

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of January 2016

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The coming challenges

TWENTY FIFTEEN was the year that demonstrated how much can change in 365 days — and how much can stay the same.

A year that began in the shadow of the attack on the Army Public School, Peshawar, was one in which at long last the political leadership, the military and the people of the country spoke with one voice: Pakistan must be rid of terrorism, militancy and extremism.

After a decade of fear and vacillation, it appeared that state and society were ready to reclaim Pakistan and reassert its founding principles as a constitutional democracy that protects and advances the safety, security and well-being of its people.

But the desperately needed resolve came with a darker side. The political and military leadership appeared to stoke the flames of revenge, casting the need to defeat the militants in the language of vengeance.

Disturbingly and shamefully, the Constitution itself was amended to effectively dismantle the edifice of fundamental rights, in order to allow for civilians — albeit those accused of grave terrorism-related crimes — to be tried in newly set-up military courts. Pakistan may be on the road to recovery, but already unacceptable compromises, including the resumption of executions, have been made.

On the political front, it was a good year for the democratic project. The anti-democratic challenges of 2014 receded and the focus turned to a spate of elections — by-elections and LG polls — which underlined the reality of continuing and deep support for democracy among the people.

Seven years since Pakistan's return to democracy, two general elections and a full set of LG elections later, it is surely the case that the democratic choice is becoming the people's unquestioned preference. State institutions must recognise and accept that evolving reality.

Finally, on the external front, it was an uneven year. Relations with Afghanistan and India are in yet another critical period, and on both fronts 2015 was beset with problems, though it ended on an undeniably positive note. If stability and peace are ever to be realised in South and West Asia, Afghanistan-Pakistan and India-Pakistan relations will need to improve immeasurably.

On the positive side, 2015 demonstrated that all sides, domestic and foreign, appear to have recognised that reality. If in 2015, stability and hope reasserted themselves in Pakistan, 2016 should be a year of consolidation. While the business of prediction is a perilous one in this country, there are several challenges and some opportunities that can be identified at the outset.

The paramount concern must remain pushing ahead in the fight against militancy. With the military suggesting that Zarb-i-Azb is likely to be wound down soon, the focus should switch to the long-term rehabilitation and regeneration of Fata. For that, the military leadership will need

to accept a secondary role to the political government, while the PML-N government will need to demonstrate greater will to focus on governance and legislative matters. Fata will not be recovered over the long term unless it is a joint effort by the military and the civilians.

But the challenge goes far beyond Fata. The next phase in the fight against militancy will be primarily a counterterrorism challenge — developing the resources and skills to fight a slew of existing and emerging militant threats across the country. That multi-tiered, multi-institutional challenge is one that the political governments, both at the centre and in the provinces, appear unprepared to take on so far.

Externally, the twin challenge of helping stabilise Afghanistan and normalising ties with India will likely dominate the diplomatic and security landscapes.

January may see a continuation of the recent intensive diplomacy on both fronts, with foreign secretary-level talks between India and Pakistan and a Pakistan-Afghanistan-US-China summit to help restart political reconciliation between Kabul and the Afghan Taliban. Neither process will be easy.

A fracturing Taliban that is militarily in the ascendant inside Afghanistan does not bode well for a peaceful settlement.

Meanwhile, on India and Pakistan, the two prime ministers have thrown their political weight behind the upcoming talks process, but it remains to be seen if they can achieve institutional breakthroughs. There remains one significant unknown.

November ought to bring the induction of a new army chief. Whether or not that process plays out smoothly will largely depend on the two Sharifs: Gen Raheel Sharif and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Twenty sixteen could be a year of great breakthroughs, but it would be a success even if there is cautious consolidation.

Published in Dawn, January 1st, 2016

Economy in 2016

THE economy of Pakistan could be poised for a revival of growth in 2016, after languishing in low-growth equilibrium since 2008. Ever since the growth years of the Musharraf regime came crashing down, the economy has struggled to recover.

For almost five years, the predicament was described by the State Bank as ‘low-growth, high-inflation’ equilibrium. Along with this was a severe power crisis, brought on in large part by a severely constrained fiscal situation and low foreign exchange reserves.

But in 2015, the tide began to change. Reserves reached historic highs, even if on the back of borrowed money. And inflation fell rapidly throughout the year, picking up slightly only in the closing days.

As the tide turns, a window of opportunity opens up for the government in the year 2016, the first of its last two full years in power. Whatever the PML-N government is going to do, this is the year when it must get going.

It is worth bearing in mind that the promise of the moment owes itself almost entirely to fortuitous circumstances. The biggest stroke of luck came in the form of sharply dropping oil prices, which stabilised the current account even as exports and FDI fell. It also contributed in no small measure to the drop in inflation.

But the slide also brought in its wake unanticipated consequences that the government struggled to contain. More pointedly, the fiscal consequences of the slide in oil prices began to bite immediately following the first pass-throughs of the lower price in November 2014, necessitating resort to extraordinary revenue measures such as a sharp hike in the GST rate and an assortment of miscellaneous surcharges, to offset the negative revenue impact of lower oil prices.

So long as they were for the short term and meant to contain the immediate impact of a rapidly changing situation, these measures were fine. But over time, it became apparent that the government did not have many other ideas about compensating for the drop in revenues brought about by the slide in oil prices.

The absence of big ideas to manage the changing circumstances has been this government’s biggest constraint thus far, and 2016 will test this weakness to the maximum.

This is the year when the promise of CPEC has to take shape, but thus far CPEC projects are being executed without an overarching planning and coordination body (notwithstanding the attempts of the Planning Commission to perform that role) and without any serious transparency.

Power-sector reforms do not appear to be advancing, and privatisation appears to be stuck in limbo. Realising the promise offered by improving macroeconomic fundamentals is the big opportunity offered by 2016.

But the year will reveal whether that promise lives up to its transformative potential, or becomes just another short-term burst of unsustainable growth triggered by fortuitous, external developments of the sort that we have seen on many occasions in the past.

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Terrorism's informal ways

A Joint Investigation Team in Punjab has been surveying the bank accounts of 200 seminaries in Punjab, and it has discovered that none of them channelled any substantial funds through their accounts.

So either these institutions, some of which are quite large, are operating on minuscule budgets, or they are using channels to receive funds and make payments that conceal their transactions.

The JIT now intends to question the management of each of these institutions to find out where they are receiving their funds from and how they process their transactions.

The JIT would be well advised to first study the myriad options available to anyone in the informal economy to make payments as well as send and receive funds from abroad. Otherwise, it is possible the management of the seminaries could talk circles around them during questioning.

The example of the massive growth of hundi and hawala in the past few years provides a good starting point. By some reported estimates, gleaned from exchange companies, the illegal hundi and hawala trade has crossed \$15bn annually.

The case of gold imports offers an example: imports of gold as shown in official figures are tiny, but the ready availability of the precious metal in markets around the country, as well as the relative stability of its price, indicates that large quantities are being imported. However, their value is not reflected in official data because the payments are processed through informal channels.

There are numerous other examples, such as the misdeclaration of the value of goods in foreign trade, or the straightforward transfer of funds across national boundaries through cash carriers or hundi and hawala operators.

A very large payments system exists in the country for managing bulk cash transactions, or cross-border payments and remittances, which conceals the transaction from the authorities in order to evade taxes and duties, or other regulatory requirements and limitations. The same system can also conceal the transactions of militant groups and their facilitators and handlers.

The findings of the JIT suggest that large-scale concealment of cash flows by seminaries suspected of involvement in militant activities is widespread. They may be conducting part of their operations in cash, or using bank accounts belonging to other people in their network, which would not show up in the investigation being carried out because it is focusing entirely on bank accounts registered in the name of the seminary under investigation.

In order to curb terror financing, it will be necessary to also tackle the large informal payments economy, which means more attention being paid to measures to detect and shut down hundi and hawala as well.

So long as these informal channels exist, militant organisations will always find ways to carry on with their transactions without fear of detection. The effort to curb the informal payments economy is, therefore, a necessary part of the larger fight against terrorism and militancy.

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‘Encounters’ continue

IN the year that has just ended, law-enforcement agencies — including the police and Rangers — continued to make widespread use of so-called encounters to eliminate suspects. For example, in Karachi, where clearly ‘encounters’ are a favoured method of law enforcers, nearly 700 suspects were killed in this manner in 2015, while the number of security personnel who fell in the line of duty is 95, as per official figures. If it is any consolation, the number of ‘encounters’ was less than in 2014; around 925 suspects were killed in the city in such shootouts that year. The Punjab police is not too far behind, as regular reports of ‘encounter killings’ also came in from that province in 2015. In fact, one of the most high-profile examples of such slayings was that of dreaded Lashkar-i-Jhangvi militant Malik Ishaq and his sons in July last year. Though it is difficult to establish a correlation, Karachi police also claim that there was a considerable drop in targeted killings in the city last year as compared to 2014; in 2015, 986 people fell victim to targeted attacks while the number was 1,925 the year before.

As Pakistan wages an uphill battle against crime and militancy, it is clear that law enforcers continue to prefer short cuts such as ‘encounters’. This is a deeply troubling approach. Perhaps the main problem is that senior police officials condone the practice in not so many words. For example, Rao Anwar, a seasoned Karachi police officer who is known as an ‘encounter specialist’, shrugged off questions from this paper recently about the use of extrajudicial methods in the course of police work. Police officials appear to believe that ‘encounters’ are a requirement of getting the job done, especially when it comes to dealing with suspects of notorious repute. However, in order to maintain the sanctity of fundamental rights and due process, the police hierarchy, as well as the high command of other security forces, must take a clear stand against extrajudicial methods, including ‘encounters’, of eliminating suspects. In other words, security personnel cannot be allowed to play judge, jury and executioner, whether they are dealing with violent criminals, or militants of various persuasions. Instead, criminal justice reform — something that seems to be completely missing from the official agenda — is the only way to deal with dangerous criminals and terrorists without violating the bounds of fundamental rights and misusing authority.

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New Year celebrations

ONE more time, a festive occasion was celebrated with unusual gusto around the country. New Year's Eve saw more people out on the streets of the big cities of Karachi and Lahore, and more organised events — featuring some fairly impressive fireworks displays in some instances. The last time such events were witnessed was on Eid when everyone noted unusual levels of public participation, with traders reporting high levels of spending, and large numbers of people opting to celebrate in public venues with their families. Such festivities in public are a welcome development and they speak of the improving law and order situation in the country, as well as of a certain optimism that is spreading in people's hearts regarding the direction in which the country is headed.

But despite the general air of festivity, authorities in Karachi once again did their best to try and dampen the excitement by a massive road closure exercise, which was billed as a traffic control measure but that quickly began to look like a blatant attempt to prevent people from celebrating. The road closure plan was accompanied by instructions for markets and restaurants to close by a certain time, which added insult to injury, because the city authorities have really no business to order establishments to shut down for illogical reasons. In fact, the plan was executed so poorly that it made the city authorities look ineffectual. The road closure plan that was announced a day before was departed from almost immediately. Shortly before 11pm, the movement of traffic was largely choked. The authorities in Karachi should draw a lesson from their counterparts in Lahore who made no effort to dampen the spirit of joy in their city, and, instead, focused their energy on controlling the large presence of traffic on the streets. Restaurants and markets were packed, and many among the younger generation felt free to dance in the streets. Why did the authorities seek to deny the residents of Karachi the same right?

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No let-up in executions

SUCCESSFUL as 2015 was on many fronts in the fight to stabilise the country and restore internal peace, there was one especially grim statistic: following first the partial and then the complete lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty, 333 individuals were hanged to death last year. As a report compiled by Dawn.com has shown, the record executions in Pakistan were only exceeded by Iran and China. None of the three countries, and Saudi Arabia, which executed the fourth highest number of people, has a judicial system that inspires confidence or is a model that other states want to emulate. From the standpoint of justice, it is not an enviable company of nations. Yet, the state here appears to show no intention of slowing down. The new year has begun with the ISPR announcing that the army chief has ratified the death sentences of nine more individuals convicted by the military. The crimes that the men allegedly belonging to various militant groups have been convicted of are clearly of a very serious nature. But the opaqueness of the trials and the sentences handed down do not meet the standards of justice — the fight against militancy can and should be won without the dubious crutch that is the death penalty.

As documented over the course of the last year, the reinstatement of the death penalty in the country had little to do with terrorism — the overwhelming majority of the men hanged had no militant, terrorist or extremist affiliation. Moreover, there is no evidence whatsoever that the reinstatement of the death penalty has acted as a deterrent. While militancy and terrorism were markedly lower last year, military and government officials themselves routinely credited the reduction to military operations in Fata and counterterrorism actions across the country. It is not just the direct effect — while more than 30 individuals have been sentenced to die by military courts, the high-profile nature of those cases has drawn virtually all attention away from the death sentences that continue to be handed down by the regular courts and made even more difficult scrutiny of the non-military cases that have been sent to the gallows.

While wide-ranging judicial reforms remain a distant priority for the government, there are two interventions that could help slow down the frantic rate of executions. Firstly, the government could form a special high-powered committee consisting of judicial and human rights experts to review the cases that are set for execution rather than leaving it to the normal channels of review via the courts and the interior ministry. Secondly, the unacceptably wide range of crimes that the death penalty can be handed down for should be urgently reviewed. If the political will exists, the legalities of both steps could surely be worked out in reasonable time. The shameful record of executions last year should be not exceeded in 2016.

Coalition concerns

IN the extremely fluid situation obtaining in the Middle East, Pakistan has had to maintain a delicate course, and continues to face complex foreign policy choices. Take, for example, the 34-nation, Saudi-led counterterrorism coalition formed last month, of which Islamabad is a part. As reported, a few days ago a senior Saudi defence ministry official was in the country and met the army chief. While the meeting was ostensibly convened to discuss ‘defence ties’, it has been suggested that greater details of Pakistan’s inclusion in the coalition may have been discussed. The Saudis are reportedly due to host a meeting concerning the coalition later this month, and it would not be unusual for Riyadh to be sounding out Islamabad about the fine print of coalition membership.

Pakistan should continue to engage with the Saudis while cooperation on counterterrorism can be a productive exercise for both states. However, if the coalition in question is meant to be an ideological or communal initiative — there has been criticism along these lines due to the exclusion of Iran, Iraq and Syria, the latter two major victims of terrorism — then Pakistan should best keep away from such endeavours. Already, Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim-majority state and a country which has also dealt with internal Islamist radicalism, has quietly distanced itself from the alliance. Pakistan, primarily due to its internal confessional dynamics, as well as its domestic security situation, cannot afford to be part of any plan that may increase the divide within the Muslim world further. Last year, efforts were made to ‘convince’ Pakistan to join the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, which Islamabad wisely declined. If anything, this country should push for an inclusive Muslim bloc that can jointly address the menace of terrorism and extremism. Moreover, the country should refrain from getting involved in the ‘good militant, bad militant’ game abroad. It must clearly state that all militant groups active in Syria, Iraq and beyond are not legitimate. Countering terrorism both at home and abroad is a must for this country, especially as the militant Islamic State group is spreading its tentacles across the region, and is inspiring elements inside Pakistan. However, Pakistani boots should not be on the ground in complicated foreign conflicts that show no signs of abating. Also, the state should continue to involve parliament where the role, scope and extent of Pakistan’s involvement in the Saudi-led coalition is concerned.

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Amir's comeback

ROM being a prodigy to a spot-fixer to approver to making perhaps the most-talked-about comeback in cricket's history, young Mohammad Amir has a knack of taking centre stage. On Thursday, the 23-year-old pacer got a new lease of life when national selectors named him as a member of the Pakistan squad for the upcoming tour of New Zealand. While there had never been any doubts about the tremendous talent Amir possesses as a bowler, it is to the young pacer's credit that coming from a lengthy, nerve-wracking five-year ICC ban, he has lost none of his panache. This speaks volumes for his unflinching focus. It is apparent that Amir is keen to shrug off the 'fixer' tag and make amends with his bowling as seen in his sharp pace and swing in domestic cricket as well as in the more competitive environment at the Bangladesh Premier League where he rubbed shoulders with many international players.

Having said that, his biggest challenge — other than taming the competitive New Zealand side — remains his integration into the current Pakistan team. With senior pros Mohammad Hafeez, Azhar Ali and a few others still wary of sharing the dressing room with the young pacer, he perhaps realises that it may not be that easy for him to mix comfortably. Fortunately for him, senior all-rounder and T20 skipper Shahid Afridi and head coach Waqar Younis have put their weight behind Amir and have shown enough faith in his resolve to improve his reputation. They have also made efforts to get the required support from the players for Amir. Pakistan's dismal record in limited-over games in 2015 as well as the shocking ouster of match-winning spinner Yasir Shah in a doping row has left the field open for a strike bowler to take charge. Amir has a part to play here. How successfully he does so remains to be seen; a realignment of attitude by those who are critical of his inclusion will be essential to make it work.

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Attack on Pathankot air force base

WHILE Pakistan-India ties are necessarily about a great deal more than terrorism, the latter is perhaps the one threat that can derail the relationship yet again.

It is too early to know the facts about what transpired at an Indian air force base in Pathankot but already some challenges — and opportunities for broadening and deepening anti-terrorism efforts — can be identified.

Firstly, the Pakistani government has done the right thing in quickly and unequivocally condemning the terror attack and offering its cooperation to India.

Having suffered grievously from militant violence and having resolved to fight militancy in all its forms, Pakistan should rightly offer its support to any state confronting terror threats. It is a welcome change that Pakistan now officially and directly condemns terrorist attacks regionally and internationally and offers its assistance where necessary.

The years of ambivalence appear to have been left behind.

Yet, the challenges are formidable. The hostile reaction by much of the Indian media to the alleged involvement of Pakistanis in the attack even before the barest facts could be established underlines just how difficult peacemaking will be.

Courageously, however, the Indian government has appeared to resist media and hawkish pressure and declined to go into attack mode against Pakistan. It is all too easy to reap political capital in the midst of a major terrorist attack by targeting perceived external enemies.

The preferable approach — one that hopefully the Indian government will continue to adopt in the days ahead — would be to quickly establish the facts. If no involvement of Pakistani nationals is found, the information should be shared with the Indian public.

If Pakistani nationals are found to be involved in the attack, the information should be shared with Pakistani authorities as quickly as possible — and reciprocal steps should be taken here. To thwart the political motives of terrorists, a sensible, cooperative approach by both governments should be key.

Inside Pakistan, there needs to be some reflection. Has Pakistan's inability to deal adequately with India's concerns about the 2008 Mumbai attacks caused cynicism about Pakistani intentions and led to Indians being automatically suspicious of Pakistan whenever a terrorist attack occurs in their country?

If so, does that not harm Pakistan's own interests? There is still too much defensiveness about the terrorism threat on the Pakistani side — perhaps less so in the political government, but certainly in the military-led security establishment.

There is no conceivable gain that Pakistan can make through terrorism when it comes to key disputes and issues with India. Not only is that abundantly clear outside the state apparatus, a generation of senior officials, both military and civilian, have publicly and privately acknowledged and accepted that.

If that is indeed the case, then Pakistan ought to lead confidently on the regional terrorist threat. No one — at least no one credible — can accuse the Pakistani state of not wanting to or failing to fight the banned TTP today. The day must come when the same can be said for all terror threats, internally, regionally and internationally.

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Tax amnesty scheme

THE amnesty scheme tabled by the government before parliament deserves serious consideration. This is not the same as many other amnesty schemes attempted in the past.

It is very specific in its objectives and is open only to members of the trader community, who have historically defied attempts to bring them into the tax net. It is also closed specifically to members of the assemblies, as well as those who have any type of criminal background.

It contains a slowly rising gradient of taxation to gradually reel in those who choose to avail themselves of its provisions and have their incomes documented, and it includes turnover as well as income tax.

This might be the best opportunity that the country has to document a very large segment of the economy that has resisted all attempts to be included in the state's revenue effort thus far.

The biggest advantage that the government's approach has is that it is non-coercive.

Past attempts to coerce traders into coming into the net, such as during the Musharraf era in its early years as part of the regime's documentation drive, were doomed to failure because of the deep underlying mistrust of the FBR, and because the state's coercive abilities are inherently limited and easily resisted.

By going about it in the way that it has, the government has effectively persuaded the traders that it is in their own interest to begin filing tax returns and wealth statements with the authorities.

For this reason, it stands a better chance of succeeding now than during previous efforts which were either coercive or offered blanket amnesties to anybody who wanted to declare their tax-free assets and enter the net.

The temptation to oppose the scheme for the sake of mounting an opposition, like what the PTI is seeking to do given the remarks of its party chairman, could well prove futile because there are no constituencies in society vocally opposing the legislation.

The scheme being offered offers a good chance to fulfil an old objective of broadening the tax base by bringing in a large constituency that has grown up outside the net, and as such deserves an opportunity to prove its usefulness.

The government has played a skilful hand by negotiating the deal and bringing it before parliament. Let's hope the parties in parliament can recognise that and do the right thing when they vote on it.

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Tourism in Lahore

ONLY 2,350. This is the number of foreigners who visited Lahore in 2015, the city that is said to be without parallel and that has drawn the proudest and most boastful songs out of a long line of bards down to the current times.

The figure would be something to be embarrassed about, until we start to put things in perspective. A city that has long stood on a path considered a favourite of marauders, Lahore is today trying to recover from the effects of the long years of militancy this country has been subjected to.

The measures taken at the government level to restore the process of cultural evolution aided by preservation has included some activity in and around the Walled City.

This is a segment that has been viewed with respect or at least with less cynicism by the people at large than is usually the case with official projects. It is no surprise then that the government is keen to flaunt its pro-culture side as it fights accusations of being anti-heritage in its quest to pursue development projects in the city, such as the Orange Line.

Stats of the Walled City of Lahore Authority for the last year portray a promising picture. Some publicity campaigns were carried out and a few tourist attractions such as rickshaw and tonga rides initiated on select routes, apart from preservation work undertaken with the help of foreign donors.

The sum of it managed to draw a total of around 50,000 tourists from within and outside Pakistan to the initial tourist package — Royal Trail — offered by the WCLA.

This may be considered reason enough to hail these efforts as a sound beginning but obviously it will not please those who believe that Lahore can — that it must and should — attract a much larger number of visitors.

The city must not be sold to overzealous developers bent on imposing the same ‘modern’ look on everything everywhere. A city can only stand out by being itself.

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Dangerous polarisation

THE assurance given to Austria by Iran and Saudi Arabia that they are not interested in heightening the tension is the only redeeming feature of the crisis touched off by the Saudi execution of 47 people on terrorism-related charges.

Those executed included Nimr al-Nimr, a leading Shia cleric, who was a vocal critic of the Saudi royal family. His execution touched off violent demonstrations in Iran, where protesters attacked Saudi missions in Tehran and Mashhad, with spiritual leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani denouncing the executions in strong terms.

Also read: [Pakistan calls for peaceful resolution to S. Arabia, Iran tensions](#)

Saudi Arabia — followed by Sudan and Bahrain — retaliated by severing diplomatic relations. As was to be expected, the crisis could not remain bilateral and triggered sectarian vitriol, with Iraq’s Moqtada al-Sadr calling for demonstrations and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, chief of Lebanon’s Hezbollah militia, describing the Saudi executions as “a message of blood”.

Demonstrations have also begun in Pakistan and India, and obviously worse could follow if the principals do not demonstrate the wisdom necessary to contain what could be a deadly fire that could devastate a region already being devoured by the fanatic hordes of the militant Islamic State group.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran execute criminals, with Amnesty International recording nearly 700 hangings in Iran in the first half of 2015.

Those executed were mostly drug smugglers, while some belonged to minority communities. In Saudi Arabia, 2015 saw the highest number of executions, 151, after trials that fell far short of international standards.

What is extraordinary about the executions reported on Saturday was the timing, for Riyadh went ahead with them at a time when Iraq and the Levant are burning in sectarian strife.

While Iraq's sectarian killings began in the aftermath of the US-led invasion, Syria's Arab Spring degenerated years ago into a schismatic conflict after non-state actors and two of the Middle East's major oil powers encouraged the chaos instead of controlling it.

Iran's failure to protect the Saudi missions was most unfortunate, for the authorities should have foreseen the trouble that was inevitable after al-Nimr's execution, but Riyadh clearly overreacted.

In September 1979, a furious mob burnt down the American embassy in Islamabad over a rumour, but Washington did not sever relations with Pakistan.

Will Riyadh and Tehran have the foresight and courage to rise above petty considerations and answer the question that is agitating the mind of many in the Muslim world?

Are they going to use their clout with their acolytes to throw the entire region into a big sectarian conflagration that would make the world recall Europe's 30-year war when the continent was reduced to the worst kinds of atrocities?

Actors in today's Middle Eastern drama will one day phase out, but the legacy of a Muslim re-enactment of the 30-year war will linger on, making history recall with shame those responsible for all that is happening or could happen in the Muslim heartland today.

Published in Dawn, January 5th, 2016

Census road map

AFTER many months of silence, it looks like the exercise to hold a population census by March may well be on track after all. Some serious delays have been encountered, and there was even talk back in August of scrapping the exercise altogether.

But going by the recent meeting between the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, it appears that the exercise will be moving ahead after all. One key sticking point is the availability of the army for security.

Take a look: [Population census to be held in March](#)

Given the large commitments the army already has as it continues its fight against militancy, whether or not it will be able to spare the needed manpower remains to be seen.

The census is a vital exercise, especially when it comes to policy implementation. The last census, held in 1998, yielded up some puzzling data, such as near-constant population ratios between the provinces.

This was perplexing because Sindh had seen massive inward migration in the intervening years between 1998 and the last census in the early 1980s. For this reason, its results are always taken with a grain of salt by demographers.

The underlying suggestion is that the data was manipulated to ensure that population ratios do not change very much, because that would lead to changes in the numbers of seats each province has in the legislature.

This time round, the government has specifically issued instructions to hold a ‘credible’ census, and it is extremely important that this happens.

It is also possible that the latest census, if it is truly credible, will see sharply altered population ratios between the provinces; in fact, the head count may well set into motion a complex and highly contested set of politics.

Nevertheless, it is critical to get the best picture possible of the country’s demographic make-up, and altering the data to make it less contentious is clearly not an option.

Instead, the government could follow the example of India, where a population census was held in the early 2000s, but legislation was passed beforehand to freeze the seat shares of the various states in the national legislature for some 25 years.

That way, nobody has any reason to be afraid of the truth. The politicians get what they want, and policymakers get what they desire. The government should consider advice that dampens the nature of the politics surrounding the census exercise; the latter should be allowed to yield up numbers that reflect the reality.

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Rape probe

THE alleged gang rape of a young girl, reported to be a minor, in Lahore in late December has drawn the usual — and for some still the most shocking — reactions.

In more recent days, a relative of the victim claimed that the girl had attempted suicide because of the pressures that she had come under during the police investigation of her complaint.

On the other hand, lawyers of the accused — who include a man said to have held office in the PML-N youth wing — have called for a fair trial.

There have been some reports doing the rounds in the media that either do not tally with the facts confirmed by police or that are one-sided. Apparently, some of the stories in the media amount to an attempt at influencing the probe. We are, sadly, once more hearing painful remarks about how the powerful can — and will — escape the clutches of the law.

One again we are witnessing society's tendency of subjecting a rape complainant to the cruellest of inquiries. These are genuine concerns and cry out for the imposition of the unwritten code dictated by a most basic principle: respect for human dignity.

This critique of the role of the media, of the influential politicians trying to absolve their party of blame, and of society in general has drawn the usual round of vows about the dire need for corrective measures.

But the danger is that all these promises of restraint are going to lose out to a hard-to-suppress urge to protect, report and comment.

There is as yet not sufficient evidence around to inspire hope that the demands for fairness by all parties will not go unheeded.

There is surely a need for civil society to counter the urge to resort to the sensational through debate and popular censure. The government still has a bigger role. This is as good a time as any for the government to display its commitment to investigate without fear or favour.

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A delicate balance

Ominous clouds are forming over the Gulf and Pakistan — for a variety of reasons — we must find middle ground and not take sides in the brewing Saudi-Iranian conflict.

There was a cautious note in Sartaj Aziz's words when he addressed the National Assembly on Tuesday regarding the issue.

A day earlier, the government had been criticised in parliament for failing to outline a clear policy on the Gulf crisis by members of various parties.

Also read: [Opposition seeks definitive stance on Riyadh-Tehran spat](#)

However, on Tuesday, the prime minister's adviser on foreign affairs said Pakistan would work to reduce tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, along with working for "unity" within the Muslim world. In the current climate, this seems to be a sensible approach.

The Tehran-Riyadh row, which was sparked by the execution of senior Saudi Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr on Jan 2, and thereafter exacerbated by the storming of Saudi missions by protesters in Iran, shows no sign of being resolved soon.

In fact, on Tuesday, Kuwait recalled its ambassador from Tehran; earlier, following the Saudi lead, Bahrain and Sudan had snapped ties with the Islamic Republic. As the crisis escalates, there has been little in the form of proactive diplomacy from the international community to calm cross-Gulf tensions, apart from appeals for restraint.

Only Russia has offered to mediate. The UN must play a more visible role in cooling tempers as the Middle East cannot afford a Saudi-Iranian conflagration. As for where Pakistan stands, this country's primary position should be that of neutrality.

Geographic, geopolitical and geoeconomic reasons — along with issues of religious sensitivities — dictate that Pakistan must not take sides in the rivalry. Of course, this is easier said than done. Pakistan has enjoyed good relations with Saudi Arabia for decades while the kingdom has been a major economic benefactor, which means the Saudis will be expecting Pakistan to return the 'favours'.

However, Iran is a neighbour while this country also shares religious and cultural links with the Islamic Republic, hence antagonising Tehran would be equally unwise. While the Foreign Office has rightly condemned the storming of Saudi missions in Iran, there has been some speculation over Islamabad possibly downgrading diplomatic ties with Tehran. This would be inadvisable.

Should the opportunity arise, Islamabad can use its good offices to heal the rift between Riyadh and Tehran. To safeguard its internal communal harmony and stability, neutrality is the best choice for Pakistan to make.

The government seems to have adopted a logical approach to the crisis up till now. Let us hope — and the days ahead will tell, especially if the crisis escalates — that the state opts to stay the course and refrains from picking sides, regardless of the internal and external pressure to get involved. What is clear is that choosing favourites in an ugly confrontation will bring little benefit to this country.

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After Pathankot

THERE is much that is uncertain about the immediate state of India-Pakistan relations, but at least one thing is clear: for all the outstanding, bilateral issues, terrorism has forced its way to the front again.

At the very highest and official levels, both sides continue to be measured and cooperative in their responses. The telephone call yesterday between prime ministers Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif suggests that the political establishments at least are willing to see if the diplomatic approach can yield results.

Whatever evidence, if any, India finds about the involvement of Pakistan-based actors in the Pathankot IAF base attack should be shared promptly and in full with Islamabad. Then, as Mr Sharif has pledged, Pakistan should investigate urgently, and take action where necessary.

Already, though, there has been a public lead provided — and possibly a gauntlet thrown down to the Pakistani state. The claim by Syed Sadaqat Husain, a spokesperson for the United Jihad Council, an umbrella jihadi group based in Azad Kashmir, that the UJC is responsible for the Pathankot incident has created several problems for Pakistan.

Whether the UJC did in fact launch the attack or not — a hitherto unknown branch of the UJC, the National Highway Squad, has been credited with the attack — the claim will invariably draw yet more scrutiny of anti-India militants based inside Pakistan, and in Kashmir in particular.

The UJC leadership, which has with varying degrees of success put together a disparate group of militants over the past two decades, is believed to be politically close to the Pakistani state, but its role in militancy has been doubtful for many years, particularly since the Musharraf-era freeze on cross-LoC attacks. Has that changed? Or have elements inside the UJC gone rogue?

If the state wants to convey that it speaks with one voice and that dialogue resumption between India and Pakistan is the result of a consultative process and consensus decision-making, then it must demonstrate that the UJC claim is being taken seriously.

It cannot be that Mr Sharif tells his Indian counterpart that terrorists always try and derail the peace process between the two countries, and then the state here tries to sweep under the carpet the claims of an armed attack made by a group whose leadership is based in Pakistan.

If the UJC claim is a ruse, it should be exposed as such. If not, the architects of the Pathankot attack need to be brought to justice.

Balochistan cabinet

FOR the first time, the province of Balochistan has seen a power-sharing formula successfully implemented, but it appears to have snagged on an old problem.

The formula itself was worked out in the Murree Accord soon after the May 2013 election, when two contenders for the post of chief minister were both assured that they would get a chance to serve in the highest executive office of the province, but one after the other.

As a result, Dr Abdul Malik Baloch of the nationalist NP occupied the post till December 2015, then tendered his resignation and stepped down to vacate the post for Nawab Sanaullah Zehri of the PML-N. Such a voluntary power-sharing formula was last tried in 1996 in Balochistan, but could not be successfully seen through. This time, matters have worked out more or less smoothly thus far.

Now comes the hard part. The new chief minister is to decide his cabinet team, and Balochistan has a long history of highly contested politics surrounding the allocations of portfolios, with the result that almost all MPAs end up getting some sort of a ministerial position.

Mr Zehri has now run into this old problem, and despite the passage of almost two weeks now, and while knowing for a long time that he would be the next chief minister, has been unable to name a new cabinet.

Instead, in the wrangling for cabinet posts that has ensued in the wake of his becoming chief minister, Mr Zehri has been making trips to Islamabad to seek guidance on the matter rather than working the political mill at home to start his important tenure on a strong note. The chief minister needs to play a stronger hand than this.

He has been brought to power under a formula that had many details worked out for him. Rather than looking to Islamabad for guidance, he needs to show that he has the mettle to rule his province and rise above the squabbling at this early time.

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Stirring the CPEC pot

ONCE again KP Chief Minister Pervez Khattak and his high command are up in arms against the manner in which the government is seen to be implementing the CPEC projects.

Less than two months ago, he was already threatening “massive agitations” against these as well as a halt to all land acquisition under way in his province for CPEC projects.

The reasons given were that the centre had not allocated the promised funds for those projects that lie in the province, and that changes were being made in the allocations and routes without consulting his government.

On Dec 5, shortly after Mr Khattak’s outburst, the KP Assembly unanimously passed a resolution endorsing his views that the maps of the project being issued by the Planning Commission “indicate the consensus achieved on May 28 has not been implemented in letter and spirit”.

This was the second such resolution on CPEC passed by the provincial assembly — the first one came in October.

Today, the chief minister is upping the ante all over again. Once again, he is threatening agitations and the withdrawal of support for the land acquisition process, and his complaints are being echoed by parties besides his own in the provincial government.

It is not clear what precisely is the issue at stake, with all the emotional rhetoric in play, but what is evident is that the concerns raised in November, and echoed in the resolution of the provincial assembly, do not appear to have been resolved.

We can be excused for feeling a little confused as we witness this spectacle. Is this all politically driven, or is the government living up to its reputation of showing a stubborn preference for Punjab when it comes to the allocation of the state’s material resources?

The minister for planning has tried to assuage these concerns by saying his government “cannot even think about discriminating against any province”, but the words sound somewhat vacuous.

What is clear is that the whole controversy ultimately grows out of the lack of transparency shrouding CPEC projects, to the point where even the State Bank governor has made public comments that he is not aware of the foreign exchange requirements of the financing arrangements under which the projects are being executed.

Between fiscal year 2014 and 2015, the disbursement of bilateral loans and grants for CPEC energy projects doubled to reach \$1.2bn, a large sum which doubtless carries repayment obligations that need to be known in advance.

The resolution of the KP Assembly further demands that the “[m]onographic study on highways of CPEC should be made a public document. Similarly, the agreements between Pakistan and China should also be made public”. It is high time to bring transparency to CPEC, or perhaps call another multiparty conference to hammer out a new consensus behind it all over again.

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Ties with Sri Lanka

THAT terrorism was one of Nawaz Sharif’s major concerns during his Sri Lankan visit became obvious when he rang up Narendra Modi to assure him that his government would not hesitate to take “prompt and decisive action” if the involvement of Pakistan-based elements in the Pathankot attack was proved.

Terrorism also came up for discussion during talks between Mr Sharif and Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena, when the latter thanked Pakistan for its help in putting down the Tamil insurgency led by the LTTE.

While there is no doubt that the crushing of the insurgency is a controversial, blood-filled chapter in Sri Lanka’s history and has involved egregious human rights violations, Pakistan’s military assistance is seen as having helped restore peace to the island.

Yet countering terrorism is only one aspect of the multidimensional relationship between Pakistan and Sri Lanka as is evident from the number of agreements signed during the visit of Prime Minister Sharif.

Besides the memorandums of understanding signed on cooperation in such diverse fields as financial intelligence and terrorism financing, the two sides also pledged to work closely in science and technology, healthcare, tourism and defence, while deciding to include the exchange of services under the free trade agreement.

Given Saarc’s failure to click, Pakistan has no choice but to develop bilateral relations with its members. The principal reason for Saarc’s inability to become a going concern like Asean and the EU are many, but the principal factor is the adversarial India-Pakistan relationship.

The same is true, though at a lower level, of Islamabad’s ties with Kabul, both failing to develop a workable model of coordination in tackling terrorism on either side of the border. In contrast, Colombo and Islamabad always had a warm relationship that has worked to their advantage.

The Sri Lankan government's decision to buy eight Pakistan-built JF-17 aircraft in the face of stiff Indian opposition shows the Sri Lankan leadership's resolve to withstand pressure and develop the country's military capability against a possible resurgence of insurgency.

Mr Sharif welcomed the Sri Lankan navy's participation in joint manoeuvres with the Pakistan Navy and hoped cooperation in defence would continue. What is regrettable is the low volume of trade — a mere \$325m. We can only hope that the resolve to raise it to a billion dollars will be met, even though, given the natural resources the two countries possess, trade could be expanded manifold.

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Biometric verification

THERE can be little arguing with the fact that there is a dire need for electoral reform in Pakistan. However, thorough debate and experimentation are certainly required before innovations are introduced in the voting process in order to prevent further controversies.

Technological solutions such as the introduction of biometric verification and electronic voting machines have been suggested as silver bullets to make elections in this country more fair and transparent.

As reported on Wednesday, Nadra has agreed to provide data for biometric verification of voters with 'security checks' in place. This will enable the authority to verify voters offline during polling.

Biometric verification was tried last year at certain polling stations during the by-poll in Haripur; observers point out that the exercise did not go well and irregularities were reported.

Yet one by-election is not enough to pass judgement on the technology. Biometric verification may be a good idea and worth a try if it can help improve electoral transparency. But there should be no rush to implement the technology by the 2018 elections.

For one, online verification may be a highly complex, if not impossible, task considering that there are tens of millions of voters on the rolls. Offline verification is also not completely foolproof. Perhaps the best option would be to continuously test and improve verification technology by deploying it at by-elections.

We must realise that introducing technology in the electoral process is a long, tedious process. For example, India — arguably a more mature democracy — took over two decades to fully introduce electronic voting machines, from the experimentation stage onwards.

So while technology is welcome, it cannot replace the basics; electoral transparency would go a long way if the stakeholders — the government, the ECP, political parties etc — all pledged to help enforce the electoral laws already on the books.

It would be a massive waste of time and resources if technological innovations ended up complicating the situation because of the ineptitude of those operating the technology.

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Hurriyat's condemnation

THE condemnation by the All Parties Hurriyat Conference of the Pathankot air force base attack is a welcome addition to the chorus of criticism that all right-thinking and sensible people in India, Pakistan and the disputed Kashmir region have added their voice too.

Dialogue alone can resolve the Kashmir dispute and the other outstanding issues between India and Pakistan. That is a reality that the militant groups are in denial of. So for peaceful means to prevail over militancy, it is important that all political forces come together to marginalise those seeking to change reality through violence.

The Pathankot attack could have been a disaster, but the fallout has been manageable so far precisely because the political leadership in the region has not given in to fear. The Indian government could have tried to deflect serious domestic criticism of its response to the attack by trying to shift the blame on Pakistan. It has not.

Also read: [Indian airbase attack bid to derail talks, says All Parties Hurriyat Conference](#)

Similarly, Pakistan could have bristled at the clearly unsubstantiated allegations that were bandied about in India in the early stages of the attack; instead, at the highest levels, cooperation has been pledged.

The Hurriyat's condemnation could be seen as a response to the claim by the United Jihad Council that some of its members carried out the Pathankot attack. In the complex world of intra-Kashmir politics, the fortunes of both the Hurriyat and the militant groups have waxed and waned over the years.

For a while, it appeared that the APHC may be in terminal decline: divided by internal rivalries and lacking charismatic leaders who could energise and mobilise the Kashmiri people. But for all its internal problems, the APHC's insistence that dialogue, especially between India and Pakistan, is the only way to find a solution to Kashmir has helped it retain its relevance, and even influence.

With dialogue taking centre stage once again — something the Pathankot attack presumably intended to change — the Hurriyat is rightly trying to enhance the space for all pro-dialogue forces. The days of militancy in Kashmir must end — and soon.

Yet, it is India too that must consider whether its policies in Kashmir are creating more room for groups with a violent agenda — and thereby reducing the space for elements favouring dialogue.

The unrest in India-held Kashmir is not a figment of the Pakistani imagination nor is it a fiction created in Kashmir to justify violent agendas. In fact, the repressive military presence in India-held Kashmir and the policies of the centre that accentuate communal tensions there have created dangerous tensions that are never far from the surface.

The APHC itself has been treated by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as an enemy, even though Mr Modi's partner in Srinagar, the now-deceased Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, was in favour of giving the APHC more space. When pro-dialogue forces are treated as the enemy, it is usually militant forces that benefit.

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Falling tax compliance

MORE than two years into the government's attempts to 'broaden the tax base', the number of people filing their returns has been consistently falling.

As of the latest data, the total number of returns filed this year has barely reached 690,000. Last year, the figure was 750,000. The drop is appreciable — 8pc — and comes after the tax authorities claim to have sent out 233,000 notices to potential taxpayers, out of which only 33,000 returns of new filers have been received.

The slow grinding pace of the process speaks to the inherent difficulties of inculcating a tax culture in a country habituated to ignoring the tax authorities. But it also speaks volumes for the inefficiencies that the entire taxation system is riddled with.

The inefficiencies are present in both areas crucial to successfully broadening the base: administration and enforcement.

The system of mandatory electronic filing of returns for salaried persons, association of persons, and companies may be good for bringing about some automation in the filing process. But the system is so cumbersome to use that the finance minister's own tax returns had to be handled by two senior members of the FBR to complete the process.

On the enforcement side too, very little effort is being put into pursuing those who have filed returns in the past and then fallen off the radar. Tracking taxpayers from year to year and conducting regular analyses on the data generated by the taxpayers database should be a regular feature of the FBR's workflow.

Instead, the officials are seen largely working in silos, focused only on executing their own tasks. The government claims that the figure for this year is smaller because a large number of potential filers are waiting on the sidelines for the tax amnesty scheme to go into force, following which they expect a big jump. It would be easier to believe this story if they could establish that it is indeed traders alone that account for the bulk of the drop in filers this year.

Their inability to present such data only means that an analysis of the situation is being developed without any empirical foundations. The citizenry needs to undergo a change in mindset if the goal of broadening the tax base is to be achieved.

But the FBR also needs to undergo deep reforms and an accompanying change in its own thinking to lead the way. Thus far, that does not appear to be happening.

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Nathiagali rest house

ACROSS Pakistan, there have been many instances where public infrastructure has been arrogated by the civil and military bureaucracy for its own exclusive use, or worse, for the benefit of a few individuals.

The curious case of Rockingham House, a government rest house in Nathiagali, seems to be a pertinent example of this unfortunate trend. Last May, an apex committee, which included the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister, decided to hand over 15 rest houses to the provincial tourism department to be rented out to the public.

All but one — the Nathiagali facility — were handed over and as reported in Thursday's paper, the rest houses earned a decent amount for the exchequer. The problem with the Nathiagali structure is that the KP police hierarchy is reluctant to relinquish it; they claim it is a 'police facility' housing offices, residential quarters etc, and that a police presence is essential in the 'sensitive' area.

It is the norm for the police to be called in to evict encroachers and land grabbers; and it is most unusual to see the force itself resist official demands to vacate a property. It is unacceptable for the KP police to resist a decision made by the elected government.

Yet this is not the only instance where state institutions have taken over real estate meant for public welfare or that is of historical value.

For example, in Karachi last year, the Sindh government declared the Mitharam Hostel — a historical structure — a sub-jail at the request of the paramilitary Rangers.

The Rangers also currently occupy other hostels in the metropolis. Without doubt, police, Rangers and other state institutions need physical infrastructure to work out of. But must they occupy buildings meant for public use?

There is no shortage of state land where the barracks, offices etc of these institutions can be housed. The KP government made the right decision to turn over the rest houses to the public. It must now enforce its writ fully and open the gates of the Nathiagali facility to common citizens.

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Saudi FM's visit

THE caution that the Pakistani leadership, both political and military, has demonstrated in the midst of the alarming escalation in tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been relatively reassuring.

Following Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir's visit to Islamabad and Rawalpindi, the Prime Minister's Office put out a now familiar-sounding statement expressing support for the Saudi people and pledging to help protect Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. While the Saudi leadership is presumably unimpressed by such seemingly bland statements, it is correct that Pakistan follow this course of moderation.

Where Pakistan and Saudi Arabia can find avenues for cooperation, particularly in the counterterrorism arena, that cooperation should be diligently and effectively pursued.

Where there is a diplomatic and political cost in terms of Pakistan's other relationships and its own national interests, political and military officials must act with great caution and after thorough deliberation. Gone are the days where private assurances could contradict public statements.

Part of the reason for caution is that the Pakistani relationship with Saudi Arabia goes beyond the ties to a particular ruler and the choices his deputies make. Seen from afar, not all of the present Saudi leadership's choices appear to be in that country's own interests.

Fear, more than bold leadership, appears to be shaping Saudi Arabia's decisions in recent times. For example, it is fairly evident that the mass executions at the start of the year have caused Saudi Arabia a great deal more trouble internally and regionally than whatever gains the regime was hoping to make.

Yet, precisely because the Saudi leadership is sensing such acute danger to itself and its country, there is a need for Saudi Arabia's allies to act with empathy.

Only long-term allies and friends stand any chance of nudging Saudi policy towards stabilising the Middle East and Gulf countries instead of drifting towards ruinous confrontation. The Pakistani approach of frequent and high-level discussions with the Saudi leadership is a sensible one — with immediate breakthroughs unlikely, patient diplomacy is the only meaningful alternative.

Where the Pakistani approach does need to be shored up though is in the outreach to Iran. Necessary and vital as the ties with Saudi Arabia are, Iran is an important neighbour possibly on the verge of an economic breakout and with influence in Afghanistan and old ties to Pakistan.

Closer cooperation with Iran on a mutually beneficial basis would not only be in Pakistan's economic and regional interest, it would also help serve as an important example that ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia need not be a zero-sum game.

Moreover, closer cooperation with Iran could potentially offer a reliable and trusted channel of communication between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Pakistani officialdom has long touted the geostrategic importance of this country; in fact, geopolitical relevance is there for the taking — if creative, sensible and courageous diplomacy is practised.

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Fresh delimitation

ONE key factor while considering electoral reforms is the issue of delimitation of constituencies.

Too often, accusations of gerrymandering have emerged challenging the validity of delimitation of certain constituencies. Hence the calls for fresh delimitations before the 2018 general elections made by lawmakers and civil society at a recent event in Islamabad make sense.

Amongst the suggestions was to take the size of a constituency into consideration along with its population when carrying out delimitation. For example, federal minister Abdul Qadir Baloch said his constituency in Balochistan was so geographically vast that it was difficult for him to touch base with the voters. Another participant suggested that there should be a geographical limit to the size of a constituency.

As per data shared by the Free and Fair Election Network, the delimitation of National Assembly constituencies was “highly skewed”, while there was considerable variation even within regions. For example, Battagram in KP, which has just over 400,000 people, and Lower Dir, also in KP, which is home to around one million people, have only one member respectively in the National

Assembly. Experts also point out that Balochistan and Fata are particularly under-represented in the Assembly.

With polls scheduled for 2018, there is plenty of time to delimit fresh constituencies in an equitable manner if the state starts the process now.

Firstly, the Election Commission must listen to all voices: political parties, civil society, experts and members of the public must all have a chance to give their points of view on the redrawing of constituencies along fairer lines. Over-representation and under-representation must be avoided so that all regions have a more equal say in parliament and lawmakers have a better chance to keep in touch with the electorate.

However, while political parties must be consulted in the process, it is important for the delimitation exercise to be seen as apolitical and impartial to prevent new controversies from cropping up.

And while it would be ideal for fresh census numbers to be available when redrawing the electoral boundaries — the final census data is not expected to be in till the end of 2017 if all goes according to plan — some experts suggest that delimitation can also proceed on the basis of available data.

The goal should be to give equal representation to all federating units and it would be welcome if the process were to begin as soon as possible.

Dhaka-Islamabad farce

RELATIONS between Pakistan and Bangladesh seem to be on a downhill course with both countries expelling each other's diplomats.

The senior Bangladeshi diplomat, expelled by Islamabad recently, had to be a woman, because last month Pakistan recalled Farina Arshad, the political secretary at its high commission in Dhaka after Bangladesh accused her of having militant links.

Although there is much speculation in the media, we are still in the dark about why the Bangladeshi diplomat was asked to leave the country.

While Islamabad can legitimately claim to have simply reacted to the provocation by Dhaka, both governments need to sober up and ask each other — and themselves — in what way their tit-for-tat expulsions will promote mutual ties, or lead to a more stable South Asia.

That Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed came to power through an election that was deemed controversial by many is indeed Bangladesh's internal matter.

What is cause for concern, however, is her obsession with the past in a manner that neither advances her country's image abroad nor promotes internal peace and reconciliation.

The execution of a number of Bangladeshi nationals after trials that fell far short of international judicial standards has also strained ties with Pakistan and added to, instead of lessening, the acute polarisation in Bangladeshi politics and society.

In contrast, the people of the two countries have shown a more positive attitude, in fact friendlier sentiments, towards each other, as is often evident in Pakistan-Bangladesh cricket matches.

With Islamabad and New Delhi making determined efforts to not allow acts of terror, such as the one at Pathankot, to derail the peace process, it is time the leaderships in Dhaka and Islamabad also made fresh efforts to halt the downhill slide.

There is every reason for us to plead with Nawaz Sharif and Ms Wajed to end what is a thoroughly unnecessary diplomatic crisis. The next Saarc summit in Islamabad provides an excellent opportunity for the two to meet on the sidelines and sort things out.

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Role of Pemra

PEMRA's intervention on behalf of the government to warn news channels from airing content or debating the recent Saudi-Iran tensions in a manner that could allegedly harm diplomatic relations with those countries is perhaps unsurprising — but is still thoroughly unwarranted. There are two issues here, only one of which was raised in the National Assembly by opposition speakers on Friday. First, as PTI and PPP MNAs suggested, it does appear that the PML-N government is trying to gag the media in the name of the national interest. Especially scurrilous is the government's reliance on an unlawful interpretation of Article 19 of the Constitution. The constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press subject to "reasonable restrictions imposed by law" can in no way be interpreted as preventing public debate on what the government itself accepts is a critical foreign policy issue. The PML-N may consider it a grave offence to be critical of Saudi Arabia's policies and the Saudi leadership may be prickly when it comes to criticism of it anywhere, but freedom of the press is a cornerstone of a constitutional democracy, which is what Pakistan is and what the political government has been elected to uphold.

Fuelling suspicions of the government's real intentions, however, is the PML-N's chequered history of trampling on press freedoms. While news channels are often violators of good sense and even good taste, it does appear that the PML-N tries to use whatever opening it finds to try and bring the media further to heel. But what of the role of Pemra itself? The recent appointment of a well-known journalist as Pemra's full-time chief had fuelled hope that the apex regulator would work with the media to address genuine issues in the industry rather than hone in so

quickly on content regulation matters. Unhappily, however, the regulatory capture of Pemra by the political government of the day appears to be continuing. Regulation of broadcast media is a sensible and necessary measure — as long as freedom of the press is the guiding principle. But for that the regulator itself must be independent — and, until it has full legal independence, those working there must try and distance themselves as much as possible from political agendas. If that does not happen, Pemra will be drawn into an increasingly adversarial role with the media, resulting in even sensible and needed regulation becoming controversial. The new Pemra chief must do better — and soon.

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Harassing an activist

THE list of civic problems, each one eminently solvable, that plague the city of Karachi is getting so long and so noticeable that many citizens have been forced to take matters into their own hands, either organising committees for their neighbourhoods, creating online groups to pressure the city administration into action, or in one case, taking to stencilling a picture of the Sindh chief minister next to piles of garbage or open manholes, with the words “fix it!” written underneath. In the latter case, the activist responsible is a young marketing professional who also made a video of himself doing the stencilling and explaining why. One would have expected the chief minister to respond like a seasoned politician by taking the initiative to perhaps reach out to Alamgir Khan, even arrange a photo op of himself accompanying the young man to a number of locations with KMC staff, and ordering immediate action to fix some of the problems that he pointed out. Good politics would be to try and harness and co-opt the energies of activists like Mr Khan, and any seasoned politician would search for a way to do so.

But, instead, it appears the response of the city authorities has been to try and harass Mr Khan into silence. If this is true then it is craven politics, revealing the extremely insecure mind of the ruling party in the Sindh Assembly, which continues to run the affairs of the city despite local bodies elections having been held more than a month ago. If he has initiated any retaliatory actions against the activist, the chief minister should immediately rescind it, and, instead, take note of the problem. It is unfortunate that it is Mr Khan, along with some others, who has reportedly provided covers for some gaping manholes, with the government having apparently abdicated its responsibility. Meanwhile, Karachi’s denizens are entitled to better governance of their civic affairs, and there’s no harm in pointing this out in novel ways.

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Property scam

FOR many years it was an open secret in Lahore, discussed in living rooms and other settings, that the brother of the then army chief was involved in massive land deals around the city, particularly in contracts with Defence Housing Authority, Lahore.

Last year, we heard for the first time that the National Accountability Bureau had served notice on the man in question, Kamran Kayani, for having sold allotment certificates for DHA land in Islamabad to be acquired and developed by him but failing to deliver on his commitments.

Notice was reportedly served on him at the time, and when no response was received, the matter was quietly dropped and fell out of the headlines.

Now he is once again in the headlines, this time in Lahore.

Once again it is in a NAB case, although notice has not yet been served and word suggests he is no longer in the country to receive one.

And once again, it is for failing to live up to his contractual obligation to acquire and develop 15,000 kanals of land for DHA City Lahore, a contract he apparently obtained in 2009.

NAB has confirmed that a formal inquiry has been authorised in their Lahore office against two companies, Globaco (pvt) Ltd of one Hammad Arshad, and Elysium Holdings of Kamran Kayani. Common sense tells us that DHA Lahore, which is the complainant in the case, would not move on this matter without authorisation from higher offices in the military.

The complaint is serious: that Rs16bn worth of allotment letters were sold to the general public, the money transferred into Mr Arshad's own account, and from there forwarded on to his benefactors and partners in the enterprise.

The episode reminds us all that corruption, whether real or alleged, is not necessarily the exclusive preserve of the politicians.

We must ask if it was a coincidence that both inquiries, in Islamabad and Lahore, were launched only after Mr Kayani's brother had relinquished the office of army chief.

And although there is no evidence at all to suggest that the former army chief was in the know of such dealings, the very fact that the two were related may lead to scepticism.

The sheer rapacity of the snatch-and-grab land acquisition and development scene that has broken out in the country over the past decade is quite a spectacle.

The lingering presence of senior military officials, of an institution like the DHA, and now of personalities linked to the highest offices make for troubling thoughts.

The present case should not be allowed to quietly disappear from the headlines.

The investigating authorities must be pressured to get to the bottom of this affair, and of others where property developers may have reason to believe that they have enough clout to allow them to indulge in unethical dealings.

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Pathankot aftermath

It has been speculated that the nascent India-Pakistan rapprochement has been made possible by outside diplomacy, particularly by the US.

Now, a peak into that behind-the-scenes cajoling has been offered with the telephone call between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and US Secretary of State John Kerry over the weekend.

A statement from the Prime Minister's Office offered some clues about what was presumably discussed in more robust and forthright terms privately: the India-Pakistan dialogue must not be derailed and Pakistan must work to investigate and bring to justice any Pakistan-based individuals involved in the Pathankot airbase attack.

Presumably, senior US officials also reached out to stress that dialogue should not be derailed and to seek Pakistan's cooperation in the Pathankot investigation. It is also fairly obvious that the US has a great deal of leverage, both with India, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi has actively courted the US economically and diplomatically, and with Pakistan, for whom the US is an important security partner.

However, beneficial as high-profile interventions can be, they are sometimes a disadvantage too. The perception that Pakistan and India are only talking to each other because of external considerations can undermine the possibilities of dialogue. Moreover, while the attack should not delay talks, it is clearly the most immediate issue that needs to be resolved — between India and Pakistan themselves.

High-level diplomacy and serious intelligence cooperation are the urgent needs right now. Rather than leaving it up to India to provide all the details available to it, there should be an independent investigation inside Pakistan too. Were Pakistanis involved in the Pathankot attack?

Where was the plan conceived and how were preparations made?

What assistance, if any, did the attackers receive from Pakistani soil, including in the breach of the international border?

Surely, given the vast counterterrorism dragnet that has been thrown across the country in the fight against militancy, it should not be too difficult for the security and intelligence apparatus to establish the facts here.

The unhappy truth is that the Pathankot attack has once again displayed the potential of terrorism to hold the Pakistan-India relationship hostage. If historical disputes and issues between the two countries are ever to be solved, it cannot happen while terrorism finds it so easy to intervene.

Surely, there must be steps taken to dismantle the infrastructure that anti-India militants seem to have built around the country.

If Pathankot was possible even before talks officially resumed, it is frightening to think of the possibilities in the midst of serious dialogue. The internal fight against militancy, particularly over the last year and a half, has been about securing the country. Now it is time that this country's foreign policy is also protected from militants.

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Healthcare in Thar

ONCE again, mortality among newborn babies in Thar is in the spotlight, bringing with it a concomitant focus on the appalling inadequacies in the area's health infrastructure.

According to Tharparkar's district health officer, 13 newborns have died in the first week of this year largely due to causes that should not ordinarily result in death, were it not for lack of awareness and/or prompt and adequate medical care.

A report in this paper on Thursday listed shocking statistics that illustrate the cavalier manner in which the people's constitutional right to quality healthcare is flouted in the most fundamental ways. About 70pc of government dispensaries in the area are either only partly functional or are being operated on an ad hoc basis without SNEs, that is, without a budget, staff, furniture or other facilities to run it properly, thereby rendering them virtually non-functional.

Out of a total of 256 health facilities in the region, 177 — a whopping 69pc — do not have SNEs. Most patients, therefore, need to make their way to the Mithi civil hospital, which places an intolerable strain on that establishment's limited resources. A number of doctors' posts are also lying vacant because medical professionals are reluctant to serve in an area where they cannot profit from private practice that is so lucrative elsewhere.

Thar has historically been one of the country's most disadvantaged areas, but until about 10 years ago, when the construction of road networks through the district made it more accessible,

the deprivation of its population — scattered in rural settlements across its vast arid stretches — did not often get relayed to a wider audience.

Last year, the death of around 350 under-fives in Thar from effects of drought created a furore in the media, even though officials from the provincial government responded by describing the outrage as unwarranted because the figure was no higher than it had been earlier.

There may well be the same excuse proffered this time around, but as the Dawn report illustrates, much of the blame lies with the government's shambolic planning and management of health infrastructure in the area. There is also an undeniable element of callous indifference.

Late last year, it emerged that of five imported, fully equipped mobile health dispensaries given to the health department in Thar, only three were in service while two were in the personal use of government functionaries. The people of Thar deserve far better.

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A chilling act

IT is more than ideological indoctrination, it is more than brainwashing, it is more than hypnotism; it is more than all these instruments of thought control put together as hundreds of people see and approve the chilling act of matricide in broad daylight outside the woman's workplace.

It occurred in Raqqa, Syria, when Ali Saqr shot in cold blood the woman who had kept him in her womb and raised him. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the militant Islamic State group had declared Lena al-Qassam an 'apostate' for pleading with her son to abandon IS because the US-led war on the militant group would succeed.

The man reported his mother to his marauding bosses, who pronounced the death penalty because Lena had gone 'out of the fold of Islam' by exercising her right to dissent — privately. Barring this 'crime', her conduct, according to neighbours, was 'normal' and she had in no way violated the IS's barbaric code of living.

This is not the first case of matricide in history. But what is perversely unique and haunting about this repulsive act is that it was committed in the name of Islam.

The man pumped bullets into his mother because the IS decreed it was his 'religious' duty to do so. Who is to blame — the son under the IS spell or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's concept of 'justice', which includes throwing people down from rooftops, slitting throats and burning humans alive, as in the case of the captured Jordanian pilot?

The man involved in this hideous crime is 21; this shows Al Baghdadi's 'catch them young' philosophy is paying off — and not only in the charnel house that is Syria. The murdered woman thought the US-led coalition would win and IS, with all its monstrosities, would pass into history. Should we share her optimism?

Those who could liberate the Levant from the IS curse are themselves at each other's throats, so what chance does the US-led coalition have of preventing more such acts?

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Stock exchange merger

IN a laudatory development, the three stock exchanges in the country have been merged into one — the Pakistan Stock Exchange. But the real work will begin once the applause and self-congratulations die down.

The merger sees an old dream come closer to realisation. It was little more than a decade ago that the SECP first released its report on the demutualisation of the stock market — the process where ownership and trading rights at the exchanges are separated from each other.

The idea was to usher in an era of privately owned and operated stock markets so that the necessary investment in upgrading the infrastructure of the exchanges could be mobilised and superior oversight could restrain the power of the large brokers to manipulate the market and engage in unethical trading practices.

The integration of the three exchanges is an essential step in that direction. With three separate stock markets, and with one of these dominant, the search for a private investor was complicated because it was hard to find an interested party for the Lahore and Islamabad exchanges, given their tiny size, and any private investor was wary of acquiring ownership of one exchange in Karachi while the other two remained in government hands.

That problem has now been solved. But it is important to keep in mind that the integration was not a goal unto itself; it was, in fact, a means to an end. The ultimate objective was always to locate a private investor willing to acquire ownership rights over the exchange and take on the responsibility of operating the market and serve as the frontline regulator. That search is still on, and it remains to be seen whether or not the integration will spur the process on.

Recently, the markets have given us some indication of improved stability. The arrest of some senior management figures from a leading brokerage has not induced sharp volatilities in the market, despite some declines in recent days.

Previously, the market was virtually hostage to the power of large brokers who could engineer steep drops if the regulator or the law enforcers cast a glance in their direction.

The absence of sharp volatilities may bode well for market stability in the present day, but the arrests also speak of continuity in the kinds of practices that demutualisation is supposed to eradicate.

For the integrated stock exchange to be an attractive proposition for foreign investors, the power of the brokers and their reach in the upper levels of the country's politics must be dealt with so that they do not remain a source of deep concern.

Curbing this power, and getting the brokers to focus exclusively on trading as the way to make money on the stock market is the big challenge before the government. An integrated stock exchange can help in this process, but there is no guarantee that it will.

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Saudi prince's visit

THE flurry of political and military contact with Saudi Arabia in recent times continued over the weekend with perhaps the most significant visit to Islamabad so far — by Mohammad bin Salman, the deputy crown prince and son of the ruling king.

Popular at home and thought to be the force behind his aging father, the young prince has also been the brash leader of Saudi Arabia's headlong dive into regional wars.

Yet once again it appears that the Pakistani government has taken a sensible line. Whatever the demands that the prince and the present Saudi regime may have of Pakistan, the political and military leadership here have been consistent in their cautious response.

Pakistan will help protect the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia and its internal security, while externally it will help diplomatically resolve issues that Saudi Arabia may be facing.

While that formulation is unlikely to impress the present Saudi leadership, it is clearly the only realistic option for Pakistan.

Given the internal security demands of this country, the regional tensions with Afghanistan and the uneasy relationship with India, it simply makes no sense for Pakistani troops to be sent abroad to participate in military actions.

While Saudi fear and Iranian ambition may be driving many of the tensions and reckless actions in the Middle East and the Gulf, it is clearly not a situation that is beyond retrieval.

Patient diplomacy can work and the Pakistani example is quite relevant here. A year ago, it seemed unlikely that a PML-N government or a military with close ties to Saudi Arabia could resist urgent and adamant demands by a new Saudi leadership.

The relationship between Pakistan (in particular the political government and the military) and Saudi Arabia appeared too lopsided for Pakistan to resist seriously.

Moreover, Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia's chief rival, Iran, did not appear to be strong enough to resist the Saudi logic.

Yet, a sensible line was taken, backed by parliament and public opinion, that Pakistan's interests lay in maintaining relative neutrality and pursuing diplomacy. But diplomacy needs to be pursued more urgently.

Could Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity, in fact, come under threat if the various conflicts in the Middle East drag on?

If that were to happen, the repeated and public pledges by Pakistan could be put to the test. Neutrality will be hard to maintain if a live war erupts — something only diplomacy can prevent.

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Women motorcyclists

ONE woman on a motorcycle appeared on the road, encouraged by a growing number of supporters.

A few women rode shoulder to shoulder in Lahore, unperturbed by the disapproving eyes watching them and betraying few signs of performing a rare act.

These sights heralded an event that is going to be the topic of discussion in the country for sometime to come. On Sunday, a taboo was sought to be broken when more than 100 women motorcyclists came out in a symbolic rally in Lahore with the aim to restore to the Pakistani women the space that has been taken away from them over decades of suppression.

It wasn't as if it was being restored to them as a favour. These women were pressing to reclaim on their own what was always theirs. They were doing it by right, refusing to live the 'content', submissive, resigned-to-fate life of a silent pillion clinging to the man at the helm for dear life.

There is an apparent scheme to it all when a PML-N government uses something related to transportation as a tool of empowerment.

The party is well known for its penchant for roads and bridges, buses and trains for desired mobility. It is in the fitness of things that it chose the very powerful image of this motorcycle rally comprising women who had undergone a 15-day training course to spread its message far and wide.

The chief minister of Punjab has announced 1,000 pink scooters for women at 50pc discount, in continuation of the experiment of the government-run pink buses in Lahore, as well as the pink rickshaws which was a private initiative.

This colour distinction may have been necessitated by the desire for publicity but it should not detract from the ultimate aim: the removal of gender distinctions and discrimination from our midst.

Hopefully, these women motorcyclists will be in the vanguard of an era where gender won't matter and the focus will be firmly on moving forward.

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Afghan reconciliation

THERE appears to be an understanding of what needs to be done but no clarity on how to achieve it.

The first quadrilateral meeting on Afghanistan has ended with a public emphasis on the urgent need for direct talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban — a sensible and welcome emphasis that is clearly the only way ahead for a political settlement in that country.

Yet, there are clearly continuing differences over how to make talks happen immediately because, for all the emphasis on urgency, the representatives of Pakistan, Afghanistan, the US and China were unable to announce anything other than a second quadrilateral meeting next week.

From the public statements and what officials have claimed privately, there appear to be at least two sticking points.

Firstly, the Afghan government is apparently demanding that action, military or otherwise, be taken against Taliban elements that it has deemed irreconcilable. However, as the foreign affairs adviser, Sartaj Aziz, has suggested, it is problematic to impose preconditions and demand action against particular Taliban factions even before the talks kick off.

Presumably, the Afghan government hopes that cracking down on the so-called irreconcilables will reduce violence inside Afghanistan, while simultaneously sending a message to other factions that talks are the only viable option left.

Yet, given the fluid situation that the Taliban have found themselves in — the leadership of Mullah Mansour still appears to be contested and it is not clear which factions will emerge victorious in the intra-Taliban struggles — using force to shape the pecking order among the Taliban could be counterproductive.

From a Pakistani security standpoint, military or police action against Taliban factions could also trigger a domestic militancy backlash, a factor that simply should not be discounted in order to pursue foreign policy goals.

Perhaps the sensible middle ground could lie in more urgent efforts on border management, thereby partly addressing both sides' concerns about sanctuaries along the Pak-Afghan border.

Secondly, there appears to be some confusion about the state of the Taliban themselves: are they relatively united? Have they fractured?

Or are the Taliban splintering into localised groups and an unmanageable number of factions?

Reports that Pakistan may have offered the names of a number of Taliban figures with whom the Afghan government could potentially hold talks suggests that there may now be multiple power centres among the Taliban.

Quite how a coherent reconciliation process can be achieved if the Afghan government is confronted with multiple factions whose importance ebbs and flows depending on what happens on the battlefield is not readily apparent.

Ultimately, however, there is a bottom line here: the quadrilateral group has to make peace achievable before the next fighting season arrives.

A repetition of last year's security disasters could cause the regional situation to unravel faster than any power wanting peace could react to.

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Student unions

THE ban on student unions in Pakistan is over three decades old — a remnant of the Ziaul Haq regime.

However, even though Zia's military dictatorship is now a part of history, successive democratic governments have been unable, or unwilling, to lift the ban.

After the PPP came to power in 2008, prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani announced in the National Assembly that the student unions would be revived.

Unfortunately, he was unable to deliver on his promise. Now there seems to be a fresh effort to revive the unions.

On Monday, Senate Chairman Raza Rabbani said in the upper house that the ban on student unions was “unconstitutional” and that the matter would be referred to a Senate committee. Many lawmakers agreed with the Senate chairman, adding that the prolonged absence of the unions had created a vacuum.

Removing the ban on student unions would do much to promote a democratic culture. However, there has been criticism that union activity on campus takes the focus away from academics and encourages a culture of violence.

Firstly, violence has become a part of society and student unions cannot be blamed for promoting it.

If anything, healthy union activity on campus may encourage an environment of tolerance and debate. Also, despite the ban on unions, the student wings of political parties are active in colleges and universities across Pakistan.

It is also true that many of these student wings have been involved in deadly violence on campus, particularly in public-sector institutions in Sindh and Punjab.

Perhaps the solution is to revive unions in varsities with a code of conduct in place — one that calls for zero tolerance for violent activities.

It is strange to expect students to refrain from political activities while on campus, but then participate in the democratic process once they step into the real world.

Politics in Pakistan would gain much if democratic culture was allowed to take root within colleges and universities.

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Guantanamo closure

HE has delivered on more of his campaign pledges than many other American leaders, some of them of a truly historic nature.

But there is one unfulfilled promise from President Obama's 2008 campaign that he must deliver on in the final year of his tenure.

He must close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, where the first inmates began arriving 14 years ago. The prisoners were dumped in a legal black hole, stripped of any rights and often subjected to egregious forms of torture, or "enhanced interrogation" to use the sanitised vocabulary of the Bush years.

During his 2008 campaign, President Obama made a pledge that he would close the facility, and either send the prisoners held there to their own countries or transfer them to US soil for trial.

That pledge was abandoned in early 2011 because the effort was "interfering in other legislative priorities", specifically the president's determined focus on obtaining Congressional approval for his landmark healthcare initiative.

Today, many years after the infamous opening of the prison, the president is said to be considering the use of executive powers to finally close the facility and move the remaining 103 prisoners there to their home countries.

It is not known what he intends to do with the 50 to 60 detainees inside who are considered too dangerous to be released, and who cannot be tried because evidence against them has been gathered from intelligence sources and cannot be presented in a court of law.

In any case, a way must be found to close the prison because it has become a symbol of oppression, and all that is wrong with the way America has been conducting the so-called war on terror.

Torture and arbitrary detention are tools used by authoritarian regimes, and when a country that claims to be the purveyor of superior values around the world takes recourse to them, it only undermines its own moral authority and credibility in a war that is more about values and perceptions than it is about territory.

The way forward may well prove complicated considering that Congress is still signalling its opposition to shutting the facility down. But getting this job done is critical for the US if it wants to rescue its tattered credibility in this war.

It is imperative that President Obama find a way to ensure that the detention facility is shut down before his term is over.

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Crackdown on JeM

Having pledged to investigate and act on any evidence found or shared on the involvement of Pakistani individuals in the Pathankot attack, the government claims to have detained alleged members of Jaish-e-Mohammad and sealed so-called offices of the banned militant group.

The emphatic language in the [statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office](#) following a meeting of senior civilian and military leaders suggests that the government is attempting to ensure that the foreign secretary talks meant to kick off the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue can take place as soon as possible.

Officially scheduled to begin on Jan 15, there is reason to be hopeful that the talks will, in fact, go ahead as planned, or take place after a minor delay.

The initial response from the Indian government to yesterday's announcement of [fresh steps being taken against JeM](#) also suggests that the high-level diplomacy and personal involvement of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the military leadership in the Pakistani response to the Pathankot attack may pay off.

Examine: [After Pathankot](#)

Whatever the JeM militants intended to achieve with the Pathankot attack the governments of India and Pakistan appear to have thwarted with their mature responses. But why was the group still able to plan and execute such an audacious and sophisticated attack on the air force base?

The PMO statement offers a clue — “offices of [JeM] are also being traced and sealed” — but it is an inadequate explanation. Thirteen years after the group was banned by the state, why was it able to still operate offices that are only now being sealed?

For too long, militant groups that have been banned by the state have simply changed their names or gone temporarily into hiding, only for them to reappear stronger and more resilient. In the case of JeM, the state's failures have been exceptionally egregious. Until yesterday, when he was reportedly detained, Masood Azhar was a free man; other well-known leaders of the group apparently routinely roam the country preaching jihad.

It is fairly obvious that leaders of banned outfits publicly exhorting violence is likely to lead to some kind of disaster or crisis. Pathankot has certainly been the former, though mature political leadership on both sides of the border has prevented it from becoming a full-blown crisis.

For the state here, the challenge will be to ensure that the initial actions against JeM are converted into sustained and meaningful measures that ensure the long-term dismantling of militant groups. Too often steps taken in haste have unravelled over time.

To permanently seal offices and successfully prosecute those involved in the Pathankot attack, a great deal of evidence will need to be gathered.

Past experience suggests that JeM, like some other banned organisations, has access to sophisticated legal counsel which can help protect its operations and its leaders' freedom. This time JeM, and others like it, must be fully and permanently dismantled.

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Quetta bombing

WEDNESDAY'S devastating suicide bombing in Quetta serves as a painful reminder that despite advances, religious militancy remains a major security threat to Balochistan.

Most of the victims of the attack were police personnel deputed to guard polio vaccination teams. An anti-polio vaccination drive was under way in Balochistan on the day of the bombing. To their credit, the authorities resumed the anti-polio campaign soon after the tragedy.

The banned TTP has claimed responsibility for the atrocity. It seems that with the bombing, terrorists have struck two of their 'favourite' targets: members of law-enforcement agencies, as well as the anti-polio campaign.

The bombing occurred the day after the new Balochistan cabinet took oath; indeed, the Sanaullah Zehri-led provincial set-up has its work cut out for it on the law and order and counterterrorism fronts.

Over the past several years, the province has suffered from a low-level separatist insurgency along with sectarian terrorism. However, last year, after the formulation of the National Action Plan, like elsewhere in Pakistan there seemed to be perceptible movement on the anti-militancy front. Provincial officials claimed "thousands" of militants had been arrested.

While some observers point out that most of these were quite likely Baloch separatists, it is a fact that religiously motivated and sectarian militants were also apprehended. Moreover, some high-profile sectarian militants were eliminated in Balochistan in 2015; their numbers included Usman Saifullah Kurd, a provincial 'commander' of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi.

But while sectarian killings may indeed have come down, especially compared to the situation in 2013 when massive bombings targeting the Hazara Shia community resulted in hundreds of

deaths, the infrastructure of religiously motivated militancy very much appears to be intact in Balochistan, as Wednesday's bombing shows.

The significance of militants targeting security officials guarding polio teams also cannot be overlooked. Last year, significant gains were made in the fight against polio, with far fewer cases reported as compared to 2014.

Hence, the momentum of the anti-polio drive should be maintained and security for the vaccinators beefed up. The civil and military leadership must reassess the threat posed by religiously motivated militants to Balochistan. Intelligence-based operations need to be stepped up to dismantle what remains of the terrorist infrastructure in the province. Balochistan is far from pacified.

The gains made in the realm of security in the recent past should not be squandered, and terrorism and militancy of all shades must be eliminated in the province.

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IS strikes Istanbul

WHILE President Recep Tayyip Erdogan lamented that his country was the “top target for all terrorist groups in the region”, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu wasted no time in blaming the militant Islamic State group for Tuesday's carnage in the heart of Istanbul.

The suicide bombing at the tourist hub should be seen against the background of Turkey's stepped-up role in the anti-IS coalition and the military reverses Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's hordes have of late been suffering.

Ankara has allowed American warplanes to use its Incirlik base, while the Turkish air force, too, has been bombing IS targets in Syria.

Moreover, the overall military situation doesn't seem to be going in the militant group's favour. Last month, it lost Ramadi to Iraqi forces, while there are reports that some IS commanders are deserting.

Observers believe that the city of Manjib could be retaken next by Syrian forces. No wonder, IS should have thought it fit to strike what is Europe's biggest city (in terms of population) and convey a deadly message — that it can strike wherever and whenever it wants. The carnage in Paris is still fresh in everybody's mind.

Until late last year, Turkey had not really shown much zeal in taking on IS, even when the militants had come as close to its border as Kobane.

Instead, the Erdogan government seemed focused on ending the Bashar al-Assad regime. Its other concerns were the Kurdish militia in Syria and the PKK, with which the ceasefire has all but collapsed. While Ankara must seek a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish issue, the Erdogan government has no choice but to throw its full weight behind the US-led coalition to wipe out IS and give peace and dignity to the people in what is the heart of the Middle East.

Situated strategically, Turkey cannot anymore ignore IS terror attacks on its soil or sit on the sidelines while the militants remain in possession of large chunks of territory and use it as a base for international terrorism.

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The threat within

THE complexity of the challenge confronting the Muslim world where dealing with religiously inspired militancy is concerned has been aptly demonstrated by a series of recent events.

The latest crisis emerged in Jakarta, where elements linked to the militant Islamic State group went on the rampage on Thursday.

A news outlet connected to the group claimed responsibility for the carnage, while Indonesian police also said they believed IS was behind the attacks.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, IS claimed responsibility for the attack on the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, while Turkish authorities said the individual responsible for the Istanbul bombing on Tuesday was an operative of the militant group.

These events show that nearly all Muslim states — despite geographic, cultural and political differences — are vulnerable to violent religious extremism.

It would be incorrect to assume that a monolithic IS is planning attacks in Muslim countries — and elsewhere — based in Syria.

However, what is entirely possible is that the so-called caliphate is inspiring fringe groups and individuals across the globe to act in its name, or in support of its cause.

For example, in Indonesia IS doesn't actually need a physical presence; militant groups such as Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah are ideologically on the same wavelength.

Pakistan faces the same predicament: Al Baghdadi and his men do not need to be physically present to forward their agenda.

There is a plethora of militant and sectarian groups that are arguably still active and more than willing to carry the IS banner in Pakistan. The same can be said of nearly any Muslim country, where a variety of factors have led to the growth of home-grown radical movements.

Unfortunately, some Muslim states have either looked away as extremist groups grew in size and strength in their backyards, while others have even used these as proxies in geopolitical conflicts. It is also true that most Muslim states — both authoritarian set-ups and democracies — have failed to deliver social, economic and political justice to their citizens, helping fuel the rise of radical movements, which want to destroy the ‘system’ and build it anew in their own image.

In the immediate term, the Muslim bloc should realise that the war against extremism and terrorism is ‘our’ war.

Firstly, there must be realisation within Muslim states that the militant tide has to be confronted, without differentiation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ militants.

Secondly, a pan-Islamic effort is needed to clamp down on militancy, which can be achieved through joint counterterrorism efforts. However, any alliance built along sectarian or geopolitical lines is doomed to fail.

Moreover, Western involvement in such an endeavour should be avoided for two reasons: to prevent extremists from portraying it as a ‘war against Islam’, and the fact that much of contemporary Islamist militancy has been fuelled by Western intervention and regime change in Muslim states.

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IMF review

THE documents from the IMF’s ninth review of its ongoing programme in Pakistan paint a largely disappointing picture.

There is progress in stabilising the macroeconomic situation from where things stood in 2013 when the country was drifting towards a crisis of balance of payments.

But much of this stability appears to have been brought about through enhanced borrowing; the more important underlying structural reforms have yielded very little results.

The Fund has only qualified praise for Pakistan's track record, with the executive board commending the government for "significantly reducing near-term vulnerabilities".

The medium-term outlook remains vulnerable, however, as key debt-service obligations are set to mature in the coming years.

For the time being, the position of the external sector appears comfortable from a debt-service point of view, but the Fund suggests that there is little room for complacency by stressing "the importance of further reducing public debt to more sustainable levels".

By now, we ought to have seen a measurable increase in the tax base, and a return to more sustainable growth, as well as the advancement of key reforms in public-sector enterprises and the power sector.

The review documents suggest, however, that much of the time spent on the programme has seen the government treading water or firefighting.

In the closing months of the programme, the executive board still finds the room to emphasise "the importance of advancing critical structural reforms" to boost exports and growth. It also underlined a need for "continued effort in the areas of energy-sector reform, privatisation, the business climate, and trade integration", and the staff pointed to "[p]ervasive tax evasion combined with still prevalent tax exemptions" as well as "loss-making state-owned enterprises" and "reliance on domestic financing" for the budget deficit.

The energy sector "still accumulates payment arrears and is unable to meet growing demand", and the privatisation agenda appears stalled following the rejection of the PIA ordinance and failure to bring any of the power-sector entities to the market.

As a result, the Fund says "Pakistan's macroeconomic outlook is favourable, contingent on sustained implementation of key reforms", and the latter is exactly where progress has been disappointingly slow.

To be fair, this was a big job for any single government to pull off in one term, but we were nevertheless entitled to see far more progress on these fronts than what has actually been the case so far.

Published in Dawn, January 15th, 2016

Attacks on journalists

ON two occasions this week, journalists have been attacked or harassed by extremists and state authorities — alarmingly, the capital was the venue of both incidents.

First the house of a New York Times correspondent, who is also resident editor of The Nation newspaper, was searched by Rangers paramilitary, who were purportedly looking for a terrorist, and who kept asking him whether he possessed any illegal weapons.

Then the premises of ARY News were attacked with a grenade followed by gunfire before the attackers fled, leaving behind a leaflet claiming the assault was in retribution for not disseminating the militants' point of view.

Pakistani journalists find themselves caught between the militants and the state. This is particularly true in KP and Balochistan, where reporters working in insurgency-prone areas are regularly threatened by both security forces and militants for reporting or not reporting on a particular story.

It is hard to reason with militants, but the security forces can be expected to show more respect for the work that journalists do.

It is not easy to report from places experiencing a long-running conflict, and journalists in such areas put the own lives and that of their family at risk. Pakistan's media manages to do an admirable job under the circumstances despite being subjected to extreme pressures and must be supported by both the state and the media houses they work for.

Unfortunately, little action on this front has led to routine threats to journalists, a number of whom have been killed or injured in attacks. This must change.

In the ARY case, every effort must be made to locate the attackers and bring them to justice. And in the NYT correspondent's case, the interior minister's promise to conduct an inquiry must materialise.

He must ensure that whoever ordered the search by the Rangers is identified and asked to explain his actions. The state must see to it that attacking and harassing journalists does not go unpunished; it should act without fear or favour in this matter.

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Obama's reminder

When Pakistan earns a reference in a State of the Union address by an American president, it is worth dwelling on what was said and why.

On Tuesday, US President Barack Obama had this to say when answering his own question about how to keep the US safe without becoming a global policeman: “instability will continue for decades in many parts of the world — in the Middle East, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in parts of Central America, Africa and Asia. Some of these places may become safe havens for new terrorist networks; others will fall victim to ethnic conflict, or famine, feeding the next wave of refugees”.

Mr Obama's comments are a sobering reminder of how — despite the domestic view that Pakistan has turned around its security situation and may be on the verge of an economic turnaround too — the outside world continues to perceive this country as a long-term generator of instability.

Is Mr Obama right? Will Pakistan continue to be a safe haven for terror networks, new and old? Certainly, the successes against the banned TTP give hope that Pakistan can find the will and learn how to fight militancy and terrorism.

The response to the Pathankot air force base attack also suggests that the old instinct to deny and effect cover-ups is giving way to sensible and responsible reactions.

Yet, the fight to reclaim Pakistan from terrorism, militancy and extremism is a long one — and success is far from guaranteed. As Mr Obama speculated, it is difficult to rule out new terror threats rising.

A decade ago, as Pakistan fought against Al Qaeda, it was difficult to fathom the militant Islamic State group would rise. A decade before, as jihad was redirected towards Kashmir, it would have been difficult to imagine 9/11 and Fata as a warzone. For all the military and counterterrorism successes today, Pakistan remains a society that is vulnerable to extremism and a state that has a number of weaknesses.

To win the long war, state and society will need to be transformed — a transformation that has not yet begun.

Clearly, however, the choices made by the US itself have contributed to the very instability, as in Iraq, that American presidents, past, present and future, have lamented and will bemoan. When Mr Obama said, “American leadership in the 21st century is not a choice between ignoring the rest of the world — except when we kill terrorists — or occupying and rebuilding whatever society is unravelling,” he identified a problem familiar to much of the rest of the world — the American superpower's tendency to rampage like a bull in a China shop.

Historically, how much of what has gone wrong in Pakistan can be attributed in some part to the choices that the US has made? Even with Mr Obama, how sensible has US policy in this region been?

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Hawala raids

THE series of raids in Peshawar against money changers possibly involved in illegal hundi and hawala transactions is a welcome development.

However, far more effort is required to shut this business down. It is widely known that money changers deal in enormous amounts of cash on a daily basis, and dollars are literally auctioned on the streets in rapid makeshift markets that rise and disperse quickly.

The FIA has been active in the area for a while now, with some officials claiming that over 200 shops in the Chowk Yadgar area, where the money changers are located, have been sealed, 150 traders arrested and 126 cases filed.

The KP apex committee discussed the possible role of Peshawar-based currency dealers in terrorism financing back in November. Then in late December, a leaked report reflected the concerns of the law-enforcement agencies about how the informal market for currency exchange in this area is being used for terrorism financing.

On Thursday, the FIA in KP conducted another large raid in the area and arrested 45 dealers.

There appears to be a strengthened push to clamp down on illegal hundi and hawala operators in Peshawar. Some of these operators engage in money transactions so large that there have been occasions — admittedly rare though — where their dealings have been felt at the State Bank and have possibly impacted the exchange rate.

Turnover volumes in the Peshawar clearinghouse, where all paper instruments such as cheques and pay orders are processed, are also amongst the largest in the country, after the cities of Lahore and Karachi.

Such massive volumes of turnovers, in paper clearing and currency exchange, in the absence of any visible economic activity is grounds for suspicion that a portion of these is very likely linked to illegal business and possibly even terrorism financing.

But it will take far more than the heavy hand of the state, or even the apex committee, to bring this business into the full light of day. A larger policy response is needed to shut down the capillaries of terrorism financing, rather than relying on periodic crackdowns and criminal prosecutions alone.

The federal government needs to do more to coordinate the overall effort against this lethal funding to supplement the efforts of the KP apex committee. Thus far, going after this kind of financing is one of the weaker links in the implementation of the National Action Plan.

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Attack on PIA

It is indeed welcome that India has arrested the chief of a Hindu extremist outfit responsible for ransacking the PIA office in Delhi on Thursday.

Earlier, the Hindu Sena said it had carried out the act of vandalism because it opposed talks with Pakistan unless “stern action” was taken against individuals like Dawood Ibrahim and Hafiz Saeed.

The symbolic value of the attack cannot be missed as PIA’s Delhi office, and the Pakistani high commission in the Indian capital, are the most visible representations of this country’s presence across the border.

As the peace process between Pakistan and India cautiously moves forward, there is no dearth of bigoted elements on both sides of the border who will try and thwart progress.

The Pathankot air force base incident was, of course, the most obvious attempt to derail the talks.

It is positive that Islamabad and New Delhi are dealing with attempts to sabotage peace talks maturely, unlike many previous responses from both capitals. We can be sure that if the process moves forward — and especially if there is substantive progress — then spoilsports in both countries will try and throw a spanner in the works. In this country, the anti-India lobby balks at the thought of normalisation of ties with Pakistan’s ‘traditional enemy’.

In India, groups inimical to Pakistan, especially the more extreme elements of the Sangh Parivar, will similarly pull out all the stops to prevent Islamabad and New Delhi from coming closer.

Indian media has reported that the Hindu Sena wants to disrupt the Delhi-Lahore bus service as well as the Samjhauta Express train link. In view of these threats, the Indian government must provide additional security to these symbols of the Pakistan-India relationship, as well as Pakistan’s assets across the border.

Considering that the Hindu far right is part of Prime Minister Modi’s constituency, the BJP government has a greater responsibility to rein in rabidly anti-Pakistan elements. Both countries must continue to deal with provocations maturely, and keep the peace process moving.

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Action under NAP

THE interior ministry may intend the numbers to convey a sense of achievement, but they only raise troubling questions. In a parliamentary update on actions taken under the National Action Plan, the interior ministry has claimed that 2,159 militants have been killed and 1,724 arrested by law-enforcement agencies. Who were and are these nearly 4,000 individuals? Where were they killed or arrested? What are the crimes each of them is alleged to have committed? Disturbingly, neither does the government seem to think such questions need detailed responses, nor do the opposition parties in parliament appear to have any interest in getting answers. Had that been the case, the interior ministry may perhaps have thought twice about clubbing together statistics on alleged terrorists killed with the number of SIMs and websites blocked. Surely, all statistics are not the same — especially when some of those statistics involve killings that are not judicially investigated or specifically authorised.

Clearly, NAP was necessary because there is a serious terrorism problem. It would be unsurprising if, after a year of intensive effort, several thousand militants were identified and captured or killed across the country. The scale of the terrorism threat makes it almost inevitable that thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, are involved. But there is also another reality — if allowed to operate without careful and sustained scrutiny, the state can often veer into excesses. Perhaps the 2,159 killed were all involved in terrorism — but when there are no explanations offered or details demanded, should it be assumed that only actual terrorists have been caught in the cross hairs? Individual names, details about terrorist affiliations or activities and the specifics of the encounters would go a long way to assuage doubts. What about the 1,724 arrested? Where have they been detained? Will all, or even most, of them face trial? It is not unheard of for the law-enforcement agencies to exaggerate their effectiveness by arresting many individuals and then quietly releasing them later.

The lack of transparency and absence of scrutiny in fact impedes NAP. If details are publicly known and shared among the various law-enforcement and intelligence agencies, they would help better direct NAP. Trends would emerge — do certain regions require the application of more NAP resources; are some militant groups bigger or operating in larger areas than previously known? Effectiveness could be better gauged, too. For instance, is the government getting the right targets? How can prosecutions be improved? At its core though there is a question of justice here. Is it right that some 4,000 individuals, all or most presumably Pakistanis, be simply eliminated or imprisoned without so much as their names being shared? There is also the element of propaganda to consider — militants routinely say that the state is eliminating innocent people and use that claim as a recruiting tool.

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Child marriage bill

ANY proposal that seeks to place restrictions on male ‘privilege’ where it pertains to women triggers a predictable storm of protest in this country. Whether the issue is that of sexual harassment, domestic violence or child marriage, good sense and empathy are in scarce supply. Instead, self-righteous pontification and regressive obduracy animate the most vocal participants in the debate. So it was on Thursday, when the National Assembly Standing Committee on Religious Affairs declared as ‘un-Islamic’ the amendment suggested by PML-N MNA Marvi Memon to the Child Marriage Restraint Bill 2014, which proposed that the minimum marriageable age for girls in Pakistan be raised to 18. Under the extant Child Marriage Act 1929, the minimum threshold is stipulated as 16 years. Members of the committee, after seeking the opinion of the Council of Islamic Ideology members, rejected the notion of placing any such limit, decrying it as a ‘Western’ idea and one that went against the culture, traditions and family values of Muslims.

The smokescreen of faith is a handy recourse in this country to counter attempts at ameliorating the rights of women and girls. Tradition is no excuse for retaining customs that are out of sync with modern thinking. Indeed, customs change over time — if that were not so, the practice of slavery would not be illegal in Pakistan. Marriage is not a relationship fit for those categorised as minors in other aspects of life. Operating a vehicle or casting a vote in this country require individuals to be aged 18 and above. And quite rightly so, for 18 is legal age of maturity in Pakistan. Why should marriage, navigating the many complexities of which requires not only physical maturity but also — and far more importantly — mental maturity, be any different? The pernicious custom of child marriage, still widely prevalent in many parts of the country, robs girls of their childhood and deprives them of opportunities to access education and gainful employment. It also puts their immature bodies at risk of conditions such as obstetric fistulae and increases their chances of dying in childbirth. The legislators’ callous disregard for the lives of Pakistani girls in rejecting the amendment could well slow the momentum created by Sindh, which in 2014 became the first — and so far only — province to raise the minimum marriageable age for girls to 18. It will, however, be welcomed by misogynistic sections of society, of which there are sadly too many.

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YouTube ban

THE senseless ban on the video-sharing site YouTube might finally be getting closer to being lifted, but it appears there is still some residual reluctance to actually do so in some quarters of the government. According to reports, the government has given a commitment to Google at the highest levels that following the localisation of its domain, access to the site will be opened up. Reportedly, Google has upheld its end of the commitment by investing millions of dollars in the localised domain, following which the prime minister committed earlier this week to a group of American business leaders that the government would now lift the ban. But days after the commitment, the site remains blocked, reportedly due to reluctance on the part of the IT ministry to implement the prime minister's instructions.

It is imperative that the directive to lift the ban be implemented without further delay. The ban itself has hurt nobody other than the citizens of Pakistan, who have been deprived of the enormous educational benefits the site has to offer. Continuing delay in lifting the ban is now hurting the country's credibility, as well as the standing of the prime minister before foreign investors, who are left wondering whether they should believe anything they are told by the government of Pakistan. Not only has the ban invited ridicule, it has also damaged the credibility of the government and political leadership. The IT ministry should waste no further time in lifting the ban, or at least provide sound reasons as to why it is unable to implement the directive of the prime minister. If it has not received any such directive from the top political leadership, that should also be admitted openly. Thus far, the IT ministry is either avoiding all contact with the media, or a few officials are providing off-the-record comments only. The ban and the stalled efforts to lift it have dragged the country into an absurd position, and the affair should end now.

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Mediation efforts

LONG having relegated itself to the sidelines of diplomacy, the country appears to be making something of a comeback on the international stage.

Led by the unlikely combination of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and army chief Gen Raheel Sharif, an unprecedented Pakistani diplomatic intervention is about to be attempted in the Middle East.

Travelling first to Saudi Arabia and then to Iran, Mr Sharif and the army chief will likely try and mediate in a Middle Eastern rivalry that has escalated dangerously in recent months. Quite what Pakistan has to offer to either side is unclear. Will the Saudi leadership be open to Pakistani counsel?

Are the Iranians willing to consider Pakistan as an honest broker between itself and Saudi Arabia?

Yet, it is encouraging that the prime minister and Gen Sharif are willing to get personally involved and throw their weight behind diplomatic solutions. While Pakistan alone may not be able to achieve a breakthrough, a coordinated effort by international and other regional powers could help lower tensions in the Middle East.

Also read: [PM, COAS to visit Iran, S. Arabia for mediation](#)

Strikingly, the Middle Eastern foray is not the only, or even the biggest, diplomatic initiative by the combine. For over a year now, Pakistan has publicly and determinedly tried to stabilise and improve relations with the Afghan government and taken centre stage in the bid to revive peace talks in Afghanistan.

Complicated and frustrating as that process has been, both the prime minister and Gen Sharif have remained personally involved and helped ensure that the Pak-Afghan relationship has not disintegrated.

The Quadrilateral Coordination Group is a potent symbol of Pakistan's newfound willingness to lead rather than stay on the sidelines and pursue ambiguous policies. It is the right approach and the country's leadership should be commended for it. Where Pakistan's national interests are at stake, the country's leadership needs to be at the fore.

There is a further area of transnational leadership that Pakistan could consider. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan all face a threat, albeit to varying degrees, from the militant Islamic State group.

In their mediation efforts in the Middle East and attempts to help revive an intra-Afghan peace process, the prime minister and army chief could also help create an environment for the development of a common strategy to fight the IS threat.

It will be anything but easy. Ultimately, the success or otherwise of Pakistan's recent diplomatic efforts will depend on the relationship between the two Sharifs. While it may never become a partnership of equals, the relationship cannot become too lopsided either.

Partly, that will depend on the initiative and ideas that Mr Sharif brings to the relationship. But it will also matter if the army chief is willing to be persuaded by the prime minister where the two disagree on strategy or approach.

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GB taxation

THE shutter-down strike observed in Gilgit-Baltistan on Thursday, followed by continuing protests against tax measures imposed on the residents of the area are entirely justified.

The inhabitants of this region have no constitutional status — where territory is concerned it is ambiguous at best. And they have no representation in parliament.

It took more than six decades before the region could have a legislative assembly, created by an executive order in 2009 granting it “provincial status”, but still not full membership in the federation. That assembly has passed two resolutions asking for the region to be made a full province so its inhabitants can finally have their share of federal resources, as well as representation in parliament. But so far it has been to no avail.

Also read: [Strike observed in GB against imposition of taxes](#)

Therefore, it is unjust to impose any revenue measures, other than purely local taxes that stay within the region's economy.

There is an old principle in tax matters which stipulates that taxation obligations come with reciprocal rights, and so long as the inhabitants of GB do not have the full rights of the citizens of Pakistan, they should not be subjected to any taxes from the federal government.

It would be better if the episode serves as a catalyst for the grant of full membership in the federation. It has been more than six decades now since the inhabitants of the region opted to join Pakistan in the hopes that being part of a Muslim-majority state would ensure full protection of their rights as citizens.

The renewed push towards clarifying the constitutional status of the region under Chinese pressure is to be welcomed, but if it results in anything less than full acknowledgement of the region's membership in the federation, the push will be a failure.

This need not involve a climbdown from Pakistan's principled position in the Kashmir dispute with India. The resolutions demanding full provincial status passed by the GB legislative assembly themselves point out that the arrangement can be considered an interim one, to be finalised only upon the holding of a plebiscite in the entire disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir in line with UN resolutions.

Continuing to deprive the inhabitants of their full rights as citizens of Pakistan is a grave injustice and it is high time that the matter was resolved in line with the wishes expressed by the region's assembly.

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Insensitive comments

WHEN faced with crises, proactive governments go into damage-control mode and react with a mix of empathy and spin, projecting an image of concern. However, the PPP-led Sindh government prefers to deal with crises in an insensitive, even crass manner.

Take the example of the recent deaths of infants in Thar. While indeed every death cannot be blamed on the inefficiency of the administration, the manner in which senior Sindh government officials have reacted is cringe-worthy and completely devoid of compassion.

For example, Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah has said the deaths have been "exaggerated" and that it was not possible for the government to know about every death in the desert. He added it was an "injustice" to hold the Sindh government responsible. And what about PPP MNA Imran Zafar Leghari's reported comments questioning what the "big deal" was "if a few of them die" in hospital?

The words of Adviser to the Chief Minister on Information Maula Bux Chandio and Senior Minister Nisar Khuhro while visiting Mithi's Civil Hospital were no less abhorrent.

The gentlemen said that Thari children were dying because of the "carelessness of mothers and underage marriage", and that the government should not be blamed for the poor performance of the health department.

Over 60 children have reportedly died in Thar due to malnutrition and waterborne diseases since the beginning of January.

The children's families have criticised the lack of medicine and other facilities at government health centres.

Yet, instead of empathising with the bereaved parents and promising to address the structural deficiencies that allow such tragedies to occur, Sindh's rulers have reacted with brashness.

Governments elsewhere in Pakistan are also guilty of failing to deliver good governance. When confronted with criticism, elected representatives should admit their mistakes and promise to rectify them. In this case, criticism is termed a ‘conspiracy’ against democracy.

The fact is the biggest disservice to democracy is failing the people in whose name our leaders rule, and worse, brushing aside their miseries in such a callous manner.

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A new era for Iran

IT has been a very long journey, but Iran, it seems, is finally out of the woods.

In a rare and hard-fought moment of triumph for international diplomacy, after matters came down to the wire in July 2015 and three deadlines had to be extended to allow negotiators the room to arrive at a final agreement, an important principle has been established: diplomacy does work, and where there is a will, even the toughest and most intractable of foes can be brought around to see eye to eye on sensitive issues.

The starting point of the negotiations is difficult to establish. As early as February 2003, the government of then president Mohammad Khatami had agreed to submit its nuclear programme to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. But the modest progress made under that commitment was quickly rolled back with the arrival of president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who favoured a more hardline approach and insisted on Iran’s right to enrich uranium purely for energy purposes.

As a matter of principle, Mr Ahmadinejad may well have had a point, but coupled with his irresponsible bellicosity and the pragmatic pressures of the real world, that push ended up landing his country in the quagmire of crippling new sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council, the European Union and the United States. The results for the Iranian economy, and the Iranian people were nothing short of disastrous as inflation rose to 42pc, and the economy ground to a halt. Iran’s oil and gas infrastructure deteriorated as investment dried up.

It has taken the government of Hassan Rouhani more than two years of bare-knuckled diplomacy to pull his country back from the brink. Mr Rouhani, and, in particular, his intrepid foreign minister, Javad Zarif, have shown admirable skill and diplomatic acumen in pursuing the negotiations with five great powers and one international agency simultaneously, while balancing matters with their own hardline establishment at home.

The saga shows how easy isolation is to earn and how hard it is to shed. It also shows the benefits of pragmatic thinking, when undertaken with due skill, and the power of compromise

and negotiation. It is a pity that Pakistan under US pressure, gave the Iranians the cold shoulder throughout the process.

It preferred Saudi largesse and negotiated a bread-and-butter LNG deal with Qatar, instead of starting work on a pipeline to carry Iranian gas. That gas could have been flowing months ago, and the first payment could have been made the day sanctions were lifted to inaugurate a new era in our relations with an important neighbour.

Still, all that has been lost is time, and now the excuses for the government to not pursue the Iran pipeline have vanished. It is time to raise the curtain between Iran and Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, January 19th, 2016

LG infrastructure

IT is a fact that both Sindh and Punjab have tried their best to avoid sharing power with the local, most basic tier of governance without which a democratic set-up is incomplete.

When it was clear that installing local governments could not be delayed further, the provinces had no qualms about encroaching on the powers of the people's grass-roots representatives through amendments to the law and procedures.

There is yet another manifestation of how the time and energy the provinces spent on jealously guarding what they consider their turf against those interacting at the grass roots could have been used to prepare the infrastructure needed for local governments to fulfil their responsibilities.

Reports say that the elected union councils, much larger in number than at any time previously, are faced with the soul-dampening prospects of being deprived of offices to work from.

As one example out of the many available, it was reported in this paper on Monday that some 25 out of the 111 union councils in Muzaffargarh do not have an office.

A union council chairman quoted in the story was indeed lucky enough to have a charpoy placed under a tree from where to watch over the affairs of his small kingdom. There used to be a building that served as the local union council office, which was swept away by the floods in 2010.

The scene may not exactly be the same in other parts of Punjab and Sindh, where the process of LG elections is nearing completion with the recent swearing-in of the elected members. But there is plenty of evidence that the administrations have failed badly in anticipating the coming of the new local set-ups and providing them with the required facilities.

Take Lahore, simply because the city is a source of envy for the ‘preferential treatment’ it gets. It is quite daunting that the number of union councils in the city has been raised from 150 to 274.

Now since this is something seemingly not on the fancied list of the Punjab set-up, many of the union councils have no idea where they are going to be lodged — let alone what use they will actually be to the people.

A search for offices to accommodate them is on, belatedly. The task could have been finished much earlier everywhere. The delay could well sow more disrespect for the basic tier created by popular choice.

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Distressing incident

WHAT occurred a few days ago in Okara district’s Hujra Shah Muqem can only be described as highly disturbing.

As reported, a 15-year-old boy chopped off his hand due to an allegedly blasphemous act. During a gathering at a mosque, the young man apparently misheard a question related to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and mistakenly raised his hand in response.

The local prayer leader and a section of the congregation pounced on him, accusing the boy of having committed blasphemy. To ‘atone’ for his mistake, the youth later reportedly chopped off his own hand. Yet the strange twists in this horrifying tale don’t end here: the boy’s family reportedly celebrated the inexplicable action.

When the lack of common sense, barely literate clerics and hyper-religiosity come together — as they often do in Pakistan — the results can be disastrous. In this case, it is reassuring to know that the cleric who reportedly told the youth to chop his hand off has been arrested and a case has been registered against him.

Now the state must fully investigate the matter to establish what actually happened. Unfortunately, the mindset that apparently led the cleric to denounce the boy for ‘blasphemy’ is far too common.

In villages, small towns, and even cities in Pakistan, semi-literate clerics often shape the narrative and in some cases, especially where matters of faith are involved, end up playing judge, jury and executioner. By most accounts, the boy in this particular episode had misheard the question.

Yet many so-called men of religion are quick to pass judgement, without ascertaining the facts or realising that a mistake could have been made. If it is indeed established that the cleric was insistent that the boy carry out the gruesome act, then punishment under the law is in order.

In the longer term, state and society need to formulate a method to prevent obscurantist elements from occupying the pulpit and promoting views and actions that defy logic and create an atmosphere of suffocating intolerance.

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Friday sermons

IN any Muslim society, the Friday sermon is a powerful platform from which to disseminate views. Most mosques are filled to capacity and preachers use the pulpit to communicate various concerns.

Sadly, in Pakistan, as well as other Muslim states, some clerics have used the pulpit — particularly during Friday prayers — to promote obscurantism and militancy.

There are cases on record in Pakistan where the mosque loudspeaker has been misused to stir up sectarian hatred, demonise other religions and communities, and promote extremism. In view of these concerns, the Sindh government has reportedly decided to table a bill in the provincial assembly designed to regulate Friday sermons.

Also read: [Sindh plans to regulate Friday sermon](#)

On Monday, the adviser to the Sindh chief minister on religious affairs said the move was aimed at promoting “sectarian harmony” and bringing an “end to hatred and extremism”.

There can be little argument with the need to counter the poison of sectarianism and extremism in society. However, we must ask if government-issued sermons are the best way to approach the problem.

First, this method has been tried in other Muslim countries, with less than commendable results. For example, in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the state gives ‘themes’ and ‘guidelines’ to preachers to incorporate in Friday sermons.

This is primarily designed to exercise political control and ensure clerics toe the official line. Further, for the military in Egypt and the royal family in Saudi Arabia, these measures are designed to stamp out criticism.

Yet despite the strict controls over religious activity in these states, they have failed to snuff out militancy. Second, we must ask whether the action suggested by Sindh would not breach the principle of freedom of expression — although the state must ensure that preachers do not egg on the people to break the law.

Monitoring what preachers have to say in these tense times and punishing them for attempting to incite violence may be acceptable, but to assume that all of them will actually do so is unreasonable.

Finally, there is the issue of practicality. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of mosques in Sindh where the Friday sermon is delivered. Does the state have the wherewithal to bring all these under its control and issue them uniform sermons?

Rather than dictating the content of sermons, the state needs to keep an eye on what is being said by preachers. There must be simple guidelines: promotion of militancy and hate speech, rebellion against the state etc must be strictly off limits.

The state has a relatively effective intelligence apparatus at its disposal. This — together with the involvement of communities and ulema — must be employed to keep an eye on rabble-rousing clerics who misuse the pulpit to encourage militancy and fan hatred.

Citizens also have a responsibility to stop frequenting mosques which host hate-mongering clerics.

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More attacks

A MILITANT attack claimed by the banned TTP on the Peshawar-Khyber Agency boundary, a separatist attack in Balochistan — the new year has continued with grim reminders of a troubling reality: the country still has a long way to go before victory can be declared in the fight against militancy.

While it was never expected that a year and a half of sustained counter-insurgency operations in Fata and intensive counterterrorism actions across the rest of Pakistan would eliminate militancy, the worry is that the state may have reached the point of diminishing returns.

Past counter-insurgency operations, like the several iterations in Khyber Agency, have yielded a worrying pattern.

Also read: [FC loses six men in blast near Bolan](#)

While the military is able to reclaim territory and ensure militants do not return en masse, the militants adapt their tactics to new realities. The occasional suicide bombing against security targets and frequent IED attacks have prevented the return of true normality.

Vastly improved as the situation on the ground may be, small-scale attacks continue with disturbing frequency. Meanwhile, in Balochistan, two years of outreach by the previous civilian governments to separatist elements have not been able to offset the continuing realities of a province where politics and security have effectively been militarised.

The Bolan attack on FC personnel and the claim of responsibility by the BLA suggest that a decade of trying to militarily crush the separatists has not worked.

Could NAP be the answer to both problems in areas abutting Fata and in Balochistan? On paper, yes. But in reality, patchy implementation and the lack of meaningful coordination between the centre and the provinces and the civilian and military arms of the state continue to impede long-term success.

The attack on Khasadar personnel stationed at a Khyber-Peshawar check post embodies the dizzying array of challenges — border control with Afghanistan; normalising Fata; and protecting the provinces.

Neither the success of Khyber I and Khyber II, nor high-level attempts to improve border management prevented the militants from being able to kill personnel right on Peshawar's doorstep.

The NAP platform offers potential solutions, but only if intra-state cooperation and centre-province interaction are taken more seriously.

Similarly, as per NAP, has the Balochistan civilian dispensation really been empowered as was envisaged? The Bolan attack cannot be seen in isolation.

If engaging separatist elements via the civilian government is not made the cornerstone of state policy, no amount of military resources can be used to prevent low-level violence. But are the powers-that-be really willing to listen?

Trigger-happy police

THE Karachi police gave yet another demonstration of their antics by shooting dead a young man for failing to stop immediately when signalled and then trying to pass the killing off as an ‘encounter’.

At least now we all know how these ‘encounters’ take place. The young man was shot dead with a single bullet to the head when he was signalled to stop but kept going — only to halt further down the road and turn around to return to where the policemen stood.

Police and Rangers in Karachi claim that almost 700 people have been killed by them in ‘encounters’ last year alone. Some of those killings could well have been genuine encounters where the law enforcers had no choice but to shoot because they were facing armed criminals. But after this incident, it is clear that the police also see encounters as a way to cover up their own incompetence.

The episode reveals the true face of the Karachi police. With their ‘shoot first, investigate later’ attitude, the police appear to many citizens as poorly trained and trigger-happy.

Meanwhile, the sense of impunity — stemming from their strong belief that they can get away with their misdeeds — that characterises their actions adds to the problem. In this particular episode, the only reason the policemen were caught is because the young man’s friends happened to be there and witnessed the episode.

In many cases, witnesses are either not present, or not willing to talk, making it easier for the police to simply chalk up a murder as an ‘encounter’ and bury the case.

The DIG police has ordered that the policemen in question be arrested, and they will be tried for murder. But what about all the other killings that have been conveniently called ‘encounters’?

Is it possible that these too will be investigated? The city police need to be armed, and ready to respond, but their training must include more stringent requirements under which pulling the trigger is allowed.

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University attack

ONCE again Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is reeling; in fact, Pakistan itself is under attack. The savagery at Bacha Khan University yesterday makes the heart sink and evokes deep despair. Monstrous as the Taliban are and have been, the determination with which they kill children and young adults comes as a shock each time.

The carnage in Charsadda may not be on the scale of the Army Public School attack, but the intentions were the same — to deliberately, monstrously and wretchedly strike at the most vulnerable and to spread anger and fear far and wide.

They must not be allowed to win. A greater resolve exists — that of the Pakistani people and the state that represents them — and it will prevail against the banned TTP. But there should be no illusions.

This is a long war. It will not be won in a month or a year. It will be many years before Pakistan can truly be rid of the militant curse. But that reality does not mean immediate steps cannot be taken.

Quite simply, the time has come for Pakistan to stop merely talking about better border management and demanding the eradication of militant safe havens in Afghanistan, and get serious work done on both fronts.

Fifteen years since a new war came to Afghanistan and Fata is a long enough period to force some change. The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan has always been porous. But must it remain so?

This frontier should not be turned into another India-Pakistan border — virtually sealed and the source of potentially deadly tensions. Yet, this country's borders with Iran and especially China offer other possibilities for managing the flow of people while acting against criminal and violent elements.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border is an anachronism, a colonial inheritance that has been both a buffer against and a base for projecting power into Afghanistan. Now, with more than 150,000 troops spread out across Fata for years, the border has become perhaps the single-most immediate danger to this country's stability. That must change.

Second, the militant safe havens in Afghanistan from where attacks against Pakistan are plotted and executed need to be eliminated. Be it via the quadrilateral coordination group, directly between Pakistan and Afghanistan or with US support, serious action inside Afghanistan must be taken against the safe havens.

Excuses will not suffice. The Afghan security forces are engaged in a war of survival with the militants in many parts of the country. It is also known that the mission of US forces in

Afghanistan has changed after 2014 and military engagement has become more restrictive. But as the Kunduz example demonstrated, where there's a will there is almost certainly a way.

Further, while Afghan demands for similar actions inside Pakistan against anti-Afghan militants are legitimate, there is the reality that Kabul is also seeking to restart peace talks with the Afghan Taliban. When it comes to the TTP and its various factions, there is no possibility of dialogue being sought by Pakistan.

Third, a difficult question needs to be asked. What really have military courts and the reinstatement of the death penalty achieved?

The APS attack triggered a violent reaction that ought to have been resisted. What separates the militants from the state, what makes the two so fundamentally different and the latter worth defending, is the rule of law and individual rights.

The 21st Amendment is a blot on this nation's constitutional history, passed by a democratically elected parliament, but on a par with the other violations of the Constitution in the past. Moreover, what was clear even then is incontrovertible now.

The death penalty does not deter terrorism. In fact, it can act as a propaganda tool for the militants as a contested claim of the responsibility for the Charsadda attack attests. Finally, the Bacha Khan University and the day of the attack do not appear to have been selected randomly.

The tolerant, compassionate, inclusive politics of Abdul Ghaffar Khan is what Pakistan ought to embody, and what the militant extremists are seeking to destroy. They must not win. Essential as it is to physically eliminate militancy, the very idea of the Taliban needs to be defeated too by making Pakistan a peaceful, democratic and constitutional land.

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Gulf mediation

WHILE there appears to be no immediate threat of a Saudi-Iran conflagration, ties between the cross-Gulf giants remain far from cordial.

In such a scenario, the Pakistani leadership's efforts to bridge the gulf between Riyadh and Tehran have produced mixed results. While the initiative was welcome, expectations were naturally limited, considering the complexities of the Saudi-Iran relationship, as well as the nature of ties between both states and Pakistan.

Also read: [Nawaz stresses peaceful resolution to Saudi-Iran row](#)

There was a difference of emphasis in both capitals. For example, on the Saudi leg of the peace sojourn — which saw the prime minister and army chief form a high-powered peacemaking team — there was discussion of Pakistan's involvement in the 34-nation Saudi-led 'counterterrorism alliance', along with standard fare about Pakistan's standing "with the people of Saudi Arabia" against threats to the kingdom's territorial integrity.

Compared to the somewhat cool response to Pakistan's peace initiative in Riyadh, the Iranian leg of the journey seemed to produce more tangible results.

For instance, Pakistan and Iran agreed to appoint 'focal persons' from each country to help defuse cross-Gulf tension. It is also significant that in his meetings with senior Iranian defence officials, the army chief sought to assure his hosts that Pakistan's involvement in the Saudi counterterrorism coalition was not an anti-Iranian measure.

Of course, the days to come will tell whether or not Pakistan's shuttle diplomacy to the Middle East will pay off and pledges by Riyadh and Tehran to work for regional peace materialise.

For one, the Saudis should also appoint a focal person to make operational the proposed tripartite conflict-resolution mechanism. Pakistan is, of course, not alone in its efforts to defuse tensions in the Gulf.

World powers, including China, Russia and the US, have all expressed concern over the Saudi-Iran spat. The Russians have reportedly offered to mediate, while the Chinese president, currently on a regional tour, has visited Saudi Arabia and is due to arrive in Iran.

We must realise that differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran are significant, covering a mix of geopolitical, geo-economic and religious factors, and will not be resolved overnight simply by issuing positive-sounding statements.

What is needed is a constant effort on part of the international community, particularly the Muslim states, to keep the lines of communication open between the kingdom and the Islamic republic.

On the home front, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif's remarks in the National Assembly on Tuesday categorically stating that Pakistan will not join an anti-Iran alliance, are also welcome and back up the observations made by Pakistan's leadership in Tehran.

Moreover, Mr Asif's mentioning that Pakistan will not get involved in any anti-Shia grouping is also positive. These statements matter not just for domestic communal harmony, but also to reinforce the position abroad that this country will not get involved in any sectarian conflicts beyond its borders.

The defence minister also gave the house a few details about the over 1,100 Pakistani military officers currently stationed in Saudi Arabia. While these personnel may be present in the kingdom to honour decades-old bilateral agreements, mostly in an advisory capacity, Pakistani combat troops should not be sent to Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan has made the right decision by not taking sides in the cross-Gulf spat and trying to bring the protagonists together. Now it must stay the course and maintain its neutrality.

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Repercussions of past policies

THE wave of terror unleashed in the first month of the new year — and the apparent links to militant safe havens along the Pak-Afghan border — triggered some reflection in parliament on Wednesday.

Reacting to the Bacha Khan University attack, Mahmood Achakzai, chief of the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party, drew a line connecting policies of the past with the terrorism the country faces today.

Agreeing with Mr Achakzai was Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, who had this to say: “The fires that were lit in the 1980s are now engulfing us.” While the defence minister predictably also assailed the Musharraf-era cooperation with the US-led war in Afghanistan, the broader point that Mr Asif and Mr Achakzai made is undeniable — the fight against militancy is rooted in wrong choices made in the past.

True as that may be, it is something of a victory that the past can be so readily acknowledged in parliament. Some years ago, to question the Afghan jihad of the 1980s would have attracted angry denunciations and allegations of unpatriotic behaviour.

Yet, how widespread is that view outside parliament — or even inside parliament? In some circles, there still appears to be a great deal of denial.

Consider that Wednesday’s attack in Charsadda immediately led to allegations of Indian perfidy or Afghan involvement. While there is certainly an urgent problem of cross-border militancy, there is also another reality.

Each one of the attackers is likely to be proved a Pakistani. They are also likely to have been raised in Pakistan, embraced extremism inside Pakistan, joined militant groups inside Pakistan and waged war against Pakistan from inside.

It is likely that only during the very last stages of their lives would the attackers have relocated to Afghanistan. Similarly, the architects and planners of the attack are entirely likely to be citizens of this country.

What makes denial more dangerous is that it is often paired with the belief that armed jihad has a role in the modern world — that the war fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s was a glorious religious victory and that the war being fought in Afghanistan today is a legitimate religious struggle against imperial invaders.

This country will struggle to defeat terrorism, militancy and extremism as long as such views prevail about the outside world.

The debate in parliament on Wednesday fell short in one regard: there were few ideas mooted about how to tackle the internal militancy threat today.

Simply demanding NAP be implemented in full is not a policy recommendation. The latest wave of militant violence suggests that specific steps need to be taken to keep so-called soft targets better protected.

It will require reallocating intelligence and law-enforcement resources to either prevent such attacks or respond to them faster. The enemy is shadowy and tends to adapt — the state must learn to tailor its response to that reality.

Published in Dawn, January 22nd, 2016

State Bank's scepticism

THE first quarterly report of the State Bank provides a healthy corrective to the otherwise jubilant narrative being pushed by the government.

Some success has indeed been achieved in stabilising the economy from the position it was drifting towards in 2013, but three years down the line, many of the underlying structural problems that keep pushing Pakistan towards crises on a cyclical basis remain in place.

The report begins by acknowledging the positives that are undoubtedly there, such as an uptick in growth, decrease in the current account deficit, foreign exchange reserves rising to a level sufficient to finance seven months of imports, lower fiscal deficit and a shift away from government borrowing from the State Bank, and lowered inflation.

These are considerable achievements, but their impact is diminished when one sees the list of what remains to be done.

Widening the tax base and failure to reform public-sector enterprises come on top of the list of things on which progress has been slow or non-existent.

They are followed by falling exports and dwindling foreign investment, with the report adding “[m]ore disturbingly, this decline was attributed primarily to lower quantum”, in the case of exports, ie exports are down not only because the prices of cotton products have come down but because the volumes being exported have also fallen.

The government has targeted a growth rate of 5.5pc for this year, but “[i]nitial assessment suggests that achieving this target would be challenging”, due to the dismal performance of agriculture, battered by floods, adverse weather, pest attacks and collapsing commodity prices.

The uptick in manufacturing is largely driven by increased gas allocations for fertiliser plants, depressed global prices of raw materials, revival in construction activity and pick-up in auto financing. In the case of autos, the report cautions that the recent boom may fizzle out once the

Apni Rozgar scheme of the Punjab government, which has seen a boost in orders for cars, expires soon.

The State Bank is optimistic about the manufacturing sector, but there are grounds to be concerned at the lopsided nature of the revival under way there, considering it grows out of factors that are either contingent or based on increased consumption and speculative activity.

The improved performance of the economy is real enough, but it appears to be built on shaky foundations. Sustainability remains a far-off goal.

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Stillbirth rate

THOUGH numerous healthcare woes plague Pakistan, the problem of stillbirths has largely failed to register in the way it should.

However, as a number of studies published recently by the respected medical journal The Lancet show, Pakistan has the highest stillbirth rate in the world.

As defined by the editors of the publication, stillbirth occurs when “a child being alive at the beginning of labour” dies “for entirely preventable reasons”.

Also read: [Worst of 186 countries, Pakistan has highest stillbirth rate](#)

According to the data, last year, while the number of stillborn children was higher in India and Nigeria, Pakistan had the highest rate of stillbirths in the world.

Despite this alarming situation, local medical experts say that the issue of stillbirth is mostly missing from national health priorities.

A number of factors contribute to stillbirths — mostly linked to the poor quality of healthcare. As with other miseries, the poor and the marginalised in this country are affected the most.

While the picture is indeed bleak, with determined interventions things can be turned around on this front. Medical professionals point out that preventing stillbirth must be linked to the overall strategy of improving maternal and neonatal health nationally.

Providing women antenatal care and monitoring the labour process can bring the stillbirth rate down considerably.

However, a difference can only be made when health authorities at the centre and in the provinces first realise that stillbirth is a major concern, and that it can be addressed if the right actions are taken.

Pakistan's unenviable ranking on this count can also be taken as an indictment of the poor state of healthcare infrastructure overall.

Thanks to the state's neglect of public health concerns over decades, ailments and issues that can otherwise be eradicated remain major killers.

Unless we put into practice our pledges to improve mother and child health, the situation is unlikely to improve. It is hoped that officialdom takes notice of these grim figures and that the next time data is collected on stillbirths in Pakistan, there will be visible and vast improvement.

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Trial of Saad Aziz

The list of shocking and grotesque acts of violence by militants in Pakistan is a desperately long one, but few acts stand out like the Safoora Goth carnage last May.

Similarly, among the many attempts to silence civil society and those working for a progressive, tolerant Pakistan, the murder of Sabeen Mahmud was a particularly disturbing act.

The Safoora Goth bus attack, which came less than a month after Sabeen Mahmud's assassination, triggered an intensive investigation that led to the arrest of Saad Aziz, [a graduate of a well-known business university](#), and several of his cohorts, who were subsequently identified as assailants, facilitators and financiers.

The country was then informed that the investigation had been personally overseen by everyone from the prime minister to the army chief and from the [Sindh chief minister](#) to the heads of intelligence agencies.

The evidence collected was incontrovertible and voluminous. So why have Saad Aziz and his cohorts now been [handed over](#) to the military courts?

The foundational — unacceptable — logic of the military courts was that the civilian judicial processes were inadequate and therefore a new system had to be created to ensure the successful prosecution of the highest-profile and most violent militants and terrorists.

If the allegations against Saad Aziz and his counterparts are true, they certainly fit the description of so-called jet-black terrorists. But why the recourse to a closed system where a lower standard of proof is needed when a historic investigation allegedly produced immediate and irrefutable evidence against Saad Aziz and his co-accused?

Examine: [*Prosecutors in Safoora carnage case decide to quit for lack of security*](#)

A year since they were created, 36 individuals have been handed death sentences and four life sentences, but there is virtually nothing known about the evidence that was presented against them in the courts.

The Supreme Court is slowly sifting through some of the appeals, but the nature of the convictions means the general public is unlikely to ever see the bulk of the evidence.

Saad Aziz, though, ought to be an exception. The investigation was very publicly and visibly led by the Sindh police, and civilian law-enforcement agencies played a significant role. Are military courts now meant to shield evidence gathered by civilians from the public?

Moreover, the alleged radicalisation of Saad Aziz and the [linkages to the militant Islamic State group](#) is a frightening new development in the militancy landscape. While young men of similar backgrounds to his have embraced militancy in the past, they mostly took well-worn paths.

The Safoora Goth suspects appear to be sui generis — a new breed of self-radicalised individuals who are embedded in mainstream society.

As the state battles the militants of yesterday and today, is a new generation being recruited, or self-recruiting, unknown to state or society? Surely, the public deserves to know more about the new evil that may be existing in their midst.

A public, civilian trial of Saad Aziz and his seven co-accused would have gone some way to informing the public of the new dangers.

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Stock market gyrations

THE roller coaster ride that the newly formed Pakistan Stock Exchange has seen over the past couple of weeks has left many investors feeling a little nauseous.

The latest trading session saw a little stability, with the index gaining 192 points, but it still closed below 31,000 points. However, the past week has seen the market slide by more than 1,500 points, and the market overall has lost almost 15pc of its value from its peak.

Moreover, the volatilities don't look as if they are going away. For one, the realities belie the claims being made by the stock exchange management that the arrival of an integrated bourse will give the market a boost. That analysis was clearly based on the specious logic that there would be increased liquidity and increased participation in the stock market once the Lahore and Islamabad bourses were integrated with Karachi. The opposite appears to have happened.

But it would be unfair to blame the entire declines on factors intrinsic to the market. Corporate fundamentals have not changed nearly as rapidly as valuations on the trade floor have.

Clearly, the sustained and ferocious bear run is connected with factors beyond the stock market itself. Capital markets around the world are experiencing a massive and sustained rout that began in the summer of 2015 with a large rout on the Chinese stock market.

Those volatilities are still with us, with almost \$735bn having fled emerging markets since the summer. Thus far nobody knows how far this will go since it is driven by a complex set of factors that include a massive slowdown of the growth rates in China as well as investor confidence in commodities evaporating.

Pakistan is not immune to trends in the global economy, as the past has made abundantly clear, and as the present is reminding us once again. It is important to bear in mind in times such as these that the small investor should resist the lure of easy money that brokers sell so well.

It is also worth emphasising that public funds should not be used to bail out any brokers or even the market at large, should matters come to that. It would be better to engineer a sustained soft landing for the stock market rather than try artificial attempts to prop it up using pools of public money available with the government.

The stock market is not a public enterprise, and deserves no public support.

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All hail Sarah Palin

THE American presidential contest is now at risk of turning into a cartoon. Or the Republican side of it anyway.

With the return of Sarah Palin in what one hopes is nothing more than a cameo appearance to endorse Donald Trump, the late night comedy shows are having a field day. One newspaper even ran the headline “I’m with stupid!” when announcing the news.

In her first, and hopefully only, appearance, the indomitable princess of gall already managed to contribute a new word to the English language, describing the myriad power struggles breaking out across “these nations who are oil-rich” as “squirmishes going on for centuries”, leaving the rest of us with a mental image of an oily bowl of heavily armed maggots in bandanas busily decapitating each other.

If this is the beginning of a Trump and Palin ticket roaring to emerge from the Republican primaries, then one doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Ms Palin actually mentioned the possibility of Mr Trump being her running mate last year, at a comedy show of all places.

However, the unfortunate fact is that the endorsement is likely to put some wind in Mr Trump’s sails before the important Iowa caucus on Feb 1, because as one historian of presidential elections put it, the endorsement brings together the two things Americans seem to love the most: God and money.

Though the likelihood of a Trump and Palin ticket emerging on the Republican side is still too remote a possibility to be taken seriously, and in the meantime the comedy shows are going to have all the fun they can with the idea, the endorsement shows how a bankrupt right wing in the United States is providing fertile ground for troubling politics with a tinge of fascism.

In times to come, the politics of spectacle and identity, fuelled by money and emotional hype, is likely to grow. Sarah Palin’s return may be a laughing matter for now, but let’s see who has the last laugh.

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Talks after Pathankot

AFTER days of official comment and frenzied speculation, the India-Pakistan relationship appears to have gone quiet once again, at least officially and publicly. That is an unwelcome lapse into old habits.

There are two things that the two countries need immediately: one, an expedited investigation into the full contours of the Pathankot air force base attack; and two, the initiation of the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue.

Three weeks from the Pathankot attack, India ought to have completed its initial investigations and Pakistan ought to have done the same.

This, then, is the time for the two countries to try and jointly piece together the details of the attack — and find the collaborators who exist on both sides of the border.

In Pakistan, the symbolic closure of some centres and madressahs affiliated with the outlawed Jaish-e-Mohammad is simply not enough.

Had the Pathankot attackers been able to kill or injure more individuals or had aircraft been damaged, the crisis would have been of far greater magnitude. It is evident that spectacular carnage was the militants' real intention.

For precisely that reason, the Pathankot investigations, both in India and Pakistan, should not be allowed to drift towards inconclusiveness.

As for the CBD, what is the point to dialogue when an episode like Pathankot cannot be dealt with inside the proposed framework?

The broadened CBD, which has added two issues to the eight baskets in the Composite Dialogue, covers counterterrorism, peace and security and even confidence-building measures.

The Pathankot investigations and India-Pakistan cooperation regarding them could surely fit into one of those categories. Initiating the CBD would also set an important precedent. If dialogue is to be uninterrupted, it must be seen to be uninterrupted.

The national security adviser channel or secret communications between the Pakistani establishment and Indian intelligence cannot and should not become a replacement for true dialogue.

The very premise of the CBD is that Pakistan and India have disputes and issues to resolve that, no matter how important and urgent the terrorism challenge may be, go far beyond one, near-term incident.

Just as it is necessary to carry the Pathankot investigations to a swift conclusion and initiate the CBD, inside Pakistan there should be urgent attention paid to spoilers who have emerged in recent days.

Syed Salahuddin, the head of the United Jihad Council, for example, appears determined to make a comeback in the public eye.

This week, he condemned the partial crackdown on JeM — a condemnation that followed the UJC's claim of responsibility for the Pathankot attack.

What is the state doing to address the trouble that Syed Salahuddin is seeking to stir up? Surely, the time has come when public assertions of responsibility for terrorist attacks in another country can no longer be tolerated.

Dialogue between Pakistan and India should be able to proceed in a climate free of intimidation and fear.

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Houbara bustard ban

ON Friday, the Supreme Court lifted the ban on hunting the houbara bustard, an activity that has been termed a 'pillar' of Pakistan's foreign policy. However, conservationists need not despair completely, for if the state allows the sustainable hunting of the bird and prevents an all-out slaughter, the creature's 'vulnerable' status on IUCN's Red List may well improve. The apex court had last year called for a blanket ban on hunting the bird. However, Friday's decision came in response to a number of petitions filed by the federal and three provincial governments, as well as by others. The state was apparently worried that the ban could negatively affect relations with the Gulf states, whose potentates — together with their entourages — descend upon Pakistan to hunt the houbara bustard every year. That a part of our foreign policy should be based on such a fragile pillar is unfortunate. But now that the court has ruled on the matter, it will be incumbent upon the state to balance foreign policy considerations with conservation of the houbara bustard, which winters in Pakistan every year.

Some independent experts have endorsed the idea of sustainable hunting of the bird as opposed to a complete ban. Still, it will take considerable effort by the government to ensure that the houbara bustard is hunted in a sustainable manner and its population is not decimated. The onus lies on the federal government, as well as the Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab administrations. As the Supreme Court has pointed out, the local communities must be involved in conservation efforts. If they can be convinced that the bird be allowed to breed and be hunted only in limited numbers, the local population can play a crucial part in raising the houbara bustard's numbers. Further, the concept of trophy hunting should be applied in this case; the hunters should be charged considerable amounts to be allowed to hunt their prey, with most of the money going to the local communities. But all conservation efforts will fail if bag limits are violated by hunters with deep pockets. Does the state have the courage to tell its foreign guests that they cannot hunt beyond a certain limit, and that violators of these limits will be punished? Perhaps the court should also call for independent verification to ensure that its orders are being complied with and that the bird's numbers are going up despite the lifting of the ban on the annual hunt.

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Pakistan's T20 loss

THERE has been a lamentable lack of consistency in the Pakistan cricket team's limited-overs performances over the past 18 months. This trait has yet again led to their recent T20 series loss against New Zealand. Shahid Afridi's men appeared too ill prepared to face a Kiwi side which bounced back strongly to win the contest after losing the opening match at Auckland. In hindsight, and keeping in view Pakistan's abject surrender in the last two games, one can safely say that in Auckland, the New Zealanders were perhaps caught off guard by the opposition's rather young bowling attack — or it would have been 3-0. Prior to the start of the tour, much emphasis was laid on the national team's fitness camp in Lahore. The expectations of fans were unnecessarily raised by tall claims made by not just the captain and the head coach but also the PCB top brass that harped on endlessly about the rich dividends the players stood to reap from the camp.

Sadly, it all amounted to nothing in the New Zealand series. The batting was as brittle as ever, the bowlers lacked rhythm and control, and catches were dropped at crucial stages. It is quite frustrating to observe that no lessons have been learnt from the successive ODI and T20 defeats last year against Australia, New Zealand and England. While there's no denying the talent of the players, Pakistani teams have perpetually missed a game plan while psychological grooming has been ignored altogether by the coaches. As for Shahid Afridi's captaincy, some quarters eulogise him for being an aggressive skipper who leads from the front. However, the fact is that the mercurial all-rounder is only a shadow of himself today as far as performance goes. Regretfully, he has struggled to shun the annoying trait of being dictated by his emotions instead of putting serious thought into outwitting his opponents. That has frequently seen his charges succumb in crunch games which doesn't augur well for Pakistan as the all-important T20 World Cup draws near.

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Plight of Afghan refugees

IN the aftermath of a terrorist attack, scapegoating tends to appear.

This time, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Pervez Khattak has called for Afghan refugees to be returned to their home country — because ostensibly Afghan refugees are involved in criminal activities and facilitating terrorism inside Pakistan.

Missing, as ever, was proof. Each time a call is made for the repatriation of Afghan refugees, the demand is accompanied by hyperbole about what the refugees are allegedly doing to destabilise Pakistan.

But examples are rarely, if ever, provided. In the case of the Charsadda attack, all of the individuals identified so far as being involved in the attack or its planning are Pakistani. No intelligence or law-enforcement agency has suggested any refugee connection whatsoever.

Yet, because they are vulnerable and deemed to be unworthy of further help, the Afghan refugees are routinely targeted by politicians looking for scapegoats.

Thankfully, the federal government appears to be cognisant of its humanitarian and international responsibilities.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif extended the validity of the Proof of Registration for 1.5 legally registered Afghan refugees until June 30, 2016.

While that measure itself was a compromise — rights groups have called for the extension of PoR cards until the end of the year — it came after a year of public vilification of refugees in the aftermath of the APS school attack and the creation of the National Action Plan.

Had that measure not been taken, it is likely that the registered refugees would simply have joined the unregistered ones — estimated to be as many as, or even greater in number than, those holding PoRs — and been driven further to the margins of Pakistani society.

Are Afghan refugees a threat to Pakistan? Surely, after residing on Pakistani soil for three decades in many cases, Afghan refugees should be able to ask Pakistan the reverse question — do they not have a right to live here?

Refugees are not in voluntary exile. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani made this point when he referred to Pakistanis who have left Fata for parts of eastern Afghanistan following the military operations in the tribal areas.

When Pakistani politicians try to score political points by blaming Afghan refugees for this country's security woes they ought to remember that many of their countrymen are either IDPs or refugees in Afghanistan.

A far more helpful approach would be to work with the Afghan communities to understand their needs and to address any law-enforcement and security concerns that exist in those communities.

There is no suggestion that the Afghan refugees would resist any legitimate concerns of the Pakistani state.

In fact, given the precariousness of their legal status, they are likely to cooperate wherever possible.

Mr Khattak may find that if he reaches out to the Afghan populace in Pakistan, he could discover more allies than enemies.

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Another power trip

IN less than one week, the national grid tripped on two occasions. The episodes were reminders of the frequent trippings we saw in late 2014 and early 2015.

Those incidents were larger, because at least this time the southern zone comprising Sindh and Balochistan kept running while power went out across Punjab and KP.

At least one of the previous outages was also triggered by an act of sabotage in Balochistan when a power line was attacked causing a cascade of trippings up the entire national grid.

The contained nature of the trippings this time round owes itself to the fact that the water and power ministry installed circuit breakers which prevent exactly that sort of cascade from travelling through the entire grid when an event occurs in one location.

But the circuit breakers were not enough to prevent two large provinces from going without power for many hours.

Nationwide trippings may have been contained, but the recent episodes point to the need for further action. Both episodes were triggered by different events.

The first occurred when a power line in southern Punjab tripped, and the second was reportedly due to a fire at the Guddu thermal power station.

Both incidents highlight the difficulties that the power bureaucracy has in assigning responsibility following major failures of this sort. In any efficiently run organisation, that is responsive to strategic directive from the top, responsibility would have been quickly fixed and

some individuals would have been held accountable, facing either demotion or suspension from service.

But the power bureaucracy is sluggish in responding to events of this sort, except to get things back to normal as quickly as possible.

It is important that each such incident be followed up and responsibility fixed in a public manner so that those entrusted with the operational task of keeping our power system running know that failure to discharge their duties will have consequences. That sort of accountability will not come to the power bureaucracy without further reforms that do more than rearrange reporting lines at the top.

The impact of the reforms must be felt all the way down the chain of command to the lowest tier that must be made to focus on its responsibilities with a mix of incentives and the prospect of accountability in the event of failure. Thus far, such reforms don't look like they are about to happen.

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Senate bar on minister

THE moment finally arrived on Thursday when the Senate chairman barred the defence minister from taking part in the upper house session.

There had been repeated reminders and then warnings by Raza Rabbani to ministers to attend proceedings in the Senate.

The ban on Defence Minister Khawaja Asif was imposed when he failed to be present in the house for a debate in which, in the opinion of the chair, his input was essential, and about which he had been informed in advance.

In the event this was a symbolic ban considering that the session was only two hours shy of conclusion, yet it did mark the boiling over of a sentiment that had been long brewing.

Parliament is divided in two clear groups which are at loggerheads with each other over one very basic issue: the alleged disinterest of the treasury in sessions of the Senate, as well as the National Assembly.

The opposition, in particular the PPP, the erstwhile arch foe of the ruling PML-N, has time and again accused the government of trivialising parliament's sittings by staying aloof.

The point is backed by all those occasions where a senior member of government has been sorely missed at crucial points during a debate.

There have been assurances of more active, persistent and meaningful participation by the government in parliamentary discussions but when the time comes to prove this resolve, the cabinet and its head, the prime minister himself, usually find more urgent things to do.

The decision is theirs: they can either come up with some response to the symbolic ban slapped on the defence minister by the Senate chair, or act in a manner that affords due respect to parliament as the grand — and as is often said, the supreme — gathering of the representatives of the people of Pakistan.

If for nothing else, the ruling party has a responsibility to dispel the negative impression that seeks to portray all collections of politicians as crowds of good-for-nothing souls.

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Army chief's retirement

GEN Raheel Sharif has made a habit of breaking with recent convention.

Much of what has taken place on the counter-insurgency, counterterrorism and, indeed, political fronts during his tenure can be seen as an implicit rebuke of his immediate predecessor.

So, perhaps it is unsurprising that Gen Sharif has chosen to publicly and definitively end speculation about an extension in service, even before that speculation reached anything close to a crescendo.

In a surprise move, the DG ISPR took to Twitter yesterday to announce that Gen Sharif will neither seek nor accept an extension as army chief.

Also read: [I don't believe in extension, will retire on due date: Gen Raheel Sharif](#)

Come November, the country will have a new army chief, restoring an institutional convention that was disrupted for 15 years by the combined tenures of Pervez Musharraf and Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

For that reason alone, Gen Sharif's decision should be welcomed. A succession of army chiefs flouting rules and convention and themselves determining whether or not to stay on in office can only set an entirely undesirable precedent.

Welcome as the army chief's decision may be, in making the announcement via ISPR and in his stating his opinion so forthrightly he has unwittingly cast a light on the enduring civil-military imbalance in the country.

Consider the record of a non-military leader seeking an extension in service. The last constitutional office holder around whom such speculation briefly swirled was the former chief justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Chaudhry.

Yet, when the time came for his retirement in 2013, it was clear that there was no choice to be made. What the Constitution directed is what Mr Chaudhry did.

Strikingly, it is the very politicians vilified in some quarters who have shown the true constitutional way over and over again. When the last PPP government's tenure expired, elections were immediately scheduled. When former president Asif Ali Zardari's term was up, he handed over the reins without fuss or resistance.

This time, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has frequently and consistently pledged that the only arbiter of his government's fate will be the people themselves via the ballot box after the parliamentary term is completed.

There is little doubt that whatever the verdict of the people in 2018, the PML-N will accept it.

Meanwhile, as principled as Gen Sharif's decision is, the fact is that it seems to have been decided on his terms — and announced by the institution he heads.

Always marginalised in service decisions, the civilian-headed defence ministry appears to have become a nonentity.

On Gen Sharif's watch, the ISPR's Twitter account has become the de facto authoritative voice on all things military, eclipsing the Prime Minister's Office and the federal cabinet.

Perhaps over the last months of his tenure, Gen Sharif will seek to correct some of that military overreach.

A constitutional, democratic Pakistan would be where individuals are always subordinate to institutions — and all institutions subordinate to a democratically elected leadership.

Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2016

Winter gas allocations

EVER SINCE the shortages of domestic natural gas began to bite almost a decade ago, it has been standard practice for the government to issue a gas allocation schedule for the winter months that prioritises the sectors that rely on this resource.

The idea was to discourage discretionary allocations as the shortages increased, because these create the room for wrangling and possible corruption.

Those sectors, or those enterprises, that are able to secure supplies stand to make a lot of money at the expense of their competitors who have to shoulder the burden of gas load-shedding.

Also read: [Plants getting gas at consumers' expense](#)

In all such exercises of drawing up an allocation schedule, it has been standard practice for domestic consumers to get top priority, with all other sectors coming after.

Every sector that relies on natural gas as an essential fuel or feedstock had compelling arguments for why it should continue receiving the dwindling supply even as the shortages grew. But domestic consumers received priority partly because it was politically expedient, and partly because people come first in any government decision.

Now we have news that some sectors have continued to receive supplies through the winter months even as domestic consumers are shouldering the burden of widespread and prolonged gas shortages as temperatures plummet to near-freezing point across much of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Some fertiliser and power plants are being kept operational, even though in some cases their supply contracts are reportedly only for nine months.

The shortages for domestic consumers have forced many of them to resort to the use of LPG cylinders for cooking and heating instead, causing a boom in the LPG market, segments of which have taken to following the illegal and dangerous practice of decanting the gas into cylinders in small, makeshift workshops located in densely populated neighbourhoods.

This is dangerous and needs to be checked. What also needs to be seen is whether or not the gas allocation schedule is being followed.

There were good reasons to discourage discretionary allocations in the midst of growing shortages, and those reasons are still valid.

The debate over who will and who will not receive continuous supplies over the winter months ought to have ended a long while back. Once the merit order is drawn up, it should be followed

to ensure that everybody understands that the rules governing gas allocations will not be bent in the face of pressure.

Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2016

Repairing history

UNFORTUNATELY, issues of history, heritage and cultural preservation rarely find themselves at the centre of attention in the Pakistani polity's discourse.

And when they do, more often than not it is because of shortcomings and losses, real or alleged. Consider the controversy following the unveiling of the new entrance gate to the National Museum of Pakistan in Karachi earlier this month: to the shock of conservationists, they feature stone panels and tiles that formerly graced the Shah Jahan Mosque in Thatta.

Also read: [Removal of Shah Jahan mosque relics termed theft of history](#)

There is as yet no clarity on when exactly the stonework was removed. Some quarters have alleged that it was taken away fairly recently by Sindh's culture department that promised to preserve and restore it on the pretext of carrying out architectural repairs and renovation work on the mosque structure.

Others believe that these tiles and panels were removed decades earlier. The culture department, on its part, insists that it lawfully owns these tiles.

But all of this finger-pointing takes away from the real issue. From no quarter has there come any denial so far that the panels originally came from the Shah Jahan Mosque, and as such, what needs to be focused on is their return to the original premises.

That the National Museum is being revamped is welcome. But there is no reason for this to come at the cost of a heritage site of national importance. Thatta's Shah Jahan Mosque is a building of great historical and architectural significance, built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in 1647.

Its distinctive red brick and blue tiles were brought to the site from Hala, and the craftsmanship is of a level that it has over the decades been a popular destination for field trips for educational institutions across the region.

If the Sindh government wants to prove its commitment to culture, it could do no better than to return the stone and tile panels to the structure from which they came and, indeed, intensify efforts for all possible conservation and repair work.

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Obama's expectations

TWICE now this year, Pakistan has featured in comments made by US President Barack Obama.

Following a prediction of decades-long instability in Pakistan during his last State of the Union address, Mr Obama has spoken to the Press Trust of India about the Pathankot air force base attack and what his administration expects of Pakistan.

Overall, the comments reflect a balanced approach. Unlike in years past, when there were angry denunciations and counterproductive demands of Pakistan, this time the president chose to reflect on both the dangers and the opportunities — and, indeed, the steps that Pakistan has taken to combat terror.

Also read: [Obama says Pakistan 'can and must' do more against terrorism](#)

While suggesting that Pakistan “can and must” take further actions against militant groups, Mr Obama also said that Pakistan had embarked on the “right policy” following the APS, Peshawar, attack.

Furthermore, Mr Obama acknowledged that both Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, “are advancing a dialogue on how to confront violent extremism and terrorism across the region”.

Perhaps where the emphasis should lie is on Mr Obama's following words: “Pakistan has an opportunity to show that it is serious about delegitimising, disrupting and dismantling terrorist networks.”

True enough. But can Pakistan really do all of that on its own? Delegitimising terror networks inside Pakistan is long-term counter-extremism strategy that the country must develop. But when it comes to disrupting and dismantling terrorist networks, it is the US too that can and should do more.

For all the problems inside Pakistan, the threat emanating from sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan is undeniable.

When it comes to those sanctuaries, the US has a great deal of leverage and a number of possibilities.

Influence needs to be brought to bear on the Afghan government, especially its intelligence wing, to take the anti-Pakistan threat inside Afghanistan more seriously.

As for military resources, now that the US has changed its rules of engagement, there is the explicit possibility of joint US-Afghan strikes against sanctuaries of the banned TTP. The do-more mantra is not a one-way street.

There is a second area in which the US could bring its influence to bear: the reconciliation process inside Afghanistan.

One of the sticking points in the resumption of talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban appears to be the insistence by Kabul that Pakistan take action against so-called irreconcilable elements among the Taliban.

Whether that is the real sticking point or the Afghan government is insisting on other preconditions behind the scenes, the US surely has influence and interest enough in Afghanistan to help realise the stable and peaceful country that all outsider powers insist Pakistan's neighbour to the east ought to be.

Yes, given the history — and the present — there is an onus on Pakistan to demonstrate leadership and tough resolve in the fight against militancy. But the US too has a great deal of responsibility in this region.

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Responsive missions

IN order to cater to the needs of the large number of overseas Pakistanis living, working or studying in different parts of the world, this country's foreign missions must play a responsive and proactive role.

In this regard, it is welcome that the grievance commissioner for overseas Pakistanis has asked the Foreign Office to instruct envoys in missions abroad to hear public complaints on a weekly basis. The federal ombudsman had issued a similar directive.

Also read: [Ambassadors told to hear complaints on weekly basis](#)

As reported on Monday, diplomats have been asked to upload their contact details and set up online appointment systems to resolve public complaints. If implemented in earnest, these steps can do much to address issues faced by citizens living in foreign countries.

Too often within Pakistan, the bureaucracy is less than enthusiastic about providing relief to the people; unresponsive officials in foreign countries can make a bad situation worse, especially if citizens there are faced with unfamiliar legal issues.

From routine issues such as the renewal of passports and procuring other national documents, to more serious concerns such as accessing counsel in case of legal problems, Pakistani missions abroad play a critical role.

Those familiar with the work of Pakistan's diplomats say our officials do interact with expatriate communities. Some missions, especially in countries where Pakistani community members are present in large numbers — such as the US, the UK and the Gulf states — have community welfare attachés as well as other officials whose job description involves resolving citizens' issues.

Officials from the mission also travel to different cities to set up camp offices to look into the community's problems. However, complaints do arise and there is a lot of room for improvement.

For example, if the envoy is active, the mission's staff will go the extra mile to resolve people's issues. But in missions where the head is not very active, the staff can follow suit and be unresponsive and lethargic.

Hopefully, what this system of lodging complaints will do is to streamline the communication process between members of the Pakistani community and the diplomatic staff.

While projecting and protecting the country's interests abroad is indeed the central focus of any state's diplomatic activity, the provision of assistance to citizens must be of equal importance.

Our officials abroad must be available to help Pakistanis in distress as well as address their routine issues. Citizens cannot be left in the lurch, especially in foreign countries where the legal system is often complex and unfamiliar.

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Sahibzada Yaqub Khan

AN age has passed with the departure of Sahibzada Yaqub Khan, a man of many parts. Yaqub Khan had a lot to say to the country before leaving us for good. Unfortunately for us, he never wrote his memoirs and has taken with him all his memories to his final abode.

Where government service is concerned, it is a sad fact that the experience of the past is always lost with the passing of the older generation, and the accumulated wisdom of our elders is rarely codified to serve or guide us in the present and future.

Yaqub Khan had a close affiliation with three military rulers in Pakistan's history. And yet he was estranged from the military establishment.

Also read: [A leaf from history: Taming the bureaucracy](#)

When he disagreed with the military action in what was then East Pakistan, he was demoted. He retired from the army in 1972.

Only a few years later though, he was back again in the service of another military ruler, Gen Ziaul Haq, and served as foreign minister at a time when Pakistan's external affairs acquired their schizophrenic quality — during that period, the suit and tie were reserved for public forums, while the turban and beard called the shots from the lengthening shadows.

Despite his vast erudition and great depth of character, there are hardly any signs on record of any misgivings that he might have had about the contradictions that Pakistan's foreign policy, under his stewardship, was straddling. In these times, another superpower's conflict is winding down in Afghanistan, and India and Pakistan once again find themselves starting afresh on the road to peace amidst violent attempts by non-state actors to sabotage the process.

Meanwhile, the army finds itself under attack from the very shadows in which it nurtured its assets during Yaqub Khan's time. Indeed, his honest counsel would have been invaluable for us.

Sadly, we are left to surmise what we can of his thoughts from the recollections of those who knew him in the closing years of his life.

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PIA strike

LARGE-SCALE losses are no doubt mounting as PIA workers go on strike against what they perceive to be measures to privatise the national airline.

Earlier, the workers' unions had successfully blocked a board meeting, delaying the finalisation of the company's annual report, again due to their perception that the board was meeting to advance plans on privatisation.

Know more: [PIA workers observe countrywide strike](#)

While the frustration of the fliers is understood, and the difficulties facing the government in dealing with a loss-making enterprise with strong workers' unions are also evident, it is difficult to escape the impression that the centre is mishandling the whole process.

The manner in which the ordinance to make PIA a corporate body was issued on the sly was inexcusable; similarly, the bill in the National Assembly was more or less railroaded through.

It was amazing to see all PML-N legislators in the Assembly on the day of the vote, when otherwise their attendance leaves much to be desired.

True, ensuring a large turnout on an important day when the party leadership was abroad was a sign of discipline within the ranks.

Unfortunately, what was also on display was the party's reluctance to have a debate on the process as well as its haste to pass the bill without any consensus-building effort.

While no doubt PIA employees have every right to make their insecurity known through protest, they might have been less convinced of their action had the major political parties been persuaded to support the process the government had embarked upon.

In turn, these parties would feel far more comfortable supporting the government if they were at least informed about what the rulers' plans are.

Thus far all we know is that the government intends to locate a 'strategic investor' who will take a minority stake in the company along with management control. We don't know why the government delayed moving on this matter when the commitment for privatisation, or divestment at least, was given to the IMF at least two years ago.

There is little doubt that the government has to take some drastic action to rescue PIA. The losses are mounting, even after oil prices have hit their lowest point in over a decade, and management spends most of its time arranging funds to meet their debt-service obligations.

So long as PIA's balance sheet remains laden with an almost Rs300bn debt, it is difficult to envisage some sort of a turnaround in its finances and operations.

Making this happen in a matter of months is not something that ought to be attempted. It will take time to chalk out the strategy that leads out of this quagmire, and then build a consensus around it.

But the government's preference to make arbitrary decisions in the absence of transparency is to be blamed for the noisy fiasco that is shaping up around the future of the national airline.

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MQM's polite protest

TUESDAY'S protests in Karachi organised by the MQM are a far cry from what — until quite recently — used to happen whenever the party wanted to express its dissent in the metropolis.

At the very mention of an MQM protest call or 'day of mourning', a wave of panic would ripple through Karachi, disrupting everyday life. On the day of the protest, roads would be deserted, offices closed, businesses shuttered, and few would venture out of their homes.

Yet Tuesday's demonstrations — organised by the Muttahida to protest against what it terms is a media blackout of its supremo, Altaf Hussain — were a different affair entirely. Instead of flexing its muscle by shutting down the city, MQM leaders and supporters, in small groups, stood on green belts and sidewalks in numerous locations holding up placards inscribed with their demands.

Also read: [MQM protesters choose not to disrupt traffic](#)

Unlike the ominous protests of yore, the event resembled polite demonstrations organised by civil society. This is a far more civic way to express dissent.

However, it is a path the MQM should have adopted a long time ago. It would not be wrong to say that the security establishment-led crackdown on the party has had a role in mellowing the Muttahida's ways. Protest is a democratic right; yet shutting down the city through the use of force is unacceptable.

Despite its recent strained relations with the state and the establishment, it is a fact that the MQM has retained its support in urban Sindh. In the recent LG polls, the party won a large number of seats in Karachi.

But what is unfortunate is the PPP-led Sindh government's attitude of denying the MQM full powers to run the local governments. For example, the Muttahida has described the latest amendment in Sindh's LG law — regarding the election procedure of the mayor and deputy mayor — as 'rigging'.

The Sindh government has also ignored demands to hand over Karachi's water board to the city's elected mayor. The provincial administration should not try and micromanage the affairs of the local governments. This is a clear violation of the spirit of devolution, which seeks to empower the third tier.

The elected representatives of the third tier must be given full powers to discharge their duties and run civic affairs effectively.

Moreover, the MQM's legitimate demands should be met to encourage its continued participation in the political process, and to convince the party to forever shun the politics of agitation and strong-arm tactics.

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Denmark's callousness

Migrants and refugees have long been a distressing reality of the modern age.

Even so, the issue was forced into the headlines only when, during the latter half of last year and beyond, the numbers of desperate people trying to enter Europe reached such staggering proportions that the scale of the current crisis of dislocation became impossible to gloss over.

Since then, various countries' responses have served, in several instances, to expose as hollow rhetoric what was earlier projected as lofty commitment to the ideals of humanity and human rights, no less the dignity and equality of man.

Consider, for example, the case of Denmark, not so long ago a very vocal champion of refugee rights. Recently, however, it has taken stock of the implications of having registered during 2015 21,000 asylum applications against a population of 5.6 million people — making Denmark one of the top EU destinations per capita.

And as a result, following a series of polls showing that some 70pc of Danes rank immigration as their top political concern, parliament approved on Tuesday legislation that has drawn widespread condemnation.

International criticism is homing in on the plan for asylum seekers to be stripped of cash and items of value exceeding \$1,450, and the fact that family reunification has been delayed to three years.

From as high a forum as the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, has come the observation that the bill passed by the Danish parliament — sadly enough, by a huge majority — violates several conventions on rights and refugees.

The right-wing government of Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen is shrugging off the criticism, insisting that the country must take action, and that the world must come together to formulate a joint solution to the migrant crisis.

The latter is unarguable. Even so, Denmark's stance is opprobrious since it will further victimise the most hapless. It can only be hoped that the Scandinavian nation's actions do not set a precedent for the inhumane treatment of those fleeing unbearable suffering.

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Schools' closure

GIVEN this country's long-drawn-out and bloody engagement with militancy and terrorism, and given the lessons dictated by the mass slaughter of the most vulnerable, it would have been reasonable to expect that at least at some levels of state and society standard operating procedures would have been developed.

But judging by the chaos vis-à-vis educational institutions in large parts of the country — specifically Punjab, the Islamabad Capital Territory, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi — that was seen in the past few days, this would not seem to be the case.

In the wake of the atrocity unleashed on Charsadda's Bacha Khan University and the subsequent statement given out by the banned TTP, the level of insecurity had been very high.

Earlier during the week, it had been announced that schools in Punjab would remain closed for the few remaining days of the month on account of the cold snap. But that decision, endlessly circulated and breathlessly speculated upon as it was by the electronic media (helped in no small part by the social media) seems to have set off a domino effect.

By Wednesday, an as yet unknown number of institutions (both public and private) had been closed.

The decision that same day that Army Public schools and Bahria colleges would also be closed fuelled the panic, with even more institutions barring their gates. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of parents and guardians were left asking questions to which no answers have been forthcoming from any level of governance.

Were the closures indefinite? Was the risk so clear and immediate? What was the state doing to ensure that another institution was not targeted? Dismayingly enough, the government remained silent; there were no words to quell the panic, no expression of purpose about militancy, no policy statement about security.

In short, the state completely and shamefully abdicated its responsibility, both in terms of fostering a better security situation and in allaying the fears of an anxious citizenry.

If, as Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar stated yesterday, “Pakistan is losing the psychological war against terror”, then the unconscionable silence of state authority in the face of turmoil has had a significant part to play.

Urgently needed now is renewed resolve to improve security conditions in the country and to protect institutes of learning.

The guidelines issued after the Army Public School massacre on Dec 16, 2014 need to be revisited; and while the resources of the state have their limits, institutions nevertheless need to be provided with all the help they need to fortify themselves in the face of the ugly twist that the war against militancy has taken.

In the larger picture, it has to be recognised that this conflict is already levying an unbearable cost on the country’s future — the latter will not have a chance unless the very roots of militancy are weeded out.

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Hindu marriage bill

WHILE many politicians are quick to issue public statements about the rights of minorities in Pakistan, when it comes to taking practical steps to secure these rights, there is very little to show. A prime example of this strange paradox is the decades-old issue of legislation related to Hindu marriage.

At the current time, there is no marriage law for the millions of Hindus living in Pakistan. This legal vacuum naturally creates a multitude of issues for Pakistani Hindus, especially the women of the community.

For example, Hindu women have to face problems in proving their relationships when dealing with officialdom, while widows are particularly disadvantaged. Without official proof of relationships, getting government documents issued or moving forward on any other activity which involves documentation — from opening bank accounts to applying for visas — becomes next to impossible for any citizen.

So how is the Hindu community supposed to cope? Some experts point out that forced conversions are also facilitated by the lack of documentation of Hindu marriages.

Yet despite the fact that many of these points were raised at a seminar in Islamabad on Wednesday by the chairman of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Law and Justice — which is supposed to approve the Hindu marriage bill to be tabled in the house — he was unable to convince the committee to give the green signal at a meeting on the same day. As reported, some committee members had issues with certain clauses of the bill.

Despite the fact that even the Supreme Court has ordered the state to enact the law, lawmakers have failed to do the needful.

While family law is now a provincial subject, the federating units can ask the centre, through resolutions passed by their respective assemblies, to legislate on the matter.

Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have passed the requisite resolutions, but the Sindh and Punjab assemblies have not yet done so.

This tardiness and lack of political will are inexcusable. If the parties leading the Sindh and Punjab governments are serious about their commitment to minority rights, they should pass the resolutions without further delay in order to do away with the hurdles in the way of a Hindu marriage law.

Sindh should show particular alacrity, as most of Pakistan's Hindus reside in this province. Failure to take timely action and pass the law will only compound this decades-old injustice and expose our leaders' claims of respecting minority rights as hollow.

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Karachi mass transit

THAT the absence of political will stands between Karachi and a mass transit system has always been obvious. But on Wednesday, someone had the courage to pointedly blame the PPP and MQM for their lack of interest in building a modern transport system for the nation's biggest city.

Between them, these two political parties virtually monopolise representation in the provincial assembly of Sindh.

If they had cooperated with each other, the very face of the province would have been different. Instead, the PPP and MQM leaderships have hardly ever managed to stick together to work sincerely and with determination to give the people of Sindh a better life.

Their perpetual quarrels and the breakup of several coalition governments for reasons that often appeared frivolous have stood in the way of development projects, a mass transit system for Karachi being one of them.

At a workshop organised by the Asian Development Bank and a British consultancy firm, Sameer Hamid Dodhy of Shehri said work on the Bus Rapid Transit system for Karachi could not be launched because the two parties had shown no interest in it. "Good projects," said the Shehri official, "have come and gone" because of "a constant alibi" given by the provincial government.

The BRT system is one of the many "good projects", another being the Karachi Circular Railway. The KCR has only been "spoken about"; it has mainly remained on paper.

Nobody, thus, would disagree with Mr Dodhy when he said "nothing can happen" unless the PPP and MQM were "taken on board".

But perhaps it is not a question of being taken on board; these two parties should themselves have served as a growth engine for Sindh and taken other stakeholders on board.

As the workshop was told, work on the BRT could not begin because the provincial legislature hadn't bothered to pass the required law. It is time these two parties realised the enormous damage they have inflicted on Sindh because of their internecine quarrels and lack of vision.

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Chaudhry Nisar's outburst

INTERIOR Minister Nisar Ali Khan appears to have a notoriously thin skin. It was recently on display when Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Khursheed Shah did what he seems to do best — provoke the interior minister.

Earlier in the week, Mr Shah castigated the interior minister for his alleged unavailability in parliament and inaction over many parts of the National Action Plan.

As soon as the interior minister rediscovered his health — his indisposition was perhaps the reason why he kept away from the public gaze after criticism of his ministry — he has seen it fit to assail Mr Shah.

It has been a thoroughly dubious attack. The recent carnage at Bacha Khan University in Charsadda was not an isolated incident as the interior minister has suggested, nor is there an obvious reason to deny an independent investigation into the circumstances that allowed the attack to take place.

Sadly, the interior minister's belligerence is not new. At the height of the PTI protest on Constitution Avenue, Chaudhry Nisar turned his guns on veteran PPP senator Aitzaz Ahsan.

At that particular moment, the PML-N needed every bit of democratic support that it could muster in parliament. Instead, bizarrely, the interior minister turned the special joint session of parliament called to reinforce support for democracy into a slanging match with Mr Ahsan.

For some reason — blame it on Nawaz Sharif who even now seems unwilling to rein in his interior minister or the latter politician himself who came across as de facto deputy prime minister, unwilling to accept a role equal to the rest of the cabinet — Chaudhry Nisar was allowed to undermine the entire joint session of parliament.

It was a ghastly performance in September 2014 but unfortunately, he does not appear to have learned any lessons.

Undeniably, there have been many faults in Chaudhry Nisar's parliamentary career. However, the role of Khursheed Shah as leader of the opposition is not altogether commendable either.

Mr Shah has proved himself in parliament as an orator and a combatant, but what of the timing of each of his speeches? Ultimately, it appears that whatever the legitimacy of his complaints, there is a link to the pressure on the PPP — or elements close to the PPP leadership — in Sindh.

The ongoing incarceration of Dr Asim Hussain appears to have inordinately drawn the attention of the PPP. In fact, be it Dr Hussain or others accused of crimes connected to the very apex of the PPP leadership in parliament, the party only appears to become active when it finds itself under attack, either in Sindh or at the centre.

The interior minister was wrong to respond in the manner he did and Mr Shah was wrong to attack.

Regrettably, it appears that the only thing the parliamentary leadership is interested in is scoring political points.

Hidden costs of LNG

It looks like a host of hidden costs associated with imported LNG are about to be offloaded onto gas consumers.

In the ECC meeting held on Thursday, the finance minister had a tense exchange with a member from Ogra, the oil and gas sector regulator, about levying an additional charge on gas consumers to help pay for the laying of gas infrastructure, particularly for transporting LNG upcountry.

The regulator believes that consumers have already been charged for this under the Gas Infrastructure Development Cess, and the finance minister believes that more funds will be needed and should therefore be included in gas tariffs. This is pure double taxation and needs to be opposed.

The finance minister has shown a troublesome willingness to resort to expedient measures of this sort over the years, taking the easy route to raising revenues rather than walking the hard road of reform — and consumers and the paying public are worse off for it.

In the matter of revenues for gas infrastructure, the finance minister is right that the funding required for the various pipeline projects is large and will need extraordinary measures to meet. But first there should be a proper accounting of what happened to the funds collected under the GIDC thus far.

Next there should be proper reform of gas pricing, since the continuation of a rigid administrative pricing regime in the gas sector is at the root of its financial constraints.

If there were greater market pricing of domestic gas, perhaps it wouldn't be necessary to resort to extraordinary revenue measures to pay for future infrastructure requirements.

It also needs to be asked what additional costs arising from LNG imports will now be bundled into the gas tariffs as imported gas begins to play a bigger role in our economy in the future.

At this rate, consumers are entitled to feel that they have been misled into thinking that imported LNG brings massive savings, if we are to now believe that the infrastructure requirements to handle this also need to be factored into the tariff.

The best way to avoid landing up in such a situation is to advance reforms in the gas sector — with particular focus on pricing — where private markets and players can assume a larger role in

mobilising the investment to meet future needs. Sadly enough, on that front the government has very little to show.

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Passport delivery

THE past few years have seen a number of changes where the issuance of passports is concerned.

The biggest change, of course, has been the introduction of machine-readable passports and the digitisation of data, that has made the passport application process far less cumbersome, though bugs in the system remain.

Two recent innovations introduced by the interior ministry include the launch of a voice helpline service and a passport home delivery service.

Now people will be able to track their passports, check for passport office locations and get other information related to the travel document in Urdu, English, Pashto, Seraiki and Sindhi. As for the home delivery service, for a small fee passports can be delivered to the applicant's doorstep by a private courier company in Pakistan's major cities.

These innovations are welcome, and it is hoped they will further make the process of applying for or renewing a passport easier for citizens.

The home delivery service has initially drawn a lukewarm response. This may well be due to the lack of trust and confidence that citizens have in the state.

Many people are only comfortable with the thought of picking up the document from the passport office themselves. But the state should encourage citizens to opt for the service, and assure them that their documents will safely reach them.

This service can especially be useful for people living in far-flung areas. In fact, the authorities could also consider the services of Pakistan Post in this venture. Meanwhile, the interior ministry needs to maintain greater vigilance at the passport offices.

Despite the positive changes in the method of data collection, most passport offices could do with better organisation and efficiency. For example, despite the simplification of the process, touts and the 'agent' mafia are still active and on the prowl, no doubt with encouragement from elements within.

It would also help if more passport offices are opened to process applications in areas with high demand but not enough supply, such as Sindh.

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Dormant cabinet

WHAT did the image intend to convey? Perhaps the PML-N brain trust believed that a picture of a meeting between the prime minister and his top civilian aides to discuss security matters would suggest a hands-on political leadership that is stable and mature. Instead, a very different signal has been sent. In a week in which the PML-N has been under attack on the parliamentary front, a strong, democratic signal from the prime minister would have been welcome. A meeting of the federal cabinet — the very constitutional forum designed to handle discussions such as the one presided over by the prime minister on Friday and a forum that has not been convened in half a year — should have been the only democratic option. But the PML-N does not appear to be interested in institutional strengthening. Only when the government is in trouble and needs to remind others of the constitutional separation of powers or the proper institutional roles does the PML-N leadership appear to remember core democratic institutions.

Has all hope for institutional reforms in the short-term been extinguished? Part of the problem is parliament itself — most mainstream parties appear to have accepted the primacy of a democratic mandate, but not gone beyond the electoral aspects of democracy. If Senator Aitzaz Ahsan's taunts about the federal cabinet have been uncomfortably close to the truth, what of the Sindh cabinet, which for all intents and purposes appears to be controlled remotely from Dubai? Even more egregiously, during the life of the last parliament, the political centre of the country was the presidency, where the PPP boss Asif Ali Zardari had taken up residence. Similarly, the PTI is quick to pounce on the PML-N's parliamentary and democratic missteps, but how effective and empowered is the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly? As for parliament itself, the PTI chief, Imran Khan, still appears to have very little regard for its processes. Rare is the parliamentary day that Mr Khan makes an appearance in the National Assembly.

Yet, it is the federal government on whom the greatest democratic responsibility falls. The tendency of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to centralise power, restrict access to himself and channel most decision-making through no more than a handful of aides and long-standing political allies tends to have a corrosive effect far beyond the corridors of power in Islamabad. With the PML-N itself, many of the next generation of leaders have been reduced to trying to desperately gain access to a chosen few. Even in the federal cabinet, full ministers with what would otherwise be considered meaningful portfolios can do no more than try and catch the attention of Ishaq Dar or a bureaucrat in the Prime Minister's Office. What Mr Sharif does not appear to realise is that democracy is strengthened not just by the decisions made, but the manner and forums in which they are made.

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Lahore's train project

THE Orange Line train project is proving to be more difficult to implement than anything the Shahbaz Sharif set-up has deemed fit for Lahore in recent years. The voices are getting louder even as the Punjab government brooks little opposition and pounces upon whoever appears to offer the slightest sign of resistance. On Friday, the redoubtable minister Rana Sanaullah rose on the floor of the provincial assembly to counter with typical force the objections made by the leader of the tiny opposition in the house, Mian Mahmoodur Rasheed of the PTI. Mr Rasheed reiterated how the project could be disastrous for some historical buildings, and if these were not worth saving, then there were people who had their homes on the line. He said the train lacked the sanction of the Punjab Assembly — one elected body whose blessings could have been sought in the absence of a local government. Mr Sanaullah vehemently responded that no rules had been broken and that it was impossible for the opposition to prove their case constitutionally.

It appears that all governments jealously guard their development projects, especially those very proud of their feats. Unfortunately, there has been little room for debate in this case as the Punjab government sets out to fight those it identifies as troublemakers blocking the orange train and not just your ordinary dissenters in a democratic order. More recently, there have been violent demonstrations by people who have their houses on the train's route. These cries of anguish have been responded to officially with an assurance that those who lose their houses will be compensated. Full stop. Just as these promises fail to calm fears among those affected by the advancing train, the effort by the project's opponents to sugar-coat their criticism — by referring to some grand achievements of Shahbaz Sharif — has had little effect on the government. In the event, where a dialogue aimed towards a resolution of the problem fails to take place, it once again comes down to the court's resolving the issue. Last week, the Lahore High Court stayed the work on the train line within a 200-metre radius of 11 heritage sites and fixed the next hearing for Feb 4. Failing to convince the government on its own, civil society will be hoping for some permanent relief by the court. And it must have the support of all those wary of one-dimensional development initiated without a proper exercise in understanding popular priorities.

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Uzair Baloch mystery

At times our law-enforcement and security agencies work in ways that are unconventional to say the least. Take the example of the arrest of Uzair Baloch, a shadowy figure in Karachi's underworld. His arrest was announced by the Rangers on Saturday. Apparently Baloch, who heads the banned People's Amn Committee based in Lyari and allegedly has political links, was picked up "outside Karachi" by the paramilitary force. Yet the arrest has raised several questions; for example, how did Baloch, who had reportedly been detained in Dubai in 2014, make his way to Karachi? In fact, Pakistani police officials had travelled to the emirate to get a hold of him, but returned empty-handed. The authorities need to explain how Uzair Baloch ended up on Karachi's outer rim when his last sighting was in the UAE.

The suspect's arrest has uncanny similarities with the apprehending of two men wanted in the Imran Farooq murder case; these individuals were said to have been captured in Chaman, the Balochistan town on the Afghan border. They were earlier thought to be in the custody of the intelligence agencies. Recently, the family of one of the suspects, Khalid Shamim, has contested official claims of the arrest in Chaman; his wife has said Shamim was already in custody. These incidents indicate the need for more transparency where law-enforcement and criminal justice procedures are concerned. Security agencies obviously cannot be expected to reveal operational details, but the basic facts behind the arrest of suspects must be made public. Uzair Baloch was considered a 'kingmaker' in the crime-ridden area of Lyari, so much so that he allegedly vetted the PPP's electoral candidates from the locality. Yet there are a large number of cases against the suspect, including of murder, extortion and terrorism. It is hoped public proceedings against him bring to the fore more details about the nexus of crime, militancy and politics in Karachi. Clearly, explosive details may emerge when Uzair Baloch is produced in court.

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