

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of January, 2015

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Words that wound

THE past few days have seen criticism against content aired on a recent episode of Geo's Subah-i-Pakistan programme — hosted by Amir Liaquat — in which clerics invited on the show made several unpalatable accusations against the country's already stigmatised and persecuted Ahmadi community.

Following a show cause notice by Pemra, the channel apologised for its editorial lapse, stating that “In live programmes it is often difficult to control the crowd and the guests who speak their mind”.

Certainly, there are constraints in live programming which have, on earlier occasions too, resulted in hate speech being aired without check. However, there are ways to circumvent these constraints. One is by including a time delay in such programmes and by carefully vetting potential guests.

Also read: [Geo apologises for hate speech against Ahmadis in Amir Liaquat's show](#)

At the same time, it should be pointed out in the interest of accuracy that on this particular show Mr Liaquat made no attempt to steer the discussion in another direction

and instead, most regrettably, led the applause in what can only be interpreted as appreciation of the remarks.

By its very nature, the media has a multifaceted relationship with society: it reflects its mood, and also impacts the tenor of its discourse. Which is why, understandably so, there is much focus on the media's role as part of the response to the collective realisation — post-Peshawar — that we as a nation have been drifting along a ruinous path.

In these circumstances, the media must be doubly conscious of its responsibilities, among which an important one is to lead and reinforce a counter-narrative that eschews divisive religious rhetoric, without exception and without any ideological bias.

In an environment bristling with many self-righteous 'protectors of the faith', words — even carelessly uttered — can have dire consequences. While there appears no direct link per se between the offending TV episode and the murder of an Ahmadi five days after it was aired, the oxygen that peddlers of hate speech have long enjoyed at various levels of society must be turned off forthwith.

Published in Dawn, January 1st, 2015

Verification of SIMs

THE government is asking cellphone operators to re-verify subscriber data for all prepaid SIM cards within 28 days.

Industry estimates say there are 100 million prepaid SIM cards in circulation, which would mean verifying almost 2,500 SIMs every minute for 24 hours a day for 28 days continuously to achieve the goal.

Clearly, the deadline is unrealistic and shows a disconnect between what the state authorities are wishing for and what is actually possible.

Also read: [Cellular firms 'unable' to re-verify users within 28-day deadline](#)

The repeated demands from the government for telecoms to set up new systems for monitoring the issuance of SIMs is a further indication that the government acts in ad hoc haste when trying to devise a plan for countering the use of SIM cards in incidents of terrorism, as opposed to developing a well-thought-out plan that can remain in place for years at a stretch.

SIMs need to be re-verified, but the deadline ought to be more realistic and the exercise accompanied by a large campaign, funded by the telecoms, to let the people

know that their SIMs will be disconnected if subscriber data has not been re-verified by a certain date.

How do other countries with endemic insurgencies and security issues deal with the question of issuing SIM cards? Such a study needs to be conducted to learn from the experience of others who have faced similar challenges.

Figures need to be generated giving us a comparative idea of the number of 'ghost' SIMs floating around as a percentage of the total, as well as unverified ones so that we have a clearer picture of the situation in our country regarding the potential for abuse of the telecom infrastructure for terrorism purposes.

Thus far the government and the telecoms have failed to develop a proper equation with each other when it comes to putting in place a sound framework for preventing the abuse of telecom services.

And this failure is visible every time telecom services have to be shut down altogether in large parts of the country in an effort to guard against a violent incident.

It is high time both parties came to an agreement on how to prevent the misuse of telecom services for terrorism and crime purposes. But for that to happen, the government will need to bring its own expectations in line with reality before making demands of cellphone

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operators. Controlling this menace ought to be a shared priority for both parties.

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The prime minister's role

PRIME Minister Nawaz Sharif has been shuttling from meeting to meeting, speech to speech, prepared comments to prepared comments in recent days, all with the purpose of keeping his government's and the nation's focus on the fight against militancy.

Through it all, the prime minister has rightly insisted that the nation and the state need to be united in confronting militancy. But consensus-building is more than simply rallying a nation in grief and shock by vowing to crush the enemy.

Also read: [Nation's resolve to crush terrorism is undeterred: PM Nawaz](#)

Ultimately, there needs to be consensus on how to fight militancy because no strategy will work if the tactics are controversial and divisive.

In, for example, opting for military courts, the government did reflect the political consensus in the immediate

aftermath of the Peshawar school massacre, but was it really a consensus or consent under duress?

Now, with the trauma and shock in the days after Peshawar giving way to more measured thinking, there are voices calling for revisiting the lynchpin of the government's new strategy to fight terrorism, military courts.

Perhaps what the prime minister should be considering then is to revisit that most controversial of decisions, ie military courts, via a gathering of the political leadership once again.

Given the proliferation of committees, the breadth of recommendations on various aspects of the fight against militancy and extremism the government is receiving, and the range of actions the government will be required to take in tandem with provincial governments and the military, it would hardly amount to a setback if some of the more controversial aspects of the early plan, devised in a matter of hours in a single meeting in Peshawar, are opened for debate again.

Consider that when military courts were first mooted, perhaps many in the political leadership and certainly many among the public would have been unaware of the far-reaching consequences even a limited era of military courts would have.

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The enemy must be defeated, but surely not at the cost of eroding the very constitutional democratic process that the state is fighting to defend. The government would do well to reopen for debate a decision taken in haste with profound consequences for state and society itself. Military courts should not be considered a foregone conclusion.

There is another aspect where Prime Minister Sharif could demonstrate better leadership: communicating with the public. For all his visibility in recent weeks, the prime minister has only once addressed the nation. This, in the prime minister's own reckoning, is a nation at war.

Nations at war need their leaders to address them, to communicate with them and to explain clearly what is being considered in their name and what is to be done. Far too often, the prime minister and his team appear to believe that PR moments can make up for direct communication with the public at large.

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Hard country for media

AS the year drew to a close, there was yet another reminder of the dangers that stalk those whose profession demands that the truth be told.

On Wednesday, the International Federation of Journalists released its 24th annual list of journalists and other media persons who have died in work-related targeted or crossfire incidents, showing that the tally of 2014 lies at 118 — an increase of 13 killings as compared to last year.

Take a look: [Pakistan 'most dangerous country for media' in 2014](#)

This figure does not include those who died in accidents or natural disaster whilst on assignment. While the Asia Pacific region had the highest death toll, it was Pakistan that topped the unenviable list of countries where media workers were killed, with 14 people in this profession having been cut down during the past year.

The Federation warned that these findings were a “reminder of the gravity of the safety crisis in media” and called upon governments to urgently make the protection of journalists a priority.

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There can be no argument that Pakistan's circumstances have for years made it a dangerous country in which journalists must discharge their professional obligations.

Even so, the past year has seen some distressing new lows, from a major news network being forced off the cable operators' list to a political figure hurling threats at journalists and the National Assembly's standing committee wanting to impose restrictions on what can be reported on.

Meanwhile, the targeting of journalists by both state and non-state actors has continued with absolute impunity, with hardly any instance of the state going after the perpetrators with anywhere near the necessary resolve.

As the nation gears up for the long fight against militancy and terrorism, the situation is in danger of deteriorating further as the push and pull over information intensifies.

The answer lies in the hands of the government: were it to signal, through strong prosecution, its intolerance of attacks on journalists, the air of impunity would be dispelled. That would be a good start to defending this country's hard-won media freedoms.

Published in Dawn, January 2nd, 2015

Raids against Afghans

A RECENT feature in this paper on security action against Afghans in this country paints a depressing picture of the difficulties and everyday challenges faced by the community, against the backdrop of a much-publicised 'crackdown' on those Afghans living illegally in Pakistan.

In fact, it has come to the point where even uttering the word 'Afghan' in today's insecure environment can give rise to dark labels of suspicion being instantaneously attached to the unfortunate community in the country.

The popular perception has been strengthened over time by frequent raids in 'Afghan areas' in the wake of a security threat or an attack by militants. This is the formula that has been in practice in Islamabad, Peshawar, Lahore, Karachi as well as in some smaller towns.

One consequent impression of the police fixation on rounding up Afghans is that this is all the security agencies are capable of doing: cracking down on the community and hoping to find a link with some terror operators or their facilitators.

Also read: [No involuntary repatriation of Afghans](#)

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The impression, unfortunately, holds despite all the talk about the prime minister and other government functionaries supporting a non-discriminatory and comprehensive purging of militants.

The security campaign remains focused on stereotypes, which are reinforced by unqualified, sometimes even irresponsible statements that have found their way into the discussion in the wake of the Peshawar school tragedy.

On Thursday, for instance, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Pervez Khattak attached much stress to the need for sending the Afghan refugees back home, apparently to overcome the menace of terrorism in the country.

To prevent it from becoming a witch-hunt against the Afghans or one particular ethnic group, our officials need to be a little more elaborate and a lot more careful in what they are saying.

Since this factor is often missing the message conveyed is that all Afghans are a security risk to Pakistan, and that if Pakistan could somehow get rid of these refugees, its militancy problem would be as good as resolved. Both assumptions are dangerous — for those who make them and those against whom these are made.

A more sensible approach would be to solicit the help of members of the community that has to be surveyed for any disturbing elements present within, and use the intelligence thus gathered to weed out the unwanted. This may be a more time-consuming exercise but is perhaps the most effective and safest.

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Pak-India skirmish

VIOLENCE along the Working Boundary between Pakistan and the India-held portion of Kashmir has been a regular feature for much of the past year. Sadly, New Year's Eve was to be no exception.

In typically murky circumstances, with both sides trading accusations and offering contradictory accounts, several Pakistani, and at least one Indian, border guards were killed — the only certainty being that both sides did fire on the other.

What is alarming about the latest, however, is that the Pakistani version suggests that two Rangers were lured

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into a flag meeting with their Indian counterparts and then killed in a hail of gunfire.

If true, it would be an astonishing breach of the rules of engagement and would surely make managing the peace in an already fraught environment infinitely more difficult.

Also worrying is the Indian defence apparatus's seeming determination to resort to the use of disproportionate force and then boast about its disproportionate response. When responses are measured in multiple killed for every dead body, something is surely terribly amiss.

Consider also that Jan 1 is supposed to be a day when a spirit of pragmatic cooperation prevails between India and Pakistan.

Exchanging lists of nuclear sites and prisoners is an archetypal confidence-building measure. It indicates that even rivals can develop rules and systems to manage the risk of conflict and the fallout of potential conflict. But CBMs such as the exchange of lists on Jan 1 between Pakistan and India can only go so far; they are not meant or designed to replace real dialogue on substantive issues.

Also read: [Exchange of fire along Indo-Pak working boundary, five killed](#)

In the immediate term, what is needed is some meaningful work on reducing the LoC/Working Boundary

tensions. Whenever uniformed Pakistani and Indian security personnel are shooting at each other regularly, there is always a possibility of escalation, no matter how carefully the two sides believe the issue is being managed or choreographed.

The only effective guarantee of peace is to make sure the guns fall silent. Otherwise, the unthinkable becomes frighteningly more possible than officialdom on both sides would like to project.

On the Pakistani side, it seems inconceivable that with an army heavily deployed in Fata on counter-insurgency duties and a military leadership preoccupied with the response to domestic terrorism in the wake of the Peshawar carnage, conflict with India is part of the agenda at the moment.

While the state here has quietly pledged to defend the eastern borders against any threat, there has been no real belligerence in evidence. Still, the ground between not wanting a fight and learning to avoid one can be wide.

The political and military leadership of both sides needs to come together to bring an end to this turbulent phase along the LoC and the Working Boundary. Surely, no one could argue that distracting Pakistan from its fight against militancy is a good idea at this stage.

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A sad day

IN the end, our political leadership proved unable to defend the constitutional and democratic roots of the system or resist the generals' demands.

Pakistan is to have military courts once again. To establish them the politicians have agreed to distort the principle of separation of powers, smash the edifice of rights upon which the Constitution is built and essentially give up on fixing decrepit state institutions.

Know more: [MPC ends with national consensus on NAP](#)

Yes, we need a coherent strategy to fight militancy and political and military leaders to work together. But military courts are not the answer.

First, let there be no doubt why the country must now prepare to live under the shadow of military courts: the military leadership wanted these courts.

Yesterday, the ISPR quoted army chief Gen Raheel Sharif as having told the multiparty conference in

Islamabad that military courts “are not the desire of the army but need of extraordinary times”.

A day earlier, the ISPR quoted him as having told a corps commanders' meeting that “bold, meaningful decisions” were needed to ensure “stern action vs terrorists, their sympathisers” and warned that the “much wider political consensus” should not be “lost to smaller issues”.

It is a sad time for democracy when an army chief so openly directs the political process.

Second, while it is parliament's right to amend the Constitution and the idea of a basic structure to the latter was only given a fresh lease of life because of the tussle between parliament and the Iftikhar Chaudhry-led Supreme Court over the judicial appointment process, one hopes that in a democratic system parliament will not undermine civilian-run institutions, least of all to hand yet more power to an institution that has overthrown the Constitution several times in the past.

Also read: [Military courts: How the reluctant were brought around](#)

Consider that where previous constitutional amendments during civilian dispensations were designed to clear the mess left behind by military dictators, this time it is the civilians who will be muddying the document to empower the army further. The 21st constitutional amendment will

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stand as a monument to the betrayal of the civilian, democratic cause.

Third, nothing — nothing — has prevented the government or parliament from urgently strengthening the existing legal system and judicial process other than the government and parliament itself.

Had the same time and effort spent on winning consensus for military courts gone into urgent reforms and administrative steps to fix the criminal justice structure, the existing system could have been brought into some semblance of shape to deal with terrorism.

Sadly, the political leadership has abdicated its democratic responsibilities. Surrender perhaps comes easily.

Published in Dawn, January 3rd, 2015

Newsmen in prison

THE decision by Egypt's top court to order a retrial of three convicted Al Jazeera journalists deserves to be welcomed, leading to hopes that they might eventually be released.

The charges on which they were convicted and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment were difficult to justify and appear to have been motivated by political considerations.

Relations between Egypt and Qatar, where Al Jazeera is based, deteriorated after Gen Abdel Fattah al-Sisi overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood government, arrested Mohammad Morsi, Egypt's first freely elected president, and launched a crackdown that killed a large number of Brotherhood supporters.

Also read: [Egypt court orders retrial of jailed Al Jazeera reporters](#)

The three journalists — Peter Greste, Mohammed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed — were doing their professional duty and were in no way involved in what they were charged with ie “spreading false information”.

Egypt is now a dictatorship worse than Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian regime. Mr Mubarak replaced Anwar Sadat when he was assassinated. But Mr Sisi overthrew a democratically elected government and then had himself elected president through a bogus election.

All dissent has been crushed, and the Egyptian press is not free. When the Egyptian government can arrest and throw foreign journalists into prison, we can only imagine the conditions in which Egyptian newsmen operate.

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The three Al Jazeera correspondents might have talked to opposition leaders, including Brotherhood sympathisers, and reported for their channel. But that doesn't constitute a crime. That the judicial process was flawed became obvious when the Court of Cassation ordered a retrial.

The journalists' family members were disappointed by Thursday's verdict and thought the three newsmen should have been released. As an Al Jazeera official put it, "Their arrest was political, the sentencing was political and their being kept in prison is, for us, political".

Their conviction has been denounced by journalists' unions and rights bodies, including Amnesty International, which called the trial a "complete farce".

A family member's hope that relations between Egypt and Qatar will improve so that the journalists are released is not the issue; the issue is media freedom.

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Bitter taste of sugar

SUGAR mill owners in Sindh are up in arms again in what is turning out to be one of the most troubled sugarcane crushing seasons in recent memory.

They are demanding that the price of sugarcane be set at Rs155 per 40kg after the Sindh government notified Rs182 via a notification issued on Dec 9, 2014.

The dispute between the mill owners and the growers has been simmering for months. Thus far, the provincial government has see-sawed between the two because both have strong representation within the provincial assembly and strong lobbies within the ruling party, although it seems that the growers' lobby in the government is bigger.

Also read: [Sindh raises support prices of sugarcane, wheat](#)

Unable to decide firmly, the government had first notified Rs182 as the price, then capitulated to the protests of the mill owners and revised it to Rs155, only to submit once again when the growers raised a hue and cry — within days it changed the price back to Rs182.

Meanwhile, procurement of the crop has been massively disrupted across the province as many mills have

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delayed firing up their boilers and refused to procure sugarcane at the government price.

Now, less than three weeks following the last notification of the procurement price at Rs182, the mill owners are mounting a renewed campaign to bring the price down to Rs155 again, threatening a shutdown of all crushing activity.

Their petition asking the Sindh High Court to intervene has been dismissed, and they are now planning to approach the Supreme Court with their grievances.

This is a surprising threat coming from them, considering the right to set sugarcane procurement prices has been properly devolved to the provinces via the 18th Amendment.

Additionally, sugar mills in Punjab have had no such issue and crushing has been proceeding steadily throughout the province with a procurement price of Rs180. This makes it difficult to understand why mill owners in Sindh cannot make things work at the same price.

The Sindh government needs to stop vacillating and exercise its mandate with more autonomy and more decisiveness than it has been doing so far.

More swings in setting the price are not acceptable. While the Sindh High Court has dismissed the petition of

the mill owners, the provincial government still needs to justify its earlier action of changing the fixed price more than once.

If the government decides to favour the growers over the mill owners, it will also have to keep the interests of the consumers in mind.

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Damage limitation

NOW that the government has decided to take the plunge, the details still remain to be worked out. And, as ever, much of the devil lies in the details. Early drafts of the different pieces of legislation, including a constitutional amendment, that are needed to ready military courts to put on trial civilians accused of terrorism suggest that the government is attempting to protect some semblance of the fundamental rights it has decimated by maintaining the right to appeal to the superior judiciary for individuals convicted in military courts of the new offences being drawn up. If – if – the final legislation approved by parliament envisages such safeguards, it would suggest that the political class is at least aware of the disastrous consequences of allowing the military to completely usurp the judicial process. Anything that circumscribes, limits and tightly patrols the new military courts ought to be welcomed: the fewer the exceptions, the shorter the duration, the quicker the imminent constitutional deviation can be recovered from.

There is, though, a basic problem. In attempting to maintain a right of appeal while denying terrorism convicts the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution, the government — and parliament by

extension — is trying to avoid a contradiction that cannot be avoided. In essence, there is a two-fold purpose in opting for military courts: ensuring a quicker, more streamlined process for anti-terrorism trials, and lowering the threshold of evidence needed to secure convictions. If the right to appeal is maintained, the government will be hoping that the superior courts will decide appeals based on the lower threshold of evidence, and fewer due-process and fair-trial protections, that military trial courts require, and not the higher threshold that the regular court system allows. But that will be up to the courts themselves to decide. Will the Supreme Court participate in a system that denies the superior judiciary the right to enforce fundamental rights while still allowing it to hear appeals of terrorists convicted in military courts? That only the SC can decide and the country will only know when the new system is in place and the laws are challenged and convictions appealed.

In truth, now that the government — the entire political class, really — has acquiesced to the military's demand for expanded military courts, the only thing it can really do to try and return to a fundamental rights regime in the quickest timeframe is to reform and improve the criminal justice system, the state prosecution service and the police investigation process. Two years is what the army has demanded for expanded military courts. Two years should also be the time the government takes to ready the normal judicial process to deal with the terrorism

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threat inside the country. It can be done. But only if the government gets serious about governance and reforms.

Published in Dawn, January 4th, 2015

Zikris under fire

THE traditionally secular nature of Baloch society has been under threat for some time, and things appear to be taking a turn for the worse. A report in this paper recently detailed the growing persecution of the small community of Zikris — a little-known Islamic sect — who are concentrated mainly in southern Balochistan. In July, several Zikris were injured when a bus carrying members of the community was the target of a roadside bomb in Khuzdar, and the following month their Khana-i-zikr in district Awaran was attacked. Six worshippers were killed and seven injured. Around 400 Zikris have moved out of the area after the incident. Members of the community have also been singled out in various cases of looting in Awaran and Turbat. These incidents have reportedly begun to vitiate the traditionally harmonious relationship between Zikris and other Muslim sects whose lives are often intertwined through ties of kinship.

Although the Zikris — unlike the Hazaras — are ethnic Baloch, there has been a consistent effort led by religious parties in the province to marginalise them on account of what are considered their unorthodox practices. These efforts gained further strength from regional developments, such as the Afghan war of the early '80s, which led to the proliferation of madressahs in the province churning out jihadis for the next-door theatre of war. Upon returning home, the governance void that has long been Balochistan allowed them to entrench themselves, and sow discord among the Baloch along religious lines. By doing so, they also served the interests of state elements cynically patronising ideologically-driven extremist groups to counter the Baloch insurgency which, like the society from which it arises, is secular in character. A people divided are, after all, easier to control. This provincial government, with its nationalist credentials and representative aspects, is better placed than many others to demonstrate a real understanding of the problems that bedevil the province. But it has yet to demonstrate it has the courage to do something about them.

Published in Dawn, January 4th, 2015

SBP taking sides

THE State Bank of Pakistan, the lead regulator for the financial system, is supposed to be a neutral party to the various claims to superiority that various banking products often try and project for themselves through their marketing campaigns. It is not supposed to endorse one product as superior to another, least of all in the very area it is supposed to be regulating. Yet recently we have seen a number of ads appearing in the press, put in by the SBP, urging people to opt for Islamic banking as the place to keep their deposits in order to avail religiously sanctioned returns. What's more, the ads imply that other banking products are against Islamic principles and the only way to obtain "peace of mind" with returns on savings and deposits is to opt for Islamic banking products. The ads clearly show that the regulator has taken sides in granting religious legitimacy to one set of products, and has implicitly declared rival products to be against Islamic principles and thereby injurious to religious sentiment. If this were a marketing campaign being run by a private bank in order to promote its product offerings, that would be a different matter. But coming from the regulator, it is a problematic message to be sending out.

The State Bank should be meticulous in its neutrality when dealing with the wide array of financial products offered by the banking industry. It should avoid promoting one set of products over another. This is particularly the case since unlike the early 1980s, there is no policy decision in place at this time to phase out all banking products not specifically registered as Islamic. Since 2001, the policy decision has been to run two parallel systems of banking in Pakistan and leave it up to the consumer to choose between them. Yet for almost a year now the SBP has been going quite the distance in portraying Islamic banks as being more resilient to financial storms and superior in capital adequacy ratios, amongst other things. Now we're seeing the regulator raising the stakes further, by adding its voice to marketing campaigns that seek to delegitimise all other product offerings by conventional banks. There is nothing wrong with seeking to encourage Islamic banking, but the regulator should restrict itself to strengthening the regulatory framework rather than becoming a party to the marketing messages put out by the industry.

Published in Dawn, January 4th, 2015

Elected dictatorship

FOR all practical purposes, Bangladesh is now an elected dictatorship. A year ago, Prime Minister Hasina Wajid stole the general election and then went on to consolidate her rule by crushing all dissent, wreaking vendetta on her foes and hanging opposition leaders through a judicial process condemned as flawed by world rights bodies.

On Sunday, the Bangladesh National Party's head office was sealed and its leader, Khaleda Zia, confined to the party office for what the government called her own security.

The real reason was to crush the countrywide strike called by Ms Zia to demand a fresh election, because Ms Wajid had abolished the constitutional clause providing for a caretaker, neutral government to hold the polls.

This was a provocation to the opposition, because since 1991 general elections in Bangladesh had been held by caretaker governments.

Take a look: [Civil strife in Dhaka](#)

No wonder, the BNP and 17 other parties boycotted the polls in which Ms Wajid's Awami League 'won' 153 of the

National Assembly's 300 seats because the opposition fielded no candidates.

The fraudulent majority in parliament has since then enabled the ruling AL to persecute the opposition.

The most blatant form of the government's use of courts to destroy all dissent is to be seen in the flawed trials of many opposition leaders, especially those belonging to the Jamaat-i-Islami, which has for long been waging a campaign against the AL government.

Also read: [Bangladesh court rules Jamaat illegal, bars party from polls](#)

Several JI leaders have been [hanged](#) for their alleged war crimes during the 1971 insurgency, and many more leaders, including those belonging to the BNP, are on trial.

The BNP-led strike may not lead to a fresh election, but the violence seen on Monday could snowball and throw Bangladesh into anarchy.

Persecution of the opposition and judicial farce are not what Bangladesh needs. The rivalry between the two leaders and periodic strikes have done enormous harm to Bangladesh's fledgling democracy and have hurt its economy.

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What the country needs is national reconciliation and peace to consolidate democracy and speed up economic development.

Published in Dawn, January 6th, 2015

Schools' security

THE shadow of the Army Public School carnage hangs heavy, leaving students and parents, to say nothing of school and provincial administrations, unsettled.

The reopening of government-run and private schools has overwhelmingly been delayed by varying numbers of days (depending on when the winter vacations were originally set to come to a close) in different cities, and provincial administrations have asked schools to beef up security.

In Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Islamabad Capital Territory area, schools and other educational institutions have been categorised according to the threat assessment as perceived by the authorities, and the standard operating procedures issued to them include raising boundary walls, topping them with concertina

razor wire, hiring security guards and installing closed-circuit camera systems. (Balochistan and Sindh have for different reasons not yet undertaken such measures.)

Private-sector schools must arrange their own funding, and while public-sector schools have been promised some financial help, few — if any at all — have seen it materialise.

After the extended winter vacation, schools are now to open on the 12th, subject to their having met the new security protocols. But the situation does not look conducive to students being able to resume their academic activities.

With few institutions — barring some schools, colleges and universities that have ample financial resources — having being able to improve security, most complain of a lack of funds, insufficient time and question even the viability of the measures proposed.

Consider the fact that there are well over a 100,000 schools in Punjab alone, many without even the most basic of facilities and some that aren't even registered with the government. Is it plausible to expect them to hire private security? Or for schools that don't even have boundary walls — there are some 50 such institutions just in Islamabad — to now build them to required standards?

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The issue is far too complex for the one-size-fits-all approach taken by the administration. No doubt, there is urgent need for educational institutions to improve security; another APS-style horror can simply not be contemplated. But institutions are well within their rights to ask what provincial and federal authorities are doing to also protect them, and keep attacks at bay.

Surely, the problem in its most basic iteration is this: until the state comes up with an effective and long-term strategy to contain the terrorism threat, and starts implementing it immediately, there is very little individuals and institutions can do to protect themselves.

Published in Dawn, January 6th, 2015

Agreement needed

DAMAGING as the anti-terrorism military courts era will be to democracy, the PML-N and PTI have somehow contrived to inflict yet more damage on the democratic process in the midst of an extraordinary session of parliament.

In a better, more democratic world, the PML-N and PTI would have had a binding agreement to resolve their dispute by now.

The PTI would have been present in parliament to explain to the country its position on the 21st Amendment and to vote on it. The PML-N would have announced the formation of a super commission to investigate alleged electoral fraud in the May 2013 general election.

The country would have been able to move on from a long-running political crisis and focus on matters of governance and the fight against militancy.

Unhappily, none of that has happened as somehow the issue of a commission to investigate alleged electoral malfeasance in May 2013 has yet to be resolved.

From the government's perspective, with so much happening on the legislative and anti-terrorism fronts, perhaps a speedy resolution of the elections-related dispute with the PTI was not realistic. But that overlooks a rather basic fact: negotiations have been conducted in various phases with the PTI over so many months that there is nothing new left to be explored at all.

In fact, once the PTI supremo Imran Khan backed down from his demand that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif resign, permanently or temporarily, there was little to stop a deal from being reached immediately — nothing other than the PML-N's seeming determination to not cede an inch to the PTI, even where the PTI has just and legitimate demands.

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Of course, where the PML-N can be stubborn, the PTI can be destructive, often even self-destructive.

Had the PTI allowed its MNAs to appear in parliament and participate in the 21st Amendment process, it would have sent a signal that the party has returned to the democratic, parliamentary scheme of things and made it that much more difficult for the PML-N to continue to hold out on sealing an agreement with the PTI.

Sadly, though perhaps predictably, the PTI chose the politics of grandstanding and confrontation instead.

If Peshawar has changed everything, if it has helped create a consensus that the first priority of the country should be to defeat terrorism and militancy, then surely the two biggest political parties — in terms of votes in May 2013 and relevance to the national political discourse today — need to be able to settle eminently solvable political disputes.

Barring proof of systematic rigging that changed the overall election result in May, 2013, it seems unlikely the PTI will be able to force the PML-N from power in the post-Peshawar environment. Similarly, was serious electoral fraud to be discovered, it seems unlikely the PML-N could cling to power now. The country needs this dispute settled once and for all.

Published in Dawn, January 6th, 2015

World Cup challenge

THE failure of senior all-rounder Mohammad Hafeez to clear a second biomechanics test over his bowling action in Chennai has come as the latest blow to Pakistan's preparations for the upcoming ICC Cricket World Cup beginning in Australia and New Zealand next month.

Hafeez, who had failed his first biomechanics test in Loughborough, England, in November after being reported by umpires in the first Test against New Zealand in Abu Dhabi, could not consistently measure up to the ICC's permissible limit of 15 degrees set for bowlers and has now been definitely ruled out as a bowling option for Pakistan.

Also read: [Hafeez fails to clear bio-mechanics test on bowling action](#)

However, he still remains in contention for World Cup selection purely as a batsman due to his rich experience in the game.

With ace spinner Saeed Ajmal already having been ruled out of the World Cup for a similar offence last year, Pakistan's spin bowling resources for the World Cup appear considerably depleted.

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Most critics have pointed to the short-sightedness of the Pakistan Cricket Board in the Hafeez saga as they say that the all-rounder should have been withdrawn from the New Zealand Test and ODI series after being reported by the umpires and sent to an academy for correction.

They further argue it was injudicious to send Hafeez to India instead of making arrangements for his test and training at the best-equipped biomechanics lab in Brisbane, Australia.

There's no doubt that Pakistan will direly miss the bowling services of Hafeez as he has taken over 120 wickets in this form of the game and has been instrumental in many a victory for his team.

In all likelihood, it will be left to veteran all-rounder Shahid Afridi, leg-spinner Yasir Shah and rookie Haris Sohail to share the major burden as spin bowlers in the World Cup.

The World Cup is likely to be the swansong for a number of stalwarts and it is imperative for the PCB to do all things right to make it memorable for the departing players.

Published in Dawn, January 7th, 2015

Kerry's visit

JOHN Kerry's visit to Islamabad comes in the wake of some major developments in Pakistan and the region.

While to the west Afghanistan braces itself for a transition full of hazards in the wake of America's withdrawal, in the east India has upped the ante, with skirmishes between India and Pakistan along the Line of Control and the Working Boundary resulting in the deaths of soldiers and civilians.

Also read: [Spat over aid, border firing overshadows Kerry's South Asia trip](#)

However, the most seminal development, and positive in character, is the emergence of a national consensus on terrorism in Pakistan.

Voices that regularly claimed that the war on terror was not 'our war' or that the mass murder of civilians could be attributed to America's drone attacks have been silenced in the wake of the massacre of schoolchildren in Peshawar.

In North Waziristan, the stupendous task of rehabilitating the area and the displaced people remains to be done, but Operation Zarb-i-Azb has destroyed the Taliban's

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operational base and crippled their ability to send out death squads against the people and the state from the comfort of their safe haven.

Pakistan and America, thus, have a great deal to talk about when the strategic dialogue begins next week.

The immediate problem is Indian belligerence, and that's where Pakistan can legitimately hope that Mr Kerry will use his good offices to emphasise to the Indian leadership the need for a quieter border with Pakistan — and not only during President Barack Obama's visit.

Since hitting a low in 2011 following Abbottabad, Salala and Raymond Davis, America and Pakistan now seem headed towards a more stable relationship.

A cooperative relationship between the two is in their mutual benefit, given Pakistan's strategic location on the meeting place of South Asia, Southwest Asia and the Gulf — a region in which America has vital economic and geopolitical interests. Washington, thus, can ill-afford to lose Pakistan.

In turn, Islamabad has to realise the damage done to Pakistan's national interest by the way the establishment overreacted to what undeniably were challenges to Pakistan's sovereignty in the summer of 2011. But actions such as the choking of the Nato supply line were

arguably not commensurate with the degree of provocation.

Without compromising the country's national interests, our foreign policy managers need to view Pakistan's relations with the US in a global perspective, and realise the pitfalls inherent in an adversarial relationship with the US-EU combine at a time when India is attempting to emerge as America's ally in Asia.

Published in Dawn, January 7th, 2015

Disservice to democracy

SOME objected but then either abstained or voted in favour anyway; others tried to defend the law; fewer still tried to justify their vote — the sombre mood in parliament yesterday, and on Monday too, suggests that politicians were at least aware of the great disservice to the democratic project they had gathered to inflict.

But inflict they did and, now, with the passage of the 21st Amendment in parliament, the country must live with the spectre of anti-terrorism military courts for the next two years — assuming the civilian leadership has it within itself to deny an extension if sought two years hence.

Also read: [Raza Rabbani in tears: 'Ashamed to vote against conscience'](#)

While several parliamentarians, especially from the government side, did try and claim ownership of the idea of expanding the military court regime to try civilians accused of terrorism and militancy, few who understand the structure of power in this country would have been convinced.

Consider when the idea was first mooted: after a meeting of the national political and military leadership. Within days, perhaps even hours, of that meeting what was

agreed to in the presence of the military leadership was quickly reopened for debate by sections of the political class.

Then, after the army chief publicly insisted on the need for courts via the ISPR — including while the last All Parties Conference on the matter was in session — the politicians again endorsed anti-terrorism military courts unanimously.

Between that last meeting and the vote in parliament however further doubts were expressed by various parties, or at least the leaders of several parties. In the end, though, with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and PPP boss Asif Ali Zardari deciding to back the courts, the numbers in parliament were always in favour of the easy passage of the 21st Amendment.

Perhaps, though, it would be wrong to suggest that the politicians were completely coerced into accepting anti-terrorism military courts. As has been evident in the national debate over military courts, the focus shifted from the failures of the civilians to the need to do something against Taliban-type militant groups.

Indeed, in supporting the courts, politicians may even have found themselves on the right side of popular opinion, thereby deflecting much of the anger over Peshawar away from themselves.

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Finally, as has been evident during the proceedings on Monday and Tuesday, the political leadership is still not willing to take complete ownership of the fight against militancy.

There was, for example, no meaningful call for urgent reform of the criminal justice system, the civilian-led state prosecution service and the police investigation process. Without those reforms, two years from now it seems highly unlikely the civilian side of the state will be in any shape to deal with anti-terrorism prosecutions.

If there is one thing that has been reinforced during this sad episode it is this: the civil-military imbalance will worsen unless the civilians learn to deliver.

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Banned groups

An event organised by Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat in Chakwal at the weekend showed how banned groups continue to advertise their presence in the country and how the local administration does not want to or is not able to block their activities.

As per the usual practice, the proscribed group was given full freedom to announce its meeting, and a news report noted how the busy squares in the city were decorated with ASWJ banners in the run-up to the meeting.

Read: [Banned outfit operates with impunity in Chakwal](#)

A local official said it was not the ASWJ but its 'parent' body, the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan, that had been banned.

He was wrong. Both he and the state need to go over the list of banned groups once more before they allow themselves the innocence with which they approach this very serious matter.

Also read: [Three more religious groups banned](#)

As things stand, the moment an organisation is given the title of 'proscribed', it is seemingly freed from any control or oversight by the state.

A banned outfit assumes the status of a force that instils fear in everyone around. It is a group which cannot be challenged and that is above reproach. There may be a change in name, but that's about all the adjustment needed.

The proscribed Jaish-e-Mohammad took up a new identity as Tehreek-i-Khuddam-ul-Islam and Lashkar-e-Taiba was renamed Jamaatud Dawa; in essence though

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they retain their original character. The sameness of ideology, leadership and ranks in the new groups that have emerged from the embers of the old ones, should negate any impression that they are different.

Also read: [Banned group holds rally in Muzaffarabad](#)

It then becomes very clear that unless strict measures are put in place to disperse the ranks of such groups and to put curbs on the activities of their leadership, a common past and shared objectives will reunite them.

Any exercise in banning an organisation would be of cosmetic value unless there are legal provisions, as well as a willing government, to stop individuals — the leaders of the group — from resorting to hate-mongering in the name of ideology.

Published in Dawn January 8th , 2014

Curbs on politicians

BEFORE, during and after the votes in favour of the 21st Amendment to the Constitution were cast on Tuesday, several parliamentarians openly struggled with their need to abide by the decision of their party chiefs to support the amendment.

But that only emphasised the undemocratic spirit of certain constitutional requirements and the utter lack of internal democracy within political parties.

Read: [Parliament passes 21st Constitutional Amendment, Army Act Amendment](#)

Perhaps unknown to many, no parliamentarian had the individual right to choose how to vote on Tuesday — that decision belonged to the party thanks originally to the 14th Amendment. Passed in 1997 in an era where floor-crossing and the buying of votes in parliament was rife, the 14th Amendment sought to address the problem by denying individual parliamentarians the right to switch sides after election or vote against party decisions.

Subsequently, the newly added Article 63A of the Constitution was narrowed via the 17th and 18th Amendments, but three exceptions have been maintained. A parliamentarian stands to be disqualified if he votes against his party in the election of the prime

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minister; a vote of confidence or no-confidence; and a vote on a money bill or, post the 18th Amendment, a vote to amend the Constitution.

Thus, any parliamentarian who opposed the 21st Amendment could vote 'no' and either immediately resign or suffer the potential ignominy of being unseated by his or her party leader. Where once party discipline in a sea of rampant, anti-democratic indiscipline may have made sense, the restraints on parliamentarians are now acting as a brake on the democratic system.

Also read: [Raza Rabbani in tears: 'Ashamed to vote against conscience'](#)

Sad as it was to see a democrat like Senator Raza Rabbani shed tears in parliament, the present era of parliamentarians must also share some of the blame: the clause in the Constitution preventing parliamentarians from voting against their party in constitutional amendment votes was added by the 18th Amendment — a process that Senator Rabbani himself stewarded.

Even four short years ago, in 2010, many of the very same representatives in parliament today decided that it was safer to have consensus than to allow members to choose whether to support a constitutional amendment. Perhaps none of them realised they could be called upon by their own parties to vote against the spirit of the Constitution itself.

The other problem is, of course, how the parties are run — and how decisions are made inside parties. When every member of nearly every major party owes his or her position in the party to the party leader, the possibility of a challenge to the leader's decision is remote.

Simply, without intra-party democracy there can be no real democratic decisions. When the leader is the party, when the leader is for life and when the leader decides who else gets what position, it is difficult to have spirited debate or meaningful dissent. Can the constitutional constraints and intra-party realities be changed though?

Published in Dawn January 8th , 2014

China FTA

IF any further proof were required that too much emotion in our relationship with Beijing is harmful to our interests, the disclosures from the ongoing review of Pakistan's Free Trade Agreement with China ought to be sufficient.

The FTA became operational in 2007 and is now being reviewed for possible modifications. On the face of it, the trade data shows that Pakistan has reaped substantial benefit from the agreement, seeing its average monthly exports to China climbed from a range of \$40m to \$50m at the start of the period to beyond \$200m by 2012, with peaks approaching \$300m during some months.

Know more: [FTAs hurting Pakistan's trade balance](#)

One could attribute this increase to the FTA, which it can be argued has made China the second-largest country destination for Pakistani exports after the United States. So far so good.

But a deeper look is revealing. For one, the biggest jumps in monthly export volume have come in times when the price of cotton saw a spike. In the middle of 2008, 2009 and towards the end of 2010, each period

saw a jump in the value of exports to China, and each period coincided with a spike in the price of cotton.

The last period carried total exports beyond the \$200m per month mark. The data appears to suggest that most of the increases have come about due to cyclical fluctuations in the price of cotton rather than a broad basing of our exports to China.

The commerce ministry is right to point out that the effect of similar FTAs granted by China to other Asean countries has had a negative impact on Pakistan's ability to compete in the Chinese market, and that the failure to broaden the base of exports to China has stymied the benefits for Pakistan, whereas the massive growth of imports from China has negatively impacted domestic manufacturing.

This is the right time to take up a tougher line on the FTA and seek to renegotiate the terms of agreement keeping the concerns of domestic manufacturing in mind. This is also a reminder that in all our other dealings with China, in energy and infrastructure, emotion ought to be avoided since it tends to cloud judgment.

Caution is needed when devising the terms of Pakistan's engagement with its northern neighbour, to ensure that we don't end up bargaining away our own industrial and commercial interests out of blind faith.

Published in Dawn January 8th , 2014

Paris attack

MUCH of the world is reacting in shock and grief over the massacre at the offices of the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo in Paris on Wednesday.

Nevertheless, regrettably enough, some are still trying to contextualise the attack by bringing in the larger issue of provocation in matters of faith, extremist Islamists' demonstrated tendency to resort to violence in such situations, and the marginalisation from the mainstream that Muslims in many countries feel despite being perfectly law-abiding.

Also read: [12 dead in shooting at Paris offices of satirical magazine](#)

Of these people, there is a simple question to be asked: in choosing to adopt such an abhorrent method of voicing their disapproval of the publication's editorial choices, did the perpetrators of the attack do their religion and its 1.6 billion adherents any sort of positive service? Or have their actions poured yet more fuel on the fires of prejudice and fear that are lighting up in many parts of the West regarding the inherent 'otherness' of Muslims?

In the minds of those who are neither Muslim nor immigrants from Muslim countries, did the three

gunmen's decisions do anything to further the fact that the ones responsible are merely a minority of violent extremists, and not the overwhelmingly peaceful majority or the system of belief itself? Obviously, the answer is no.

Once again, Islam and Muslims are in the spotlight, and once again, it is for all the wrong reasons.

That strong denunciations are coming from Muslim sources too is exactly as it should be. It is fitting that the Al-Azhar University in Cairo called the attack "criminal" and reiterated that Islam denounces "any violence", while the Arab League has also condemned the massacre, echoing Pope Francis who called it "abominable".

But much more needs to be said and done, particularly given the deep divisions that are springing up between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West.

This latest in a string of atrocities, the perpetrators of which claim refuge in religion, was certainly not the will of the majority, and neither does it reflect their mindset.

Take a look: [Fanaticism: From Peshawar to Paris](#)

A large number of commentators and ordinary people across the world are clear enough thinkers to refrain from the temptation — led by fear — of tarring all with the same detestable brush.

Nevertheless, amongst many others, there is unease; there is a growing lack of understanding of the way the religion is being misused and misquoted by fringe extremist elements.

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If further evidence were needed, attention only has to be paid to what is happening in Germany, where thousands have participated in anti-immigrant demonstrations. This is the reality that Muslim societies and countries need to recognise, and counter.

The push back can only come from what is within their own purview: inculcating tolerance, clamping down on extremist tendencies, and controlling violence in their own societies, thus giving the signal that assaults such as that in Paris are universally, utterly, indefensible.

Published in Dawn, January 9th, 2015

Water filtration plants

A STRING of reverse osmosis (RO) water desalination plants has been installed across the province of Sindh in what must be one of the most energetic initiatives undertaken by the provincial government.

The latest plant was inaugurated in Mithi, Tharparkar, by former president and co-chairman of the PPP, Asif Ali Zardari, accompanied by one of his daughters who was shown prominently in all the promotional photographs released after the event had taken place.

Salutary rhetoric accompanies the photographs, announcing that the latest project is one in a line of 750 such plants to be set up in Tharparkar, and declaring the plant to be “[Asia’s largest solar RO plant](#)”, with a capacity to filter almost eight million litres of water every day.

Over the years, so many such plants have been installed across Sindh that one loses count, and almost all of them appear to be sourced from the same company.

Providing clean drinking water to the people is an important priority without doubt. But it is also important to ask a few basic questions regarding these plants. For one, the filter on these plants is the main cost, and needs to be changed every few months.

Whose responsibility is it, under the contractual terms on which the plants are being procured, to monitor and replace the filter and bear the costs of doing so?

Given how high-maintenance these plants are, exactly whose responsibility is it to keep them in operational condition, and how well is that party discharging that obligation?

If utilised properly, there is no doubt that RO plants can help provide clean drinking water to the people of Sindh. But considering the growing investment that the provincial government is making in high-maintenance plants of this sort, the need for more disclosure regarding

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their maintenance contracts and records is becoming increasingly urgent.

Somebody in the provincial assembly should take the lead by asking for disclosure of the maintenance contracts and operational status of all the plants installed thus far.

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The core challenge

THE year recently concluded saw several lows for the country; among these was the rampant, seemingly unstoppable march of polio.

Nearly 300 cases were reported in the country in 2014, said to be the highest number since 1998.

Though the state has never given polio eradication or other health issues the attention they deserve, it is also true that the government's efforts were stymied by an incredibly fragile security situation.

Also read: [Pakistan launches first ever polio injection drive in Fata](#)

Even so, there seems to be some hope on the horizon in 2015. As reported in this paper, the federal government is all set for the countrywide launch of the Inactivated Polio Vaccine (IPV) from July, which will be included in the Expanded Programme on Immunisation.

This particular vaccine, said to be effective in combating polio, is already in use in some parts of the country, including Balochistan and Fata. Though it is a costly vaccine, it will fortunately be provided free of cost to Pakistan till 2018. Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, will bear the cost while China has provided technical and logistical support.

Though terrorism is no doubt Pakistan's biggest present challenge, the fight against polio must be joined concurrently. The tally of cases recorded last year must be reduced significantly and for this to happen polio must feature significantly on the national agenda.

The introduction of the IPV is a welcome development, but brings its own challenges. Though the vaccine's high cost will be covered for the next few years, it must be ensured that there is enough trained manpower to administer the injectable vaccine.

Also, we must not forget that whether the health authorities are administering the injectable or the oral polio vaccine, the core challenge remains the same: accessing all the target children.

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The method of administration is indeed important, but getting to all the children in violence-prone and remote areas is equally so, as is countering harmful and baseless propaganda against the vaccine spread by obscurantist quarters.

While moulding its counterterrorism strategy, the state needs to prioritise the safety of vaccinators. Pakistan indeed remains polio's final battleground.

The new year provides the government a fresh opportunity to ensure that no child is left unvaccinated and that polio is eradicated from this country as soon as possible.

Published in Dawn, January 9th, 2015

Asset declarations

The Election Commission of Pakistan should tell us what the point is of asking politicians to declare their assets when no action is taken on the basis of the information collected.

Now that all politicians who won in the last election have finally declared their assets, what exactly will be done

with this information other than letting it stir the news flow a bit?

Some of the numbers presented strain credulity. For example, in many of the declarations, more money has been shown as cash in hand or in bank balances than in assets.

Read: [PM's investment in mill increases six-fold in a year](#)

Will anybody be inquiring about the source of the funds? Also, will anybody study the assets of politicians from declarations past and look at the trends? If somebody's declarations over the years contain wide swings in the assets held, will that inspire questions?

Will the ECP liaise with the FBR to determine if the individual's tax filings are consistent with their asset and bank balance declarations? For too long now, these asset declarations have been quietly shelved as if the whole exercise is nothing more than a ritual meant for media consumption.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to build a template that contains information from declarations past as well, so we can get a snapshot of each candidate's declared net worth following each successful election bid.

Also read: [ECP releases Parliamentarians' list of assets](#)

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Without such a template, the information is largely useless, and the fact that the ECP has done nothing to build one suggests it has no serious intention of following up on any of the data generated from the exercise.

Without a longitudinal view, how can anybody realistically reconcile the information disclosed with the taxes paid over the years?

And the failure to develop such a template shows that no meaningful attempt has been made to conduct such an exercise.

The ECP should step up its scrutiny of a candidate's eligibility to hold high office. People whose assets are out of sync with their cash holdings or their declared incomes or even their lifestyles should be asked where the money is coming from, or what tax liabilities have been paid against the incomes from where the assets have been accumulated.

One wonders what the disclosures would need to show to prompt action. Without probing more deeply into aspects such as reconciliation against declared incomes, taxes paid and declarations past, and asking the relevant questions, the whole point of the exercise is lost.

Published in Dawn, January 10th, 2015

Liver transplant facility

ONE of the unfortunate characteristics of Pakistan is the large number of projects that look viable enough on paper but come to grief on the ground.

Thankfully, though, also available are a few endeavours that, in their success and commitment, stand out like beacons. One that immediately comes to mind is Abdul Sattar Edhi's vast enterprise; another is the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation in Karachi, which has over the years proved the steadfastness of its dedication to serve all patients alike, free of cost, and with the highest standards of professionalism.

It is in this context that the latter institution's desire to set up a liver transplant facility must be framed. On Thursday, the provincial health department sent a summary to the chief minister for the approval of a request to provide a grant of Rs1bn to SIUT for the establishment of such a centre. And in the interest of patients who need help in this regard all over the country, there is really no reason why the request should not be approved.

Also read: [Rs1bn sought for SIUT liver transplant facility](#)

As a summary noted, the facility already has full infrastructure for a large-scale kidney transplantation

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department, with the requisite technical expertise and trained staff that provide “qualitative healthcare services”.

The facility has the space, having set up a new building alongside the original premises of the Karachi Civil Hospital. And there is no denying the issue: official estimates say that there is an “acute need” to save lives through transplantation since some 150,000 patients need the procedure every year.

The institution has spearheaded a campaign Pakistan desperately needs, ie countering people’s resistance to and misunderstanding of cadaveric organ donations. But in the case of liver transplants, fortunately, even this stumbling block is not there: the science for live-donor liver transplantation has been in practice for over a decade since this is the only organ in the body that can regenerate itself.

For the larger benefit, SIUT ought to be provided funds for furthering its healthcare services.

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Twisting the narrative

OBFUSCATION, deception and wrongful conflation are the usual tools of the religious right when it comes to attacking any form of consensus on the need for state and society to focus seriously on the fight against militancy.

Now, it is the turn of Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the JUI-F to try and create doubts in the minds of the public about what the principal internal threat is in Pakistan and suggest that there is some kind of conspiracy afoot against madressahs, conservative Muslims and the religious right here.

Also read: [Fazl mobilising religious parties to protest against military courts law](#)

Clearly, the 21st Amendment is a deeply flawed, undemocratic piece of legislation, and anti-terrorism military courts for civilians are a blow to the democratic project.

There are many good and proper reasons to oppose draconian laws on grounds of principle and in practice too. But in criticising the 21st Amendment to the Constitution and an amendment to the Army Act for singling out religious militants for trial in military courts and threatening to launch a national movement, the JUI-

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F chief is simply pandering to his base — and doing his best to confuse issues.

To be clear, the principal internal threat in Pakistan today is terrorism and militancy in the name of religion — simply, the Islamist militancy, terrorism and extremist threat. In trying to lump other groups carrying out political violence together with Islamist groups waging war against the Pakistani state and society, Maulana Fazlur Rehman appears to be deliberately trying to dilute the national consensus and create fresh discord between state and society.

Political groups embracing separatist or sub-nationalist ideologies inside Pakistan do resort to violence. But, inspired by a sense of disenfranchisement and exclusion from mainstream Pakistan, those non-religious, secular movements need to be won over by political action at the macro level and thwarted in their violent agenda by more effective law-enforcement and intelligence-gathering at the micro level to prevent attacks.

To its credit, the wider political class understands the very fundamental difference between the overarching Islamist militancy threat and small-scale, regional groups that have turned to violence to achieve otherwise justifiable political aims of inclusivity and equality. Hence the very specific focus in the new legislation on the much bigger and more potent Islamist threat.

It is fairly obvious that by demanding all forms of armed militancy be treated in the same way — ie the new military courts regime be used against all groups that have resorted to any kind of political violence— the JUI-F is trying to drive a wedge between state and society and ensure that the effect of the National Action Plan and military courts embedded within that plan is minimal.

To do so makes sense for the JUI-F because of an unpleasant truth: the party continues to sympathise with and have allies in the world of Islamist militant groups here. The JUI-F is yet positioning itself on the wrong side of a democratic, inclusive, moderate Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, January 10th, 2015

Trade deficit widens

IN a time when oil prices are falling, it's surprising to see the trade deficit continue to widen. Latest figures show that the trade deficit in December grew by 31pc compared to the same month last year. Since the fiscal year began, the trade deficit has expanded by 34pc for the first six months.

By December, the impact of a falling oil price had begun to be felt in the external account, so it remains a puzzle

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why imports should continue to grow. Between November and December of 2014, for instance, imports grew by 6.3pc, even as exports grew by 9.7pc. The continuously widening trade deficit over the course of 2014 is a cause for concern because it is happening at a time when the country's external debt service obligations are also about to rise. Reserves remain healthy, which is why the outflows are not leading to an adjustment in the exchange rate, but given the persistent increases in the trade deficit it is worthwhile to ask how long this can be sustained.

There are still no clear answers as to why the trade performance is going so poorly. The government needs to conduct a detailed study on where the increases in the import bill are coming from, and why export growth is unable to keep pace. Is the poor trade performance due to supply-side problems such as the power shortages or is the currency being kept at too high a level given the state of competitiveness of our exports? Whatever the problem may be, it needs to be clearly spelled out and a course of action should be adopted to arrest the slide, especially given the outflows on the external account that are about to kick in. Exporters will naturally point towards incentives they require in order to increase performance, for example on the tax side. But a clear picture of the reasons behind the widening deficit ought to be provided before any further concessions are granted.

Published in Dawn January 11th , 2014

Power of ballot box

THE outcome of Sri Lanka's presidential election has many lessons for Pakistan, the most important being the people's wisdom as seen in the power of the ballot box. It also shows in unmistakable terms that even a successful war against terrorism doesn't have to be at the expense of democratic values, for that is where Mahinda Rajapaksa was vulnerable, and lost.

Seeking a third term as president, Mr Rajapaksa was voted out of office for the authoritarian policies he pursued to turn his regime virtually into an elected dictatorship. That the angry Tamil, Muslim and Christian minorities voted against him was only one of the factors in Maithripala Sirisena's victory. The Muslims were alienated by the activities of Bodu Bala Sena, an extremist Buddhist organisation, besides the riots in which Muslim villages were burnt and thousands rendered homeless in southwestern parts of the country. The Tamils and Christians, too, felt insecure in an atmosphere where the freedom to protest was increasingly being restricted. However, the major factor in Mr Rajapaksa's defeat was the division within the majority Sinhalese community.

Mr Sirisena, the victor in Thursday's election, is like Mr Rajapaksa, Sinhalese, and hit him hard where he was

most vulnerable, especially his persecution of journalists and rights groups agitating against war crimes during and after the war on the Tamil Tigers. Mr Rajapaksa had called the election two years earlier, because he thought the opposition would not be able to field a common candidate. However, Mr Sirisena, once general secretary in Mr Rajapaksa's Freedom Party, sprang a surprise by mobilising all dissent and launched a campaign that appealed to a wide variety of people. He accused Mr Rajapaksa not only of human rights violations, persecution of the media and war crimes but also of "plundering" the country and the natural wealth, and turning government into a family enterprise by placing his brothers and son in key positions. Mr Rajapaksa's defeat emphasises the fact that a successful war on terrorism is no guarantee of a regime's stability and continuity, and that voters go by a leader's success or failure in addressing the people's grievances. A denial of human rights or curtailment of freedoms in the name of a war on terrorism doesn't necessarily win the people over. The election was held on Thursday, Mr Rajapaksa conceded defeat, and on Friday Mr Sirisena took the oath of office, signalling a smooth transition.

Published in Dawn January 11th , 2014

A warning sign

THE state's action against militants in the aftermath of the Peshawar tragedy was bound to produce a bloody reaction. Friday night's bombing of an Imambargah in the garrison city of Rawalpindi seems to be the first major salvo fired by the extremists as part of this blowback.

A number of people were killed and injured in the explosion at the entrance of the place of worship as a milad ceremony was under way inside the premises. It is a small miracle the bombing did not occur within the crowded Imambargah, or else the body count would have been much higher. On Saturday, a foreign news agency quoted the spokesman of the banned TTP's Jamaatul Ahrar faction claiming responsibility for the atrocity. While this claim needs to be verified by the security establishment, it must be noted that Rawalpindi has in recent times seen ugly sectarian violence; the caretaker of the targeted Imambargah was also murdered a few years ago. Local police are reportedly looking into these angles, too.

Whether it is places of worship, schools, markets or other public spaces considered 'soft targets' by the militants, in the days to come both state and society will need to redouble efforts to thwart terrorist attacks. While

Peshawar may have shaken the leadership out of its slumber, dismantling the militant infrastructure across Pakistan will not be an easy task, considering how deeply entrenched militancy is within this society. Thinking that battling the militant hydra will be a surgical, bloodless operation is a fallacy. What the nation needs is preparation and resolve to confront the challenge. But while the security forces have been carrying out raids and there are efforts to shore up the defences of schools, much more needs to be done on the ground to reassure citizens that the state is ready to tackle the problem. And preparing the nation for the blowback is firmly the responsibility of the government.

However, while the elected leadership has activated itself on the security and legislative fronts, where public interaction is concerned it still needs to improve its efforts. Just saying we are in a state of war is not enough; the prime minister and the top leadership need to reassure the nation that steps are being taken to ramp up security and uproot militant infrastructure. Things like regular public contact through the media, visiting survivors of terrorist attacks or condoling with heirs can go a long way in reassuring people that their government stands with them. What is certain is that more attacks like the Rawalpindi bombing will only further demoralise the nation, even as Peshawar's pall of gloom still hangs heavy. It is time for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to lead

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from the front and for the elected leadership to be seen at the front and centre of the fight against militancy.

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Lyari stars

AT the auditorium of Karachi's National Academy of the Performing Arts on Wednesday, the audience had gathered to enjoy not a professional performance, but one put up by a group of school students — extraordinary, for this venue.

The schools they are from is what made this event worthy of note. On stage were a group of 60 boys and girls from Lyari, an area which is characterised by high levels of poverty, crime and gang warfare, who had attended a six-month course at the MAD [Music, Art, Dance] School Society under a programme called Lyari Stars.

Also read: [The stars of Lyari shine on](#)

Here, they learned to act, sing, dance and play music. Wednesday's performance put on display a considerable amount of talent, for which the students and their teachers deserve commendation.

Yet what underscored the value of the programme was the personal stories of some of the students that had been woven into the piece: tales featuring guns and police chases, about jacking cars and being put into lock-ups, and experiences of ethnic rivalries and fears about safety.

In setting up the programme, the aim of the MAD School and the Karachi Youth Initiative, which provided financial support, had been to open up horizons, and draw upon the power of creative fields to build bridges, promote peace, and foster confidence and ambition. And, indeed, in the view of the students and their parents, the experience had been an uplifting eye-opener.

This method of tackling crime and restlessness has been put into practice in ghettos and slums in many places, and everywhere it has been found that it offers considerable benefits in terms of integration and co-existence.

There is every reason to replicate such an endeavour urgently in Karachi, and in other towns and cities in the country, too.

There are many ways to tackle the issues of lawlessness and a divided society, and offering young people creative, healthy alternatives is one way of encouraging them to keep their outlook — and their deeds — positive. We could benefit greatly from more such initiatives.

Published in Dawn, January 12th, 2015

Selective action the wrong approach

OF the 72 banned militant groups in Pakistan, many are of the religiously inspired variety — precisely the category that the National Action Plan focuses on. But, according to a report in this newspaper yesterday, the interior ministry is drafting a plan to focus on a very small sub-set of the banned groups.

The immediate question: why? The political and military leadership has, particularly after the Peshawar massacre, been clear that the era of differentiating between militant groups operating on Pakistani soil is over.

No more good Taliban/bad Taliban, no more good militant/bad militant, and no difference between those attacking state and society today and those who harbour designs to eventually do so.

Take a look: [Govt to act against 'violent banned outfits' only](#)

Even as the leadership made those statements, there were doubts whether they had the will to follow through on them. Now, it appears, the doubts were well founded and possibly true.

The report in this newspaper yesterday quoted officials in the interior ministry as having claimed that in the so-called first phase action would only be taken against groups that have taken up arms against the Pakistani state.

Consider the many reasons why a narrow focus on a sub-set of religiously inspired militant groups is a bad idea. To begin with, if each of those militant groups in that particular category does not represent a threat to the Pakistani state and society, why is it on the banned list in the first place?

Surely, when the classification was originally made, it was done because each of those groups was either directly implicated in violence or was advocating violence.

After the Peshawar massacre, with a national consensus against militancy and terrorism, what reason could there be to delay action against groups that embrace violence and operate on Pakistani soil?

Perhaps an argument could be made that operationally it is preferable for the law-enforcement apparatus to start at

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the top of the list, with the very worst offenders, and then methodically make its way down.

However, there is a danger in that approach, specifically that delaying action at this stage will translate into no action later. Given the very large number of militant organisations here, there will always be a reason to delay action against certain groups.

It is also the identity of the banned groups against which action may be delayed that is revealing. Anti-India and pro-Kashmir groups with long-standing links to the army-led security establishment may not have a reason to take up arms against the state, but they are still very much incubators of hate and extremism.

With vast networks of mosques, madressahs and welfare organisations, those groups have penetrated deep into society, from where they pump poisonous ideologies and hateful messages into the bloodstream of this country.

Consider also the reality that in the not too distant past, most of the leadership of the banned TTP and likeminded groups was not considered a serious threat to the Pakistani state. If Pakistan is to win the fight against militancy, all militant groups must be dismantled.

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Hell on wheels

GIVEN the grisly death toll from traffic accidents on our highways, one would think that the road transport sector is deserving of some attention so that the hazards that create often hellish scenes can be identified and addressed.

Most recently, over 60 people were burned alive following a collision on Sindh's Super Highway when their bus collided with an oil tanker and caught fire. Scenes of the burned wreckage inside the bus were absolutely nightmarish.

A few months ago in November, a similar collision near Khairpur killed 58 people while earlier in April some 40 people were killed in an accident near Sukkur when their bus collided with a trailer. Closer to Karachi, another collision between a bus and an oil tanker last year led to 35 people being incinerated in Hub district. In each case, the death toll was dreadfully high, and the nature of the collisions strikingly similar.

Take a look: [Highway tragedy: bodies burnt beyond recognition](#)

The myriad hazards that lead to accidents of such horrific scope remain unaddressed, while all that the grieving

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families of the victims are left to deal with is a bland form of fatalism.

Far too many hazards are allowed to persist in the road transport sector. The state of the roads is appalling and traffic rules poorly conceived and even more inadequately enforced.

Drivers are untrained and not sensitised to the need to protect the precious lives entrusted to their care. Buses are packed beyond capacity and built to prevent any escape in the event of an emergency, while fuel tanks are loosely assembled. In the case of the Hub accident, for instance, the bus in question was carrying jerry cans full of smuggled fuel from Iran on its roof. In the most recent accident, the CNG cylinders on the vehicle's roof exploded, causing the inferno.

To top it off, no proper emergency response system is in place. High-level responsibility needs to be fixed, starting with the provincial transport minister, Mir Mumtaz Hussain Jhakrani, and the secretary transport, Tuaha Ahmed Farooqui.

It is too easy to blame the driver especially when the frequency of such accidents makes clear that far more than the carelessness of those driving the vehicle is at play.

The roads are hazardous, and the transport sector has been left to its own devices. The provincial government needs to wake up to its responsibility in this area, and it must start by holding those at the top accountable for their lapses.

Published in Dawn, January 13th, 2015

Monumental courage

TO dwell upon what must have gone through the minds of those connected with Peshawar's Army Public School, when it reopened yesterday, less than a month after the grotesque Dec 16 massacre, is to be overtaken simultaneously by apprehension and awe.

The former sentiment stems from reasons that are obvious, but it is the latter that dominates because of the immense courage and fortitude shown by the staff, parent body and especially the students of the school.

The horror these premises saw was too much, and took place too recently; too many spoke silently by their absence. Those who had to make such a difficult decision can be offered only the empathy of a nation in mourning, for perhaps there was never really a choice when it came to reopening the school: the darkness that seeks to overcome the country has to be resisted in every way possible — sadly enough, regardless of the enormous personal cost extracted.

Also read: [Undeterred and unafraid, Army Public School reopens](#)

The army chief, Gen Raheel Sharif, was correct in showing support by visiting the school on the day it

reopened, but it is the prime minister who should have been present. It is reasonable to expect the head of government to concern himself with such an event, not for the optics or reasons of politics but out of genuine emotion. Yet, unfortunately, in this country such hopes often turn out to be in vain.

Now that the school's administration and student body have signalled their desire to turn towards the future, it behoves the government, the army and the polity at large to provide all the help possible.

Most obviously and crucially, there is the need to make available teams of professionals who are easily accessible and can help in grief counselling and countering the effects of conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder. In the wake of an atrocity of such scale, it is hard enough to imagine adults finding coping mechanisms; for children this appears almost impossible.

If the state is committed to its promises of saving the future of the country ie its children, then this would be a good place to start. The school administration, on its part, can consider methods of catharsis too, one example being the conversion of the auditorium, the main venue of the killings and which has been cordoned off, into a memorial.

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Meanwhile, in Peshawar and elsewhere, there is the need for the state to more urgently start beefing up security and step up coordination on gathering intelligence. Educational institutions have been asked to tighten protocols, and they must surely do that. But it is for the government to aggressively counter the central problem: the hydra-headed monster of militancy.

The words that spring to mind come from Pakistan-born British author Nadeem Aslam: “Pakistan produces people of extraordinary bravery. But no nation should ever require its citizens to be that brave.”

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Fisheries threatened

OWING primarily to overfishing, not only is the long-term stability of the fisheries industry under threat, species once found in plenty in Pakistan’s coastal waters may soon become a rarity. As reported in this paper, lobster fisheries along the Sindh and Balochistan coasts are on the verge of collapse, while matters also do not look good where other marine species, such as fish and shrimp, are concerned. Along with overfishing, the use of illegal

small-sized nets has also jeopardised the fishing trade, as these nets scoop up nearly everything — including juvenile fish — from the depths of the sea. Reportedly, most of the catch that reaches the harbour in Karachi consists of juvenile fish. This ‘trash fish’ yields a lower price in the market, while the process also disturbs the natural reproductive cycle of marine life. Huge foreign trawlers fishing illegally in Pakistan’s waters have also decimated fish stocks.

To protect the fisheries industry and to maintain the ecological balance, a sustainable fisheries policy needs to be implemented. A crackdown is required against destructive illegal nets that — despite being outlawed — are still in widespread use. Better policing of the coastline and territorial waters is also required in order to keep a check on illegal vessels. It must also be ensured that fish, shrimp and lobsters are not caught during their respective breeding seasons; unless the stocks are allowed to be replenished, there is little hope for the future availability of many marine species in our waters. Fishermen need to be consulted and alternative means of livelihood suggested during the periods the ban on fishing is enforced. The choice is between the stakeholders coming up with a sustainable and fair fisheries policy and the seafood industry in Pakistan being prepared for its eventual demise. Unless the fisheries sector is regulated with input from all

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stakeholders, including fishermen and experts, and policy decisions are firmly implemented, we risk destroying rich marine life and countless livelihoods due to unsustainable practices.

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Problematic security

THE latest announcements on the subject of school security display a breathtaking lack of sagacity. On Monday, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh governments disclosed further measures they intend to take in order to beef up security at educational institutions in the wake of last month's devastating attack on Peshawar's Army Public School.

It seems that the KP government has decided to allow employees of all educational institutions to carry licensed arms on the premises.

Also read: [Govt allows teachers, staff to carry arms into schools](#)

According to the provincial information minister, Mushtaq Ahmad Ghani, the move will allow teachers and other

staff members to engage the attackers for the “initial five to 10 minutes” before law-enforcement personnel reach the spot.

On the other hand, in Sindh a high-level security review meeting resolved to ban the use of mobile phones in all educational institutions during teaching hours since the devices afford room for “unchecked communication”.

The latter piece of absurdity can perhaps be dismissed not just because mobile phones are now ubiquitous and indispensable, but also because such a decision would be near impossible to implement. The question to be asked of the Sindh authorities is whether, by raising the issue of “unchecked communication”, they are implying that an attack on an educational institution may involve inside help. And if that is the case, where is the effort to identify and de-radicalise such individuals?

The move in KP, however, deserves outright castigation. Leave aside the folly of expecting the employees of educational institutions to act as the first line of defence in case of an attack.

Leave aside even the fact that weapons and the violence that they lead to are anathema to places of learning. Consider simply the numerous scenarios in which such a move could go horribly wrong — weapons in the hands of untrained and apprehensive chowkidars; guns being

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misued or misappropriated; or, terrifying, a potential assailant having easy access to the weapons.

Consider just the fact that the answer to solving the conundrum of a heavily weaponised and violent society does not lie in adding more guns to the mix. No doubt, it is important to boost security at our schools, but this is a deeply irresponsible way to go about it.

Taken together, these decisions run the gamut between idiocy and serious hazard. If this is the best that the two provinces can do in the face of an implacable enemy, there is much to worry about.

Published in Dawn January 14th , 2015

Kerry's visit

CONTINUING the recent trend of workmanlike and somewhat productive meetings between Pakistani and US officials, US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Islamabad has gone off smoothly. There were no histrionics, no surprises and, thankfully, no American demands for Pakistan to 'do more'.

The two countries appear to have found a recipe for relatively stable relations: focus on security matters; keep American aid — military and civilian — flowing; and recognise the economic importance of the relationship in terms of Pakistani exports to the US and American influence over IFIs that Pakistan is indebted to.

Also read: [Kerry meets Nawaz, reiterates commitment to fight terror](#)

In Islamabad this week, that three-part recipe was again in evidence as America's top diplomat met the senior political and military leadership here. While the civil-military imbalance in Pakistan may have worsened, at least both sides appear to be on the same page when it comes to keeping ties with the US stable and productive.

Also continuing the trend established in recent interactions between senior Pakistani and American leaders was the focus on two countries in particular: Afghanistan and India.

On Afghanistan, with the US having a significantly different military mission there beginning this year, Washington appears keen to nudge the Pakistani and Afghan states closer and to ramp up the bilateral relationship.

This makes sense for it is Pakistan and Afghanistan that must directly bear the consequences of each other's

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security decisions and so routing substantive relations through a distant superpower is not necessarily the desirable formula.

However, given the long-running divergences in the security interests of the two countries (as articulated by the Afghan and Pakistani security establishments) and the old suspicions that plague the bilateral relationship, an American role is necessary to try and make the most of the new beginning that the post-Karzai era in Afghanistan and the Pakistani military operation in North Waziristan may represent.

Surely, reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban and the bi-directional cross-border militancy problem should be at the top of the security agenda and it is there that a delicate three-way dance between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US will have to play out if results are to be achieved.

While the US does appear interested in actively working on the Pak-Afghan relationship, it appears far cooler to the idea of intervening in the Pak-India relationship.

From army chief Gen Raheel Sharif's visit to the US late last year to the Prime Minister's Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz, Pakistani officials have tried to nudge the US into suggesting to India that now is not the time to stoke tensions on Pakistan's eastern border, given the internal fight against militancy here.

But thus far the US appears unwilling to do more than offer carefully worded phrases of support for stable Pak-India ties. That is not enough, as surely the American side must know.

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Military operation costs

THE finance minister has disclosed that an incremental expenditure of at least Rs110bn will be required this fiscal year to meet the expenses arising from the military's Operation Zarb-i-Azb under way in North Waziristan and its larger fallout.

Of this, he says, Rs75bn will be used for the operation and Rs35bn for IDPs, which presumably includes the cost of reconstruction in populated areas that have been destroyed by the bombing. This is an out-of-budget expense, meaning it was not programmed into the expenditure plan in June 2014. The fiscal deficit target, already under pressure from declining revenues, will probably need to be revised upwards, with commitments to the IMF and implications for the fiscal framework, and other areas of the budget from where resources will have to be freed up to pay for this incremental expenditure.

But the finance minister must try and obtain greater disclosures from the military about how this money is being spent, even if those numbers are not to be made public. The government can afford this expense given the nature of the threat, but since it has ramifications for other areas of the budget, and because it is an off-budget item, it is important that there be at least some oversight to ensure that it is being spent wisely. The figure appears

to suggest that the military operation may be larger than what we have been led to believe, both in its present execution as well as its future scope. Reportedly, two divisions are involved in the operation, and if their expenses can add up to such a huge sum then it is essential for the government to raise the right questions regarding these expenditures. If the costs of mobilising a small number of divisions can escalate so rapidly, then one wonders what the expenses would be in the event of a larger conflict, and how far the fiscal framework can sustain them. It is hoped that our rulers will focus on these concerns as they proceed with their plans.

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Recourse to encounters

Apart from the presence of religious and sectarian extremists, Karachi's law and order situation is also jeopardised by political and ethnic militants, as well as criminal gangs.

But while the city's crime and militancy problems are indeed major and require effective approaches to tackle them, the answer certainly does not lie in relying on extrajudicial methods to address the violence.

Of late, there has been an uptick in the number of alleged encounters and extrajudicial killings in the city.

Read: [Malir shut as MQM worker dies in police custody](#)

The MQM cried foul when a party member died in police custody on Jan 10.

While police claimed the man was in possession of an illegal weapon and had confessed to several murders, other reports indicated that the individual was tortured in custody.

Following the man's death, party leaders said the Muttahida was being targeted both by religious extremists and the security establishment, while the MQM shut down the city on Sunday in protest. Around

the same time as the custodial death, the bodies of three MQM supporters were discovered on the outskirts of the metropolis bearing torture marks.

Also read: [Four Al Qaeda men killed in 'encounter'](#)

Meanwhile, several suspected religious militants have been gunned down in alleged encounters over the past few days.

Two suspects with reported links to Al Qaeda and the banned TTP were killed by police on Tuesday, while two individuals allegedly belonging to militant groups were also shot a day earlier.

It is not only political parties that are complaining about the extrajudicial deaths of their workers; civil society activists have also raised concerns about the all-too-frequent encounters in Karachi.

Supporters of Sindhi and Baloch nationalist groups have also been targeted. It appears likely that some within the law-enforcement apparatus are using the cover of anti-militancy operations to settle scores and eliminate suspects by circumventing the criminal justice system.

Yet in a civilised, democratic society there is simply no room for extralegal methods. Especially now, with the creation of military courts — despite their drawbacks — the law-enforcement agencies have no excuse to skip the

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investigation and prosecution process and play executioner.

The criminal justice system surely needs a massive overhaul, while militancy in Karachi must be addressed through firm action.

But neither of these realities can justify extrajudicial killings.

The authorities need to fix the investigation and prosecution systems, at the same time making it clear to law enforcers that no extralegal methods will be tolerated when it comes to dealing with militancy and crime.

Published in Dawn, January 15th, 2015

Confrontation again

It proved to be the shortest of hiatuses. Even in the immediate aftermath of the Peshawar school carnage, there were questions about just how long the pause in the long-running feud between the PML-N and PTI/PAT could last.

Now, the country knows the answer: less than a month. When the PTI unilaterally called off its anti-government protests, the rulers had an opportunity to end the long-running crisis by constituting a high-powered commission to investigate PTI allegations of fraud and malfeasance in the May 2013 general election.

But the PML-N did not take the initiative and soon enough the quarrelling restarted. The PTI claimed the PML-N was reneging on its promises; the PML-N claimed the PTI kept shifting the goalposts and expanding its demands.

Read: [PTI announces 'dharna convention' on January 18](#)

Neither side seemed particularly concerned that the most urgent issue — developing a coherent, workable plan to combat militancy and extremism — was suffering as a result of the squabbling.

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It was also only a matter of time before the supporting cast also became involved. Sure enough, and seemingly on cue, the PAT has announced that it will restart its own protests against the government a day before the PTI will re-congregate near Constitution Avenue in Islamabad.

At this point, six months since the PTI and PAT launched their Islamabad campaign to oust the government, there is little new to be said about the individual culpability of the major protagonists.

By now, the PML-N should have notified the formation of a high-powered commission to investigate alleged electoral fraud in May 2013 and completed the process of electoral reforms. That neither of those steps have been taken is the result of the PML-N's recalcitrance.

What after all could the PTI's legitimate complaints be had a high-powered, manifestly independent and substantively empowered investigation commission been formed by the government? Surely, pressure would be on the PTI to accept such a commission and not insist on its own tailored version of one.

Also read: [PAT to relaunch protest campaign on 17th](#)

Similarly, the process of electoral reforms did not have to become an issue to be sorted out privately between the PML-N and the PTI and could have been entrusted to parliament in substance and not only in form.

Yet, for all the PML-N does wrong, the PTI manages to set new lows in terms of a focus on the parochial. Post-Peshawar, the PTI could have used its demonstrable ability to shape the national political discourse to focus on the militancy threat.

Instead, the party appears to have chosen to do the bare minimum — support military courts, make perfunctory suggestions to improve security in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — and then immediately return to its politics of protest. When more was needed and expected, the PTI once again has chosen to disappoint and under-deliver.

It is a vain hope that the imminent return to the politics of confrontation will be brief.

Published in Dawn, January 15th, 2015

Merkel's resolve

IT may not have had the dimensions of Sunday's Paris march, but Tuesday's rally in Berlin symbolised the German leadership's determination to preserve the country's multicultural character in the face of a rising wave of xenophobia, a large part of it in reaction to acts of terrorism carried out in the name of Islam. While President Joachim Gauck said Germany had become more diverse "religiously, culturally and mentally", Chancellor Angela Merkel pledged to use "all the means at our disposal" to combat intolerance. The challenge before the Merkel government shouldn't be underestimated. Home to four million Muslims, mostly Turkish immigrants, Germany has been witnessing a growth in support for extremist groups many of whom have been mobilising people against the government's immigration policy; some groups display their Islamophobia openly. The most notorious of them is Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West, which on Monday organised a rally in Dresden. Another anti-immigrant group gaining attention is Alternative for Germany. Both are anti-Muslim and demand stricter immigration and asylum policies. The Dresden marchers carried Chancellor Merkel's doctored pictures showing her wearing a scarf.

Fortunately, rallies in other cities have drawn fewer participants.

There can be no doubt that murderous attacks such as the Charlie Hebdo killings only strengthen anti-Muslim lobbies worldwide, creating difficulties for those who believe in tolerance and pluralism. While the far right in the West is in a minority, many among the majority do listen to what it has to say when terrorists spill innocent blood. The killers should know that whether it is 9/11, the London bombings, the Mumbai attack or Paris, the losers are Muslims worldwide, especially those who have made the West their home and want to live in peace. Chancellor Merkel has made no secret of her determination to take on the extremists, and declared at Tuesday's rally that "xenophobia, racism, extremism, have no place" in Germany. Hopefully Muslim community leaders in the West will support the chancellor's inclusive stance — whether in the fight against European xenophobia or Islamist militancy.

Published in Dawn, January 15th, 2015

School van hazards

IT is unfortunate that the general lack of humane values in our society should also manifest itself in the manner in which children go to school and return.

Packed like sardines in a four-wheeler that is unfit to be called a school bus, the children are without a chaperon who could ensure their safe journey and return.

A common sight is students standing precariously on the footboard, highlighting the indifference of school managements and education authorities to students' lives and limbs.

Also read: [Children on board, drive safely](#)

As an ad published in yesterday's issue of this paper shows, the Sindh government appears solely concerned with security matters and is oblivious to the hazards of students' transportation.

Developed countries have strict rules regarding school buses to ensure children's safety.

Invariably, school buses have a standardised body and colour so that they can be spotted, and traffic rules provide for all motorists to observe certain norms when a

school bus is stationary, when it is in motion and when children are boarding or alighting. These are followed strictly, and tests for driving licences include questions on safety regulations regarding school buses.

There are websites which inform parents about possible changes in the pick and drop schedule due to the weather, and companies which run school bus services require a parent to be present at the appointed place to receive his/her ward. Besides, there are meetings between parents, teachers and bus operators to discuss safety concerns.

It is time the provincial transport department updated the rules regarding school buses to make the system more humane and compatible with life in many of our bustling cities where traffic discipline hardly exists.

To begin with it is not vans but buses that should carry students, and the law must make it compulsory for every school to provide a chaperon with every bus to keep a meticulous record, including the time when a student is finally home. Above all, motorists, pedestrians and society itself need to change their attitude towards the young and vulnerable.

Published in Dawn, January 16th, 2015

LG poll inaction

WHILE Balochistan is plodding along the path of establishing elected local governments, the other provinces, especially Sindh and Punjab, appear least interested in this essential component of the democratic project.

As reported on Thursday, the Election Commission of Pakistan has set Jan 28 as the date for the election of Quetta's mayor as well as the chairmen of local councils.

The local polls' process began in December 2013 and the elections on the 28th should bring the long-drawn exercise to a close. While Balochistan with all its security and political issues has gone ahead with the LG polls, it is indeed a matter of shame that more 'stable' provinces have shown little inclination to carry out the grass-roots democratic exercise.

Also read: [Balochistan set to be first province to hold LG polls](#)

There is some encouraging news from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; delimitation has been done there and Imran Khan reportedly has said the polls will be held by April. Let us hope the PTI sticks to this latest deadline. However, where Sindh and Punjab are concerned, the situation remains bleak, despite demands — such as that

of the opposition leader in the Sindh Assembly — to hold the polls without delay.

For example, the ECP told the Supreme Court recently that it had not received the data from Sindh and Punjab that would allow it to delimit wards. Despite the apex court's pressure, both provinces have been slothful in completing the legal and procedural tasks required to pave the way for the polls.

This paper has said countless times that the provincial governments need to speed up the process and hold the polls without delay. Yet for some puzzling reason — perhaps fearing the loss of influence and control to elected local governments — provincial lawmakers have not been interested in holding LG polls.

This attitude is highly undemocratic and is tantamount to denying the people elected representation at the local level. The lack of local governments adds to the people's miseries, as citizens have to cut through much red tape just to secure basic civic services.

Despite the sensitive law and order situation in the country, Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa need to move at full speed to prepare for the polls. Counterterrorism operations should not be used as an excuse to postpone polls indefinitely. If general elections can be held in a less than desirable atmosphere where

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law and order are concerned, there is no reason to block local polls in the current circumstances.

Published in Dawn, January 16th, 2015

Militants in Punjab

LONG in denial about Punjab's militancy problem, the PML-N appears to finally be waking up to the dangers in its home province.

On Wednesday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan briefed the prime minister on steps taken under the National Action Plan against militant groups and extremists operating in Punjab and even the scant details offered to the media make for sober reading: 14,000 individuals hauled up for investigation; 341 allegedly involved in hate speech; 1,100 warned for misuse of loudspeakers; and 41 shops closed for distributing hate material.

Also read: [95 banned groups active in Punjab](#)

Those numbers though surely represent only a fraction of the militancy and extremism in Punjab. Consider just a few factors: the population of Punjab is in the region of 100 million; the province has a vast mosque-madrasah-social welfare network operated by multiple groups —

some of them household names, others unheard of outside the sub-regions of Punjab; and virtually nothing has been done in over a decade to clamp down on extremist and militant outfits in the province.

That is perhaps why the number of proscribed groups operating in the province has soared to 95, according to the interior minister's presentation to the prime minister on Wednesday.

However, for all the attempts by the PML-N leadership to get serious about problems in its home province, the revelations by the interior minister indicate a continuing unwillingness to be as forthright as possible.

Statistics are important, but should not be a substitute for meaningful details. To begin with, which groups comprise the proscribed 95? That number is well above the nationally proscribed 72 groups that the interior ministry itself has listed, so which are the additional groups active in Punjab?

To expect the names of proscribed organisations to be shared is the bare minimum. Who are the leaders of these groups? Where do they operate? What is their reach? Who funds them? Which madressahs, mosques or religious networks are they tied to? What attacks have they carried out? And, perhaps most relevantly, what type of attacks are they suspected of planning?

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Worryingly none of these details were provided. That would inevitably lead to speculation about the true identities of the individuals targeted and whether the state is simply indulging in a cover-up.

Consider that according to the interior minister's own claim, of the 14,000 individuals rounded up in Punjab since the NAP implementation has begun, a mere 780 have had some form of preliminary charges drawn up against them. What about the rest?

Have they been wrongly scooped up? Where are they now? What about the hardcore terrorists and militants who do exist in Punjab — have they been allowed to slip out of the province undetected?

Encouraging as it is that the PML-N is willing to acknowledge a militancy problem in Punjab, defeating the militant threat will require a great deal more transparency and determination by the state.

Published in Dawn, January 16th, 2015

ODI retirements

TWO of Pakistan's favourite sportsmen Misbah-ul-Haq and Shahid Afridi have decided to retire from ODI matches after next month's ICC Cricket World Cup scheduled to be held in Australia and New Zealand.

The two cricketing stalwarts, who have served the game in Pakistan with distinction over the years, have expressed their resolve to perform their best at the upcoming event in order to make it a memorable departure.

However, Misbah will continue to lead Pakistan in the Test matches while Afridi has been named captain for the 2016 T20 World Cup and intends to concentrate his energies on that event which will be held in India.

The announcements, though very much on the cards, have rocked Pakistan cricket especially as there are no immediate replacements in sight of those who could be termed as natural successors of the two. However, it has triggered a lively debate regarding the nomination of a possible candidate to lead Pakistan in the ODIs after the World Cup.

Interestingly, the other senior player in the team Younis Khan has made it evident that he has no immediate plans

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to hang up his boots where ODIs are concerned like his two other colleagues. But whether or not the Pakistan Cricket Board hands him the mantle, or, with an eye on the future, appoints a youngster to lead the team remains to be seen.

Also read: ["Who says this is my last World Cup" asks Younis](#)

The names of talented youngsters including opener Ahmed Shehzad, Sohaib Maqsood, Fawad Alam and Asad Shafiq are being discussed in cricketing circles for the coveted position, but since they have not led Pakistan at the international level, their leadership skills remain untested.

Besides Misbah and Afridi, Sri Lanka's Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara have also announced their retirement once the World Cup is over. Some other international players who are likely to call it a day after the extravaganza include Chris Gayle of the West Indies, New Zealand's Daniel Vettori and Brendon McCullum and Robin Peterson of South Africa.

Published in Dawn, January 17th, 2015

Price of free speech

WHILE the debate on the limits of free speech has always been pertinent in a globalised, interlinked and interracial world, it has assumed greater urgency in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo killings last week.

Particularly so after the French satirical magazine's latest edition once again included a depiction of the Prophet (PBUH). Pope Francis has also weighed in on the subject, saying that while murder "in the name of God is an absurdity", freedom of speech should be tempered by respect for faith.

Know more: [Pope on Charlie Hebdo: There are limits to free expression](#)

Several Muslim countries have voiced disapproval of the latest affront to their beliefs. The massacre at Charlie Hebdo had given rise to expressions of unalloyed sympathy across the world, and rightly so, for no matter what the provocation, settling scores through violence is never justified.

From that sympathy, a unity of narrative — transcending divisions of faith, ethnicity and nationality — had emerged. This is a critical element in fighting the multi-dimensional scourge of religious extremism on a global scale, and it was perhaps that realisation which prompted

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President François Hollande to publicly acknowledge the fact that Muslims themselves are “the main victims of fanaticism, fundamentalism and intolerance”.

The statement, similar to the stance taken recently by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is especially significant against the backdrop of worrying xenophobic trends in Europe.

A refusal to cave in to threats of violence can be deemed courageous, but the situation in this instance demands a more nuanced view.

Charlie Hebdo’s journalists, by re-offending, have opted for a narrow, parochial response instead of seeing resistance to extremist elements as a battle in a much bigger war.

As a result, the narrative against extremism has once more become fragmented, skewed towards the acts that insult faith, rather than the actions that violate the norms of all faiths, in this case murder in the name of religion.

Such a climate is conducive for voices on the margins to stir the cauldron of hate anew. Their impact is already being felt on the streets of Karachi with violent protests against the new cartoons.

Further afield, the lives of millions of peaceful, law-abiding Muslims across the world will become more

precarious at the hands of those who conflate Islam with Islamist militancy.

Perhaps it is time for world leaders to come together and shape this debate along rational and non-discriminatory lines with a view to the long-term implications of unbridled free speech.

Published in Dawn, January 17th, 2015

Detection of terror funds

THE Senate finance committee was told by a State Bank delegation led by the governor that only 34 cases of suspicious transactions were proceeded against in the past five years, while 5,775 Suspicious Transaction Reports, or STRs, were filed in the same period.

This is an abysmally low figure and underscores the strong need to strengthen efforts to intercept terror financing.

A new bill is being debated in the Senate to amend the Anti Money Laundering Act 2010 which dilates significantly on the definition of funds considered suspicious in connection with militancy.

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Also read: [SBP tracking cases of money laundering, committee told](#)

This is a good start, but in order for efforts aimed at intercepting terror financing to bear fruit, much more will need to be done to boost the detection of these funds in the first place. Without stronger detection, there is little point in strengthening the powers of investigation and prosecution, which is where the bulk of the bill's emphasis lies.

Banks must play an important role in detecting funds connected with terrorist activity, but banks cannot undertake the challenge on their own. Banks need to know what they are looking for when told to track fund flows and look for telltale signs of connections to terrorist activity.

To do this, they need some idea of the geography of fund flows and a database of names and entities that are on a watch list, no matter how long the latter may be. Both these elements need to be updated in real time.

Currently, the regulations to AMLA 2010 contain guidelines only for detecting money laundering, but very little for the detection of fund flows linked to terrorist activity. In light of the extremely poor track record of the Financial Monitoring Unit to facilitate the detection of funds connected to terrorist financing, there is clearly a need to update these guidelines and include more

specific information on the form that fund flows connected with terrorism might take.

This is a big task that cannot be left to the FMU and the banks to perform by themselves. The intelligence agencies and other law-enforcement bodies need to play a role in developing these guidelines. Once detection has been strengthened, the next question to address is the speed with which suspicious funds can be frozen.

Currently, AMLA 2010 stipulates a seven-day limit within which suspicious activity must be reported, though in reality STRs can take years before landing on the desk of an investigating officer. With strong guidelines, and stronger compliance requirements for banks, freezing of the funds can come much earlier than it does at the moment.

These are the first steps involved in apprehending terrorist facilitators who, contrary to popular belief, actually do use formal banking channels on many occasions. Terrorism cannot be defeated if its facilitators cannot be apprehended, and that cannot happen if the state cannot see them.

Published in Dawn, January 17th, 2015

Out of fuel

Faced with a crisis in fuel supply, the government decided last night to shoot the messenger and suspend four officials from the bureaucracy, leaving ministers untouched.

The minister for petroleum escaped accountability after telling the Senate and later the media that the shortages are the result of a spike in demand because of the downward revision in prices, as well as a partial shutdown at Parco, the country's largest refinery.

Read: [Shortage of petrol hits alarming levels](#)

Ogra, the regulator for the oil and gas sector, placed the emphasis elsewhere, saying that the crisis is due in part to the rise in demand, and also to the unwillingness of oil marketing companies to maintain stocks to help tide over temporary difficulties.

Meanwhile, the finance secretary told the Senate that the circular debt was the main reason, because of which PSO could not arrange the funds to pay its creditors and thus found itself unplugged from its lines of credit.

Also read: [80pc of Lahore's petrol stations closed due to cut in supply](#)

So which of all these is it? Common sense says all these factors must have played a role, but the evidence says it was mismanagement of the circular debt, which caused a severe crisis of liquidity in the country's largest oil importing company — PSO — which was the primary cause.

The unexpected surge in demand could certainly have aggravated the problem, but the figure given for the size of this surge — 23pc — cannot justify the complete closure of pumps across Punjab and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Also read: [Fuel, power shortage looms as oil stocks plummet](#)

A string of defaults on its payments for oil imports at PSO begins on Nov 28 and escalates rapidly to Rs46bn in a week's time. The company began sounding the alarm as early as Dec 24 raising the spectre of "an imminent supply chain breakdown".

Today government ministers and functionaries are searching for all sorts of excuses that absolve the government of responsibility in the creation of this mess, while heads roll in the wrong quarters, and different departments give us different ideas of how long it will take for the situation to normalise.

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They have offered excuses before the Senate, on media talk shows and at press conferences that say everything, other than stating the plain fact that we are in this mess because they have failed to manage the circular debt, in cause and consequence.

Also read: [Illegal petrol outlets' sale booming](#)

This circus must end. In large part, the crisis is also the result of the heavy centralisation of all decision-making in the hands of a very small number of individuals, which is the hallmark of this government's style.

Also read: [Shortage of petrol forces cars off roads](#)

Evidence is in the fact that when the crisis is at its peak, both the prime minister and the finance minister, widely understood to hold key decisions in their own hands, are both out of the country, while the government clutches at straws to explain itself. The situation is serious, and demands a mature response.

Published in Dawn January 18th , 2015

Problematic penalty

When an ambulance carrying the body of a Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan militant hanged in Karachi Central Prison is showered with rose petals by well-wishers — as pictured in this newspaper on Friday — it demonstrates how problematic the death penalty is in religiously inspired militancy and terrorism cases.

It clearly cannot be a deterrent for terrorists whose very missions either involve blowing themselves up or launching attacks in which death is a likely outcome.

Moreover, the hangings may only be inspiring other would-be militants given the faux martyr status bestowed by a certain fringe section of society upon those executed.

Read: [SSP militant hanged for sectarian killing](#)

All that the hangings have achieved so far is feed a growing appetite in society for vengeance rather than justice — turning an already wounded populace into cheerleaders of death.

More broadly, the question that is still unanswered is, what of the government's National Action Plan and the range of other measures the government is meant to take

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to combat extremism and dismantle terrorist groups operating on Pakistani soil?

Also read: [Arshad Mehmood: Hanged, then buried by crowds of well-wishers](#)

Some initial steps have been taken, but nothing close to a coherent strategy has emerged yet and the government, for all its meetings and press releases, does not appear to have the will or the capacity to develop one.

Where there has been movement, it appears to occur largely because of the military's initiative or insistence that the civilian-run side of the state take certain steps.

Surely, though, a militarised strategy to fight militancy and extremism cannot be a winning strategy.

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

The PML-N government may have only reluctantly, and very belatedly, tried to own the fight against militancy, but being in charge of two governments — in Punjab and the centre — means the party leadership must play a central role. Where is the PML-N lacking?

In nearly every department, starting from the interior ministry, which is still in the hands of a minister who fruitlessly pursued peace talks with the very same militants that the ministry must now take the fight to.

The unwieldy committee approach to taking on militancy is another problem, with bureaucrats having an unhealthy large presence in many committees that could do with subject-specific expertise.

Why, for example, is the police leadership so under-represented in the multiple committees that the PML-N has created? There is still time to correct course, beginning with admitting that execution is no answer and what the government really needs to do is speed up other aspects of the fight against terrorism.

Published in Dawn January 18th , 2015

Safety of media persons

IN Pakistan, media personnel often have to carry out their duties in an extremely volatile and dangerous atmosphere. It is not just active conflict zones; cities can also become highly unstable, prone to acts of terrorism, riots or other disturbances.

Hence journalists must act with alacrity and caution, balancing their professional duties with awareness about when to pull back should things spiral out of control.

Read| [AFP photographer shot by anti-Charlie Hebdo protesters: police](#)

While numerous journalists have been killed for carrying out their duties in Pakistan over the years, the threats media persons face while covering live events are also a matter of concern. In this regard, it is a relief that a photojournalist associated with French news agency AFP is in stable condition now.

Asif Hassan was shot on Friday in Karachi as a clash broke out between the police and supporters of the Islami Jamiat-i-Talaba; the latter were marching on the French consulate in protest against the controversial caricatures published recently. It is unclear who shot the photographer, as in such situations it is difficult to affix responsibility without a proper investigation.

But irrespective of who is responsible, the incident highlights the threats journalists face while working in the field, as well as what can be done to minimise these hazards.

Firstly, it is clear that the onus is on the media organisations — both foreign and local — to ensure their employees have the protective gear and training necessary to deal with covering conflict situations.

Also read: [French news agency photojournalist wounded during IJT protest near consulate](#)

For example, while covering riots or protests, flak jackets need to be worn, while emergency response training must also be given to journalists working in the field.

Also, while equipment is usually insured, those operating it are mostly not, which needs to change. While foreign media outlets are generally more responsible when it comes to sensitising employees about safety protocols, most local organisations need to do much more.

Getting the story is important, but much more so is the safety of media personnel.

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

This is a message media organisations need to clearly communicate to their workers.

KASB depositors

IT has been two months since the State Bank of Pakistan moved to place **amoratorium on KASB Bank**, telling depositors that withdrawals beyond Rs300,000 would not be allowed for six months at least.

The step created a fair amount of unease amongst other banks, but it was depositors who worried the most. Fortunately the episode did not have any spillover effects on the rest of the banking system and panicked withdrawals did not occur.

Also read: [KASB Bank to remain open: SBP](#)

In part this was because of a reassuring message put out by the SBP that the situation is temporary and withdrawals would be permitted soon. Given the Rs300,000 withdrawal limit, most retail depositors felt assured that the situation would normalise before they had exhausted this limit.

It has now been two months and the concern amongst retail depositors is growing. Businesses that maintained their accounts at KASB are now reduced to borrow to bridge the non-availability of those funds.

Now that due diligence has begun for eventual sale of KASB, depositors further fear that they will be made to wait for the entire length of time it takes to sell the bank and merge its operations with those of the new buyer before they will be allowed to withdraw their funds. That means the wait could be a lot longer than what they had been prepared for.

The State Bank needs to address the growing anxiety amongst the depositors that their funds will be safe and available for withdrawal within, if not sooner, than the stipulated six months.

Safeguarding the interests of the large investors in KASB, as well as ensuring that it fetches as decent a price as possible given the circumstances, cannot be larger priorities than safeguarding the trust the depositors placed in the institution.

The reputation of the entire banking industry in Pakistan could be adversely impacted if depositors' anxiety is not addressed. This would be a grave consequence, especially in light of the fact that there is no deposit insurance in Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, January 19th, 2015

Climate change

SUCH is the ferocious immediacy of the threat of terrorism that a whole host of other issues, some that may in the long term prove perhaps equally debilitating for the country, have ended up being pushed into the shadows.

The battle against polio springs immediately to mind. Another such area is climate change, the effects of which are already being felt globally and which will have in the future a devastating effect on vulnerable terrains.

Unhappily, Pakistan joins several other developing countries in having done little to trigger climate change, but are likely to bear the brunt of the effects.

Also read: [Footprints: Ignoring climate change](#)

This was pointed out yet again in Islamabad on Thursday, as members of the Parliamentary Task Force on Sustainable Development Goals attended a presentation on the issue.

They were told that Pakistan ranks 135th among carbon-emitting countries and contributes merely 0.8 per cent to global carbon emissions; nevertheless, it is still included in the eight countries most vulnerable to climate change.

In the view of Dr Qamaruzzaman Chaudhry, a former director-general of the Meteorological Office and vice president of the World Meteorological Organisation, already “a considerable increase in intense floods, rains, extreme weather and other climatic changes has been noted in Pakistan.”

Take a look: [Deal on climate change](#)

This country is amongst the few developing nations with a ministry for climate change, and in 2013 launched its first national policy in this regard.

On paper, this was a holistic plan, laying down policy measures for mitigation as well as adaptation for sectors that include energy, transport, agriculture and livestock, industries, forestry and water resources, etc. But, as always, it is in the phases of implementation and engagement that not enough will has been displayed.

True, some effort has been made, such as the Punjab government offering farmers incentives to adapt to more sustainable and efficient methodologies, and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government launching some reforestation drives.

Some universities, too, have helped raise awareness about the effects of climate change and mitigation measures. But these have tended to be few and

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piecemeal, and a cohesive effort to concurrently take on all dimensions of the issue is hardly in evidence.

The potential severity of the coming changes can be gauged from Dr Chaudhry's warning that in the next 30 to 40 years, "there may be no more water in the River Indus because all the glaciers have melted." Pakistan drags its heels over the matter at its own peril.

Published in Dawn, January 19th, 2015

Ban on militant groups

IN the long, convoluted history of the Pakistani state banning militant groups, the present episode may be the most mysterious: a US government spokesperson has publicly and explicitly welcomed a decision by Pakistan to ban several more militant groups, even though absolutely no one in government here has made any such announcement.

If US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Marie Harf's assertion in a news briefing on Friday proves true — "We welcome [the decision] to outlaw the Haqqani network, Jamaatud Dawa, and I think about 10 other organisations linked to violent extremism," Ms Harf is quoted as saying — it would demonstrate that the bad

old days of Pakistani leaders treating external powers as more relevant and important in matters of national security than, say, the Pakistani public or parliament have never really gone away.

Know more: [US praises ban on Haqqanis](#)

Even more problematically, the latest move — if, indeed, it is announced soon, as Ms Harf has claimed it will be — would bolster the perception that Pakistan is fighting militancy at the behest of others, especially the US, and not because this is a war that this country must fight and win for its own survival.

There is no doubt that the Pakistani state needs to do more against a much wider spectrum of militant and extremist groups operating its soil.

Focusing on simply the so-called anti-Pakistan militant networks such as the TTP will only produce medium-term results, perhaps, but guarantees long-term failure in the fight against militancy. This is both because of the overlapping nature of militant groups — operational, strategic and ideological — and because a long-term future where the state is in competition with militias for predominance inside Pakistan is not a future that ought to be acceptable to anyone in this country.

Also read: [A paradigm shift?](#)

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So yes, the Haqqani network needs to be banned as does the Jamaatud Dawa and sundry more names that may come to light soon. But without a zero-tolerance policy against militancy, there will be no winning strategy.

Zero tolerance certainly does not mean simply military operations and heavy-handed counterterrorism measures in the urban areas; what it does suggest is a commitment to progressively disarm and dismantle militant groups and the wider extremist network that enables those groups to survive and thrive.

Of course, simply banning more groups will not mean much unless the previous bans are implemented, the new bans cover all incarnations of a militant group, and there are sustained efforts by the law-enforcement and intelligence apparatus to ensure banned organisations do not quietly regroup once the initial focus fades. That has never happened before.

And the present is even more complicated. What will a ban on the Haqqani network mean in practice given that the major sanctuary in North Waziristan has already been disrupted by Operation Zarb-e-Azb? What will banning the JuD mean for the Falahi Insaniyat Foundation? Will the government offer answers — to anything?

Published in Dawn, January 19th, 2015

PIA's Delhi office

WHENEVER ties sour between Pakistan and India, people-to-people contact is the first casualty. It is a matter of concern for all those who desire friendship and harmony between the two neighbours that the Indian government has asked PIA to vacate its offices in Delhi.

As reported on Monday, the Indian authorities have apparently caught the flag carrier out on a technicality. India's Directorate of Enforcement has asked PIA to "dispose of" its real estate in Delhi as its purchase was "unauthorised". Also, the carrier's staffers in the Indian capital are facing problems in extending their visas.

Also read: [PIA New Delhi office receives closure notice from Indian authorities](#)

If the Indian authorities feel there are genuine legal issues with PIA's real estate purchases, it is difficult to comprehend why the issue has been raised nearly a decade after the properties were acquired.

Assuming that the Indian government is right on a point of technicality, we must nonetheless accept that when it comes to Indo-Pak relations, there are more than just legal or administrative details involved — there is always a deeper context, one that is completely political.

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Whether it is the case of the reopening of Pakistan's consulate in Mumbai, the suspension of Indian carriers' flights to Pakistan or even the closure of the Indian consulate in Karachi, it is politics on both sides that mostly guides such decisions.

Relations between the states have of course been frosty ever since the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Yet India's establishment has adopted a more aggressive posture after Narendra Modi's coming to power last year.

PIA's flights to India are now the only direct air links between the two states. Should this vital link be broken, travellers from either country wishing to visit the other by air will have to take a cumbersome, expensive detour through a third country.

Pakistan's high commissioner in Delhi has said the issue has been taken up with the Indian authorities. We hope it is resolved at the earliest. The people of South Asia deserve a better future based on friendship; for that to happen, the communication lines must be kept open.

Published in Dawn, January 20th, 2015

PTI's new direction

THE party was voted to power in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in May 2013, but at long last the PTI appears to be turning its attention to the very thing it was elected to do: govern.

Imran Khan's so-called dharna convention in Islamabad on Sunday produced a surprise — and a pleasant one for a change. Instead of threatening the PML-N with further strife and more street protests, the PTI chief chose to focus on governance, reforms and service delivery in KP. And not a moment too soon.

Also read: [Development work in KP to be refocused, says Imran](#)

Hearing Mr Khan talk about education, health and the environment harkened back to seemingly another era when the PTI focused on real issues and talked in a language that the voter could connect with.

Missing though was the substance: no implementation timelines and concrete plans beyond a seemingly unrealistic and facile target of planting a billion tree saplings in the province was offered by Mr Khan.

However, if the PTI is in fact serious, the opportunities are near limitless. No province has really managed to

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take on the raft of new responsibilities that devolution under the 18th Amendment has created, and no province has attempted to tie local governments to a developmental, people-orientated focus.

In KP that laudable goal would be complicated by needing to stay simultaneously focused on the fight against militancy.

Daunting as the challenge that the PTI has laid for itself is, Mr Khan's announcement has in a way also thrown down the gauntlet to the PML-N.

It was after all the PTI chief who has been accused over much of the last year of being unreasonable and unwilling to hew to the logic of democratic politics. But Mr Khan has now proved on several occasions that he is able to back down for the greater good.

First, he abandoned his demand that the prime minister resign to allow a high-powered commission to inquire into alleged electoral fraud on May 2013 — after it had become clear that that precondition was an insurmountable hurdle in any deal.

Then, after the Peshawar attack occurred, Mr Khan again stood down, bowing to the logic of the need for a national consensus to fight militancy.

Now, even though the PML-N has yet to constitute the commission it once more pledged it would after the

Peshawar attack, Mr Khan has turned his focus to governance issues in KP. Can the PML-N learn something from Mr Khan and do the right thing by forming the commission it has long promised?

Published in Dawn, January 20th, 2015

Fuelling controversy

A FLUSTERED and beleaguered finance minister suggested in his first public appearance since returning from his visit to Japan that the critical fuel shortages in Punjab might be a conspiracy against his government.

On his part, the petroleum minister, who has been doing the rounds on TV since last week, blamed variously the finance ministry for not releasing funds in time to retire outstanding payments on oil imports, a spike in demand for oil, and refinery shutdowns.

Four heads have already rolled, although none at the highest level. Meanwhile, consumers continue to throng the petrol pumps filling up small containers with tiny amounts of petrol as the fuel is rationed by pump owners, and a black market thrives.

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Also read: [PM suspends officials over fuel crisis as anger escalates](#)

Of all the damaging attitudes to bring to the table at this juncture, none can be worse than casting the whole affair as a conspiracy against the government. Not everything that happens in the country is politically motivated.

The sequence of events that led up to the shortages is quite obvious by now, and it is disingenuous on the finance minister's part to try and shrug off responsibility. It has been observed that most major decisions of this government are taken by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, who are often criticised for concentrating power in their own hands.

Since a large part of the crisis grows out of the funding requirements of PSO, which found itself unplugged from its credit lines due to defaults in payments of furnace oil imports, at least some of the explaining must come from the finance ministry.

Managing the oil supply chain is tricky business and requires advance planning — especially since Karachi, where the imports land, has limited storage capacity for petrol. Managing the supplies becomes difficult if the company placing the order does not know whether it will have the funds to honour the payment, especially as suppliers are demanding money before a vessel is loaded.

Vessels have transit time, berthing is often not available on demand, and discharging the fuel for upcountry transportation can take days. It becomes impossible to manage such a supply chain if one doesn't know when the necessary funds to make payments will be available.

As a result, oil supplies are routinely being arranged through short-term emergency measures for every vessel, which brings additional costs as well as delays in berthing and discharging of the fuel. The government will need to take a serious look at how it is running things for a more mature answer to why this situation arose in the first place.

Over-centralisation of decision-making in the hands of a small group of individuals, coupled with inept management of the consequences growing out of the circular debt, has created this crisis. Resorting to conspiracy theories must be avoided.

Published in Dawn, January 20th, 2015

Cricket record

THE world record-breaking century scored by South Africa's ODI skipper AB de Villiers recently against the West Indies has left critics searching for superlatives and statisticians scratching their heads.

Besides being a breathtaking spectacle for all those who had the privilege to witness it, De Villiers' 31-ball century also underlined the remarkable change that the game of cricket has undergone since the advent of Twenty20 cricket.

Ranked as the best batsman in world cricket today along with Sri Lanka's Kumar Sangakkara, De Villiers plundered several records in his epic innings including that of the fastest half-century off just 16 balls and the most number of sixes (16) hit by a player in a single innings.

Also read: [De Villiers record 'not unbreakable': Corey Anderson](#)

Back in 1996, when Pakistan's dashing all-rounder Shahid Afridi had set the record for the fastest hundred off just 37 balls against Sri Lanka, the pundits believed the mark would never be eclipsed. However, with cricket's shortest format of T20 gaining ground, it is no shock that Afridi's world record has been bettered twice

in the last 12 months — first by New Zealand's Corey Anderson who scored a 36-ball hundred in January last year, also against the West Indies, and now by De Villiers.

Such hitting and batting innovations are a far cry from the traditional format of the game which remains the Tests.

In Test matches, which have been played for nearly 150 years now, the hallmark of a good batsman is his sound defence and wristy ground shots which were thrown out of the window by De Villiers last Sunday.

When the concept of limited-overs cricket first took shape in the early 1970s, it was disliked by the purists who dubbed it 'slam-bang cricket' or 'the pyjama games' due to its reckless brand and coloured clothing.

However, those features are the highlights of today's game of cricket and a sure-fire draw for crowds all over. Who knows, with the ICC World Cup 2015 just round the corner, there may well be another player waiting to upstage De Villiers.

Published in Dawn, January 21st, 2015

Iranian official's visit

OVER the past few decades, the Iran-Pakistan relationship has seen its ups and downs. While there has been much talk of 'warm, brotherly' ties, suspicions and certain irritants have prevented the bilateral relationship from maturing beyond niceties.

However, with regular engagements between officials from both sides, as well as the implementation of practical steps that can help alleviate concerns in both Tehran and Islamabad, bilateral ties can improve significantly.

In this regard, the recent visit of Aaqai Ali Awsat Hashemi, the governor of the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan, which borders Balochistan, to Pakistan, is a welcome development.

Also read: [Pakistan, Iran term border attacks a conspiracy to undermine relations](#)

Heading a delegation, Mr Hashemi visited Quetta and Karachi as both sides discussed a number of security and economic issues.

It is significant that the official said that "non-state actors" were responsible for attacks on Iranian border posts. While smuggling, human trafficking and the illicit drug

trade are major areas of concern, it is militancy in the border areas that has proven to be one of the major irritants souring bilateral relations.

Militancy is a problem on both sides of the border. Last year, Iranian border guards were kidnapped and allegedly brought to Pakistani territory. Iranian officials were then quoted as saying that they would pursue militants inside Pakistan, which certainly didn't help matters.

The death of a Pakistani FC trooper reportedly from cross-border shelling further vitiated the atmosphere. However, the engagements of officials from both sides indicate there is a will to resolve these contentious issues.

Since terrorism is a common problem, Islamabad and Tehran must cooperate in order to neutralise insurgents working to destabilise both countries' territory. As Pakistan carries out its crackdown against militancy, the 'non-state actors' pinpointed by the Iranians also need to be dealt with.

Not only do such elements destabilise Pakistan internally, they also make things difficult for the country by carrying out cross-border forays. Regular meetings between security officials can coordinate action against terrorists, drug smugglers as well as other criminals operating in the border area.

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It is hoped such official encounters continue and that both capitals work constructively to build on the relationship.

Other than security concerns, trade also needs to be focused on, as was highlighted in the recent meetings, while progress on the Iran-Pakistan pipeline would give bilateral relations an additional boost. And the proposed visit to Pakistan by President Hassan Rouhani, as indicated by the Sistan governor, would go a long way in improving ties.

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Extremism danger

THE focus on the fight against terrorism by the military and other security forces tends to overshadow another crucial aspect of the war: the need to clamp down on those individuals, institutions and groups that promote extremist religious thought in the first place.

So while the stepped-up military operation in the northwest is a reminder of the consensus against terrorism that was formed in the aftermath of the Peshawar school attack last month, more action is still needed against those who promote divisiveness and hate.

Also read: [Clampdown on religious hatemongers ordered](#)

In this context, it is a welcome sign that some action is now being taken in towns and cities, and the government is finally waking up to the fact that a large number of mosques use the pulpit to preach their narrative of extremism and intolerance.

Resultantly, the past month has seen a number of news items about clerics and prayer leaders being booked for contravening the amplifier act, or the rule that mosque public address systems be used for nothing but the call to prayer and the Friday sermon.

Many people have been booked and shops have been shut down over the dissemination of extremist ideas. For instance, it was reported yesterday that over the preceding two days, the Islamabad Capital Territory police had booked 12 prayer leaders for violating the loudspeaker ban. Before that, as many other clerics, including the deputy prayer leader of Islamabad's Lal Masjid, were booked for the same transgression.

But despite these measures, it is pertinent — indeed, imperative — to ask the government about its long-term plan. Being 'booked' refers merely to the registration of a complaint; over the weeks past, dozens of people have been booked. Are investigations under way? Is the government hoping to arrest the thousands who promote extremism and put them behind bars? Or is this just a cosmetic procedure aimed at mollifying those who have directly or indirectly suffered over the years at the hands of extremists?

If the fight against extremism is to have any chance of success, it must be multipronged and above all, well-thought-out and cohesive.

Efforts such as those outlined above are indeed a first step, but no more than that. They need to be buttressed by a long-term plan and strong measures to counter the poisonous narrative of the extremists, who must be isolated from those who preach peaceful religious values.

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Unfortunately, that is as yet not in evidence, notwithstanding the consensus against terrorism. Where is the effort to strengthen the judicial process, for example? To empower investigators and prosecutors and to protect judges and witnesses? In fact, to create a system that can deter the extremist mindset evident across the country?

As the operation against the militants intensifies, radical mosques and seminaries will push back. The state must diversify its arsenal to take them on.

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Rising inequality

THE latest figures on global inequality paint a picture of increasingly stark contrasts. In just two years, says the global charity Oxfam, the richest 1pc of the world will own more than the rest of the world combined.

The richest 1pc, a segment that has found itself increasingly in the spotlight since a book by the French economist Thomas Picketty clearly laid out how they were a closely knit group for over a century benefiting more from inheritance than hard work, is now being seen as a parasite.

It is said to be consuming more than the rest of humanity, and stymieing economic growth in the process. For almost a quarter of a century now, economists have placed the policy emphasis on growth of output alone, saying that inequality will sort itself out once the size of the pie increases.

Now evidence is mounting that this will not happen. The pace of growth of inequality is staggering, and it continues through good times as well as bad.

Since 2009, while the advanced industrial democracies have been in a persistent economic slump, the top 1pc of

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the human population increased their share of global wealth from 44pc to 48pc.

The statement from the charity came only days before the meeting of global leaders at Davos, Switzerland, where the future priorities of the global policy elite are decided.

Developing a policy framework to tackle inequality is not simple, and the experience of the 1970s when such an exercise was indeed attempted, shows us the pitfalls if the state takes on too much of the burden. And given the massive stimulus programmes that are under way to kick-start the growth process, the fiscal space to forcibly redistribute wealth is also limited.

What is needed is a vision of a growth process that generates incomes at the bottom and lets the money percolate up. Are any of the assembled heads at Davos up to the task of devoting their energies to creating such a vision? Time is running out to simply stand and stare.

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Mirage of authority

‘DEVELOPMENT in Balochistan’ is once again the buzzword. Some big numbers were trotted out during the high-powered, two-day forum on the subject that concluded on Tuesday. Rs10bn to be released annually under the Aghaz-i-Huqooq-i-Balochistan package, Rs80bn out of Rs162bn already transferred under the Seventh National Finance Commission Award, etc.

Several ambitious infrastructure projects were also highlighted by the prime minister in his address, including under-construction highways, a 300MW power plant in Gwadar as well as plans for the education sector.

On the second day though, Chief Minister Dr Abdul Malik spoke some plain truths. He stated that the basic reason for Balochistan’s continued state of deprivation is that the benefits of devolution contained in the 18th Amendment have not accrued to it.

By virtue of the amendment, Article 172 (3) of the Constitution confers joint ownership of “mineral oil and natural gas within the province or the territorial waters adjacent” upon the federal government and the province concerned.

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However, because the rules of business pertaining to natural resources have not been amended by parliament, the centre's authority endures as before, thereby making a mockery of the notion of self-empowerment.

For a province like Balochistan whose vast natural resources are its principal asset, this lack of agency is particularly devastating. Even more so when the centre, in collusion with the unrepresentative governments that have ruled the province for the most part, has shamelessly exploited Balochistan's natural wealth without any regard for its future or that of its people.

It has thereby created deep-seated grievances which, in a complex geopolitical arena, have provided fertile ground for insurgency to take root. From time to time, the federal government has rolled out grand schemes with the avowed aim of addressing the province's problems. Among these is the Aghaz-i-Huqooq-i-Balochistan project, announced in 2009.

The fact that six years later the province remains the country's backwater in terms of human development indicators, with its population caught in a vicious battle between security forces and insurgents, illustrates the bankruptcy of the state's approach.

Injection of funds is no panacea: in any case, much of Balochistan's share still does not come to it directly. It is after a long time that the province has a government with

some claim to being representative, despite the flawed process that brought it about. Only if it is truly empowered can there be any hope of change in that troubled land.

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Foreign funding of militancy

IN order to effectively put militant groups out of business, it is essential to dry up their finances.

Religiously-motivated militants do raise funds through local sources and criminal rackets, but foreign funding — particularly from Muslim states in the Middle East — is also a major source of cash.

While the Gulf states are often cited as sources of militant funding, especially from private donors, it is extremely rare for government officials in Pakistan to openly identify any one of them.

Hence, when Inter-Provincial Coordination Minister Riaz Pirzada named names at an event in Islamabad on Tuesday, eyebrows were certainly raised. The minister,

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though he claims he was quoted out of context, told a conclave that “Saudi money” had destabilised this country.

In fact, it has been largely established that Pakistan has been a conduit for funds destined for religiously inspired fighters for over three decades.

In 1979, two monumental events took place in this region that forever altered the geopolitical calculus: the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Thereafter, funds flowed in freely from the United States, Saudi Arabia and others for the ‘mujahideen’ battling the Soviets across the border, while many Arab states — fearful of a revolutionary and explicitly Shia Iran — started to fund groups that could resist Tehran’s ideological influence in Muslim countries.

Ever since, a jumble of jihadi and sectarian groups (of varying persuasions) has thrived in Pakistan, as the country became a proxy battlefield for Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as a front line of the last major battle of the Cold War.

Since then, militancy has morphed out of control to such an extent that it now threatens the internal stability of this country; neutralising the myriad jihadi outfits has then become Pakistan’s number one security challenge.

While documentary evidence is often hard to come by, Gulf money has been linked to the promotion of militancy in many instances.

There have been reports of Gulf funding for extremists in the Syrian conflict, while the WikiLeaks disclosures of 2009 also attributed comments to Hillary Clinton linking Saudi funds to militant groups.

Another cable claimed donors in Saudi Arabia and the UAE were pumping millions into south Punjab, with much of these funds ending up in the hands of jihadis. Even Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan admitted recently in a written reply to a question in the Senate that madressahs were receiving funding from “Muslim countries”.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with seminaries or charities receiving foreign funds. But when this cash is used to fund terrorism and extremism, things become problematic. The best way to proceed is for the intelligence apparatus to monitor the flow of funds.

If the authorities have reasonable evidence that funds from the Gulf or elsewhere are being funnelled to militants, the issue needs to be taken up with the countries concerned.

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Sindh resignations

SINDH'S ruling party has said that the approaching Senate elections have nothing to do with the acceptance of the resignations by the provincial assembly's four PTI members.

The denial is hard to accept since there is nothing else on the horizon that would explain the PPP's step. The PTI members had sent in their resignations last August to protest against the alleged rigging of the 2013 elections.

In the period that followed, the PPP had changed tack many times. It often chose to play a staunch ally of the PML-N but did occasionally manage to overcome its meekness to politely advise Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif against frustrating Imran Khan to a point where it became too dangerous for whosoever was in power.

Also read: [Resignations of PTI Sindh MPAs accepted](#)

If anything, of late, some sections within the PPP have been found to be increasingly sympathetic to Mr Khan's rigging refrain. For instance, Aitzaz Ahsan, the more respectable among the PPP men and a senator, has been offering the most vocal support to the PTI's cause.

There is also Khursheed Shah, the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, who has just

renewed his offer of mediating between the PTI and the PML-N government at the centre.

It makes for a very uneasy equation when the aspiring mediator suddenly discovers some forgotten resignation letters filed by one party to the dispute and decides to exercise its right to accept them.

The message is that the grand ideals of reconciliation which PPP supremo Asif Ali Zardari has been pursuing are open to compromise in the face of an impending election to the upper house.

This is bound to spike tensions whereas in the given national situation stalemate on this count could have been a better option.

In the wake of daily fights with the MQM and groups from other parts of Sindh, the PPP should have been careful to not open too many fronts at the same time.

Meanwhile, the Sindh Assembly's decision notwithstanding, other assemblies holding on to PTI resignations should persuade the protesting legislators to return.

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Anti-torture bill

WHETHER in times of conflict or of peace, state-sanctioned torture and killings in custody are totally unconscionable.

However, though such grim methods of extracting information or punishing suspects may be morally unacceptable, they remain part of the norm for law-enforcement and security officials in Pakistan.

Elements within the military, paramilitary units, intelligence agencies and the police have all been accused of torturing suspects in this country, as well as of involvement in custodial killings.

Also read: [Senate committee adopts anti-torture bill](#)

Though the state machinery may deny it, it is no secret that in lock-ups and internment centres across Pakistan, violence and torture are rules of thumb.

Considering the situation, it is a welcome development that a Senate panel has given the green light for a proposed law — the Anti-Torture Bill — that calls for a life term and heavy fine for any government official involved in custodial killing or rape.

Along with widespread torture, sexual violence against women in custody remains a major concern. Pakistan had signed the UN Convention against Torture in 2008 but enabling legislation defining torture was lacking. It is also significant that a state of emergency, war, political instability or following a superior's orders will not be acceptable defences to justify torture under the proposed legislation.

Human rights activists had for a long time been campaigning for legal instruments that would clearly outlaw barbaric practices such as custodial killings and torture.

Though torture is indeed unconstitutional, the absence of clearly defined laws has given a loophole to security officials to get away with the appalling practice for decades. Torture is so ingrained in the system that it will not be an easy task to eliminate it.

Yet the bill is a much-needed and bold step in the right direction and we hope it is passed into law without delay. For too long, society has tolerated brutality in the name of law enforcement.

Rather than lessen crime and terrorism in society, torture and violence against suspects only breed more violence, apart from being inhuman. If the proposed law is implemented in spirit — which will be a tough task — it

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will send a strong message to officials that impunity will not be tolerated.

Regardless of the fact that the state may be dealing with suspected militants or criminals, all law-enforcement activities must respect fundamental rights and no extrajudicial and inhuman methods can be tolerated in the name of laying down the law.

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The CII – again

THE Council of Islamic Ideology has yet again illustrated the utter irrelevance of its existence and its capacity for dredging up matters that would do well without its input.

Following a meeting of the Council, its chairman Maulana Sheerani said that the body will recommend to the government that three pronouncements of divorce at a time should be criminalised — even though they would nevertheless have the effect of dissolving the marriage — because it is against the spirit of the religion.

The Muslim Family Law Ordinance, 1961 has already laid down the procedure for divorce and the CII's statement

only sows confusion in a social milieu where tradition and custom, especially in matters of marriage and divorce, often take precedence over legislation.

Also read: [Three consecutive declarations for divorce should be punishable offence: CII](#)

Moreover, not for the first time, the body has rejected as un-Islamic the clauses of the Muslim Marriage Act, 1939 that allow women to seek divorce on the grounds of their husbands' remarriage without their consent. During its deliberations, the CII also arrived at the conclusion that only women above the age of 40 could become judges and that too on condition that they observe purdah.

The CII, particularly in recent years, has been on a consistently regressive march, its statements arousing derision and outrage in equal measure. And as is the wont of those who use religion as a crutch to pontificate on social issues, the fixation of its members has largely been on women's rights — more specifically, on how to circumscribe them further.

It has shown itself resistant to logic and technological advances, not to mention judicial precedent. In 2013, for example, it said that DNA evidence — used the world over to definitively affix criminal responsibility — should be treated only as supplementary evidence in cases of rape, contrary to several judgments by Pakistan's

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superior courts in which DNA results have been admitted as primary evidence.

Instead, the CII urged reliance upon the testimony of four eyewitnesses as primary evidence, thus conflating rape with adultery, for which such evidence is required under the law.

Then last year, it said that laws barring child marriage were 'un-Islamic', notwithstanding the evidence of the terrible physical and psychological toll this inhuman custom exacts upon minors, particularly girls.

One may well question the wisdom of retaining the CII on the statute books at all, that too with a parliament bound by the constitutional stipulation that no law will be passed contrary to the Quran and Sunnah.

The judiciary and media also play a watchdog role over the content of proposed and existing legislation.

Although the recommendations of the Council are not binding upon parliament, it serves as a platform for unelected representatives of right-wing persuasion to influence public debate and create roadblocks in the way of progressive legislation. The public should no longer have to suffer the ponderings of this august body.

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Polio arrests

IT would be flint-hearted not to spare a thought for the family of young Mohammad in the Dhodha area of Kohat district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It is bad enough that the three-year-old has received a confirmed diagnosis of polio; the fact that his father was arrested on Thursday for having refused to let the child be administered the vaccination will only make matters more difficult for the family.

Two other men were similarly arrested on the same day, in the same area, for refusing to let their children be given OPV doses. And these detentions follow those of over 50 others so far in the area this year alone, for the same reason.

Also read: [Man held after unvaccinated son catches polio](#)

The periods of confinement these men will suffer is unlikely to be long, given that they have been arrested under the Maintenance of Public Order law. It can only be hoped that now that the law has taken such extreme action, these men and others will allow themselves to be persuaded to change their position.

It might seem a travesty that such force is being used against opponents of the vaccine. Unfortunately, the

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realities of the environment prevalent in the country vis-à-vis the vaccination campaign do dictate severe measures, even if not precisely this one.

Not just is polio spreading at an appalling pace in Pakistan — 2014 drew to a close with the tally of new cases having crossed the 300-mark — the country is also poised to infect the rest of the world, which is overwhelmingly polio-free.

Pakistan-specific strains of the virus have been found in other countries, and there are fears that the herd-immunity of the world population may be compromised.

Pakistan must urgently employ some blue-sky thinking. Where the threat of arrest is perhaps an extreme way of forcing parents to accept the vaccine, an effective measure could be to link the issuance or renewal of vital documents to proof of vaccination. Desperate times require desperate measures, and the danger this country is courting has never been more obvious.

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King Abdullah's death

THE passing away of Saudi king Abdullah in the small hours of Friday comes at a time of great tumult in the Middle East. Across the kingdom's southern border, Yemen is in a state of chaos while across the northern frontier in Iraq, the so-called Islamic State remains a threat.

Within Saudi Arabia, there are sporadic protests in the mainly Shia Eastern Province, while a budget deficit looms on the horizon, brought about by low global oil prices.

The late king, who was around 90, had not been keeping well, while speculation had been rife about how the generational shift of power would take place within the desert kingdom. Abdullah ruled for a decade, though he had effectively been running the government in the absolute monarchy 10 years before his accession to the throne when the then king Fahd was incapacitated by a stroke.

He oversaw cautious reforms in the conservative state, though perhaps the monarch did not go far enough in expanding his subjects' civic rights.

The late ruler shielded his kingdom from the winds of change triggered by the Arab Spring by injecting billions

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into social programmes, while an unofficial cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran saw both Middle Eastern powers square off through proxies in various regional hotspots during Abdullah's rule.

Salman, the new Saudi sovereign, will have to steer the kingdom through myriad crises. Reports indicate the monarch, who is also of advanced age, is in poor health. This means that Crown Prince Muqrin — who was until only a few years ago a dark horse within the House of Saud — may play a greater role in governance and policymaking.

Know more: [New heir to Saudi throne is relatively liberal outsider](#)

But perhaps the most important development following Abdullah's death is the appointment by Salman of Mohammed bin Nayef as deputy crown prince. This means that for the first time in Saudi Arabia's eight-decade history, a grandson of founder Ibn Saud has officially been named in line for the throne.

The House of Saud will need to strike a delicate balance between different camps within the royal family, the clerical establishment and tribal interests — the traditional poles of power in Saudi Arabia — to steer the country through choppy waters.

As the kingdom confronts numerous internal and external challenges, the international community will be watching to see a stable transfer of power in one of the world's leading oil producers, and the home of Islam's two holiest cities.

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Banned or not?

IT ought to be a straightforward answer to a simple question: has the Pakistani state taken any measures in recent weeks against, among others, the Haqqani network and Jamaatud Dawa that impact on the legal and operational status of those groups on Pakistani soil?

Unhappily, even in this most straightforward of cases, the Pakistani state is being anything but direct and honest.

The Foreign Office tells the media to check with the Interior Ministry and Nacta; the otherwise voluble and media-attention-loving Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan goes silent; anonymous bureaucrats and unnamed officials give contradictory statements; parliament is given ambiguous answers to direct questions; and nowhere does anyone in any relevant public office show

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any inclination to inform the public of what is or is not being done in their name.

Also read: [Confusion over status of JuD, Haqqani network](#)

Meanwhile, the conspiracy theories are growing more feverish: an outright ban, frozen bank accounts, restrictions on foreign travel of JuD leaders — whatever new measures have been taken, it has all been done at the behest of the US to placate an angry India and assist the Afghan government.

Such conspiracy theories do more than confuse the public; they strike at the heart of the consensus this country needs, that the fight against militancy is Pakistan's own and not imposed by the outside world on a hapless nation.

All the confusion can be cleared up by a simple, authoritative statement by the interior ministry, or — given the implications for national security policy — by the Prime Minister's Office. But, in a way that echoes the old practice here of saying one thing (or saying nothing) and doing another, the government has chosen to remain silent — just as the state alternates between remaining silent about drone strikes and condemning them.

Just as once upon a time the army-led security establishment cut clandestine — sometimes, public —

deals with militant groups while claiming it was opposed to religiously inspired militant groups existing on Pakistani soil. And just as the state banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, but allowed it to first morph into Jamaatud Dawa and now, to some extent, into the Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation.

A simple path towards clarity — at least in terms of designation and profiles — in the present instance was offered by the Supreme Court on Thursday: make public the names of proscribed groups and translate anti-terrorism laws into local languages to increase awareness.

As the Supreme Court observed, often the public is unaware that groups operating as social welfare networks or collecting charity are in fact designated by the state to be terrorist groups. That has the effect of allowing the groups to grow and even gain public affection by pretending to be something they most certainly are not.

Perhaps it will be easier to begin to believe that the era of good militants/bad militants is over if the state can bring itself to name and ban all militant groups.

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Obama's India visit

Even before US President Barack Obama arrives in India — he is expected to arrive late this morning — Pakistan has already featured in the conversation.

In an international norm for such high-profile visits, Mr Obama gave an interview to a local publication (in this case, India Today) prior to his arrival on a state visit and, perhaps inevitably, he was asked about the Mumbai attacks and the issue of militant groups with regional agendas operating from Pakistani soil.

Read: [Obama says elements behind Mumbai attacks must face justice](#)

Mr Obama spoke plainly, though he said nothing new or surprising — or even disagreeable.

After all, the political and military leadership of this country now routinely insists that its goal is to eliminate terrorists 'of all stripes' and 'every hue and colour' from Pakistani soil, so when an American president says that safe havens are "not acceptable" and that the architects of the Mumbai attacks must "face justice" that only echoes what Pakistani leaders themselves have been saying.

In addition, Pakistan itself has put on trial Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi and several other members of the Lashkar-e-Taiba for crimes related to the Mumbai attacks — meaning that the Pakistani state itself believes justice has yet to be delivered to the victims of that shocking episode in 2008.

To be sure, there is an element of playing to the gallery involved in all such visits. Indian officialdom and its relatively nationalist media will likely try and elicit further comments on Pakistan from Mr Obama and other American officials that can be used by India to portray Pakistan in an even more negative manner.

If they are to fail in that objective, perhaps some Indian official himself will say something provocative in the next three days to grab the headlines.

Here in Pakistan, that will present a dilemma for the government and foreign policy establishment — say nothing in response and risk being labelled as weak or say something through the Foreign Office and risk getting into a fresh war of words with India.

Difficult as it may be, perhaps silence would be the better option here. To begin with, Pakistan and India need to get out of this habit of incessant, meaningless competition: if Mr Obama goes to India, that is India's business; when Mr Obama visits Pakistan, that should be Pakistan's bilateral matter.

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In addition, nothing any Pakistani official says here in the midst of an US-India summit would have any impact on what's discussed by those two sides.

Perhaps the only thing that should be remembered, or even reiterated publicly, is that dialogue between Pakistan and India needs to restart; there are several major and legitimate concerns on both sides; and, regardless of the state of relations with India, Pakistan's foremost concern is to win the fight against militancy domestically — against all militant and terrorist groups.

Every turn in the spotlight for India should not automatically alarm Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, January 25th, 2015

Health sector mess

AS the process of decentralisation to the provinces began in the wake of the 18th Amendment health was one sensitive area where the transfer had to be swift and smooth so as to prevent distress to the general public. This sector has thrown up several challenges. For instance, there have been issues of jurisdiction in the purchase of vaccination drugs and there has been confusion as to whether the provincial or

federal government was responsible for overseeing education at autonomous medical colleges. Not least, there has been a debate about the need for achieving some uniformity in the standards of treatment at public-sector hospitals all over the country and in the service structure of those employed in the sector in the provinces.

The latest controversy pertains to the reputable Sheikh Zayed Hospital in Lahore. More than 65 members on the faculty of the Postgraduate Medical Institute affiliated with it expressed their inability to carry on with their teaching assignments. They said they had no option but to discontinue after their teaching fees were stopped. The provincial health department has since responded by promising an early resolution to the problem, but this will need to go beyond the provision of ad hoc relief. There is no great mystery about where and how a permanent solution can be found. Sheikh Zayed is an autonomous facility, a midway option for those who cannot or do not want to go to either the overburdened, messy public-sector hospitals or the more costly private clinics. Its affiliate teaching institute enjoys respect, attracting students at various levels. The hospital and the teaching institute are required to be run by a board of governors previously approved by the federal government. After decentralisation, in 2012, the approving authority was passed on to the Punjab government, which has so far been unable to set up the board of governors. A board of

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trustees has already made its nominations. It seems to be a matter of attaching due priority to the case.

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Yemeni crisis

UNLESS better sense prevails and all stakeholders choose the route of dialogue to address their differences, the impoverished state of Yemen could well plunge into anarchy. While confessional, tribal and regional divisions threaten Yemen's stability, unless efforts are made to bridge these divides, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, which has a strong foothold in the country, may well emerge as the biggest beneficiary of the chaos. The political crisis intensified when the president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, resigned on Thursday, after the rebel Houthi militia surrounded the presidential palace. The Zaydi militia — based in the country's north — swept into the capital Sana'a in September, and is perhaps the most powerful single political and militant group in Yemen. Mr Hadi, a US ally from the south, says the Houthis did not honour a peace deal while parliament is yet to accept his resignation. Thousands of people have marched both in favour of

and against the Houthis as Yemenis, as well as regional states, keep a close eye on developments in the hopes of a breakthrough. There has been no reduction in rampant corruption and poverty ever since former strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced from power in 2012 in a popular uprising. Many Yemenis thought the Houthis would usher in change, yet what has resulted is political gridlock and a collapsing state.

Regional states must make more of an effort to defuse the crisis before Yemen implodes. While the Houthis — Zaydi Shias by faith — are believed to have some Iranian support, rival tribes apparently have Saudi backing. Hence perhaps it is Riyadh and Tehran that need to actively engage on this front to address the crisis and urge their allies in Yemen to come to a negotiated settlement. What needs to be realised by all in Yemen as well as the international community is that should the state collapse completely, AQAP will have the field wide open to plan and execute further acts of terror. The militant outfit claimed responsibility for the Paris magazine killings while it is a staunch opponent of the Houthis, having attacked the militia as well as the Yemeni military. The Houthis and their political rivals need to find common cause against AQAP and help preserve Yemen's unity. Regional powers should also put aside geopolitical differences and use their influence to neutralise AQAP. In a region afflicted by wars and

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militant insurgencies, the terror network should not be given room to expand.

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Arms on campus

IT seems that better sense finally prevailed last week as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government reconsidered its decision to allow arms on the premises of educational institutions.

Earlier, the KP information minister had stated that the provincial cabinet had authorised the employees of educational institutes to carry licensed arms with them.

While the idea itself of promoting the presence of weapons on campus is appalling, even more preposterous was the reason in this case: that the weaponry they carried would facilitate the staff in engaging with assailants in the initial moments of an attack.

Also read: [KP makes a U-turn on allowing arms on campus](#)

It quite seemed to have escaped the authorities' attention that those involved in such an assault would most likely be hardened militants, ready to fight to the death, and not ordinary criminals who might be scared away by a security guard or a watchman with a gun.

Thankfully, after a representative body of KP's primary school teachers volubly rejected the move, the provincial government distanced itself from it, with the provincial education minister saying that his department had not issued the directives and that his government would not encourage teachers to take arms to school.

The KP government did well by rescinding its decision, even as across the country schools were being asked to ensure that their premises were protected by gunmen. Security must be boosted at education institutes but are guns necessarily the answer?

Some accidents have already occurred as schools hire the services of armed security. Quite recently, four schoolgirls in Mansehra were injured when the gun held by a private security guard hired by the school went off accidentally, with one student receiving a bullet near her eye.

Before that, in Rawalpindi, a college student was similarly injured; in this case, it was found that the guard had never received any training in handling firearms.

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Better ways have to be found to protect campuses. True, the fear factor in the aftermath of the Peshawar school tragedy is high. But the answer lies in implementing well-coordinated safety measures rather than encouraging the acquisition of guns.

Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2015

Karachi mass transit

A NEW study just released on Karachi's mass transit crisis makes one point very clear: there are some areas of public life that cannot be left to the vagaries of the private sector alone.

According to the study, the state had already begun farming out the transport business to private-sector operators in 1971 under the free transport policy, but it was in 1997 that it withdrew from the obligation altogether with the disbandment of the Karachi Transport Corporation.

Take a look: [Karachi's public transport on the verge of collapse: report](#)

Since then, mass transit in the country's largest city, with an estimated population of 22m, has been left entirely to

the private sector, which has struggled to keep up. Today, Karachi faces a shortfall of 8,676 buses on its roads.

The authors of the study detail two separate attempts since the end of the KTC to bring about some sort of public-private partnership in the transport sector.

The first attempt was the Urban Transport Scheme in 2001 in which investors were invited to acquire routes and service them on government-controlled terms.

The other attempt came in 2005 in the form of a donor-driven initiative to revive the Karachi Circular Railway that ran between 1964 and 1999, and was used by approximately 6m passengers per year at its peak.

In both cases, the schemes have failed to take off due to the inability of the government to manage its responsibilities.

In fact, as the authors list one initiative after another over the decades since independence, it becomes clear that factors such as poor maintenance and inability to manage routes properly have been the reason why the government has failed in fulfilling its obligations in the mass transit area.

The failure of KCR to move along in spite of the availability of financing, and all relevant studies, and its induction in the Karachi Transportation Improvement

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Project of 2010-12, is due to “the lack of political will and the absence of ownership of the project”.

They also mention “the failure to develop a resettlement policy” for 23,000 people to be dislocated by the project. This contrasts with the slash-and-burn resettlement that was undertaken in the Lyari Expressway project.

Clearly, the play of vested interest has been aligned favourably behind the expressway, but not the KCR. Karachi is home to the country’s largest concentration of working people, their commuting needs cannot be left to the private sector alone.

The government must find its feet and move towards a viable mass transit system for the city.

Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2015

Power blackout

ANOTHER major blackout occurred on Saturday night as sabotage on one transmission line that feeds power to Quetta rapidly cascaded through the entire transmission system, causing power plants to trip and shut down one after another across the country.

Within minutes, all but a handful of power plants fell, leaving little more than 600MW of electricity in a system that was generating more than 9,000MW at the time.

Also read: [Parts of Pakistan still without electricity, following breakdown](#)

Two earlier acts of sabotage had placed all the burden of Balochistan’s full load onto one transmission network that runs between Guddu, Uch, Sibi and Quetta. When two pylons of a key line in this network were blown up, the entire load fell on the link that connects Guddu with Quetta, something that Guddu’s grid station could not bear.

All three grid stations of the aging plant tripped as a result, which sent a disturbance cascading up and down the entire transmission system taking out power plants one by one throughout the country. The whole process took minutes to happen, but hours to reverse.

One positive to note through this affair is how the various components of the power system worked together to restart the system.

The hydel plants operated by Wapda, the thermal power plants of Pepco, the independent power producers and K-Electric all coordinated to energise each others’ power plants in the dead of night.

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Wapda energised Pepco's plants in northern Punjab, Pepco energised K-Electric (although on their Twitter feed K-Electric claim they started up "in island mode", meaning they received no assistance in re-energising their system), and K-Electric energised Hubco.

But this not the first time that our transmission grid has been brought down by a single event in one section. There were two blackouts in December, both centred on Guddu, that also cascaded through the system in this way, although their effects were felt south of the plant.

It is worth asking at this point, how hard it is to have systems in place that can serve as circuit breakers to prevent this sort of cascading, and what is being done to put such systems in place.

The growing frequency of blackouts of this sort, that originate in a single event on the national grid but travel rapidly through the system to plunge entire areas of the country into darkness for prolonged periods, highlight the serious vulnerabilities that are nestled in our power system, and for some reason these vulnerabilities are coming increasingly into play these days.

The power system is already groaning under the load of financial problems and efficiency issues, but this is one challenge that surely should have a simple solution.

Is somebody in the power bureaucracy following up on this? Is somebody asking what can be done to provide synaptic protections in the grid to ensure that adverse events are localised?

Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2015

A new chapter is possible

As the US and India bask in the glow of a rejuvenated friendship, a civilian nuclear deal that may finally deliver what it first promised in 2006 and some small-scale military deals, the feeling in certain quarters in Pakistan may be one of acute discomfort.

After all, it does look like the world's largest democracy and the world's foremost advocate of democracy have more in common economically, diplomatically, and geo-strategically than anything the Pak-US relationship has to offer.

Read: [Modi, Obama announce nuclear breakthrough after talks](#)

To put it more bluntly, where the India-US relationship is seemingly about smiles and opportunities, the Pak-India relationship is about grimaces and perceptions of threat.

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However, the simplistic, reactionary approach would miss the perhaps historic opportunity that a closer diplomatic, economic and military relationship between India and the US could create: it will surely be in the interest of both those sides to nudge the India-Pakistan relationship towards normality.

Consider first the incentive for the American side. A conflagration in South Asia is fundamentally against American interests, not least as it expands its search for markets in India.

Also read/ [Ties with India not at Pakistan's expense: US](#)

In addition, for all the focus on a rising India being a counterweight to China on the eastern side of Asia, there are plenty of security interests that Pakistan sits at the centre of on the western side of Asia, from Afghanistan to Iran and from the Central Asian Republics to the tensions internal to Muslim societies in the Gulf.

Not only have successive US administrations made it clear that Pakistan is a needed ally in the new century, it is also quite clear that India and Pakistan have their own roles to play in their respective spheres.

Consider then what closer ties between Delhi and Washington could mean: instead of the two ganging up on Pakistan on issues of security and Pakistan-based militancy, the incentives really are for the US to use its

influence over India to try and push for the resumption of dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Of course, India will likely try and resist any such attempts by the US and the Modi government will certainly like to keep the pressure on. But international relations have a logic that goes beyond the wishes of a new leader, no matter how charismatic or ambitious.

The Modi foreign policy team is largely made up of novices on the international stage: while they do seem to understand the logic of business and economics, they have struggled with security equations.

Pakistan certainly needs to do more — much more — to placate the outside world about its concerns regarding Pakistan-based militancy.

However, nothing in the Modi government's approach seems designed to induce those desirable security outcomes. Understanding economics and not security will only leave Prime Minister Modi's India with lopsided vulnerabilities — meaning, it will eventually realise that there is no option but to talk to Pakistan.

The key though may be Pakistani sincerity and purposefulness — will it sustain the push against militants it has begun?

Published in Dawn, January 27th, 2015

Confusion at SBP

It must have been uncomfortable for State Bank Governor Ashraf Mahmood Wathra to announce the monetary policy statement on Saturday.

A few hours earlier, the finance minister had already stolen his thunder by telling the world that the policy discount rate has been revised downward by a whole percentage point, even before the State Bank had made its announcement.

Read: [SBP slashes interest rates to 10 year low](#)

The clarification issued later by the finance ministry sounded more like a hastily arranged affair, trying to convince us that the finance minister “was unaware of the exact timing” of the governor’s news conference. The point is that Finance Minister Ishaq Dar had absolutely no business announcing the interest rate reduction as some sort of victory.

And if that was not the intention behind his slip of the tongue, then why even bring up interest rates in a presser that was largely about a judicial commission? The clear impression here is that he was telling the business community that this reduction in the cost of borrowing was something they owed to him.

To top it all, the picture that was painted in the unusually long and convoluted statement accompanying the decision is not nearly as rosy as the authors would like us to believe.

Also read: [SBP reduces monetary policy rate to 9.5 per cent](#)

For instance, we are told that the government has retired almost Rs450bn of borrowing from the State Bank in the first half of the fiscal year, but the amount it has borrowed from bank and non-bank sources is beyond Rs1tr. What is this if not simply a shift in the base of borrowing away from one source towards another? In the fiscal domain, revenue slowdowns appear to be papered over.

Quarter two data is not presented, except in one line to simply say “42 percent growth would be required in H2-FY15 to meet the budget target of Rs2810 billion”. Everyone knows that 42pc growth in revenues is not about to happen, but the State Bank still prefers to talk about an ongoing “fiscal consolidation”.

It is not very encouraging to see the overbearing eagerness of the finance ministry to announce a rate cut, but it is even more distressing to note how the bank is searching for ways to put a smile on an otherwise considerably dour state affairs, as regards public debt and fiscal affairs. The State Bank of Pakistan is an

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autonomous institution under the law, and it should be treated and behave accordingly.

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Qadri's case

The difficulties the police in this country face in gathering evidence, and prosecutors in mounting a strong case, are seen as the primary reason why so many suspects implicated in all sorts of crimes walk free.

Consider the case of Mumtaz Qadri, who was sentenced on Oct 1, 2011 by an Anti-Terrorism Court and shortly afterwards filed an appeal.

Read: [Mumtaz Qadri files appeal against death penalty](#)

The evidence against Qadri, who openly confessed when charged with the gunning down in January that year of the Punjab governor, Salmaan Taseer, could not be more incontrovertible.

Also read: [Blasphemy law claims another life][2]

But, more than three years after a guilty verdict, the case is still pending due to the appeal against Qadri's

sentence. Qadri has, meanwhile, set himself up as a 'religious' figure, and there is evidence that he has radicalised others including prison staff.

Also read: [Mumtaz Qadri, Prison King](#)

Now, with another hearing scheduled before an Islamabad High Court division bench, it seems that the government is having difficulties getting a lawyer to agree to represent the prosecution.

Why this reluctance in what is an open-and-shut case? The reason is simple: fear. Lawyers contacted by this newspaper pointed out that hardly any special protection or security is provided to those who may find themselves in the crosshairs of criminals or extremists on agreeing to take flashpoint cases.

Also read: [Govt lawyers not ready to prosecute Mumtaz Qadri](#)

The special judge of the ATC that passed the sentence against Qadri had to leave the country for fear of his life, and at the last hearing of the Qadri case in 2011, large numbers of his supporters gathered outside the IHC.

The threat is real, and society's tilt towards extreme views is palpable. If this is the situation in this case, the fear factor in others where the men accused belong to violent gangs or militant groups, or are hardened criminals, can only be imagined.

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Pakistan's situation demands effective provisions such as witness, lawyer and judge protection programmes, for those who prosecute or testify are in the end individuals. Without that, there is little hope of winning the long-term battle.

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Cricket woes

WITH cricket's showpiece event, the ICC Cricket World Cup, due to begin next month in Australia and New Zealand, the successive defeats experienced by the Pakistan team in four games this week as well as a nasty row over central contracts have blighted the national team's preparations.

Pakistan's back-to-back defeats at the hands of a lowly ranked New Zealand Board President's Eleven has come as a setback.

Also read: [Pakistan suffer another defeat against New Zealand Board President's XI](#)

The team, though buoyed by skipper Misbah-ul-Haq's recovery from a hamstring injury and the welcome return to form of Umar Akmal, failed to get its act together as both batting and bowling struggled to measure up in the two matches.

Meanwhile, the team's woes have been exacerbated by a needless central contracts row that has been simmering over the past few days, thanks once again to the short-sighted approach of the Pakistan Cricket Board officials.

Instead of issuing fresh contracts to the national cricketers based on their recent performances in

international cricket, the PCB opted to extend their previously awarded contracts by three months.

This has earned the players' ire and, to a large extent, has taken their focus away from the job at hand. The PCB decision, besides being shorn of logic, has shown the star performers of the recent series in the UAE against Australia and New Zealand in a poor light.

Capable players such as wicketkeeper Sarfraz Ahmed, batsmen Haris Sohail, Fawad Alam and pacer Mohammad Irfan have all failed to find a place in the top categories, while others that remained on the sidelines for the most part of 2014 owing to injuries and suspensions, dominate the contract ratings.

The players have also expressed their reservations at the abolishment of the win bonus clause by the PCB which was earlier applicable on a per match basis. With each and every game having utmost importance in the World Cup, the players have demanded the PCB restore the win bonuses which are being seen as an incentive for them to excel in the extravaganza.

Published in Dawn January 28th, 2015

Forensic facilities

OUTDATED and ineffective methods of investigation and evidence collection are among the weaker links of Pakistan's law-enforcement and justice systems.

Evidence is mostly obtained through rudimentary methods, and combined with a flawed investigation process, this can result in letting criminals off the hook, or punishment for the innocent.

Take a look: [CSI Lahore: US forensics big shot comes home to help Pakistan](#)

However, if forensic science is properly employed, the scenario can change for the better. For example, Punjab's Forensic Science Agency has set a positive trend and despite the limitations of the police force, is making an effort to change the culture of investigation and evidence collection. Set up in 2012 by a Pakistani-American expert with support from the Punjab chief minister, the multimillion dollar lab has been praised by independent observers.

The lab has covered nearly all the bases required for a facility to meet the demands of modern forensic investigation, most importantly DNA analysis. But as Ashraf Tahir, the lab's director general, has said, the

police lack training in how to secure crime scenes and collect evidence.

This fact has been corroborated by Punjab's inspector general of police. However, if training is imparted to the force — from the officer level down to the policeman in the field — there is no reason why evidence collection and investigation cannot significantly improve.

Whether it is cases of terrorism or regular crime, well-equipped forensic labs staffed with well-trained professionals are essential in investigating incidents.

At present, Punjab's facility is the only one of its kind in the country. Sindh has a forensic lab, but the facility lacks the capability for DNA analysis.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have no satisfactory forensic facilities. Perhaps Punjab's forensic lab can be used as a template to be replicated in other provinces. In such troubled times, it is incomprehensible why each provincial capital does not have fully functioning forensic investigation facilities.

This needs to change: along with establishing labs staffed with independent professionals who can run them, a thorough training of police forces is needed in each province so that modern investigation and crime scene preservation techniques become part of the law enforcers' standard operating procedures.

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In a country where evidence is frequently compromised or even hosed down this is a tall order, but it is a change that is essential if police culture in Pakistan is to be positively transformed. Admittedly, such facilities and training will not come cheap; but we can ill afford to continue fighting crime and terrorism using obsolete methods.

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Fixing responsibility

THE two-member commission appointed by the prime minister to investigate the recent petrol crisis has blamed the bureaucracy for the shortage, but has absolved everybody of ministerial rank.

The report produced by the commission gives different reasons in different places for why the crisis happened at all.

In one place it says the crisis was “a result of structural issues and not only an event-driven situation”; in another it openly speculates that private-sector oil marketing companies “may also be involved in creating this artificial shortage”.

Also read: [Petrol crisis: ‘a very serious governance failure’](#)

In yet another place it says the crisis “has a lot to do” with lack of fuel payments from the power sector, but then quickly brushes away these concerns saying “this is not a unique situation for the PSO”.

This is strange, considering that the strongest empirical evidence before the commission was indeed the power sector receivables, which they acknowledge stood at Rs171bn.

This may not be a “unique situation” for the company, but defaulting on LCs is, and those defaults had begun long before the crisis arrived at the pumps, meaning the liquidity situation was getting difficult very early on.

Yet the commission prefers to resort to speculation when assigning blame, saying for instance that “foul act” on the part of the OMCs “cannot be ruled out”.

If such foul play “cannot be ruled out”, on what evidence can it be alleged? How solid is the evidence that the “foul act” was indeed responsible? In fact, in the absence of solid proof, the commission has invoked a speculative reason to try and deflect blame away from the sorry state of PSO finances towards some other, as yet unproven, cause.

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Beyond speculation, the commission has also indulged in wishful thinking, when blaming the lack of storage capacity for the crisis. If the commission wants us to believe that the PSO management is at fault because “[n]o efforts were made to manage 20-day required stock”, they need to answer a simple question first: when has Pakistan ever maintained three weeks worth of fuel stocks?

The whole report reads like a list of hastily made-up reasons for why responsibility for the crisis must rest only with those operating the oil supply chain machinery.

The overriding question is whose job was it to oversee all these officials named in the report and to ensure that they were working together to accomplish their objective?

And if nobody wants to assume that responsibility, can we at least know who appointed so many supposedly inept people to operate the oil supply chain? What steps were taken by the federal government when the crisis was brewing in late December?

All views of the crisis eventually lead towards cabinet-level accountability, and it appears that the entire purpose of the commission report has been to pre-empt precisely this.

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Anti-militant push: out of steam?

MEETINGS, meetings, meetings — when the PML-N assumed office for a third time at the national level in June 2013, there was a widespread belief (or maybe just an impression) that the party would be more organised, more efficient and better in matters of governance than several, if not most, other governments in the chequered political history of this country.

Fast forward 19 months and much of that hope has dissipated, though now it seems that even a modicum of sensible, smart action by the government is elusive.

Also read: [PM retreats to Murree for key meetings](#)

The PML-N appears to have settled into the following pattern: in Lahore, Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif takes notice of crises, requests a report — and then nothing is heard of follow-up actions; in Islamabad, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif convenes emergency meetings to respond to crises — and invariably the blame falls on bureaucrats instead of the close circle of politicians on whom the prime minister exclusively relies.

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Outside those bubbles, the country appears to do little more than lurch from one crisis to the next.

After the Peshawar school massacre, the country was well and truly at a crossroads. Not only was the public behind a serious and sustained effort to fight militancy, the state itself had been seemingly shocked into action.

As the government of the day, primary responsibility for organising and building the civilian capacity of the state to take the fight to the militants in the urban and rural areas of Pakistan fell on the PML-N.

However, after floating a 20-point National Action Plan, shepherding through parliament the army-demanded 21st Amendment and taking a few, scattered steps against extremist and militant elements, the PML-N seems to have run out of steam — and ideas and the will too.

Where is this country's Peshawar moment now? Energy — gas, electricity, fuel oil, petroleum, etc — is an important element of a government's socioeconomic policy, but the basic, fundamental crisis in this country was, and remains, the fight against militancy.

Where is the government's urgency on that issue, when Prime Minister Sharif can convene a meeting to discuss the electricity and fuel crises involving the interior

minister but not a word on the militancy and extremism issue?

In the wake of the horror in Peshawar, the government appeared to belatedly understand that terrorism is a long-term threat that can neither be defeated through military operations nor be rolled back without dismantling the enabling environment that the extremist mosque-madrasah-social welfare network has created.

But without any meaningful follow-up actions, the narrative was quickly hijacked by the religious right. Protests against the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and unspecified grievances against a non-existent new madrasah policy gave the religious right and its extremist partners — in some cases, banned militant organisations — the excuse to turn out into the streets.

Instead of pushing back the PML-N appears to have quietly acquiesced once again into a non-policy against militancy and extremism.

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CPLC controversy

A BIZARRE drama unfolded on Tuesday involving Citizens-Police Liaison Committee chief Ahmed Chinoy and the paramilitary Rangers. As reported, in the early hours of Tuesday the Rangers ‘raided’ the Karachi residence of Mr Chinoy.

The CPLC chief had initially confirmed the ‘raid’, but later in the evening denied that any such incident had taken place, adding that the ‘visit’ by the Rangers involved sharing information about an abducted youth.

Also read: [No raid?: CPLC chief says Rangers ‘came to discuss findings’](#)

To add to the puzzling developments, the MQM had initially issued a scathing critique of the Rangers, in defence of the CPLC head. But when Mr Chinoy seemed to backtrack on his allegations, the Muttahida criticised him with equal fervour.

Going by the information so far, the Rangers’ early morning visit would appear to be uncalled for, and the paramilitary force needs to clarify its stance on the matter.

However, it is also true that this unsavoury event has tainted the once sterling reputation enjoyed by the CPLC,

and all stakeholders need to explore ways to restore the organisation’s independence and credibility.

The events indicate that the CPLC has been politicised. This is unacceptable for an organisation that has served as a vital go-between — as its name suggests — linking the citizenry with the law enforcers.

Whether it is helping solve kidnapping cases or assisting citizens with registering FIRs, the CPLC has for over two decades served as an essential public service organisation in Sindh, that has helped create a more public-friendly interface between the people and the police.

That politics — or apparent mismanagement — should dent the reputation of such an institution is regrettable. It is difficult to build institutions in Pakistan and even more difficult to maintain them.

Hence if there are management issues within the CPLC they need to be addressed so that the latter’s image as an apolitical organisation can be restored.

The committee must have smooth working relations with the police and Rangers, while the same is true for the law enforcers.

Due to its various deficiencies — namely the unwelcoming atmosphere of the infamous ‘thana culture’

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that prevails in Pakistan — the people are reluctant to approach the police directly in many cases.

That is why especially in a crime-infested city like Karachi the CPLC serves such a valuable purpose. It is hoped that this ugly episode serves as a turning point and efforts are made to restore the professional and public-friendly image of the CPLC.

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‘Teacher training’

EVER so often, the country demonstrates its almost unerring ability to either compound tragedy or to turn it into farce.

Either indictment can be applied to the event in Peshawar on Tuesday, photographs of which have been circulating: women in bright dupattas drawn tightly over their heads, as custom demands in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, familiarising themselves with the use of assault weapons.

This, it seems, is the new face of teaching in the province: books and pens replaced by guns in the hands of those entrusted with the care and education of

children. It was appalling enough that matters had come to such a pass that schoolteachers feel so vulnerable.

Take a look: [Teachers get gun training after Peshawar massacre](#)

Even worse, though, is the cynicism with which the authorities turned the training sessions into a photo-op, as though schoolteachers with guns are not the worst possible distortion of what the future should hold, a perverted glorification of the very tools that have caused so much senseless bloodshed.

Up until Tuesday, some 10 educational institutions in Peshawar had requested the police for such training. That they felt it necessary to resort to such an extreme step should have been a matter of shame and a reason to introspect on all that has gone wrong. That said, clarity is desperately needed on what the KP government’s policy is regarding arms on campuses.

At what level are these decisions being made — or reversed? On Jan 12, the KP information minister said that the provincial cabinet had decided to allow employees of all educational institutions to carry licensed arms on the premises, so that they could “engage attackers”.

Just over a week later, the provincial minister for elementary and secondary education said that his

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department had never issued any such instructions and that his government would never encourage arms in classrooms.

So which is it? This is a matter of the gravest proportions; the KP government needs to clarify its stance immediately, and find ways of tackling insecurity other than by further militarisation.

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Anti-child marriage law

WHEN tradition militates against the well-being of individuals, and runs counter to advances in scientific knowledge, it is time to let it go.

Too often though, tradition has many impassioned, blinkered defenders reluctant to discard time-honoured rituals and that is when the government can play an important role by legislating on the issue.

Thus on Wednesday, the Punjab government declared its intention to discuss amendments to the family law and raise the minimum age for girls from 16 to 18 years, as well as penalise the non-registration of marriage with a

fine of Rs50,000 and make it mandatory for the bride and groom to produce CNICs to enter into a nuptial contract.

Also read: [Punjab plans to raise marriage age for girls to 18](#)

In most of Pakistan, the burden of being born female — with disadvantages of access to healthcare and education — is often compounded by the cross of early marriage.

In a patriarchal and stultifying social sphere that places a high premium on a female's child-bearing role, millions of girls become wives and mothers before they are mentally or physically capable of the attendant challenges.

There are a number of health risks incurred by females thrust into such early unions, and resulting early motherhood, including obstetric fistula, death in childbirth and cervical cancer.

According to recent studies cited in a report in this paper, the latter is the second most common cancer afflicting Pakistani women, claiming a shocking 20 lives every single day. The country ranks seventh among countries with the highest rates of cervical cancer.

There is, therefore, more than one good reason to welcome the Punjab government's initiative to review laws that impact girls and women in far-reaching ways.

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The precedent was set by the Sindh Assembly in April last year when it passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013, thereby making marriage below the age of 18 a punishable offence. Although changing hidebound attitudes takes time, at least there is now a legal framework to shore up and reinforce the effort. It would behove other provinces to follow suit.

Published in Dawn, January 30th, 2015

Electricity for Karachi

THE debate, if it can be called that, surrounding the renegotiation of K-Electric's power purchase agreement with the federal government, is getting caught in the wrong theme.

This is not about the city of Karachi versus the rest of the country. It is about how we manage the consequences of a power crisis that has everybody in its grip, and that includes the residents of Karachi.

Going by K-Electric's own figure, 57pc of consumers in Karachi get uninterrupted electricity, but what is worth noting in this is that the remaining 43pc experience extended hours of load-shedding just like the rest of the country.

When the Sindh chief minister says that Karachi needs the electricity from the national grid just like every other city does, he is stating a simple fact.

The negotiations with K-Electric should safeguard the larger public interest where pricing and transparency are concerned, but the talks should not work towards cutting this supply off to the country's largest city.

At a more philosophical level, it is hard to come up with an argument to not allow K-Electric to purchase electricity from the national grid.

Every distribution company in the country purchases power from the grid, and Karachi cannot be an exception without good reason. But at a purely practical level, it is true that continued purchases of power from the grid serve as a disincentive for investment in further power-generation capacity.

However, why should Karachi alone be told to invest in its own power-generation capacity? Why not make that demand of other distribution companies as well? In terms of quantity, K-Electric deals in almost exactly the same amount of electricity as Lesco, the distribution company that serves the city of Lahore and its surrounding areas.

Yet the burden of load-shedding is felt more in Lahore than in Karachi. Clearly, this is not because one city has more electricity than the other. Perhaps Karachi is better

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managed than Lahore. In renegotiating the agreement, the federal government is right to ensure that any undue concessions given in the past must be removed.

It is also right to underline the question of incentivising investment in the utility by the private-sector sponsors. But the city should not be spoken off as a foreign land, and the theory should not be peddled that somehow the residents of Karachi are consuming more power than everybody else in the country.

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The wrong priorities

OVER a year after the electoral process had begun, Balochistan finally has an elected third tier of government. With the election of mayors, deputy mayors and chairmen of district and union councils on Wednesday, Balochistan has become Pakistan's only province to currently have elected local bodies.

While there is some talk of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa holding the polls a few months from now, there is silence in Punjab and Sindh on the question of dates when it comes to the crucial elections.

However, compared to the state's apparent disinterest in holding the polls in these provinces, MNAs have managed to pull off quite a feat by securing funds for their respective constituencies.

Also read: [UNDP urges poll system enjoying voters' trust](#)

As reported on Thursday in this paper, the government has decided to give lawmakers in the National Assembly development grants of Rs20 million per year under the head of 'community development schemes'.

The PML-N was said to be under considerable pressure from the lawmakers to release the funds and the lobbying has clearly paid off. Yet keeping the mantra of good governance in mind, the money will be routed through the district coordination officers, to ensure that the bureaucracy and parliamentarians jointly oversee the disbursement of funds.

A similar scheme of funds' distribution was tried under the previous PPP administration but was criticised for mismanagement. While diverting funds towards development activities in all districts is a good idea, we must question the spirit of this move, especially in light of the state's disinterest in LG polls.

Essentially, overseeing development work at the grass roots is the domain of local bodies, and that is where the funds should be going. But since there are no elected

local representatives in three provinces, MNAs — along with the bureaucracy — have assumed this role. Is this in line with the spirit of decentralisation and devolution, or does it smack of the old thinking where elected local bodies were viewed as a threat to power?

The government's move to grant funds appears to confirm the feeling that both the rulers and MNAs are least interested in the holding of LG polls. It is unfortunate that the people's representatives are proving to be the primary obstacle in the path of elected local governments, perhaps afraid that their power and influence will be eroded if citizens turn to local governments to solve routine civic problems.

As a minister told this paper, the release of funds is designed to “engage local communities who could take ownership of the schemes through these grants”.

Instead of such schemes, the best way to engage and empower local communities is to pave the way for local elections, so that people can choose their representatives at the grass roots. If Punjab, Sindh and KP's lawmakers are truly sympathetic to their constituents' concerns, they should lobby their governments with equal fervour to hold LG polls at the earliest.

Published in Dawn, January 30th, 2015

[\Governor's resignation](#)

AN increasing number of Pakistanis, who have done well abroad, would like to remove disparity between the countries where they have prospered and the land of their origin. Of those who actively try many are frustrated by the system here.

We can add to this list the name of Chaudhry Muhammad Sarwar who quit as governor of Punjab on Thursday. On the face of it, Mr Sarwar was in a privileged position. He was believed to have cultivated a close relationship with the Sharif brothers during their years of exile in the UK where Mr Sarwar ran a successful business and had earned a name in politics.

Also read: [Punjab governor Sarwar resigns: 'I can serve Pakistan better out of office'](#)

As Punjab governor, however, he was perhaps too assertive to adopt the style the Sharif brothers preferred. Indeed, tensions were apparent not too long after his appointment in August 2013 — and these were reflected in the impatient, then frustrated, tone in which he pressed for reform and the revamp of the system.

He drifted away rather quickly from those at the head of the system, ie the Sharifs. Mr Sarwar's departure came soon after he had questioned Pakistan's foreign policy in

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the wake of President Barack Obama's recent visit to India. But it is very probable that he had realised much earlier how ineffective he was as governor, in contrast to his own description of the job.

The erstwhile governor possessed initiative and he preached dialogue and development. It was no small feat that he managed to catch people's attention in the presence of a chief minister as prominent as Shahbaz Sharif.

Even when his exit as governor was imminent there was talk as to how he could still be utilised as a federal adviser. There is now speculation about how he can contribute from the platform of a party other than the PML-N. But whereas his next move is keenly awaited, the Sharifs are bound to face strong criticism for yet again failing to coexist with other prominent figures.

Mr Sarwar survived accusations that he was in some way allied to the protest politics of Imran Khan and Dr Tahirul Qadri; there were even whispers that he coveted a role in a 'soon-to-emerge' caretaker set-up.

He went with his reputation intact, putting the blame of his departure on a Sharif government that has been struggling to live up to the promise of good governance. He can be seen as a dissenter who has vindicated those who oppose the Sharifs.

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Amir's comeback

THE International Cricket Council's landmark decision to allow Pakistan's banned pacer Mohammad Amir to return to domestic cricket with immediate effect has given the young pacer a new lease of life besides making headlines everywhere.

Amir, now 22, was banned by ICC from all cricket along with fellow players Salman Butt and Mohammad Asif following the infamous spot-fixing scam during the Pakistan tour of England in 2010.

Take a look: [Will Amir's return hurt Pakistan cricket? No.](#)

While Amir's ban technically expires on Sept 2 this year, he has been permitted to make an early return to the game by the ICC's Anti-Corruption and Security Unit that used its discretionary powers to facilitate the left-arm bowler for showing remorse and for cooperating with the unit's ongoing investigations against corruption in cricket.

Here, one must also not discount the role of the Pakistan Cricket Board that keenly pursued Amir's case with the ICC. Its persistence paid off with cricket's governing body

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approving a provision to allow banned players to make an early return to the game.

Amir, a bowler of immense talent, was hailed as a prodigy at the time of his international debut in 2009. He vindicated the experts' faith in him by turning out impressive performances in all formats of the game. Having said that, Amir faces, perhaps, the stiffest challenge of his career today.

Firstly, he will have to prove his detractors wrong by throwing off the stigma attached to his name and playing the gentleman's game in its true spirit to take his career further. Secondly, he will have to convince the selectors that he has not lost any of the sting or panache in his bowling despite his almost five-year-long absence from the game, if he harbours any serious hopes of representing Pakistan again.

Amir has vowed that his teammates and fans will find him a different man this time round and, to be fair to the young bowler, one feels he deserves a second chance after having served his punishment for a blunder committed in his formative years.

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An expanding war

AS though caught in a grotesque time loop, the same spectacle plays out over and over again. This time in an imambargah in Shikarpur, where yesterday's bomb explosion after Friday prayers killed around 50 people and injured scores, many of them critically.

The intensity of the blast can be gauged by the fact that the building's ceiling collapsed from the impact, trapping many underneath the debris. It was the second major sectarian attack to take place since the beginning of this year.

The earlier one, responsibility for which was claimed by a TTP faction, occurred in a Rawalpindi imambargah, killing seven people and injuring nearly 20. But the attack in Shikarpur is significant for several reasons.

It is the first large-scale sectarian attack in interior Sindh, the traditional home of Sufi Islam, underscoring the need to expand the war against extremism beyond the tribal areas to cities and smaller towns.

It is also damning evidence of how misgovernance compounded by state inertia can provide space for extremist elements to insidiously widen their influence. Over the past few years, critical, telling signs of the drift

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towards radicalisation and religious disharmony in Sindh have been ignored.

A number of Hindu temples have been desecrated and there is a rising crescendo alleging forced conversions of Hindu girls. Deobandi sectarian groups have become increasingly assertive in what is traditionally a Bareilvi ethos.

Exploiting the wilful neglect of the education sector, madressahs have proliferated, enrolling droves of children from poor families and enabling them to absorb their divisive ideologies. The vacuum of governance that exists in Sindh does not bode well for controlling the sectarian forces that have entrenched themselves there, and the Shikarpur bombing may mark the trajectory of a yet deadlier chapter in extremist violence in Pakistan.

A recent Human Rights Watch report has castigated the government for failing to protect religious freedoms and prevent violence against minorities.

There appears little hope of a change in this situation with the government seemingly unable to ride the crest of an unprecedented public consensus in favour of a robust response to counter the scourge of extremism. It was significant perhaps that when the attack took place, the prime minister was chairing yet another meeting on law and order, this time in Karachi.

What has been the substance of its response apart from repeatedly going into a huddle with trusted aides in the aftermath of the Peshawar attack, and hanging some death row inmates in rapid succession? Where is the evidence of the National Action Plan being put into practice?

While religious groups have appropriated the Charlie Hebdo issue to seize the initiative and demonstrate their street power, the state appears to be on the retreat, taking recourse to a timorous, fire-fighting approach that is far from what is needed at this desperately difficult hour.

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