For one, China is already struggling with its external sector situation as its growth falters and is therefore unlikely to view any concessions to Pakistan favourably. Second, there is no convertibility between the rupee and the yuan, which would mean the dollar will retain its importance as the currency through which conversions are done. In order to realise the proposal, not only in trade but also

in settlements of the CPEC investments where some Chinese sponsors are asking for dollar denominated returns, it would be helpful for Pakistan to have a stronger negotiating position vis-a-vis China, something that can be attained if the east to west axis can also be included in the corridor. In any case, it is a good sign that the proposal is being floated from a platform as high as that of the SBP governor, and it would be encouraging to see it find some traction in Islamabad as well.

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Needless firestorm

A YEAR on from the Imran Khan- and Tahirul Qadri-led attempt to oust the PML-N government, the repercussions are continuing. The first anniversary of the beginning of the four-month-long sit-in in Islamabad has resulted in an extraordinary set of allegations by a member of the federal cabinet and frontline PML-N spokesperson, Mushahidullah Khan, that resulted in an immediate firestorm. That it came only weeks after the Supreme Court-led inquiry commission rejected the core of the PTI's allegations regarding the May 2013 general elections and after the PML-N itself had taken a generally conciliatory and forward-looking approach towards the whole affair makes the senator's comments especially perplexing. Either the PML-N is not convinced by its own rhetoric that damaging as the dharna was, the country needs to move on or the PML-N is unable to maintain party discipline and avoid shooting itself in the foot. Neither of those explanations is

particularly comforting. Simply, this was an entirely unnecessary and avoidable firestorm.

In a more evolved, deeper democracy the events of last year would never have happened. The PTI and Tahirul Qadri tried to use street power to oust a legitimately elected government on the flimsiest of grounds. Principal blame for the whole sordid affair rests with those two groups, then. But it should also not be forgotten that the whole affair was turbocharged by a sense that the military had not backed the elected government. Had that been the case, the widespread apprehensions that the government was at risk and that democracy itself may be in trouble would never really have been present. Instead, the military chose to announce its neutrality in the matter, effectively putting an elected government and a patently unreasonable street movement on the same level. Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri explicitly tried to involve the military in their ouster bid too and at one time Mr Khan even travelled to GHQ to meet the army chief, who briefly appeared to play the role of interlocutor between the government and its opponent. There was also the memorable ISPR statement pledging neutrality and urging a political settlement at the height of the drama.

Clearly, civil-military relations remain a complicated affair. The PML-N has been bullied on occasion and the military is becoming ever-more forthright about its internal role, be it in Karachi, Fata or in certain legislative matters. It is not really clear what the government, indeed the political class as a whole, can do to slow down the ingress, let alone reverse it and work towards constitutional civilian supremacy. The PML-N does appear outmatched, unwilling or unable to bring to bear the accumulated experience of three terms in power to the

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problem. Perhaps Mushahidullah Khan decided to speak out on his own and did so out of deep frustration. But the fallout from the senator's comments have only worsened the situation.

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Awards and patronage

YET another set of national awards was announced on Friday to mark the country's 68th Independence Day.

There are always a few surprises in the list, a few shocking inclusions and a few unwanted omissions. One view, however, is that the announcement of national honours doesn't quite generate the kind of excitement it once did.

This could well be because of the variety that is on offer in life today — best reflected in the media — that prevent so many occasions and ceremonies from getting the single-focus attention they traditionally received.

Take a look: [President approves awards](#)

Without detracting from the merit of this year's awardees, the state needs to find ways of reviving public interest in and respect for national awards.

This is a tough ask given the state's preoccupation with delegating what were its responsibilities, and in the process

compromising its position as an authority which confers titles on prominent people.

Tokenism must always be shunned by those looking to create honourable examples of service. In changed circumstances where state patronage is difficult to come by, the likelihood of a bestowment by a government being seen as a superficial, half-hearted attempt at promoting a cause increases manifold.

In the Pakistani context, no better – or worse – example can be quoted than the one that involves the arts. Each year the various lists of national awardees include the names of professionals and each year the nomination is followed by a congratulatory line, a 'but' and a question: Great that the state has recognised the talent of those working as writers, painters, performing artists, etc, but what is it doing to promote the very disciplines these acknowledged greats have been working in?

For an authority which is not yet prepared to forego its right to declare prizes, there must surely be a way to continue as a promoter of talent at large. Beyond distributing a clutch of medals, the state must remain active in its role as the provider of an enabling environment to all without discrimination.

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Heritage protection

BUREAUCRATIC lethargy and political disinterest have both contributed to the deterioration and neglect of heritage sites in Pakistan, especially in Sindh and Balochistan.

While major sites in Sindh such as Moenjodaro and Makli do make it to the news, usually when they face threats, other lesser-known but potentially equally important sites do not get the same attention.

Know more: [Footprints: Mysterious Agham Kot](#)

Take Agham Kot, for example. As reported on Saturday in this paper, the site in Sindh's Badin district, which is estimated to be several centuries old, is in precarious condition, with the brickwork of certain monuments falling apart, while there is no protection from thieving visitors who walk away with artefacts.

The lack of protection is attributed to the fact that Agham Kot is not on the Sindh government's list of protected monuments, though it can be argued that even 'protected' sites — such as Makli in Thatta district, which has Unesco recognition — have not been spared by encroachers.

Experts say there are hundreds of sites in the province that should be on the list of protected heritage, which would bring funds and official attention towards their maintenance and upkeep. Balochistan's archaeological heritage is in dire straits due to a paucity of official attention.

And while there are some relatively successful stories — the Punjab government is doing a relatively better job, while the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa administration gets high marks for being the most active in preserving heritage — much remains to be accomplished.

Perhaps the first step towards protecting heritage would be passing legislation that provides legal cover; following the 18th Amendment this is now a purely provincial concern.

However, in Sindh's case, the draft antiquities law is still reportedly sitting with the law department. Perhaps this reflects the priority the bureaucracy and politicians give to promoting historical heritage.

Along with passage of the law, all historical sites need to be listed and documented. If need be, the state can ask students and volunteers to help complete this essential process, which would feed into creating a reliable database of historical sites.

Also, the Sindh and Balochistan administrations could consult the KP authorities to see what best practices can be applied in their respective cases. There are a variety of threats Pakistan's heritage sites face, most notably encroachments, deterioration and relic hunters.

Unless the provinces craft robust responses in their individual capacities that address the preservation of heritage, it will continue to be eroded, brick by brick.

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Ties with Iran

A MASSIVE opportunity is opening to Pakistan's west as Iran moves towards seeing sanctions lifted.

The visit by Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, has underlined this fact, and it is unfortunate that the government of Pakistan offered little more than a pro forma reception to the visiting dignitary.

This was the moment to unveil a bold new willingness to expand cooperative ties, to sign agreements, to initiate projects.

Take a look: [Iran wants expanded relations with Pakistan: Zarif](#)

Instead, all we had was a few meetings, some smiles and handshakes, a press conference and a photo op. This is the time for Pakistan to start working to prepare for the moment when, as looks likely, sanctions are lifted on Iran – a moment that is not very far away.

Mr Zarif was clear in saying Iran is “eager to expand ties”, and this sentiment ought to have been reciprocated with equal clarity. Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

Pakistan has much to gain from an expansion of ties with Iran. From energy imports via gas and oil pipelines as well as power through transmission lines, there is huge potential for trade in goods as well.

The opening under way to our west is a historic opportunity knocking on our door, and it would be a grave mistake to simply smile at it without doing anything concrete.

An impression is in wide circulation that the PML-N government is reluctant to advance matters with Iran because it is deeply beholden to the royal family of Saudi Arabia.

It is important to dispel this impression and make clear that where the interests of the country are concerned, the personal interests of Pakistan's rulers take a back seat. In drawing up Pakistan's priorities in expanded ties with Iran, it is imperative that economic ties be given primacy.

The scope for bilateral expansion is large, but the real scope for expansion lies in connecting the different neighbours of Pakistan with each other. That opportunity cannot afford to become hostage, or play second fiddle, to any other strategic or vested concerns of specific institutions or individuals.

This was not the moment to raise concerns about Iran's broadening engagement with India, as some members of parliament chose to do.

Iran is entitled to engage with any country in the world that it chooses to, and rather than imply a zero-sum perception of Pakistan's own relations with Iran by raising questions of this sort, the thrust of the conversation ought to have been kept to discussing what sort of work can be commenced immediately to prepare for when sanctions are lifted.

The visit by Mr Zarif ought to have been used to produce more quantifiable steps towards an expansion in the two countries'

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relationship. One opportunity to move further down the road to greater expansion in cooperative ties has been missed; it is to be hoped that subsequent ones will not fare similarly.

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Economic diplomacy

IT looks like Pakistan is on track to fumble yet another opportunity at economic diplomacy.

Reportedly the country has missed an important chance to have a director on the board of the newly created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, to which the country signed on as a member in end June. Pakistan has a small share in the bank, and clearly hopes to tap some of the funding lines that will flow from it.

A director's seat would be important for the country to hold. But it turns out that due to a lack of coordination between the ministries of finance and foreign affairs, relevant contacts were not established with Central Asian states whose vote will help decide who gets the coveted seat.

Take a look: [Pakistan misses chance to have a director on AIIB board](#)

This is a big blunder, although time has not entirely run out to rectify the mistake. Both ministries should expedite their

efforts to approach the Central Asian states and obtain their support for Pakistan's director.

Pakistan has a history of taking economic diplomacy lightly. Over the decades the country has borrowed extensively from the IMF and the World Bank, and grown accustomed to enjoying privileged access to their resources by virtue of its strategic position in American foreign policy.

In the matter of the AIIB, there is a chance that the leadership will similarly take its access to the bank's resources for granted by virtue of its close ties with China. This would be a mistake. It is well to bear in mind that India is the second largest shareholder in AIIB, and will therefore command considerable clout on the board in deciding who gets funding, as well as deciding on key questions on waivers and conditionalities.

The AIIB is less likely to show leniency for countries that are chronic users of its resources and perpetually in default of reform commitments. If Pakistan wishes to be anything more than a spectator at the AIIB, it will need to lift its game in the economic sphere, both in terms of enhancing its capacity to meet commitments as well as conducting its economic diplomacy more skillfully, with a closer eye on the meticulous placement of its pieces on the regional chess board.

The seat on the board may not sound like a big affair at the moment, but once lending operations begin its importance will become clearer. This stumble must be rectified quickly, and obtaining that seat should be a priority.

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Attock tragedy

THE assassination of Punjab home minister Shuja Khanzada in a suicide attack in Attock is a grim reminder that, recent successes notwithstanding, the war against militancy will be a very long war along the length and breadth of the country and against multiple enemies.

Mr Khanzada's death is surely a blow to the counterterrorism efforts of the Punjab government. By most accounts, the home minister was an adroit and capable leader and had chalked up a number of successes against militant groups.

It is in the nature of counterterrorism work and policing that the biggest successes are often unknown to the public because success is measured by the absence of violence. Inevitably, there will be questions about how a senior minister, and a frontline figure in the fight against militancy, was left so vulnerable.

Take a look: [Punjab loses minister in terrorist attack](#)

As reported in a section of the media, Mr Khanzada's security was nowhere near as tight nor along the lines of what standard procedure demanded. It appears that perhaps Mr Khanzada himself preferred to visit his hometown to meet with constituents without onerous security.

Therein lies the problem of weak systems and institutions. In a more evolved system, the security of public officials would be determined independently of the individuals who are to be

protected; such decisions would be made by professionals and would be final.

Culturally, however, the deference offered to superiors and powerful individuals means professional opinion is sometimes overridden. It remains to be seen if that is indeed what happened with Mr Khanzada, leaving him — and others — open to a devastating attack.

Standard operating procedure should be revisited in any case because the state has lost a capable leader and many families have lost their relatives. Fighting the war against militancy is a constant reminder that while the defenders have to fail just once, the enemy has to succeed only once.

Beyond the immediate tragedy, there is the issue of how widespread militancy has become and how far the reach of militants is. In the Attock attack, there is confirmation of what independent observers have long warned: the myth of south Punjab being the sole hotbed of militancy in the province needs to be laid to rest.

Urban Punjab, central and northern Punjab, indeed areas in other provinces not usually associated with militancy, have all become zones in which the militants are able to hide and operate.

To root out those elements, it will take much more than raids and so-called intelligence-based operations. The state is still not any closer to understanding why militancy continues to attract new converts.

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Simply capturing or killing generations of militants is not enough. The emphasis needs to switch to ensuring there is no next generation being indoctrinated.

That alone would do justice to the legacy of Shuja Khanzada and the countless others who have died over the past decade.

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Hameed Gul

PERHAPS no other ISI chief had such a deep and lasting impact on the military-civilian relationship as Hameed Gul, who died over the weekend in Murree.

Appointed by Ziaul Haq as ISI chief in 1987, Gul played a big role in organising the anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan during its last years and later followed it up by conceptualising and spreading a ‘jihadi’ worldview, the consequences of which are still with us.

His insight into all facets of the Afghan ‘jihad’ was legendary, and he put to good use his superb knowledge of the rivalries and hostilities among the principal militant leaders.

Take a look: [Former ISI chief Hamid Gul dies of brain hemorrhage](#)

His removal as chief of the premier spy agency by Benazir Bhutto in 1989 didn’t dampen his passions for turning this country into the bastion of an international ‘jihad’ whose consequences for Pakistan’s state and society seemed to have escaped his attention.

A dedicated soldier, he saw no contradiction in combining his professional duties with covert political activity that aimed at destabilising and overthrowing elected governments.

He didn’t hide his contempt for politicians, thought they were incapable of sharing his concept of an international ‘jihad’ and, yet, had no qualms of conscience in collaborating with the politicians of his choice. That he had supporters within the armed forces goes without saying, for he was one of three generals – the others being Mirza Aslam Beg and Asad Durrani – who helped create the IJI, an anti-Benazir alliance.

Gul later had the courage to admit his many mistakes, including the formation of the IJI. He apologised to the nation in 2006. No other general has done so.

Hameed Gul is dead but his legacy lives on, for ‘jihadi’ organisations not only exist and continue to kill Pakistanis, they still have sympathisers in the armed forces as the attacks on the GHQ, Mehran base and the naval dockyards show.

Many of the banned organisations still operate freely, and more regretfully the retired generals indicted by the Supreme Court are yet to face trial.

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Transport ‘incentives’

‘INCENTIVES’ are hardly the way to solve Karachi’s transport problem: burgeoning, endemic, forgotten, bungled — many negative adjectives are applicable here. One brazen example need be noted: earlier this month, the authorities set out to solve the traffic problem and ended by aggravating the transport crisis. On Aug 4, the police announced a new traffic plan, providing for an up to two-year jail term for a variety of offences, including allowing passengers to ride on the rooftops of buses. More than a fortnight has passed, but traffic violations continue as before. And since the Sindh High Court’s ban on Qingqis has added to the commuters’ misery, the transport problem has gone from bad to worse. Now comes the news that the Karachi traffic police have asked the Sindh government for “incentives” to help ease the people’s travel miseries. The incentives demanded included soft loans for transporters and the status of an industry for transport. There is every expectation that the Sindh government will take years to study those proposals, but even if it does agree, that will hardly make a dent in the problem.

Only a modern mass transit system can solve Karachi’s transport problem — no amount of incentives or efforts to shy away from this reality will help. A mass transit system was first mooted by the PPP government in 1971, but since then no federal or provincial government could marshal the political will to turn it into reality. Over the decades, many schemes have been considered, vetted and approved, but the projects have remained on paper. Years ago, the Japanese fine-tuned the circular railway project, pledging money and technology; all they wanted was for the encroachments to be removed. The

Sindh government failed to do this. Such are the dimensions of Karachi’s transport problem that only single-minded devotion to the idea and a firm commitment to long-term benefits can present a durable solution to the problem. The dream of a mass transit system for Karachi must one day come true.

Published in Dawn, August 19th, 2015

Devouring forests

THE encroachment on forest land by three large housing societies in Rawalpindi highlights the weak capacity of the state to protect the public interest, as well as its casual disregard for vital natural endowments like forests. Reports regularly appear of the casual way in which forest land is distributed as if it were largesse to be handed out. Recently, there was news of 9,000 acres of forest land in Sindh being allocated to the army for distribution to the families of fallen soldiers. Whereas such families are entitled to land compensation, care should be taken that this need be met without compromising commonly held lands or the environmental heritage that it is the country’s duty to curate. In the most recent case in Rawalpindi, the disclosure of encroachment upon 600 acres of forest land by housing societies has no altruistic motive behind it other than sheer greed. The encroached-upon land has brand name shops and other commercial establishments catering to elite demand built upon it. The encroachers, the forests department alleges,

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include DHA and Bahria Town, in addition to a third private housing society.

What is also striking in this case is the sheer difficulty state functionaries have had in establishing the facts. The disclosure was made in the context of a suo motu case under way in the Supreme Court since 2009. Two government departments — forest and revenue — took years to arrive at the 600 acre figure, which is still not endorsed by the forest department. An earlier report submitted before the court said the area of the encroached land measures 200 acres, but that figure had to be revised since it was disputed. One would think that measuring the area of a piece of land would be a straightforward task, but the sheer difficulty that the government had in arriving at a figure shows how deep the collusion between property developers and state authorities actually goes, where the former are able to subvert the working of the state with relative ease. The various forest departments of the provincial governments need to be more vigilant over the land whose care they are entrusted with, and move faster to raise the alarm in the event of encroachment. And the provincial governments also need to rise to their obligation to safeguard common lands under their care. Levelling forests to build housing societies for the elites is criminal negligence of government duties.

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Lack of clarity

SHUJA Khanzada is dead and the state has found refuge in a familiar set of responses. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has ordered that the architects of the attack be found and punished, as has army chief Gen Raheel Sharif. Prime Minister Sharif and Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan have emphasised that the National Action Plan be implemented. Meanwhile, in Punjab, Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and his cabinet have adopted a resolution appreciating Mr Khanzada's efforts in the counterterrorism domain and have pledged to eliminate terrorism from the province. The provincial government has also called on its sister federal government to honour the slain Punjab minister with the highest civilian award posthumously. In all of that, there are absolutely no details about what exactly will be done, and how or where. There is no mention of how and why the NAP has stalled in key areas and what will be done to re-energise it. In weeks or months from now, the country will learn, possibly through an ISPR Tweet, that the architects of the Attock attack have been killed in air strikes or a surgical operation, or have been secretly caught and tried in military courts and condemned to death. The public and the media will have no way of independently verifying what the state claims.

Time and again, the difference between what government and military officials assert and what is seen to happen is the same: the policy promised is rarely delivered and never implemented. The state would point towards the decline in militant attacks and the re-taking of terrain in the North Waziristan and Khyber agencies as signs of meaningful and genuine progress. There have likely been a number of attacks thwarted in the cities by

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so-called intelligence-based operations. Militants have been killed and captured and the immediate capabilities of several militant groups reduced. But consider another reality. The most devastating militant attack in the country's history was the Army Public School attack in Peshawar. That was claimed by and has been blamed on Mullah Fazlullah, the TTP kingpin who waged war against the state in Swat and who was dislodged after a massive military operation in 2009. It says much about the nature of the long war against militancy that the leader of an insurgency that the state stamped out in Swat in 2009 caused the convulsion that was December 2014.

Mere vows of immediate action by the political and military leadership mean little. The war will be a long one and it will have to be fought purposefully and with clarity. There the state is failing. What, for example, is Towheedwal Jihad Group, six members of which were condemned to death for the Peshawar school attack last week? If the public is unaware of even the names of militant groups being fought, how can it be sure the state is winning the fight?

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Modi in the UAE

INDIAN Prime Minister Modi's visit to the UAE, and the joint communiqué issued afterwards, should be nothing less than a wake-up call for Pakistan.

Both countries have agreed to enhance their economic cooperation and set specific targets, including bringing UAE investment into Indian infrastructure up to \$75 billion and raising their bilateral trade by 60pc in five years.

The communiqué also goes to some lengths to "condemn efforts, including by states, to use religion to justify, support and sponsor terrorism against other countries", dilating upon this commitment with a specificity and sweep that almost betrays a sense of relish with which the words were written. The language is being widely interpreted to be pointed towards Pakistan.

Know more: [Modi steps into Pakistan-UAE breach](#)

By itself, the growing closeness between India and the UAE would be cause for little more than some alarm. But given the diplomatic moves under way in the region it highlights how the conduct of foreign policy is changing in profound ways.

India has already received overtures from Iran for expanding its economic beachhead at Chabahar port, giving access to Iran and Afghanistan as well. It has obtained American support for its Look East policy, building a Trilateral Highway through Myanmar to Thailand, as well as greater connectivity with ASEAN countries.

The main artery of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor is almost ready as an all-weather road, linking Yunnan province in China with West Bengal. In short, India is on the move in the region, keeping countries as diverse as the UAE, Iran, China and the United States on board as it spins a web of connectivity from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

This should be enough to wake Pakistan's foreign policy community up to the fact that their game has changed fundamentally. Lingering territorial disputes are no longer the driving force behind foreign policy. Instead, the foreign interests of states are now, more than ever before, viewed through an economic lens. States can be rivals in one sphere and partners in another.

The game is no longer about pushing a single-agenda item, but the meticulous placement of pieces on an increasingly complex and interconnected chessboard. For Pakistan, remaining wedded to an old foreign policy template developed in the early Cold War years — which saw friends and masters in its search for a big brother who would help solve problems in return for a geopolitical alliance — is no longer a viable option.

Maturity is the need of the hour in Pakistan's foreign policy, as a thaw with Iran opens up opportunities to the west, and the possibility of building an economic partnership with India to the east — however remote it might seem at the moment — remains a viable foreign policy goal. It's time to emerge from the old world, and recognise the changes happening in our region before it's too late.

Published in Dawn, August 20th, 2015

'Ghost' pensioners

A PENSIONER'S lot in Pakistan can be pitiable because systems have often not evolved sufficiently to take the age-related limitations of this particular demographic into account.

Newspapers frequently report on the ordeal of infirm individuals having to suffer extended waiting periods at banks and, sometimes, humiliating treatment at the hands of bank staff while collecting paltry amounts at the beginning of each month.

Another dimension of the issue has now come to light that underscores the importance of putting in place streamlined disbursement methods not only for the pensioners but for the government itself.

Testifying before the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Revenue, the National Bank president said the bank had discovered at least 600,000 'ghost' pensioners who had for long been collecting pension amounts they were not entitled to receive, thus causing huge loss to the public exchequer.

Some NBP branches, he said, were dealing with up to 80,000 pensioners in the first few days of every month which resulted in further delays. Ostensibly, some heirs of deceased pensioners had chosen not to inform the bank of the latter's demise and continued collecting on their behalf.

The fraud was uncovered during the bank's computerisation of the pension system which will be completed by the end of the year and is based upon pensions being transferred directly into

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pensioners' accounts that can be operated via ATM cards requiring biometric verification for transactions.

The possibility of deceit would thereby be largely eliminated. Equally important, so will the need for pensioners to queue up in person for hours to collect the pension, which — inhumane though it is in practice — is meant to safeguard against precisely such deception. That begs the question, how then could so many ghost pensioners go undetected for an extended period?

After all, although pensioners can depute someone to collect in their place, they can do so only for three months at a stretch.

Moreover, this is probably only the tip of the iceberg; there are certain to be many more ghost pensioners on other systems, such as Pakistan Post, from where pensions are disbursed. The authorities, rather than different institutions independently, should undertake efforts to address the shortcomings, thereby putting an end to such manipulation.

As it is, pensions account for a huge proportion of the government's annual budget outlay, and while the amount undeservedly disbursed so far has yet to be determined, it is likely to be considerable.

Published in Dawn, August 20th, 2015

Food safety campaign

PAKISTANIS love to eat out and though the experience may be enjoyable, the lack of proper hygiene where food preparation and handling is concerned at many eateries can result in food poisoning or worse.

In eateries across the country — from restaurants with full-fledged premises to humble push-carts — it is not uncommon to see flies buzzing over food, food being exposed to the elements and a general lack of cleanliness.

Take a look: [PFA seals 10 more food outlets, eateries](#)

Hence the recent raids targeting food outlets in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are welcome; in Lahore over the past few weeks the zealous Punjab Food Authority has either sealed or fined a number of food joints due to hygiene and cleanliness concerns.

Similarly in Peshawar, eateries and stores selling substandard fare have been penalised by the district administration.

In both cases action seems to be across the board, as restaurants in five-star hotels as well as establishments much lower down the food chain have been inspected and either sealed or fined. While earlier on it was thought that the Punjab authorities would buckle under the pressure of restaurant owners, the campaign has continued without much sustained protest from the business community.

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These efforts at protecting the public from substandard and unhealthy food and drink must be applauded while the campaign should continue and be replicated in Sindh and Balochistan.

Indeed, the food and beverage industry provides livelihood to many; if only basic hygiene standards were observed the health and well-being of countless Pakistanis could be protected.

Food- and waterborne diseases are no joke: some medical experts estimate that every month, hundreds of Pakistanis end up in hospital due to gastroenteritis or food poisoning. Even if the existing food safety laws are fully implemented and restaurant owners and smaller-scale food merchants are sensitised about the importance of good hygiene, it would result in safer food being sold to consumers.

Eating out is indeed joyful; it would be even more enjoyable if diners were reassured their meal was prepared in a hygienic, sanitised environment.

Published in Dawn, August 20th, 2015

Saving the houbara

THE Supreme Court's decision to ban hunting of the houbara bustard is the right step which should ideally have come much earlier, and without opposition from any quarters in the country.

In a ruling on Wednesday the court cancelled all hunting permits, fulfilling a long-voiced demand that has been calling for saving the bird whose numbers have by some recent counts decreased to less than 100,000 globally.

The endangered species was left without protection and at the mercy of visiting royalty from the Gulf states in defiance of good sense and knowledge.

Also read: [SC upholds petition seeking ban on houbara hunting, issuance of permits, licences](#)

Some, like the Balochistan government and an individual petitioner, still felt the need to oppose a ban on hunting the houbara.

However, in a way these anti-prohibition petitions that the top court in Pakistan dismissed were not without a purpose: they brought into sharp focus the cheap interests that often hold sway and helped set an example about how not everything can be dictated by ready money and patronage.

The ruling has come, and hopefully this time it is going to be accepted in spirit and essence by the authorities all over Pakistan.

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Similar directions set by courts earlier, like a ruling by the Balochistan High Court earlier this year, have been countered by arguments stressing upon the need to please the friends, at legal and other forums.

The governments, federal and provincial, would be better advised to work towards evolving a code that aims to save the endangered species. They would be doing everyone and themselves a favour by ridding themselves of the mindset that compels them to robotically bow to the wishes of their esteemed guests.

There is a difference between hospitality and appeasement, and even if such a task is to be pursued, it is not these birds that should be paying for it – in the process risking extinction. If self-esteem is not a big enough motivator to be in control of their own resources, it is nature which demands that governments here behave much more responsibly.

Published in Dawn, August 21st, 2015

Banks' attitude

A BRIEF exchange during a hearing in the Senate cast light on an interesting problem.

Senators complained to a State Bank delegation that banks were refusing to deal with politicians and their families, whether for opening accounts or issuing credit cards or any

other kind of dealing. The State Bank's deputy governor seemed to agree that banks were using the "politically exposed person" category very liberally, and using it as an excuse to refuse or delay any dealings with members of the political class and their families.

Take a look: [SBP says banks can't misuse definition of 'politically exposed person'](#)

A number of issues are thrown into relief with this little exchange. First, it is a fact that most of the names on the list of loan defaulters belong to politicians; but that list belongs to an earlier era when banks were nationalised and susceptible to political pressure.

Second, it is true that members of certain professions, including journalists and lawyers in addition to politicians, have been known to misuse the power that comes to them by virtue of their work and have demanded special treatment in their personal dealings with various institutions, including banks.

But the real issue here is that banks don't really need customers. In an environment where they can acquire their liquidity from the State Bank and then lend it all to government with no risk, it should not be a surprise that efforts to mobilise deposits and seek out borrowers have slackened completely.

Politicians and their families are not the only ones discovering that banks are not interested in their business.

Small and medium enterprises have a hard time getting loans, ordinary depositors have difficulty getting secure returns on

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savings accounts, farmers are largely out of the loop, and branch networks are clustering more and more in posh localities and away from rural areas and poorer neighbourhoods.

In every area, banks have taken a very reluctant attitude towards providing services to their clients. It is hard to blame them, given that they don't have to work in order to post their record profits.

So long as government remains the largest provider and consumer of bank liquidity, the rest can complain all they want to — there is nothing we can do to change the attitude of banks towards their rank-and-file customers.

Perhaps the senators should direct some of their questions to the fiscal authorities as well if they are serious about their complaints being addressed.

Published in Dawn, August 21st, 2015

LG polls on the horizon

AFTER much procrastination and many false starts, it seems the path has finally been cleared for holding local government polls in Sindh and Punjab.

On Wednesday, the Election Commission of Pakistan announced that the first phase of the polls will be held in the

two provinces on Oct 12; ECP officials say the remaining two phases will be held “before the end of the year”.

This is welcome news for the people of Pakistan's two most populous provinces, which have been without elected local bodies for over six years. In May Khyber Pakhtunkhwa held local polls, though the exercise was marred by mismanagement and allegations of rigging.

Balochistan was the first province to complete the LG polls' process when mayors and district chairmen were elected in January. Meanwhile local elections in the cantonments were held in April.

Should things proceed as planned in Sindh and Punjab, only Islamabad would be left without a clear schedule for LG polls. However, parliament has passed the requisite legislation, while observers say elections in the federal capital should also be held by year's end.

Much of the delay in LG polls nationwide was due to the disinterest in holding the exercise displayed by both the ruling party as well as lawmakers from nearly all parties in the national and provincial legislatures.

Clearly, if it were not for the Supreme Court's consistent pursuit of the matter the polls would still be on the back burner.

Yet local governance is not the primary responsibility of provincial and national lawmakers — these individuals are supposed to be looking at the ‘big picture’ issues instead of micromanaging civic matters.

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Fixing street lights and ensuring that local roads are in good condition — in fact the whole range of tasks that fall within the domain of local administration — are the responsibility of elected local representatives who are, or should be, available to solve citizens' problems.

People should not have to travel to their provincial capital or even district headquarters to resolve town- and neighbourhood-level issues.

And the lack of elected local bodies for such a lengthy period has had a negative effect on our cities and towns, which is visible, for example, in the dearth of capable district-level disaster management bodies and decaying civic infrastructure.

Also read: [LG polls in Punjab, Sindh from Oct 12](#)

We hope the polls are held on schedule without further delays in Sindh and Punjab, and that a schedule is soon announced for Islamabad.

Also, KP's experience should be studied in order to not repeat the same mistakes. It is also welcome that the polls will be held on party basis, as holding non-party polls is not in consonance with democratic principles.

Overall, it is hoped that the soon-to-be-elected local governments will respond to the people's civic needs in an effective manner so that power is truly devolved to the grass-roots.

Published in Dawn, August 21st, 2015

Chairlift incident

IT is hard to imagine what must have gone through the minds of the tourists using the chairlift and cable-car in the hilltop Patriata resort near the capital city on Wednesday, when the service was suspended for over two hours.

For the hundreds of people who remained dangling in mid-air, in some cases very high above the ground, what would initially have been taken as a slight glitch in the day's plans turned into helpless panic.

The outrageousness of their predicament is only matched by the cause: an electric failure occurred, and both the back-up generator and the emergency engine — which allow enough movement to evacuate passengers — were out of order.

Take a look: [Patriata chairlift leaves tourists hanging](#)

The Patriata Chairlift manager has blamed the Islamabad Electric Supply Company for fluctuations in the supply of electricity, but that hardly settles the matter. The fact that this is a well-visited tourist destination offering a popular, big-ticket ride, but that every effort is not being made to ensure it is secure for visitors says much about the authorities' lack of concern.

It seems that the service was also interrupted a day earlier, again because of a fault in the generator.

The incident should be taken as symptomatic of the way the authorities handle the heavy tourist traffic to the Murree area.

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From time to time, different plans are formulated to manage the load on the roads and other infrastructure, most of them piecemeal and bound to further compromise the area's environment.

Consider, for example, the one announced just a few days ago: to lessen the rush on the link road that leads up to Murree Mall, it has been decided that a new chairlift will be constructed along with a parking lot, and vehicular entry will thenceforth be barred on the road.

Yet can the infrastructure on the Mall itself — accommodation, water, sewage facilities, etc — handle the extra traffic a new chairlift will bring? It is to be hoped that such questions will figure in the authorities' plans.

Published in Dawn, August 22nd, 2015

Taking stock

TO say that the mission to restore peace in Karachi has been accomplished would be incredibly premature; yet it should be acknowledged that the nearly two-year-old operation in the metropolis has brought down levels of violent crime.

Now the state needs to continue the process to ensure that law and order is improved further in the Sindh capital and that the relative peace is not fleeting. As expected, the Karachi

operation was the main topic of discussion during the prime minister's stopover in the city on Thursday.

Interestingly, the provincial administration seemed to balk at the idea of setting up a monitoring committee to oversee the operation even though the prime minister said complaints regarding the process — specifically those of the MQM — would be addressed. Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah said that in his capacity as “captain” of the operation, he did not feel the need for such a committee.

Also read: [Operation almost ended killings, extortion in Karachi: Sial](#)

This is a rather strange position to take. Firstly, while the presence of militants within the MQM is not exactly hidden, it is also true that law enforcers have been accused — at times even by independent observers — of coming down extra hard on the party.

Some of the Muttahida's more serious allegations include those of extrajudicial killing of its supporters. Hence, there would be no harm in setting up an independent monitoring committee to look into possible abuses of authority by law enforcers.

Secondly, the Sindh chief minister's resistance to setting up an oversight committee is odd because he himself has accused the Rangers — who lead the Karachi operation — as well as the FIA and NAB, of overstepping their limits.

In fact, a few months ago when the LEAs had picked up officials believed to have links to the PPP, Mr Shah had written

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to the Rangers accusing them of “acting beyond their mandate”.

The Sindh government must realise that if the LEAs are given a carte blanche — without legally defined limits on their actions — in Karachi, in future they can replicate these methods in other parts of the province. Without doubt the operation should continue against militants and criminals of all stripes regardless of their political and other affiliation. But it should be even-handed and allegations of abuse must be investigated.

Also, while targeted killings and kidnappings for ransom have come down, street crime remains endemic, hence the state needs to expand the scope of the operation to counter all shades of violent crime.

Published in Dawn, August 22nd, 2015

The final battle?

THE so-called final phase of Zarb-i-Azb is under way in North Waziristan, 14 months after the operation began.

Thus far it appears the military has reclaimed much of the terrain that it had set out to do and it is certainly the case that the rate and intensity of terrorist attacks inside the country have gone down since the operation began.

But, as ever, in the long war against militancy, immediate successes can be undone if the next steps are not prosecuted with equal vigour and intensity.

To begin with, the fight in the Shawal region is expected to be very tough, according to the military and what the militants themselves have suggested. It is not so much a last stand by the militants as the fact that the region is difficult for armies to operate in, the dense foliage and mountainous terrain putting small groups of militants at an advantage, at least when it comes to evading the full force of the military power that is to be used against them.

This challenge ahead is indeed cause for sombre reflection even as the country remembers those who have already fallen in the war against militancy.

The battle will also be complicated by the Afghan question. Earlier, too many militants escaped into Afghanistan and while the military has repeatedly claimed that this is less likely to occur in the current fight, only the days and weeks ahead will confirm whether that is in fact true.

Unhappily, Pak-Afghan relations have taken a downward turn yet again in recent weeks and it remains to be seen how much cooperation is extended by the Afghan side to interdict or help capture North Waziristan-based militants who flee into Afghanistan.

As the sorry tale of Mullah Fazlullah has underscored, unless the Taliban leadership is captured or eliminated and unless cross-border militant movements are curbed the relative peace inside Pakistan since Zarb-i-Azb began may not last long.

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It always has been and very much remains so in the interest of both Afghanistan and Pakistan to cooperate in the fight against militancy — even if the two states sometimes behave as if that were not the case.

Finally, there is the question of the Haqqani Network and US demands. While the military has claimed not to have made any distinction in the fight against militants in North Waziristan, it also appears to be the case that the Haqqanis have been encouraged to play a more direct role in the Afghan Taliban leadership structure.

Furthermore, while the timing of the announcement of the Shawal operation may have nothing to do with the US government's resolve to withhold Coalition Support Funds, there remains far too much that is unknown about how the military makes decisions vital to securing the country. More transparency in policy and especially the results of goals is needed.

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India-Pakistan spectacle

RARELY, even by the tortured standards of the Pakistan-India relationship, has there been as much farce and confusion surrounding the now cancelled talks between the national security advisers of Pakistan and India.

The dual news conferences yesterday of National Security Adviser Sartaj Aziz and Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj had made the late-night cancellation by Pakistan a mere formality. While it was obvious that neither side wanted to be seen to officially call off talks, it was also patently clear that neither side was willing to do much to rescue them in Delhi.

That the Indian government reacted so angrily to what was to have been a fairly innocuous and standard meeting between a visiting Pakistani leader and representatives of the Hurriyat Conference is perhaps a sign of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's true intentions. He does not really want dialogue with Pakistan, but does not want to be seen rejecting talks outright in front of the international community.

Yet, for all the Indian obstinacy, there have been some serious errors by the PML-N government in Pakistan. To begin with, what was the understanding in Ufa, Russia, that led to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Mr Modi issuing a joint statement? Did Mr Sharif mention the Kashmir dispute or bring up the composite dialogue? If not, why not?

Then, there was the statement itself – initially welcomed by many, including this newspaper, as an unexpected breakthrough, but pounced on by hawks in Pakistan for its so-

called pro-India stance. That terrorism was made central to the upcoming round of talks without any mention of the broader Kashmir issue appeared an error on Prime Minister Sharif's part. At the very least, the government should have expected the domestic backlash and prepared for it. Instead, the government seemed to have been caught unawares and quickly found itself under intolerable pressure.

Then came the next error: seemingly reversing itself on Ufa and demanding that the Indian government talk about Kashmir too. That elicited a predictable response from the Indian government in the form of an angry denial that the Ufa agreement had been about broader issues and a rejection of the Pakistani attempt to include Kashmir in the agenda. Finally, without a full-time foreign minister, the talks switched to being conducted at the NSA level, an awkward fit for full-spectrum dialogue and the Kashmir dispute.

Perhaps what is truly discouraging is the trend that has become apparent in the Sharif-Modi era. The prime ministers themselves mostly have encouraging words about the bilateral relationship, but they allow their underlings to damage goodwill and trust. Mr Modi in particular seems not to have a clear Pakistan policy at all. How does refusing to talk to Pakistan address any of the concerns that India has? But Mr Sharif needs to demonstrate stronger leadership internally too. How can a three-term prime minister find himself in a self-created bind?

Published in Dawn, August 23rd, 2015

Farmers' case

AGGRIEVED farmers recently brought their case to the area in front of the Punjab Assembly. For those who cared to take note, and who did not want to dismiss them out of hand as another lot of troublemakers out to block commuters in downtown Lahore, theirs has been one of the more significant protests going on for many months. These farmers after all, theoretically, form the backbone of the agriculture-based Pakistan economy. Those who care to scratch the surface a little deeper will find reason to sympathise with these growers.

The farmers have spoken in plain terms. They say the cost of inputs has been going up whereas the price at which they were forced to sell their produce — cotton, rice, etc — have declined sharply. This makes survival extremely tough and the future uncertain, if not dark. The farmers have been raising their voice trying to wake up the rulers, with little effect, forcing them to organise demonstrations in bigger urban centres such as Lahore and Islamabad. They have warned of social upheaval unless their basic demands are met. These include subsidies 'where they matter most' and where — which could be a problem to a government keen on making a grand show of whatever concessions it issues to the people — they are less visible. The demand is for subsidies on various inputs to bring down the cost of crops. Also, they are pressing the government to fix the support price of at least cotton, paddy and potato, all three of which have been hit by the increasing gap between the cost of production and prices in the market. Of course, these assertions are backed by reasonable arguments and models from around the world, with India, as usual, providing the prime example. These are ideas well worth exploring. The

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farmers have to be given a patient hearing. It is clear that they cannot go on like this. There has to be a solution to the issues they have been agitating about.

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MQM's dilemma

THE political leadership of the MQM has to decide on its own whether or not it wishes to remain a part of the political set-up. It cannot toss this ball into the court of the federal government. Using resignations as a bargaining tool to extract some assurances from the government is not without risk and could land the MQM leaders in an absurd situation, at the same time weakening their grip on the meagre quantum of power they still retain. It may be true that the party's political leadership is in a very difficult situation at the moment. It is caught between the demands of the more militant elements within the MQM on the one hand and the Rangers' operation, which has targeted many of the party's political activists, on the other. Given this environment, wisdom and magnanimity are necessary when dealing with the political leadership of the party because even small gestures have considerable significance — without compromising the aims or execution of the operation. The prime minister could have asked after the health of Rashid Godil, for instance, and at least given some expression of support for tracking down those who sought to murder him while wishing the injured MNA a speedy recovery.

Such a gesture would have limited impact, however, in placating the political leadership of the MQM. The party in Karachi has some decisions to make, and they must be made by its leadership alone. Playing a drawn-out game with the resignations is likely to make it look weak and indecisive, while the act of resigning will damage the party's political standing even more. For its part, the government should sharpen its actions while blunting its rhetoric. It is one thing for the interior minister to seek to advance a legal reference with the UK government against the MQM chief Altaf Hussain. But it is quite another to issue public statements following every meeting with the UK high commissioner stating the facts that came under discussion. What is the purpose of this, other than to taunt the party's political leadership? If a legal reference is indeed going to be handed over to the UK government, then it is better to simply advance the matter without rubbing it in the face of the MQM constantly. And for its part, the MQM leadership needs to avoid getting stuck in a manoeuvre that it cannot follow through on without damaging itself even more.

Published in Dawn, August 23rd, 2015

Tainted cricketers

THE ICC decision to declare Mohammad Asif and Salman Butt eligible for return to competitive cricket next month is being perceived as detrimental to the future of the game in Pakistan.

The two players, along with young fast bowler Mohammad Amir, were banned from all cricket five years ago for taking money and bringing the game into disrepute during a spot-fixing scam in 2010. Now having served their bans, the three will become available for international matches from Sept 2, just a month before England begin a Test series against Pakistan in the United Arab Emirates.

However, criticism has come from several quarters that do not want to see the players rejoin the Pakistan team. They have called on the PCB to keep them out of the game permanently.

Former greats, such as Javed Miandad and Ramiz Raja, have argued that since the three players had deliberately indulged in corruption to bring a bad name to the country, they should not be allowed to return as this could derail the team on its road to redemption.

Indeed, their return could spoil the efforts of skipper Misbah-ul-Haq and his men who, over the past five years, have tried to resurrect Pakistan's image as a leading cricketing nation.

It has been noted, though, that Amir commands a greater degree of sympathy owing to his naivety and young age at the time of the crime.

He was allowed to play domestic cricket early this year by the ICC after he showed much remorse at his actions and disclosed relevant information to the anti-corruption units.

The PCB too travelled some distance to convince the ICC to review the conditions of Amir's ban during the past one year, and appears inclined to draft him into the national side for the Twenty20 World Cup in India next year.

However, in a positive move the other day, the PCB made its stance clear by acting swiftly to put Asif and Salman's return to domestic cricket on hold.

Published in Dawn, August 24th, 2015

Lest we forget

IN Pakistan, it is easy to forget even the ghastliest of tragedies due to the unrelenting nature of the news cycle. With terrorism, corruption and disasters — both natural and man-made — dominating the headlines, other issues, of equal importance, often recede into the background.

This also seems to be the case with the Kasur child sexual abuse horror. Which makes it all the more important for civil society and the media to keep reminding the state about this monstrous crime.

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In this regard, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has done well by conducting a fact-finding probe into the matter. What the HRCP found should prompt the state to speed up its investigation and bring the perpetrators to justice without delay.

Take a look: [*Credible proofs of child sexual abuse in Kasur*](#)

The report says it received “credible testimonies” that pointed to years of “large-scale sexual abuse of children” in Kasur’s Husain Khanwala village.

The team also found that the victims’ families had been intimidated to keep quiet after the abuse was filmed and were forced to pay extortion money to the perpetrators. What should be of particular concern to the state’s investigators are indications that some of the local police officials were apparently in collusion with the criminals.

The violation of even a single child is unacceptable; in this case possibly 300 children were sexually abused and humiliated — some as young as 10 — over a five- to six-year period.

Hence, considering the magnitude of this outrage, it would be simply unforgivable for state and society to let this crime go unpunished.

The joint investigation team formed by the Punjab chief minister needs to dig deep and conduct a detailed, transparent investigation. If an independent human rights body was able to uncover such details, there should be nothing stopping the state

— with all the resources at its disposal — to get to the bottom of the matter.

However, care must be taken so that the victims’ identities are not made public and their privacy is protected. Additionally, the state must provide the victims with qualified medical and psychological help.

Tragedies occur and, after the initial shock, are soon forgotten. But we must not let the Kasur outrage recede into the background.

Justice demands that the criminals who violated these children are brought to book while the administrative and law-enforcement machinery across this nation needs to be shaken up to crack down on the abuse and sexual assault of minors — which is by no means a limited phenomenon in Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, August 24th, 2015

Speaker unseated

THE unseating of the speaker of the National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq and the ordering of a re-election in NA-122 by an election tribunal has created an awkward situation for the PML-N.

After the judicial inquiry commission report validated the overall general election result, the PML-N would have that electoral disputes had been left behind. However, as with the Saad Rafique case, it was known that an individual judgement was awaited in the Ayaz Sadiq case and that it could go against the PML-N.

Take a look: [NA-122 election tribunal deseats Ayaz Sadiq, orders re-polling](#)

The election tribunal appears to have found many of the anomalies identified in the report authored by the now former chief justice Nasirul Mulk. The difference is that the commission was sifting through allegations of mass manipulation and systematic fraud in May 2013 whereas the tribunal appears to have been trying to ascertain if the record of the vote in NA-122 conclusively demonstrated that Mr Sadiq had defeated PTI chief Imran Khan.

As in the Saad Rafique case, the PML-N has decided to appeal to the Supreme Court, where it will likely argue that administrative anomalies do not amount to proof of any wrongdoing by Mr Sadiq and that he should not be punished since the record of the vote was improperly collected and poorly maintained by election officials.

Awkward as the situation may be politically – the speaker is supposed to represent the best of the National Assembly and is meant to guide parliamentary democracy – there is no real crisis this time round. If by-elections are to be eventually held in Lahore in the constituencies won by Saad Rafique and Ayaz Sadiq, they would probably reignite the rivalry between the PML-N and PTI and stoke public interest.

But that is something to be welcomed – healthy electoral competition is good for democracy. Less welcome though is the lack of interest in parliament, indeed lack of initiative shown by the speaker himself, in pushing ahead with electoral reforms, something that the judicial commission report made clear are desperately needed. If the dispute over May 2013 is not to be repeated in 2018 – and at the moment, it looks very likely that the principal contenders will again be the PML-N and PTI – the election commission must be overhauled and the voting process made more transparent and verifiable.

Unhappily, the PML-N government seems to be uninterested in legislative matters generally and the parliamentary election reforms committee appears to be going nowhere.

For the PTI, the impact of the news from Lahore over the weekend is difficult to gauge. For a while now, and especially since the election inquiry commission report, the PTI has seemed unsure and adrift as a party. As with May 2013, the party appears to have had no fallback plan or strategy to help it close the gap to the PML-N.

The politics of endless agitation and dissent inevitably has diminishing returns.

Palmyra in peril

When the self-styled Islamic State captured Palmyra in May, there was little hope that the ancient city — a Unesco World Heritage Site — would escape the murderous group’s iconoclastic fervour.

As subsequent events have shown, that sense of foreboding was entirely justified. According to Syria’s antiquities chief and a Syrian human rights group, IS has blown up one of the most important sites in Palmyra, the 2000-year-old Baal Shamin temple, known as the “pearl of the desert”. Then, on Tuesday, the group executed Khaled al-Asaad, an acclaimed archeologist and scholar who had worked for over 50 years as head of antiquities in Palmyra.

Before his murder, the 82-year-old was subjected to torture for more than a month to extract information about the location of artefacts that had been removed for safekeeping before the arrival of IS militants. Asaad refused to cooperate, choosing instead to give up his life to protect the priceless relics that bear the imprint of the many civilisations that crossed paths in Palmyra in times past.

Syria is believed to contain archeological sites and historical monuments in greater numbers than almost any other country.

The chaos that prevails there in large swathes, not only those areas captured by IS but also those where troops loyal to President Bashar al-Assad are fighting rebel fighters and Islamist groups, has wreaked havoc on this heritage.

Aside from the physical damage, the smuggling of antiquities has also thrived in the shadow of war. Religiously inspired zealots have often engaged in destruction of cultural heritage, not only for ideological but also political reasons.

The Afghan Taliban, for instance, sought to convey their contempt for international opinion by destroying the Bamiyan Buddhas.

The IS, however, seems to be largely driven by a nihilistic rage unparalleled in its brutality. Meanwhile, as the world stands by and wrings its hands, what survived for thousands of years through war and peace, through the eras of caliphs, kings and despots, is deliberately and methodically being ground into dust.

Published in Dawn, August 25th, 2015

Electronic Media Code of Conduct 2015: Regulating the media

Given the context in which it has come, it is a case of better late than never: following the directives of the Supreme Court, on Thursday the Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Heritage issued the Electronic Media (Programmes and Advertisements) Code of Conduct, 2015.

The first code of conduct regulating the field was produced in 2002. Yet despite the formulation of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Rules 2009, it has felt as though media organisations and their employees have run rings around lumbering efforts to operate within the rules — and in some case, even the norms of common decency.

Lapses and deviations from the guidelines have become distressingly common, from allegations and unsubstantiated ‘facts’ becoming regular features of discussion, to live coverage of hostage situations which put the law enforcers’ operation in jeopardy, the bandying about of hate speech, and even media crews intruding into hospital wards or carrying out ‘raids’ on citizens’ homes or places of work.

Also read: [Warning to cable TV operators](#)

The last is referred to in the 2015 code as “door stepping” and it, along with a raft of other malpractices, has been defined and restricted / barred under the new code of conduct.

Unsurprisingly, substantial sections are devoted to explaining what, for example, constitutes hate speech, the glorification of terrorism and the promotion of taking up arms against the state. Yet encouragingly, the code goes beyond these most pressing problems and also addresses other, less glaring malpractices, such as in advertising.

There are sections relating to the protection of minors, and a right of response for persons against whom an allegation has been made. Also of value is the balancing act that has been attempted by including, at appropriate places, “unless in overriding public interest” riders.

As ever, though, there are problems which will require further work, one of them being the “sweeping nature” of the guidelines against which the Committee to Protect Journalists has protested. Consider, for example, the section that declares that nothing must be aired that is against Islamic values or the ideology of Pakistan, or that is obscene; the country is all too aware of instances where such language has been invoked to limit debate and dissent.

It would have been far better had the Pakistan Broadcasters Association itself come up with a code. Now, the greatest challenge lies in implementation. Urgently needed is a media monitoring committee that is acceptable to all, independent of the government and resistant to any efforts to subvert its will through political manoeuvring.

It should not be forgotten, after all, that while some of the malpractices identified by the 2015 code were also present in the 2009 rules, the latter went largely ignored. Indeed, first and foremost, it is the media houses themselves that need to revisit

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the ethics of their field, with the long-term aim being the parliamentary oversight of media regulation.

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Medicine danger

One name, two medicines, two different health problems. One is used to treat high blood pressure, the other is given to patients with symptoms of epilepsy.

Know more: [Two very different drugs, one name](#)

Clearly, this is a disaster waiting to happen, in addition to so many other problems that either remain to be addressed or continue to be invented in the health sector, especially in drug manufacturing. The ‘good’ thing is that officials say this was a rare case.

Some 52,000 drugs have been entered in the computerised database that the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan is in the process of creating. Whereas an estimated 20,000 drugs have yet to be registered the Drap chief executive officer says “the chances of two drugs being registered under the same name will be greatly reduced”. The statement should draw sighs of relief and exasperation both.

The country should thank its lucky stars. At the same time, as always and despite Drap’s assurances, this bit of information

will inevitably fuel fears about yet more cases that have not come to the notice of the officials and there will be reminders about how health circles have not even got the basics rights. After all, two drugs meant to treat two wholly different health problems were being sold in the market. It is indeed serious that it took an exercise in national data-gathering to bring to light this fact.

The way Pakistan has dealt with the challenges of the medicine sector is far from satisfactory. Drugs are freely available without prescription.

Among the many aspects that need to be addressed on an emergency basis, not least important is the issue of unqualified salesmen who offer substitutes to medicines prescribed by doctors.

They may justify the alternative on the basis of price or availability or, as it is sometimes alleged, the seller could be trying to promote his favourite brand. But, more dangerously, he could also be ignorant when it comes to guiding a buyer about two drugs with one name.

It would seem that those who allowed these drugs that were meant to treat two different ailments to be sold in the market have never visited the Pakistani equivalent of a pharmacy.

A ‘medical store’ in any neighbourhood of the country provides a revealing lesson in much that is wrong or in need of fixing. It must provide impetus for an overhaul of the system — and as quickly as possible.

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Threat of sectarianism

There remains a troubling disconnect between what the government claims and the reality on the ground when it comes to the state's attempts to fight sectarianism.

On Monday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan [once again claimed](#) that there has been significant progress in several areas of the National Action Plan and appeared to suggest that the clampdown on sectarianism is continuing.

To support his case, the interior minister cited actions against the misuse of loudspeakers and a progressive eradication of hate literature. Yet, there is reason to believe that many, if not most, sectarian elements have remained untouched, continuing to operate with impunity and little fear of the law.

Also read: [Banned outfits operating under different names undermine state's credibility: Babar](#)

Consider the case of the banned ASWJ and its leadership. While some of its leaders may be in jail and other affiliated groups' leaders dead, the fact remains that the ASWJ has an open and vociferous presence inside the country.

When one of the most notorious of banned organisations can have active social media accounts and hold rallies across the country, there is something wrong with the claims of the interior minister.

A key part of the problem is that the state appears not to have given much thought to what constitutes sectarianism and the

violence it engenders. If that were to be done and meaningful action taken, sectarian groups like the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan could not simply morph into the ASWJ or another avatar at some later point.

By defining sectarianism clearly and robustly, the focus would be on the leaders spewing hate and the recruits perpetrating the violence — a change from the present nonsensical approach of simply banning organisations and waiting for them to appear in a new form.

Then there is the problem of the mosque-madrasah-social welfare nexus along with the proliferation of hate literature that makes sectarianism so hard to root out — even if present-day sectarian militants are captured, the next generation is already being trained and prepared for battle. It is not enough to simply curb the sale and distribution of hate literature outside mosques on Fridays — there has to be an attempt to find and prosecute the creators of the content.

And with the ever-growing use of the internet via smartphones and relatively cheap internet access, there has to be attention paid to online hate literature and the forums in which it is distributed. Anything less and the lull will prove to be only temporary.

Published in Dawn, August 26th, 2015

SC's civic interventions

WHEN government departments fail to do their jobs, citizens often have few places to turn to other than the judiciary, often the Supreme Court.

Two recent examples from Karachi have reaffirmed this as the apex court has stepped in to address law and order and civic issues.

On Monday, a Supreme Court bench in Karachi instructed the authorities to ensure that no vehicles with 'applied for registration' or fancy number plates and no non-duty paid vehicles plied the roads of Sindh.

Also read: [Action against vehicles with AFR, fancy number plates ordered](#)

The court has also issued a deadline for the removal of "dangerous" hoardings and billboards. Traffic police officials have told the court that "hundreds" of vehicles with 'AFR' or fancy number plates have been impounded, but a drive across Karachi will reveal that the law enforcers have much work ahead of them in this regard.

In this age of rampant crime and terrorism, allowing unregistered motorcycles and automobiles as well as vehicles with illegal plates to operate is totally unacceptable.

Criminals and militants use the apathy of the LEAs to their advantage, as a vehicle with an 'AFR' or fancy plate affixed to it is very difficult to trace. Also, should a vehicle with an

improper plate get involved in an accident, problems can arise where the registration of a case is concerned.

As for dangerous signage, while outdoor advertising is a legitimate form of marketing, the way it is carried out in Karachi is problematic.

As the Supreme Court has observed, some outdoor advertising has encroached upon footpaths, leaving little space for hapless pedestrians, while some hoardings are so huge they end up obstructing the drivers' view. In both these instances, the court's orders must be followed as these are matters of public safety and well-being.

Traffic authorities must ensure that no vehicles with illegal plates are allowed on the road, while the excise department must also issue plates in a timely manner. Moreover, the civic bodies that control land in Karachi must ensure that all signage that threatens public safety is removed or conforms to safety standards.

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Financial market gyrations

FOR the past one year at least, a series of economic crises have been roiling the global economy to which we in Pakistan have been little more than spectators. But this week, the sharp volatilities of the international economy briefly landed on our shores and triggered powerful adverse movements in the financial markets.

The stock market saw falls that rekindled memories of 2008, and the exchange rate has also been coming under increasing pressure.

For now, the stock market seems to be on a rebound, but the volatilities could return very quickly since the crisis in the international markets is far from over.

Also read: [KSE bloodbath after global equity meltdown](#)

The exchange rate on the other hand is continuing to feel the stress. The sharp swings on the stock market coupled with pressure on the rupee is a reminder that Pakistan remains vulnerable to instability in the global economy, and it is best to be prepared.

As a first step, the government should allow the rupee to find its own value. Investing too much importance in a strong currency is far too old-fashioned a way to view the exchange rate.

Especially since commodity prices, including oil, are on a sharp downward trajectory that is likely to continue for a while,

it would be better to allow a soft landing for the rupee towards a value that does not require too much expenditure of reserves to sustain.

For the stock market, the government should put out early word on whether or not it would be willing to utilise public funds for a bail-out, should matters come to that.

The last such bail-out following 2008 had to be hastily arranged and was of doubtful merit. It would be better this time, if recourse to public funds should become necessary to prevent systemic risk, for strong guidelines to be in place for transparency as well as to ensure that the funds are not appropriated by the big brokers.

Now is also a good time for the SECP to wake up and monitor the advice being given by the brokers to their clients.

Misleading ‘research’ and attempts to sell unwarranted optimism, as well as talking up certain stocks, should be strictly prohibited.

The sharp volatilities roiling the global markets are escalating and it would be a grave mistake to seek solace in the notion that Pakistan will remain insulated from these developments. That same complacency magnified the impact of the 2008 crisis.

Nobody knows where the volatility will end, and nobody expects that the government can do much to keep it from impacting the country. But a few preparatory steps can go a long way to ensure that the government works to safeguard the public interest should matters deteriorate, rather than have its

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actions dictated to it in the thick of the crisis by a small cabal of brokers.

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Karachi's dilemma

The language at least speaks of determination. According to the ISPR, army chief Gen Raheel Sharif has pledged that the Karachi operation will continue against terrorists, criminals and mafias across the board.

That is a good thing. In the nearly two years since the Karachi operation was launched, there have been noticeable results, especially the reduction in serious crime and political violence. It does appear that the federal and military intelligence apparatus have been able to progressively identify and dismantle groups that have long tormented the denizens of Karachi.

Take a look: [No let-up in Karachi operation: army chief](#)

To ensure that the anti-Karachi elements do not rebound and try and re-establish their reign of terror, the operation in the provincial capital must continue. There remain, however, complicated and continuing questions of just where criminality ends and politics begins.

It is not yet known if the detention yesterday of a close aide of former president Asif Ali Zardari and a senior figure in the last PPP government Asim Hussain is linked to Gen Sharif's visit to Karachi a day earlier.

Yet, with the army chief pledging to also break the "evil nexus" between "terrorism, criminal mafias, violence and corruption" it would appear that the military will not avoid upsetting the political leadership in the province.

To be sure, there are some legitimate complaints of the political parties that dominate Sindh. The MQM in particular has faced the brunt of the operation and insofar as various members of the party have been detained without following proper legal procedure and others have died in custody in murky circumstances, the party is justified in demanding that its grievances be addressed.

Putting in place an independent but powerful mechanism that can act as a bridge between the MQM and the security apparatus would be the right step. The MQM is a legitimate political party, but it also has been unusually tolerant of violent elements in its midst over the years.

The PPP too has some legitimate complaints, not least that the federal authorities have usurped provincial powers in conducting raids on provincial offices and confiscating provincial documentation.

Yet, it is to be hoped that following former federal minister Asim Hussain's detention, the PPP leadership will counsel former president Asif Ali Zardari to not lash out as he did after

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the military leadership openly began to discuss the problem of political corruption in the province.

Rather than confront the military perhaps what the PPP government in Sindh could do to rehabilitate its image and restore its reputation is to take governance more seriously.

It is troubling that as a near parallel system of administration is taking shape in Sindh, the provincial government remains either somnolent or quite indifferent to its responsibilities to help secure the peace in the province.

When politicians abdicate their responsibilities, other institutions invariably act to fill in the perceived gap.

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LNG imports sputter

ALMOST six months since commencing commercial operations, the LNG import terminal is still gasping for air. Now we have a leak from PSO — the company responsible for arranging the imports — saying that in the absence of a long-term arrangement, purchase of LNG by private parties will not be economically feasible since the cost of the imported gas is higher than that of furnace oil in these times.

And a long-term supply arrangement from Qatar is facing obstacles because the petroleum ministry has failed to do its homework.

Take a look: [Doubts about LNG supply in winter](#)

Specifically, the homework included arranging an agreement between PSO and the two natural gas distribution companies, SSGC and SNGPL, whose networks will be used to get the consignment to its buyer, as well as dredging of the channel at Port Qasim so it is capable of seeing LNG vessels travel safely through it, and finally an agreement with power producers to develop a payment mechanism.

The whole project was inaugurated with much fanfare by the PML-N government and presented as proof of its business credentials, but almost six months after entering commercial operations, the terminal today presents itself more as a monument testifying to the opposite.

It is far too late in the day for blame games or for higher-ups to be clarifying their positions in public. What is needed is rapid movement towards viable imports of the vital fuel.

As oil prices decline further in international markets, new challenges on the price front are materialising rapidly, and there is little doubt that the price differential between imported LNG and heavily subsidised domestic gas will pose hurdles. But this ought to have been straightened out by now, considering the ministry had more than a year in which to work out all these issues.

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We can only hope it is not too late and that LNG imports can begin soon so the terminal will not be just a silent spectator when the winter gas allocation plans are drawn up.

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Madressah clean-up?

It appears that the Punjab government has been busy cleaning up the seminaries — but away from public view.

Rana Sanaullah, the provincial law minister, says the madressahs in Punjab have somehow been purged of militant elements. He did, as a prelude to his claim, ‘admit’ to the presence earlier of 20 such seminaries whose students or faculty had been involved in terrorism, even if ‘only’ as facilitators.

What magic wand the administration waved to get such surprising results has yet to be disclosed.

Know more: [No militancy in Punjab seminaries: Rana Sanaullah](#)

For the moment, those informed of the figures, intended to be reassuring no doubt, must deal with the mini-surprise of learning that, long identified as a hotbed of extremism, Punjab only had 20 seminaries that, presumably, required a little bit of fixing here and there.

The minister did come up with figures: 532 seminaries raided; 1,100 suspects taken into custody from them; 13,787 madressahs geo-tagged. But then, according to his remarks, the record of each and every student on the roll of these 13,000-odd tagged seminaries was being looked into.

So how is he so sure that the militant element has been uprooted?

There may be some credible evidence that shows the Shahbaz Sharif government’s commitment to targeting the nurseries of militancy, a commitment dictated by the National Action Plan. But unfortunately, the absence of substance in Mr Sanaullah’s claim does not make it part of the clinching evidence that would put Punjab ahead of the other provinces. On the same day the claim was made, in Sindh surfaced a list of 49 madressahs against which action had been ordered for their links to militancy. Just as it was unclear as to what the action in Sindh would be, it was difficult to assess whether Sindh had been sufficiently inspired by the big brother in the federation, or if both these bigger provinces were equally guilty of many airy-fairy boasts with little achieved on the ground. Sindh has repeatedly been criticised for lethargy and lack of purpose in recent years. In this case, it could justifiably look for some appreciation for having been able to identify 49 suspect madressahs whereas the much larger and, by many estimates, far more suspicious Punjab stopped at 20. Much more significantly, both these provinces — in fact, the whole country — need to come up with a transparent system where they are actually seen to be cleansing their respective territories of the dangers that are nurtured inside seminaries.

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PSL in Doha

AFTER much indecision, the Pakistan Cricket Board has finally announced the launching of the Pakistan Super League in Doha, Qatar next February. Inspired by the lucrative Indian Premier League, the five-team T20 tournament will carry collective prize money of \$1m, with a number of leading players from around the world participating. Najam Sethi, who is chairman of the PSL's governing council, is excited about the potentially prolific league and envisages a tremendous response from players, sponsors and broadcasters in the lead-up to the league's launch on Feb 4.

However, many a critic and ex-player still see the PSL as a gamble which may or may not prove to be PCB's golden goose. Question marks continue to hang over the cash-rich league at the moment despite Mr Sethi's claims that all bases have been covered to make it a viable venture. Following a lukewarm response from the UAE as first choice hosts, the PCB opted for Doha as the venue for PSL despite the fact that Qataris as a nation do not naturally take to the game of cricket. While Qatar has made rapid strides in soccer and is all set to stage the Soccer World Cup in 2022, it lacks the basic infrastructure for cricket tournaments, while the sultry weather conditions there are also not ideal for the game. More importantly, the players need the stimulus of an appreciative crowd to deliver their best on the field, particularly in the T20 format, which Doha will woefully lack despite being home to a sizeable South Asian population. While the ICC was browbeaten into creating a special slot for the IPL at the time of its launch, thanks to the tremendous influence India wields in international cricket, Pakistan may not find it so smooth

when it comes to foreign teams releasing their players for the PSL. While there is much to celebrate, the challenges for Pakistan are considerable on this front. Only time will tell if the PCB can overcome them.

Published in Dawn, August 28th, 2015

Fiscal straitjacket

THE country has been stuck in a fiscal straitjacket since its inception. Calls for building the state's revenue apparatus and bringing it in line with the requirements of a growing modern economy have been made since at least the early 1950s. Today, those same calls continue to be made, and in a few places, have become louder. The issue of tax reform has followed a rocky trajectory in our political and economic history; today, the government is struggling to raise the tax-to-GDP ratio relying primarily on withholding taxes and taxes on petroleum products. Calls to come up with a 'charter of economy' to build consensus around a set of core economic proposals have also had a lukewarm response in parliament.

Most recently, a new report funded by the UK's Department for International Development, has tried to take up the cause of highlighting the fiscal emergency the country is drifting towards, but it falls short of its target. For one, it is ironic to note a donor-funded effort trying to remind the country of its growing dependence on donor support. Then the report's presentation of its core data contradicts itself in different

places, leaving it to the reader to check the underlying assumption behind each discrepancy. From the tax-to-GDP ratio, which is given as 9.4pc in the accompanying press release and brochure and 10.4pc in the body of the report itself, to other key fiscal expenditure items, data discrepancies sprinkled throughout the report inadvertently highlight the difficulties involved in building any consensus on economic policy — and if we are not clear on the numbers then the rest of the conversation cannot begin. Getting the numbers right can be a harder job than most people imagine. In Pakistan, the economic numbers themselves have been politicised, creating an environment where building a consensus on a core economic agenda has become even more complicated than it was previously. Not only that, messaging economic challenges in a public space dominated by shrill breaking news is problematic in itself, forcing those who try to indulge in this exercise to resort to some hyperbole which sounds unconvincing to most ears. Nevertheless, the report is an effort in good faith to draw attention to a vital weakness in the structure of the state in Pakistan. The authors' effort to highlight the unsustainable nature of the fiscal framework needs to continue.

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Brahmdagh Bugti's changed stance

IT is a volte-face that was least expected, and one that could have a defining impact on the Baloch insurgency. Brahmdagh Bugti, in an interview to the BBC on the ninth anniversary of his grandfather Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti's death, has said he is prepared to give up his demand for an independent Balochistan if its people so desire. The separatist leader, who heads the Baloch Republican Party from self-exile in Switzerland, also expressed his willingness to engage in dialogue with the government provided the ongoing military operation in Balochistan was halted and the forces withdrawn. For Mr Bugti to extend the olive branch, albeit with caveats, is a significant development. After all, it was his grandfather's death in a military operation on Aug 26, 2006 that exacerbated disaffection towards the state among the Baloch and added fuel to the fires of insurgency. The Bugti scion, who barely escaped with his life that day and subsequently fled into exile, is considered one of the most prominent separatist leaders, the quintessential 'angry Baloch' who has long been implacably opposed to any option other than an independent Balochistan.

Considered in the light of recent circumstances, Mr Bugti's conciliatory words are rooted in pragmatism. Several factors have changed the dynamics in Balochistan. For one, the security establishment has ramped up the intensity of operations across the province. It is not difficult to fathom why: the successful execution of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is predicated on securing peace in that theatre of conflict. 'Managing' the violence through dubious proxies and

occasional security operations is no longer enough. Meanwhile, the insurgents, however well-armed, cannot match the army's firepower and large numbers of Mr Bugti's followers as well as insurgents belonging to other separatist groups have been killed in the military offensive. Second, in response to the amnesty announced by the provincial government in late June, hundreds of purported rebels have laid down their arms. While it is difficult to ascertain the true extent of such 'surrenders', the spectacle — played up to the hilt by the authorities as a counter-insurgency ploy — must be demoralising to those still fighting the state. Third, and perhaps most crucial, the separatist movement that once appeared an impregnable monolith has fractured over the past year as a result of internal crises. Mr Bugti's statements on Wednesday could accelerate the process.

All of which is very good news for a government that has recently approached the Khan of Kalat for talks as part of its overtures to bring the 'angry Baloch' leaders to the negotiating table. Now is the time for skilful statecraft to capitalise on the opportunity offered by Mr Bugti; with the main sticking point of an independent Balochistan in abeyance, give and take is certainly possible. Getting the military hardware to fall silent and putting an end to enforced disappearances of the Baloch would be a good start.

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Rangers' mandate

THE operation being carried out by the Rangers in Karachi is at serious risk of losing its focus, as the detention of former petroleum minister Asim Hussain on Wednesday has shown.

Dr Hussain, an associate of former president Asif Zardari, was taken into custody under a law strictly formulated for the pursuit of terrorists, and his detention has come across as a misuse of legal authority by the paramilitary force.

Also read: [Dr Asim remanded in Rangers custody for 90 days](#)

Indeed, the perception of the Rangers overstepping their mandate has extended to other instances as well: not too long ago, an MQM leader was detained by the Rangers for organising a public meeting during which Altaf Hussain spoke against the security establishment.

Dr Asim Hussain was detained under Section 11E of the Anti Terrorism Act of 1997, which was passed as an amendment in October 2013 at the start of the Karachi operation, specifically to empower the Rangers to detain and question those suspected of being involved in terrorism.

Since then, the anti-terrorism law has been used to apprehend a growing number of individuals from all walks of life, from the chairman of the Fishermen Cooperative Society, to the head of the country's largest association of builders and developers, to various officials of the city government.

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In their application for preventive detention, the Rangers simply have to inform the court that they possess “credible information” that the suspect is involved in terror-related crime. Whatever the former minister’s alleged involvement in corruption cases, it beggars belief that he could have been involved in acts of terrorism.

This is the case with many others too who have been similarly detained under this draconian law. Such detentions, which the court is powerless to refuse or even demand details on, are creating the impression that the operation in Karachi has now gone far off the rails.

Pursuing corruption cases is the mandate of the federal government, and inquiries for the purpose are conducted by the FIA with laws governing the rights of the accused.

The PML-N government is mistaken if it thinks it can benefit by remaining silent in the face of this dilating mission. Not only does this risk politicising the operation, thereby tainting the successes — and these have been considerable — the Rangers have scored thus far, it also risks overstressing the paramilitary force’s capacity to effectively pursue the real terrorists.

The federal government should demand an account of how many people have been detained under this law, and what has been their fate subsequently. Perhaps the law itself needs to be revisited to give the courts greater powers to examine the grounds upon which the detention of a suspect is being sought.

Meanwhile, the provincial government in Sindh is doing practically nothing to tackle corruption and crime. Its inertia

has only created further space for those whose mandate does not go beyond tackling terror-related crimes.

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By-elections indicated

ONCE again demonstrating that it will eventually do the right thing — after trying everything else — the PML-N has indicated it will opt for by-elections instead of challenging the unseating of three of its MNAs, by election tribunals.

Clearly, the PML-N does have the legal right to challenge the decisions of the election tribunals in the cases of Saad Rafique, Ayaz Sadiq and Siddique Baloch.

Take a look: [Election tribunal orders re-election in NA-154, deseats PML-N lawmaker](#)

A cursory reading of the decisions suggests that administrative anomalies identified in the May 2013 general election inquiry commission report have been used as the basis for determining that the individual results cannot be adequately verified, rather than there necessarily being proof of wrongdoing by the winning candidates.

Moreover, Saad Rafique and Ayaz Sadiq are high-profile leaders of the PML-N and the party leadership will be loath to see their electoral record tainted.

Yet, it is precisely for that reason that the electoral solution is preferable. In Mr Sadiq's case in particular, the taint would stretch over to the National Assembly itself, which elected the winner of NA-122 in Lahore as speaker two years ago.

The benefit of the political/electoral solution also is that by-elections would almost certainly be of significantly better quality in terms of oversight than the general election.

As with the several by-elections held since May 2013, the ECP has proved capable of holding elections that could be considered genuinely free and fair when it has the chance to focus on just a handful of constituencies at a time.

That is admittedly a problem too — the ECP will need to beef up its resources ahead of the local government elections in Punjab and Sindh later this year — but that is separate from the legitimacy of the winners from seats that the PTI has made so controversial since 2013. There are further positive possibilities.

Perhaps Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will use the unseating of a frontline minister and the speaker of the National Assembly to finally reshuffle his cabinet, a move that has been much delayed for no good reason.

Meanwhile, the PTI will be forced to confront its own policy of endless agitation rather than focusing on the voters' concerns. Electoral logic will likely nudge the party to participate in the by-elections rather than boycott them because of specious reasons.

Whoever wins, the PTI or the PML-N, the democratic process will surely be strengthened a smidgen by the by-elections.

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High-denomination notes

THE Rs5,000 note is the unlikely culprit in a number of high-profile conversations in the country today, and for good reason.

The note, issued in 2006, plays a key role in large cash transactions mainly of a speculative or unscrupulous nature. Some quarters in the State Bank argue that the note is essential to simplify the cash management operations of banks that require large volumes of currency notes in their sprawling network of bank branches, and that cash management on this scale using smaller denominations is too cumbersome.

But that still begs the question: who really needs and uses the Rs5,000 note? It's rarely seen in retail transactions. Much of the demand for the note, which circulates mostly outside the banking system once issued by a branch or ATM machine, comes from players who settle large transactions in cash on a daily basis. This should automatically raise questions about the nature of their work.

It is easy to make the case that the note ought to be discontinued. Large payments should be made through the

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banking system, and retail customers rarely need such high-denomination currency.

Most recently, the Public Accounts Committee of the National Assembly was told by the deputy governor of the State Bank that there was a need to study whether or not the note ought to continue to be printed.

This is the highest level of acknowledgement thus far that the mere presence of the note may be playing a role in perpetuating dubious transactions and the statement ought to be welcomed. But more importantly, the statement ought to be followed up on.

The uses to which the Rs5,000 note is put in the economy has already been studied, and many years ago its printing was actually discontinued for a brief period.

The deputy governor might want to revisit the study and that episode to add some detail to his knowledge about the role the note is playing in our economy.

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Turkey-PKK tensions

THE condition of the Middle East is already precarious, with wars in Syria and Yemen, instability in Iraq and the security of the entire region threatened by the self-styled, expansionist Islamic State. In such a bubbling cauldron, another conflict can only add to the chaos and give IS and other extremist entities room to manoeuvre. Unfortunately, the situation involving Turkey and Kurdish dissidents is heating up, and if sagacity and statesmanship are not shown by both sides, it may prove destabilising for Ankara's internal security while taking the focus away from the fight against IS. Though Turkey and Kurdish group PKK had announced a historic ceasefire in 2013, that accord is now in tatters as the gulf between both sides has widened. The Kurds say the Turkish state is targeting them under the cover of the anti-IS campaign, while Kurdish militants, as a reaction, have stepped up attacks inside the country. Yet as with most conflicts, there are multiple dimensions to the situation. While Ankara and the PKK do not trust each other, they both oppose IS. In fact, while Turkey has recently started targeting the extremist outfit, Kurdish groups have also confronted the 'caliphate' in Syria. Despite the fact that they share a common foe, each side has opened up a front against the other.

Turkey and the PKK need to return to the political process to resolve their differences. Using force to address what is essentially a political problem will only distract both sides from the bigger challenge: confronting ascendant Islamist militancy in the region in the shape of IS. The Turkish state should take the lead and keep the channels of dialogue open with the PKK so that it can concentrate — working with other

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regional states — in countering and eventually defeating IS. We must remember that IS struck roots in Syria and Iraq because a vacuum had been created by internal conflicts. Turkey should study the experience of its neighbours to make sure that the same mistake is not repeated.

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Integrated stock market

MORE than three years after the passage of key enabling legislation, stock market reforms took another step in the right direction this week when the finance minister put his signature down for integrating the three stock exchanges of the country. The step had been held up since the passage of the Stock Exchanges (Corporatisation, Demutualisation & Integration) Act, back in 2012, but the memorandum of understanding signed on Thursday has got the process moving once again. The demutualisation of the stock exchanges — basically separating ownership of the exchange itself from trading rights — is an important step in the right direction. Although some progress has been made in removing the influence of brokers at the stock exchanges, there is still a long way to go. The presence of brokers on the board of directors has shrunk since talk of demutualisation began about a decade ago, but it needs to end altogether before the frontline regulator's autonomy is secure.

The next step is crucial because that is when the real material progress towards this goal begins. The process of acquisition of shares of the integrated stock exchange, and the reconstitution of its board is the goal towards which progress must be made rapidly, although thus far it appears there are no strategic buyers on the government's radar. There are also concerns that integration will produce a monopoly in the country's share market, although it is not possible to see how this can be avoided given the sheer disparity in weight between the Karachi Stock Exchange and all the others, unless a host of smaller regional exchanges are organically grown and merged together, which can take years. The influence of brokers on the management of the stock exchange can be reduced, but curbing it on the trade floor will be the bigger challenge, especially given the enormous concentration of holdings in the hands of a small number of brokers. Practices like insider trading and price manipulation will be harder to eliminate if the regulator is not ramped up, and the rumoured role of brokers in selecting the heads of key capital market regulators is not curbed. In short, demutualisation is an important step for Pakistan's capital markets to take, but it must be accompanied by a host of other steps as well for the process to have genuine credibility. Perhaps this is why the search for a strategic buyer is proving so elusive.

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Working Boundary violence

ONCE again, the Pakistani and Indian states are resorting to violence and, once again, it is civilians who are paying the price. The eruption of serious violence along the Working Boundary and the deaths of several Pakistani and some Indian citizens is as tragic as it is unnecessary. The usual set of accusations and recriminations have been on full, tawdry display. The Indian side claims to be responding to either infiltrations from the Pakistani side or to prohibited security-related activities along the boundary. The Pakistani side vehemently denies the Indian claims and alleges instead that India is attacking Pakistani civilians unprovoked or that India is using disproportionate force to settle relatively minor disputes. The claims of both sides are never independently verified and all that is certain is the death toll — though even there the numbers are sometimes manipulated to whip up nationalist sentiment in one or the other country. It is nothing but callous madness — and it needs to stop.

Once the guns fall silent, there is an immediate opportunity for high-level consultations on Line of Control- and Working Boundary-related issues. While the NSA talks were cancelled, the meeting between the DG Rangers and the DG Border Security Force is still scheduled to take place in New Delhi in September. Face-to-face meetings between the commanders of the forces exchanging fire are a time-tested way of reducing tensions along the LoC and Working Boundary. Both the directors general will know the details of what is really taking place in the zones of violence and will surely, if the Delhi meeting is not politicised, be able to identify measures to help restore calm and relative peace. Not only can they do so, they

also owe it to the respective populations whose security they are in charge of in the Kashmir region. The problem though clearly goes beyond local commanders. The Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has almost boasted about its use of disproportionate force along the LoC and Working Boundary since last year — without having anything meaningful to show for it in terms of disproportionate force acting as a deterrent. Similarly, if infiltration has gone up, what real benefit has Pakistan accrued from tweaking its policy?

There is another tragedy — India and Pakistan appear to have learned all the wrong lessons from history. Could the latest violence be linked to jingoism in the run-up to the 50th anniversary commemorations of the 1965 war? Quite possibly. But that conflict ought to really stand as a warning of how seemingly small miscalculations can lead to all-out war. Fifty years on, there have been two other wars and nuclear weapons added to the equation. Perversely, there may be a temptation to believe that this makes low-level violence and conflict more permissible and manageable. But when it comes to the old rivals, it is best that theories of violence not be tested so brazenly.

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Agitational politics

THE Election Commission of Pakistan has many shortcomings. Be it the individual election tribunal judgements or, more importantly, the inquiry commission report authored by former chief justice of the Supreme Court Nasirul Mulk, most of the problems identified in the conduct of elections appear to be ECP-related.

Despite being constitutionally empowered and having security of tenure, ECP members have by and large not been able to ensure progressively cleaner and fair elections. Yet, is the path of confrontation taken by the PTI supremo Imran Khan really a sensible choice?

To begin with, the Constitution clearly and deliberately provides ECP members with security of tenure designed specifically to insulate them from political pressures. The only way to remove an ECP member, other than the latter choosing to quit office, is by taking up the issue with the Supreme Judicial Council and proving that the ECP member is incapable of performing his duties or is guilty of misconduct.

Also read: [PTI to hold sit-in on October 4 if ECP members do not resign: Imran](#)

How does bypassing the constitutional process, demanding the resignations of ECP members and threatening to hold yet another sit-in, this time outside the ECP offices in Islamabad, improve the democratic system in the country?

Consider what will likely happen if some of the ECP members do succumb to the PTI's pressure and resign, as has been reported in sections of the media. New members will replace them and nothing will really be done to improve the conduct of elections.

There is already the example of former CEC Fakhruddin Ebrahim quitting in June 2013 after the Supreme Court appeared to dictate the timetable of the presidential election.

Did the replacement of Mr Ebrahim lead to any fundamental change when it came to the holding of local government elections in Balochistan and KP? Curiously, the PTI appears more tolerant of the many flaws in the KP LG polling process than it does of the May 2013 general election.

The meaningful solution is the one that has been apparent ever since May 2013, and underlined by the problems with the subsequently held LG elections: electoral reforms via parliament.

Individuals can make a difference in the ECP, but as presently constituted, it effectively only allows for retired superior court judges to become ECP members – are they really administrative experts capable of managing a vast electoral machine that goes all the way down to the polling station level and consists mainly of election officials temporarily borrowed from other government departments and the judiciary?

Moreover, when it comes to the voting process itself and the management of the record of the vote in case of disputes later, there have been a host of problems identified that would require amending electoral laws and rules. Should not Mr Khan

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really be taking up the issue inside parliament, using the report of the former chief justice as the starting point for change?

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Tragedy of migrants

AN image going around on the internet these days depicts the azure waters of the ocean, with a dozen human bodies floating in the shape of the circle — a biting comment on the general attitude towards migrants displayed by a set of countries that own as their flag the Europa, with its 12 golden stars.

The flood of refugees trying to land on European shores appears to not be slowing down, notwithstanding measures to discourage them such as the highly debatable decision to suspend the Italian-run search-and-rescue operation Mare Nostrum.

Initiated in late 2013, this operation reportedly saved more than 100,000 lives last year. On Friday, news emerged of the deaths of over 100 people in two more shipwrecks off the Libyan coast; here too, desperate people fleeing violence and poverty were put aboard rickety ships in the bid to cross the Mediterranean.

Amongst the survivors was a Pakistani teenager, Shefaz Hamza, who gave rescuers a harrowing account of how the boat carrying some 350 passengers disintegrated.

A separate rescue operation undertaken by the Libyan coastguard on Wednesday found 51 people who had died of suffocation in the hold of a boat, with survivors describing how human traffickers beat them and demanded money for allowing people a breath of fresh air.

And it is not just via sea that the wretched of the earth are trying to reach some modicum of safety and respect (for, even if they managed to reach Europe, their reception would still make their immediate future grim): these deaths come on the heels of the discovery of the bodies of 71 migrants, thought to be mainly Syrian, in a lorry in Austria.

The UN said on Saturday that “much more is required”, with Secretary General Ban Ki-moon calling it a “crisis of solidarity, not a crisis of numbers”.

He called on states to “expand safe and legal channels of migration”, adding that the international community must show greater determination in resolving “conflicts and other problems that leave people little choice but to flee”. There can certainly be no argument about this, and the fact that this is a humanitarian crisis that represents a blot on the world’s conscience.

A change of mindset is needed amongst the populations of stable and well-off countries. There could be potential benefits to their own societies and economies were migrants thought of as human resource rather than a burden.

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LG polls for capital

AFTER much legal and political wrangling, a clear schedule for local government polls in Islamabad has finally been announced.

On Friday, the Election Commission of Pakistan said local polls in the federal capital will be held on Nov 30, along with announcing a schedule for the elections.

This is indeed a major achievement — should things proceed as planned — as it will be the first time the whole of Islamabad will elect local representatives. Indeed, it is strange that the capital of the federation, which hosts parliament — the most manifest symbol of the people's will — should have had to wait so long for an elected third tier of government.

Of course, much of this is due to the disinterest in and mistrust towards elected local bodies that many amongst Pakistan's political elite harbour, which has also reflected itself in unacceptable delays in local government elections at the provincial level. It is also a welcome development that the polls will be held on a party basis, as it makes little sense to keep political parties away from this essential part of the democratic process.

The need for elected and responsible local governments has been reiterated several times in these columns. Rule by fiat via the national and provincial system does not work smoothly at the local level, where people need receptive and approachable representatives to address their civic issues.

Speaking of Islamabad in particular, though it is a planned city, the capital has grown considerably over the decades and as a result its municipal requirements have increased accordingly.

As with all other cities and towns in Pakistan, the capital's civic issues can best be addressed by elected representatives. It is hoped that when Islamabad's local representatives are elected later this year and take office, they will have the requisite powers and motivation to address the people's issues.

For this, it is essential that the capital's bureaucracy and its elected local leadership are on the same page working for the betterment of the people.

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