

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of December, 2014

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PTI's next move

GIVEN the heated rhetoric deployed by both the PML-N and PTI in the build-up to yesterday's rally, the tension had been palpable.

Fortunately, better sense prevailed on both sides. The PML-N government allowed the PTI to hold its rally near parliament, while the PTI exercised its democratic right to protest peacefully.

But then Imran Khan announced his next course of action: a series of attempted shutdowns of major cities — Lahore, Faisalabad and Karachi — culminating with an attempted national shutdown on Dec 16.

Know more: [Imran's Plan C: Paralyse major cities, paralyse Pakistan](#)

The PTI chief did not give any details of how the party plans to try and shut down major cities in Punjab and Sindh — noticeably KP and Balochistan continue to remain off the PTI protest agenda — but it does appear that it is tweaking its strategy of trying to drum up support for its anti-government protest via rallies in various cities and turning to perhaps a soft kind of street agitation now.

It remains to be seen quite what tactics the PTI aims to use in Lahore on Dec 4, the first of the so-called shutdowns, but the risks seem to have escalated again.

Holding rallies in contained areas such as stadiums in various cities or Parade Avenue in Islamabad yesterday

is one thing; threatening to disrupt public movement for entire days quite another.

Yet, Mr Khan's speech also offered a kernel of hope: he did not unveil new demands and appeared to suggest that a deal on an inquiry into the allegations of electoral fraud in May 2013 is still within reach.

So now what? With only a few days to go till Dec 4, the immediate choice for the government is whether to offer the PTI a deal at once or to wait and see how events unfold in Lahore on Thursday.

It is in the interest of the country to see this long-running political crisis come to an end. But if the hostile, anti-PTI advertisements the PML-N blanketed TV news channels with yesterday are any measure, the hawks within the PML-N are in the ascendant and are unwilling to extend an olive branch towards the PTI, let alone meet it halfway.

Ultimately though it is Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government and it is he who must decide. As Mr Khan said last night, the ball is in the prime minister's court.

Perhaps the PML-N remains wary of the PTI because it believes that Mr Khan will not stop until he dislodges the government and a deal would only be exploited by him. But leadership is about taking calculated risks — and doing the right thing.

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A war worth winning

While much of the world has attained polio-free status, and polio-endemic countries like Afghanistan and Nigeria are at least moving in the right direction, Pakistan, the only other polio-endemic country, is on a deadly backward slide.

The tally so far this year, 260 and counting, is the highest number of cases in a year since 2000.

The complex environment that bedevils the polio eradication effort in this country was brought home once again last Thursday when four polio workers, three of them women, were killed and three others injured when gunmen attacked them in Quetta.

Read: [Polio workers boycott campaign in Balochistan as 4 workers gunned down](#)

Rumours, which later proved unfounded, that WHO was terminating anti-polio operations in Balochistan following the murders sowed panic among health officials.

However, the issue of security, starkly illustrated by the murder of more than 60 polio workers or members of their security detail in Pakistan since 2012, is only one of several obstacles that hamper polio vaccination campaigns here.

Refusals by parents occur with disturbing frequency throughout the country, even among more educated, urban populations.

The government could take a leaf out of India's book in this respect: the country achieved polio-free status earlier this year and has earned international accolades for its innovative programme and homegrown strategies. Significantly, refusals there were reportedly found most often among Muslim communities.

As a result, in 2004 for example, 62pc of polio cases in India were among Muslim children — Muslims account for only 13pc of the population.

To address this, ulema committees which included representatives of various Muslim sects as well as a doctor were formed to allay parental reservations regarding polio vaccinations.

This strategy is believed to have tipped the balance in favour of the anti-polio effort in India. In Pakistan, an initiative some years ago involving clerics in a polio communication campaign achieved appreciable results and it should be revitalised with added innovations in light of the Indian experience.

Also read: ['Refusal major cause of Balochistan polio cases'](#)

The effort must be reinforced by a sustained media campaign, particularly on TV and radio, in order to wrest the narrative from those who peddle misinformation about the 'danger' posed by the polio vaccine.

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It may also be time to consider linking sanctions with parental refusals, perhaps in the form of making the issuance or renewal of certain documents contingent upon parents allowing their children to be vaccinated.

While such measures may seem drastic, the situation has assumed such critical proportions that it needs to be tackled on a war footing.

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Bloodshed in Nigeria

THE large number of dead and wounded in Friday's massacre of the faithful in a mosque in the northern Nigerian city of Kano once again highlights the danger which 'religious' militancy poses not only to the sub-Saharan country but to the entire Islamic world. No one had so far claimed responsibility for the butchery during Friday prayers, but the fingerprints are those of Boko Haram, which presumably wanted to show its power to Kano's emir, who had recently asked the people to take up arms against the militants. Believing in the physical elimination of anyone with whom it differs, Boko Haram has killed 2,000 civilians in 95 attacks in the first six months of this year. Women and students are its special target. Last April, it abducted almost 300 schoolgirls and claimed they had been converted to Islam and married off. So far, Boko Haram has

abducted 500 women since the insurgency began in 2009. Earlier last week, two suicide bombers, one of them a woman, targeted a crowded market in the north, killing and wounding dozens, and a student suicide bomber spread death and destruction at a boarding school, killing 50 young men.

We in Pakistan know from experience that there are no short cuts to combating and eliminating a highly motivated insurgency. The emergency declared by President Goodluck Jonathan in many northern states is now more than a year old, but the militants' power has remained unscathed. Politics is also in the way, and most parties in the northeast, which is a militant stronghold, do not agree with the government's counter-insurgency strategy. The army lacks modern equipment, and this, many people allege, is part of many African governments' policy to keep the armies weak to deter coups. Nigeria has no choice but to develop a national strategy to destroy Boko Haram's network. As in Pakistan, the Nigerian government has neglected education, forcing people to send their children to the militants' schools. This enables the militants to brainwash young minds and turn them into mass murderers.

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Kerry meeting

GEN Raheel Sharif's extended visit to the US may have caught many by surprise here.

In fact, few seemed aware that the army chief was still in the US, especially since the otherwise vocal ISPR went quiet for a full week.

However, his meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry on a holiday weekend in the US is a notable capstone, suggesting that Pak-US relations are more on track than ever before.

Also read: [Meeting COAS, John Kerry terms Pak Army a 'truly binding force': DG ISPR](#)

Yet, with few details other than diplomatese over Twitter on Sunday by Secretary Kerry and DG ISPR Gen Asim Bajwa about the hard issues that were surely discussed, comment may have to be limited for now to two facets: one, the ascendancy of the army leadership once again in matters of foreign policy and national security; and, two, what a closer Pak-US relationship could mean for the region going forward, especially with the new mandate in Afghanistan post-2014.

To begin with, the sight of America's top diplomat meeting Pakistan's most powerful military leader has sent a strong signal. From the standpoint of a constitutional democracy and civil-military relations it is a dispiriting one.

Perhaps the vision articulated by Gen Sharif on security policy and how Pakistan should push forward in the fight against militancy is not fundamentally problematic.

Nevertheless, consider the optics. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif caused ripples last week because of his comments on the Pak-US relationship — but those comments were made in Islamabad.

Meanwhile, the prime minister's adviser on foreign relations Sartaj Aziz caused a bit of a kerfuffle with poorly chosen words on Pakistan's stance on militants of all stripes — again, words uttered here in Pakistan.

For all intents and purposes then, the shaping of foreign and national security appears to have been surrendered by the PML-N, to the detriment of the democratic process.

In truth, if the PML-N had the capacity and determination, this was not an inevitable result. When Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif originally kept the defence and foreign portfolios for himself after winning a third time last year, it seemed there was some purpose and intent behind it.

Unhappily, time was lost, unnecessary choices were made and no vision was forthcoming. Fast forward a year, after other events have combined to constrain the government's policy space further, and there seem to be parallel tracks once again: the de jure, constitutionally empowered locus of power; and the de facto, based on power relations locus of power.

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On the possible Pak-US convergence on how best to help achieve a stable Afghanistan, deal with the insurgency in Fata and help Pakistan maintain political and economic stability while fighting against militancy, the picture is murkier.

Engagement does not automatically amount to a plan or strategy. Both Pakistan and the US need a stable, cooperative relationship that is more than just about security. But is this about managing differences rather than resolving them?

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Media workers attacked

IT is well known that for those in the media business, Pakistan is a country full of occupational hazards. Here journalists are 'advised', threatened or even killed by a variety of actors if they refuse to toe the line.

The attack on media workers in Islamabad on Sunday appears to be part of this pattern of intimidation and violence. Five media persons were injured when unidentified attackers lobbed a cracker at DSNG vans returning from the PTI rally.

Two of the victims work for DawnNews, while employees of Dunya News and Abb Takk News were also among the injured.

Also read: [DawnNews vehicle attacked in Islamabad, cameraman injured](#)

A similar incident was witnessed in Karachi in January, when an Express News van was attacked. Unfortunately, in that incident — claimed by the banned TTP — lives were lost. The same media house's offices in Karachi were also targeted in earlier attacks.

While claims of responsibility for the latest attack had not emerged at the time of writing, a committee has been formed to investigate the incident.

The number of actors who have attacked journalists and media workers in the past have included religious and separatist militants, as well as individuals reportedly associated with political parties.

Personnel apparently working for the security agencies have also been known to target media workers. So until more details of Sunday's incident emerge, it will be difficult to fix the blame.

However, what past cases make clear is that almost anyone can commit acts of violence against the media in Pakistan, and get away with it. In this case too, how did the attackers disappear into the ether in the supposedly secure environs of Islamabad?

We hope the committee formed to investigate the matter pursues the case and does not end up with inconclusive results similar to those of committees past. And media houses need to close ranks to send a strong message to the state that violence against journalists will not be tolerated and those using intimidatory tactics against media workers must be made to face the law.

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Threat to close OPDs

CAUGHT between an uncaring state and an intractable set of problems, it is always the people — overwhelmingly, the poor — that must pay. Many iterations of this can be seen in Pakistan, but the example in the news yesterday is particularly arresting.

On Sunday, according to the president of the Sindh Paramedical Staff Welfare Association, “representatives of all the bodies of paramedics met at the National Institute of Child Health in Karachi in which we have decided to lock the outpatient departments of all the large and small hospitals across Sindh”.

Also read: [Paramedics threaten to shut OPDs against govt 'privatisation' plans](#)

This statement is particularly jarring coming from an association tasked with providing healthcare. The country's healthcare sector in general, with Sindh far from being an exception, is already in a shambles and utterly inadequate for the needs of the population.

Given these stark realities, government hospitals are accessed mainly by those who cannot afford far more expensive but of generally better quality private healthcare. What this means is that any shutdown of OPDs would primarily affect large swathes of the already marginalised.

Such an extreme step on the part of health workers is not an aberration; there have been several instances, from Karachi to Lahore, where medical staff have forced the shutdown of facilities and departments, or impeded patients' access to them, as a method of protest.

To be sure, like all other sections of the citizenry, health workers have the inalienable right to air grievances. In the current case, the paramedics are protesting the provincial government's alleged plans to privatise health facilities and hand them over to NGOs.

More light needs to be shed on this, for doing so may well prove to be an unwise idea, especially given the profile, as outlined above, of the bulk of patients accessing government hospitals.

Providing affordable and regulated healthcare is a primary duty of the state, and Pakistan is regrettably already doing little in the field. That said, the principles of medical ethics, no less the Hippocratic Oath, demand

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that patients' suffering be mitigated in every way possible and their access to healthcare not be disrupted.

For this very reason, certain professionals are viewed as belonging to the 'essential services', such as policemen and healthcare workers, who have less leeway than most to stop work.

Better sense should prevail: the government urgently needs to pay attention to the complaints of paramedics out of fairness to the latter and to avoid actions by them that could deprive patients of healthcare.

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False accounts

IT seems that some 'cleaning up' is finally required. A few individuals have taken their complaints about fake Facebook accounts to the Federal Investigation Agency in the past.

Some cases have been reported in the media about how ill-equipped the FIA is to deal with cyber crime in general, amid the rising instances of statements on social media sites being quoted all around, taken at face value and attributed to the person in whose title an account is being maintained.

Know more: [ISI and the military lodge complaint against fake Facebook accounts](#)

The news that now the ISI and the army have asked the FIA to investigate false accounts established in the name of some of their senior-most officers is just another manifestation of how dangerous the practice can be.

It confirms the long-acquired national preoccupation with spreading rumours and falsehood by camouflaging these in military colours.

An account in the name of the military would require some measure of denial before Pakistanis can be convinced that someone, near or far, has had the temerity to invade the privacy of and impersonate a member of the military that they are in awe of. In fact, the possibilities that such a false account can present to its operators are unlimited.

Considering that every muscle that is flexed in Pakistan is easily believed to have been flexed by military order and that all the sit-ins, sit-outs and lounging about in places of power are said to be controlled by the security establishment, there is a danger that someone with a mischievous bent of mind could really turn everything upside down.

There is no shortage on Facebook itself of those who conveniently disguise themselves as soldiers to let loose a volley of words often bordering on abuse, some invoking the worst kind of invective.

Hopefully, the FIA will now display the requisite urgency to come up with a plan that prevents this abuse of technology, and the effects of its efforts will be felt in

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areas beyond the specific accounts the military has complained about.

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A wobbly stage for the PTI

OVER the last four months, as the PTI's anti-government protests have ebbed and flowed there have been moments of high drama and low farce. Sometimes though the PTI appears to outdo itself.

After a long build-up to the Islamabad rally on Sunday, the PTI chief Imran Khan unveiled his next plan of action, the so-called Plan C, amounting to attempted strikes in Lahore, Faisalabad and Karachi days apart with a countrywide shutdown to be attempted on Dec 16.

It was not quite high drama compared to what had unfolded in the months before, but Mr Khan's new strategy did up the ante once again. Then, a day later, the grand plan appeared to wobble as the PTI backtracked on the dates, sequence and substance of the purported strikes — leaving many outside the PTI — and surely some inside — wondering how much thought had gone into Plan C.

To begin with was the choice of the awkward date of Dec 16, a dark day in this country's history. To call a national strike in a bid to topple a government on the day that half

the country was lost 43 years ago was more than a PR faux pas by the PTI.

It suggests the party leadership, and perhaps Mr Khan himself, is either unaware of political history or would prefer to ignore it — a worrying sign indeed for a party that focuses on systemic change.

Then the sequence of the citywide attempted strikes was also changed because the PTI machine in Lahore was deemed to need more time to organise itself, something not manageable by the original date of Dec 4.

In the background though was an even more damaging claim: that the PTI had to switch its Lahore strike around because of a large, two-day programme by the Jamaatud Dawa in the Punjab capital.

It is truly a staggering thought: national politics, even of the fight-to-the-death kind that the PTI and PML-N are engaged in, must take a back seat to the plans of a group whose parent organisation is the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba. Unwittingly, yet again, the PTI appears to have exposed more about itself and aspects of this country than it had hoped to.

For once though the PML-N has resisted the temptation to match the PTI in witlessness. Having initially dismissed the idea of talks unless the PTI discards Plan C, the PML-N appears to have had a rethink.

In truth, the gap between what Mr Khan demanded on Sunday in Islamabad and what the government can offer in talks with the PTI is really quite small now.

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The ball is in the government's court. It can choose to overcome its fear, to show a spirit of generosity and do the right thing. Meaningful electoral reforms and a definitive inquiry into the May 2013 election can and should take place.

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Troubled Balochistan

FOLLOWING close on the heels of a similar weapons haul made public some weeks ago, authorities in Balochistan claimed on Monday to have once more seized arms, ammunition and some 5,000kg of explosives in raids over the past month or so.

Considering that the province is home to various strands of militancy and terrorism, the news is both welcome and alarming. There is, it seems, a greater effort by intelligence units to intercept these deadly consignments, while the mere thought of the consequences of not detecting and seizing the weapons and explosives is chilling.

Once again, the finger of blame has pointed towards Afghan and Indian agencies who have been accused by the provincial home minister, Mir Sarfaraz Ahmed Bugti, of indulging in 'subversive actions' in Balochistan.

Also read: [Truck entering Quetta with 5,000kg explosives seized](#)

That assertion may well be true, considering that the province is not well-policed and is a fertile ground for all manner of operators.

Similar concerns have been previously voiced before by high-ranking government officials. And even if solid proof is required to corroborate these claims, the tense relations Pakistan has had with some of its neighbours and the fact that an insurgency, even if riven by internal dissensions, has been ongoing in the province for several years, should be enough reason for greater vigilance.

At the same time, it is also true that the state needs to look beyond such facile finger-pointing and take stock of its own performance in determining what can be done to rescue Balochistan from the abyss.

For decades, the province has been deeply unhappy with the centre and its neglect of development there. Devolution has so far not had the intended effect, and Balochistan continues to record abysmal socio-economic indicators, some of the worst in the entire country.

For years, it has faced the security establishment's wrath which gave impetus to the nationalist insurgency. To this day, the bodies of 'missing Baloch' turn up in various spots, despite the active interest the Supreme Court had taken in the issue under former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry.

To top it all, the state has also been accused of turning a blind eye to religious extremists who have added a new dimension to fear in the province.

Extreme poverty combined with ethnic cleansing, religious terrorism and intimidatory tactics by the security agencies are fast narrowing all options for salvaging the situation. In this combustible situation, which enemy agent, foreign or local, would not determinedly push on with its agenda? The state has only itself to blame.

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Nothing but the ‘truth’

TWO incidents in what were once two wings of this country until 43 years ago demonstrate how history can be exploited in juxtapositional ways to ensure that old wounds continue to fester.

A Bangladeshi scholar, Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, who was to have been the keynote speaker at a conference at the Karachi University yesterday was barred from the event after Islami Jamiat-i-Tulaba, the Jamaat-i-Islami’s student wing, made its fierce opposition to his inclusion known to the university administration.

Also read: [‘Controversial’ BD professor barred from KU moot](#)

Justifying the latter’s acquiescence to the pressure, a representative of the campus teachers’ association described the work of Dr Ahmed, director of the Centre for Genocide Studies at Dhaka University, as “controversial and, to some extent, against our country and ideology”.

Meanwhile in Dhaka, a special war crimes court found British journalist David Bergman guilty of contempt for questioning, in a 2011 post, Bangladesh’s official death toll of three million in the 1971 war.

Know more: [Bangladesh court convicts UK reporter of contempt for questioning 1971 toll claim](#)

The revoking of the professor’s invitation sets a deleterious example for the exercise of academic freedom and intellectual exchange in times already not conducive to unfettered debate.

Educational institutions would serve their cause far better by showing some spine against those who use student bodies as a bully pulpit to stifle dissent.

Also, there appears to be a political motive animating the IJT’s objections: almost all the leaders convicted — several of them sentenced to death — by the war crimes court in Dhaka belong to the Bangladeshi Jamaat-i-Islami.

Moreover, not only had Dr Ahmed visited Pakistan several times over the past few years without causing any furore, the government had reportedly issued him a six-month multiple visa for this aborted visit.

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On the other side of the divide, the journalist's conviction for contempt in Bangladesh is yet another instance of allowing, in the name of patriotism, only the acceptable version of the 'truth' to have currency. Granted, one's man truth can be another's lie, but that's no reason not to keep the channels of debate free and open.

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Support for Palestine

IT is indeed non-binding, but the French parliament's resolution asking the government to recognise Palestine as a state is another reminder to Israel that even the Western world is increasingly coming round to what the UN and many international treaties have accepted in principle — a two-state-solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Tuesday's French vote with an overwhelming majority — 339-151 — comes in the wake of similar developments that have served to boost the Palestinian position and highlight Israel's greater isolation from world opinion.

Also read: [French MPs vote in favour of recognising Palestine](#)

In October, the British parliament and the Swedish government upheld the Palestinian people's right to a

state of their own on their soil, and last month, Federica Mogherini, the European Union's foreign policy chief, reaffirmed Europe's position that the Palestinians have a right to their own state and went a step ahead by declaring that Jerusalem be the joint capital.

Contrast this with the balderdash by Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman that Arabs should be bribed into leaving the Jewish state. While his remarks were about Israel's Arab nationals, Mr Lieberman's tirade gives an inkling of the Zionist psyche.

As time passes, two contradictory trends have sharpened — greater worldwide support for the Palestinian cause and stepped-up Israeli efforts to gobble up the West Bank by increasing the pace of settlement activity.

While no Israeli prime minister was ever really serious about honouring Israeli commitments and withdrawing from the West Bank, Israel's policies have hardened under the Likud government led by Benjamin Netanyahu.

At a news conference on July 11, while his troops were slaughtering Palestinian civilians, the Israeli prime minister said he would never countenance a sovereign Palestinian state on the West Bank.

He also tried to sideline the Palestinian issue by asking the world to focus on terrorism. There is no doubt terrorism is a threat which all world governments take seriously with many adopting countermeasures. But Israel has used terrorism as a propaganda tool to delegitimise the Palestinian people's struggle by equating

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it with terrorism — a view which global opinion apparently does not share.

Mr Netanyahu also wants the world, and the Palestinians, to recognise Israel as a Jewish state — something which any rational mind would find hard to accept. The writing on the wall is there for Israel and its ally America to see — no less than 134 states have recognised the Palestinian state. It is time Washington and Tel Aviv too did the same.

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Paradigm shift?

IN a speech at a seminar in Karachi, as part of the arms expo held in the provincial metropolis this week, chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee Gen Rashad Mahmood touched on the changing threat environment in the world today, a result of both changes in technologies and cracks in the old order.

In essence, the general argued that the old paradigm of strategic stability has to be amended to deal with present-day threats that cannot simply be fought physically with weapons and ammunition, and claimed that a state's security institutions have seen their mandate widened to include achieving domestic peace and internal harmony.

Know more: [‘Traditional paradigm of strategic stability consigned to the past’](#)

The former argument is true enough: with cyber threats, non-state actors, suicide attackers and overlapping threats across international borders, the old paradigm of state vs state and army vs army has changed significantly.

In many ways, given events in Afghanistan for several decades now, the Pakistani state has had more experience in dealing with a certain kind of non-state threat at least.

Yet, it is the other arenas — domestic peace and internal harmony — that Gen Mahmood mentioned that are far more contentious.

Clearly, the Pakistani military has a major, even fundamental, role to play in defeating the militant threat internally, especially in Fata. Without significant military operations, the militancy threat in Fata would only grow — and the state would never have had a chance to reassert its control.

But this is also where it becomes difficult: a military-led strategy against militancy is probably, in the long run, inadequate to win the fight against militancy nationally. The military leadership itself acknowledges that military operations are a necessary but not sufficient condition to win this war — but then always stops short of explaining how the sufficient conditions will be achieved.

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A national strategy with input for all institutions is required, but is the military willing to cede that space to civilian-run institutions and is the civilian leadership of the country able or willing to take the lead?

There is more. For all the talk of the end of any notion of good Taliban/bad Taliban and making no distinction between so-called soft, pro-state militants and anti-state militants, there is also the reality of what is happening far away from Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The Kashmir-centric groups, the militants focused on India, the so-called welfare organisations with vast networks across the country — can anyone really say that they are regarded now as entities that have to be rolled back and whose cadres must be disbanded and reintegrated into society?

Instead, all that seems to be apparent at the moment is the old, half-hearted attempts to mainstream such groups politically and hope that the electoral process smoothes their roughest edges. It is a vain hope, in all probability. So even if paradigms need to be discarded, where is the new policy for a new age?

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A CEC at last

A TEAM of the Pakistani parliamentarians has finally found the bravest man in the country. On Thursday, a parliamentary committee nominated Justice Sardar Muhammad Raza Khan for the post of chief election commissioner, hours before yet another Supreme Court deadline was to expire.

The committee comprising government and opposition members in the National Assembly and the Senate had failed to meet three previous deadlines given by the apex court.

The PTI, which demands large-scale reform of the election commission and which questions the very legal status of the assemblies that came about after May 2013 polls, stayed away from the deliberations.

Also read: [Justice Sardar Raza Khan named CEC](#)

The PTI's position was primarily responsible for landing the sensitive office of the election commissioner in controversy, which is thought to be the reason why many of the prominent personalities – all retired judges – who were publicly tipped for the job expressed their inability to accept the responsibility.

In the circumstances, apart from efficiency and a clean reputation, it became a question of the candidate also having the courage to take up the challenge.

Even those most committed to the continuation of the system in Pakistan in its present form should be aware that, if the nomination is a landmark, it is one of the many that the country must cross on its journey to having a smoothly functioning democratic order.

The presence of an independent election commission is only one, basic, element. A lot of work is to be done before it can be said with any degree of confidence that Pakistan is on track to getting this fundamental bit right.

Almost every party worth the name in the country has spoken about the need for empowering the election commission and ensuring its independence.

To be able to advance towards this objective, the new chief of the election commission has to first deal with the pile of current cases on his table.

He will inevitably have to begin with the conduct of the last election, which left so many grumbling, even if it was only Imran Khan who chose to lodge a protest.

The PTI is careful that the focus does not shift from its complaint about rigging, and is quick to, rightly, point out that the appointment of Justice Khan in itself does not address this basic grievance.

Whereas some election commission officials in the recent past reacted to allegations of irregularities by the PTI with a tone almost befitting a political opponent, many details about the 2013 general election remain shrouded in mystery and there is a genuine desire in people to get to the truth.

Clearing this heavy backlog will be a difficult but crucial first step towards establishing the new CEC in a position from where he can, hopefully, supervise the reform which is desired by not just one party or by politicians but by all Pakistanis.

Published in Dawn, December 5th, 2014

Safe blood needed

THERE is indeed a lot wrong with Pakistan's health infrastructure, both where medical facilities and the regulation of the sector are concerned.

From tainted drugs to outbreaks of controllable diseases to quacks operating without hindrance, much of our health woes simply come down to bad management or complacency on part of the authorities. But amongst all the other major health-related issues, the lack of an effective screening system to ensure safe blood for transfusions is often ignored.

That is, until some tragedy emerges linked to unsafe blood transfusions. As reported in this paper on Thursday, at least 10 children suffering from thalassaemia have tested positive for HIV after apparently receiving contaminated blood.

Take a look: [10 thalassaemic children get HIV from transfusions](#)

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While obtaining safe blood is a matter of concern for all, those living with thalassaemia are particularly prone to contracting blood-borne diseases as they need frequent transfusions, often every month.

With voluntary blood donation rates in Pakistan very low, the shortage of safely-screened blood is exploited by unscrupulous blood banks that procure the product from 'professional' donors and then sell it on a commercial basis.

These illegal operations put lives at great risk, as recipients of unscreened blood can be infected with HIVids (as in the most recent case) as well as hepatitis and other diseases.

While blood transfusion authorities exist in all four provinces as well as Islamabad and Azad Kashmir, and legislation designed to regulate transfusions is also on the books, the state has been unable to crack down on the racket of unregistered and illegal facilities selling possibly contaminated blood.

As is often the case, the relevant authorities might raid an illegal establishment selling unscreened blood, often to see it soon reopen or relocate and continue with business as usual.

The provincial health authorities must step up their efforts to seal illegal blood banks and make sure they stay shut. Increased manpower and effective legal tools are needed to monitor the sector and to prosecute individuals involved in the racket.

A more effective monitoring mechanism is also required for legal facilities, both in the public and private sectors. Also, a coordinated countrywide campaign is needed to urge healthy individuals to donate blood on a voluntary basis.

If the number of voluntary donors goes up, perhaps the shortage of safe blood needed for transfusions can be reduced significantly. With planning and firm action, 'professional' donors and illegal commercial blood banks can be put out of business.

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Held hostage

THERE has never been an easy relationship between Pakistan and India, but far from the posturing with which officialdom concerns itself, there is a generally held belief that at least on the cultural side, lasting linkages are being forged.

How harsh the terrain can actually be though, and how very little is possible unless state authorities take a sympathetic view, was demonstrated in Mumbai on Monday evening, when the internationally renowned Sachal Jazz Ensemble was forced to call off its performance because the city police refused to grant permission – despite the fact it had already earlier performed in New Delhi and Pune without any trouble.

Also read: [Music becomes collateral damage in souring of Pak-India ties](#)

The reason, according to sources quoted by the media in India, was security concerns as a result of Indo-Pak tensions. And lest there be any doubt that the reservations were country-specific, the fact that the three UK citizens in the band were given the permission to perform that was withheld from the seven Pakistanis tells its own tale.

While this is the first time such a move has been made since the government of Narendra Modi took charge, it is far from unprecedented.

In January, two plays by Ajoka Theatre and the NAPA Repertory Theatre that had been scheduled for participation in the National School of Drama's international festival in New Delhi were similarly prevented from being staged, with the same reason cited, also at the last minute.

The authorities in India need to see sense. Cultural connections should not be held hostage to diplomatic relations, particularly since an exchange of art, music and culture can only have a beneficial effect in reducing each country's 'otherness' in the eyes of audiences.

Since the intention to perform is declared at the time of visa application, the Indian authorities cannot hide behind the fig leaf of having caught up with events at the last minute. Such a cancellation should not be brought about again, and any security concerns should not be addressed by taking the easy way out.

Published in Dawn, December 5th, 2014

World Bank on inequality

A GLOBAL conversation has been under way on the scale and nature of modern-day inequality as well as the best remedy available to tackle it.

This conversation has been running in parallel to another that began in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis: how to restart growth in the advanced industrial democracies of the West, that have been struggling with their moribund economies for more than half a decade now.

Increasingly, these two separate conversations are drawing closer together as demands are growing that the search for a remedy to rising inequalities be made part of the search for a new growth paradigm.

Also read: [Energy subsidies benefit the rich in Pakistan: WB](#)

As an example, consider the debate surrounding the demand to make the reduction of inequality a part of the Millennium Development Goals. The constituency opposed to allowing inequality to deflect the conversation on restarting growth is very powerful, and very concerned these days by the growing demand for equitable reform.

When presenting the World Bank's latest report titled Addressing Inequality: Policy Reforms as Important as Growth, the chief economist behind it, Martin Rama, said the authors preferred to take "a very narrow view" of the subject, to make a few measurements and ensure that

none of the findings call into question key assumptions of the World Bank's philosophy.

Not surprisingly, the approach taken by the authors of the report is a series of cookie-cutter measurements. For one, what is the utility of adopting a South Asian focus for questions of inequality? Regional differences are substantial when one takes into account social factors as well and it is not clear how a regional focus yields any special insight into this case.

The report begins by noting the high levels of inequality between the maharajas of the 1950s and the rest of the population. It takes some note of the billionaires of today, who are products of the liberalisation that the World Bank has pushed onto countries around the world, but it does not make this connection between the appearance of billionaires and the liberalisation of the past three decades. Instead, the authors prefer to use the maharajas of an earlier time as emblems of high inequality.

It appears the World Bank has not been listening over the decades as more and more voices have pointed out that liberalisation and the reign of the market tends to exacerbate inequality, that the private sector can act as a motor of growth, but that growth does not trickle down automatically.

Far from seeing present-day inequalities as a product, at least in part, of its own policy dogma, the report appears to be written by the World Bank to exonerate its own thinking.

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It's admirable that the Bank would want to join the conversation on inequality, but a little more introspection, and perhaps a little more intellectual honesty, could have strengthened its effort.

Published in Dawn December 6th , 2014

The internal danger

IN recent days, the military leadership has taken on the task of elucidating a broad-based understanding of what constitutes security for a country and of identifying the principal and most immediate threat confronting Pakistan today.

On Thursday, army chief Gen Raheel Sharif once again described the militant threat in forthright language: according to him, the enemy “[lives within us and looks like us](#)”.

While such candidness should be applauded and a front-line role for the military is essential in the fight against militancy, the wider problem remains: where is the broad-based strategy to fight a complex threat, as the military itself describes militancy today?

Gen Sharif and other senior military leaders are on the right track when it comes to defining the militancy problem. It will take many years, possibly longer, to truly

defeat militancy. Militancy cannot be defeated by military operations alone.

Militancy is not a problem confined to Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It is a national threat. Combating militancy will need significant input by all other institutions of the state, and not just of the military and intelligence variety.

Yet, articulating the problem well has appeared to lead to only doubling down on the military option alone so far. Surely, without a North Waziristan operation, and even the one launched in Khyber Agency more recently, militancy would not be defeated. Clearly, given the slow, if steady, pace of those operations, the militants are fairly strong still and their sanctuaries in Fata need to be dismantled.

That requires the full attention of the military. But can a war truly be won by focusing solely on the fight today when the next stage is already clear? Consider the peace in Swat, the most successful of all the counter-insurgency operations waged by the military so far.

Five years on, while relative peace has been established, the military has become a permanent presence — and the civilian administration is far from a pre-eminent force there.

If the end state is to be a vastly expanded permanent role for the military internally, then can it really be said that the war is winnable, let alone being won? Surely, the inadequacies of the civilian-led institutions are manifold.

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In many cases, the civilian, political and administrative leadership do not have the capacity to understand the militant threat. But without building up that capacity, how will the kind of militancy spreading outwards from the big, urban centres to the hinterlands in the provinces ever be contained?

Published in Dawn December 6th , 2014

Violence against the blind

A RALLY of physically handicapped individuals being set upon by police armed with batons — the optics could not have been worse.

The incident took place in Lahore earlier this week on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities during a protest by the visually impaired raising a voice for their rights.

Condemnation of the violent police reaction from various quarters has been swift. The Punjab government has ordered an inquiry and a petition filed in the Supreme Court seeks a judicial commission to investigate the incident.

While the Punjab police, of Model Town fame, is scarcely known for its measured and proportional response to situations — and certainly there must be repercussions for its use of brute force in this instance — the

insensitivity displayed by it is symptomatic of our society as a whole.

Also read: [Police baton-charges blind protesters in Lahore, several injured](#)

Otherwise, the group of visually impaired individuals, with their white canes, would not in the first place have had to come out on the streets to ask for the officially-mandated 2pc job quota in government and semi-government departments to be implemented.

Aside from giving short shrift to the right of the handicapped to earn a livelihood, and thereby acquire a certain amount of independence, there is little consideration for their physical limitations.

Some months ago, the State Bank, in a welcome move, had instructed all banks to offer preferential treatment to individuals with disabilities and ensure their premises are handicap-accessible.

It is not known to what extent this directive has been complied with, but a cursory glance at public places as a whole shows that the handicapped have a formidable landscape to traverse if they want to participate in public life.

The fact is that those with handicaps in our society are expected to live on sufferance of the able-bodied, and exist on the margins without complaining or voicing their grievances.

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For a nation that has reportedly over 18 million people with disabilities, that is a large segment of the population to sideline.

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Marbles lost

There is some irony to be found in the fact that the British Museum has sent one of the Parthenon Marbles for display to Russia, given that relations between the government in Moscow and Nato countries are at a historic low, while Greece is left discomfited.

The British Museum's director said on Friday that such loans must continue between museums regardless of political disagreements at the level of governments, and it is hard to disagree.

Nevertheless, the sculptures being in the news again provides reason to reflect on how much cultural treasure from across the globe was removed from the land that gave birth to it — hijacked, bought for peanuts or shanghaied away during periods of direct colonisation or indirect influence.

In many countries that have lost parts of their history in this way, there are now a growing number of voices

demanding that such 'stolen' artefacts be returned to their original homes, including Greece.

With reference to the Elgin Marbles, as they are also known — a nod to the British peer who saw to their removal from Greece just over two centuries ago — the Greek prime minister said in an emailed statement that the British Museum's decision "taunts the Greek people. The Parthenon and its sculptures were vandalised".

Those opposing the return of cultural artefacts to their original homes often say that these countries — many still struggling along the path to development — do not have the resources to properly look after them.

Indeed, many developing countries, including Pakistan, tend to be characterised by lack of desire to prioritise the protection of sites and artefacts of culture and heritage.

Whether it is the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan or the use of Pakistan's Makli necropolis as a camping site for people displaced by the floods in Sindh, the attitude is one of neglect — even when, as in Pakistan, protective laws and government agencies are in place.

Old, it would seem, is still not gold in many countries.

Published in Dawn December 7th , 2014

Pak-Afghan ties: a fresh start

IF words and body language are anything to go by, the Pak-Afghan relationship is warmer than ever. Part of the reason is certainly the exit of the mercurial former president Hamid Karzai from the equation, but that alone cannot explain why so many seem cautiously optimistic about the bilateral relationship going forward.

Surely, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani must get some of the credit, given his attempts to speak of Pakistan in warm terms and his willingness to not unnecessarily ruffle feathers here.

Read: [US praises improvement in Pak-Afghan ties](#)

But then, both Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the military leadership under Gen Raheel Sharif have also consistently held that a new chapter in relations in Afghanistan is not only possible, but also achievable — and have done several things to suggest that the old era of massive and coordinated interference in the security and politics of Afghanistan is indeed changing.

Also read: [Afghan president assures Pakistan of anti-terror cooperation](#)

Yet, whether it is the bonhomie on display in London (far removed from the volatility that President Karzai brought

to such meetings) or the quietly reassuring words of US Secretary of State John Kerry after his meeting with army chief Gen Raheel Sharif recently, it should not be forgotten that seemingly intractable problems remain.

The key to solutions may be cooperation — bilateral and international — but causing interests to align is fiendishly difficult. Consider the vexing issue of cross-border militancy.

Also read: [Ghani dubs Pakistan 'important pillar' of Afghanistan foreign policy](#)

There is an attempt to squeeze sanctuaries and even go after the senior leadership of various militant groups operating on both sides of the border, but deep and historical suspicions remain.

Ultimately, rather than the issue of better border management being subordinated to the matter of cross-militancy, a reversal will be needed if Pakistan and Afghanistan are to move incrementally, but irreversibly, towards more stable and secure domestic scenarios.

Yet, the conversation tends to be more about immediate security threats and medium-term state concerns on both sides rather than a full-fledged understanding of how to marry a 21st century border regime with the reality of constant movement of tribes across a border they consider to be fluid.

Also read: [Nawaz, Ghani visit 10 Downing Street to discuss regional situation](#)

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Perhaps President Ghani will be able to demonstrate a greater vision than his predecessor on this front.

Encouragingly though, the bilateral relationship seems to be also moving towards understanding the economic and political needs of Afghanistan, with some of the language focused on how the new dispensation in Kabul needs support to help it better deliver to the Afghan people.

Also read: [Gen Raheel's Kabul visit in focus as meeting with Ghani ends on positive note](#)

That should also help assuage Afghan concerns about Pakistani intentions, especially if the recent wave of Afghan Taliban attacks continues.

But neither should there be any illusions about the urgency that is needed: if the Ashraf Ghani- and Abdullah Abdullah-led dispensation doesn't demonstrate its bona fides quickly and political support drains away from them, the ghosts of the past may quickly return to haunt the relationship.

The leaderships on both sides need to make the present count.

Published in Dawn December 7th , 2014

Killings in Sindh

There are growing indications that the methods used by the security establishment to quell separatism in Balochistan are being replicated in Sindh.

As cited by the HRCP, over the last few weeks, a number of men associated with Sindhi nationalist groups have been abducted, allegedly by security personnel, with their bodies later turning up in different parts of Sindh and Balochistan.

In one particularly brazen incident, a young wounded man was taken away from Karachi's Civil Hospital by over a dozen men, including some in police uniform; the man's body was later found dumped near Hyderabad.

Read| [Analysis: Sindhi nationalists stand divided](#)

Sindhi nationalist groups have protested against such 'custodial killings' and have pointed the finger of blame at the state. The separatism debate is not new in Sindh; in fact it dates back to at least the early 1970s when G.M. Syed gave the call for an independent 'Sindhudesh'.

From then onwards, nationalism in Sindh has taken on various forms and hues. The nationalists have ranged from those who choose to work for the province's rights within the framework of Pakistan, to more militant outfits that support separatism through armed violence.

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Also read: [Qadir Magsi urges JSMM to give up armed struggle in Sindh](#)

A group belonging to the latter category, the banned Jeay Sindh Muttahida Mahaz, has seen its profile rise over the last decade and of late has reportedly been responsible for numerous low-intensity bomb blasts in the province.

Activists belonging to this group have been among the victims of the recent enforced disappearances.

Also read: [HRCP slams targeting of nationalists in Sindh](#)

Of course, Sindh does not suffer from the type of insurgency that has affected Balochistan. In Sindh, the political process is very much alive, even though political forces have failed to give its people good governance, law and order and economic prosperity.

While Sindh did experience armed militancy during the Zia era, there is a need to address the current problem using foresight. If some of Sindh's youths have lost faith in the state, they need to be engaged and their grievances addressed.

If some are genuinely involved in militancy, charges must be proved against them in court. If the security apparatus adopts reprehensible and patently illegal methods such as the abhorred abduct, kill and dump policy, it will only add to alienation against the state in Sindh and raise the profile of separatist forces.

As for fringe nationalist groups, they need to listen to the advice of leaders such as Qadir Magsi and shun the path

of violence and struggle for Sindh's rights politically instead.

Published in Dawn December 7th , 2014

Support for new CEC

TO hear Imran Khan speak sometimes – the few times when he does not appear willing to burn everything to the ground in his quest for power – is to believe that the ongoing political crisis between the government and the PTI can in fact be resolved.

Yesterday, Mr Khan provided some much-needed relief by welcoming the appointment of Mohammad Raza Khan as the new permanent chief election commissioner and reposing his trust in him.

While there is no direct constitutional role for Imran Khan or the PTI to play in the appointment process – that requires consultations between the prime minister and the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly – the fact of the matter is that Mr Khan's megaphone allows him to scuttle many seemingly foregone conclusions.

Know more: [PTI expresses confidence in new CEC](#)

Consider that several frontrunners for the CEC post either dropped out or were hectorated into bowing out

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because of pressure from the PTI and Mr Khan in particular.

Yet, the welcome that Mr Khan has extended to the incoming CEC should also allow matters to rest there. Far too often, the PTI chief has said one thing but then contradicted himself when it was no longer convenient to abide by his original position.

If Raza Khan is an acceptable choice now, then any adverse decisions on electoral issues that impact or concern the PTI should not instantly be seen with the partisan lens that the PTI tends to apply to everything.

Also read: [Justice Sardar Raza takes oath as CEC](#)

Yet, there is also a great burden on the election commission chief too: now that the country's political leadership has expressed their confidence in him as the chief custodian of the electoral process,

Mr Raza Khan owes it not just to the political parties but the electorate itself to deliver a fair, transparent and independent electoral system that minimises the barriers to entry and ensures that every legitimate vote counts.

Also read: Profile: [CEC Sardar Raza Khan](#)

For whatever the criticism of the PTI chief's approach to politics, the fact remains that he has exposed some deep and continuing weaknesses of the democratic and electoral systems. Raza Khan has inherited an ECP that is unprecedentedly powerful while also at the centre of the national political discourse.

There is much that the ECP can do, not just retrospectively when it comes to the May 2013 elections but looking ahead to the next general election, to ensure they are less susceptible to manipulation. With broad support, he is well positioned to enforce the necessary reforms.

Published in Dawn, December 8th, 2014

Drug mules' execution

The relatively high number of Pakistanis executed for drug smuggling this year in Saudi Arabia raises key questions about how these individuals are able to slip through our borders, and what is being done by the authorities here to demolish the criminal networks that facilitate this trade.

As per one figure recently cited in the media, at least 15 Pakistanis have been executed for drug trafficking by Riyadh in the current year.

These drug mules usually belong to the working class and are duped and then forced by criminals to carry contraband abroad. Criminals try and ensnare individuals with promises of visas and jobs in the kingdom.

Also read: [Families mourn drug mules beheaded in Saudi Arabia](#)

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Hailing from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, these men find the prospects of making a better life abroad irresistible.

Yet once such individuals take the traffickers' bait, they are forced to carry drugs across borders, or suffer the consequences. Often, as soon as the drug mules land at Saudi airports, they are rounded up by local authorities, and once the narcotics are discovered it is pretty much a guarantee of ending up on death row.

Of course, there is much to question about the transparency of the Saudi legal system in this regard, especially when it comes to prosecuting foreigners. Representatives of international monitor groups including Human Rights Watch have termed it 'arbitrary'.

While this newspaper opposes the death penalty, we realise that drug trafficking is a serious crime. We must ask then what our own government is doing to crack down on networks in this country involved in the drug trade. While drug mules are executed by foreign governments, the powerful players in this country that exploit these men remain largely untouched.

The state must rectify this with stricter monitoring of individuals at airports used to transport drugs abroad and by dismantling the local networks involved in smuggling narcotics. Also, a public awareness campaign is needed to warn potential drugs carriers not to fall prey to glittering but suspect offers of a passport to Middle Eastern prosperity.

Published in Dawn, December 8th, 2014

Policy paralysis

A TREND appears to be in the making. The government is increasingly caving in to a wide variety of special interests, from agriculture to industry.

It remains to be seen to what extent this will become a defining trend, but thus far the government appears somewhat pusillanimous before a surging groundswell of vested interests.

Take as an example the agricultural sector, which is demanding a hike in the procurement price of wheat, the controlled price of sugar, and abolition of the general sales tax on agricultural inputs.

Also read: [NA offers solace on farm inputs, remains divided on crop prices](#)

Last week, parliament witnessed a furore as the Standing Committee on National Food Security and Research debated a proposal to abolish the GST on agricultural inputs.

As the debate unfolded, demands materialised to the effect that the committee should also recommend a hike in the support price of wheat and the controlled price of sugar.

The final recommendations to parliament said that GST on agricultural inputs should be withdrawn, but the

resultant furore in the National Assembly over the absence of any mention of further escalation in the support prices for wheat and sugar forced the deputy speaker to refer the report back to the committee.

Let us understand two things here. First, the inclusion of agricultural inputs into the GST net was a hard-fought-for measure of the previous government at a time when it was also facing serious political challenges. Second, the price of wheat has fallen by almost 30pc in international markets since April this year; and yet under pressure from the agricultural lobby the government still agreed to a support price hike of Rs100 per bag last month.

Now some members of the house are demanding a further increase of Rs200, which makes no sense in the prevailing circumstances. The government has already obliged these interests by agreeing to remove GST from agricultural inputs, effectively rolling back a hard-won reform measure of the previous government, and it now appears to be trying to find a way to oblige them further with price increases as well, whether or not the economics make any sense.

The same story is repeating itself in many other forums. The government was recently bullied by the textile lobby into hurriedly abandoning its winter gas allocation plan, and another demand for zero-rating textile exports from GST is being prepared.

The sugar cartel is freely fleecing cane growers, and yet demanding an increase in the controlled price of sugar. One is hard-pressed to find a place where the

government is taking a strong stand against a powerful vested interest.

Given the ambitious targets being set by the finance minister, who likes to give the impression that he is in charge, it is important that the ship of state be in strong and steady hands. Thus far, it appears the government is too fearful to meet the challenges before it.

Published in Dawn, December 8th, 2014

Hafeez suspension

THE suspension of senior all-rounder Mohammad Hafeez by the International Cricket Council over an illegal bowling action has come as a body blow to Pakistan cricket.

The seasoned opener, who was reported by on-field umpires in the Abu Dhabi Test against New Zealand last month, was taken to England for biomechanics tests and found guilty of bending his arm more than the stipulated ICC limit of 15 degrees.

Also read: [Hafeez suspension hits Pakistan's Cup hopes](#)

It is, indeed, surprising and reflects rather poorly on the Pakistan Cricket Board that Hafeez, despite having been reported twice for suspect bowling — first in 2005 and again early this year in India during the Champions

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League competition — has continued playing for Pakistan which has now resulted in his abrupt suspension.

With barely two and a half months to go before the commencement of the Cricket World Cup in Australia and New Zealand, it is unfortunate that Pakistan have now lost their two key bowlers, Saeed Ajmal and Mohammad Hafeez, to this 'chucking' menace that has clearly jeopardised the national team's chances of faring well in the 2015 extravaganza.

In fact, matters reached frenetic proportions when PCB chairman Shaharyar Khan, soon after taking over, admitted to the media that as many as 25 bowlers with suspect bowling actions had been reported by umpires in domestic cricket over the past two seasons. That includes Test and ODI hopefuls such as Atif Maqbool, Adnan Rasool and some others which leaves Pakistan with little or no back-up for bowlers like Saeed and Hafeez.

It is pertinent to ask why the PCB failed to take prompt remedial measures to arrest this worrisome trend all this time. Besides denting our hopes in the World Cup, the repeated reporting of our bowlers has proved to be a huge embarrassment for a leading cricket nation like Pakistan. And while Hafeez features purely as a batsman in the current ODI series against New Zealand, the restriction on his bowling deprives Pakistan of fielding their strongest team combination in future games.

Published in Dawn December 9th , 2014

Pak-Afghan equation

THE handover of Latif Mehsud, a key leader of the banned TTP, and unnamed other prisoners held by the US military in Afghanistan and wanted by Pakistan is a significant confidence-building measure. It suggests the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan are genuinely working towards trying to address the respective security concerns that the three countries have in the region.

At the very least, it marks a conclusive break from the strained era of Hamid Karzai, who was often accused by the Pakistani security establishment of effectively offering sanctuary to anti-Pakistan militants in order to put pressure on Pakistan on the Afghan Taliban.

Going forward from here though is not necessarily straightforward or easy, given that the Afghan government is almost sure to insist on a quid pro quo that will involve Pakistan facilitating access to the Afghan Taliban leadership in order to push ahead with the dialogue process. Perhaps, though, with the US acting as a broker and a kind of guarantor behind the scenes, the Pak-Afghan equation can be unlocked.

Know more: [Key Taliban commander, three others handed over to Pakistan: sources](#)

Yet, ultimately, a few prisoner releases here and there will not make for a fundamentally transformed relationship.

As repeatedly echoed in these columns, the true test of a stable, cooperative relationship will be on border management and preventing the cross-border militancy that has so damaged bilateral ties for decades. Will the two countries pass the test?

Furthermore, bringing Latif Mehsud back to Pakistan could bring valuable intelligence on the operations of the TTP, but that intelligence will have to be handled carefully, given that it is likely to bring to light further information on the extent of ties between certain militant groups here and the Afghan defence establishment.

As has been seen several times before, what initially appears as an opportunity for improved ties ends up being used by hawks to drive a wedge between the two countries.

But for now, it appears that pragmatists on both sides are inching towards a closer understanding and the ideologues are being held in check.

Surely, this is a result of high-level interactions, whether in the US with army chief Gen Raheel Sharif or in London at meetings involving Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. More such meetings could substantially increase chances of a breakthrough.

Here in Pakistan, there should be an additional channel of communication left wide open: between the army-led security establishment and the political government. Talking among all sides is vital.

Published in Dawn December 9th , 2014

Protest turns violent

THE disturbing violence in Faisalabad on Monday marks a change in the PTI's profile. Despite the events of Aug 30 and Sept 1, the party had, generally speaking, not shown a predilection for the politics of violence.

But now, the rioting and confrontation in the industrial city should entail some serious thinking on the part of the PTI, while the PML-N needs to do much better than play victim to an unreasonable opponent's desperate assaults.

It has been observed frequently that the ruling party must shun any strategy that brings it face to face with the protesters on the street. That advice was not heeded on Monday, resulting in at least one fatality as supporters of the two parties clashed.

Also read: [PTI calls for countrywide day of mourning after activist killed in Faisalabad](#)

The government is inclined to put down the unrest to a grand design aimed at destabilising the whole system, and may continue with that refrain. In reality, what the government side has done or not done in the wake of the poll-rigging allegations is an example of how not to deal with a situation as volatile as this.

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To many Pakistanis, the PTI is a party that has evolved its policy in reaction to the government's constant denial of its demands.

PTI chief Imran Khan's argument is that he has been pushed into pressing harder since he originally wanted the opening up of just four constituencies in which he suspected that large-scale fraud had taken place during the 2013 general election.

There is, in fact, a valid view that notes that Mr Khan has climbed down from his position where he had demanded the prime minister's resignation. This has lent some balance to his protest, and should have led both sides to rediscovering the path to an agreement through dialogue.

It is unfortunate that despite this important adjustment one side is still out in the streets protesting and the other is tackling it as if it were a simple administrative matter.

In some analyses, the government has been cast as a helpless entity which could do itself grave harm if it were to allow the inspection of the disputed electoral process.

Whereas the contention in itself is revealing and raises further doubts about the conduct of that election, what needs to be kept in mind is that the PML-N government did at one point agree to a probe of the polls by a judicial commission. That was a promise made to Pakistanis at large and not just to the PTI which was only the vehicle of presenting a widespread sentiment — in fact, most political parties had complained about the way the election was organised.

The PTI has planned more shows of street power in Karachi and Lahore before its scheduled Pakistan-wide protest later in the month. The government will be playing with fire if it does not go all out in an attempt to revive talks with Mr Khan.

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Militant proxies

HE may be justifiably criticised for many things, but one of Pervez Musharraf's better moves during his rule was to restart the composite dialogue with India, through the Islamabad Declaration of 2004.

The decision to do so came at the end of a long and gruelling learning curve for the now retired general. The journey to the declaration can be traced through the Kargil fiasco and the failed Agra summit.

But by 2004, Mr Musharraf appeared to have learned some lessons from his years in power. Pakistan's use of militant proxies as a tool to pressure India to negotiate on Kashmir was no secret, and the cost of this policy had become unbearably high.

It is no propaganda to say that militant proxies were encouraged by official quarters to use Pakistani soil to support an armed insurgency on the other side of the

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Line of Control, which some militant groups later decided to extend to the Indian heartland as well.

Also read: [FO did not draft 2004 Islamabad Declaration: ex-foreign secretary](#)

There were no surprises when the Islamabad Declaration announced that Pakistani soil would not be allowed to be used for waging militant campaigns in neighbouring countries. Any ruler with sense would have gladly signed off on this commitment, and it is to Mr Musharraf's credit that he did.

But what is surprising, and discreditable, is the attempt on the part of former foreign secretary Shamshad Ahmed, to suggest that the decision to sign off on the declaration was a private one, made by the leadership at the time without input from the Foreign Office.

First, it is the leadership's prerogative to decide the line in strategic matters. Second, the decision itself was a positive one, and every effort should be made to abide by its letter and spirit especially in these days of Indo-Pak tension. It makes no sense whatsoever to try and find a way out of that Declaration at this point in time when a commitment to a peaceful foreign policy is more important than ever before.

Published in Dawn, December 10th, 2014

State of limbo

THE country's history has been marked by a struggle between the central government, which wanted to keep all authority for itself, and the provinces and regions, that supported devolution of power.

Though the 18th Amendment was a major step towards increasing provincial autonomy, some parts of the country continue to be ruled through fiat from Islamabad. Gilgit-Baltistan is one such example.

Today, the region's first legislative assembly elected after the passage of the landmark Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, 2009, completes its term.

Also read: [Sound bytes: 'The GB Council failed to play due role'](#)

Yet despite increased self-governance, Gilgit-Baltistan's people have largely been unable to reap the fruits of devolution. Local leaders say the federal bureaucracy interferes far too often in local affairs, while there are complaints that the region is overly dependent on Islamabad for finances and does not get its fair share.

Also, key subjects such as tourism, minerals and power generation fall under the purview of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, a body which contains both nominated and elected members.

Further, while Islamabad continues to try and run things through remote control, the region's elected leadership over the last five years has also failed to deliver. There was criticism in the legislative assembly recently over federal minister Pervaiz Rashid's reported remarks that Gilgit-Baltistan is not constitutionally a part of Pakistan. Though the minister's words were uttered in another context, they are technically correct and point to the crux of the problem.

Despite development and positive changes made to the region's administrative structure during the Musharraf era and during the PPP's last federal government respectively, the fact is the people of Gilgit-Baltistan remain in a constitutional limbo.

Due to its links with the disputed Kashmir region, Islamabad has put the region's status in suspended animation. But local people deserve a more permanent constitutional framework and the progress made in 2009 needs to be built upon.

Either the region should be given provincial status, as its elected representatives have demanded through a resolution, or an Azad Kashmir-like set-up should be created. The centre needs to stop treating Gilgit-Baltistan in a step-motherly fashion; and the elected assembly should be more than a glorified municipal government.

Having said that, the next elected leadership that takes power in the area — the date for elections is yet to be announced — must perform much better than the PPP-led set-up that is being wrapped up, hounded as it was by allegations of corruption and nepotism.

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A never-ending crisis

PAKISTAN is in desperate need of a mediator. The PML-N government 'strategy' that is apparently based on a wish to see the PTI protest fizzle out is not working — and will not work.

Already, so much time has been wasted in dilly-dallying by bringing in technicalities and by not properly engaging those who are ready to facilitate a dialogue.

The violence in Faisalabad on Monday is a grim reminder of the unreasonable approach to the resolution of the dispute, just as it is a dire warning about how things could further deteriorate from this point on.

It is unfortunate that individuals on both sides, especially those in the PML-N's camp since they have a greater responsibility to resolve the crisis by virtue of being in power, are busy solidifying their old position, in shouting rather than reflecting.

Also read: [Khurshheed Shah says ready to mediate between govt, PTI](#)

The fact that the conflict had brutally extinguished a young life is submerged in the appalling eagerness of politicians to exploit the incident for point-scoring. If for nothing else than respect for the lost life, the emphasis should now be on how best violence can be avoided from

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here onwards and on finding an acceptable course out of the turmoil.

The PTI made a smart move when its delegation on Tuesday called on the newly appointed chief election commissioner.

The team reiterated its demand for the removal (through resignation) of the other four members of the Election Commission — a call that received impassioned support from the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, the PPP's Khursheed Shah.

Mr Shah has offered to play the crucial missing link between the PTI and PML-N, a suggestion that would have been all the more meaningful had the PPP understood its potential as a mediator at the outset rather than choosing to play the most vocal defender of the government.

In other words, it is the democratic system's interests that would have been better served if some of those taking sides had stayed neutral.

The politicians are in a whirl. The current situation is a test of their effectiveness that has been brought into question in the past — fairly or unfairly.

It is about time they put petty politics aside for the moment and concentrated all their energies on finding an answer to a most critical question: who from among their ranks can effectively mediate between the PTI and PML-N and is there still time to do so? Or do we believe that the politicians, having lost the plot, are entirely incapable

of even facilitating a process that could lead to a resolution of the current crisis, let alone directly finding a solution?

In any case, it does not matter whether it is the PML-N or the PTI that wins the current round. It is the democratic system that will be dealt a bruising blow if such politics continue.

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CIA's badge of shame

IT now carries the stamp of officialdom, which in turn carries a degree of mea culpa. And yet, the US Senate Intelligence Committee's assessment of the excesses committed by the CIA against 'war on terror' prisoners cannot be said to have come as a surprise.

On Tuesday, the committee released the report on its years-long review of the agency's methodologies for obtaining information from terror suspects after the 9/11 attacks.

Also read: [US Senate report assails CIA's torture techniques](#)

The committee voted 11-3 to release the report — or, more accurately, the 400-page redacted summary of the full 6,000-page version that remains classified — perhaps because changes in the Senate next month might have

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led to a Republican effort to keep it out of the public domain.

It constitutes a truly damning indictment of the CIA's efforts to 'save lives'. As human rights groups and the UN, that on Wednesday called for the prosecution of American officials involved in what the report terms as "brutal" interrogation techniques, have concluded, the methodologies can hardly be viewed as anything other than torture.

The rights violations are made all the more egregious by the fact the CIA employed the harshest techniques right from the word go, without even trying to first elicit information in an "open, non-threatening manner".

Know more: [Americans in Pakistan, Afghanistan warned after CIA torture report](#)

To compound the misconduct, the report concluded, there were cases in which the White House's questions were not answered completely or truthfully by the CIA, misleading the US president, even though an internal report by the CIA, the Panetta Review, had found that there were numerous inaccuracies in the way the agency represented the efficacy of its techniques.

But over the past decade, there have been more than a few indications that the methods being used by the CIA far exceed the domain of the permissible. From Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo Bay and Bagram, news has leaked out often enough.

So, why was stringent investigation not undertaken earlier? Why were the excesses not brought under control? Was this silence in high quarters due to the latent fear of any sort of repeat of the 9/11 atrocities, a desperation to glean any scrap of information that might help prevent such an eventuality?

To some, there is a smoking gun to be found in the Senate committee's conclusion that the harsh interrogation techniques never yielded any useful intelligence: had it done so, might it have been made out to be a case of the end justifying the means?

The CIA, and the current and earlier US administrations that oversaw its working, have a great deal of questions to answer. But more than that, the American government and people need to look inwards: their own narrative sees the country as a champion of democracy, human rights and as something of a moral compass for the world — but it is not possible to lay claim to such lofty ideals when the reality is so very ugly.

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Repatriating IDPs

IT is encouraging to see that plans for the repatriation of the North Waziristan IDPs who had to leave their homes when Operation Zarb-i-Azb was launched are being discussed. But it is also important to keep in mind that the operation is now entering its most delicate phase.

The fact that the army is keen to see people return to their homes means they are confident of the security situation, but do the displaced people share this sentiment?

For rehabilitation to be successful, infrastructure and livelihoods need to be restored, housing needs to be rebuilt and most importantly, owners of homes need to be properly identified.

Also read: [Nawaz gives nod to initiate rehabilitation of IDPs](#)

Each of these tasks presents challenges in a society that is largely undocumented. The security challenges are more complex. Even as the government lauds the success of the Swat operation, it is worthwhile to note that security functions there have still not been handed over entirely to the civil administration even after half a decade.

In North Waziristan, the security challenges are more complicated than they were in Swat considering the footprint of the state is far smaller.

The military operation cannot succeed without the support of the local population, and obtaining that support presents unique challenges and opportunities.

For example, livelihoods in the area are built heavily on the vast cross-border trade with Afghanistan, estimated to total \$2.5bn. Encouraging these links can help rebuild the regional economy as well as forge closer ties with Kabul.

The writ of the state can be extended beyond the protected areas into territory that was left to be governed under tribal law prior to the operation. And reconstruction of houses can be an opportunity to register the population and land.

Harnessing the support of locals to perform security functions, for which arming the populace will be necessary, is a suggestion being discussed. But arming the populace is fraught with dangers. Responsibility for providing security must stay with the army until a viable enforcement mechanism can be built.

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A proud moment

MALALA Yousafzai's eloquent speech at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo on Wednesday was indeed a proud moment for this country.

The teenager from Swat, who was shot by religiously-motivated militants in 2012 and shared this year's prize with Indian child rights activist Kailash Satyarthi, has set a commendable example through her activism and commitment to the cause of education.

After all, she is only the second Nobel laureate from Pakistan — Dr Abdus Salam being the other — and the youngest in history to win the prestigious prize. However, despite the fact that Malala has been feted around the world, Pakistan, both at the state and public level, has failed to acknowledge this brave girl.

Also read: [Malala awarded Nobel Peace Prize](#)

For example, while some in Pakistan have praised her efforts, a significant body of opinion is either indifferent to her achievements, or bears outright animus towards her. There is irresponsible talk of a 'conspiracy' cooked up to defame Islam and Pakistan by honouring the young activist.

This is the unfortunate reality of Pakistan, where we tend to either ignore or run down genuine heroes. Take the case of Dr Abdus Salam. Despite being a scientist of

international repute, he remains an unsung hero in Pakistan simply because he was an Ahmadi.

He has been wiped clean, it seems, from the national consciousness. We are not ready to own the great man or his achievements, an attitude that is showing signs of being repeated in Malala's case.

What is there to disagree with in the young laureate's message? Our state of public education is in a shambles, while extremists have done everything possible to destroy educational infrastructure in parts of the country.

It is also a fact that Islamist militants in other states, such as the dreaded Boko Haram in Nigeria, have launched similar attacks on education.

Malala told the media before the ceremony that she was 'disappointed' the prime ministers of Pakistan and India would not be attending the event.

Indeed, if Nawaz Sharif was unable to attend, a bipartisan parliamentary delegation from Pakistan should have gone to Oslo to participate in the ceremony. That would have sent a strong message — that the state is proud of the young activist from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and that it is serious about supporting her mission of promoting quality education to counter obscurantism.

Our treatment of Dr Salam was unforgivable; let us make a fresh start and own Malala's achievements to show the world Pakistan values such brave voices.

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State Bank's annual report

THE State Bank of Pakistan's annual report starts off by telling us that the situation may have looked grim at the start of the last fiscal year, but with time many things improved.

Inflation went down, reserves went up, the fiscal deficit was contained and growth saw a modest revival. But read on and the shine diminishes steadily as the caveats appear.

Yes, inflation went down, but surely much of this decline owed to larger than expected declines in oil prices, and a steep appreciation of the rupee. Reserves went up, but largely on the back of one-off inflows, driven mostly by borrowing.

Also read: [SBP report says most targets missed](#)

The fiscal deficit was indeed contained at 5.5pc, but much of this was made possible by accounting tricks, without whose aid the deficit would have been 7.5pc. Growth saw a modest revival, especially in manufacturing, but much of this centred on areas that the SBP does not see as priorities, like beverages and fertiliser.

The report is skilfully written to avoid assigning any blame, and rightly highlights the structural weaknesses that have plagued Pakistan's economy for many decades.

Manpower, for instance, is the country's largest export — larger than textiles, if we compare remittances with textile exports. This is a problem, because it means the economy's capacity to earn foreign exchange is steadily being eroded.

Some perspective on this problem is provided a few pages later, when the report looks more closely at the recovery in the reserves posted earlier in the year. That recovery allowed the rupee to appreciate, and unlocked other inflows from the donor agencies and international investors. But since that recovery was financed by borrowed money, "certain debt sustainability indicators witnessed erosion" at the same time.

Not satisfied with this admittedly mild rebuke, the report goes on to add "this should be viewed as a warning that Pakistan must increase its hard currency earnings in the future, and not take on expensive debt to finance its external deficit". This deficiency, which is growing wider each year, lies at the heart of the economy's dysfunction.

The description of the rulers' response to the challenges does not live up to the positive spin that the government likes to put on its own track record.

Shortages of gas "have regressed to publicly lobbying policymakers" — polite language for ad hoc management. Failure in the power sector is visible in the resurgent circular debt, "which will be paid off this fiscal year" — a debt, we were told 18 months ago, that would not be allowed to recur again.

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Any improvement in the fiscal equation is either driven by one-off measures, or by large increases in withholding taxes, pointing towards the difficulty in getting people to file their returns. The report gives a balanced and substantive look at what ails our economy, and Q block would be well advised to read its contents carefully.

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A dangerous parallel

NO doubt the investigation into the methods of interrogation used by the CIA at detention centres housing post-9/11 terror suspects ought to have come much earlier.

But if there is any positive aspect to the sorry spectacle under way in the US, it is that the Senate — as an institution and at the level of its individual members — has demonstrated the will and capacity to call out a powerful state organisation for its misdemeanours, and correct the trajectory of the rule of law.

Compare the CIA torture findings with a parallel that has become an increasingly bigger issue in Pakistan: that of the ‘missing persons’.

As is known generally, the euphemism refers to persons who are illegally picked up — and there are strong reasons to believe that the state security agencies are

responsible — and confined or interrogated without due process being followed.

It is a matter of record that over the years, many missing individuals have showed up as dumped dead bodies, often bullet-riddled and bearing marks of torture.

Also read: [Commission sought to investigate ‘mysterious death’ of missing persons](#)

The issue is linked primarily to Balochistan and the nationalist insurgency there, while there have also been reports over the years of people being picked up in KP and the tribal areas and kept in illegal detention as part of the various security operations against militancy. Worryingly, the scourge has now spread to Sindh.

Yet no amount of quizzing by a host of investigative cells, in fact by the Supreme Court itself, has solved the problem. Press reports, public outcry and heroic activism, such as the long and lonely march by Mama Qadeer Baloch, have all failed to move the state’s democratic institutions towards any sort of meaningful action.

While some people, such as most of the Adiala 11, have been recovered alive, the fate of far too many remains untraced.

Meanwhile, for good reason, suspicions remain that the agencies have not changed their ways. Pakistan might take a leaf out of the US Senate’s book.

The answer to what currently seems an intractable problem could lie in the constitution of a bipartisan

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parliamentary committee that works concertedly to investigate the matter and lay it bare, paving the way for taking to task individuals and institutions that are found to have exceeded the limits of their mandate.

There is no reason for parliament to not demonstrate its will and capacity in this regard, and settle once and for all the shameful matter of extra-judicial detentions and killings.

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Another Israeli atrocity

THE death of a peaceful Palestinian demonstrator, who also happened to be a minister in the Palestinian government, has led to outrage across the world and hurt the Israeli cause even in places where Tel Aviv has traditionally enjoyed support.

Ziad Abu Ein died at the hands of brutish Israeli security personnel, even though media reports made clear he and other foreign peace activists, including Israeli human rights crusaders, were protesting peacefully against settlement activity.

Know more: [Palestinian official dies in confrontation with Israeli troops](#)

TV footage showed that the minister offered no resistance as an Israeli soldier punched, kicked and assaulted him, grabbing him by the throat. Killing innocent civilians is nothing new for Israel's security apparatus.

Ignoring such historic and chilling massacres as those at Deir Yassin, Sabra-Chatila and Jenin, brainwashed Israeli soldiers have as a matter of state policy displayed a vicious streak in dealing with peaceful civilians, including non-Arab activists.

In March 2003, Rachel Corrie, an American peace worker, was run over by an Israeli bulldozer while she was protesting against the demolition of Palestinian homes in Gaza. Such, however, is the control of the Israel lobby in the US over the media that American public opinion is hardly aware of Corrie's sacrifice.

Like countless crimes against humanity, Ziad Abu Ein's murder, too, will be forgotten as the Israeli leadership continues its relentless drive to build and expand settlements, besides acting on a calculated policy to strip the West Bank population of its economic assets.

It seems that even a Palestinian-owned olive tree is an affront to the Israeli state — the Palestinian minister and others were carrying olive plants. Israel's ultimate aim is to sabotage the two-state formula.

Also read: [French MPs vote in favour of recognising Palestine](#)

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In fact, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's media talk some months ago was categorical, for he declared he would never countenance a sovereign Palestinian state on the West Bank.

Israel should, however, note that the world has started to express stronger sympathy with the Palestinian cause and that the emergence of a sovereign Palestinian state may not be a distant dream after all.

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Rethinking shutdowns

Mention of the words 'shutdown' and 'strike' send a wave of uncertainty rippling across Karachi, and for good reason. As is often the case, such protests are accompanied by violence and bloodshed, as well as the disruption of daily routines and loss of livelihoods.

Luckily for residents of the metropolis, the PTI's shutdown on Friday was a relatively peaceful and violence-free affair. Roads were indeed blocked by party workers at key points in the city while tyres were burnt at many spots.

Also read: [Karachi down Lahore next, says Imran](#)

But compared to past protests in Karachi, and the recent unfortunate events in Faisalabad, the shutdown in the country's financial hub passed off without incident. There are of course reasons for this.

Firstly, the PTI itself was in a restrained mood and seemed content to block roads from dawn to dusk to get its message across.

The realisation that the protest was taking place the day before Chehlum must have also led the party leadership to ensure that matters did not get out of hand at such a sensitive time. Secondly, the attitude of the PPP-led Sindh government was starkly different to what the PML-N administration in Punjab put on display in Faisalabad.

While workers from both the PTI and the N-League were riled up at that event, perhaps the ugly violence could have been avoided had the PML-N taken a less confrontational stance, especially when it was running both the provincial and federal governments.

And then, the MQM — arguably Karachi's most powerful political force — also seemed content to let Imran Khan's party have its day in the sun; in fact Muttahida chief Altaf Hussain defended the PTI's "political and constitutional right" to protest.

While it is indeed the democratic right of all groups to stage peaceful protests, political and religious parties need to rethink the strategy of using shutdowns as an effective mode of protest.

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Even when shutdowns are peaceful, as on Friday, the financial losses caused to the national economy by bringing life in major cities to a halt are considerable. And in case the demonstrations turn violent, the damage can be high both in terms of blood and treasure.

At the end of the day, blocking roads and suspending routine activities hits the common citizen the hardest. Hence protests must be planned in such a way that the message is conveyed to the intended recipients with the least inconvenience caused to the public at large.

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Foreign pressure

IT is a measure of Pakistan's weak position in the comity of nations that even a modest attempt by Islamabad to diversify its economic and defence ties can invite pressure if not disapprobation from Western quarters.

For instance, some days ago, the European Union envoy to Pakistan, Lars-Gunnar Wigemark, urged the government here to condemn Russia's "aggressive role" in Ukraine.

Pakistan's recent deal with Russia is hardly the milestone in ties described by Islamabad. No doubt, the accord speaks of cooperation between the two countries in a

variety of fields, including defence — which at best concerns Russia's willingness to sell MI-35 helicopters to Pakistan.

Also read: [EU wants Pakistan to condemn Russian role in Ukraine](#)

Given the unhappy relationship Pakistan has had with Russia in the past, the accords signed last November are significant from Islamabad's point of view at a time when Nato forces have all but withdrawn and a question mark hangs over the future of Afghanistan, where stability and peace are a common concern for all regional countries.

That the EU envoy should put pressure on Islamabad to adopt a position which militates against its bid to improve relations with Russia underlines Pakistan's weakness in the harsh world of geopolitics.

Contrast this with India's ambitious deal under which Russia will supply 10 nuclear reactors to it. This massive inflow of nuclear assets from Russia follows a similar deal with the United States some years ago, with both Moscow and Washington accepting New Delhi's sovereign right to set its own priorities in foreign affairs.

To be fair to Pakistan, this country successfully stood all pressures when it came to ties with China. But the leaders who crafted our China policy were a different breed. They had the courage to chart an independent foreign policy at the height of the Cold War when Pakistan was in the Western camp.

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Now it is Pakistan's aid-dependent economy, rampant terrorism and political instability that make it weak and diffident. If we want to earn the world's respect, we must first put our house in order.

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Circular debt yet again

THE independent power producers have been persuaded to withdraw their notices to call in their sovereign guarantees for now, and the government is busy trying to arrange the funds for another massive retirement of the circular debt.

The latter has once again reached historic highs near Rs580bn. This spiralling increase has happened in spite of huge increases in the power tariff.

This is the second time that the IPPs have been forced to call in their sovereign guarantees, which means pushing the government into paying up or being declared in sovereign default in the last two years.

Also read: [Govt pays Rs15 billion to IPPs](#)

The government has reportedly told the IPPs that so long as the notices are hanging over its head, its ability to raise funds to properly pay the receivables in the power sector will be hampered.

This shows the enormous position of weakness that the government finds itself in when dealing with private power producers.

Not that long ago, Nepra, the power regulator, had raised the prospect of auditing the accounts of the IPPs to determine if they were properly billing the government for sale of power. But this time round it appears all attempts to push back against the IPPs' tough talk have been abandoned.

The State Bank has also said in its annual report that the circular debt "will be paid this fiscal year, or it could risk undermining the supply chain of power", meaning we could land up right where we were in June 2013, with unending power outages across many parts of the country.

Certainly nobody wants to traverse that territory again, but we also cannot afford to keep letting the debt pile up then retire it at one go every two years. Somewhere something has to change fundamentally to make sure that this problem does not keep recurring, and endless tariff increases are not accomplishing the task at hand.

The fundamental changes needed are on the distribution side. This is where the bulk of the inefficiencies are piling up. The government's efforts thus far have been focused on increasing generation, because improving distribution is a long and difficult road that includes fundamentally reforming the distribution companies and making them more responsive to the needs of the consumers and the prerogatives of the government.

The minister for water and power has emphasised the importance of the transmission and distribution side as well, saying that it is pointless to arrange for more electricity since our system cannot carry it.

The State Bank has also pointed in this direction, saying “the immediate solution lies in overhauling the existing transmission and distribution system on a war footing”, as well as bringing down the cost of generation.

Given the emphasis that the transmission and distribution inefficiencies have been receiving over the years, it is almost incomprehensible why there has been so little effort at reforming this.

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Sugar pricing dispute

IT has been more than two months now that a dispute over the minimum support price of sugarcane has been simmering in Sindh. To this day, most mills in the province have not fired up their boilers or begun the procurement of sugarcane.

This is one of the longest delays to the start of the cane-crushing season in recent memory. Despite two orders from the Sindh High Court ordering the millers to start cane-crushing, as the law requires them to do, the only thing being crushed today is the provincial government’s resolve to exercise its executive powers. After putting pressure on the mills for more than a month to begin the

crushing season, the Sindh government surrendered to their demand and notified a minimum support price of Rs155 on Dec 4.

The notification caused an uproar among growers in the provincial assembly, and days later the provincial government again surrendered and notified a price of Rs182 instead. Now the millers are up in arms, saying they were deceived, calling the revision illegal, and threatening to shut down their operations if the notification is not withdrawn. Clearly, a powerful tug of war is taking place within the Sindh government, since in Punjab the price has been set at Rs180 by the provincial government and crushing has been under way smoothly for weeks now. The Sindh government finds itself caught on both sides of an agricultural price dispute because each side of the equation has powerful representation within the party. Caught between both interests, the only loser is the small grower who cannot wait for very long to sell his crop, as well as the consumer who will bear the ultimate cost of this dithering by the Sindh government. The provincial government must move fast to break this deadlock, taking care to preserve the interests of growers and consumers first. Otherwise, it should simply admit that it is incapable of exercising the executive powers handed to it by the 18th Amendment.

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Need for introspection

OVER the past few days, there have been visible signs of flux within the MQM. On Wednesday, party chief Altaf Hussain, in an emotional speech to his workers gathered at the party headquarters in Karachi, announced the dissolution of the coordination committee, a key body within the party's organisational structure.

Though the immediate reason behind the move was what the Muttahida head called the committee's lack of response to the killing of a party activist in Punjab, Mr Hussain openly criticised committee members for other reasons as well. He lambasted their "corruption" and censured them for "selling streets and playgrounds" in Karachi. The internal shake-up seemed to be complete on Friday as new members of the committee were announced.

A similar scenario was witnessed a few months ago when Mr Hussain disbanded the Karachi Tanzeemi Committee, another powerful organ within the Muttahida's administrative machinery. However, the party's internal political rumblings have rendered it unable to perform on the governance front. It has joined, left and re-joined the Sindh government several times both during the current administration as well as the previous set-up, though it currently sits in the opposition.

During this period it has failed to serve as a robust opposition force, while during its time on the treasury

benches with the PPP no major moves were made to improve governance. While it is true that the MQM's strength lies in the now defunct local government — Karachi was significantly developed during Mustafa Kamal's watch — the party is now failing to make its mark in the provincial legislature.

The Muttahida must realise that unless it sets its house in order, other parties will look to court its vote bank in Sindh. The PTI's profile in the province seems to be rising, if the last two rallies are anything to go by. Last month, Imran Khan's party staged a decent show in Larkana, while Friday's shutdown and rally in Karachi indicate that the PTI is feeling increasingly confident on what the MQM considers its turf. While the PTI cannot at this juncture match the Muttahida's organisational structure in Sindh, if the latter party fails to resolve its internal crises, things may change. After all, the PTI polled a respectable number of votes in last year's elections on numerous Karachi seats that were considered MQM 'territory'. The election numbers indicated changing voting trends in the metropolis. If it fails to focus on good governance, the Muttahida might find itself facing a serious political challenge in Sindh.

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Still no resolution

YET another week of hope and trepidation appears to lie ahead for the country. Today, the PML-N and the PTI are set to kick off another round of talks centred on an inquiry into PTI allegations of fraud in the May 2013 general election and a raft of much-needed electoral reforms to make future elections more acceptable and credible.

But the PTI also looks set to continue with its so-called Plan C, with the focus switching to the ultimate political battleground in Punjab — Lahore itself. On both fronts, there are many potential complications. For one, the round of talks to begin today are going to be held in private — thus depriving the public of knowledge of what is being negotiated on their behalf by their present and would-be representatives. It is odd that secret negotiations need to be held when it comes to determining whether the voting public was denied legitimate and transparently elected representatives in May 2013. Moreover, with the respective positions of the PML-N and PTI not staked out in public, there is always the possibility of one or the other side either reneging on promises or denying publicly what it may have conceded in private. Hopefully more transparency will be delivered than has been promised.

On the arrival of Plan C in Lahore and then nationally, the risk is obvious: a repeat of the Faisalabad episode or worse. In Faisalabad, the PTI's aggressive tactics and the PML-N's aggressive response created a situation

where a life was lost and many more lives were endangered. Lahore has already witnessed one unacceptable and horrifying incident this year, in Model Town on June 19 when several Tahirul Qadri supporters were killed in clashes triggered by police action, and another bout of violence could have all manner of serious consequences. Perhaps both the PTI and the PML-N can learn from the Karachi experience, where PTI protesters were organised but not threatening and the local administration maintained a hands-off approach. It is not often that Karachi can be a template for other cities in terms of managing risk, but surely the administrators of Lahore — and the PML-N leadership — need to study both the Faisalabad and Karachi experiences and learn from them.

Ultimately though, the question has to be asked: for how long can this go on? The impasse and the protests could go on indefinitely, but only if the PTI and PML-N continue with their selfish, often destructive style of politics. Protest is a democratic right, but after laying siege to Constitution Avenue in Islamabad, the PTI has moved on to disrupting daily life and business in some of the country's biggest cities and economic hubs. The PTI has slipped far from the politics of hope it once championed. As for the PML-N, it seems to have lost its way and forgotten its responsibilities as custodian of the democratic process. Perhaps the week ahead could mark a turnabout.

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A war based on falsehood

THE accusation comes from a politician who has been referred to as the ‘senator’s senator’. Retiring after six terms as a member of America’s upper house, Senator Carl Levin on Thursday said the Bush administration misled the nation to justify the 2003 attack on Iraq.

The basis of his criticism of the Republican administration was a declassified CIA letter which said the agency’s field agents had serious doubts about reports that Mohammad Ata, the man behind 9/11, had met an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague — one of the pretexts used by the Bush administration to make a case for attacking Iraq because it claimed Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Also read: [Letter shows CIA had doubts about Iraq link to 9/11 attacks](#)

The truth is that Ba’athist Iraq had been defanged after the Iraqi strongman’s Kuwait misadventure in 1990. A US-led coalition, crafted by then president George Bush Sr., had annihilated Saddam Hussein’s war machine, banned the flying of Iraqi planes within parts of Iraq and imposed crippling sanctions.

Such was the comprehensive nature of the sanctions that Iraq was denied the import of certain categories of pharmaceuticals and was unable to filter water that contributed to the death of half a million civilians, something which secretary of state Madeline Albright later justified.

The truth was that the very basis of war fizzled out when the Iraqi dictator agreed to let the UN’s inspection and verification team, led by Hans Blix, operate without hindrance.

Mr Blix later told the Security Council he had found no “smoking gun”. That Mr Bush and British prime minister Tony Blair still chose to attack the oil power was one of the 21st century’s great tragedies.

The results of the Anglo-American invasion are before us. Iraq has almost ceased to exist as a state and the so-called Islamic State has created anarchy that has the entire Levant in its grip.

While millions have been killed, maimed and displaced, America, too, suffered over 50,000 casualties. Perhaps future US governments will not commit, as hoped by Carl Levin, America’s “sons and daughters to battle on the basis of false statements”.

Published in Dawn, December 15th, 2014

Intractable problem

IN Pakistan, heads are shaken often over the ills, such as poverty and illiteracy, that beset much of the population, dimming the prospects of the country's future being more productive.

But there's one debilitating problem that is so ugly in its contours that society in general and policymakers in particular tend to simply shy away from addressing it: that of drug abusers and addicts.

The problem is huge, though. According to a report released on Thursday on Drug Use in Pakistan 2013, launched by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime and supported by the federal ministry of interior and narcotics control, more than a million Pakistanis are regular heroin or opium users.

Know more: [Over one million Pakistanis hooked on opiates: study](#)

Some 430,000 people are estimated to be injecting drug users, of which 73pc reported that they shared syringes.

This figure illustrates how fast the drug addiction issue can lead to other, deeply problematic health consequences. UNODC representative Cesar Guedes, who presented the findings, said that some 42pc of injecting drug users in Karachi alone, for example, had contracted HIV, and countless others faced the risk of

being infected by this and other blood-communicable viruses such as Hepatitis C.

And let it not be forgotten that once contracted, blood-borne illnesses can be communicated to spouses and children, to make them victims too of a spiral of often fatal sickness.

There have been several pushes over the years to counter the spread and use of drugs in society. While success has been achieved here and there, overall the problem has not been eradicated, and the matter has — especially in terms of interventions and medical care for drug addicts — been left largely to the non-governmental sector to address.

What is required is a concerted push, perhaps led by the centre and in conjunction with the provincial governments, to form a holistic, multi-pronged strategy at several levels.

For example, potential drug abusers often tend to be from among the poorest sections of society; children who grow up on the streets, labourers, etc, are often far more vulnerable. They need to be made aware of the danger and helped in improving life conditions.

Meanwhile, the constitution of drugs in the country, smuggling and sale needs to be brought to a halt — we need much more seriousness on this count. But drug abuse won't end until the demand is brought down; that can only happen when the state decides to invest in its citizenry.

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US funding for military

THE sanctioning of \$1bn in military aid to Pakistan by the US Congress will be hailed in many quarters in Pakistan as a sign of improving relations between Pakistan and the US and evidence of trust in the leadership and strategy of army chief Gen Raheel Sharif.

But a few will want to ask a more basic question: why does Pakistan still need US funds to fight militancy inside Pakistan?

The billion-dollar military funds that Pakistan will receive in the year ahead is a decade-old programme, beginning in a period when the country first began to militarily confront the militant threat and when the military was neither fully prepared nor properly resourced to fight militants.

Also read: [Congress approves defence bill, CSF for Pakistan](#)

But a decade is a long time and during it the Pakistani military has developed indigenous strategies to fight militants, so why is the state still so reliant on outside funding for military operations here?

Consider that \$1bn is roughly Rs100bn, a significant chunk of not just the overall military budget each year but

an overwhelming proportion of the extra funds that are allocated for specific military operations.

So were the aid to be suddenly withdrawn or were Pakistan to surprisingly reject it, it would have wrenching budgetary consequences in the short and even medium term. But aid alone should not be the consideration here. Consider that in the fight against militancy narrative matters, especially the narrative being propagated by the militants to recruit and motivate its fighters.

The annual cash doled out to Pakistan by the US makes for a straightforward and alarming narrative for militants to spread: that Pakistan is still doing all that it does in terms of military operations and counterterrorism measures because it is being paid to do so by the US.

While simply untrue – not only is the fight against militancy a Pakistani fight too, it is being fought here because the state understands its necessity for the security and stability of Pakistan – the militant narrative will always gain some traction, if only because military aid continues to flow into Pakistan from the US.

It is one thing to receive equipment and resources considered necessary by the Pakistani state for its military; it is quite another to be paid for military operations that are vital to our own survival.

In other countries, where trade-offs also have to be made, the rise of the militant threat would have not left operations starved of funds.

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Instead, hard decisions would have been made domestically to free up the necessary funds.

The military would be required to forego non-essential expenditure, long-term spending and acquisition plans would be tweaked and the state would work hard to either free up more budgetary resources for the operations or find equitable ways to increase revenue to pay for them. In Pakistan, it seems turning to good old Uncle Sam is enough.

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No let-up in rhetoric

FAR from making the atmosphere conducive to talking out their differences on a slew of issues, ranging from Kashmir to Siachen, both India and Pakistan are taking several steps back on the road to peace.

True, the response on Saturday of Pakistan's Foreign Office to the deliberately provocative remarks of Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar was restrained and measured.

By making remarks such as the need to "teach a lesson to those who are rogue" and hinting at "harsh measures", Mr Parrikar has done little to alleviate Pakistan's suspicions of its neighbour.

Know more: [Pakistan warns India against issuing 'provocative' statements](#)

But a broader look at the overall picture, beyond the current war of words, shows that neither side has done much to clear the air. Indeed, certain Pakistani ministers themselves are not above targeting New Delhi.

While the hawkish government of Narendra Modi, held responsible for the anti-Muslim Gujarat pogrom of 2002, has left no stone unturned to vitiate the atmosphere, for example by calling off foreign secretary-level talks earlier, the Indians remain concerned by the lack of progress on the trial of the Mumbai suspects in Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the more immediate concern for both sides has been the recent skirmishes between Indian and Pakistani forces along the Working Boundary and the Line of Control.

A recent attack on Indian security personnel by militants, accused by Mr Parrikar, of having crossed over from Pakistan into India-held Kashmir has further strained ties.

There are lessons in diplomacy to be learnt by both sides here. Rather than jumping the gun, and asserting that it was "an open secret that the militants came from Pakistan", the defence minister would have done well to have waited for investigations to produce evidence that could substantiate his views.

For its part, Pakistan must remember that even if it no longer provides support to such forays by militants, its lack of action against anti-India groups and their leaders,

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indeed its tacit acceptance of them, may cause India's concerns to be seen as valid.

Sadly, over the years the problems between India and Pakistan have mounted to a point that may appear difficult to solve now. Hard egos instead of flexible attitudes, disdain instead of accommodation and eagerness to blame each other for any untoward incident instead of self-introspection have pushed matters almost to the point of no return.

Had the two countries attempted earlier to resolve the less intractable differences between them, by now there would have been hope that they were at least on the right track. Conversely, taking hard-line positions will only boost the attempts of those lobbies, in both countries, that are keen to see a South Asian conflagration.

In the end, it will be the ordinary folk who will continue to suffer as the lack of cooperation on so many fronts, including trade and development, would mean continuing poverty for the entire region.

Published in Dawn December 16th , 2014

Hockey chaos

PAKISTAN'S 2-0 loss to Germany in the final of the Champions Trophy in Bhubaneswar, India, on Sunday deprived the team of a golden opportunity to win the prestigious event after 20 years and to recover some of their lost glory.

The Germans, who claimed their 10th title in the tournament's history, displayed a superior game of skills and stamina to emerge as deserving champions.

Though Pakistan held the Germans to a goalless first half, they failed to cash in on the scoring opportunities that came their way, and were, in fact, a shadow of the fiercely competitive side that got the better of Holland and India in the quarterfinal and the semi-final respectively.

Also read: [Germany beat Pakistan to win Champions Trophy](#)

Clearly smarting over a series of ugly incidents that marred their 4-3 win over India on Friday, the Greenshirts sorely missed the services of midfielder Mohammad Tauseeq and reserve goalie Ali Amjad as they had been duly handed a ban by the game's governing body for conduct unbecoming in the high-voltage clash against the Indian team.

There is no doubt that a win over India has always held special meaning for Pakistani teams as well as their fans since the inception of this country, and emotions quite

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naturally run high whenever the two arch-rivals face off in international sports. Nevertheless, the offensive behaviour of the national team players on Friday was deplorable and cannot be condoned in any way.

Besides embarrassing Pakistan hockey itself, the nasty incident stymied the euphoria of a rare victory over India, in India, and compelled Pakistan manager-cum-coach Shahnaz Shaikh to tender an apology to the International Hockey Federation soon after the semi-final.

That said, a number of critics have also chastised the federation for succumbing to Hockey India's threats to boycott all world-ranking events that later induced the world body to ban Tauseeq and Amjad after letting off the two without any penalty earlier in the day.

It is also being felt that the hockey federation should have taken notice of the hostile response of a partisan Indian crowd during the semi-final and the aggression shown by the Indian media in the post-match presser that saw both Shahnaz and captain Imran walking out in a huff.

The moral of the story, however, is that the lack of players' grooming continues to mar Pakistan hockey and despite the better playing skills displayed by the team this time round, their inconsistency impedes their rise to the top.

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Deal on climate change

THE climate change-global warming debate has seen years of contestation. Finally, new resolve seems to be building.

On Sunday, two days into overtime after a fortnight of talks that at one point seemed almost on the verge of collapse, some 190 countries agreed on the building blocks of a new-style global deal, due in 2015, to combat the phenomenon.

China and India, which had expressed concern over earlier drafts of the deal because they placed too heavy a burden on emerging economies as compared to the rich, got what they had been demanding: the preservation of the Kyoto Protocol convention that rich countries must lead in the cuts in greenhouse emissions.

Also read: [190 nations agree on building blocks for climate deal](#)

Matters were helped along by the joint US-China agreement last month to curb emissions. If the resolve holds, governments are to submit their national emission-management plans by the informal deadline of end-March next year, which could form the basis of a global agreement at the Paris summit.

In terms of climate change, it is an unfortunate reality that while the more industrialised countries have done/are

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doing the most damage, it is the planet as a whole that must pay.

Countries such as Pakistan, which might not have significant emission levels because of the low levels of industrialisation, nevertheless stand badly affected, particularly when the availability and efficacy of coping or mitigating mechanisms is factored in.

In their own interests, though, such states need to step up to the plate. There are already indications that Pakistan's climate and weather patterns are changing, such as the floods in recent years. But there seems to be no recognition among policymaking circles that an action plan is required for the future — even though Pakistan counts agriculture as its economic base.

The country is ignoring harsh realities at its own peril. The fact is that the future will bring, to whatever extent, challenges in water and consequently food availability, which will have an adverse knock-on effect on the population. It is time to start preparing.

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New blood-soaked benchmark

IT was an attack so horrifying, so shocking and numbing that the mind struggles to comprehend it. Helpless schoolchildren hunted down methodically and relentlessly by militants determined to kill as many as quickly as possible.

As a country looked on in shock yesterday, the death count seemed to increase by the minute. First a few bodies, dead schoolchildren in bloodied uniforms, then more bodies, and then more and more until the number became so large that even tracking it seemed obscene.

Peshawar has suffered before, massively. But nothing compares to the horror of what took place yesterday in Army Public School, Warsak Road. The militants found the one target in which all the fears of Pakistan could coalesce: young children in school, vulnerable, helpless and whose deaths will strike a collective psychological blow that the country will take a long time to recover from, if ever.

Also read: [Militant siege of Peshawar school ends, 141 killed](#)

In the immediate aftermath of the carnage, the focus must be the grieving families of the dead, the injured survivors and the hundreds of other innocent children who witnessed scenes that will haunt them forever.

Even in a society where violence is depressingly endemic and militant attacks all too common, the sheer scale of yesterday's attack demands an extraordinary effort by every tier of the state — and society — to help the victims in every way possible.

For the survivors, the state can help ensure the best medical treatment, for both physical and psychological wounds, and rehabilitation. All too often, after the initial shock wears off and the TV cameras move on, the level of care and attention given to survivors drops precipitously. That must not be the case this time.

For the families of the dead, the state can find a way to honour their sacrifices beyond announcing so-called shaheed packages and promising to disburse cheques. It is also incumbent on wider society and the media to ensure that this time the state does more than the bare minimum.

Inevitably, the hard questions will have to be asked and answers will have to be found. Schools are by definition vulnerable, the trade-off between security and access making for a relatively soft target. Yet, vulnerability ought not to mean a disaster on this scale can occur so easily.

Where was the intelligence? The military has emphasised so-called intelligence-based operations against militants in recent months, but this was a spectacular failure of intelligence in a city, and an area within that city, that ought to have been at the very top of the list in terms of a security blanket.

Then there is the issue of the operation to find and capture or kill the militants after the attack had begun. The sheer length of the operation suggests the commanders may not have had immediate access to the school's layout and there was no prior rescue plan in place.

Surely army public schools are under high enough risk to have merited some kind of advance planning in case of such an attack. Was that plan in place? Had there been any drills at the school to help the children know what to do in the eventuality of an attack? Who was responsible for such planning? Most importantly, will lapses be caught, accountability administered and future defences modified accordingly? The questions are always the same, but answers are hardly forthcoming.

The questions about yesterday's attack can go on endlessly. They should. But what about the state's willingness and ability in the fight against militancy? Vows to crush militancy in the aftermath of a massive attack are quite meaningless.

From such events can come the will to fight, but not really a strategy. Military operations in Fata and counterterrorism operations in the cities will amount to little more than fire-fighting unless there's an attempt to attack the ideological roots of militancy and societal reach of militants.

Further, there is the reality that militancy cannot be defeated at the national level alone. Militancy is a regional problem and until it is addressed as such, there will only be a long-term ebb and flow of militancy, cycles

destined to repeat themselves. Perhaps the starting point would be for the state to acknowledge that it does not quite have a plan or strategy as yet to fight militancy in totality. Denial will only lead to worse atrocities.

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Devolution ‘rollback’

IN a country where, for over six decades, the thought process that favours concentration of power at the centre has dominated, devolving responsibilities to the federating units — and even further to the third tier — has not been easy.

The 18th Amendment, passed in 2010, was indeed a landmark piece of legislation which established a more equitable relationship between the provinces and the centre. Yet in the years since the passage of the law, implementation of the devolution process has been slow and there have been several hiccups along the way.

Some observers have even said there are fears of a ‘rollback’ to the pre-2010 order. For example, at a discussion organised by the HRCP in Islamabad on Monday, speakers lamented the fact that ‘forces’ were at work trying to undo the progress made so far.

Also read: [‘18th Amendment faces threat of rollback’](#)

The presence of the National Curriculum Council was cited as an example of “federal encroachment”, while speakers pointed out that the Council of Common Interests was failing to meet regularly. There have also been issues with division of resources and funds between Islamabad and the provinces. It has been pointed out that departments with liabilities have been handed over to the provinces, while the centre is reluctant to let go of profitable institutions.

We must unambiguously say that any moves towards the ‘rollback’ of provincial autonomy will prove disastrous. If anything, the provinces need to be given greater responsibility over their affairs without an overbearing centre watching their every move. Indeed, the state’s structure has been such since independence that the federal bureaucracy may be reluctant to share power with the provinces.

But this attitude must change; while the provinces need to coordinate amongst themselves and with Islamabad, the democratic will as embodied by the 18th Amendment needs to be respected. There are surely capacity issues with the provinces, especially Balochistan and Sindh. But considering these units were only given increased powers in 2010, the centre must work with them to build capacity.

The provinces themselves must also improve their performance. While complaints of federal interference may be genuine, the provincial administrations need to perform much better where good governance, accountability and service delivery are concerned.

However, there is one key area where devolution of power is concerned which has been ignored in equal measure by both the centre and the provinces: elected local governments. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that apart from Balochistan, provincial administrations have proved to be the greatest stumbling blocks standing in the way of elected local bodies.

Demanding the rights of provinces is essential; but so is paving the way through legislation and other administrative measures for an elected third tier of government. Or else, one sort of concentration of power — that by the central administration — will be replaced by the provincial capitals denying sub-units their democratic rights. The process of devolution must continue unhindered, with the ultimate goal being empowered provinces and elected representatives at the district and sub-unit levels.

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Challenge for politicians

A day after the deadliest terror attack in the country's history, the political leadership gathered in Peshawar to focus on the militant threat and, crucially, to develop a unified response.

That Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, PTI chief Imran Khan, former PPP prime minister Raja Pervez Ashraf and sundry other national leaders, including from religious parties, chose to address the media together suggests that at long last the political leadership understands the need for unity in the face of the militant threat.

Whatever the complexities of crafting a meaningful and effective anti-militancy plan, no strategy can have any possibility of success if the country's mainstream political leadership does not own it and fully support it.

Also read: [PM chairs MPC on Peshawar tragedy](#)

For too long, despite several multi-party conferences before, fighting militancy has been seen as the sole responsibility of the party in power, with other political parties either doing little more than paying lip service or, often enough, scuttling the possibility of clarity and unanimity with doublespeak.

Now, seemingly stirred by the monstrosity of what happened on Tuesday in Peshawar, meaningful unanimity appears to have been achieved.

Political consensus alone, however, will not create a meaningful strategy. Prime Minister Sharif yesterday announced that a committee under the leadership of Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan will devise a policy in seven days to fight militancy.

Perhaps the political leadership meant to sound serious and purposeful, but it is not clear what really can be achieved in seven days that could not be done yesterday at the conference. After all, the government already has a nearly year-old National Internal Security Policy in place.

Then, four different parties are running the provincial governments in the country and each of them is intensely familiar with various facets of the militant threat. Finally, the mainstream political parties of the country have attended APCs before on the militant threat and also been briefed in parliament by the military leadership. So why not announce immediate steps and wait seven days?

With the hard decisions deferred, it will be even more difficult to maintain a consensus in a week's time, given that there are fundamental differences among the various sections of the political spectrum on how to define terrorism, let alone how to defeat it.

If there is already reason to doubt that a meaningful anti-militancy strategy will emerge in a week's time, perhaps it can be hoped that the sheer savagery of the Peshawar attack will not allow the usual style of politics to reassert itself so quickly.

There was also another important development yesterday: the military leadership's dash to Kabul for urgent talks. That is key because the country's leadership has a choice: either develop a full-spectrum, civilian and military response now or allow the military-led response to militancy to continue. As Peshawar so tragically demonstrated, a military-only response to terrorism is not an adequate strategy.

Published in Dawn December 18th , 2014

Assault on education

THE atrocity in Peshawar on Tuesday underscores the particular vulnerability of schoolchildren and educational institutions in Pakistan.

In essence, schools and the young learners within them are perhaps the most vulnerable of all the 'soft' targets on the militants' hit list.

For long, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Fata have witnessed militant violence targeting schools. For example, as per an International Crisis Group report, in the period from 2009 to 2012, between 800 to 900 schools were attacked in KP and the tribal areas. In most of these incidents the extremists chose to strike empty schools, in a symbolic gesture, without causing many casualties.

Also read: [Another December 16, another black day](#)

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But perhaps out of frustration, the militant camp has shed any inhibitions about targeting schoolchildren and now has no qualms about slaughtering students, as the Peshawar tragedy shows.

Girls' education has been a particular thorn in the obscurantists' side. The conflict in the tribal belt has also upset the education of local children in other ways, as thousands of families have fled the region for safer climes. Fata and KP are not the only areas where education has come under attack.

A school principal was killed in an incident in Karachi carried out by suspected militants last year, while also in 2013 a terrorist assault on a university bus in Quetta killed a number of female students.

This year, too, began on a bloody note, when a suicide bomber targeted a school in Hangu. Were it not for the selfless heroism and sacrifice of young Aitzaz Hasan, a student who confronted the bomber and tackled him, greater carnage could have resulted in the schoolhouse packed with students.

Unfortunately, this time around there was no Aitzaz to confront the monsters who stormed the Army Public School.

The militants have declared war on education, and by extension on society. Perhaps only Nigeria's dreaded Boko Haram outfit has a more ferocious anti-education agenda in the murky global militant spectrum.

There, of course, needs to be greater security of schools, especially in vulnerable areas. But more than posting a policeman or paramilitary trooper outside every threatened school, a more long-term solution is required.

For too long, violent obscurantists have been allowed to publicly spew venom on modern education in Pakistan with barely any reaction from the state.

It is time these avowed opponents of learning were taken to task and uprooted in order to allow the youth of this country to build a brighter, literate future.

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Attack on media team

THERE'S no argument that Pakistan is, for a variety of reasons, already amongst the most challenging of terrains for journalists to navigate. Even so, the events that took place during the PTI's 'shutdown' of Lahore on Monday mark a new low; the media team of Geo TV, whose management PTI leader Imran Khan has in recent weeks been censoring from the podium, was shamefully harassed.

Party supporters lobbed plastic bottles and gravel on the reporters, one of whom was a woman, raising slogans and making indecent gestures.

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Also read: [Attack on journalists condemned](#)

This is not the first time PTI supporters have made this particular media house their target — consider, for example, the fact that while a showdown was under way between the police and party supporters in Islamabad soon after Mr Khan launched his series of protests, the Geo building was singled out by PTI affiliates to vandalise.

That a female reporter was so poorly treated by supporters of a party that is rightly proud of its ability to attract large numbers of women out on the streets is considered by some to be an anomaly.

Yet at another level, the violence is not at all hard to understand. For months now, the PTI leader has been leading the verbal attacks against particularly this member of the media community, hurling threats and giving ultimatums.

While he has stopped short of calling for physical violence to be visited on the owners or employees of the media house, what is the message that the ordinary party supporter and activist walks away with? That media people are legitimate targets, even if their presence at the scene is necessitated by the demands of their profession. While it is true that this particular television channel's approach to issue- or politics-centred journalism is problematic, in no way can assaults such as that by the PTI be justified.

It is not enough for party leaders to issue condemnations after violence has already taken place; the PTI leadership

must unequivocally emphasise that such attacks are abhorrent.

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The right decision

IMRAN Khan's decision to suspend the PTI's anti-government protests in the wake of the Peshawar carnage is a sensible, compassionate decision that will surely be welcomed by right-minded and rational individuals across Pakistan.

The soul-destroying violence in Peshawar on Tuesday was not just an incomprehensible terrorist attack, it was an assault on everything good and decent that the overwhelming majority of this country holds dear.

To continue a political campaign in the post-Peshawar environment would have been an abomination, as Mr Khan has rightly recognised. But it could not have been an easy decision and Mr Khan deserves much credit for making what would have been a very hard choice.

Consider that while after four months of protest the PTI was no closer to its goal of ousting the government, the opposition party had succeeded in tapping into a deep vein of discontent with the electoral system and the manner in which the country is being governed by the PML-N. Credit for that must solely go to the PTI, not least

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because while all other opposition parties had alleged electoral malfeasance in May 2013, none had the courage to demand a cleaner electoral system nor really held the PML-N to account for its various governance shortcomings.

Also read: [Peshawar tragedy prompts Imran to call off sit-in](#)

Clearly, the PTI would not have come this far without genuine support from sections of the electorate and the public at large. It does appear that when a political leader focuses on serious issues, sections of the public respond in good faith and in the belief that the democratic system can and should be improved.

Those individuals, ordinary, everyday Pakistanis, are the real heroes and their voices must not go unheard. The country both deserves and can achieve a fair and transparent electoral system.

Now, the onus of responsibility on the PML-N is greater than ever. The PTI has called off its protests on the very reasonable conditions that the PML-N establish a commission of inquiry into alleged electoral fraud in May 2013 and also continue with the process of introducing meaningful electoral reforms for future elections.

Surely, given all that has occurred over the last several months, it is incumbent on the PML-N to step up and do the right thing. A commission with powers of inquiry to the satisfaction of the PTI and in line with the letter and spirit of the law is surely achievable.

After Peshawar, it is nothing short of an urgent necessity. For nothing — let alone power politics — should come in the way of focusing on what needs to be done in the fight against militancy and maintaining the fresh political consensus that militancy must be defeated.

There is no reason other than petty politics for an inquiry into May 2013 to be stalled going forward. Imran Khan has shown the country that he can rise above petty politics. Now, the PML-N must do the same.

Published in Dawn, December 19th, 2014

Death for terrorism

The atrocities unleashed by the banned TTP in Peshawar on Tuesday have illustrated, horribly, that decisive and cohesive action is required against the monster of militancy. But while there is justified anger against the perpetrators of the attack on the Army Public School, government action should not take its cue from populist demands that are based more on emotions than reason.

It is in this context that we must see Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's decision to rescind the de facto moratorium on capital punishment vis-à-vis convicts in terror-related cases.

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Know more: [President rejects mercy appeal of 17 death penalty convicts](#)

First, consider how ineffective capital punishment would be in the case of those militants who resort to suicide bombing as their primary weapon of death and destruction. Indoctrinated to the point where the perpetrator does not expect to emerge from the attack alive, how can the death penalty be expected to deter others of his ilk?

Secondly, in recent years, domestic and international human rights organisations have repeatedly raised the concern that the high number of people on death row for terrorism-related convictions points to an overuse by Pakistan of its anti-terrorism laws.

A joint report released recently by Justice Project Pakistan and Reprieve states that “instead of being reserved for the most serious cases of recognisable acts of terror ... [it is] being used to try ordinary criminal cases [...]”. In such a situation, the lifting of the moratorium will undoubtedly lead to serious miscarriages of justice.

Besides, the death penalty will always remain a cruel and inhumane form of punishment, even if those sentenced to die are found guilty of having perpetrated the most barbaric of acts.

At the crossroads where it stands, Pakistan can either attempt to temporarily lighten the pressure by instituting cosmetic measures, or do what is needed: devise a coherent push-back at several tiers, only one of which is the battlefield.

Realisation must dawn that matters have gone far beyond physical attacks by the militants, and that the Talibanisation of society is being fanned by those who act as apologists for the killers by justifying their barbaric acts.

Their numbers include those representing banned radical groups, from the Lashkar-e-Taiba to the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan, that are openly operating under new names.

Without clamping down on such leaders and groups, no policy can remove their poisonous discourse that is encouraging public opinion to subscribe to conspiracy theories and to turn a blind eye to the enemy within.

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Cuba's victory

TO his credit, in what is indeed a major policy reversal, President Barack Obama had the courage to do away with a five-decade old “outdated approach” and restore diplomatic relations with Cuba, one of the world’s five states still officially communist.

Even though Raul Castro, his Cuban counterpart, was subdued in his speech and expected Mr Obama to do more, he nevertheless welcomed the proposed resumption of diplomatic relations — something that would not have been possible without a nod from the icon that is his brother, Fidel.

Also read: [US re-establishing relations with Cuba, Obama announces](#)

While the Vatican and Canada have been involved as facilitators since early last year, it was the release by Havana of the ailing American prisoner Alan Gross that made Washington move.

In his televised speech, President Obama was frank enough to admit that he was determined to chart “an even more ambitious course forward”, because America’s policy that sought to topple the Castro regime by means of diplomatic and economic coercion had failed.

For Havana, the move will have definite economic advantages. Venezuela, which gives aid to Cuba, has

been embroiled in an economic crisis because of falling oil prices, making the Castro regime wonder whether Caracas will be able to continue its doles.

Normalisation with America will, therefore, mean at least a partial lifting of the embargo, something to which President Obama referred in his telecast.

Credit must be given here to the political acumen and steely nerves of the senior Castro. Only a small strip of water stood between tiny Cuba and the American giant, but Mr Castro never flinched.

He was the gainer when the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion failed to arouse a popular uprising, making the Castro regime stronger than before. Those were the Cold War days, and he received full backing from the communist world. But even after the Soviet empire had collapsed, Mr Castro showed his mettle and didn’t bow. By any standards, Wednesday’s simultaneous announcement by the two presidents is a resounding victory for Cuba.

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A turning point?

EVEN when they have violated every tenet of humanity, purveyors of hate and obscurantism have long remained virtually unchallenged in Pakistan. Their triumphalist ideology has been the bedrock upon which the justification of every atrocity has been based.

Even at a seminal moment such as now, in the aftermath of the Peshawar school attack, the collective outpouring of grief found no resonance with Maulana Abdul Aziz, chief cleric of Lal Masjid in Islamabad.

Asked for his reaction, he refused to condemn the massacre of students and teachers, seeking instead to explain it away on the grounds of “wrong decisions” taken by the state. His prevarication was greeted with revulsion across society, and on Thursday night an unprecedented protest took place outside Lal Masjid, with participants chanting slogans against Maulana Aziz and lighting candles in memory of the victims.

Take a look: [Lal Masjid protest: FIR registered against Maulana Aziz](#)

A member of the mosque administration warned them that no further chanting would be tolerated, while police, anticipating a clash, asked the crowd to disperse. An FIR was filed against the participants for violating Section 144. The police also accused them of using “hate speech” against the mosque administration.

But why should we be surprised at this grotesque inversion of culpability? After all, let alone the right wing, even extremists are above the law in this country, able to openly promote their views from the pulpit, from television screens, in the political forum, with utter and complete immunity.

Banned organisations have been allowed to resurrect themselves under new names and continue to spew their noxious rhetoric. The state has not merely tolerated these individuals; it has patronised and employed them as a means to further its strategic objectives and shape the national discourse.

They are a handy means of fomenting agitation against perceived external threats as and when needed, and for negotiating with terrorists who pose an existential threat to Pakistan.

As a result, they have become emboldened enough to sometimes adopt a stance completely at variance with that of the state that has given them succour. A glance at Maulana Aziz’s own recent record is proof of this: he has named the library in his seminary after Osama bin Laden, and voiced his support for the self-styled Islamic State.

As the right wing — represented by the likes of Maulana Aziz — gradually intimidated society into submission, several progressive voices — represented by the likes of Rashid Rehman — were silenced through violence.

Now that the state finds itself scrambling to construct a befitting response to the tide of extremism that has begun to devour its own, it should take a cue from those who

came to Lal Masjid to demand that apologists for extremism be held to account. In fact, it is imperative for the state to seize the moment and craft a counter narrative, one that abjures links with any shade of extremism, politically expedient or otherwise.

Published in Dawn December 20th , 2014

Economic risks

THE latest review of Pakistan's economy conducted by the IMF under the ongoing programme is the most candid assessment produced by the lender thus far. After a string of positive reviews, we now have a statement from the Fund's executive board that warns of "significant risks" facing the fragile recovery.

The statement speaks of "possible revenue shortfalls" in the fiscal framework and calls for more purchase of dollars from the spot markets and for "greater exchange rate flexibility". It says legislation for greater central bank autonomy is crucial, and that the legislation "should conform to international best practices".

Also read: [Reserves increase](#)

It also calls for continued power tariff reforms (a euphemism for tariff hikes) at a time when the government is busy slashing the power tariffs to pass on

the benefit of falling oil prices, as well as for greater efficiency in generation through strict implementation of a merit order list for dispatch.

Gas prices also need to be hiked, particularly through the gas levy, the Fund says, and producer prices need "rationalisation" (also a euphemism for hikes). The privatisation programme may enjoy strong ownership, but faces challenges due to market conditions.

There is no mention in the statement of the rapid fall in oil prices, and what effect this might have on inflation, power subsidies and the current account.

The government is reaping a small windfall in the form of falling oil prices, but the Fund is clearly reluctant to acknowledge any fiscal and forex space that might be opening up as a consequence.

Whether or not this is prudence or just a dour take on the state of public finances will become clearer when the Fund releases its more detailed report soon. In the meantime, it's enough to note that despite windfalls and strengthening reserves, risks to the economy remain serious and continued vigilance over revenues and expenditures is required.

Government borrowing from the central bank may have declined, but its shift towards market sources, especially longer tenors and external borrowing, highlights the importance of sound debt management practices as well.

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Mumbai trial delays

IN a move that bewildered many here, and much of the outside world too, the anti-terrorism court charged with trying Lashkar-e-Taiba leaders for their role in the November 2008 Mumbai attacks saw fit to grant bail to the principal accused Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi just days after the Peshawar school carnage that so shocked the world this week.

While the court may have acted according to the rules and within the letter of the law, there is also a context here that cannot be overlooked.

Also read: [ATC approves bail of Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi in Mumbai attacks case](#)

Consider that for five years the trial has remained in limbo, hearings repeatedly adjourned on one pretext or another — so why pick this week of all possible weeks to grant bail to Lakhvi?

It suggests a tone deafness that at the very least offends common sense at this sensitive, possibly pivotal, moment in the country's history. Instead of building on the consensus that militancy needs to be systematically eradicated from all corners of the country, the national conversation is being pulled in unwelcome directions.

On the Mumbai-related trials the facts speak for themselves. The Pakistani state itself acknowledged that

the attacks were planned and masterminded by individuals based in Pakistan.

During the course of the Indian investigation, the state here provided a great deal of evidence to help piece together how the attacks were carried out. Indeed, the ATC trials were triggered by that very process of the Pakistani state investigating and unearthing evidence against the architects of the Mumbai attacks.

Lakhvi, a top echelon leader of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, was at the centre of the evidence pieced together by not just Pakistani authorities, but also Indian and other international investigators. In no normal, fair and independent judicial system would the trial of Lakhvi go nowhere for years before resulting in his bail.

The government has rightly acted to keep him in custody for now, but that is only a fire-fighting measure. What is really needed is for the trials of Lakhvi and his co-accused to be taken up again with a seriousness of purpose and sound legal strategy. For in these Mumbai trials, Pakistan's overall record in the fight against militancy is also on trial.

Both the political and military leadership of the country has stated repeatedly that there is no longer such a thing as a good militant. For that to be true, individuals like Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi cannot be allowed to simply walk away free men.

Published in Dawn December 20th , 2014

A slippery slope

Deeply problematic as the lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty is, yet more troubling is a country seeking public executions and calling the massacre in Peshawar to be quickly and immediately avenged by deaths of militants, wherever and whenever.

Disturbing too is the role that sections of the media have been playing, acting as cheerleaders for executions, demanding more and lobbying for executions to be broadcast or even carried out in public arenas.

Read: [Militant siege of Peshawar school ends, 141 killed](#)

What can really be said about a society that appears to want to descend to the level of the Taliban in order to fight them?

It is a sad indictment of Pakistan that citizens now want the equivalent of a 'khooni chowk', a bloody square, that Mullah Fazlullah and his militants made notorious in Swat at the height of their insurgency.

Surely, the violence of the battlefield should not be replicated by the state under public demand in the form of public executions, whether televised or in front of a cheering crowd.

Also read: [Nawaz removes moratorium on death penalty](#)

That would not just be the start of a slippery slope, it could spell the end of the hope for a civilised, rules-based society where rights are paramount and laws carefully and honourably implemented.

Is the spirit of revenge being so brutally projected in the media and in conversations across the country simply because of fear or is it a sign of some deeper malaise that afflicts Pakistan?

At the very least, it appears that neither state nor society, neither the country's leadership nor the average citizen, appears willing to reflect on what has gone wrong and how to find a way back towards a stable and secure Pakistan.

Consider that appalling as the Peshawar massacre was, it did not come out of nowhere nor do the perpetrators reflect a mindset that is not reflected in other, dark corners of this country.

Furthermore, while the problems of extremism and militancy are not one and the same, just how much of an enabling environment has been created over the years by militant apologists, preachers of hate and even the toxic ideas that pass as mainstream views via textbooks across the country.

Also read: [20 questions we should be asking after the Peshawar massacre](#)

Can militancy really be eradicated root and branch if the infrastructure of jihad — the mosque, madressah and welfare network created and sustained by groups

espousing violence against Pakistan's purported enemies — is not also rolled up? The military and political leadership has talked about ending the distinction between good and bad militants, but has it even an idea about how to progressively eliminate the environment that makes any kind of militant possible? The media too must surely shoulder some of the blame. Focusing on the here and now, avenging the sense of grief and loss after Peshawar, instead of asking the tough questions and holding rulers to account will do little more than ease the path to the next terrible atrocity.

Published in Dawn, December 21st, 2014

Bashing K-Electric

THERE is much to hold K-Electric accountable for. But the gratuitous bashing of the power utility and its private-sector management by the power bureaucracy and its line ministry needs to end.

The latest example of trenchant criticism of K-Electric comes from none other than the Minister for Water and Power Khawaja Asif, who in his testimony before a standing committee, reportedly said that the current privatisation of the entity was “against the public interest”, and that the shareholders had a reputation of doubling their money within a few years and moving out. These are highly unfair remarks. If the privatisation was “against the public interest”, would the minister care to clarify how his own government's scheduled privatisation of power distribution companies will be different? And given that

the current shareholders have held management control for more than six years now, how can he argue that their intention is to double their money in a few years and then move out? Does his government intend to prohibit successful bidders from ever selling their shareholding when they privatise the distribution companies next year?

When K-Electric was in government hands, it was vilified for being inefficient and overstaffed and for devouring state subsidies. Using these arguments, the utility was the first to be placed on the chopping block when privatisation of the power sector began in the early 2000s, and now a new set of complaints is being bandied about. Yes, the federal government is owed money by K-Electric, but aren't there payments owed to the utility by the government as well? Yes, K-Electric buys electricity from the national grid, but why shouldn't it? Yes, there are inefficiencies and losses, but K-Electric's record of reducing these is so far better than that of its counterparts in Punjab. Khawaja Asif should realise that he is responsible for the power sector of the entire country, and not just one province. He should understand that Karachi, as part of the country, does not deserve such one-sided censure.

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Crackdown in Turkey

BY taking arbitrary measures and showing authoritarian tendencies, Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems to be vindicating his critics at home and abroad. So far, 24 journalists, including the chief of a television network and the editor-in-chief of a newspaper, have been arrested on terrorism-related charges. Even though the court set free eight of them, including the editor, those still in custody include the television boss and others accused of trying to overthrow his regime in league with Fethullah Gulen, once Mr Erdogan's friend and now his critic. Mr Gulen lives in self-exile in the US, but Mr Erdogan accuses him of planning his regime's overthrow by setting up a "parallel state" through a network of cells in Turkey. It is obvious that the arrest warrant for Mr Gulen is largely symbolic and unlikely to evoke a response from the US, which, in any case, is unhappy with the Erdogan government's policy on the so-called Islamic State. The European Union, which is unhappy with Mr Erdogan's Syria policy, denounced the arrests as being incompatible with "European values".

It is astonishing that a man of Mr Erdogan's stature should exhibit such paranoia. He created a new party after easing out the late Necmettin Erbakan, won three general elections in a row, was prime minister thrice and is now, after amending the constitution, the president. He has some extraordinary achievements to his credit, including the spectacular growth of the economy and the

marginalisation of the military's role in politics. Yet Mr Gulen seems to have got on his nerves, with Turkish politics revolving round the Erdogan-Gulen rivalry. Hizmet, Mr Gulen's powerful movement, has branches in over 150 countries and controls a chain of newspapers and television networks, which regularly target Mr Erdogan's policies. Matters came to a head early this year when Mr Erdogan thought the Hizmet-linked media was using a corruption scandal to overthrow his government and accused Hizmet followers of hatching "a dirty plot" by creating "a state within a state". Then he upped the ante by booking Hizmet supporters on terrorism-related charges. He has now defended his action, wondering whether the EU was "competent to make comments" on the raids and said he did not care whether or not Europe accepted Turkey as a member. The issue here is not Turkey's EU membership but media freedom and Turkish democracy. Mr Erdogan is clearly overreacting to criticism and must show restraint.

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Cricket defeat

Pakistan's preparations for the upcoming ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 received a setback of sorts with the 3-2 defeat against the lowly ranked New Zealand in the ODI series that concluded in the UAE on Friday.

The national team, though clear favourites to win the five-match contest, failed to perform as a well-oiled unit. Their campaign was further dampened by a spate of injuries to key players including skipper Misbah-ul-Haq, Umar Gul, Wahab Riaz, Bilawal Bhatti and a few others.

Read: [New Zealand beat Pakistan for series win](#)

The Kiwis, on the other hand, proved a surprise package as they put up a thoroughly professional, highly competitive show.

Their comprehensive homework on the strengths and weaknesses of the Pakistan players paid off as they successfully managed to blunt match-winners such as Sarfraz Ahmed, Younis Khan and Mohammad Hafeez in most games.

Besides, Kiwi newcomers including Adam Milne, Matt Henry and Anton Devcich did surprisingly well to get the better of their highly rated rivals.

Also read: [New Zealand beat Pakistan to level Twenty20 series](#)

What should be of greater concern to Pakistan is that this is their third consecutive ODI series loss in the UAE, coming on the heels of a 4-1 drubbing by the Aussies two months ago.

A similar fate befell the team when it played against Sri Lanka last August.

The other major concern is diminishing bowling resources.

No team can afford to lose match-winning bowlers like Saeed Ajmal, Junaid Khan or Umar Gul, especially in their build-up campaign for the World Cup which commences in Australia and New Zealand from Feb 14 next year.

However, one heartening factor has been the return to form of mercurial all-rounder Shahid Afridi. The seasoned player looked pretty much in his element as he slammed a flurry of sixes and fours to keep the Kiwi bowlers at bay during the series.

Along with young Haris Sohail who has clearly come of age, he put in some fine all-round performances giving his fans something to cheer about and, perhaps, providing them with a ray of hope vis-à-vis next year's extravaganza.

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Security threat

THE lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty in response to the Peshawar carnage has triggered a serious threat: terrorist attacks to avenge the executions by the state.

Already, intelligence agencies are issuing all manner of warnings to possible targets, especially state institutions and security installations across the country, and many educational institutes, including in the federal capital, have closed their campuses indefinitely ahead of the scheduled winter break.

Pakistan is bracing for a backlash. This is the moment in which the performance and capabilities of the intelligence and law-enforcement apparatus across the country will be assessed. Failure could have catastrophic consequences, not just in terms of lives lost and individuals injured but also in terms of the state's very ability to fight terrorism and militancy in all its manifestations.

Also read: [Sympathisers, supporters of terrorists live among us: Nisar](#)

For, a wave of successful attacks in response to state execution of militants could leave the resolve to fight terrorism in tatters, especially if the forces on the frontline are left exposed and vulnerable.

To be sure, in this long fight against militancy, there will be more suffering inflicted on the country. Given the willingness of the militants to attack virtually any target, hard or soft, and the reality that militants are embedded across the country, the possibility of more terrorist attacks is high.

But there is, or ought to be at least, a difference between the unexpected attack, the one that slipped through the cracks in the system, and attacks in major cities at a time when the country's security apparatus is in a state of high alert and mobilised essentially on a war footing.

Yesterday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan gave his frankest assessment yet of the scale and size of the militancy problem in the country. But it is not enough to call on the citizenry to act as eyes and ears on the ground against militancy.

What is the government doing about the militant supporters and sympathisers within the state machinery? Time and again, the infiltration by militant groups into law-enforcement agencies and even the intelligence apparatus briefly emerges as a topic of debate at the national level before being quietly pushed into the background again. Beyond that, where is the public investigation into lapses that have made militant attacks possible and where is the accountability of those who are found to have failed in their jobs?

No system anywhere can improve if there is no transparency and accountability. In essence, it is about disrupting the militants' tactics and plans. Studying past attacks and disseminating knowledge within the security

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apparatus about how attacks are carried out help prevent future attacks — but only if the state is willing to adapt and learn itself.

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Oil price windfall

OIL prices have defied all projections as the downward spiral continues. According to the IMF's World Economic Outlook, last year the average price of oil in international markets was \$104 per barrel, and as of April this year it was forecasting the price would remain at that level throughout 2014 as well, with a small decline to \$97 in 2015.

Instead, the price has plummeted steadily since June when it stood at \$115, accelerating from September onwards. When Opec failed to agree on production curbs in its last meeting in Vienna on Nov 27, the price fell steeply to as low as \$51 on contracts for February's delivery.

The declines stem from a glut in the markets, coupled with contracting demand as global growth remains sluggish. More importantly though, increasingly the collapse is being recognised as engineered by Saudi Arabia, the country at the heart of Opec's refusal to curb production, to hurt Iran and constrain its growing influence in the Middle East.

Know more: [Will oil prices continue to fall?](#)

Pakistan had erred on the side of caution in its last budget and its estimates for oil prices at \$109 for the fiscal year 2015 were higher than IMF forecasts.

According to that figure, the oil import bill was estimated to come in at \$15.5bn for the current fiscal year. The real windfall from this price decrease has yet to arrive since much of the oil landing in Pakistan thus far this fiscal year was contracted before the downward spiral got under way in earnest.

Thus far, the reported oil import bill is slightly higher than in the corresponding period last year. But that is now set to change, as oil being contracted today for delivery in the first few months of 2015 is being purchased at prices almost half of what was expected.

There is a danger that this windfall can lead to complacency and poor utilisation of the resultant savings. If it is true that the declines are due to geopolitical reasons, then it stands to reason that they can reverse very quickly.

The IMF, as well as other international agencies, is warning of a price spike due to geopolitical developments in the Middle East. The government must not allow the lower prices to breed a sense of comfort on the reform measures undertaken to wean our economy off its dependence on imported oil.

It must also resist the temptation to utilise foreign exchange savings to artificially prop up the value of the

rupee. The windfall should be seen as a window of opportunity to take the necessary steps to move towards cheaper fuels, as well as renewable sources of energy instead.

A brief spell of respite on the external front is a good opportunity to bring down the external debt service bill, as well as help ensure price stability. That would be money well spent.

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Madressah reform

IN exonerating the majority of madressahs across the country from any involvement with extremism or militancy, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan may have meant to send a reassuring message to both the custodians of these seminaries and the public at large.

Simple maths though suggests that the interior minister instead flagged an alarming problem: if, as he suggested, 90pc of the madressahs in the country are problem-free, then that still leaves thousands upon thousands of seminaries in the country that do have an extremism and militancy problem.

The question then should be what the state is doing about the militancy- and extremism-sponsoring

madressahs, although it is a rather pointless query given that the interior minister himself would rather gloss over the fact that there are thousands of madressahs with a militancy and extremism problem.

Also read: [Lal Masjid protest activist receives threatening phone call](#)

For too long, the religious right and madressah administrators across the country have resisted state oversight and even registration in the name of religious freedom, the argument ostensibly being that the state is really either trying to slow the growth of madressahs or progressively shut them down in the name of oversight. But that is simply untrue.

A conservative population combined with a scarcity of education means that madressahs will continue to exist and even flourish, just like the private sector offering more mainstream education does.

Surely though, providing a religion-based education does not — or should not — mean creating an enabling environment where either radicalisation of young minds directly takes place or militant groups seek out vulnerable individuals to recruit for terrorist purposes.

Moreover, why should so many madressahs be able to teach a curriculum that simply does not prepare its student for any aspect of the modern world, leaving them without a set of skills that can help them find any semblance of a job outside the mosque-madressah-social welfare network that many militant groups have assembled?

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Reforms are essential, but so is extra vigilance and policing in the short term. While only a systematic and exhaustive survey will create a map of madressahs that identifies all the trouble spots, the big problem centres are well known.

Whether it is hate speech, off-site recruiting facilitated by madressah administrations or straightforward ties to banned outfits that some high-profile madressahs have, the intelligence and law-enforcement apparatus of the country already has a reasonably developed picture.

Now is the time to clamp down on madressahs that are sponsoring hate or promoting terrorism. But that will only be possible if decisiveness is shown by the state.

If those such as Lal Masjid's Abdul Aziz can spew hate and threaten suicide attacks in the heart of the federal capital, then what of the far-flung areas where the state's writ is weak and local law enforcement very much subordinate to powerful madressahs with all manner of state and non-state connections? Now is the time to stand firm.

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Tunisia's example

IT is in the fitness of things that the country where the Arab Spring first blossomed should attempt to take the latter to its logical conclusion. Even though incumbent president Moncef Marzouki had yet to concede defeat to Beji Caid Essebsi at the time of writing, the victory of a presidential candidate belonging to a secular-leaning party within months of a parliamentary election shows Tunisia's commendable progress towards a democratic dispensation.

The first indication of Tunisia's opinion swing came in October's parliamentary election when the Islamist Ennahda Party lost to Nidaa Tounes.

In the 2011 election, Ennahda had won and formed government, followed by amendments to the constitution. Nidaa Tounes's parliamentary victory and the success of Mr Essebsi underline a democratic transition of power — something that no other Arab country — Iraq's is a complicated case — witnessed.

Also read: [Tunisia's Islamists down but not out after election defeat](#)

In fact, there has been a deplorable relapse into authoritarianism and anarchy. Egypt showed some promise when Hosni Mubarak was overthrown, followed by a fair election that brought Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood to power.

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His overthrow by then army chief Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has landed Egypt back into a dictatorship that is seen as worse than that of Hosni Mubarak.

Great tragedies occurred in Syria and Libya where the Arab Spring gave way to a multilateral civil war in which fundamentalist militias and several Al Qaeda offshoots have been waging savage battles for aims that have nothing to do with what the Arab Spring was originally meant to achieve.

The ultimate sufferers are the people, especially in Syria, where more than 200,000 civilians have been killed and millions displaced. The most disturbing element has been the rise of the so-called Islamic State whose stunning military victories seem to threaten the Middle East's century-old borders.

Observers had doubted whether Ennahda would give up power easily, though there is no doubt one reason for Ennahda's cautious governance was the lesson it must have learnt from the way the Muslim Brotherhood lost power in Egypt. Nevertheless, the ease with which the transition has taken place holds out hope.

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Power breakdowns

TWO large power breakdowns that affected huge swathes of the country have occurred within a period of 10 days.

In both cases, the restoration of power took many hours. And in both cases the cause of the breakdown lay in the Guddu thermal power station and its transmission lines.

Guddu is one of the oldest power plants in the country, and has three large transmission lines that feed its output to Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan.

Take a look: [Resumption of power supply underway: K-Electric](#)

All of Balochistan's power comes from here, and a large amount of the power consumed in Sindh is also generated in Guddu. Given its importance in our power grid, by virtue of its power-generation capacity and central location in transmission, it is sad to see the plant and its transmission lines sinking into a deplorable state of disrepair.

A few years ago, an explosion at the plant occurred in its gas pipelines, again shutting it down and causing a massive power outage. The excuse being given this time is heavy fog, which supposedly caused the line that connects the plant with a grid station at Dadu to trip, and then hampered the movement of restoration teams.

In a sense, the ageing plant and its transmission infrastructure are a perfect metaphor for the advanced state of disrepair of our power infrastructure and the outdated control systems being used to operate it.

For instance, it is astonishing to think that our transmission system cannot handle much more than 15,000MW and that it is laid out in a way that causes severe bottlenecks at critical junctions such as Guddu.

It is also astonishing to note that fog can cause a massive transmission line to trip, and that the tripping can then cascade through the entire provincial transmission system, shutting down the country's largest city for the better part of the day.

The repeated breakdowns are a powerful reminder that our power crisis does not stem from a lack of generation capacity alone, but a poor transmission system, as well as woefully outdated systems to manage potential breakdowns and not allow their consequences to affect the entire system.

It is high time we tackled the problems plaguing the power sector in a holistic manner rather than remedying each defect on its own in an ad hoc fashion.

Until then, we can only hope that breakdowns of this sort are not going to become a regular feature of our lives the way load-shedding has come to be.

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Drug pricing

AFTER more than a year of delaying the matter, the government is finally gearing up to pass a drug pricing policy. Currently, drug prices, which continue to be administered by the government, are being adjusted under ad hoc mechanisms since the last price adjustment was done in 2001.

This is an extremely sensitive matter in a country where proper healthcare and medicines are already beyond the reach for a large segment of the population.

Adding to the complications are the concerns of the drug manufacturers, who feel they have been pushed against the wall by a 13-year-long delay in the revision of drug prices while their production costs escalate rapidly.

Also read: [Dar for balanced drugs policy](#)

According to pharma industry representatives, three large multinational manufacturers have already left the market since 2008, with the latest exit in the last few months. The pharma industry had been ramping up its push for a pricing policy since last year, and finally managed to obtain a directive from the Sindh High Court giving the government the deadline of Dec 29 to produce a comprehensive policy.

As the deadline looms, wheels have finally begun to turn. A series of meetings of the policy board, tasked with

producing the policy, have been held and input sought from industry stakeholders.

Three separate pricing mechanisms are being debated. They are cost plus pricing, average pricing, and reference pricing. Industry favours reference pricing that would peg the prices of drugs to a basket of prices from other countries of a comparable socioeconomic bracket.

Average pricing makes little sense since it does not factor in quality differences between the same medicines in different price ranges.

Cost plus pricing is already proving too difficult for the government to administer in other areas, notably power and gas. It has serious transparency issues, and opens the door to graft.

Reference pricing would see prices rise across the board, something the government is very nervous about.

It is important to keep the interests of the poor in mind when dealing with drug prices, and it is also important to ensure whatever pricing methodology is ultimately agreed on carries an automatic adjustment mechanism in it to ensure transparency and reduce the potential for allegations of graft.

The government has wasted too much time on this important issue. It is time to bring closure to it and produce a drug pricing policy that does not cause a flight of investment while safeguarding the right of access to quality medications for the poor.

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Militancy in urban areas

PRIME Minister Nawaz Sharif has vowed to take the fight against militants to cities and villages across the country, pledging to stamp out terrorism wherever it exists.

In clear and unequivocal words, Mr Sharif has not only accepted that urban Pakistan has a significant militant problem, his statement is a vast improvement on the old formulation that whatever the terrorist and militant presence in urban Pakistan, it is a function of individuals and small splinter groups, and not a systematic, organised presence across the provinces.

Also read: [State will protect every citizen irrespective of religion, sect or caste: Nawaz](#)

Yet, there is much more clarity that the government needs to bring to the issue publicly. In condemning specific atrocities and vowing that those responsible will not be allowed to repeat their crimes, the prime minister left out a significant part of the explanation: identifying the groups involved.

Without identities revealed, groups named, organisations described and methods exposed, the prime minister's vow will amount to little more than a seemingly firm but in

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reality nebulous promise to stamp out terrorism wherever it is found.

Terrorism has a face. It has an identity. The militant groups that organise in the cities have physical networks and infrastructure. It is not just nameless men killed in alleged encounters with the police, as happened in the Sohrab Goth area of Karachi again this week.

If terrorism is to be defeated, it has to first be identified. Names have to be named, networks have to be publicly declared and the full spectrum of extremism and militancy laid bare.

But none of that has occurred so far. Why, for example, does the government not state which groups are active in Punjab, name the leadership, explain the connection between extremist religious centres and terrorist recruiting, and, more to the point, make clear the measures the state is taking to progressively shut down the terrorist and militant organisations that have been identified?

The same applies to the other provinces. Is the federal government able to do more than simply talk about cooperating with the province in counterterrorism efforts? As ever, few details were given by the prime minister.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the state's, particularly the political government's, approach to counterterrorism is to co-opt certain sections of the police and civilian-run intelligence to fight a dirty, clandestine war against unnamed terrorists.

All that the public is ever told is that militants and terrorists are killed in encounters where independent witnesses are nearly never present. But that has not and cannot prove to be a successful strategy — let alone a remotely ethical or legal one — because it is simply about cracking down on visible sides of militancy, not the roots that help grow new cells, more fighters and fresh ideologues.

The prime minister needed to speak firmly and a worried nation needed to hear of the government's resolve. But what is the plan?

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Forced conversions

WHEN Narendra Modi won the elections last year, many wondered whether he would act to dispel the impression — created in part by his own association with organisations that actively propagate Hindutva — that India’s constitutionally mandated secular character was under threat. Unfortunately, to date his government has done little to check the rise of aggressive Hindu nationalism.

In one of the most recent examples of this, multiple reports have emerged of ‘forcible conversions’ of Christians and Muslims to Hinduism, achieved apparently through methods ranging from offers of free food and education to outright threats of violence.

These conversion ceremonies, perversely called ‘homecomings’ in an allusion to the ‘original’ nature of Hinduism, have taken place at the hands of hard-line Hindu groups that are allied with the ruling BJP and that, along with corporate India, played a key role in its electoral success.

Also read: [Indian parliament in chaos over forced conversion protests](#)

The prime minister, meanwhile, has observed a deafening silence on the issue. On Monday, however, his reticence precipitated a storm of criticism in the Indian parliament from opposition lawmakers demanding he

take a stand against the growing incidence of these conversions.

Tainted as he was by the horrific Gujarat riots that occurred on his watch as chief minister of the province in 2002, despite having been cleared of culpability by a Supreme Court investigation, Mr Modi’s election to the highest office in the land was viewed nervously by the minorities.

As prime minister of the world’s largest democracy, it behoves Mr Modi to alleviate these fears aggravated by the strident patronage of ‘cultural revivalism’ by some quarters.

So far, his hands-off approach has sent the resurgent right into overdrive, rewriting school textbooks and calling for the Bhagwad Gita to be declared the national holy book.

The conversions are the latest, most ominous portent of a deepening sense of alienation among minorities in the country. A chauvinist incarnation of Hinduism is on the march.

India need only look across the border to see the devastation that can result when religion becomes the business of the state.

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Afridi's retirement

SEASONED all-rounder Shahid Afridi's decision to retire from One-Day International cricket after the ICC World Cup 2015 is widely seen as a timely one by his critics while it has left a large number of his fans disappointed.

The dashing player who is known for his exhilarating brand of cricket — be it his batting, leg spinners or his breathtaking catches — has enthralled cricket fans all over since his debut in 1996.

However, the cricketer says he wants to leave the game while he is still on top and would prefer to concentrate on the T20 format until the 2016 ICC World T20 in India where he will be leading the Pakistan team.

Also read: [Warhorse Afridi to quit ODIs after World Cup](#)

One of the most experienced players on the international circuit today, Afridi's exploits over the past decade and a half have propelled him into the ranks of the finest all-rounders the game has ever seen.

With a number of records already under his belt, he is now eyeing the feat of completing 8,000 runs and 400 wickets during the upcoming World Cup in Australia and New Zealand before bidding farewell to the 50-over format.

Though Afridi has been in the spotlight for the past year and a half owing to his chequered performances, he recently overcame a bad patch when he turned in a solid all-round show in the five-match series against New Zealand, which has ensured him a place in the squad for next year's extravaganza.

Having led Pakistan a number of times including during the 2011 World Cup, Afridi has had his share of controversies. And yet, one must give him credit for surviving it all on the dint of his abilities and fervour that have allowed him to make a comeback each time the critics wrote him off.

The game of cricket today needs personalities like Afridi; unfortunately, with hardly a suitable replacement in sight on the domestic front, Pakistan cricket will be poorer without a player of Shahid Afridi's calibre and charisma.

Published in Dawn, December 25th, 2014

A new resolve

HAD they had the wisdom years ago to do what they seem to have resolved finally to do now, Pakistan and Afghanistan would have been much better off in terms of their ability to crush a common enemy.

The fact that Isaf commander Gen John Campbell and Afghan army chief Sher Mohammad Karimi should have come together to meet army chief Gen Raheel Sharif shows the realisation, albeit late, that only a joint strategy and coordinated action undertaken with sincerity can produce results and eliminate the safe havens which enable the Taliban on both sides of the Durand Line to spread death and destruction.

Tuesday's meeting between the three generals comes in the wake of several high-level sessions held to chart out a new course at a time the stakeholders consider ideal to undo the follies of the past.

Take a look: [Peshawar attack: Afghanistan, Isaf promise action against Taliban group](#)

The first of these was Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's visit to Islamabad and his meetings with the Pakistani political and military leaderships; then we saw American Secretary of State John Kerry's meeting with Gen Sharif in the US, and lately, the latter's dash to Kabul in the wake of the massacre at the Army Public School in Peshawar.

The [last visit](#) was especially significant because Gen Sharif reportedly shared with Kabul incriminating evidence Pakistan had obtained about the involvement of the Afghanistan-based TTP leadership in the Dec 16 carnage.

An even more significant development was the Afghan National Army's operation earlier this week against the Taliban militants in the Dangam district of the Kunar province bordering Pakistan.

By any standards this is a good beginning, which needs to be built upon. While the world had legitimate concerns regarding the presence of militant sanctuaries on Pakistani soil, Islamabad's protestations that there were safe havens on the other side, too, seldom evoked a sympathetic response.

With Hamid Karzai gone, there are reasons to believe that President Ghani is sensitive to Pakistan's concerns and realises that the common enemy cannot be neutralised without wholehearted cooperation at the political and military levels.

The latter breaks down into details that include operational matters and intelligence sharing. Afghanistan is in transition in more ways than one, so it would be naive to believe that there is going to be total harmony between Islamabad and Kabul on the shape of things to come. But elements that have the frightening potential to divide them are less pervasive than the multiplicity of common interests uniting them.

Published in Dawn, December 25th, 2014

Larger military role

IN the fight against militancy, the military has and will have an important role to play given that counter-insurgencies still need to be conducted across swathes of territory in Fata and the movement of militants across the Pak-Afghan border in both direction needs to be curbed.

Beyond that, however, an expansive role for the military would represent a renewed militarisation of security policy that will have far-reaching, hard-to-reverse consequences. Consider the call by Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan yesterday for Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh to not only keep army personnel already deployed in those provinces on security duties but to extend the cover of Article 245 to army operations inside those provinces.

Also read: [Political leaders reach consensus on military courts](#)

It is striking that while the interior minister flatly claimed that the police forces of the country were not trained or equipped to deal with counterterrorism problems, his request to the provinces outside Punjab indicated a belief that somehow the military is trained and equipped to deal with counterterrorism operations.

But is that necessarily the case? While the military has introduced training for counter-insurgency environments, has it really both the resources and the training to deal

with terrorist networks in urban environments? No one appears to have thought to ask that question.

Far too often, when the civilian side of the state is known or believed to not have the required capacity to deal with a particular problem, the military is automatically assumed to already possess those capabilities.

Sometimes that leads to truly alarming decisions, such as the one taken by parliamentary leaders yesterday that military courts be instituted across the country to try terror suspects. While the country is facing an unprecedented threat, is the impulse to draw the military further into the fabric of urban, and even rural, administration a remotely good idea?

Military courts have different standards of proof, offer fewer protections to the accused and when its relatively abrupt systems are applied to a civilian environment can lead to gross miscarriages of justice.

The country has already seen in the case of missing persons that simply because the military believes someone to be a militant or terrorist, the individual is not necessarily proved to be one.

Does it make sense to bypass altogether a well-developed, civilian-led judicial system simply because that system's implementation may be flawed?

Would it not be far better to urgently consult the judicial and legal community and draw up a list of measures that can be taken to make way for a more responsive criminal justice system that ensures terrorists are convicted

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without sacrificing the principles of a civilian-led democratic polity, no matter if that polity is dealing with a fundamental threat to its existence?

In such matters, doing the right thing is often harder than simply bowing to the logic of expediency. But the country should not give up its democratic core to fight the enemy.

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A sombre Christmas

IN the shadow of the Peshawar school massacre, the air of festivity that prevails at this time of year — both in connection with Christmas and the Quaid’s birth anniversary — is conspicuously absent.

For although, for a very long time now, each year in Pakistan has borne witness to much spilling of innocent blood at the hands of violent extremists, this was one depredation too many, the cost it exacted too monstrous, and its timing too recent, to make the display of anything resembling good cheer seem appropriate.

Christmas celebrations yesterday were therefore low-key, almost sombre. Members of the Christian community had, in the immediate aftermath of the attack, announced their intention to tone down the day’s commemorations. A number of them — several dressed as Santa Claus — had taken out a rally in Karachi to express solidarity with

the rest of the country, holding placards saying “united we stand in grief and sorrow”.

Take a look: [Christmas celebrations across Pakistan](#)

The question is, how far does the majority stand united with them in their time of grief and sorrow? After the bombing of the All Saints Church in Peshawar in September 2013, there was undoubtedly an outpouring of sympathy for the Christian community, but it was all too brief.

Three weeks later, Eid was celebrated across Pakistan with ‘customary fervour’. Newspapers reported that transporters fleeced commuters by hiking fares, buyers at cattle markets were made to pay illegal exit fees, and outlawed outfits also collected animal hides.

In short, all was well with the world. There were no special prayers for the community, no indication that the recent loss of around 80 precious lives was remembered.

This year, among other incidents, has seen the horrific lynching of a Christian couple in Punjab on allegations of blasphemy, more evidence that laws pertaining to it disproportionately impact the minorities. Jinnah’s Pakistan was to have been a very different place. If one thing is clear after so many years of bloodletting, it is that no Pakistani — whether Christian, Hindu or Sikh — should feel marginalised for his faith.

Published in Dawn, December 26th, 2014

Friday sermons

Shocking though it is that it took savagery on the scale seen in Peshawar last week to shake Pakistani society out of its stupor regarding the spread of violent extremism, there does now seem to be some introspection under way.

At the level of the state, the government has made a renewed pledge to fight this hydra-headed monster, and while the wisdom of some of the moves announced is being challenged, there is no doubt that such political consensus and will is urgently needed. At the societal level, too, several hard, ugly realities that have gone largely ignored by the majority are being confronted, even if reluctantly.

Also read: [Action likely against seminaries involved in militancy](#)

Foremost is the one that is also perhaps the most ironic: that religion and the pulpit have been hijacked by groups and individuals intent on spreading mischief and sowing divisions; society itself has been infected by deep-rooted extremism that is exacerbating already dangerous divisions.

This may not necessarily lead individual citizens to resort to physical violence, but it certainly constitutes the bed from which the seeds of intolerance and bigotry take nourishment; the fact that extremist views are rife in society explains why it has taken Pakistanis so long to

recognise the problem, despite suffering years of witnessing innocents being slaughtered.

Like all societal malaises, the path to redemption is fraught with challenges, but some measures are readily apparent. These should apply immediately to the misuse of mosques in general, and in particular to the Friday sermons in which views that are divisionary and that often amount to outright hate-speech or incitement to violence are disseminated.

These must be curtailed. One solution can lie in crowd-sourcing: citizens can be encouraged to report violations, with the state then stepping in to investigate and apply the law.

All mosques and their khateebis should be registered with the government, and the merits of requiring religious figures to apply for a licence to deliver the Friday sermon, which goes out over loudspeakers, can be considered.

It is already the case that the Friday congregations can only take place in some, and not all, places of worship; the oversight net can be tightened by the law requiring that all sermons be recorded and the records kept in order and be readily available.

To stem the tide of extremism in society, extraordinary measures are needed. Perhaps even more than the state, it is the people themselves that need to step up to the challenge.

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Military courts

THAT these are trying times was fully evidenced by the presence on Wednesday of all the political parties around the table for an emergency discussion on the ways to deal with the monster of terrorism.

Ultimately, it seems, they were required to be there to endorse the setting up of special courts to be headed by military officials. Some of the parties present agreed with the idea readily. Others took their time, but in the end were made to see 'reason' and agree to a controversial mode of 'speedy justice'.

Also read: [How the reluctant were brought round](#)

True, the civilian justice system is flawed and tardy in the dispensation of justice. But what will military courts achieve, given the increasing possibility of miscarriage of justice that experience has shown they bring with them? They not only encroach on the civilian domain of justice, they often render it redundant.

The Supreme Court judges had also assembled in Islamabad on Wednesday to discuss ways of streamlining the trial proceedings and meet the demand for expeditious justice. But by the end of the day it was clear that their effort was deemed insufficient for dealing with terrorism if not altogether irrelevant.

Notwithstanding the unusual circumstances and the justifications that have been given for the military courts,

this was not a happy sight. It was not a happy sign for those who had been pursuing the cause of an independent judiciary.

It was the confirmation of the worst fears of those who have been accusing the governments of neglecting the job of building upon the free-judiciary theme to a point where the judges could be fully empowered. In what could lead to greater complications, these civilian courts may now be asked to adjudicate on the validity of the military courts.

A few politicians at the meeting in which the consensus on setting up the special courts was reached did express their reservations, but apparently that was more out of ritual. It was clear that the army leadership which was also present was not going to settle for anything less than military courts.

Some of the politicians were keen on making an impact on the proceedings, and they insisted on a time frame for the law. The emphasis was not needed since everyone knew that the military courts would come with a time frame. Then apprehensions were expressed about the possible misuse of the law against political workers — whereas there should have been concern about it being used against people in general above political affiliations.

The politicians were there not in the interest of the parties, but to give their feedback on how the superimposing of the military over the civilian will by and large affect the system that they have a responsibility to run and improve. Back in the comfort of their camps,

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they should be asking themselves whether they fulfilled this responsibility.

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Missing Benazir

IN a country caught in a vicious circle, a good amount of time is spent pondering over 'what could have been'. Just a few days ago, we spent Dec 25, the Quaid's birthday, imagining what Pakistan's founder could have achieved had he not died so soon after the country's birth.

On Jan 5 — which is Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's birthday — the topic will be the late leader's contribution to popular politics, his successes and blunders, and, of course, his unfulfilled promise.

Today, on Dec 27, on the seventh death anniversary of Benazir Bhutto, the talk will focus on how we lost her just when she showed signs of a maturity worthy of national leadership.

It is not a question of comparison with other popular leaders of the past; the feeling, compounded by the wide posthumous approval of Benazir, is that she was brutally taken away from us at a time when the country was in dire need of her.

Also read: [Despite being neglected Amin Fahim won't leave PPP](#)

Much of this approval can be ascribed to our tendency to accept the merit of a politician when he or she is no more. All three politicians mentioned were less controversial, in fact the subject of unconditional reverence, when they were not there to counter anyone's politics.

So what is it that we now surmise Benazir could have achieved had she taken up the reins of government in 2008? There is agreement that as the force behind the Charter of Democracy she would have shunned confrontation (of the 1990s, lest we forget) and promoted reconciliation. But then, despite all the respect that she has received in recent years, there is some truth to the argument that it was she who initiated compromise and a taming of the old PPP, manifest in her 'deal' with Pervez Musharraf.

Her heir, Asif Ali Zardari, it is argued, was only following her lead when he solicited partnerships with political opponents of all stripes and when he made 'ideological adjustments'.

Yes, Mr Zardari lacked Benazir's charisma, and even more importantly, her reputation. That has led to comparisons between his recent troubled stint, and how it could have been had Benazir been there to spearhead this country through a full term in office, something she was never allowed to do.

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But more than that, what many are missing is Benazir Bhutto the opposition leader. It was a role in which she made so much sense — just like her party which has since been replaced by Mr Zardari's passive PPP, which offers the people across Pakistan little in its latest avatar.

It is a more fearful than careful player who is too wise for its own good. Meanwhile, a very large number of Pakistanis would find it difficult to even imagine Benazir abstaining from opposition politics which had been the PPP's forte. Every time Mr Zardari so proudly claims to be not doing politics he creates a longing for the past and for what could have been.

Published in Dawn, December 27th, 2014

Picture of hunger

WEARY years of experience have taught Pakistanis that there is often a huge gap between the good intentions of the government of the day and its ability to mobilise the political will required to actually produce tangible improvements on the ground.

For this reason, while the establishment of a federal-level National Food Security Commission must be welcomed, we must also stress on the need for it to truly prove its mettle over the coming months and years. Headed by the prime minister and with a federal minister as the deputy

chairman, the plan to set up such a commission was announced as part of the 2014-15 budget.

As reported, the commission has well-defined areas to work on: from getting the centre, the provinces and the administrative regions to agree on a policy for food security, to directing resources for the development of agriculture, strengthening the export infrastructure, and ensuring sufficient nourishment for vulnerable segments.

Also read: [Climate change: Food security should be top priority for Pakistan](#)

As in other areas of devolution, in the case of agriculture too, it seems that the centre and the provinces have not been able to coordinate — paving the way for hunger and malnutrition for large sections of the population.

It is to be fervently hoped that this commission proves of more value than others of a similar nature that have been seen over the decades.

The fact of the matter is that despite being a country with agriculture as the base of its economy, there are legions of poor that do not have enough food. Indeed, surveys have shown that around 60pc of the country's population could be food insecure with women and children bearing the brunt.

From food scarcity to the rising prices of edibles, and from malnutrition to outright hunger, Pakistan desperately needs to address its food security issues, to say nothing of updating and making more productive the agricultural

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sector which continues to depend on outmoded practices that do not have ideal cost-benefit ratios.

The problems are many and critical; will the commission prove itself up to the task?

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Gasping for gas

THE gas shortages in Punjab have created a dire situation where people have to manage without the fuel to cook food or heat homes and water when temperatures are hitting lows of four degrees Celsius.

The situation was aggravated in the past seven days due to an outage at the Sui gas field that caused a drop of almost 250 million cubic feet of gas per day in the system, although that problem appears to have been rectified as of Thursday. But the shortages are growing by the year.

In December 2011, for example, the size of the nationwide shortfall crossed a benchmark of one billion cubic feet per day. This winter it crossed 2bcfd, meaning it doubled in three years.

Also read: [Govt to keep increasing power and gas tariffs, IMF assured](#)

At least a quarter of this growth in demand was the result of new gas connections granted by the previous government. The present government has also abandoned any effort to freeze the grant of new gas connections, because the pressures creating the demand are too powerful to resist through simple executive actions.

Only a few days ago, the MD of SNGPL said he had a backlog of 1.5m applications for new connections. By all accounts, demand for natural gas will continue to grow exponentially in the years to come.

But all is not lost. Some steps to increase supplies are seeing credible movement. An LNG import terminal, with a capacity of 600mmcf, is scheduled to become operational by end January. A pipeline to bring an additional 1.3bcfd from Turkmenistan is moving ahead as well, although a significant question mark hangs over the project. But even in the best-case scenario, these projects will plug today's shortfall by 2017, by which time the gap would have grown bigger still.

In fact, all steps being taken to increase supplies will always lag behind the pace of demand. Therefore, it is important to realise that the shortages have become a permanent feature of our lives. In an era of ever-dwindling supplies, it is necessary to think about adapting to the shortages in addition to increasing supplies.

Reducing leakages from the distribution system and urging efficiency in the utilisation of gas is crucial. But these priorities need to be supplemented by proper pricing reform as well as improved building codes to ensure that new homes are more heat-efficient. Weaning ourselves off our addiction to natural gas will not be easy, but it is the only way forward.

Published in Dawn, December 27th, 2014

Terror financing

FOR all the emphasis the National Action Plan puts on various measures to combat terrorism, it is interesting to note the scant attention it gives to the question of financing terrorist activities. The sheer reluctance of the authorities to put in place the legislative framework and the organisational capability to track the movement of funds connected with illicit and militant activities is painfully obvious. Earlier this year, Pakistan narrowly missed being blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force for its failure to comply with international standards for monitoring and intercepting funds connected with illicit and militant activities. Following this, the government hurriedly developed an action plan in order to comply with its obligations to the international community.

Earlier this month, a monitoring team from the Asia Pacific Group smiled upon the government's efforts to implement the action plan, although the final word will be issued in February 2015 when the FATF will study the APG's findings and issue its own statement. By then it would have been a year since the original threat to blacklist Pakistan, and four years since the FATF first said that Pakistan was posing "a risk to the international financial system". Where NAP addresses in detail areas such as the judicial framework required to fight terrorism, as well as the media's role in regulating the public discourse, it is baffling to see the government's strained reluctance to move against terror financing over this time. A delay of four years is far too long when urgent action is required to implement a credible framework to track and intercept terror financing. Even now, NAP makes little mention of what is being done along these lines. We can only hope that the latest action plan, acknowledged by the APG with a nod of approval and a handshake a few weeks ago, will be endorsed by the FATF in February, and will subsequently be communicated to the public alongside all the other measures announced in NAP, and that we will see their strenuous enforcement.

Published in Dawn, December 28th, 2014

Coverage of militancy

TO read through the 46 recommendations issued by the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Information, Broadcasting and National Heritage after its meeting on Wednesday is to run the gamut between good intentions and the deeply dangerous. Opening with "the press shall not lend itself to the projection of crime terrorism as heroic and the criminals, terrorists, as heroes [sic]", it goes on to highlight several laws regarding the media and oversight of it. But other briefly put clauses amount to imposing a media blackout on the activities of militants and terrorists, preventing media houses from carrying out their duties and depriving the public of its right to stay abreast of events. Consider, for example, the baldly stated recommendation # 2: "Terrorists' statements will not be given coverage by any segment of the media"; similarly, the 30th point is that "media should ensure that no coverage is given to proscribed organisations... " adding "images and statements of such militant groups or individuals should not be aired".

There is no quibble that anything in support of militant or terrorist groups must not find its way on the media. However, it is the media's central mandate to report on the actions and the outcomes thereof of such groups. Such are the realities of the country and to try and prevent the media from bringing them into the public domain is to open the doors of censorship. The list of recommendations seems to put the onus of the country's

situation on the media's reportage of it. For the journalists, cameramen and others on the front line to report on what the National Assembly committee referred to as a "war", this is all the more outrageous given that many find themselves caught between violent groups and state actors, Balochistan and Fata being cases in point. True, there have been some regrettable slippages, and these should continue to be called out, but there is nothing to be gained from censorship; media houses must themselves tighten editorial control. Noting the youth-oriented nature of society, the recommendations end with some "psycho-social" guidelines for the media, one of which is "don't repeat bad news too often"; what the media reports would be different if circumstances were different — which is in the hands of the state. Pakistan's media freedoms were won after a long battle in which political cadres were also involved; these must not be sacrificed.

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The fog thickens

IT has been more than 15 years now that a thick blanket of foul fog has been enveloping large parts of the country in the winter months, disrupting flights, road and rail travel and the movement of goods, as well as causing numerous health issues. More than 30 flights have been diverted from landing at Lahore and Islamabad airports in the last 10 days, while the numbers for delayed departures and cancellations are far higher. Likewise, large sections of the motorway stretching from Peshawar to Faisalabad have been shut down on many days. Power lines start tripping due to elevated moisture levels, and recently a large-scale power blackout across Sindh, including the city of Karachi, was blamed on the tripping of a critical transmission line due to the fog. When a fire at the Sui gas field led to a weeklong outage of gas supplies during days when the mercury was hitting lows of four degrees Celsius, the deployment of repair teams was also severely hampered by the fog, causing long delays in the resumption of supplies. Health professionals report an increase in patient turnover of roughly 30pc in respiratory ailments as well as cardiac complications that they attribute to the fog.

For more than a decade and a half now, the fog has been crippling day-to-day life and the conduct of business every winter across a large swathe of the country. Yet to this day there is no concerted attention given to the problem from the highest levels of government, where

the response is little more than a shrug and a prayer. Whatever efforts exist to understand the problem and cope with its consequences are being undertaken by individual government departments on their own initiative. The CAA has only recently proposed the installation of a Category 3 Instrument Landing System to maintain continuous flight operations through zero visibility, and the Motorway Police manage alternate routes during closures. Hospitals struggle to cope with the rise in patient turnover, while the meteorological department tries in vain to generate forecasts for the location, intensity and duration of the fog. Suparco has undertaken a study of its chemical composition, and identified elevated concentrations of ammonium sulphate in fog samples, a chemical compound produced by the burning of low-quality coal which they say is coming from across the border, where the problem is just as severe. But even that study was undertaken more than a decade after the foggy winters began, and does not conclusively establish whether the compound in question actually causes the fog.

On their own the governments of both India and Pakistan can do nothing to rid themselves of this menace. More can be done to help manage its impact. But to rid ourselves of this problem, concerted action is required from both countries, for which they must learn to work with each other.

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Committee surfeit

Fifteen committees, dozens of members, the interior minister to chair 11 of those committees — is the National Action Plan to combat terrorism destined to suffer that oldest of fates — death by committee?

To be sure, the complexity of the militant threat requires a range of interrelated and sustained responses by the state. Militancy will not be defeated by edict. Yet, a multiple committee system to be superimposed over the pre-existing decision-making and administrative systems is rife with potential of the wrong kind.

Consider the heavy bureaucratic presence in several of the committees that have been notified. Trained and schooled in a cautious, plodding style of administration, the bureaucrats' chief contribution is likely to be to endlessly debate issues, pass files back and forth, delay decisions and mitigate risk to themselves and their organisations as much as possible.

Also read: [PM summons meeting to review progress on National Action Plan](#)

Where that is not likely to be the case, it is in committees with the military leadership participating. There the decisions will likely skew towards whatever the uniformed officers suggest, rendering meaningless such broad-based committees to begin with.

Yet, it is not just the composition of many of the committees under NAP that is the problem, it is their sheer number too. Consider the formation of a new committee to deal with the Karachi law and order problem. Members are to include the interior minister, Sindh governor and chief minister and DG Rangers. But the Karachi issue has for more than 15 months seen several high-profile meetings, an on-again, off-again security operation and killings of alleged terrorists in purported encounters. Is the new Karachi committee to pick up where the old decisions left off?

Will the Karachi committee replace other coordination mechanisms between the federal and provincial governments and security apparatus? With no real clarity of mandate offered by the PML-N government but the Karachi committee already notified, will ad hocism prevail? History suggests so.

Consider also there are to be separate committees, and so separate recommendations, on the issues of sectarianism, proscribed groups, hate speech and madressah regulation. Simply combining those separate recommendations may require another committee at the next stage. And finally consider the sheer number of meetings key political and military officials are scheduled to attend thanks to the government's committee system. It is inconceivable that more than a few meetings will have the full attention and interest of the participants.

The problem with recommendations is that it delays action and bypasses a fairly well-developed state system. If proscribed groups are already legally banned, then why

not simply authorise the security, intelligence and legal apparatus to ensure those groups are shut down?

If hate speech is in fact illegal, then why not have local administrations act against proponents of it immediately? Why reinvent the wheel each time instead of simply getting the existing wheels to turn?

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Online complaints

THE move by the Karachi police to allow citizens to register online complaints that can be converted into First Information Reports appears to be a step in the right direction, promoting openness and access.

The move replicates a similar project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where, unfortunately, the experiment has not been very encouraging, owing in part to low computer literacy. One hopes the move in Karachi proves more successful, and that apart from recording citizens' grievances the registering of complaints gives a broader picture of the nature and extent of crime that infests this mega city.

Also read: [Karachi police: Online FIR registration launched](#)

However, there are points to be considered. The principal issue that the police are trying to respond to is the widespread complaint that the processing of registering an FIR at a police station is cumbersome, fraught with politics and involves bribery.

An online registration system will bypass the need to interface directly with the police, at least at the initial step of the complaint registration process. But what then? As explained by the Karachi police chief himself at a ceremony to launch the online portal on Friday, the police will have to vet every single one of the complaints to determine which are genuine and which are fake.

Are there measures in place that will stop the police from simply transferring the system of harassment of complainants to the next step, the one at which the police will determine whether or not to investigate a complaint? It is here that liaising with the CPLC and allowing them access to the complaints is important.

Meanwhile, broader police reforms are what all provincial governments need to look into. What is really needed to make the police more responsive to the needs of the citizenry is a two-fold process: depoliticisation and independent accountability.

The National Public Safety Commissions proposed during the Musharraf era may be anathema to many politicians because the idea emanated from a military regime, but the idea was a sound one, and precisely what is used in jurisdictions around the world where the police are considered an ally of the citizens, not a presumptive enemy.

The idea in essence is to have a forum where the public can go to register complaints against the police that are independently and competently investigated and where redress can be ensured. But for that to happen and for the police to be transformed into a force that truly works for the public good, depoliticisation must be effected.

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Rail danger points

THE unmanned railway level crossings have been a serious problem over the years. They act as death traps for the impatient and the indiscreet the whole year through but in the winter months the danger is heightened because of poor visibility caused by dense fog in various parts of the country. Only last Wednesday, three people were reported killed at a railway level crossing near Mian Channu. Dense fog was again blamed, which doesn't really absolve those who must act to improve the situation at unmanned crossings. This is no small task, though. There are a total of 4,072 railway crossings in the country, according to the Ministry of Railways figures given on Nov 30. Of them 2,731 are unmanned crossings. The 'main line' between Peshawar and Karachi itself has 360 unmanned crossings, while the rest are located on branch lines that may connect any two smaller stations.

A majority of accidents at level crossings take place on the branch lines and since the railways happen to be faced with so many issues that need urgent redress, it is easy for people to blame this negligence, too, on the department. The fact, however, is that the provincial governments in their respective areas have to work closely with the railways to ensure safety at these crossings, which can best be done by converting these unmanned points into efficiently manned ones. Amid all the pledges for improving the working of the railways in the country, the ministry had last year written to the provincial governments, asking them to fulfil their obligations under the law. The letter noted that "under Section 12 of the Railways Act 1890, the responsibility for financing for manning the unmanned level crossings lies with the concerned path-/road-owning authority". There have since been reports that the Punjab government has allocated a sum for upgrading unmanned level crossings, whereas calls for other provinces to commit resources to this urgent requirement have time and again been made. Everyone needs to realise the need for some fast-track work here. There are accidents to be avoided.

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Nato withdrawal

That the Kabul ceremony marking the official closure of Nato's mission in Afghanistan should have been held in secret speaks volumes for the end-result of America's 13-year war in that country.

The war cost nearly a trillion dollars and human lives whose number is yet to be assessed. Launching Operation Enduring Freedom on Oct 7, 2001, in the wake of 9/11, former president George Bush Jr. said the aim was to stamp out Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban.

He believed he would succeed because America was "supported by the collective will of the world". Thirteen years later, the bloodshed and destruction dominate far more than Washington's military successes.

The Taliban have not been beaten, America's diplomatic somersault adding to their leadership's morale. Having for years denounced the Taliban using the choicest adjectives, the US entered into 'secret' talks with them in Doha without being clear about its goals.

Then, as the end of the drawdown neared, the Pentagon announced it would not target Mullah Omar, the man whose head had a prize, and other Taliban so long as they didn't pose "a direct threat" to the US.

Take a look: [Taliban claim Nato 'defeat' in 13-year Afghan war](#)

Now President Ashraf Ghani and his advisers should join heads to wonder whether an attack on Afghan security forces and civilian targets falls within the category of "a direct threat" to the 12,000 troops the Pentagon has left behind.

Speaking at the ceremony held in a gymnasium, Isaf commander Gen John Campbell declared, "We have lifted the Afghan people out of the darkness of despair and given them hope for the future". The reality is the Afghan people were probably never in greater despair than they are now, and the hope the general talked about appears nowhere on the horizon. Instead, a bigger and more frightening question mark hangs over the country's future.

Is the 'system' America has left behind capable of survival, stamping out militancy and launching Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction? Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, on whom the Americans relied for 13 years in a vain attempt to give democracy and stability to Afghanistan, was seen as corrupt and inefficient.

He lacked the qualities expected of a wartime leader who could bring his country's disparate ethnic groups together, effect a grand reconciliation and heal the wounds of war to pave the way for a peaceful post-America Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is just one milestone in America's foreign misadventures. Despite commanding enormous economic, military and technological power, US actions

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created chaos in Libya and Iraq, throwing both into anarchy the fundamentalist forces were quick to exploit.

The Taliban also gained from the trust deficit between Pakistan and America. The least Washington can do now is to strike some understanding with Afghanistan's neighbours, especially Islamabad, to ensure peace and a semblance of political order in a country that has been a war theatre for more than three decades.

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Karachi fire

IT is a mercy that no loss of life was reported in the huge fire that engulfed Karachi's Timber Market area late Saturday night, for the damage sustained is immense.

While the cause of the conflagration is as yet uncertain — the Sindh government has constituted an inquiry committee — by the time the flames were brought under control 12 hours later, some 400 shops, flats and godowns, including three multi-storey buildings, had been destroyed and the lives hundreds of people shattered. Women watched home and hearth go up in smoke, and traders and manufacturers stared into a financial abyss.

Could the uncontrolled spread of the fire have been halted sooner? Had the fire department responded

promptly and fully equipped, perhaps yes. There are complaints that initially it faced issues regarding manpower, poorly maintained equipment and water shortage, and reinforcements from organisations such as the Pakistan Navy and the KPT had to be called in.

Also read: [Sindh govt responded immediately to timber fire: Sharjeel Memon](#)

Meanwhile, firefighters say that they faced challenges of access given the narrowness of the streets and alleys, and because of the manner in which structures in this densely congested area are huddled one on top of the other.

Will any lessons be learnt? The fire department obviously needs to up its performance. Then, calling for city governments to ensure that adequate fire safety measures are available in all buildings, and to enforce the rules regarding haphazard construction and encroachments, would be natural. But such demands appear utopian in the context of Pakistan, where what little is planned is regulated even less.

What is required is not just a concerted push at the administrative level, but also the understanding and collaboration of the people themselves, who need to see regulation as something that is in their own interest.

In hindsight, it is possible to speculate on the many measures that could have saved more infrastructure at the Timber Market. But all of them begin with people submitting themselves to the rules the state imposes, and

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structures of governance showing the mettle to handle crises.

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Resurrecting Nacta

THE revival of the National Counter-Terrorism Authority, lying dormant under the PML-N government, as it did during much of the last PPP government's tenure, is a seemingly welcome move.

For long, the country has needed a counterterrorism think tank, as it were, as well as a body that could play a coordinating role among the myriad intelligence agencies and sub-agencies that exist at the national and provincial levels.

Also read: [Changing Titanic's course](#)

However, in the so-called reinvigoration of Nacta may lie the authority's quick irrelevance. For one, the issue of keeping Nacta subordinate to the interior ministry — the interior minister via the Nacta executive committee — has not been revisited in the flurry of legislative and administrative debates that have taken place since the Peshawar carnage.

What that effectively means is that Nacta will take its place alongside, rather than higher in, the administrative

chain that comprises the very agencies whose performance it is supposed to help improve.

Moreover, it seems quite unlikely that as the head of the executive committee, the interior minister will allow the Nacta coordinator to have a powerful or assertive role. History suggests that interior ministers by and large prefer yes-men to senior officials with an independent streak.

There is though an even bigger problem apparent: the National Action Plan and the two-tiered committee system that the prime minister has introduced has almost completely replicated the job of Nacta.

From recommendations on how to fight sectarianism and hate speech to creating committees that will coordinate how to improve the law and order situation in Karachi and tackle the militant infrastructure in parts of Punjab, the NAP system that has been created will be doing virtually everything that Nacta is meant to do.

Will Nacta own those decisions or try and reverse some of them? Will the interior minister use the Nacta umbrella to try and revive his own master plan, the National Internal Security Policy that had largely been forgotten?

Most importantly, will Nacta be able to develop any institutional role to ensure that military-run intelligence agencies cooperate with it and allow Nacta to play a bridging role between the military and civilian-run intelligence arms of the state?

Perhaps the government has a plan that will make the various parts of the counterterrorism machinery come together as a cohesive whole. But if that plan does exist or is in the process of itself coming together, the nation is none the wiser.

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Taxing oil

Ever since the oil subsidy was eliminated in FY2009, the government has been reaping an unexpected windfall in the form of higher revenues from oil as the rising prices also increased the amounts realised through the general sales tax and development surcharges on oil.

In FY2008, the federal government collected Rs14.5bn under the petroleum development levy. The next year, as all oil subsidies were withdrawn and prices at the pump soared, the same collection came in at Rs112bn.

GST collections experienced a similar windfall, prompting the government to congratulate itself in the economic survey that year for “the significant improvement in fiscal performance in FY2008-09.”

As oil prices remained persistently above \$100 over the years since then, the windfall gains on the revenue side became a permanent assumption underlying our fiscal framework.

Additional benefits came to the government in the form of spiralling share prices and profits of state-owned oil and gas firms, and the dividends they were able to pay.

All of that is now changing. Now that oil prices have started plummeting in international markets, the government has passed on some of this decrease to the pump, but is caught in the consequences of the fiscal framework.

Reliable data on the revenue impact of declining oil prices is not available. There are widespread suspicions that officers of the Federal Board of Revenue are trying to show revenue weaknesses from other areas as losses on account of the reduction in oil prices.

What is reliably known, however, is that the government is feeling the pinch and has therefore notified an increase in the rate of GST applicable to oil sales, taking the rate from 17pc to 22pc.

This is a regrettable step, especially since no such effort was made to cushion the impact of spiralling prices for consumers when the upward climb in oil prices began back in 2008.

The step to notify an increase in the GST rate shows how dependent the government has become on the easy revenue windfall that came with high oil prices. The decline in oil prices ought to be passed fully through to the consumer, just like the increases were passed through fully in 2008.

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If the fiscal framework is constrained as a consequence, the government should walk the hard road of tax reform rather than lean so heavily on withholding taxes to shore up its revenues.

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Fire tragedy compounded

Another inquiry committee has been constituted, compensation announced, and good intentions expressed. Is there any hope, though, of the root causes of the problem actually being addressed?

The fire that broke out in Lahore's congested Anarkali Bazaar on Monday evening rapidly engulfed the Alkareem Market Plaza, leading to the loss of at least 13 lives and considerable damage to merchandise and infrastructure. This occurred just a day after Karachi's Timber Market area was similarly burnt to ashes.

The causes have yet to be ascertained, but the lessons remain the same. Coordination among civic agencies such as the fire department and rescue squads needs urgent improvement; tight alleyways and multifarious encroachments that characterise Anarkali, Timber Market and other such venues across the country pose a formidable challenge of access to firefighting and rescue teams; and most importantly, the need for public

buildings to be constructed to at least some modicum of safety standards, with much stricter regulation.

Reportedly, there was just a single entry-exit door at the multistorey Alkareem Market Plaza which housed dozens of shops. The fact that most of the deaths occurred as a result of suffocation tells its own tragic tale.

On paper, the solution is simple and in some cases, already required: fire exits, multiple entrances, the availability of firefighting equipment, etc. In reality, though, the efforts made by toothless civic bodies are often nullified by a citizenry that refuses to see safety regulations as protections that benefit primarily itself.

From both recent tragedies, there is a lesson to be drawn, too, about systems of governance. When the latter is remote, as is the case in the absence of local government systems, there is risk of a huge distance between intentions and the effect on the ground — such as the preparedness of firefighting departments or the will to remove encroachments.

Local governments, however, put administrators in close proximity with the people — they are accessible and accountable. The path to correction must be taken at multiple levels, top-down and bottom-up.

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Military courts: a wrong move

PAKISTAN should not have military courts, not in the expanded form envisioned by the military and political leadership of the country, not to try civilians on terrorism charges and not even for a limited period of time.

Military courts are simply not compatible with a constitutional democracy.

In the immediate aftermath of the Peshawar school massacre, politicians and the military leadership rightly came together to respond urgently to the terror threat that stalks this country.

Also read: [PTI, PPP rethink support for mly courts](#)

What they did wrong was to decide on military courts as the lynchpin of a new strategy to fight terrorism.

Perhaps with a country convulsed with grief and the PML-N government on weak ground — given that until recently the party was insisting on dialogue with the elements behind the Peshawar calamity — there was little resistance to the military's demand that terrorist suspects be tried in military courts, and presumably summarily executed thereafter.

Perhaps also the full range of opposition political parties present were overawed by the presence of the army chief and DG ISI in Peshawar, and those opposed to military courts decided that it was futile to oppose them in the circumstances.

Whatever the thinking of the political leadership that has brought the country to the verge of amending the Constitution and sundry laws to allow military courts to try terrorism suspects, it was unquestionably wrong.

Belatedly, some conscientious members of the political leadership have begun to speak out, led by senators who are perhaps less encumbered by party discipline than members of other legislatures.

When a new system of so-called justice requires overriding constitutionally guaranteed rights and the independence of the judiciary, surely that is no solution — even to terrorism and militancy.

There is a further problem, one mostly left unsaid: military courts are a populist move, meant to show a frightened public that the state can still be relied on to keep the peace and secure the nation.

Such populism often only begets more populism, leading to more deviations from the democratic path until there is no democracy left, not even in name.

This country has travelled down the path towards authoritarianism and dictatorship too many times, with too many disastrous consequences, to countenance deviations from a constitutional democracy today.

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The question that should be asked is, why is the criminal justice system so poor at convicting the guilty? There are really just three steps: investigation, prosecution and judicial.

While the courts are often maligned for allowing the accused to walk free, it is at the investigation and prosecution stages that most of the cases are already lost. And where the judiciary is at fault, it is often because of a lack of protection offered to trial judges.

Can those problems not be urgently fixed in Pakistan? Does not a democratic system exist to strengthen and buttress the democratic system? Military courts are certainly not the answer.

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