



## ***Editorials for the Month of August, 2014***

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## Preventable tragedy

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 01, 2014

When lifeguards posted by the city administration and volunteer groups warn them about the hazards, they are reprimanded and some even physically assaulted for ‘invading’ the picnickers’ personal space. — File photo

A pall of gloom fell over Eid festivities in Karachi because of the high number of drowning incidents reported from the city’s beaches during the holidays.

By Thursday, the bodies of at least 20 victims had been rescued while search efforts continued for a number of missing beachgoers. Most of the deaths were reported from Clifton beach, while bodies were also recovered from Hawkesbay on the city’s outskirts.

On any given Sunday, a large number of picnickers can be found at the city’s beaches to cool off by the waters of the Arabian Sea. On public holidays like Eid, the crowds grow manifold, with thousands of men, women and children heading to the coast. Yet, tragedy inevitably strikes because discipline and orderliness are not virtues the majority of Pakistanis adhere to.

For example, every year the government bans swimming in the sea during the monsoon season due to the rough waters. But few beachgoers pay heed to such warnings. People who barely know how to swim, and often accompanied by toddlers, venture into the dangerous waters without realising the risk.

When lifeguards posted by the city administration and volunteer groups warn them about the hazards, they are reprimanded and some even physically assaulted for ‘invading’ the picnickers’ personal space. The result of such recklessness is tragedies similar to what was witnessed during these Eid holidays. It is easy to blame the state, but the public also bears major responsibility for defying rules meant to save lives.

No doubt the public is at fault, but the administration too should make greater efforts to prevent drowning deaths. The number of lifeguards should be increased while female rescuers are direly needed, keeping cultural norms in mind; a larger police presence at crowded beaches can also be used to pacify unruly beachgoers.

Warning signs at the beaches and media campaigns can help highlight the dangers of swimming in rough seas during the summer months while well-equipped ambulances and field hospitals are needed at popular picnic spots to deal with emergencies.

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## Israel's brutality in Gaza

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 01, 2014

Minutes after its artillery had shelled a Gaza school killing at least 16 people, Israel had the audacity to say, “we have a policy — we don’t target civilians”. There had been no less than 17 warnings, prior to the attack, from a UN agency that the school was housing displaced persons.

The spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency has called the massacre a matter of “universal shame”, while this time UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who usually pedals a ‘balanced’ line, did not confine himself to a ritual condemnation of the atrocity.

The UN chief declared categorically that “all available evidence points to Israeli artillery as the cause”. As always, Tel Aviv had boilerplate remarks ready. There was, said an Israeli spokesman, “hostile fire on our people from the vicinity of the school”.

Earlier, when Israel began its blitz on Gaza on July 8, it accused Hamas of using civilians as a shield — the state’s armed forces have frequently come out with such remarks in Arab-Israeli conflicts. As for UNRWA’s warnings, human rights organisations the world over have recorded what amounts to war crimes by the Israeli state in innumerable attacks on refugee camps and UN monitoring posts — twice in Kana — despite warnings.

The shelling of the school, which was housing 3,000 civilians in the Jabaliya refugee camp, wasn’t the only Israeli attack on non-military targets on Wednesday; the same day, Israel poured fire on a market near Gaza City, killing 17 people, bringing the Palestinian death toll in a single day to over 100.

For this massacre, the Israeli war machine came under scathing criticism from Doctors Without Borders because it targeted health facilities in Gaza — Al Shifa, European General, Al Quds and Beit Hanoun hospitals. The attacks on the hospitals and their surroundings, it said, constituted “a serious violation of international humanitarian law”.

Not surprisingly, America has been very careful not to blame Israel for the school massacre; instead, the State Department spokesperson condemned the slaughter “which reportedly killed and injured” children and UN relief workers, without naming the guilty party, and hastened to add: “We would also condemn those responsible for hiding weapons in UN facilities in Gaza.”

Recently, knowing well what the cost of an anti-Israel resolution would be, the US Senate passed a unanimous resolution in favour of Israel’s air, naval and ground assault on Gaza. The response from the European Union has been equally disappointing.

In fact, Western leaders appear more preoccupied with developments in Ukraine than what has been unleashed on the Palestinians. But the greater cause of mortification is the powerlessness of the Arab-Muslim world, which is watching the massacre of the Palestinian people as a spectator.

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Unfortunately, little else can be expected of a people busy killing each other from Pakistan to Nigeria.

*Published in Dawn, August 1st, 2014*

## Filing tax returns

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 01, 2014

Our tax system has two categories of taxpayers within it: those who are paying taxes but not filing their returns, and those who are filing their returns but concealing their real incomes. —  
File photo

The government has decided to issue taxpayer cards to all return filers starting this year, according to a report published in this paper. It has also decided to publish the tax directory on March 1 every year. The idea is to incentivise people to file their returns.

Publication of the directory has been supplemented with a drive to send notices to more than 120,000 non-filers, with the aim of adding 100,000 new taxpayers to the tax net. The response thus far has not been good. Just over 17,000 new taxpayers were registered voluntarily as a result of the exercise, which gives us a hit rate of around 15pc.

Moreover, the incremental revenue that the exercise yielded has been a paltry Rs306m. This is hardly a significant step towards bridging a deficit of Rs1.7tr budgeted for this fiscal year. The publication of a directory of all filers coupled with a campaign to serve notices on all non-filers is part of a larger

strategy seeking to promote a culture of compliance with tax laws.

The strategy has attracted the ire of critics, with some arguing that publishing their tax details potentially makes them targets of kidnapping rackets. Others have argued that serving notices on non-filers is not fetching enough revenue in return for the effort invested in the exercise, and therefore should be abandoned.

It would be short-sighted, however, to give in to these criticisms. Those who are afraid of being targeted by kidnapping rackets should know that criminal elements do not need a tax directory to identify high-net-worth individuals. And those pointing to the limited quantum of revenue realised through the effort need to understand that this is not about the money, but about creating a culture where filing one's returns is seen as an obligation.

In the absence of such a culture, punitive measures come to be perceived as victimisation. Before reaching out to those outside the net, it would be a good idea to rationalise how those within the net are treated.

As it stands, our tax system has two categories of taxpayers within it: those who are paying taxes but not filing their returns, and those who are filing their returns but concealing their real incomes. Getting these parties to file their documentation properly is a key step towards broadening the overall tax base, and all efforts to pursue this goal deserve to be encouraged.

## Obama and Obamacare

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 02, 2014

President Obama has been equally derisive about the proposed lawsuit, saying that instead of suing him for doing his job, Congressmen should do theirs. — Photo by Reuters

While the decision of the House of Representatives to sue President Barack Obama may be unprecedented, it is hardly surprising.

Four decades have passed, but Watergate is still fresh in the public memory. Richard Nixon did not believe he had committed any wrong. By any standards a great man, Nixon ‘vindicated’ himself after he was no more in the White House by making an extraordinary comeback as a writer and freelance diplomat. Bill Clinton had a charisma of his own.

If Nixon made history by effecting a rapprochement with China — Henry Kissinger flew to Beijing from Nathiagali — Mr Clinton’s tour de force was the ‘peace of the brave’ that saw Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin shake hands on a White House lawn in 1993.

But then came Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky, and the Republicans began to sharpen their knives. Accused of perjury and obstructing justice, Mr Clinton was lucky to survive impeachment in the Senate because of lack of a two-thirds majority.

Several years later, it is the Republicans again who want to go after a Democrat president. Understandably, the Democrats have reacted angrily, with Nancy Pelosi, a former House speaker, calling the move “sickening”.

President Obama has been equally derisive about the proposed lawsuit, saying that instead of suing him for doing his job, Congressmen should do theirs.

It is noteworthy that the move to sue the president concerns Mr Obama’s health reforms, or Obamacare, which have hurt America’s powerful medical insurance lobby.

And yet, despite the politics, one cannot but admire the strength of America’s constitutional institutions. The two parties may take bipartisan rivalry to absurd limits, but as history from the ’70s to the 21st century shows, it is the American people’s commitment to democracy that weathered the crises.

Watergate and the Lewinsky scandal rocked the US, but they did not derail or weaken democracy. Unfortunately, the point to note is also the unmistakable decline in the quality of US politics. It is this aspect that should be cause for concern.



## ‘Case closed’

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 02, 2014

Leaving key incidents untraced or investigations pending opens the door for further atrocities as perpetrators melt into the background in order to plan the next attack. — File photo

While eliminating extremists’ sanctuaries in Fata is vital, the effort to uproot terrorism cannot fully succeed unless the militants’ foot soldiers and networks in Pakistan’s cities and towns are neutralised.

One of the key ways to achieve this is to prosecute and punish those involved in acts of terrorism. However, as numerous examples have shown, the state has failed miserably on this count.

For example, as this paper reported on Friday, probes into two major terrorist attacks in Rawalpindi are going nowhere: both in the case of an attack on a Muharram procession in 2012 in Dhoke Syedan and the R.A. Bazaar bombing in January this year, the police have been less than enthusiastic about tracing the culprits and bringing them to justice.

In the R.A. Bazaar bombing, Rawalpindi’s regional police officer considered the case solved as “the TTP had claimed responsibility” and the banned outfit’s leaders had been named as the main accused. He added that if the whereabouts of TTP leader Mullah Fazlullah and the group’s spokesman Shahidullah Shahid were known, the law enforcers would nab them.

As for the Dhoke Syedan case, it has been termed ‘untraced’, which means there is hardly any likelihood that those involved in the crime will be punished.

The police’s claim that since some terrorist masterminds had owned an attack, further investigation was not required is whimsical.

Even if a militant leader is calling the shots from some remote or untraceable location, the organisation surely has foot soldiers on the ground that serve as the eyes and ears of the central command and are instrumental in planning and carrying out new attacks.

Hence leaving key incidents untraced or investigations pending opens the door for further atrocities as perpetrators melt into the background in order to plan the next attack.

Identifying a suicide bomber or militant leader as being responsible is not enough. If the police and intelligence agencies — all 26 of them — fail to uncover and bust active militant networks, how can terrorism be eliminated? In this regard, the National Counter Terrorism Authority, which is supposed to be the central actor in Pakistan’s counterterrorism efforts, still seems to be in hibernation.

Also, if the police are unwilling or unable to pursue and investigate suspects through legal means, unsavoury extrajudicial methods such as enforced disappearances and custodial killings will become the norm. For long-lasting counterterrorism results, the investigation system needs to be vastly overhauled.

# Losing power

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 02, 2014

A closer look at the data compiled by the power bureaucracy shows that all distribution companies of the country are contributing their fair share to these overall losses. — File photo

Despite a year of talk, the facts remain the same. Losses in the power sector are at the same level they were last year when the government made what it called a one-time retirement of the circular debt.

That extraordinary measure was taken to create some breathing room in which to implement the necessary reforms and bring down the losses, a goal that has evaded the government so far.

The latest round of figures compiled by the power bureaucracy in its monthly report of operational data show that the gap between the amount of electricity provided to the distribution companies and the amount of units billed is just under 19pc in the fiscal year ended June 2014, the same level they were at last year.

And this figure tells only half the story. In financial terms this means that electricity worth Rs211bn was lost in the last fiscal year. When recovery losses — the gap between the units billed and the amount of money actually recovered against those bills

— are added to this tally the figure doubles, bringing us close to the approximate total of Rs550bn of the circular debt.

A closer look at the data compiled by the power bureaucracy shows that all distribution companies of the country are contributing their fair share to these overall losses.

For a while, the minister of state for water and power tried to peddle the story that the chief reason for the circular debt was that Punjab pays its bills but that Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa do not.

The data provided by the power bureaucracy belies this claim; it shows that more than half the losses occurred in distribution companies in Punjab with the remaining half shared by those from Sindh, KP and Balochistan.

It seems that inefficiency and incompetence do not have an ethnicity, and all apparent attempts to paint one province as superior in the matter of billing recoveries or distributional efficiency are without foundation.

Why is this data not made public? The power bureaucracy is required to produce monthly reports of its operational data which includes details of all the electricity generated and provided to all the distribution companies in the country.

The result is a report with 150 or so pages of detailed data on where the electricity is coming from and where it is going. There is no reason to keep this information out of the public domain, and the water and power secretary should seriously consider making the document available online, along with all back issues.

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In addition, financial data should be similarly gathered and disseminated, including cash flow statements, so that claims about operational efficiencies can be verified.

There should be accountability of the power bureaucracy, and allowing some daylight into the dark corners where discretionary decision-making power lurks is the best way to ensure this.

## PML-N's faulty track

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 03, 2014

The government made it clear that its foremost concern is to somehow prevent the Aug 14 rally.— File photo

A REARGUARD action has begun, with the PML-N deploying Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan, known for his good relations with PTI chief Imran Khan over the years, to try and appease the PTI. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has reached out to non-politician friends for advice on matters political.

With a National Assembly session scheduled to begin tomorrow, the PTI pressing ahead with rally preparations, the army distancing itself from perceived attempts by the PML-N to drag it onto the PML-N side in the political arena and the country returning to work after Eid, the days ahead will be packed. We will witness a familiar political frenzy and churning of waters that will require all hands on deck for the PML-N and a need to keep sight of the bigger picture and the larger goals.

Yet, it is far from clear that the PML-N leadership, as well as the brain trust it relies on or looks to for navigating political crises, has grasped the present situation properly. In reaching out to Imran Khan and the PTI, the government has made it clear that its foremost concern is to somehow prevent the Aug 14 rally to Islamabad that the PTI is preparing for. That necessarily suggests electoral reforms — the issue that Mr Khan and his party are agitating for — are only an issue to the extent the PTI cares about it, rather than a genuine and serious matter from a systemic and democratic perspective.

Why not, for example, use the start of the next National Assembly session on Monday to have the prime minister himself give a speech that takes ownership of electoral reforms and gives a clear vision of how the PML-N will nudge the electoral system towards greater transparency and fairness? Does the Aug 14 PTI rally matter more or do democracy-enhancing reforms? If it is the former for the PML-N, then surely the party's leadership is on the wrong track — with either immediate or later consequences to be faced.

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*Also read: [PM in consultation mode to end impasse](#)*

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Similarly, a report in this newspaper yesterday on a summit of close friends that Prime Minister Sharif convened at his Raiwind residence recently indicates that Mr Sharif is working from an old mould of politics and is perhaps even in self-denial.

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If Mr Sharif is waiting for March 2015 when the PML-N's Senate seat count will more than double, but still fall far short of a majority, it sounds suspiciously like the excuses that executive action was hamstrung under former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and more governance and leadership would be visible after his retirement. That clearly has not happened. And what of the suggestion that somehow external interference, implicitly by the US, is constraining Mr Sharif's government? It sounds suspiciously like the government is looking for scapegoats rather than undertaking some serious self-scrutiny.

*Published in Dawn, August 3rd, 2014*

## The cab is back

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 03, 2014

The yellow cab scheme was one of the PML-N's populist, signature enterprises. — File photo

It appears that nothing — high costs, low economic returns, media criticism, etc — can dissuade a Sharif government from implementing a scheme that promises high political returns. The yellow cab scheme was one of the PML-N's populist, signature enterprises.

Its latest edition aims at retaining the loyalty of Punjab's youth, especially in the face of a strong political challenge from Imran Khan's PTI. Impressed with the 'success' of its previous edition initiated before the last elections, the Shahbaz Sharif government has set aside a hefty amount of Rs25bn in the

budget for the present fiscal year to distribute 50,000 subsidised vehicles among the unemployed below the age of 35 in the province.

Previously, it had leased out 20,000 units at a discounted price. The purpose is to create employment for jobless young men and women across the province. The new, much bigger edition of the scheme is being executed from October this year. That it is being launched without any assessment of the economic impact on the lives of the recipients of 20,000 vehicles in 2012-13 indicates that the PML-N leadership is concerned more with the political impact of the project. It is not even known if the cabs already distributed are actually being used for the purpose they were given out for. The tradition dating back to the first yellow cab scheme by the PML-N in the 1990s is of many using it as 'family' car.

Indeed, there are some measures in place to avoid repetition of the yellow cab scam of the 1990s when banks lost billions.

But this is not enough. With the economy in trouble because of acute energy shortages, and inadequate and ageing economic and social infrastructure, the Punjab government needs to reset its priorities. It will do a favour to its voters and the country's economy by diverting the taxpayers' money away from politically motivated initiatives to projects that will bridge the infrastructure gap in the province and create sustainable jobs.

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## Kerry's India visit

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 03, 2014

John Kerry made first visit to India after Narendra Modi came to power. — File photo

DESPITE some outstanding issues that have soured relations, the joint statement issued simultaneously in Washington and New Delhi shows a determined attempt by the two sides to forge deeper strategic ties.

The statement comes in the wake of John Kerry's first visit to India after Narendra Modi came to power. It was also the American secretary of state's first visit to India since the arrest of an Indian diplomat, accused of underpaying her housekeeper, in New York last year.

There were other irritants too as Mr Kerry and Sushma Swaraj, his Indian counterpart, began probing the possibilities of delivering on what Mr Kerry called "incredible possibilities" in their relationship. The contentious issues included Indian anger over America's surveillance activity, and Washington's complaint that New Delhi has made every attempt to block a WTO accord on trade facilitation and its demand for concessions on food stockpiling.

That, in spite of these stumbling blocks, the two governments should express the kind of sentiments they did at the conclusion of their fifth strategic dialogue highlights the deep understanding they have developed on a number of issues, including America's assurances to the Modi government to

support India's inclusion in the UN Security Council as a permanent member. With corporate America keen to do business in a market as large as India's, Mr Kerry's visit also signals an end to whatever reservations America had about Mr Modi's record as Gujarat's chief minister.

Islamabad, however, must take note of those contents of the joint statement in which America and India have not minced words and have shown an extraordinary degree of understanding on matters concerning Pakistan. The call for speeding up the trial of the Mumbai carnage suspects was coupled with a dig at Islamabad. Even if ritual condemnation of terrorism is standard fare in diplomatic rhetoric, there is little doubt that the two countries had Pakistan in mind when the need for "eliminating terrorist safe havens and infrastructure" was stressed.

However, while Pakistan may have its own concerns about such views, the fact is that LeT is a proscribed group within the country. This reality alone should compel the state to expedite the trial of the Mumbai suspects. Indeed, cracking down on militant groups is in Pakistan's own interest and should not be linked to attempts by New Delhi and Washington to develop a relationship that, despite the hurdles, may in the long run alter South Asia's geopolitical contours.

*Published in Dawn, August 3rd, 2014*



## Monsoon preparedness

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 04, 2014 06:00am

It is primarily Karachi's administration which must be prepared to deal with the after-effects of heavy rainfall. — Photo by AFP

While the dark monsoon clouds bring with them welcome spells of rain in the country, a sense of apprehension also accompanies the wet season in Pakistan, mainly because of fears of flooding.

The threat of urban flooding is of particular concern, especially in Karachi, as the metropolis has no effective system of draining rainwater. The Sindh capital saw monsoon showers early Saturday morning; though there was no flooding several rain-related deaths — mainly due to wall collapses and electrocution — were reported.

Tragic as the deaths are, there could have been greater havoc if the city had witnessed heavier rainfall. The problem in Karachi is that due to haphazard growth and rampant encroachment, in many city areas the natural flow of water has been blocked, while numerous storm-water drains have been occupied.

The Met office has predicted below average monsoon rains this year, so the threat of major urban flooding may be averted. However, municipal authorities in all major cities and towns need to ensure measures are in place to minimise havoc in case of heavy showers.

In Lahore, efforts have been made over the years to improve the city's drainage system; for example, encroachments have been removed from nullahs. However, some parts of the city, especially areas apart from the main thoroughfares, still have problems with standing rainwater.

But the Punjab capital's main monsoon-related concern is dengue; the authorities need to make maximum efforts to eliminate the breeding places of mosquitoes that carry the virus. The situation in Peshawar has also improved, as encroachments from drains have been largely removed from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa capital.

Hence, it is primarily Karachi's administration which must be prepared to deal with the after-effects of heavy rainfall. Storm-water drains need to be cleaned and cleared of blockages to ensure rainwater doesn't collect on thoroughfares. In the longer term, a sustained anti-encroachment drive is needed — with full political backing — to clear the illegal occupation of the city's drains which would significantly reduce the chances of flooding.

*Published in Dawn, August 4th, 2014*

## Debt management

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 04, 2014

It is true that the government faces difficult choices in trying to restart growth while cutting the debt burden. — File photo

Argentina's messy and volatile default on its bonds provides a moment of reflection for Pakistan. It is a reminder that large external debt liabilities can sometimes go horribly wrong.

In Argentina's case, the default in question actually happened more than a decade ago but has been in painstaking negotiations ever since. Moreover, the debt in question — a total of \$100bn — is owed to private creditors who are much more strident in demanding repayment than government or multilateral creditors.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to make too direct a connection between the debt profiles of Argentina and Pakistan. Our external debt stands around \$5bn, is one-third of the total public debt, and this ratio has been on a downward glide path since 2009.

But it would also be a mistake to find too much reassurance in these differences. For one, these proportions are about to change. Under the advice from its own debt management office, the government is in the midst of sharply increasing its external debt, particularly from market sources while reducing its borrowings from the domestic banking system.

Already, in the first year of its rule, exposure to private debt has risen through a large Eurobond auction, as well as other private short-term borrowing. The government plans to continue this pattern of borrowing till 2017, when servicing of privately owed debt that was rescheduled in the wake of 9/11 is scheduled to resume.

The strategy has helped lift some pressure off domestic debt markets, but has also reversed the downward trend of external debt, and is creating exposures to international capital markets precisely at a time when these markets are being roiled by volatility from the Argentine default.

The State Bank has provided a soft but steady drumbeat of cautionary advice through all this, urging the government to focus more on efforts “to enhance the country's external debt repayment capacity to avoid payment pressures when newly taken loans fall due”.

The debt policy statement put out by the finance ministry has also faintly echoed these words, saying “[s]erious efforts should be made to enhance export earnings” if the growth of external debt liabilities is to remain within sustainable limits.

It is true that the government faces difficult choices in trying to restart growth while cutting the debt burden. But Argentina shows us that money from international capital markets comes with a label attached: ‘handle with care’.

*Published in Dawn, August 4th, 2014*

## Parliament's role

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 04, 2014

Parliament should not just be told; parliament should have the ability to wrest important answers from the government. — File photo

Lamenting the near-irrelevance of parliament and hoping for its flagging fortunes to be turned around and for parliament to be given the pre-eminence it deserves is a sport almost as old as parliament itself.

The National Assembly session set to begin today is probably as unlikely a time as there ever has been to hope for meaningful proceedings inside parliament.

Nationally, the political discourse at the moment is dominated by the PTI's plans to hold a rally in Islamabad on Aug 14 at which as yet unspecified demands will be made and where PTI may or may not seek the immediate ouster of the government via street power — meaning the latest session of parliament will be completely overshadowed.

Yet, present events notwithstanding, the problem is also how lawmakers themselves — both in government and opposition — tend to approach parliament.

Consider the usual course of events during a parliamentary session. On the first day, there is considerable attendance and a few fiery speeches by senior parliamentarians.

The media presence is significant and politicians compete for the TV cameras' attention. But rarely is there anything of parliamentary significance discussed or debated in those early exchanges.

That lack of parliamentary content and substance means the tone set at the outset of a session does not provide any guidance for the work that legislators ought to be doing.

Take for example the PPP's alleged interest in convening a joint session of parliament to debate the government's decision to invoke Article 245 of the Constitution and draft in more army troops to protect the federal capital.

A joint session of the National Assembly and Senate implies a serious or high-profile parliamentary undertaking. But other than passing a non-binding resolution, even if such a joint session were to be held, what would it achieve in legislative or executive-oversight terms?

Consider also the myriad ways in which a more functional parliament could take up serious work at the moment. If there were such a thing as parliamentary intelligence committees, the PPP's demand could be met in there — what, after all, are the security threats that necessitated invoking Article 245?

Parliament should not just be told; parliament should have the ability to wrest important answers from the government. There is also a major military operation in North Waziristan under way.

Surely, the plans, objectives, the execution of the operation so far, how many casualties there have been, the regional

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dynamics, the military needs — all of that and more could, in fact should, be shared with defence, foreign affairs and interior committees.

Finally, there is the ongoing electricity crisis that seems impervious to the government's attempts to fix it — could parliament not have a role to get more transparency in that sector? There is much work that could be done. But for that to happen parliamentarians would need to take the institution more seriously.

*Published in Dawn, August 4th, 2014*

## Obama on torture

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 05, 2014

Though Obama has alluded to the harsh Bush-era practices earlier after assuming office, this is the current president's most frank admission of the fact that the the US military used torture as part of counterterrorism efforts. — Photo by AP

Torture is employed by law-enforcement and intelligence agencies across the world. But when states that claim to respect democratic values and human rights look the other way while their operatives indulge in torturing suspects, the incongruity becomes glaringly obvious.

In the post-9/11 years, the US, under George W. Bush's leadership, was widely accused of torturing terrorism suspects across the world. It was during this period that terms like 'waterboarding', 'black sites' and 'extraordinary rendition'

entered the global lexicon, while Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib became symbols of abuse and rights' violations.

After Barack Obama's election it was thought this dark chapter in American history would come to a close. To his credit, Mr Obama did ban many of the more brutal methods employed on his predecessor's watch. While addressing a news conference on Friday, he admitted that the US had "tortured some folks" in the period following the Sept 11 attacks.

Though Obama has alluded to the harsh Bush-era practices earlier after assuming office, this is the current president's most frank admission of the fact that the Central Intelligence Agency and the US military used torture as part of counterterrorism efforts.

The US is, of course, not alone in the use of torture; Pakistan's security establishment, for example, applies equally brutal methods during interrogations. But whether used by Washington, Islamabad or any other government, it can safely be said that torture is not an effective counterterrorism tool.

Apart from being in flagrant violation of international law and human rights, its negatives far outweigh any potential positives. For example, if governments argue that harsh methods can make suspects confess valuable information, it can also be argued that such methods are a catalyst for further radicalisation.

Fighting terrorism is essential, but this must be done within the confines of the law. Further, when established democracies allow the use of torture, the hypocrisy is evident. For example,

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the US regularly points out alleged human rights abuses committed by other states.

But as Mr Obama's admission highlights, Washington itself does not have a stellar human rights record. And perhaps the biggest example of America's own flirtation with torture is Guantanamo. Despite promising to do so early in his first presidential tenure, Barack Obama has failed to shut down the notorious detention facility located in Cuba. To send a strong signal that the US no longer condones torture, the modern-day gulag needs to be shut down.

*Published in Dawn, Aug 5th, 2014*

## PTI's unclear goals

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 05, 2014

The confusion extends to the senior leadership of the PTI itself, with some members talking about reforms, others talking about elections and all suggesting that the final demands would be left up to Mr Khan himself. — File photo

What were once amorphous demands have turned into ominous threats. And yet, even now, there is little clarity about what Imran Khan's real goal is: electoral reforms or something more?

The confusion extends to the senior leadership of the PTI itself, with some members talking about reforms, others talking about elections and all suggesting that the final demands would be left up to Mr Khan himself. What is clear though is that the PTI

is determined to push the government a fair distance — and perhaps all the way over the edge too.

Troubling as the PML-N's conduct has been in some instances and while recognising that as the incumbent power, there is greater responsibility resting on the shoulders of the PML-N leadership, the PTI cannot quite escape blame for the growing sense of crisis and perhaps even threats to the system.

The most significant problem from a democratic perspective is not that Mr Khan wants to hold another large rally or that he is arguing that the May 2013 elections were not as free and fair as the best democratic standards demand.

The most significant problem is that Mr Khan seems unconcerned about the impact of his agitation on fundamental national political stability and the space his growing threats of street agitation is creating for anti-democratic forces in the country. It is really a question of degree. To what extent is political discontent possible before the original fault line in Pakistani politics — democracy or something else — is re-exposed?

It is not enough for Mr Khan to simply claim that he and his supporters will never allow the democratic system to be cast aside — when decisions to cast aside the democratic system have been made in the past, there is no civilian political entity that can simply reverse the decision. Once the trigger is pulled, after the circumstances have been created, it is all but impossible to put the anti-democracy bullet back in the chamber.



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Yet, it is not just the possibility of the ultimate anti-democratic measure, threatened by Mr Khan, that the entire civilian political spectrum has to worry about. Already, in subtle though difficult-to-deny ways, the civil-military imbalance has tipped further in favour of the military. Part of this is clearly the government's fault, given its panicky responses to the PTI's rally planned for Aug 14. No one outside the government considers the invocation of Article 245 of the Constitution to be a wise political move.

But in the always critically important sphere of civil-military relations, Mr Khan and the PTI's actions have already, even if not deliberately, increased the pressure on the government to somehow pacify the army-led security establishment and do nothing on the policy front that would rankle. Surely, a government so much on the defensive can do little to further the transition to democracy.

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## IMF's fourth review

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 06, 2014

Important reforms that need to be discussed this time include strengthening State Bank autonomy, hike in power tariffs, filling vacancies on the board of Nepra as well as other public-sector entities. — File photo

The fourth review of Pakistan's programme with the IMF kicks off today in Dubai amidst little fanfare. The talks are expected

to continue till mid-August, against a rising arc of political uncertainty in Islamabad.

As the capital girds itself for a noisy confrontation, the small band of economists and bureaucrats who are gathering in Dubai will strain their ears to diagnose the faint but discernible hum emitted by the economy's growth engines and the state's policy machinery. The talks in Dubai conclude on the 14th, the day the crescendo of uncertainty reaches its peak in Islamabad.

As the capital is roiled by protest, the Fund mission will hold its customary news conference at the conclusion of the talks, in which the mission chief, the finance minister and the State Bank governor will speak to the media about the mission's conclusions regarding the health of the economy, the status of reforms implementation, and the benchmarks that will form the programme's objectives in subsequent months. A more perfect superimposition of the economic and political timelines would be hard to choreograph.

There is little doubt that the government team will draw the Fund's attention to the disorder in the streets as reasons for slowing the pace of difficult decisions. For its part, the Fund staff will likely want to keep the conversation confined to the economics alone.

This subtle tug of war will animate much of the discussion and frame the ultimate objectives and evaluations both parties emerge with. In its last review, the Fund staff had flagged "delays and slippages in implementing key policy reforms" as an important risk to the fledgling recovery in growth, reserves and fiscal affairs.

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Important reforms that need to be discussed this time include strengthening State Bank autonomy, hike in power tariffs, filling vacancies on the board of Nepra as well as other public-sector entities, and the earnest rollback of key tax exemptions. In each area, the government will report patchy compliance and how the Fund team ultimately spins this will reveal how the tug of war between the economic and political priorities played out during the review discussions.

The final report, due by October, will doubtless come couched in a great deal of diplomatic understatement, but both sides should know that watchful and discerning eyes will search the report to see how the political is woven with the economic in the final analysis.

*Published in Dawn, Aug 6th, 2014*

## OIC's powerlessness

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 06, 2014

From Pakistan through the Fertile Crescent to the Maghreb and the Sub-Saharan region, the Muslim world is witnessing one of its history's greatest ideological conflicts. — Photo by AFP

On the day the National Assembly called upon the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to take "effective action" against the Israeli attack on Gaza, the 57-member body's secretary general did some plain-speaking, admitting that the Arab component of the Muslim world could do little to stop the Israeli state from destroying Gaza.

The lawmakers' speeches contained little beyond emotionalism, and the unanimous resolution passed in Monday's sessions called for an "emergency session" of the OIC to stop "Israeli brutality against innocent civilians forthwith".

Not far from Parliament House, Iyad Ameen Abdullah Madani showed a lot of realism in his speech to the Institute of Strategic Studies, referred to the loss of the West Bank, Sinai, Gaza and the Golan Heights in the 1967 war and said there was nothing the Arabs could do "practically" to confront Israel.

The OIC wanted to press war crimes charges against Israel, but, said Mr Madani, "preachers of human rights" were not only supporting Israel but serving as a "political shield" for the Jewish state. Mr Madani, however, claimed, and not unjustifiably, that the OIC had played a positive role in issues concerning Muslims in Myanmar and the Central African Republic.

It is, however, Mr Madani's views on what ails the Muslim world that deserve attention and analysis. That the current scene in the Muslim world is dominated by debilitating internal conflicts stemming from extremism and sectarianism is obvious.

From Pakistan through the Fertile Crescent to the Maghreb and the Sub-Saharan region, the Muslim world is witnessing one of its history's greatest ideological conflicts which have turned such countries as Iraq and Syria into one big charnel house.

An end to the fratricide doesn't seem in sight, because well-armed militias with motivated cadres have weakened state

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authority by occupying large chunks of territory but are themselves unable to acquire the status of de facto governments.

This has added to mass misery, forcing the people to go looking for the basic necessities of life during anarchy. The point to note, however, is that even when this anarchy was absent — as when powerful dictators gave phony stability to their states — the Muslim world's collective voice didn't count for much owing to the absence of some of the basic elements of geopolitical power.

Because of clashing national interests, it was not possible for OIC states to have a collective security system, but at least the organisation could have fostered closer collaboration in science and technology. Such cooperation was feasible, if the OIC had drawn up a comprehensive plan for active collaboration between oil-rich countries and those with a pool of scientific manpower.

What Muslim countries need today is internal peace and democracy in which to organise their societies along scientific lines to give the Muslim peoples the tools to face the social and political challenges confronting them.

*Published in Dawn, Aug 6th, 2014*

## Israel's war crimes

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 07, 2014

The use of artillery shells containing white phosphorus material has been just one of the Israeli armed forces' many war crimes. — Photo by Reuters

Violations of the laws of war by Israel are too numerous to be counted, the ongoing mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza being just a small part of that state's catalogue of war crimes spread over more than six decades.

Yet there is little possibility that the Palestinian Authority will succeed in prevailing upon the International Criminal Court to act. On Tuesday, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad al-Malki told the ICC's prosecutor there was clear evidence of war crimes having been committed by Israel, and that it was time the court acted.

In one sense, Mr Malki was generous — he said the PA was prepared to give jurisdiction to the ICC to investigate crimes by both sides, because if the PA did not help the ICC, nobody could. The evidence Mr Malki spoke of must be sketchy, because it is difficult to get facts and gather evidence in the heat of war as bombs fall, fires rage, buildings crash and wounded babies cry.

The full extent of Israel's war crimes will be known when guns fall silent. Will then the powers behind the ICC rise above geopolitical considerations and gather courage to do what some feel is an impossibility — putting Israel in the dock on charges

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of war crimes? So far, of the over 1,800 Palestinian civilians murdered by Israel, 408 are children. Not for nothing did the UNRWA official cry.

The use of artillery shells containing white phosphorus material has been just one of the Israeli armed forces' many war crimes. It used them in Lebanon in 2006 and confessed to their use on a Gaza school in 2008-09 after initially denying it, since UN relief agencies and rights organisations had evidence to the contrary.

Richard Goldstone, who headed the investigation into the Gaza war, accused both Israel and Hamas of war crimes. Hamas initially rejected the report but later accepted it, while Tel Aviv boycotted the commission and accused it of prejudice.

This time, the UN, and more astonishingly even America, have condemned Israel's attack on two Gaza schools, with the State Department denouncing it as a "disgraceful act" and calling for "a full and prompt investigation". America's denunciation of Israel is a rarity, but that doesn't mean the Zionist lobby's power to block a reference to the ICC has been impaired. The ICC must now assert itself and prove it can stand pressure and try this state for war crimes.

*Published in Dawn, August 7th, 2014*

## Challenge ahead

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 07, 2014

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif. — Photo by Reuters

The Aug 14 rally — and now threatened sit-in — by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf is surely the biggest, most visible challenge to the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yet.

What was once only whispered, and perhaps feared, has now become an open and insistent demand: the PML-N government must go, according to the PTI, because it is illegitimate and elected by fraud.

Yet, just because an opposition party alleges illegitimacy and illegality and because it is aiming to overthrow a government, it does not mean the allegations are automatically true or that the aim will inevitably be realised. Much — perhaps most — will depend on the leadership, equanimity and resolve of one man: the prime minister himself.

In truth, even at this stage, it is incredibly fuzzy just how the PTI can engineer the downfall of the PML-N government at the centre. Resignations from assemblies or dissolving the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly will not affect the mandate of the PML-N.

The PTI does have a proven ability to turn out large crowds, but does it have a large enough of a hardcore base that will

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obey Mr Khan's call to mass on the streets and stay there, come what may? And will a movement so clearly focused just on Punjab be able to branch out into the other provinces? If not, would a Punjab-only movement be enough to draw in other anti-democratic forces to cause the PML-N government's downfall through unconstitutional means?

So far the principal threat to Mr Sharif's government is that street pressure by the PTI will force mistakes from the PML-N that may ultimately allow for anti-democratic forces waiting in the wings to step in and pull the plug on Mr Sharif's third term.

Yet, when it comes to the politics of derailment and long marches, there is no one more experienced than Mr Sharif himself. Having both launched attempts to overthrow governments and defended against attacks on his governments in the 1990s, the prime minister ought to know every trick in the book, and then some.

Whatever playbook Mr Khan is now using against the PML-N, the prime minister ought not to be surprised by anything that is thrown at his government — and theoretically should be in a position to deflect it. Up till now, though, Mr Sharif has chosen to lead from behind — leaving it to his ministers and party members to defend his government, whether in parliament or on TV talk show sets or in press conferences.

That surely will not be good enough in the days and weeks ahead. The prime minister must not only take charge of the situation but must be seen to be taking charge of the situation. Hanging back has allowed the challenge to his government to become real and the crisis to grow. Now is the time to lead from the front.

*Published in Dawn, August 7th, 2014*

## Predicament of minorities

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 08, 2014

Until the general air of hostility against 'the other' is cleared, the way forward will continue to be difficult to locate. — Photo by Reuters

It is becoming increasingly clear that virtually no place in the country, be it rural or urban, mainstream or remote, offers even a modicum of safety for members of Pakistan's religious and ethnic minorities.

The theatre of oppression is growing larger, the danger stalking ever more closely and the risk comes as much from out-of-control mobs as from those who target their quarry with precision — all the while the state behaves like a disinterested bystander. It has been only days since a rioting mob set on fire houses belonging to members of the Ahmadi community in Gujranwala, leading to deaths from suffocation and smoke inhalation.

The state has much to answer for in terms of the treatment that has been meted out to this group of people, yet the Ahmadis are far from alone in their haplessness. On Wednesday, in Peshawar, a gunman opened fire on Sikh traders as they worked in their shops, killing Jagmohan Singh and injuring two other men.



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Underscoring this intolerance towards minority faiths, after years of disinterest, the National Assembly, also on Wednesday, empowered the speaker to constitute a special committee to investigate excesses such as murder, kidnappings for ransom and other forms of attacks against Hindus in Sindh's Umerkot district. Here, too, the latest incident of violence is only days old.

In fact, this community has faced so much hostility that there are reports of people fleeing across the eastern border. Whichever minority community dominates the headlines of the day as the victim of the newest atrocity — and hardly any group, be it the Christians, the Hazaras or even the remote Kalash, has been spared — this much is clear: the white strip in the national flag, that was meant to represent the country's religious minorities, is bleeding.

What compounds the tragedy faced by these communities is the fact that in most cases the latter are as much the owners and inheritors of the land that falls within the borders as the majority population. The Sikh community of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, for example, has been there for generations and there was space in earlier times for it to integrate with and be welcomed by its compatriots.

In recent years, however, as the area has been increasingly wracked by violence, many have had to flee places such as Tirah valley where they were being particularly targeted by militants and extremists. Clearly, even the provincial capital cannot offer them safety.

Is there a way out still from this vortex of religious and ethnic divisions, and the resultant violence? Yes, but the first step lies

in the state going beyond commiserations and demonstrating its commitment to protecting the minorities through deed rather than word. Until the general air of hostility against 'the other' is cleared, the way forward will continue to be difficult to locate.

*Published in Dawn, August 8th, 2014*

## Dar's doubts

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 08, 2014

The minister's confidence that the rupee will hold its value is admirable, but there is a view that he is putting too many eggs in that basket. — File photo

Finance Minister Ishaq Dar says government policy should not be made with the intention of pleasing specific institutions or people "in Washington or Lahore".

He also says economic analysts and writers are taking the IMF too seriously, pointing out the various places in which the Fund's forecasts have been wrong.

He wants to swat away speculation that the rupee will come under severe pressure in the forthcoming year, and also any suggestions that Pakistan's reserves and exchange rate have stabilised largely on the back of one-off inflows, such as the Saudi grant or auction of 3G licences.

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Lastly, he warns that continued political uncertainty can unwind the economic gains his government has brought about in the last year, which in his view are substantial.

It is true that government policy should not be made to satisfy a specific institution or individual. But, by the same token, policymaking is a public job and will be subject to critical commentary of all shades and stripes by all manner of persons and institutions, and learning to deal with this aspect of the job is part of every minister's portfolio.

It is also true that some of the IMF's forecasts have not materialised. But then, let us be frank and also admit that many of the government's own promised outcomes — putting an end to load-shedding for instance — are nowhere near fruition either. The minister's confidence that the rupee will hold its value is admirable, but there is a view that he is putting too many eggs in that basket. After all, there is a fine line between stability and rigidity when it comes to currency management.

The warnings on the one-off inflows against which the reserves have stabilised have been echoed by the State Bank as well as the Fund so Mr Dar would be well advised to take them a little more seriously. And lastly, if he wants to minimise the rigour of the analysis provided by the IMF and the State Bank, then he needs to explain why we should see Moody's pronouncements as a more reliable yardstick.

After all, Moody's and all other rating agencies have not exactly a stellar track record of forecasting events, as their role in the great financial crisis of 2008 made very clear. And finally, political uncertainty is indeed clouding the outlook. But

let us hope it does not end up being used as an excuse to further delay necessary reforms.

*Published in Dawn, August 8th, 2014*

## US air strikes in Iraq

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 09, 2014

President Barack Obama should have limited himself to ordering his forces to airdrop provisions for members of Iraq's Yazidi community fleeing the wrath of the militant group calling itself the Islamic State.

Regrettably, on Friday, he acted on his earlier warning that air strikes would be launched against the extremist militia. With American warplanes initiating their attack by bombing artillery allegedly used by IS against Kurdish forces near the Iraqi city of Erbil, an alarming dimension has been added to a regional conflict that is already spiralling out of control.

With such attacks bound to increase in the coming days, Mr Obama's statement that "there is no American military solution to the crisis in Iraq" is neither reassuring nor likely to be taken seriously.

True, the hardline IS continues to capture more territory in Iraq. Firmly ensconced in Mosul, on Thursday, it had taken over Qaraqosh, Iraq's largest Christian town, and its surrounding settlements, causing a large number of residents to flee.

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There is no doubt that the challenge posed by the IS needs a swift and firm response. But American or European military engagement is certainly not the best way forward. After all, Iraq's current predicament mostly stems from the 2003 US-led invasion that helped transform an authoritarian yet functioning country into a largely failed state fractured along ethnic, sectarian and religious lines.

In light of this, perhaps the best solution lies in a regional approach featuring Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey — Iraq's powerful and influential neighbours — in prominent roles. Iran and Saudi Arabia particularly exercise considerable influence over Iraq's Shia and Sunni communities, respectively. Tehran and Riyadh should convince their allies in Baghdad to resolve the political deadlock.

There has been some recent progress, as a new assembly speaker and president have been elected. However, the crucial post of prime minister remains vacant. Once there is political unity, Iraq, again with the help of its neighbours, can focus on clipping the wings of the Islamic State.

*Published in Dawn, August 9th, 2014*

## Qadri's demands

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 09, 2014

The PML-N governments in Islamabad and Lahore have overreacted to Tahirul Qadri and his theatrics — on this there can be little argument and it is impossible not to condemn the violence that Qadri's supporters have suffered at the hands of the state so far.

Yet, without in any way downplaying the unacceptable response of the PML-N, it is important to put the demands of Mr Qadri in the proper context which in this case is a democratic, constitutional, rule-of-law perspective.

Strident as Mr Qadri's criticism of the PML-N is — and before this, of the PPP — what, exactly, are his demands? It comes down to the overthrow of an elected government because the leadership, according to Mr Qadri, is allegedly unfit to rule. But who is Mr Qadri? What are his political credentials? Why are his demands worth listening to? Why is a political non-entity in any way to be regarded as a serious player in the political arena?

In truth, everything about Mr Qadri and his public utterances suggest he is the very definition of a demagogue.

Overthrowing elected systems to replace them with an unspecified system that would allegedly be more responsive to

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the perceived needs of the public is the quintessential demand of a demagogue.

In Mr Qadri's view of the world, rights of the public are of no intrinsic value — what matters most is what Mr Qadri believes the public needs from the state in terms of service delivery, governance and the right kind, in Mr Qadri's reckoning, of leadership.

What that really amounts to is Mr Qadri trying to give himself a veto over the system and attempting to put himself in a position to dictate to the people, perversely by acting in the name of the people. That is unacceptable, undemocratic, unconstitutional and even immoral.

A year ago, Mr Qadri chose not to participate in the electoral process — surely, there was some awareness that party candidates would not fare well. Even now, Mr Qadri deliberately chooses to keep himself ineligible for participation in electoral politics by retaining the citizenship of another country.

And even now, he seems unwilling to do anything more than engage in political tourism — visiting Pakistan to grandstand, perform for the TV cameras, shout a bit against civilian politicians, before returning to his preferred abode abroad and political irrelevance. Surely, a demagogue like Tahirul Qadri is anything but what Pakistan needs.

## Still time to back down

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 09, 2014

The hectic, perhaps even frantic, shuttling back and forth of political intermediaries between the PML-N and PTI camps had suggested that perhaps some kind of middle ground could be reached and the growing atmosphere of political crisis could be calmed down.

Unhappily, neither the PML-N nor the PTI appears to be in any mood to back down first — or at least before the eleventh hour, which is nearly here. The PML-N has had the capital's administration enforce the infamous Section 144 of the criminal code that prohibits the public display of weapons — and most importantly, curbs the public's right of freedom to assemble.

Without a shred of doubt, no matter what the PML-N leadership or the Islamabad administration may claim, the imposition of Section 144 has everything to do with the Aug 14 PTI rally in Islamabad — and is yet another unwise, escalatory decision taken by a PML-N administration that is either panic-stricken or determinedly on the path of self-destruction.

Difficult as it may be to support the street agitation that Imran Khan and the PTI have threatened, there is a fundamental right of the public at stake to protest against a government, as long as it stays within the parameters of the law.

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Yet, for every mistake or unwise decision that the PML-N has made, the PTI, and Imran Khan in particular, appear shockingly cavalier about endangering the democratic system when it comes to virtually every statement from the PTI camp.

Yesterday, the PTI supremo himself poured fuel on fire by invoking the spectre of an army intervention — but defiantly suggested that if it were to happen, then blame would lie with the PML-N for refusing to do what the PTI has demanded.

To the extent that Mr Khan is able to recognise the threat to the system — anti-democratic powers are perennially waiting in the wings in some shape or form — it suggests an awareness of the present situation and so he is clearly not the political novice or power-hungry ingénue he has been made out to be in some quarters.

But does that not then make the PTI's position even more problematic? Either the PTI gets its way or it will force a showdown that can have the gravest of consequences — surely that is against the very spirit of democracy. Still, in the world of political intrigue and showdowns, it is not unknown for all sides to engage in brinksmanship to the very end — before backing down.

It is welcome, therefore, that other political parties and mainstream political forces are active at the moment in the defence of the democratic system, willing to play interlocutor or broker for stability. Surely, there is a middle way possible — and influence exists in political circles outside the PTI and PML-N to make the two sides back down.

*Published in Dawn, August 9th, 2014*

## Is a solution at hand?

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 10, 2014

File photo

SPEAKING at the hastily called national security conference yesterday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif revealed two crucial bits of information: the PTI has indicated to interlocutors it is still willing to consider a recount on several seats from the May 2013 election; and the PML-N is willing to find a way to make a recount happen.

Immediately, the information shared by the prime minister with the political leadership of the country on the PTI's private stance was denied publicly by the PTI, but it does suggest that the door still remains open to some kind of negotiated settlement whereby the PTI's threat of street agitation does not lead to a full-blown political crisis and a make-or-break situation on the streets of the country.

Consider though what it has taken for the PML-N supremo to accept that a recount on several seats is not only possible but that the government can find a way to make it happen legally. When the demands of Imran Khan and his party focused on four seats earlier this year, the PML-N showed little flexibility. Now, with a long march threatened and a crisis on another front with Tahirul Qadri, the prime minister has acknowledged that votes in not four but 10 constituencies could be recounted and that it is something that can be done if the government is willing to find a way.



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Cleverly, the prime minister also suggested to his audience that a recount on 10 seats was the price the PTI had demanded to cancel the Aug 14 rally in Islamabad — thereby trying to sow some doubt about the PTI's determination to hold its protest in Islamabad come what may. But that aside, it is a welcome sign that the prime minister himself has talked about a specific idea to end the impasse with the PTI.

*Know more: [Imran told Siraj march may be cancelled if recount done on 10 seats: PM](#)*

Yet, there is a need to broaden the focus from simply a vote recount to encompassing genuinely needed wider electoral reforms. The prime minister's suggestion that everything is open for negotiation so long as it is done legally and constitutionally and without the threat of street violence needs to be translated into something more concrete beyond simply ensuring that the government survives Aug 14. On virtually every subject other than the power crisis and aspects of the economy and infrastructure, the PML-N has had a desultory approach — promising much and delivering very little.

In truth, every politician in parliament and many outside it know precisely what the problem with the electoral system is — because they have either suffered from or exploited every loophole in the system. The goal is also clear: every vote cast must be counted and only genuine votes must be allowed to be cast. Surely, if other developing countries have managed progress on that front, so can Pakistan.

*Published in Dawn, Aug 10th, 2014*

## Pipeline trade-offs

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 10, 2014

IT is good that the government is continuing talks on the TAPI pipeline even in the midst of a political crisis at home.

This week, as the crisis approached boiling point, the prime minister met Rashid Meredov, who is both the deputy prime minister and foreign minister of Turkmenistan to review progress on the TAPI gas pipeline project. The political situation should not be allowed to hold important policy decisions hostage.

*Also read: [Sharif vows to complete Tapi project](#)*

Likewise, it would be good to see the important matter of pipeline imports of natural gas liberated from geopolitics. Even as the government advances the TAPI project, the other big pipeline project — the Iran-Pakistan pipeline — is suffering from neglect. It may be true that Iran's involvement is causing financiers to shy away from the latter, but the government could do more to build on Iranian commitments to meet the project's construction costs. It is difficult to escape the impression that the government is itself soft-peddling on the Iranian project to appease its benefactors in Riyadh.

It has accepted a 'gift' from the Saudi government that has helped to stabilise the country's foreign exchange reserves in the short term, but it does appear as if measures of this sort

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have left the government beholden to the Saudi authorities and thereby reluctant to undertake actions that might be viewed with displeasure by the ‘friendly country’.

Pakistan needs pipeline imports of natural gas to meet its growing deficits at home. It also needs to build stronger ties with its neighbours, east and west as well as north. Both priorities are linked, and unlocking the potential of Pakistan’s location is central to breaking out of the low-growth equilibrium in which the economy is stuck.

By all reckonings, the projects to build natural gas pipelines from Iran and Turkmenistan are necessary for the country’s medium energy security, and both projects should be processed with an equal measure of urgency. The stream of positive messages for the Turkmenistan project is good.

The Thursday meeting released many smiles in Islamabad and a generous photo op showing files being exchanged amidst handshakes. The silence on the Iranian project by contrast, is conspicuous, save for one dour pronouncement by the finance minister early in the year that foreign financiers are not interested in the project. Our western neighbours deserve better answers than this, and Pakistan’s medium-term energy security deserves more balanced attention than what the government has managed thus far.

*Published in Dawn, Aug 10th, 2014*

## Waste not, want not

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 11, 2014

Whatever else the police force in Pakistan may be accused of, never let it be said that it lacks creative thinking.

Several years ago, some bright mind must have noticed that as a result of a variety of reasons, from law and order problems to energy shortages to capacity issues, Pakistan was struggling in the export sector. This meant that storage facilities and dockyards were littered with containers — great hulking rectangles of heavy metal — that were not being put to good use.

Meanwhile, the streets were increasingly becoming vulnerable to crowds of protesters riled over one thing or the other — there is, after all, no shortage of causes in Pakistan. The mob predilection for violence was something the worthies in uniform were quite unable to control, and it is almost possible to see the light bulb switched on over this unsung hero’s head as he put two and two together.

So it was that we started seeing containers being used as a method of crowd control. Need to block a road? Call a forklift, requisition some containers, and a little bit of heavy work later, the job is done. It takes resolute demonstrators, indeed, to get past blockades that are so firmly solid (though they have been successful in this endeavour, notably at a protest at Islamabad’s D-chowk against the trailer of a religiously offensive film uploaded on YouTube in 2012).

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The authorities have taken to the containers like a duck to water. They are now used so frequently that outside several 'sensitive' installations in many cities, containers have become a permanent feature taking up sidewalk or road space, ready to be moved the instant officialdom feels a little insecure. As further proof that Pakistanis are enterprising, many even sport advertising.

Nostalgia for a time when the usual barricades were all that were required is fruitless. It is better, perhaps, to ask why the state is so fearful of the people in whose name it rules. Could the answer lie in the unavailability of good governance and administration?

*Published in Dawn, Aug 11th, 2014*

## Gaza: the real issue

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 11, 2014

A temporary ceasefire halts killings for a while but gives no guarantee of a long-term peace based on justice.

On Friday, the 72-hour Gaza truce agreed upon for 'humanitarian reasons' came to an end with hostilities resuming in what by any standards is an uneven match. Pledging "no nonsense", Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's hawkish prime minister, has threatened to continue the killing in Gaza until the job is finished.

By this he means putting an end to Hamas's ability to resist. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, however, spoke the truth when he said: "Israel is not defending itself, but its settlements." The world has reacted with horror to Israel's cold-blooded murder of Gaza's civilian population under the dubious claim that Hamas is using civilians as a shield.

The bombing of two UN schools has evoked universal condemnation, and even Israel's ally America has been constrained to voice criticism. But the issue is neither that of global fury nor of any number of 'temporary' cessations of hostilities. The issue — and it needs to be repeated — is Israel's refusal to pull out of the occupied territories.

There is no denying that the methods employed by Hamas to resist Israel's hardline policies are questionable. But what Mr Netanyahu does not realise is that Hamas is, in fact, a creation of years of Israeli injustices and barbarity that have targeted the Palestinians. And even if Israel does manage to neutralise the fighting capabilities of Hamas, groups even more extremist in nature will arise.

After having accepted the two-state solution not once but many times through public declarations and international agreements, it is binding on Israel to step away from its confrontationist policies and to meaningfully engage with the Palestinians to meet their justified demands. Otherwise Palestinians will have every right to resist the blockade imposed on Gaza.

Here are some of the fundamentals for a durable peace: Israel must end its blockade of Gaza, stop building new settlements and expanding the existing ones on the West Bank, and start

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pulling out of the occupied territories to pave the way for the emergence of a sovereign Palestinian state.

Without bowing to this reality, Israel will always face Palestinian resistance even as it continues to pursue, at the cost of many lives, its obvious agenda

— *annexing the West Bank and Gaza.*

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## A dangerous game

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 12, 2014

Imran Khan, Tahirul Qadri and their respective supporters are to march together on Aug 14 — and with that decision has gone much of the veneer of democratic protest that Imran Khan and the PTI have tried to cling to in recent days.

Consider the PTI's democratic credentials and thus far constitutional demands. The PTI in May 2013 broke the PPP and PML-N duopoly and won millions of votes, with the electorate in virtually every part of the country responding to PTI candidates. Since that election, the PTI is governing one of the country's four provinces and is the third largest party in the National Assembly.

Now, even though the PTI's demand for electoral reforms appears to be morphing into a demand for the exit of the government, the PTI has at least publicly pledged to remain within the bounds of the Constitution and is not seeking the end of democracy itself.

Contrast that with the very different nature of Tahirul Qadri's politics. Mr Qadri professes no allegiance to the Constitution, does not believe in any version of democracy most Pakistanis voters would be familiar with, has explicitly aligned himself

with anti-democratic forces in the past and, perhaps most dangerously, appears to believe that his standing as a religious leader for a very small section of the population gives him a veto over what kind of system of governance Pakistanis ought to have.

In short, Mr Qadri is a dangerous demagogue who is expressly seeking the toppling of the very foundations of the state through any means necessary. How, then, can an ostensibly democratic party like the PTI line up alongside Mr Qadri? While both the PTI and PAT have bandied around the term 'revolution', the former has so far talked about improving the system already in place while the latter wants the overthrow of the system itself. So whose agenda will prevail? Imran Khan's still somewhat democratic agenda or Tahirul Qadri's explicitly undemocratic agenda?

To be sure, the PML-N has bungled the handling of both the PTI and PAT protests. Little can justify any of the tactics used by the government so far. Yet, if the PTI and PAT themselves stand side by side and adopt a common agenda, what room does that leave for the PML-N to try and negotiate its way out of the present crisis?

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself suggested over the weekend that the door to seat recounts remains very much open. Yesterday, too, while decrying the politics of protest in a speech, the prime minister sounded a conciliatory note when it came to the legitimate demands of the PTI. But Mr Sharif sounded a very different tone when it came to the PAT. Freedom march, revolution march — whatever the nomenclature, the demands have to be just and constitutional.

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## Tribesmen's fears

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 12, 2014

A part from the mass exodus of civilians from North Waziristan towards the settled areas in the wake of the military's crackdown on extremists, issues are now cropping up with those non-combatants who are reluctant to leave the conflict zone.

As reported on Saturday, residents of Eidak, a settlement outside Mirali, have refused to evacuate despite looming military action in the area. The administration had earlier warned residents of the settlement and several adjoining areas to head for Bannu.

A tribal jirga has decided to stay put, though channels with the government remain open. Reports from the area indicate that apart from the fear of displacement, locals are also apprehensive of what will become of their properties once they leave.

After all, the hardships that IDPs from other parts of North Waziristan have faced are no secret, while the army-approved images coming out of Mirali show infrastructure that has been thoroughly pounded. The tribesmen also claim their area is free of militants and that earlier, the military had agreed they would not be displaced.

The area is indeed a war zone and militants cannot be allowed to regroup. However, the tribesmen should not be forced to vacate their areas against their will. What can create confidence amongst the tribal population is if the administration and military start rebuilding the areas which have been cleared of extremists, or at least assure the locals that infrastructure will be rebuilt as soon as the situation stabilises.

Seeing the fate of their fellow tribesmen as IDPs and indeed the fact that people displaced by conflict from South Waziristan as far back as 2009 have still not been able to return to their native areas must have strengthened the local people's doubts.

The civilians still present in North Waziristan should be persuaded to leave but if they refuse, they must not be considered militant sympathisers and their areas should not be pounded by heavy artillery. The military needs to evolve a strategy that is in keeping with the situation.

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## Industry in the crossfire

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 12, 2014

Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif's apology to the people for the "inconvenience" caused by his government's increasingly desperate attempts to immobilise the long march cannot mask reality.

In addition to any "inconvenience" caused by these measures, the disruptions of industrial and food supply chains are also growing. Industry in Punjab had already been reeling from a sharp curtailment of energy when scarce gas and electricity were diverted towards domestic consumers in a bid to placate the people.

Now industry representatives are reporting a shortage of shipping containers in which to dispatch finished orders, and some have seen their shipments intercepted en route, with fully loaded containers that were carrying export cargoes for shipment to clients overseas instead being used for crowd control purposes in Lahore.

Others are complaining that the movement of raw material and goods for their factories has been impacted as obstacles to the intercity movement of goods and people have increased. Growing fuel scarcities are leading to rising absenteeism in offices, and to top it off, business is now contemplating the likelihood of a shutdown of mobile communications.

As the authorities ramp up their efforts to immobilise the protest marches, the hampering and possible immobilisation of the supply chains that keep industry and commerce moving is worrying business leaders across Punjab. The full consequences will appear only if the situation is prolonged, but already early signs of disruptions in the vital supply chains of Punjab's economy are apparent.

And industry is not the only affected party. Arrival of perishable food items into the city of Lahore has been badly affected with prices of tomatoes, for example, having tripled over the weekend and further increases possible in days to come. Other perishables, such as milk, are also in scarce supply, and vegetable sellers in at least seven Sunday bazaars in Lahore only had potatoes and onions to sell.

The impact on industry and livelihoods will only grow with time. If movement of goods and people is further hampered, ordinary citizens will pay the price in the form of food and fuel scarcities as they are turned into virtual hostages in their own homes. Industry and business will pay the price in the form of depleted stocks, disrupted production schedules and missed deadlines for export consignments.

All parties in this growing crisis should realise that their actions are sending terrible consequences cascading throughout society and the economy, with far-reaching impacts that could be months in playing out.

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## March of folly

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 13, 2014

It is the season of political immaturity and nobody is putting their money on the outcome.

The stock market has seen historic withdrawals sparked by panic. The rupee is struggling as importers are buying dollars in large quantities, also driven by panic. Day-to-day government work has ground to a halt. Shipments of edibles and fuel into cities and towns across Punjab are disrupted, leaving markets and homes running low on supplies of perishable food.

Citizens have to first locate pumps that are open and then endure a four-hour wait to fill up. The intercity movement of goods and people is strangulated, decisions remain stuck in limbo, stocks are running low in factories and homes and uncertainty grips the financial markets as the country waits to see how the brewing confrontation between the government and the PTI will end. Pakistan may have witnessed worse situations before, such as the post-election violence of 1977, but even today, extra-constitutional intervention cannot be discounted.

The blame lies with the politicians, beginning with Imran Khan, who has thrown a spanner into the wheel of democratic consolidation in Pakistan. His grievances, while valid and in need of investigation, do not merit such extreme action, especially when it is yet to be demonstrated convincingly that

the irregularities pointed out changed the outcome of the election. Many elections, particularly in developing countries, when examined under the microscope, will show irregularities of some sort, and Pakistan is no exception.

But, instead of calling for a re-election and demonstrating his support on the streets, the wiser course would have been for Mr Khan to accept the government's offer of negotiating a way out of the stand-off. In the end, the vast and messy contest of democracy works only because all parties agree that the outcome in hand is the only one they have to work with in spite of imperfections in the process. Mr Khan might think he deserved to win the election last year, but he did not and must accept that reality.

And what is Nawaz Sharif's excuse for his role in such amateur politics? After all, this is not his first taste of the combustibility of Pakistani democracy. He takes pride in presenting himself as the repository of Pakistan's political memory, boasting three decades of experience in politics. Was it then so hard for the prime minister to deal with Mr Khan's grievances before matters came to a head? Was it necessary to blockade his own capital and his hometown, thereby signalling his weakness and desperation?

Mr Khan has behaved like a novice by not leaving himself a way to climb down from the maximalist position he has taken. But Mr Sharif has played into his opponents' hands by staying aloof for long and then panicking. The result is a march of folly that begins tomorrow and ends in territory as yet unknown.

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## Role of tribunals

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 13, 2014

Amidst the din of political brinkmanship, the real reason why the PTI launched its protest — electoral reform — has been obscured and overtaken by more grand designs.

However, on Monday, PTI chief Imran Khan said he had ‘proof’ that last year’s polls were rigged, thereby boosting his party’s claim that its mandate was ‘stolen’. Mr Khan named many individuals whom he holds responsible for last year’s alleged electoral malpractices.

Prominent among them is former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and Najam Sethi, who served as caretaker chief minister of Punjab last year, while serving officers of the Election Commission of Pakistan are also included. As expected, nearly all the individuals have dismissed the allegations as ‘baseless’.

Imran Khan claims the judicial and administrative machinery was mobilised to stack the cards against his party. According to him ‘loyal’ judicial officers were appointed and ballot papers of questionable authenticity printed to pervert the electoral process.

The PTI chief has promised more disclosures and the testimony of ‘eye-witnesses’ once, he says, the PML-N leadership is sent home. Of course, while some of these allegations sound like rhetoric, designed to charge the atmosphere before Thursday’s

planned march, allegations of irregularities in the 2013 polls cannot be dismissed and certain issues raised by Mr Khan must be investigated thoroughly.

At the same time, we must ask if poll reform is best carried out on the streets, or within constitutional parameters. For example, on Monday a tribunal in Karachi declared the election of Ghulam Murtaza Jatoi to the National Assembly void based on a number of reasons, among them the fact that the individual had falsely claimed to possess a university degree.

Earlier, over the past few weeks, the tribunal had also declared the elections of winners on three Sindh Assembly seats void; the disqualified politicians hail from numerous parties, including the PTI.

While the Karachi tribunal took far more time than the 120 days within which petitions have to be decided — part of the delay attributed to slow verification by Nadra — its decisions show that the present system can work to address electoral malpractices if capable officers are appointed and standard operating procedures followed.

On the other hand, many tribunals in Punjab have yet to decide on petitions. Once the dust settles it would be advisable for all stakeholders to focus on the role of tribunals and how they can be used to meaningfully reform the electoral process.

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## Modi's Kashmir concerns

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 14, 2014

The issue of Kashmir is a perennial lightning rod in the subcontinent. Whenever leaders in both India and Pakistan wish to burnish their nationalist credentials, jingoistic references are made about the troubled territory.

In a similar vein, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi used a visit to Leh — his second to India-held Kashmir after securing the top slot — to slam Pakistan and revive memories of 1999's Kargil imbroglio. Speaking to the Indian troops, Mr Modi castigated Pakistan for engaging “in a proxy war” while he recalled the infiltration of Kargil.

Considering his audience — Indian military personnel — it can safely be said that Mr Modi was playing to the gallery. While there has been some militant activity in India-held Kashmir, the most recent incident being an ambush of troops near Srinagar, as well as cross-LoC trading of fire by both militaries, Mr Modi knows there is no comparison with the situation that existed two decades ago.

At the height of the Kashmir insurgency in the late '80s and throughout much of the '90s, hundreds of deaths were reported every year from the held territory, including a high civilian death toll. Today there is no such parallel; instead, there is a feeling of isolation from India in Kashmir and periodic waves of unrest — much of this is due to the harsh laws in place in the region as well as the heavy Indian military presence.

Comments such as those made by Mr Modi will only raise the temperature in the region and fail to address the real problem. And we must accept that Kashmir remains an unresolved issue.

Pakistan's Foreign Office, while criticising the Indian prime minister, said Islamabad seeks “good, neighbourly relations” with India. Both countries must realise that good neighbours discuss their differences in a calm, logical manner and do not go about accusing each other in public.

If India has concerns about infiltration — which is indeed unacceptable — it needs to communicate these via diplomatic channels. Issuing combative statements only makes the resolution of outstanding issues all the more difficult.

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## Egypt killings

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 14, 2014

There is good reason to reflect on the carnage Egypt has suffered in its quest for political maturity. After the ouster in June last year by the military of Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first elected civilian president, tens of thousands of people gathered on the streets to protest, and the security forces reacted with excessive force.

On Tuesday, Human Rights Watch laid bare the reality of this situation: in a thorough, 188-page report, the rights organisation said that the killing of at least 1,150 demonstrators by security personnel in six demonstrations in July and August had been systematic and widespread, that they “probably amounted to crimes against humanity”.

In the Aug 14 crackdown last year, as they sought to disperse a sit-in at Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya mosque, security forces killed at least 817 people and probably up to 1,000. HRW says that the encampments, especially at Rabaa al-Adawiya, were variously attacked with armoured personnel carriers, ground troops and snipers, and live rounds were fired into the crowds who found themselves without a safe exit.

It concludes that this was “a violent crackdown planned at the highest level of the Egyptian government” and that many of the officials remain in power; they “have a lot to answer for”.

This, indeed, needs to be brought to the attention of many of the world's leaders and governments that choose to look the other way as the military establishment in Egypt commits transgressions against people's rights and democratic freedoms — because elections threw up a result they found unpalatable.

In fact, as exemplified by US Secretary of State John Kerry's recent visit to Cairo, many governments have no qualms about engaging with a regime that has blatantly undemocratic credentials. The situation in Egypt today is a reminder, as much to Pakistan as to any other country, that democracy cannot be tailored, that political maturity lies only in following the path of legitimacy and the mandate given by the people.

Meanwhile, as Egyptians mark the anniversary today of the massacre at the Cairo mosque, there is reason for Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri, who have been irresponsibly throwing out references to Egypt and Gaza, to take note as well: there is no comparison when it comes to the situations in the Middle East and Pakistan. To try and conflate the current domestic political crisis to that level is to make light of unbearable tragedy.

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## Editorial: The forgotten war

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 15, 2014

For long, years even, a military operation in North Waziristan Agency against militants was considered essential if the country were to ever seriously start down the long road to defeating the militant threat.

Now, with the military's Operation Zarb-i-Azb under way for over a month and a half, the battle that was billed as a major turning point in the country's security outlook has nearly vanished from the national conversation.

Neither is there much news from the battle zone — at least in terms of independently and credibly verifiable news — nor, tragically, does there seem to be much interest in political and media circles at the moment to give more than a passing mention to events in North Waziristan and the repercussions beyond.

In part, this is surely because of the spectacle unfolding on TV screens across the country — a so-called long march to Islamabad by the PTI in a bid to perhaps topple the government.

Yet, current events do not fully explain why Operation Zarb-i-Azb has quickly become the forgotten war. Part of the problem is surely the mixed — often outright — confused stances that many mainstream political parties have on the issue of militancy.

The PTI having long argued that dialogue was the only option has perhaps chosen not to keep advocating its long-stated position quite so vehemently now that the military has come out openly and fiercely in support of the operation the PTI was politically opposed to.

The PML-N government having long argued that dialogue was the preferred option appears unhappy that its pursuit of the latter was cut short and is unwilling to take any real ownership of a war that it did not want.

Meanwhile, parties such as the PPP and ANP, which supported a military operation, have been undone by also simultaneously supporting the dialogue option when pursued by the PML-N.

What all of that adds up to is a deafening political silence on North Waziristan. The media, distracted by potentially seismic events in the epicentre of politics, has been unable to sustain any critical interest in North Waziristan, allowing military PR to dominate the narrative on the operation.

Unhappily, even the initial media focus on the humanitarian crisis that is an estimated one million IDPs has now dissipated and there is little light shed on the continuing struggles of a displaced population that is key to the question of whether or not militancy will return and flourish in the tribal areas.

Worryingly, even the military has chosen to shed less and less light on events in the tribal agency thereby leaving the media and the public in the dark about the actual situation. Bland pronouncements of progress being made, events unfolding according to plan and the military remaining on track to victory do not make for meaningful analyses.

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The record is one of mixed results with no real exit strategy. Is North Waziristan shaping up to be the same?

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## Erdogan as president

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 15, 2014

Recep Tayyip Erdogan has reason to be jubilant. Enjoying his third term in a row as prime minister, Mr Erdogan will on Aug 28 assume office as Turkey's first directly elected president after he convincingly defeated his two rivals in the first round of Sunday's election.

Charges he used government machinery for his campaign may or may not be true, but there is no doubt Mr Erdogan's political and economic achievements make him one of the most influential leaders in the region.

Political stability stemming from three consecutive electoral victories since 2002, the booming economy and the peace agreement with Kurdish militants have transformed Turkey into the world's 17th and Europe's sixth biggest economy.

Now Ankara is playing a more active role in the region, and even though there is little possibility that Turkey will be admitted to the European Union as a full member it was Mr Erdogan who convinced the EU to begin entry negotiations.

Perhaps his biggest achievement has been the way he established civilian supremacy by taming the Turkish army, which had toppled four elected governments and hanged a prime minister.

Deriving confidence from poll victories that enabled him to form a single-party government thrice, Mr Erdogan, unlike his mentor Necmettin Erbakan who attempted to rush through reforms like former president Mohamed Morsi of Egypt, avoided a clash with the army, the self-proclaimed guardian of Ataturk's secular legacy.

Publicly accepting Turkey's secular character, Mr Erdogan proceeded cautiously: he stripped the National Security Council of its military character and now feels confident enough to try army officers, including a former president and army chief, for treason.

Charges of corruption against his ministers and the Taksim trouble gave him anxious moments, but he has been able to weather the storm. Now he wants to amend the constitution on the lines of the French model to give the president more powers.

This move has raised fears in some quarters that greater powers as president will contribute to the authoritarian streak in him.

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## PTI's white paper

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 15, 2014

The PTI's white paper on the government's performance in the first year is a laudable effort but remains a disappointment mainly because it is riddled with errors that betray a careless compilation of the facts.

For instance, calling the sale of UBL shares a "loot sale" to "near and dear ones" on the basis of information coming from "market rumours" can only be termed sloppy.

In some places, the paper makes grievous factual errors, such as claiming power tariffs have increased by 78pc in the last year, whereas the real figure is 31pc. Or that the size of the debt has increased by Rs2,000bn, when the real figure is closer to Rs 1,375bn.

Referring to the \$1.1bn raised through the 3G auction as "a dismal response" based on a news item again indicates shoddy fact-checking, because the amount budgeted to be raised from the auction was \$1.2bn.

Some of the complaints the document raises are fair, particularly regarding the nepotism that the PML-N is known for, and also the delays in filling key posts in regulators and state-owned enterprises.

But many other complaints should have been checked first, such as the declines noted in the Global Competitiveness Report which actually relate to the period 2010-2012.

The paper is a laudable initiative to build a fact-based critique of the government's performance, but careless fact-checking combined with emotional appeals erodes its credibility. Above all, the paper fails to make a case for the government to step down.

Finance Minister Ishaq Dar has issued a detailed but point-by-point rejoinder to the white paper. The minister's efforts to engage with the critique of the paper are commendable, but his responses can also be termed misleading in important ways.

For example, he argues that foreign investment has increased to \$4.4bn in the last year despite questions regarding how this figure has been computed, and the IMF's assessment that FDI remains "disappointingly weak".

He barely touches on the charges of nepotism even though they are substantial and provide clear indication that his government views alternate opinions and independent minds with suspicion.

The government's efforts to shift borrowing towards foreign sources has been questioned by the State Bank as well, yet Mr Dar does not address the concerns.

Overall, it is good to see this fact-based exchange between the PTI and PML-N, but it would be better if both sides made a more honest effort to indicate the reality.

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## [Airport health check](#)

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 16, 2014

With the number of deaths caused by the Ebola virus already having crossed 1,000, the World Health Organisation has said that the outbreak is being “vastly underestimated” and that “extraordinary measures” are needed to stop its spread.

In its statement issued on Thursday, the health body said that its staff had seen evidence that the numbers of reported cases and deaths do not reflect the scale of the crisis.

What makes Ebola stand out in particular amongst many other deadly diseases and epidemics is the ease with which it can be transmitted — direct contact with the body fluids of an infected person — and the fact that there is no cure or vaccine to prevent it.

And while WHO says that it is “coordinating a massive scaling up of the international response”, there is danger that the virus could reach countries which have not been affected. In this regard, according to WHO, the risk of its transmission during air travel is low — but it cannot be ruled out.

At its airports, Pakistan has in place a system for incoming travellers to fill out health cards and provide information about what health risks they may have been exposed to. There also exist regulatory provisions for quarantines.

But like much else here, this is only on paper. In actual practice, these health cards are not checked at all, and can often be found littering the hall preceding the immigration counters.

People who do provide the required information have, in effect, merely wasted their time; many just hand in blank sheets to the health desks that ought to be properly scanning health documents and be in communication with the staff at the immigration counters.

While there is no need to be alarmist, should not a case be made for the system to be reinstated and put to use? It would take very little to ensure that we do not add another serious illness to the country’s already long list of health challenges.

*Published in Dawn, August 16th, 2014*

## Quetta attacks

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 16, 2014

As the military operation in North Waziristan continues, it appears the much-dreaded blowback has made a beginning. Militants targeted two military facilities in Quetta late on Thursday — the PAF's Samungli base as well as the Khalid base — in what appeared to be a coordinated operation.

Luckily, security forces acted in time and a major disaster was averted; at least 10 assailants were killed and the destruction witnessed during similar past episodes was not repeated. On Friday, the Ghalib Mehsud faction of the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility for the assault while the Balochistan home minister told the media that most of the assailants appeared to be Uzbek.

Both of these developments — the TTP's involvement and the use of Uzbek fighters — are cause for concern. They would signify that Islamist militants are making their presence felt in Balochistan and that the security forces have failed to prevent the flight of terrorists from North Waziristan.

As it is, Balochistan faces militancy of different hues, including the Baloch separatist insurgency and the activities of sectarian terrorist outfits. It would only worsen matters if the TTP and Uzbek militants decided to focus on the province which has largely remained free of Taliban-related terrorism, although the TTP does wield some influence in Balochistan.

The banned group has a presence in the province's Pakhtun areas while Uzbek militants have reportedly been operating in Quetta's outskirts and Mastung. The militants also have the support of local sectarian groups.

The Quetta attacks show that while TTP fighters may now be scattered and much of their infrastructure in North Waziristan may be reduced to rubble, they are far from a spent force. Their operational capability to cause widespread havoc remains very much intact.

If we add the Uzbek dimension, matters get even more complex as militants from this background have participated in some of the country's most high-profile terrorist attacks — including the storming of the Karachi airport in June — and have a well-earned reputation for ferocity.

The situation demands two major responses from the state: firstly, the military must ensure that the operation in the tribal belt is thorough and that militants are not able to escape, regroup and then re-launch themselves.

Secondly, the intelligence agencies need to remain alert about more possible blowback attacks in the cities. The state — preoccupied as it is with political manoeuvring these days — must not forget about the threat terrorism continues to pose to Pakistan.

*Published in Dawn, August 16th, 2014*

## Supreme Court's directives

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 16, 2014

After the controversial pronouncement of the Lahore High Court on the PTI and Tahirul Qadri rallies, the Supreme Court has stepped in and demonstrated how to better navigate the intersection of law and politics.

Yesterday, in response to a petition filed in the Supreme Court suggesting that the fundamental rights of the public may be in jeopardy from anti-democratic forces, the Supreme Court laid down a clear marker: nothing unconstitutional will be permitted under the present superior judiciary's watch.

With street agitation and power politics in the ascendant once again, the Supreme Court has rightly reminded state institutions and functionaries that there are rules that must be abided by and those rules are enshrined in the Constitution.

Unhappily, much of the national conversation on the present events has cast the situation as an almost private battle between the PML-N and PTI/PAT, with the army possibly having a role from the side lines.

Nothing could be further from the truth. It may be the PML-N's government at stake, but democracy does not belong to any one party or government. It is in fact the rights of every single Pakistani and the constitutional, democratic system under which those rights are guaranteed that are also at stake.

Sadly, in the fixation on the zero-sum game that sections of the political and, possibly, military leadership are once again engaging in, it appears to have been forgotten that democracy and the system of government do not belong to the institutions of the state, they belong to the people. What the Supreme Court has done is remind the country that the state and its organising principles are rooted in rights, not power politics.

It is also good that the government appears to have recognised that fact too, however belatedly. Allowing both the PTI and PAT rallies to proceed to Islamabad and declaring that the federal capital was open to the protesters so long as some basic security requirements unique to the capital were adhered to is a sign of a government willing to accept the protest. However ill-advised and unwise a protest may be, it is a fundamental right and must not be denied.

True, Tahirul Qadri's demands are undemocratic and Imran Khan's demands are destabilising for a still-tenuous democracy, but the greater threat to stability has come from the government's earlier refusal to negotiate with its political opponents and the use of harsh tactics to disrupt or scuttle protests. Tahirul Qadri has been to Islamabad before.

Imran Khan caused a political earthquake with his massive rally in Lahore in October 2011. Through it all, democracy stayed on track. It did so because the political and military leadership at the time exercised restraint that proved far-sighted in democratic terms. Meanwhile, as the PML-N government attempts to handle the crisis, all state institutions must heed the Supreme Court's warning and refrain from any extra-constitutional step.



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## AGP in trouble

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 17, 2014

A DISPUTE has been simmering between the government and the auditor general of Pakistan for almost a year now. Last week, tensions reached a boiling point.

The National Assembly has now decided to activate the removal procedure against the present AGP Akhtar Buland Rana.

The grounds given for seeking his removal do not inspire confidence. Mr Rana has raised questions regarding the Rs480bn retirement of the circular debt in the early days of the present PML-N government, as well as a Rs5bn anomaly in the tendering of civil works in the Neelum Jhelum project, which occurred in the days of the PPP government. He has, therefore, earned the ire of the Public Accounts Committee members hailing from both parties.

Around the same time as he raised these questions, the PAC charged him with misusing a government transport monetisation policy, under which he allegedly drew Rs100,000 as transport allowance but continued to avail himself of the use of an official vehicle. Many others in government service are also believed to have committed similar violations, so the selective investigation of the AGP arouses suspicion that he is

being targeted for his probes. It would be better for the PAC members to clear their position on these points instead of searching for ways to intimidate and silence those raising questions.

For his part, Mr Rana has not helped his position by his refusal to appear before the PAC. Whatever his reservations regarding the motivations of the PAC members, he is duty-bound to appear before the committee and answer their questions. His alleged misuse of the transport policy is also regrettable, but that is a comparatively minor matter next to the issues he is raising, and should be easy to resolve simply by withdrawing the services of the official vehicle against an assurance that the policy will be strictly adhered to in future.

A healthy and functional democracy requires checks and balances built into the system, and autonomous bodies, such as the AGP, perform a vital function in bringing transparency and accountability to the system. Therefore, extreme care should be exercised in activating the extraordinary powers through which an officer of any autonomous body can be removed. Next to the seriousness of the questions raised by the AGP, the alleged misuse of the transport monetisation policy does not appear to be of proportionate seriousness. The PAC should reconsider its decision to seek his removal.

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## An unreasonable demand

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 17, 2014

THE PTI and Tahirul Qadri have separately played their cards — they have showed the kind of street support they command and they have made known their set of demands. To the extent that Imran Khan has demanded electoral reforms be enacted by the government, the PTI's claim can and should be countenanced and worked on by parliament. As for much of the rest of the PTI's and Mr Qadri's demands, the PML-N government, mainstream political parties and parliament can rightly dismiss them. For why should Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif resign a year after winning an election widely perceived to be credible and acceptable? Surely, street power cannot once again become an acceptable means to bring down a democratically elected government — because if the PTI and Mr Qadri's supporters were to achieve it today, then what is to stop anyone else from marching to oust the government that will replace it or the one after that?

Consider also the contradictions that riddle the PTI's stance. The chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pervez Khattak stood in Islamabad to call for the resignation of Prime Minister Sharif — when the two men head governments elected under the same framework of rules and in an election where voters simultaneously voted for the provincial and national assemblies. If the entire electoral system is fundamentally flawed and prone to massive rigging, then why is the PTI's government in KP not tainted by the same flaws? Furthermore, consider the commitment to rectifying electoral flaws that the

PTI has had in other arenas: neither has the PTI-led KP government held local government elections nor has it offered up a raft of proposals to ensure that, when held, the local government polls in KP will serve as a template of fairness and transparency for other provinces and the federation to follow.

Yet, even if there are no acceptable grounds for the PML-N government and Prime Minister Sharif to resign simply because the PTI and Mr Qadri have called for the resignations, there is surely much that the government must adjust in its approach to politics and governance. The present crisis only truly became a crisis when the government panicked and tried to scuttle the protests, whether by trying to dismantle the barricades around Mr Qadri's headquarters in Lahore or by invoking Article 245 to draft in the army to help protect Islamabad and finally by barricading Lahore and Islamabad and the roads in between. Until the very end, when the government finally showed restraint and calm, it was more the mishandling by the government of the evolving situation that raised the political temperature than anything the PTI or Mr Qadri had done. Now, if electoral reforms are not taken up seriously and urgently, perhaps the seeds of another crisis in the future will be inadvertently sowed by the PML-N again.

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## Right to education denied

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 18, 2014

Heedless of the future, regardless of all the damning statistics pertaining to out-of-school children in Pakistan, criminal negligence in the education sector continues unabated.

A recent report in this paper offered a glimpse of the dire situation that prevails in Sindh's Shaheed Benazirabad district, a long-time PPP stronghold.

For example, in the area's Long Khan Brohi village, there are three schools — two primary and one middle — none of which have teaching staff (apart from, curiously enough, an art teacher) and hence, no students.

Only 30 of the 150 children of school-going age here are getting an education, for which they have to trek to the only primary school in the next village. But while the latter institution actually boasts a teacher, classes are held in the open because the school building was rendered dangerous after the floods a few years ago.

At another school in the district, there are again no students because the sole teacher appointed here takes advantage of his connections in the local power circles to remain absent from duty. Neglect of girls' schools is compounded by parental apathy towards girls' education.

The conditions in this district encapsulate the multiple problems that bedevil the education sector to a greater or lesser extent all across the country.

The indifference of the ruling elite towards the constitutional right of all children to education, the lack of accountability of teaching staff, 'ghost schools' that exist only on paper, the politicised and irrational system of teachers' postings, and the shockingly high dropout rate, particularly among girls, are just some of these.

However, given that Sindh back in early 2013 was first among the provinces to pass legislation to make education until Matric free and compulsory, the appalling education infrastructure here — particularly in a place where the PPP-led provincial government could easily take steps towards achieving that objective — makes a mockery of such efforts.

While increasing literacy rates takes time and sustained effort, there is scarcely any evidence that this journey has even begun.

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## A new PM for Iraq

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 18, 2014

More than three months after Iraq's third general elections, a new prime minister is to replace Nouri al-Maliki, whose three terms as chief executive were the subject of much criticism.

Haidar al-Abadi, the new prime minister, starts with an advantage, for support to him has come not only from Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also from some of Iraq's own Sunni tribes, which had felt alienated during Mr Maliki's chaotic eight years as premier.

Yet, it would be naive to be optimistic about Mr Abadi's ability to succeed at a time when Iraq and the region are undergoing one of their worst crises since the Anglo-American invasion in March 2003.

His first task is to form a broad-based government that could take on the challenge posed by the self-styled Islamic State, whose well-armed and highly motivated men have occupied large chunks of territory in Iraq and Syria and sent alarm bells ringing in regional states.

The IS has been ruthless in the territories it has captured, massacring not only Shias, Christians and the Yazidi minority but also Sunnis not on its side.

In Mosul, Iraq's second biggest city, which it captured on June 10, its reign of terror forced a mass exodus, while its covetous

eyes on Iraq's oil-rich north have forced the autonomous Kurdistan government to seek American help after the IS militia routed the peshmerga, the Kurdish fighting force, near Mosul on Aug 3 and captured a dam.

On Friday, the Security Council passed a resolution to 'weaken' the IS, while the US air force has already gone into action against the radical Sunni militias. But going by the abysmal success rate of America's foreign adventures, it is safe to assume that the US military intervention is likely to help and legitimise rather than weaken the IS.

On Friday, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah warned that the IS posed a threat to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan because it could get recruits in these countries. Let us also note that in his Ramazan-eve speech, Saudi King Abdullah strongly criticised religious extremists and vowed not to let "a handful of terrorists ... terrify Muslims".

A kind of consensus seems to be developing in the Middle East against mass murderers masquerading as holy warriors. The big question is whether the regional states will give up their differences and unite to resist what the Hezbollah leader calls "a monster".

*Published in Dawn, August 18th, 2014*

## PTI's latest move

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 19, 2014

Every passing day seems to bring out a new, desperate side of Imran Khan and the PTI leadership.

Twenty-four hours after vowing to lead a so-called civil disobedience movement against the federal government, the PTI chief announced yesterday that his party was quitting all assemblies, other than the provincial assembly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while today he is to lead the PTI protesters into the high-security red zone of Islamabad which houses parliament, Prime Minister House and other important buildings, including diplomatic missions.

The latest move seems designed to allow Mr Khan to exit his so-called independence rally, not turn it into an on-off sit-in, while allowing his party to retain its prized asset, the only government it has ie the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government.

To be sure, Mr Khan's attempt to turn up outside, or perhaps even inside, Prime Minister House or parliament will — and should — be rebuffed.

Perhaps what Mr Khan is seeking is to be temporarily detained in front of cameras by the capital's law-enforcement agencies and for the PTI activists to engage in some televised skirmishes as a way of ending the PTI rally on Mr Khan's version of a high note.

Deplorable as Mr Khan's tactics are, there is an immediate challenge for the law-enforcement apparatus of Islamabad to calmly and firmly but without the excessive use of force prevent the marchers from laying siege to state institutions.

Neither has the Islamabad law enforcement exactly covered itself in glory over the last year — as in the case of lone gunman Mohammad Sikander, who held Islamabad and much of the country hostage for many hours last August — nor have PML-N-led administrations inspired much confidence in their dealings with protesters of late — for example, deaths outside the Model Town headquarters of Tahirul Qadri two months ago.

Agree or disagree with their demands, consider them illegal or not, there is a responsibility on the state to protect the lives of all citizens — even those who are protesting against the government and seeking to do something illegal. Barring some violent escalation by the PTI itself, there ought to be enough well-trained and responsible law-enforcement personnel on the scene today to allow for a peaceful end to the PTI's latest ploy.

The PML-N government should also be aware of the implications of Mr Khan's other announcement: mass PTI resignations outside Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's provincial assembly (the PTI has several MNAs from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) mean a raft of by-elections will be held across the country in the next couple of months.

That means the political class will be in a semi-campaign mode and the intensity of focus on the PML-N government's performance in office so far will only increase. It is uncharted

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electoral territory that the PTI has plunged the country into, so a steady hand on the wheel will be needed.

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## Faltering IMF talks

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 20, 2014

Talks between the government and the IMF have failed to conclude. The Fund now says that “discussions will be continuing” via video conference in the coming days, without touching on the reasons for the lack of closure.

Instead, in what can only be called a diplomatic bow, the Fund prefers to use rose-scented language to tell us that it is “encouraged by the overall progress” of the government’s reform effort which is “broadly on track”, that the talks “have been useful” and the mission “made excellent progress”.

We are left guessing at the reasons why the talks failed to conclude. The government has not helped to clear the confusion, either. On Sunday, we were told by the finance ministry spokesman that the talks will end smoothly and on schedule, and waivers were being sought for non-compliance on a couple of minor items only.

He also confirmed that both sides would hold their customary joint news conference on Monday at the conclusion of the talks. Then on Monday, we were told that the talks would continue for another three or four days, possibly with a

conclusion on Friday because the finance minister had to rush back to Islamabad for a meeting of the parliamentary committee on electoral reforms.

A few leaks suggest the sticking points might be larger than what is being alluded to. For one, the government is still struggling to bring about the power tariff adjustments required to keep the power subsidy bill from growing.

The matter had been complicated by a Nepra determination calling for lowering of the tariff, followed by an order of the Lahore High Court demanding implementation. Additional leaks suggest that the government failed to fully comply with the terms of the commitment to grant autonomy to the State Bank.

It is disingenuous of both parties to try to conceal the facts. Mr Dar should have given greater priority to the meetings. The political situation in Islamabad is insufficient reason for the government to allow economic decision-making to be paralysed in this way.

It is hard to understand why the parliamentary committee could not wait while the issues with the Fund were cleared. The Fund should make special mention of this delay in its fourth review report, and give the full reasons why the talks dragged on like this.

*Published in Dawn, August 20th, 2014*



## [A disappointing move by India](#)

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 20, 2014

The Pakistan-India foreign secretary-level talks to have been held next week were supposed to mark the first meaningful engagement in the normalisation process between the two countries since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi won power.

Now, the cancelled meeting has instantly become a symbol of the difficulty to even talk about talks when it comes to the two rivals.

To be sure, this time the blame must lie firmly on the Indian side. The suggestion that the Pakistan high commissioner to India, Abdul Basit, committed a grave diplomatic error by meeting a Kashmir Hurriyat leader is simply preposterous.

Leave aside that such meetings ahead of high-level talks between Pakistan and India have occurred in the past and are standard diplomatic fare, if Mr Modi's government is really keen on starting over with Pakistan, then would it not make sense to bring on board as many stakeholders as possible when it comes to the Kashmir dispute?

Bizarrely, there have even been claims in some Indian quarters that the meeting in India would be akin to Indian diplomats engaging Baloch separatists in Pakistan.

Perhaps it is worth reiterating the basic facts here: Kashmir has been an internationally accepted disputed area from the very inception of Pakistan and India; there is absolutely no question about the legal status of Balochistan as part of the Pakistani federation.

Unhappily, latest events have underlined an old truth when it comes to Pakistan-India relations: if the political leadership on both sides appears weak, hawks and hard-liners emerge to try and scuttle the very idea of normalisation between the two countries.

Consider that on the Pakistani side, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif took the difficult decision of travelling to Mr Modi's swearing-in ceremony despite no Indian prime minister having visited Pakistan in over a decade, even as hawks inside Pakistan openly questioned why Mr Sharif was giving Mr Modi a public relations boost without getting anything in return.

Without that kind of singular commitment at the very highest levels of political power, Pakistan-India relations will never truly be able to move forward.

Of course, if forward movement is difficult, it does not mean that a tenuous quiet is a permanent condition. Going in reverse is all too easy.

The Line of Control and the Working Boundary are tense and low-level violence in recent days could quickly escalate if the political environment also turns poisonous.

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Mr Modi himself made some hard-hitting statements against Pakistan on a recent visit to Kashmir. The BJP has been in power at the centre in India before, but Mr Modi is for the first time directly in charge of the international dimension of India's interests.

It is all too easy to see how Mr Modi could use a hard-line stance on Pakistan to reap domestic dividends. But, while interconnected, international relations should not become hostage to domestic concerns.

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## Guessing game

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 22, 2014

Even in the best-case scenario, finding some kind of middle ground between the PTI and Tahirul Qadri on one side and the PML-N federal government on the other would have been difficult.

But the skittishness both sides have showed on engaging each other at all has made the possibility of a negotiated political settlement that much more difficult. After finally accepting that talks could provide a way out of the impasse and proposing a raft of ideas, the PTI quickly re-escalated matters yesterday by rejecting talks altogether.

Meanwhile, after overnight speculation that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif would at long last use parliament as the forum to

address the country and his opponents, Mr Sharif proved true to form and declined to take centre stage in that most democratic of forums, the floor of the National Assembly.

One side of the problem here is clearly the PTI supremo Imran Khan's flip-flop approach to talks, sometimes seemingly wanting an exit from the corner he has painted himself and his party into, while at other times seemingly indulging in rabble-rousing in front of the crowd that has assembled at his demand.

At times, it is difficult to know who is in charge — the PTI chief or the crowd he has assembled — given that the PTI switches back and forth between providing a glimmer of hope and returning to its maximalist position with breathtaking speed.

For a country that has seen much political turmoil over its seven decades of existence, it would not be out of place to suggest that never before has Pakistan seen a political party and its leader demonstrate such whimsicalness on the national stage as it has with the PTI in recent days.

Even so, efforts at talks must not be abandoned, and despite inflexible demands the government must push on, while the PTI must refrain from imposing preconditions.

If Mr Khan and his PTI's strategy is difficult to comprehend, the other side of the protest movement against the PML-N government — Tahirul Qadri and his supporters — are virtually impossible to fathom.

Mr Qadri, a religious preacher with a small but fervid support base, is truly seeking to hijack the country and impose his will

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upon it. To the extent that he has made demands calling for improvements in governance and public service delivery, Mr Qadri makes some sense.

But anything more and he will need to prove he has genuine political support by participating in the electoral process. Surely, the political process is open enough to allow Mr Qadri to prove his legitimate support base.

At the other end, regrettably, Prime Minister Sharif failed to capitalise on the mood in parliament yesterday. The parliamentary resolution reiterating that democracy is the only way ahead for Pakistan would have been that much more meaningful had the prime minister himself added his voice to the consensus.

*Published in Dawn, August 22nd, 2014*

## US journalist's murder

By [Editorial](#)

Published Aug 22, 2014

The beheading of an American journalist by the militants of the self-proclaimed organisation the Islamic State highlights once again the barbaric mindset that has become the hallmark of terror groups worldwide.

Kidnapped in November 2012, James Foley was a brave journalist whose dispatches, in the words of his mother, “expose[d] the world to the suffering of the Syrian people”.

The killing was supposed to be the IS leadership’s response to the American air strikes on the IS militants.

But, as made clear by Washington, Foley’s murder is not going to make America change its policy. Calling Foley’s murder “an act of violence that shocks the conscience of the entire world”, President Barack Obama said his government would continue to do “what we must do to protect our people” and that America would be “ruthless”.

Tributes to Foley have come from his family and friends, and his mother said “we have never been prouder of Jim”. We in Pakistan can relate to Foley’s death — we can recall the trauma surrounding Wall Street Journal’s Daniel Pearl, who was murdered by militants in a similar fashion in February 2002.

Pakistan is no place for intrepid journalists, unless they are prepared for the consequences, and some of them indeed have paid with their lives for their courage.

Both foreign and Pakistani newsmen have fallen victim to terror not only at the hands of jihadists but also, allegedly, secret agencies and secular political parties and groups who have punished media personnel for doing their duty and reporting the truth in spite of threats to their lives.

The list is a long one, and it has made Pakistan one of the most dangerous places for journalists. However, the militants should know that Foley’s murder and the shocking display of the crime on video are not likely to discourage newsmen the world over from discharging their duty.

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All such acts do is to highlight the barbaric nature of elements and groups wedded to terror, that perpetrate brutality in the name of religion.

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## The polio challenge

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 23, 2014

All eyes are on events in Islamabad, and many political and other leaders have weighed in with their opinion on what shape the future should take.

They seem, however, to have forgotten one crucial thing: the possibility of any future at all depends on the population being healthy and able. And it is precisely here where Pakistan is heedlessly, and despite all warnings from several quarters, barreling down a path that will surely lead to disaster.

We refer, of course, to the spectre of polio that not only is not being brought under control, but whose incidence is increasing rapidly. In the eight months that have elapsed so far this year, 117 new polio cases have been reported across the country, giving Pakistan the damning distinction of being the country worst hit by the crippling virus.

Most of these cases were reported from Fata and KP, where the public mindset and issues of both accessibility and potential violence have made matters very difficult for the vaccinators. But polio has also reared its head in Punjab and Balochistan,

which until last year were considered free of the virus, and Karachi alone accounts for 10 of the total number of cases.

On Thursday, officials in Islamabad sought answers from provincial governments as to why there was such a persistent increase, pointing out that over two months had elapsed since the World Health Organisation recommended sanctions against unvaccinated travellers leaving the country.

The answers — if any are forthcoming — will be unpalatable. Despite the escalating risk, Pakistan is simply failing to keep up with the polio challenge. Nowhere are we seeing the sort of push that is needed, such as a sustained campaign to change the mindset of naysayers, a watchful eye being kept on people flooding out of the troubled northwest and the strict enforcement of travel requirements.

True, hundreds of thousands of doses have been administered, but that has clearly not been enough. What will it take for our health administrators to wake up?

*Published in Dawn, August 23rd, 2014*

## Extent of the problem

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 23, 2014

This has to be one of the longest stand-offs in the history of the capital and as reactions go, its impact has been felt far and wide. The Supreme Court has taken note of the difficulties faced by commuters, and in other evidence of how greatly life has been disturbed, on Friday there was news of a further extension of the summer holidays for schools in Islamabad until Aug 31.

These reports point to the seriousness of the situation today as well as to the fear that the problem will persist. It is a tricky task indeed to find a balance between the rights of the protesters and those of others, including the latter's right to free movement, and to ensure that these are not infringed upon. Good sense must prevail even for rules to be effective but so far this quality appears to be in short supply.

Whereas it is reassuring that both the government and the protesters have been staying away from violence in their confrontation, the capital's predicament, which has repercussions all over the country and beyond, has to be one of the most damning examples of our inability to overcome troubles rationally and without wasting precious time and sullyng our reputation.

The stand-off is affecting the country's engagements with the outside world as well. A few days ago, the finance minister said that the IMF had cancelled its visit to the country due to

security concerns. The presidents of the Maldives and Sri Lanka, too, have put off their visits because of the prevailing turmoil. This was the second time in the space of a few months that the Maldivian leader decided not to risk coming to Pakistan.

He was earlier scheduled to arrive in June, but the tour was aborted after the militant attack on Karachi airport. If this were not enough, perhaps even more significant is the 'cancellation' of the visit by the Sri Lankan president, who has time and again showed himself keen to develop a relationship with Pakistan.

The Chinese president, too, was slated to visit either in late August or early September but doubts have been raised about whether he will come. Should the crisis not dissipate soon and should he decide to give Pakistan a miss for the time being, it will be a real blow to the country given the nature and scale of the cooperation between Pakistan and China at the moment.

*Published in Dawn, August 23rd, 2014*

## Light at the end of the tunnel?

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 23, 2014

It veers from high politics to low farce seemingly from hour to hour. Depending on the time of the day or the latest micro-move by either side, the impasse between the federal government and the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf seems to deepen, move towards resolution or maintaining status quo.

While simultaneously signalling that it could in fact still go the settlement route, the PTI formally initiated the process of its MNAs quitting parliament. Meanwhile, the government distanced itself from its default container strategy – the use of shipping containers to impede the arrival of protesters at the protest site outside parliament now. The good news is that, yet again, the door to a negotiated settlement has opened. The bad news is that it could quickly shut again, prolonging an already lengthy crisis.

At this point, given the flip-flops, feints, brinkmanship and opportunism on both sides, there is little that can be said with certainty. The PTI in particular has taken mercurialness to another, altogether unprecedented level.

If that were not problematic enough, the government seems devoid of any initiative or breakthrough ideas. The prime minister seems strangely content to lead via committee and to rely on the same small set of advisers who allowed matters to

reach this stage to begin with. Both the PTI and PML-N need a more dynamic leadership at the very top, at least that much is clear.

Yet, that is hardly likely to materialise in the present circumstances. In every crisis, though, lies an opportunity for individuals to step up and provide the missing piece in the leadership puzzle. The PTI, given its more freewheeling approach to politics, can still mint a hero or two by squaring the differences between the absolutists and the pragmatists in the party.

Coming back into the mainstream political fold by taking back the parliamentary resignations, while returning the PTI's focus on electoral reforms, would surely count as deserving of hero status for whoever in the PTI can convince the party hawks to soften their stance.

Outside the PTI too there are political forces, especially the significant parliamentary ones, who can surely up the intensity and speed of their involvement as interlocutors between the politically warring sides to broker a deal.

Former president Asif Zardari, other PPP leaders, Jamaat-i-Islami leader Sirajul Haq and the leaders of some of the regional parties too can play a role in brokering a settlement. Whatever the details of a settlement – if there is to be one – it needs to remain with the constitutional and democratic scheme of things.

At their worst, the PTI demands are not quite unconstitutional but are surely destabilising for democratic stability. The call for the prime minister's resignation and fresh elections makes little



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sense given that it is only the PTI and Tahirul Qadri's demand. Minus that, there is much that the government can offer and do.

*Published in Dawn, August 23rd, 2014*

## Pakistanis in Bagram

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 24, 2014

The US military's internment facility in Bagram, Afghanistan, much like the American prison camp in Guantanamo, Cuba, has become a symbol of one of the darker aspects of global counterterrorism efforts: there is torture, abuse and detention of suspects without recourse to due process.

While those accused of terrorism must be tried and punished if found guilty, this must be done in consonance with the law and international human rights standards. Sadly, in many instances this has not been the case. As reported, nine Pakistanis held in Bagram were repatriated on Thursday.

Justice Project Pakistan — a group which extends legal help to detainees — says, quoting the International Committee of the Red Cross, that the men were now in the custody of the Pakistani government. The Foreign Office has also confirmed the men's arrival.

This is not the first batch of detainees to have arrived from Bagram; in May 10 individuals were repatriated while a number of men also returned last November. Though the men's arrival is welcome, it throws up a number of disturbing

questions about the conditions in which they were captured and detained, as well as the role governments — American, Afghan and Pakistani — may have played in their detention.

Rights activists say all the men who arrived on Thursday had been held without access to counsel, some being in captivity for as long as eight years. Considering the allegations of abuse that have swirled around Bagram, there are distinct possibilities the men were subjected to illegal punishments.

The problem is we do not know the exact details as none of the governments in question have been transparent regarding the men's detention. Islamabad needs to say what charges the men were being held for; were they in Afghanistan to take part in militant activities, or were they simply living and working in Taliban-controlled regions of that country?

The Americans and Afghans also need to explain why the men were not tried in detention. We understand that local intelligence agencies will want to interrogate the men, but their families need to be informed and given access to them, while the individuals must also be granted access to counsel.

If no charges are framed they should be set free; if the situation is otherwise they must have fair trials. The government must also inform the public how many Pakistanis remain in Bagram while the US needs to shut down such gulags.

*Published in Dawn, August 24th, 2014*

## The media noise

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 24, 2014 02:37am

It may be a sign of progress considering that the last time a government was under prolonged siege in the country, criticism lacked the intensity and urgency of today.

In fact, the intense media coverage of the current political situation involving the two sit-ins in Islamabad has resulted in the observation that all that was required to thwart a revolution was to switch off the television channels.

There are also complaints by people — not the politicians concerned — of partisanship by the media, thus relegating sensationalism to the status of a far lesser evil in the current discourse. There are news anchors who are accused of instigation and provocation, while some anchors make no secret of their presence among the protesters — as protesters.

In the now-forgotten past, journalists would scoff when they were accused by anyone of pushing an agenda. Today, a journalist walking around without an agenda could invite suspicion about his or her motives.

No wonder then that those defending their right to stay in power speak of the protesters and the media covering the march in the same breath. The government has magnanimously ‘allowed’ the people to protest and the government, the ministers tell us proudly, has ‘allowed’ the media coverage of the protest.

However, it is the same government which says that times have changed, and that the old methods to create hype are now doomed. It is clear that, as everyone comes to terms with new realities, there are going to be some journalists who might try too hard out of concern that they would otherwise fail to read the situation and commit the ultimate journalistic ‘mistake’ of not predicting, and effecting, change.

This urge is far too strong for many of them to adhere to ethics. But what is truly perplexing is the inability of media personnel to be chastened when their forecasts have turned out to be wrong. Ultimately, journalistic fare is determined by substance, and there is a difference between being crisp and unbearably loud.

*Published in Dawn, August 24th, 2014*

## Contours of a middle path

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 24, 2014 02:30am

As Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri continue to play to the crowds and government spokespersons continue to posture before the media, the contours of a possible exit strategy from the national political impasse are starting to take shape.

In essence, squaring the difference between the PTI’s six-point charter of demands and the PML-N government’s refusal to countenance the demand for the resignation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif while still insisting on a high-powered judicial

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commission to investigate PTI claims of fraud in the May 2013 general election, a middle ground may be opening up.

This could see the judicial commission completing its task as quickly but in as wide-ranging a manner as possible and make the possibility of the prime minister's resignation and even fresh elections contingent on the findings of the judicial commission.

What that would allow is for the protesters to leave their sit-in site outside parliament without their central demand being rejected altogether while it would put the allegations of electoral fraud in independent hands for investigation so that a final verdict on last year's election is issued by someone other than the government.

If that sounds like a sensible climbdown for both sides, it is also heartening to note that potential interlocutors between the PML-N and PTI also swung into action yesterday.

Former president and still PPP supremo Asif Zardari's day trip to Raiwind and Mansoorah gave both the PML-N leadership an opportunity to elucidate the grounds for a negotiated settlement further and allowed the PPP and Jamaat-i-Islami leadership to consult on how to bridge the gap between the PTI and PML-N positions.

Whether the hectic, all-day diplomacy will produce quick results is difficult to know, but it was a good sign for democracy that mainstream electoral forces were demonstrating both their keenness to resolve the impasse and their commitment to the democratic project.

As much as the PTI would like to downplay the idea of a high-powered judicial commission investigating the charges of electoral fraud, it remains the single most sensible and democracy-enhancing of possibilities mooted so far.

Given a strong enough mandate and allowing all stakeholders to depose before it, a judicial commission would be able to both establish irregularities at the micro level as well as to suggest macro improvements to the democratic process.

Also, the government should publicly and firmly commit via parliament to a speedy electoral reforms process so that if constitutionally permissible snap polls are to be held, they would occur under a much improved system rather than one that allows defeated candidates to forever deny the authenticity of their defeat.

A clear set of proposals with specific timelines and divided into specific short-, medium- and long-term goals is a good way to prepare the country for the next round of elections. Surely, working on a stronger electoral system now can only strengthen the democratic system over time.

*Published in Dawn, August 24th, 2014*

## PTI's bizarre proposals

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 25, 2014

WHEN is a resignation not quite a resignation? It seems when it is demanded by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf.

Determined to secure seemingly even a 'non-resignation resignation' to fulfil its original demand that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif step down, the PTI has mooted a most peculiar set of ideas: the prime minister should, according to the PTI, resign for a short duration while the judicial commission completes its work, and thereafter resume office if the commission's findings do not warrant fresh elections. In the annals of global political history, it would be difficult to find an example that would match the PTI's extremely bizarre proposal. For what, exactly, would Prime Minister Sharif's temporary resignation achieve?

Consider that the very elections that the PTI is disputing were held under a caretaker government. Clearly then, even within the PTI's scheme of things, if the PML-N was allegedly able to rig an election when not in office, could it not affect the outcome of a judicial inquiry when the party has governments at both the centre and in the principally electorally disputed province of Punjab?

Or is the PTI arguing that it is Nawaz Sharif and he alone who is able and willing to distort elections and inquiries, and that with Mr Sharif temporarily on the side lines, the PML-N governments in the centre and in Punjab would miraculously

become independent bodies that will discover the world the way the PTI sees it?

Or does the PTI secretly hope that nominating a stop-gap prime minister would bring in a national government of sorts through the back door, giving the party a say in who the temporary leader should be? The latest PTI suggestion is as ludicrous and off-putting as several that have come before it.

At this point, it is worth asking who is advising Imran Khan. Shah Mehmood Qureshi has taken a central role in the present crisis and has been both extremely visible and active. The former PPP foreign minister has forged a reputation of sorts of having political ambitions that perhaps do not quite match his political stature. Is Mr Khan listening to the wrong man? Or is that wrong man Mr Khan himself?

That Mr Khan could in fact be on a solo flight, with his PTI colleagues struggling to keep up, is a possibility that was further reinforced on Friday as Mr Khan suggested that his quest for a so-called new and improved Pakistan was in part tied to his desire to get married again.

Allow that proposition to sink in for a moment. Thousands of people assembled outside parliament, a country held hostage to a political crisis, and Mr Khan has his mind on personal affairs and marriage, even if he attempted to qualify his remarks later. Is Imran Khan a serious politician a pop star or, sadly, just a pop-star politician?

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## Trading possibilities

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 25, 2014

IT remains to be seen what impact the cancellation of the foreign secretary-level talks between India and Pakistan will have on that other large issue being discussed between the two countries: normalisation of trade ties.

For the time being, it is clear that the ball is in Pakistan's court and until a firm step is taken towards the grant of Non-Discriminatory Market Access status, meaningful progress will remain elusive.

This past week, a conference held at the Lahore University of Management Sciences between academic and industry delegates from both sides saw the exchange of candid views on future directions in trade liberalisation. The discussions largely revolved around policy questions, but political realities that stand in the way of further progress were never far from the discussion — the culture of enmity that engulfs the public discourse on both sides as well as the implications of a new government headed by Mr Modi.

The cancellation of the secretary-level talks might provide a glimpse into how the new government in India intends to approach the larger question of trade liberalisation with Pakistan, but actions of this sort should not hold hostage Pakistan's decision to grant NDMA status to India.

All participants at the conference agreed that trade liberalisation between India and Pakistan is ultimately a political enterprise, and the single best path forward towards building constituencies for peace in both countries.

There is weak ownership of the process amongst the business communities in India and Pakistan, and this needs to be rectified. In India, the reason for the comparative lack of interest is the paucity of the gains that India stands to reap from a trade opening with Pakistan.

For the business community in Pakistan, fears of competing with their larger and admittedly more savvy counterparts in India is the cause. But this is about more than just the fortunes of a few businessmen or the limited vision of the hawks. This is about unleashing the transformative powers of trade. Towards that end, it is necessary for Pakistan's business and policy community to understand that moving the process along is in its own interest, and a key plank in the strategy to unlock Pakistan's locational rents.

Keeping the process moving forward in spite of setbacks in other areas is the best way to signal Pakistan's seriousness of purpose, as well as providing a reciprocal gesture of support to those holding out an olive branch from the other side.

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## Police technology

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 25, 2014

THE volatility of Karachi's law and order situation is well known, and serious enough to have necessitated a targeted Rangers-led operation that has been under way since last September.

While this has faced criticism from some quarters with regard to some of the methods being used, there is no dispute that all legal means must be employed to bring crime under control.

One of the answers the Sindh police have come up with is technology: in 2010, the police launched a video surveillance system which, at the cost of some Rs500m, saw the setting up of 1,000 cameras on the city's roads at sensitive locations. Later, this project was expanded. And on Friday, it was reported that the Sindh police have put together a fleet of 100 mobile police vans that are equipped with surveillance cameras. If the move proves helpful in police operations, more vans will be similarly equipped.

On the face of it, this is a commendable manoeuvre, for there is no argument that law-enforcement agencies around the world have found that technology can in many ways make their jobs easier.

Surveillance cameras act as the eyes and ears of the police, reducing the need for boots on the ground and freeing up manpower for more urgent activities. However, there is a catch,

a serious one: video footage only helps if there is a system in place for cross-referencing the faces caught on camera with a larger database of citizens and suspected or known lawbreakers for the purposes of identification. This is where there is a disconnect in Karachi and elsewhere.

As a result, there have been several instances, among them bank heists, where the criminals haven't even bothered to cover their faces, knowing no doubt that even if caught on tape, the chances of them being identified will be minimal. Without a cross-referencing system in place, investing in the technology may not produce results. The situation is easily remedied, though, and it is time that this was done.

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## Controversial allegations

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 26, 2014 01:43am

IN the midst of many a political crisis, out of the woodwork come individuals looking for a turn in the spotlight or simply to whip up more controversy. Now it is the turn of Afzal Khan, a retired bureaucrat who was additional secretary in the Election Commission of Pakistan when the May 2013 general election was held.

Allegedly in possession of sensational secrets that chime perfectly with the PTI's allegations of massive electoral fraud in Punjab, Mr Khan's choice of platform and the timing of his so-called revelations tell a story in and of themselves.



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First, the former ECP bureaucrat kept to himself his alleged knowledge of widespread fraud for 15 months. Next, the former ECP bureaucrat kept to himself his alleged knowledge of widespread electoral fraud even over the past two weeks, though the dispute has been all that has dominated the national political conversation.

*Know more: [Rebuttal: Afzal Khan interview was fixed match, says Justice Riaz Kiani](#)*

Finally, he decided to share his alleged secrets on a controversial programme hosted by a media personality with specific political leanings. Why not a news conference to reveal such dramatic allegations?

Assume that Afzal Khan's choice of platform and timing is entirely coincidental and that it is the call of his conscience that he is finally responding to. Even then, there have already been serious questions raised about his credibility.

The former member of the ECP Riaz Ahmed Kiani, against whom Mr Khan laid specific allegations, has publicly alleged that the former ECP additional secretary is in part motivated by the denial of an extension in service. In addition, observations have surfaced that Mr Khan himself defended the May 2013 election and the ECP's supervisory role in many forums over the past year.

When claims such as Mr Khan's are made, credibility is of great importance — at the moment, there are enough questions regarding Mr Khan's motives, his political loyalties and the nature and quality of the evidence he has, if any, to not give his

claims the kind of automatic sanctity that some sections of the media, and certainly the PTI, have been giving them.

As ever, there remains open an authoritative and credible forum for Afzal Khan — indeed, anyone relevant at all to allegations of electoral fraud and rigging — to take his claims to: the judicial commission led by Supreme Court judges tasked by the government to investigate charges of alleged fraud and rigging in last year's election.

Unhappily, the distinction between fact and fiction has been blurred so much and the intersection between law and politics become so distorted that the mere airing of an allegation is now treated as valuable evidence. Mr Khan may or may not have any actual evidence that can stand up in a court of inquiry, but whether he does or not seems to matter little to those whose political aims do not quite jive with electoral reality.

*Published in Dawn, August 26th, 2014*

## Choosing enemies

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 26, 2014

IF there were any doubts that the self-styled Islamic State, formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, has become a transnational terrorism threat, its rapid gobbling up of territory in Iraq and its latest ‘conquest’ — the Tabqa military airport in Syria’s Raqqah governorate — should put uncertainties to rest.

Syrian activists say the militants recently took the military facility from government forces after a tough fight. After seizing the key Iraqi town of Mosul and large swathes of territory in that country as well as in Syria, the capture of the airport is another ‘feather’ in the IS cap.

Yet if the militants are not countered, they will threaten the stability of regional states as well as the security of the West. But geopolitics seems to have trumped better sense; while the US and some European states have come to the aid of Iraq’s government and the autonomous Kurds in the north of that country in their battle to contain IS, the Syrian regime has received no such help.

In fact, Washington, as well as many European capitals along with most Arab states, has been more interested in engineering regime change in Damascus.

However, in the ‘mission’ to ensure Bashar al-Assad’s defeat, a variety of dubious armed opposition groups — including some

linked to Al Qaeda — have been supported, mainly because of Mr Assad’s tilt towards Iran and his alliance with Hezbollah. Yet this policy has proved disastrous.

Today, the UN says over 191,000 people have been killed in the Syrian conflict while the extremists who were directly or indirectly supported have aided the rise of the Islamic State. America and its allies must decide who poses a bigger threat to regional peace: Mr Assad or IS? While foreign military intervention is unadvisable, regional countries as well as the West must change tack and cut off support to extremists in Syria — and Bashar al-Assad should be urged to reach a negotiated settlement with the moderate opposition.

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## Counter rallies

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 26, 2014

THE stand-off brought about by the dharnas in Islamabad brings Pakistan face to face with a situation without precedent in the country’s history. Political ‘experts’ can at best pretend that they know, and then they can pretend a little more when the situation demands a change in their position.

One moment assurances are given that the past is not going to intervene, and the very next minute suspicions are raised about the protesters being led by unseen masters.

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For its part, the PML-N is clearly under pressure and perturbed, and the party and its allies are leaving nothing to chance. They are not content with statements that remind the protesters that a government brought to power by millions cannot be browbeaten into submission by a few thousand demonstrators on the road and by what many see as their unreasonable demands.

Also read: [PML-N's counter-inqilab fails to match tsunami](#)

They are not satisfied with the fact that while they have won the backing of so many political forces in the country and of international power-brokers, the protesters appear isolated. They are, apparently, not satisfied by the assurances of non-interference they themselves claim the military high command has given them.

Since this is unknown territory that everyone is trying to navigate, they feel they cannot avoid countering street power with street power. The political stakes are far too high to stop them from taking the risk of a rally of their own spiralling out of control and ending in violent confrontation with the followers of the PTI and Dr Tahirul Qadri's PAT.

The PML-N allies — veterans such as Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Mehmood Khan Achakzai — have been quite eager to confront the protests with people's power. They could have alternately tried to bridge the differences as some other old-timers are doing. The men belonging to Ahl-i-Sunnat Wal Jamaat have also made an impact, by the side of the government.

The PML-N itself has graduated from allegedly carrying out freak attacks in Gujranwala and Multan against their opponents to call for full-fledged shows of strength in various cities. These shows have been — are expected to be — strong, reconfirming the PML-N's presence. They will ensure some television time. But what these rallies also do is they compound the impression of disorder, and could actually be aiding those seeking to disrupt proceedings here. After all the calculations have been made, the resort to street power by the government could well be taken as a sign of desperation.

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## Dangerous trends

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 27, 2014

MUCH as Imran Khan, Tahirul Qadri and their respective protesters gathered in the heart of Islamabad would like to pretend otherwise, it is not just the PML-N government that is in the metaphorical firing line but the democratic system itself that is on trial. And, with the street protest against the government entering its third week, the pressure on the system has grown.

Quite how much that pressure has grown in recent days was in evidence on Tuesday as the Prime Minister's Office issued an extraordinary statement after a meeting between Nawaz Sharif and army chief Gen Raheel Sharif. In the press release issued by the Prime Minister Office, there is not just an explicit mention that matters of high politics were discussed between

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the highest-ranking civilian and the most powerful military leader on matters concerning politics but that, rather extraordinarily, the two men are in agreement that the political impasse should be resolved expeditiously.

The benefit that Mr Sharif and the PML-N would have hoped to gain from such a statement is fairly obvious: the federal government is trying to show that the army leadership and the PML-N are still working together and in agreement on the way out of the crisis.

Essentially, the PML-N's posturing is meant to signal to the protesters and their leaders that the military is on the government's side, not the protesters'. In truth, however, the PML-N's posturing only reveals its own uneasiness – and perhaps even uncertainty – about what may happen if push comes to shove. In truth, there are enough tensions on policy matters between the PML-N government and the military to leave a lingering question mark over whether the army leadership may prefer a different political dispensation in the country.

In truth, there are no guarantees in politics.

For the PML-N, the pressure is coming from many directions. The PTI has floated the idea of a so-called in-house change in parliament; the MQM has talked of a possible sacrifice being made; the PML-Q leadership has tried to sow fear by ominously reminding the political class of how political crises have led to military interventions in Thailand and Egypt; and even the ANP has talked of being committed to the democratic process but not necessarily the prime ministership of Mr Sharif.

Meanwhile, protesters continued to occupy Constitution Avenue yesterday despite the Supreme Court suggesting that they needed to move. Amidst all of this, Prime Minister Sharif has unhappily returned to his approach of being seen sometimes and heard rarely. Mr Sharif ought to speak to the public and put in perspective what this protracted crisis is about and the kind of pressures his government is under.

In May 2013, Pakistanis in unprecedented numbers showed their preference for a democratic system. That same public could be Mr Sharif's strongest ally — if he takes them into confidence.

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## Swiss talks

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 27, 2014

CONFUSION persists around the question of 'ill-gotten gains' of Pakistanis kept in Swiss bank accounts. This week negotiations will take place between Swiss and Pakistani tax authorities to amend the double taxation treaty.

The Swiss envoy to Pakistan has reportedly said the talks are "just a technical meeting" to upgrade an existing treaty to avoid double taxation between the two countries.

Also read: [\\$200bn of Pakistan in Swiss banks: Dar](#)

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Meanwhile, in Pakistan an expectation has developed that the talks are a step towards creating the legal architecture necessary to enable the identification and retrieval of ‘ill-gotten gains’, a vague term that has come to describe tax-evaded money as well as money generated from illicit activity.

In fact, the law makes a distinction between these two categories, and that distinction is important because only illicitly acquired funds can be restituted. For tax-evaded funds, information can be exchanged but that “does not mean Switzerland can help in tax collection”, the envoy is quoted as having said.

A needless haze of confusion surrounds the issue in Pakistan. The false and fabricated figure of \$200bn of Pakistani money ‘stashed’ away in Swiss bank accounts continues to be bandied about, despite having been shown to be a myth. But beyond the amounts involved, confusion also surrounds the steps required to retrieve these funds in part because of mixed messages given by the government itself.

In May, the finance minister told the National Assembly that the government intends to pursue illegal assets stashed away in Swiss bank accounts “by amending/renegotiating the existing Pak-Swiss Tax Treaty”. Many understood this statement to mean the current talks will be part of a larger effort to locate and retrieve ‘ill-gotten gains’. But the envoy’s words suggest the talks are only about updating the legal framework so information on tax-evaded wealth can be exchanged. In equal part, the confusion exists because corruption and the siphoning away of ‘ill-gotten gains’ is a politically sensitive issue in Pakistan, especially in the current environment, and even the

coarsest of nuances are bulldozed over in the rush to judgement.

Since those perpetuating the confusion draw on a statement made in the National Assembly on the finance minister’s behalf, perhaps Mr Dar should clear the air by saying what his best information is about the amounts stashed abroad, and by clarifying the steps his government is taking to locate and retrieve those funds.

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## [A laudable approach](#)

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 28, 2014

IT makes eminent sense for Iran and Saudi Arabia to get together to probe each other’s mind regarding the situation in their neighbourhood, especially where the militant group, the so-called Islamic State, is concerned.

On Tuesday, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian met in Jeddah and discussed what an Iranian diplomat called “the challenges facing the region”, particularly in Iraq, and the “means to confront extremism and terrorism”.

This was the first high-level meeting between Iran and the kingdom since the assumption of power by Iran’s relatively moderate president, Hassan Rouhani.

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Let's note that Iraq has been in the grip of terrorism for a long time, but the two oil-rich powers never could get together because of the diametrically opposite nature of their foreign policies.

The IS militia's 'conquests', however, seem to have made the two regional rivals reassess their relationship.

Formed as an offshoot of Al Qaeda, the IS aroused universal condemnation because of its barbarism and was disowned even by that radical militant network.

Its capture of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, clashes with Kurdistan authorities and the move into Syria as far as the Lebanese and Turkish borders have sent shock waves across the region.

Its extremist agenda and massacres have transformed not only the Iraqi scene but also the situation in the Levant.

In short, not only is the organisation's barbarism widening already existing fissures in Middle Eastern societies, it is a dangerous threat to the integrity of the Iraqi state.

No wonder alarm bells have been ringing in Tehran and Riyadh, making the two powers develop a common strategy towards the group's sectarian radicalism. Saudi Arabia is especially vulnerable, because the IS could find recruits there.

Failure to adopt a common approach to the IS threat would only mean an intensification of America's military involvement in the region.

This will complicate matters, make heroes out of mass murderers and cause the region to sink deeper into the morass.

*Published in Dawn, August 28th, 2014*

## Model Town FIR

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 28, 2014

ON Wednesday, as the 'final' deadline set by the Pakistan Awami Tehreek chairman for meeting his demands expired, a group of lawyers approached a police station in Lahore for the registration of an FIR against the violent action at the PAT headquarters on June 17.

The lawyers, who carried a high court order clearing the way for the registration of the report, were confronted with the same stalling tactics that had been employed to deny the PAT its demand thus far.

This signified no progress in an affair that has led Dr Qadri to march on the capital to stage a prolonged sit-in. PAT's call for an FIR was generally termed a fair one, even when some of its other demands have been dismissed as unreasonable by those who realise the importance of persisting with the system.

There is agreement that a gross violation of the law was committed around the Qadri compound on June 17 and those responsible for the brute use of force should be held accountable.



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From the outset, it was believed that the Punjab government had landed itself in an extremely dangerous situation and it would struggle to come out of it without too much damage.

But as the government tried to delay the lodging of the FIR, one logical view was that it was also trying to delay the inevitable until it was firmly and finally compelled to strike a compromise.

The thinking was that the FIR was enough of a concession to help defuse the situation, and the unavoidable risks it posed could be dealt with later. In the event, the delay emboldened the PAT marchers and added rigidity to their already strong agenda.

The time gained by the government by stalling was the time spent in speculation.

And while in recent days some excerpts from the two forums assigned to investigate the unfortunate occurrence have been leaked they do little to lift the mist surrounding the actual June incident.

But whatever little has escaped the official grasp does seem to corroborate the first impressions about the FIR.

They point to the urgent need for an impartial investigation by the police before a trial, involving the stiffest challenge faced by Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif in his entire career as a tough unyielding administrator, begins. Notwithstanding the final outcome, it is a lesson in how essential rules are and how they must be adhered to thoroughly.

*Published in Dawn, August 28th, 2014*

## Another trying day

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 28, 2014

BEFITTING a political impasse that ebbs and flows seemingly several times a day, yesterday began with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif finally addressing parliament and delivering a reasonably reassuring speech before Imran Khan took to the microphone outside parliament in the evening and rejected further negotiations with the government unless the prime minister resigned.

This after five rounds of talks between the government and the PTI. Meanwhile, Tahirul Qadri, a marginal figure who nevertheless has the ability to create much trouble thanks to his zealous following, again tried to steal the limelight last night, after the expiry of yet another deadline.

The first half of the day at least had some positives.

Despite attending the extended session of parliament several times already, the prime minister had avoided a speech from the floor of the National Assembly until yesterday.

Perhaps it was coincidental that Mr Sharif chose to address parliament the day after he had another significant meeting with army chief Gen Raheel Sharif — or perhaps it was not.

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Either way, the prime minister put on a confident display, suggesting that he and his small coterie of advisers were feeling less institutionally isolated than they may have felt several days ago.

While the prime minister did not directly address what he considers to be the real reasons for the present crisis or indeed directly make any mention of the present impasse, he rightly pointed out that the focus should be on the system and not on individuals.

It is the democratic system, respecting the sanctity of the Constitution and an institutional shift towards the rule of law that will put Pakistan on the path to stability — not the personalisation of politics without any real sense of responsibility towards the system.

There are surely political and governance shortcomings of Mr Sharif and the PML-N generally — and Mr Sharif acknowledged that in his comments in parliament yesterday — but without a system, there can be no institutional fixes.

Just as the PPP paid a huge price for its governance failures, so will any other government — if the electorate is allowed to vote on schedule and without disruption. But that is precisely what Imran Khan seems determined to ensure does not happen.

The resignation of Prime Minister Sharif would effectively mean the end of the government Pakistan elected just 15 months ago.

There are clearly circumstances in which early elections, snap polls or an unscheduled return to the voting public could be a good idea — and may even be necessary.

But these are not those circumstances.

The question is really why should Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri have a veto over the affairs of the state and by whom it is governed? Now into the third week of their protests, Mr Khan and Mr Qadri are running on fumes — at least as far as rational discourse goes.

*Published in Dawn, August 28th, 2014*

## No answers for the displaced

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 29, 2014

CITIZENS displaced by the military operation in North Waziristan are justifiably asking numerous questions about their fate.

Yet neither the civilian leadership nor the military high command has any satisfactory answers for the IDPs. Tribal elders from the conflict zone addressed a news conference in Peshawar on Tuesday, in which they raised many of their key concerns.

The tribal people have two main questions: when will they be able to return and will the state care for them until it is safe to do so? These are valid concerns.

The tribesmen say they are willing to wait even for a relatively long period, but that they must be given a time frame. The North Waziristan residents have also highlighted the problems they have faced since fleeing their native areas, including insecurity and lack of proper shelter.

*Also read: [Bajaur elders asked to expedite peace efforts](#)*

Perhaps the affected tribesmen are not wrong when they say that the response to the Swat IDPs' crisis in 2009 was a lot more robust. For example, while the persons displaced by Operation Zarb-i-Azb have been given cash by the state, other arrangements have been found wanting. As the tribesmen look

for answers, both the government and the military seemingly have bigger fish to fry.

The IDPs' plight is also a reminder of the general lack of attention the operation has been getting ever since the political crisis in Islamabad started brewing two weeks ago. When the operation began in June, ISPR, the military's media wing, was very active in releasing frequent operational updates to the media. In fact, most of the information coming out of the conflict zone depends on the military, as the media does not have access.

Yet for the past 15 days there has been mostly silence from the military. What is the status of the operation? Have all the areas been cleared of terrorists? When will it be safe for IDPs to go home? The security establishment has not given adequate answers to any of these queries.

Let us not forget that, due to the operation, hundreds of thousands of lives are on hold, with families living in limbo. While civilians cannot be allowed to enter an active combat zone, the tribal people must at least be told how long they will have to wait till they can return.

The spectacle in Islamabad has managed to take the limelight away from the plight of the displaced. The state cannot afford to forget these unfortunate people in the midst of all the noise. The military and the government — busy as the latter is in trying to ensure its own survival — must also inform the nation of the status of Zarb-i-Azb. Not too long ago, we were told the operation was meant to wipe out an existential threat to Pakistan; today its details have been drowned out by loud calls of 'revolution'.

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*Published in Dawn, August 29th, 2014*

## [A permanent truce?](#)

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 29, 2014

IT may not exactly be the victory the Palestinians want to celebrate, but there is no doubt they have proved their mettle by taking on the Israeli behemoth and fighting back for no less than 50 days in a way that has impressed many.

It was homemade missiles versus some of the world's most sophisticated arms that Israel possesses. The Palestinians had to pay a heavy price for retaliating — over 2,000, a vast majority of them civilians, including children, dead, infrastructure destroyed, the economy crippled and the sick and wounded going without medicines.

*Also read: [UN rights council launches probe into Israeli violations in Gaza](#)*

Even some of Israel's most hawkish supporters refused to believe the state's war machine was not deliberately hitting civilian targets, and that Hamas was using civilians as a shield when Israeli forces bombed two UN schools and two apartment buildings.

'Israel has the right to defend itself' was a regrettable American cliché to justify what can only be called mass murder.

Described by Hamas authorities as “permanent”, and “unconditional and unlimited-in-time” by the Israelis, the ceasefire, brokered by Egypt, will no doubt provide immediate relief to the Palestinians, while the opening of crossings at the Israel-Gaza borders would enable relief agencies to move in.

Israel has also agreed to restore the six-nautical-mile limit which it had arbitrarily reduced to three for Gazan fishermen.

While the truce deserves to be welcomed, it doesn't solve the real issue — Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories and the emergence of a Palestinian state.

The US-led peace process is nothing short of farcical, and the Zionist state has no intention of giving up its theft of Palestinian land. Last month, speaking at the defence ministry, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made it clear he would never countenance a fully sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank.

The Palestinians are not likely to accept this stance. Which means that they will not be deterred from efforts to win their own state, even if Israel continues to perpetrate atrocities on the Gazans every now and then.

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## Blow to democracy

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 30, 2014

EVENTS seemingly had degenerated into a dirge for democracy, but in a political crisis that is as confounding as it is severe, the events of Thursday night were quickly overtaken by developments on Friday.

On Thursday, it had appeared that a political crisis in which certain institutional forces had long stayed on in the shadows had reached a predictable denouement with the army leadership once again taking centre stage — a move ostensibly authorised by the PML-N government under duress.

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But then yesterday an equally confounding — though perhaps not entirely unpredictable — blame game began between politicians, with the government and its political opponents both suggesting that it was the other camp that had dragged the military centre stage.

Meanwhile, the army leadership happily lapped up the attention and focus, with statements attributed to the military leadership suggesting that it was only doing what had been asked of it by the political leadership of the country and was playing as neutral a role as possible.

In the continuing flux that has become national politics in recent weeks, there are certain things that are already obvious.

For one, the army has — whether because of serendipity or by design — already re-established for itself a position of political pre-eminence that the transition to democracy was supposed to have consigned to history.

Whatever the army leadership may claim through its selective statements, it is simply the case that it has once again assumed the role of referee, umpire or final arbiter over the political process by steadfastly refusing to choose sides — when one side clearly had the law and Constitution in its favour and the other side was agitating for the kind of politics and system that the country had collectively rejected in recent years.

That so-called neutrality of the army leadership involved essentially saying that the democratic, parliamentary, legal and constitutional legitimacy of an elected government was at par with the rabble-rousing skills of Tahirul Qadri and near-demagoguery of Imran Khan.

It should not have been this way — but the fact that events have come to such a pass indicate how against the democratic spirit and unwilling to accede to civilian control certain unelected, powerful institutions of the state are.

Unhappily, there are many failings among the democrats too.

Rewind to Thursday when the country had seemingly regressed several decades in its political evolution.

To involve the army chief as mediator in a national political crisis was capitulation of the highest order — and for that the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will have to shoulder a significant burden of the blame.

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Consider that when the transition to democracy began with the February 2008 elections and gained momentum with the ouster of then-president Pervez Musharraf in August 2008, the country had embarked on the most tentative of journeys towards the democratic idyll.

Five years on, in May 2013, after several major crises, a corner had seemingly been turned — the country had its first ever peaceful, on-schedule, democratic transition of power between one elected government and the next.

At that point, a heavy burden sat on the shoulders of Prime Minister Sharif: he was the chief custodian of the democratic process for the next five years.

The problem was that Mr Sharif quickly and unprovoked made several choices that put great strain on the democratic transition — a strain that Mr Sharif then seemed incapable of dealing with or mitigating. The hastiness of Mr Sharif combined with his inability to stay in control of events helped bring events to the present pass.

The alternative was not to do nothing at all.

Surely though given a five-year old democratic transition and a five-year term ahead of him, Mr Sharif could have picked his priorities and battles differently.

Even during the build-up to the present crisis, a prime minister who seemed content to lead from behind added to the perception of a threat to the system — and almost certainly gave the prime minister's opponents and anti-government protesters hope.

Now, yet again, the country is at a pass where confusion and clarity seemingly coexist. What is clear is that whatever democratic credentials Imran Khan and the PTI had and whatever credibility Tahirul Qadri and his supporters had have disappeared.

To so gleefully accept the direct involvement of the army in a political crisis, as Mr Khan and Mr Qadri have, is to destroy the last vestiges of democratic legitimacy and institutional good sense.

While the never-ending crisis appears to have some more time to run yet, because of the government's inept handling of the affair the political domain will continue to feel the effects of the military's role, whether as 'facilitator' or 'arbiter', for at least the foreseeable future.

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## A disastrous turn of events

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 31, 2014

LAST evening the political crisis that has captivated this country for three weeks boiled over.

First, there were indications that somehow the government had acceded to the most extraordinary and wretched of capitulations: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was, according to feverish rumour, to go on a month-long enforced vacation while a senior minister ran the government and the Supreme Court-led judicial commission investigated the allegations of so-called widespread fraud in last year's election.

If the allegations were found to be true, again according to the mooted deal, the National Assembly would be dissolved and fresh elections would be held. That the deal was rumoured to have been reached just hours after Mr Sharif had spoken scornfully of the protesters and their number and impact in Islamabad suggests that the government had already lost all control of the situation.

Then, late into the evening, came another spectacular, shocking turn of events. Imran Khan, Tahirul Qadri and their respective protesting camps decided to move from their venue outside parliament towards Prime Minister House.

Know more: [PTI, PAT protesters clash with security forces](#)

That suggested a deal – any kind of deal – was off and that the government's foes were going for the political kill. In retaliation, the government bared its teeth against the protesters and mayhem ensued as tear gas shells were fired and the civilian-run police – not the military – were used to repulse the protesters onwards movement. Never – never – has the capital witnessed such scenes in its history and events, at the time of writing these lines, could well end up as a disaster.

Surely though the events of Saturday evening were highly choreographed and scripted by some power other than Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri.

The very idea that a few thousand baton-wielding protesters can march towards Prime Minister House without some explicit assurances behind the scenes is absurd. Quite what those assurances are and what the endgame ultimately is will be known soon, perhaps overnight or in a day or two.

The biggest question: can Nawaz Sharif survive? The answer, in these frantic hours, must surely be a miserable, despondent no.

If that is in fact the case – if Mr Sharif's third term as prime minister is at or near an end – what does that say about the PML-N supremo? Is he a failed leader or a political martyr? Piecing together the events over the last year and especially over the past few months, the answer seems to be Mr Sharif is a failed leader.

This was a political crisis that was mishandled from the outset. Too much confidence, too much scorn, too much arrogance –

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and very little nous. For five years, from 2008 to 2013, Mr Sharif mostly said and did the right things.

The democratic project had apparently – and thankfully – become larger than Mr Sharif’s whims. But one year into his term, in his handling of the forces determined to undo the project, Mr Sharif has proved himself a leader very much out of his depth.

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## Modi’s PR exercise?

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Aug 31, 2014

SURPRISED by the strong domestic and foreign criticism of his government’s unfortunate decision to cancel India-Pakistan foreign secretary-level talks which were fixed for Aug 25, Narendra Modi seems to be having second thoughts.

On the eve of his departure for Japan, which wants to see friendly relations between India and Pakistan, the Indian prime minister said he would have “no hesitation” in having discussions with Pakistan on all “outstanding issues”.

His foreign ministry spokesman had said a day earlier that the talks could be held on all issues, including Kashmir, within the bilateral framework agreed upon at Shimla and Lahore.

Talking to Japanese journalists, Mr Modi said he had a “very good meeting” with Nawaz Sharif during the latter’s visit to

New Delhi and the two agreed that the foreign secretaries should meet to “explore how to take relations forward”. He added that his government would continue to make efforts to build “peaceful, friendly and cooperative ties with Pakistan”.

That was all fine. But he did not let the occasion go without a dig at his western neighbour, alleging Islamabad had tried to make “a spectacle” of the Pakistan high commissioner’s meeting with Kashmiri leaders. That was a poor excuse.

Pakistan’s position has always been that Kashmir is not a piece of real estate, that Islamabad and New Delhi could not alone resolve the dispute and that, to be lasting, a solution must enjoy the support of the Kashmiri people. For this reason, Pakistan mission chiefs in New Delhi have regularly met Hurriyat leaders to keep them informed about the state of talks.

Shortly after India called off the secretary-level talks, Hurriyat leader Shabir Shah said the Kashmir issue could not be resolved without the inclusion of the “true leadership” of the people of Jammu and Kashmir in the resolution process, because, as he put it, “we are the basic party.

*Also read:* [India calls off foreign secretary level talks with Pakistan](#)

What is wrong if one party meets the other party?” The Indian stand was that the high commissioner’s meeting with the Kashmiri leaders constituted “unacceptable interference” in Indian affairs. Mr Modi’s latest remarks constitute an admission that the decision to cancel the secretaries’ talks was wrong, because it had torpedoed the attempt to revive the process that hasn’t really recovered from the Mumbai attacks.

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Only the future will tell whether Mr Modi's intentions declared at the media talk constituted an exercise in PR, the target audience being Mr Modi's critics abroad, or if he meant what he said.

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