

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of June, 2015

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LG polls in KP

GIVEN the complexity and sprawl of the local government elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on Saturday, few expected that this first-time exercise under the new LG system would be entirely trouble-free.

But surely no one expected that the ECP and the provincial government would let down the voter to the extent they did on Saturday, with many observers already labelling the election one of the worst administered and most shambolic in the province's history.

Also read: [Six people killed in clashes during Khyber Pakhtunkhwa LG polls](#)

The Free and Fair Election Network, an independent election-monitoring body, has issued its preliminary assessment and this is the verdict: "The election was competitive, election campaign relatively peaceful but culminating in an Election Day that was marred by administrative mismanagement, extremely slow processing of voters, procedural irregularities and confusions, obstacles for women voters and widespread incidents of violence."

So what went wrong? It appears that neither was the ECP prepared for the exercise nor was the provincial government ready to accept responsibility for creating voter awareness about the new system and how to navigate a complex balloting process.

Worse yet, neither the ECP nor the provincial government appear willing to reflect on their roles in the debacle. Yesterday, PTI supremo Imran Khan pointedly claimed that administrative and police powers had been transferred to the ECP on polling day and sought to deflect all blame from the provincial government.

Meanwhile, the ECP issued an early declaration on Saturday that was striking in its defiance: "ECP expresses its satisfaction at the end of the polls for local bodies election in KPK province."

If voters, the public, media, candidates and the political parties are all crying foul, surely the ECP should be focusing on the complaints instead of patting itself on the back. With Punjab and Sindh yet to hold LG elections, the ECP needs to urgently review what went wrong in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and prepare for the future.

As for the LG system in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa itself, the focus will soon switch to delivery — and whether the provincial authorities will seek to cooperate with or undermine the LG system.

What the rules of business are to be will determine how effectively the three-tier village/neighbourhood, tehsil and district council system will work. Moreover, with each of these three tiers elected separately, will the demands and suggestions of village/neighbourhood councils truly be heard at the tehsil and district level?

Then there is the question of overlapping powers and funding. Will the provincial set-up really release the full percentage of

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development funds to the local bodies that the LG law requires them to do?

And how will provincial politicians respond to a new system that seeks to usurp much of their traditional role in patronage politics? There are many unanswered questions.

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Mad, mad, mad world

GIVEN the state of turmoil through which much of the world seems currently to be passing, the news is inclined towards the grim. It isn't often that consumers receive anything that even remotely resembles an invitation to smile.

Some might have been tempted, though, to do precisely that when it was reported recently that villagers in the Pathankot district in India nabbed an entity they thought needed to be investigated for spying, and duly informed the authorities.

The district police got down to investigating, and the Intelligence Bureau and the Border Security Force were informed. While initial checking and a body scan brought no evidence to light, apparently there are strong grounds to believe that the suspect is from, and working for, Pakistan: its body bears the words 'Shakargarh' and 'Narowal', both on this side of the border. That the creature in question is a pigeon can be

discounted as a trivial detail; after all, cross-border infiltration is a real risk.

Know more: ['Spy pigeon' detained in India after crossing border from Pakistan](#)

This can be borne out by the experience of dozens of villagers and fishermen from both sides of the border who have, over the years, strayed into enemy territory or territorial waters by accident.

That said, though, it must be conceded that there is singular charm in the idea that in this era of cybercrime and surveillance by satellite, there is still scope for the authorities to suspect that the old-fashioned messenger pigeon might be a tool in the spymasters' arsenal.

It reminds one of a distant time when the term 'cloak and dagger' raised visions of the sort of 'Spy vs Spy' situations that made famous the Cuban cartoonist Antonio Prohias, who was known for his political satire and worked in the US at the height of the Cold War.

Much of the world may have moved into a zone of far greater technological subtleties, but the paranoia across both sides of the Pakistan-India border seems to have survived intact. Alfred E. Neuman would be proud.

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‘Suspect’ identity

AT one stroke, some 100,000 individuals who defined themselves as Pakistanis have found that they have been shorn of their nationality.

They comprise those whose computerised national identity cards have been blocked or not renewed by the National Database Registration Authority on the grounds that their status is “suspect (alien)”.

While Nadra maintains it is only taking this step after meticulous scrutiny by provincial joint verification committees, those affected contend it is an imperfect and discriminatory process that is unfairly penalising them.

A recent report in this paper included accounts of some distressed individuals claiming to have presented documentation to Nadra that proves their long-standing ties to Pakistan going back several generations.

Know more: [100,000 Pakistanis lose nationality for being ‘suspect aliens’](#)

Nevertheless, they say, they have found themselves either unable to obtain or renew their CNICs. Most of those affected belong to KP or Balochistan, with Nadra suspecting them of being Afghan or, in more general terms, ‘non-national’.

Given its porous borders, strategic location within the cross-currents of regional politics, and its fractious domestic politics, Pakistan’s overall security concerns require that utmost

vigilance be exercised to ensure only bona fide Pakistanis obtain national identity documentation.

Although in a country with a long history of in-migration, the definition of ‘bona fide Pakistanis’ is debatable and can be applied in a less rigid — and more humane — manner, that perhaps is a discussion for another time.

For now at least, those who have a legitimate claim to CNICs, but have been told their status is ‘suspect’, should not have to run from pillar to post to track the progress on their cases. In an increasingly digitised world, an identity card is a gateway to many practical aspects of life, such as opening a bank account, purchasing a cellphone SIM, buying property, gaining access to certain facilities, etc.

Parents’ CNICs are also the basis upon which children obtain the ‘B’ form that is required for their enrolment in board examinations, to apply for their passports, and their own CNICs when they reach adulthood.

Suffice to say, the refusal or cancellation of CNICs can have intergenerational repercussions. That is why it is so essential to ensure that no one is unjustly denied proof of nationality. One can, however, appreciate the security concerns slowing down the verification process, and Nadra’s attempts to avoid a repeat of embarrassing errors.

After all, it was discovered earlier this year that it had issued a CNIC to the famed ‘Afghan girl’ Sharbat Bibi.

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A downturn in Pak-Afghan ties

A STRONGLY worded letter leaked to the media from Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to Pakistani civil and military authorities suggests that all is far from well in Pak-Afghan ties — just when there had been public indications that the long-fraught relationship was veering towards pragmatic improvement.

From the contents of the letter reported in the media so far, it appears that Mr Ghani has wilted under twin pressures: from the Afghan Taliban's so-called spring offensive, the intensity of which has been unprecedented this year, and from domestic political opposition, which has stridently criticised Mr Ghani's attempted outreach towards Pakistan.

Take a look: [*Ghani calls for tough action against Taliban*](#)

But the fresh tension is not one-sided. In a meeting at the ISI headquarters late last week, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and army chief Gen Raheel Sharif are reported to have discussed the role that the National Directorate of Security, the Afghan intelligence agency, may be playing inside Pakistan, and there have been suggestions since that some of the violence inside the country in recent times may be linked to an India-Afghan combine against Pakistan.

It certainly appears to be a rapid decline from what was a high point just weeks earlier with Prime Minister Sharif condemning the Afghan Taliban's spring offensive while in Kabul and the

ISI and NDS reportedly having inked a historic agreement to improve cooperation and intelligence-sharing.

But perhaps it is a part of the multi-tiered signalling that both sides have long used, cooperating in some areas and falling out in others. Consider that the principal longer-term goal — reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban — has not been disrupted, with a meeting between the two sides believed to have been held recently in China, a meeting facilitated and attended by Pakistani military officials, again according to news reports.

The key, then, as ever, appears to be the careful management of tensions and to keep the various strands of the relationship as separate from each other as possible.

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

The Afghan government's anger at Pakistan over the Taliban spring offensive is hyperbolic — the Afghan National Security Forces have had years to prepare for this first summer of fighting where they are front and centre, and not foreign troops, while it is more than improbable that a great majority of the recent attacks originate in Pakistan itself.

Similarly, Pakistani authorities are far too quick to blame some sanctuaries and intrusion from the Afghan side of the border for inadequacies in the counterterrorism and counter-insurgency strategy here.

The truth is, for all Pakistan's and Afghanistan's squabbling, the fate of the countries and their people remains intertwined.

Both states know that, even as they struggle to overcome decades-old suspicions and, in some case, hostilities. But try they must — and the immediate goal should be to put an end to public bickering and, instead, return to quieter, less public channels of communication.

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Pabbi incident

THE ugly episode in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa town of Pabbi on Sunday — and its aftermath — illustrates that despite the claims by some quarters that a new political culture is being forged in Pakistan, in many respects the vindictive ways of old refuse to go away.

Though there are claims and counter-claims about what exactly transpired, this much is clear: Habibullah, a teenaged PTI supporter, was shot dead as hundreds of the party's activists staged a victory march after Saturday's LG polls, and headed towards the local ANP office in Pabbi.

Take a look: [ANP's Mian Iftikhar Hussain arrested after killing of PTI activist](#)

Eyewitnesses say some of the marchers were indulging in celebratory gunfire. The victim's father at first alleged that ANP secretary general Mian Iftikhar Hussain — who was

inside the party office when the PTI crowd arrived — ordered his guard to open fire on the marchers.

The senior ANP leader has denied this, saying the mob was buying for his blood and that he had to be whisked away to safety by army officers.

Mr Hussain was arrested and produced in court on Monday. While Imran Khan says the PTI has nothing to do with the arrest and that this is purely a police matter, a further twist emerged yesterday when the victim's father told the court that he had been “pressured” to register a case against Mian Iftikhar Hussain.

No doubt, due process has to be followed and the killers of the teenager must face the law.

Yet there is a strong perception that Mr Hussain is being victimised on political grounds. While the political stature of the accused must not colour the investigation, it is a fact that the ANP leader is a politician of repute and has openly spoken out against violence and extremism.

His own son was killed by militants. It must be revealed who put pressure on the victim's father to implicate the ANP leader. The possibility that Habibullah fell victim to celebratory gunfire must also be considered by the law enforcers.

Above all, the investigation must be free from political pressure. Political parties have condemned the arrest of Mr Hussain and the way in which he was led away. If it is proved that the senior leader was implicated in the case to settle political scores, it would be an unhealthy precedent.

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The PTI has itself complained of being a target of political victimisation in other provinces. It would be a shame if it is itself now resorting to such tactics in the province it rules.

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Zimbabwe tour

THE Zimbabwe cricket team's recent tour to Pakistan could be termed historic for numerous reasons as it brought together passion, intelligent planning, deep ambition and competitive cricket.

Most importantly, it marked the return of international cricket to this land after a barren run of six long, excruciating years during which cricket-mad Pakistani fans were deprived of action in the playing fields at home.

What must also be appreciated is the decision of the Zimbabwe cricketers and their board to shrug off the tragedy in Karachi to honour their commitment, and in the final days of the tour to continue despite a suicide blast close to Lahore's Gaddafi stadium where the matches were held.

Take a look: [Huge sigh of relief as Zimbabwe tour ends without incident](#)

Against this is the approach of the International Cricket Council that did not send its umpires and match officials.

Besides the visitors, the credit for the tour's success must also be given to the Pakistan Cricket Board and the government for its strong security efforts, while, at the same time, encouraging the crowds to throng to the stadiums in all five games despite the cumbersome procedures.

As for on-field action, the Zimbabweans, despite losing four of the five games, exposed many chinks in the Pakistan team's armour by playing some top-class cricket. In almost all the matches played, they treated Pakistan's strong bowling attack with scant respect, posting handsome scores on the board besides fielding and bowling like a top-ranked side.

While the crowds backed their heroes to the hilt, the lack of quality talent rankled. It is also obvious that the high-profile coaches had been unable to put together a formidable outfit from a wide variety of players.

Pakistan is on the verge of being ousted from the ICC Champions Trophy, to be played in England in 2017, and drastic measures are required to streamline domestic cricket along professional lines.

It is to be sincerely hoped that the Zimbabwe tour has finally brought the phoenix back from the ashes and that a new era will now dawn for Pakistan cricket.

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Lawless Karachi

DECLINE is manifested in many ways; not all of them play out in the glare of the media. Particularly not when they take place in the lives of the poor.

In Karachi, amidst its vast swathes of urban decay and municipal neglect, the Orangi Pilot Project provided a road map for citizens to develop and sustain basic services on a self-help basis.

Located in one of the biggest slums in Asia, the celebrated project was replicated in many other developing countries. However, as per a report in this paper, the OPP — two years after the as yet unsolved murder of its director Perween Rahman — is a shadow of its former self.

Know more: [Orangi Pilot Project team relocate amid growing threats](#)

Ms Rahman was working on the regularisation of Karachi's numerous outlying settlements, which gave its impoverished residents legal title and hence some protection against the greed of ruthless land developers. That came to an abrupt end when she died, and serious threats to other senior OPP staff have forced them to relocate.

The Karachi operation was launched nearly two years ago to restore law and order and reclaim the city from its criminal syndicates, politically affiliated or otherwise. However, as the intimidation of OPP personnel illustrates, the environment for civic engagement remains fraught with risk; forces inimical to

citizens' rights continue to thrive, making a mockery of the operation's avowed objectives.

Community spaces, such as that run by [Sabeen Mahmud](#) — who was murdered in April, it is believed on account of her activism — are constantly under threat.

From a wider perspective, the situation in Karachi is symptomatic of the overall malaise that afflicts this country. Anyone who fights for the rights of the poor, the marginalised and the voiceless pays a high price — often the highest possible — for his/her integrity and courage, while the state — to its enduring shame — responds either reactively or not at all.

Even educationists have not been spared. [Dr Bernadette Dean](#) who was engaged in the laudable exercise of trying to purge Sindh's school curriculum of hate material had to flee this country after a campaign run by extremist elements against her.

Assistant professor [Debra Lobo](#), whose academic contribution has been described as “immeasurable” by colleagues, was seriously injured in a targeted attack. Then there are Karachi University professors [Dr Shakeel Aujand](#) and [Dr Waheedur Rehman](#), who were murdered in broad daylight. The city is yet to break free from the shackles of those who would hold it to ransom.

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Development priorities

THE new development budget for the next fiscal year shows some skewed priorities at play.

Irrigation projects have been reduced, as have health and education, under the argument that these are now provincial responsibilities.

Outlays on roads have been increased, and there is a mammoth Rs100bn hike in spending on IDP repatriation and “related security expenditure”.

Also read: [5.5pc GDP growth target approved for fiscal year 2015-16](#)

Additionally, Rs20bn have been allocated for the prime minister’s miscellaneous youth-related initiatives, such as laptop distribution. This is a little puzzling and some questions necessarily arise.

Why is ‘security-related expenditure’ being budgeted in the development plan for next year? And how does the bill for IDP repatriation add up to Rs100bn, especially considering the announcements that repatriation may be delayed further?

And why do the prime minister’s youth-related initiatives merit Rs20bn while other vital programmes such as health and education are brushed off to the provinces?

Roads are useful infrastructure projects, but why is railway not being touted as a bigger priority if communications are

important? Water-related infrastructure at a time of climate change and repeated annual flooding must go beyond just the lining of water courses and building dams. It must include appropriate flood warning and control infrastructure as well, which should be retained as a federal priority, but it seems as if the government is not interested in pursuing these.

The development plan appears to reflect the government’s preference for high-visibility infrastructure projects and schemes to distribute goodies instead of investing in social service delivery.

The extraordinary allocation for ‘security-related expenditure’ also raises serious questions about whether or not this belongs in a development plan or if it should be met through current expenditure instead.

If the government is getting ready to tell us that this is its plan for lifting the growth rate up to 5.5pc for next year, we can only say that it is likely to be met with scepticism. We hope that the budget itself will reflect more coherent thinking.

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India's objections to CPEC

ONCE it is decided that the time has come for Pakistan and India to undergo another round of heightened hostilities there is never a dearth of issues to build up in order to sustain the tension.

There is always a cricket series that can be put on hold. There is easy “evidence” furnished by the Pakistani state about India’s spy agency RAW fomenting trouble via its Pakistan-based proxies. There is Kashmir, with its “Pakistan-trained infiltrators” emerging from the shadows, according to Indian reports.

In short, there are many differences that can be used to hold up whatever little progress has been achieved by the two countries on the peace agenda.

Also read: [No engagement with Pakistan planned, says Indian minister](#)

Now, amidst all the predictions of economics acting as the sole, or dominant, factor shaping international politics, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor — to which the Indian foreign minister has unjustifiably voiced strong objections — threatens to open up yet another front for the trademark waving of clenched fists by Islamabad and New Delhi.

On Sunday, India’s foreign minister Sushma Swaraj told journalists in Delhi that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had taken up the issue of the \$46bn corridor running from Gwadar to China’s Xinjiang region with the Chinese

government and had termed it “unacceptable” — a stance which has been criticised by Pakistan.

Even though India’s concerns appear to be rooted in a territorial dispute as it claims the corridor will run through Pakistan’s Kashmir region, such an attitude is both petty and unfortunate.

Apart from the fact that CPEC is a bilateral matter, the project, if implemented in a transparent manner and keeping the aspirations of all stakeholders in mind, has the potential to transform the economics of the region for the better.

Much will of course depend on efforts inside Pakistan, but the corridor can be seen as part of a larger plan to focus on connectivity that benefits more than one country in the region.

The objections to CPEC are also a reflection of the deteriorating ties between India and Pakistan in the larger context. The days when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hinted at better relations between the two countries have long passed.

In search of a common, recognisable ‘enemy’ to hit out at, Pakistanis are increasingly falling back on the old ‘hate-India’ mantra to build national cohesion.

Across the border, there are signs that the ‘nationalist’ Indian rulers believe that raising the Pakistan bogey for the present would benefit them. In addition, the BJP government does not see a resumption of dialogue between the two countries soon, linking talks with action in Pakistan against those accused of carrying out the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Such mistrust between the two has impeded progress in so many areas, besides doing nothing to tap the potential of the region's billion-plus inhabitants. A negative approach to CPEC will not change that.

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Balochistan solution

PAKISTAN'S fractious politics and the push and pull of civil-military ties have made the 'all-party conference' a go-to mechanism to demonstrate that all stakeholders "are on the same page", which is often seen as a page from the security establishment's playbook.

So in the aftermath of the horrific mass murder of Pakhtuns last week in Mastung that appears to have opened up another dangerous front in the insurgency-wracked province, a multi-party conference was inevitable.

The meeting, held in Quetta, was convened by Chief Minister Abdul Malik Baloch and attended by the prime minister, provincial governor, federal and provincial ministers, the commandant of the Southern Command, and heads of intelligence and law-enforcement agencies.

Know more: [Enemies of Pakistan want to divide the nation: PM Nawaz](#)

The participants condemned the incident as one of the worst terrorist attacks in the country and an attempt to divide the various ethnic groups that have hitherto lived together peacefully in Balochistan.

The main consensus that emerged from the conference centred on the involvement of foreign forces in fomenting trouble in Balochistan through their proxies in the province.

India's objections to the \$46bn China-Pakistan Economic Corridor — recently articulated in no uncertain terms by its foreign minister Sushma Swaraj — were held up as evidence of its implacable opposition to the prospect of Pakistan's economic progress.

In effect, it seems that the same policies, based on a narrow, securitised view of the problem and which have shown little or no success thus far, will continue to be followed.

That is not to say that external forces are not working behind the scenes to exploit the situation. That is what foreign intelligence agencies do as a matter of course, and in Balochistan there is no shortage of anti-state elements — separatists would be quick to describe themselves as such — who may be willing to work hand-in-glove with them.

The mention at the conference of Zarb-i-Azb's success in wiping out terrorist sanctuaries in Fata could point towards a possible expansion of the military offensive in Balochistan to eliminate insurgent groups in the province, although operations by security forces in certain areas are already taking place.

A militarised approach such as this is likely to intensify the suffering of ordinary Baloch and further fuel already widespread separatist sentiment. While foreign meddling must be exposed and its actors dealt with through due process, the only long-term solution is to sincerely and comprehensively address the deprivation of the Baloch and the quasi-colonisation of the province's resources.

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War 'carnival'

EACH country has its own reasons to lament war and many have developed ways to remember the dead. A most visually arresting exercise was when the centenary of the First World War was observed.

The scarlet poppy has been worn on Remembrance Day since 1921 to commemorate the millions that fell, and last year for several weeks the Tower of London's dry moat was filled with over 800,000 ceramic poppies in an art installation titled 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red'.

In many other places, traditions include observing minutes of silence, assemblies at soldiers' graveyards, etc. All such ceremonies have one thing in common: they are sombre, serious affairs to reflect on the gravity of conflict and its long-lasting consequences. The message is clear: war is something that ought not to be celebrated.

Take a look: [Modi govt plans 1965 war carnival](#)

Indeed, to do so would be distasteful — which is why the suggestion attributed by the Indian press to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is so particularly jarring. The Kolkata-based Telegraph reported on Monday that the right-wing government has ordered its armed forces to organise a 'carnival' to mark 50 years of the 1965 war with Pakistan. This three-week-long extravaganza is to take place in the heart of New Delhi, with tableaux, processions and exhibitions.

Mr Modi's government may have its own agenda in making these plans, but it is difficult not to find such a display of gratuitous chest-thumping abhorrent.

The families of those who lost their lives, whether here or across the border, are bound to be dismayed at the prospect of the conflict, which claimed so many lives, being turned into a spectacle with the basest of motives.

Yet, such a move is unfortunately entirely in line with the current Indian government's apparent determination to adopt a hawkish approach towards Pakistan in order to garner domestic support.

This is a great pity; what this region needs is peace and stability — and that will not be possible until both countries make sincere efforts in this direction.

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Flawed but democratic

THE Khyber Pakhtunkhwa local government election was flawed on many counts — this much is already obvious. But does overall mismanagement and sporadic incidents of serious violence amount to a stolen election?

Unhappily, political parties in the country are once again engaging in their seemingly favourite pastime: contest an election and then, if you're on the losing side of the people's verdict, challenge the election's authenticity in whatever manner possible.

That, aside from casting a shadow over the immediate result, also has the unfortunate tendency of impugning the democratic system itself.

Also read: [Imran offers re-election to parties and ECP](#)

If seven years into the transition to democracy and multiple elections later the state machinery somehow contrives to hold the most shambolic election yet of the present era, then what does that say about the system itself?

If there is a silver lining though it is that this time the parties themselves appear to be backing away from the brink.

The PTI supremo, Imran Khan, has perhaps inadvertently helped by being his usual blustery self and vowing to hold elections again, in their entirety or in part, if the ECP determines that is what is required.

However, the basic problem still remains: the relationship between the ECP, the superior judiciary and the government on whose watch an election is held appears to quickly degenerate into an adversarial situation.

For example, in KP, the PTI-led provincial government has simply claimed that administrative and policing responsibilities on the day of the LG election were handed over to the ECP and therefore it would be wrong to blame the PTI for any mismanagement. But what did the PTI do to mobilise the provincial government set-up before the election to educate the voter in the run-up to the poll?

Initial reports suggest that it was mismanagement that led to chaos at some polling stations — but that mismanagement appears to have taken place because both the polling staff and the average voter were unsure about what exactly needed to be done.

Surely, that dual confusion is primarily the fault of the ECP and the provincial government — indeed all the mainstream political parties, none of which evinced any interest in educating the voters about a complex and new balloting process.

Furthermore, it has now become apparent what happens when the ECP and provincial governments are effectively pressurised by the superior judiciary into holding elections according to a timetable they are not comfortable with.

To be sure, the delay in holding LG elections was scandalous and most mainstream parties are not eager to devolve power to the grass-roots. To that extent therefore pressure from the

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Supreme Court has helped realise a constitutional necessity in terms of holding LG elections in two provinces.

But the biggest challenge — elections in Punjab and Sindh — is yet to come and perhaps now is the time for state institutions to learn how to solve problems together.

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Another custodial death

DESPITE the frequent use of torture of suspects by law enforcers across Pakistan — and the complete failure of such brutal methods to bring down the crime rate — it appears that security officials are not serious about addressing the problem.

On Wednesday, normal life in many parts of Karachi was disturbed when the MQM called for two days of mourning following the custodial death of one of its activists. As reported, police officials took into custody Mohammed Wasim, a Muttahida supporter, on Tuesday after an illegal weapon was recovered from him. When he was shifted to hospital in the early hours of Wednesday doctors declared him dead on arrival.

Also read: [5 more police officials suspended over MQM worker's custodial death](#)

The party claims the individual was tortured in custody, while the post-mortem report seems to support this claim. The Muttahida says a number of its workers have been killed extrajudicially or have ‘disappeared’ since the Karachi operation was launched, while independent observers have also censured the Rangers for excesses.

The metropolis largely remained shut on Thursday in response to the MQM’s call, while a number of police personnel have either been suspended or arrested following the political worker’s death.

The Sindh government needs to review the mechanism of investigating custodial deaths, especially in light of growing claims of abuse by law enforcers.

While both the CrPC and police rules have provisions for addressing the problem of deaths in custody, it appears the provincial authorities are not serious about using these mechanisms to their full potential. Perhaps what is needed is greater, independent oversight of LEAs by civil society and rights groups, particularly when it comes to ‘operations’ designed to counter militancy and violent crime.

Criminals and militants must definitely be apprehended and punished — but within the confines of the law. There is simply no room for extrajudicial methods in a society aspiring to democratic ideals. Therefore, the complaints of abuse must be investigated and those law enforcers found guilty must be punished to send a strong message that police brutality will not be tolerated.

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Civilian nuclear deal

THE seventh round of the US-Pakistan Security, Strategic Stability and Non-proliferation Working Group has yielded a familiar joint statement: Pakistan has asked for access to civilian nuclear technology, similar to the India-US civilian nuclear deal; the US has politely told Pakistan to focus on its non-proliferation credentials.

This is the relevant portion of the joint statement released on Wednesday after the working group concluded its meeting: “The US delegation welcomed Pakistan’s efforts to harmonise its strategic trade controls with those of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and other multilateral export control regimes ... Pakistan stressed the need for access to peaceful nuclear technology as a socioeconomic imperative.”

Take a look: [Access to peaceful nuclear technology a priority, US told](#)

The language may be diplomatic, but it speaks of a great divide: the deal Pakistan wants, the US is unwilling to give. What exactly though can Pakistan do to incrementally edge closer towards a civilian nuclear deal with the US that not only would greatly expand the possibilities for civilian nuclear uses, especially power production, but also signal Pakistan’s acceptance into the global nuclear order?

For its part, the nuclear establishment here has tried to stress its non-proliferation credentials; impress on US interlocutors that the safety and security of Pakistan’s nuclear programme has been tremendously tightened and rivals some of the best

protective measures in the world; and that it would continue to work with those interlocutors to identify areas in which Pak-US cooperation can be increased. But the US in particular — though it has to be acknowledged, it is much of the nuclear club in the developed world too — has unyielding reservations about Pakistan.

There is of course the A.Q. Khan debacle, which makes many unwilling to trust Pakistan in nuclear matters even a decade later. Then there are the reservations — more psychological in nature than those concerning practical issues — about Pakistan’s ongoing problems with terrorism and extremism, the underlying fear being that the Pakistani state is not fundamentally stable and radical Islamists continue to proliferate here.

Furthermore, there are those who say Pakistan’s allegedly rapidly growing nuclear arsenal and its long-standing position that has impeded advancement of the Fissile Missile Cut-off Treaty puts Pakistan on the wrong side of what developed nations believe should be the declared nuclear order of the world.

Perhaps the basic problem remains an age-old one. Both Pakistan and the international community it is dealing with tend to see the world through a securitised prism, but civilian nuclear deals are as much about trade, diplomacy and nimble geopolitics as anything else.

Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2015

Economic Survey

THE biggest takeaway from Finance Minister Ishaq Dar's presentation of the state of the economy is that we are not out of the woods just yet.

This runs contrary to what the government is trying to tell us. The mood of the presentation was dour. It began with an apology when the minister arrived almost an hour late.

During the presentation, he blamed the fact that the economy had missed all targets for growth on a combination of external factors ranging from a drop in commodity prices and recession in the advanced economies to floods and last year's extended protests.

Take a look: [Pakistan Economic Survey: Two years of growth and several missed targets](#)

At the end, the presentation descended into pandemonium when a question was raised about the wisdom behind shutting down a new television channel simply because its parent company was under investigation, and the minister responded sharply to some follow-up questions that were hurled at him from the floor.

The minister faced many difficulties explaining many things, but the least convincing part of the presentation came when he dealt with the consequences of the drastic fall in world commodity prices this fiscal year.

The dramatic fall in the price of oil in the first half of the fiscal year is perhaps the single most defining economic development of the year. It has pushed the current account into surplus, something the minister announced with much relish.

It has sent revenues plummeting by "80 to 90 billion rupees", prompting recourse to extraordinary tax hikes to compensate. It sparked the petrol crisis since oil marketing companies became reluctant to maintain reserves in a declining price environment.

Its impact has cascaded in multiple ways through the economy, and not all of them have been positive, revealing the weak state of our fiscal affairs.

The minister's testy and defensive presentation did no favours to the government's track record. He could easily have brushed aside the question on the TV channel's closure, which sparked chaos in the hall, by saying that it had no relevance to the Economic Survey 2014-2015. And he could have been more forthcoming about the challenges he has faced as finance minister in difficult times, dealing with structural problems that have been decades in the making, instead of trying so hard to flesh out the positives.

By all accounts, the government's performance has not been all that bad this year. Growth has indeed revived to some extent, and the macroeconomic framework of the economy has stabilised.

This track record deserved a better and more lucid presentation.

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Lower Dir by-poll: ECP's landmark decision

THE upholders of a patriarchal system that would deny women the right of franchise have suffered a severe and much-deserved setback.

Taking notice of the fact that none of the 47,280 women registered as voters in the Lower Dir constituency of PK-95 turned out to cast their ballot in the by-poll held there on May 7, the Election Commission of Pakistan, in a landmark verdict, recently declared the election void.

Know more: [ECP voids Dir by-poll result over women vote bar](#)

In a unanimous decision, it said it would not notify the returned candidate and that the by-poll would be held again. An unequivocal stance by the ECP on women's disenfranchisement has been long awaited, and this verdict hopefully demonstrates that the commission is no longer prepared to have the wool pulled over its eyes in the matter.

Even in the absence of a written agreement to prevent women from voting, the ECP has evidently realised through its inquiry that 'cultural reasons' do not convincingly explain the non-appearance of women at the hustings.

Casting a vote means expressing an opinion, an act of self-determination, which is something that retrogressive quarters in certain parts of the country are loath to allow women, for that would dilute the absolute control that men exercise over them

in those social milieus. In election after election, they have — either partially or completely — managed to deny women their right of franchise in Mianwali, Battagram, Bajaur, Upper and Lower Dir, etc.

This is often achieved through pacts between tribal elders, local religious leaders and even representatives of political parties that otherwise champion the rights of women.

The collusion of the latter in this patently illegal practice indicates the extent to which deeply entrenched antediluvian traditions can trump the basic principles of democracy.

Although there was no written agreement this time around, following a hue and cry by rights activists earlier, the by-election in Lower Dir was a litmus test for the ECP's resolve to protect women's right to vote in the face of more indirect, devious ways to thwart its mandate.

Published in Dawn, June 6th, 2015

Budget: challenge of implementation

THE government hit its midpoint stride with a budget that gives us schemes for the poor, incentives for the rich and a prayer for the country.

The allocations are ordinary, the ambitions are muted and the rhetoric is soaring. The finance minister claimed he has saved the country from default in his first year, stabilised the economy in the second year, and is now preparing to shift gears to move towards growth.

By the end of the next fiscal year, reserves will rise to \$19bn and growth will come in at 5.1pc, a whole percentage point higher than where it is today. Further, investment will soar by three percentage points of GDP to touch 16.5pc. These are not small claims and all eyes are now on the details to see how this will be accomplished.

Also read: [Ishaq Dar eyes 7pc growth by tenure end](#)

The narrative is a pleasant one, but the road map on how the objectives laid down will be achieved is ambiguous. The government appears to be counting on a hike in development spending and investments under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to spur the national economy.

This may yet be viable, but the type of growth it is likely to yield will be narrowly based on brick and mortar industries, and very temporary in nature.

For growth to be inclusive and sustainable, domestic industry and agriculture need to be pulled out of the doldrums, and here we saw hardly anything more than a spattering of schemes and incentives and little by way of serious policy direction.

The budgetary numbers themselves reveal a fairly large hike in external receipts and FBR taxes. External loans are set to rise by more than Rs100bn, which fuels further questions about the manner in which the present stabilisation has been arranged.

Their midpoint narrative — from default to stabilisation to growth — is an elegant one indeed. But now the time has come to move beyond narratives towards outcomes. And here the questions linger.

The out-turn from last year is not as rosy as the minister has painted, and scepticism is thick in the air regarding next year's claims. At least a part of this year's growth appears to have come out of thin air.

Agriculture growth has relied heavily on livestock and dairy, sectors notoriously difficult to measure. Industrial growth appears to have soared in cotton ginning, again a notoriously difficult sector to measure, while spinning has shown negative growth, prompting questions about where all that ginned cotton went.

A narrative that is elegantly constructed when viewed from a distance is not enough. The government needs to communicate a more serious vision of how it intends to rectify the imbalances that are increasing within the economy even as growth admittedly sputters anew.

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Rising borrowing, lagging revenues and skewed sectoral patterns of growth are poor foundations upon which to build inclusive and sustainable growth.

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Metro mileage

IT was like a jamboree of twins — Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif, a transport project and the PML-N, Pakistan and Turkey, the centre and Punjab.

They all contributed to a proud moment celebrated with typical fanfare. The prime minister declared the launch of the Rawalpindi-Islamabad metro bus service as a gift of democracy.

For many others, it was an occasion to hail the PML-N's efficiency in coming up with projects that address easily identifiable issues. The party has been asking the question and it did so one more time on Thursday: what's wrong with picking up high-resolution projects and undertaking them with trademark flourish?

Know more: [Amidst Metro bus fanfare, Sharjeel Memon promises free WiFi for Karachi](#)

As the experts debate the pros and cons, one thing has been established. The bus system that covers 23km and is expected

to facilitate the travel of more than 130,000 commuters every day will have a huge impact.

It will influence the relationship between the party and the people. Everyone knows this — from those who want the same emphasis on a mass transit system in their respective areas to PML-N opponents who refer to the latest edition of the metro bus as a waste of precious resources and as an example of the rulers' fetish for imposing arbitrary solutions.

Some problems have yet to be addressed as the PML-N government replicates in the twin cities the feat it had earlier accomplished in Lahore.

As in the latter's case, the new metro bus service is essentially a Shahbaz Sharif creation. The need for consultation with stakeholders was not felt in the provincial capital and was ignored in the present case too.

Surely, stakeholders would have wanted to participate actively in the development project that should ideally have been routed through local government. Such considerations, unfortunately, do not concern those who refrain from entrusting public works to, or sharing credit with, others. They would be even less inclined to think about the negatives given the envy the latest venture has caused among the less privileged near and far.

There are calls that capture the longing for a mass transit system in other parts of the country as well. Perhaps the loudest of these calls, not surprisingly, come from the largest and most urgently deserving city, Karachi.

June 2015

The densely populated megalopolis must find a fast track to a mass transit system — one that is not simple copycat stuff but which is evolved and crafted after long and hard considerations of the requirements of its inhabitants.

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Yemeni peace talks

After over two months of bloodshed in Yemen, the first serious signs of a negotiated settlement to the conflict are emerging. As reported on Saturday, both the Houthi rebel militia as well as Yemen's exiled government have agreed to attend UN-sponsored peace talks scheduled for later this month in Geneva.

The fact that the Houthis have said they will attend without preconditions is encouraging.

Read: [Yemeni rebels, govt agree to attend talks in Geneva](#)

The need for a negotiated settlement is essential. The Yemeni internal conflict — which intensified after a Saudi-led coalition started bombing the Houthis and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in late March — has claimed over 2,000 lives.

According to the UN, around half of the casualties are civilians while close to a million people have been displaced. Moreover, the global body says up to 80pc of the Yemeni population

requires aid, which has been difficult to deliver due to the hostilities.

Of course, between now and June 14 — the tentative date for the talks — a lot can happen. For example, around the same time the news of the Geneva talks was emerging, there were reports that forces allied to Mr Saleh had attacked Saudi border positions.

Along with the Yemeni factions drawn into the conflict, it is equally important that the external players involved in this scenario — Saudi Arabia and Iran who are supporting the government and the Houthis respectively — are on board and support the peace process.

Also read: [American freed in Yemen as US holds secret talks with Houthis](#)

Riyadh and Tehran must use their leverage with their respective Yemeni allies to urge them to seize the opportunity in Geneva and work towards a power-sharing deal that can address the concerns of all factions and, hopefully, usher in truly representative rule.

If a breakthrough is achieved in Switzerland, perhaps the groundwork can be prepared to resolve that other bloody regional conflict — Syria — where largely the same external players are backing various domestic actors. If this opportunity is lost, not only will the Yemeni people continue to suffer, but greater space will open up for extremist forces within Yemen.

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2015

Battle of the budget

Every year when the budget is presented, a number of generic themes are rolled out in its aftermath to help drive the conversation. Some decry the targets set as ‘too ambitious’, other call the budget ‘business-friendly’ or ‘pro-rich’. Many look for ‘relief measures’ in it while others focus on ‘incentives’.

The narratives collide in the public discourse and the result is confusion all around. This year promises to be no different. No sooner had the budget speech concluded in parliament than the narratives began.

The [opposition charged that](#) this was a pro-rich budget that had nothing in it for the poor.

Other commentary said that it was overly ambitious or overly cautious, that it was out of touch with the realities of life or that it leaned too far to please the rich.

Read: [Budget 2015-16: What went up, what went down](#)

The details — as they appear once the voluminous amount of information that is needed to understand a federal budget is digested — show a very cautious approach in drawing up targets, except perhaps for the development budget.

Current expenditures have been increased very marginally. Development spending is up somewhat significantly — Rs158bn from the revised figures of the ongoing fiscal year —

but considering it was cut last year, this is also a nominal increase.

The new taxation measures announced are somewhat aggressive, particularly those requiring banks and financial institutions to share account-holder information with the tax authorities when asked, and the net revenue impact of Rs253bn being touted by the finance ministry is considerable.

Also read: [Budget 2015: between push and pull](#)

To add to that, more than half of this impact comes from income taxes, which are direct and progressive.

So what’s the problem? On Monday the debate on the finance bill opens up in the National Assembly, and the first to speak will be Khursheed Shah from the opposition PPP. He has already made clear what his line of attack will be. He will decry this budget as pro-rich and anti-poor.

One can only hope that he comes armed with a sound understanding of the details, because his own government used to defend its pro-poor credentials largely on the back of the Benazir Income Support Programme and the hike in wheat procurement prices.

The former is still around and growing every year, and the latter had a debatable impact as a pro-poor measure. The budget is too important a document to be reduced to glib debating points and general rhetoric.

Explore more: [Ishaq Dar eyes 7pc growth by tenure end](#)

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Let us hope the debate in parliament will consider the detailed picture of the economy painted by the government in the Economic Survey and the priorities laid out in the budget, and that we will have a debate that goes well beyond simple rhetoric and fiery speeches.

The last thing the country needs at this point is more confusion as an unbalanced growth cycle is set into motion.

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2015

Malala acquittals

The convictions took the country by surprise: an anti-terrorism court operating in secrecy inside a military-controlled internment centre in Swat had handed life sentences to 10 individuals involved in the attack on Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai.

News of the convictions in April was the first public indication that a trial was even being held to begin with.

Now, there is widespread outrage and disbelief at the news that eight of the 10 men allegedly convicted for the attack that shook the country — and moved the world — were never actually convicted and instead were exonerated for lack of evidence.

Read: [Swat ATC sentences 10 to life imprisonment in Malala attack case](#)

Surprise that gave way to satisfaction that has now turned into outrage — perhaps the truly troubling aspect of this episode is how little information has been released to the public. Who were the 10 accused? What was the evidence against them? What did the defence argue? Where are the exonerated men now? What of the two men convicted?

There are no answers and, worse yet, there is still no indication from either the government or military that answers will be provided, whether now or at all.

Also read: [Eight Malala shooting suspects acquitted still in custody: officials](#)

If ever there has been an unacceptable state of affairs, it is the circumstances surrounding the trial of Malala Yousafzai's alleged attackers.

Eight men have been exonerated by an ATC operating in the bowels of a detention centre that is secretive and opaque in a trial that resulted in the conviction of two other men.

That alone raises questions about just how flimsy the prosecution's evidence may have been or possibly about how poorly organised or overconfident the prosecution was.

Surely, this is a dramatic, shocking revelation that cannot be ignored by the relevant powers-that-be.

If failure is possible in a case as high-profile as the one involving Ms Yousafzai's alleged attackers, what does that say about the quality of the evidence and investigative and prosecutorial competence in hundreds of other, less high-profile cases?

But the silence continues — adding to the growing impression that neither the government nor the military authorities take their constitutional and legal responsibilities seriously when it comes to the criminal justice system.

The system increasingly appears to be about focusing on public relations victories rather than actual justice. Were it not for a British newspaper that broke the news of the exonerations on Friday, would the authorities here have ever revealed the truth themselves? Troublingly, the answer appears to be 'probably not'.

Take a look: [Malala: Wars never end wars](#)

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2015

Modest polio success

AS the sun set on 2014, the tally of new polio cases during the year had crossed 300, breaking Pakistan's own record of nearly a decade and a half. But now, after a harrowing year, there is finally something positive to state.

The World Health Organisation has noted that the number of new cases reported so far this year has seen a 70pc decline as compared to the corresponding period last year, falling from 84 cases in the first half of 2014 to 24 over the past six months.

This is being understood as one of the outcomes of the intensified army operation against militancy in the north-western parts of the country, which has now been under way for almost a year.

Also read: [Pakistan sees major drop in polio cases](#)

This has allowed better access to families in areas that were previously inaccessible, and further, it has proved possible to administer polio drops on a large scale to the internally displaced.

WHO has also conceded that there have been some improvements in the implementation of the anti-polio plan, such as working with communities in Karachi to have children vaccinated.

Encouraging though all this is, it should not be allowed to mask the polio challenge in its entirety, where successes such as these are a mere drop in the ocean.

Far more effort needs to be put in. It should not be forgotten that the presence of even one unvaccinated child in a community can act as the spark that leads to fire. Further, the violence that has been visited on vaccinators means that they now work under heavy security detail; it is difficult to see how this can be sustained in the long term.

The fact that a parent's or guardian's refusal to allow the polio drops to be administered to a child now carries the penalty of arrest shows that the state has not really managed to turn around the narrative regarding polio that extremist elements skewed so dangerously. In short, Pakistan must in every way guard against complacency on the polio front.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2015

Documentation steps

ONE good thing to come out of the budget is an emphasis on measures to promote documentation of the economy.

In his post-budget news conference on Saturday, the finance minister also laid emphasis on the growing informal economy, which he said by some estimates was now equal in size to the formal economy.

The documentation measures include penalty taxes on supplies made to unregistered parties, which in theory ought to dissuade those outside the net but in reality end up working the other

way round. They also include an extension of the powers given to the FBR to demand account-holder information from financial institutions, which will now be extended to non-residents as well.

Also read: [Govt aims at documentation of economy](#)

A number of other similar measures show the government is trying to heed the advice that growing informality poses a threat to the fiscal framework.

But two things need to be noted about the measures. One is that they are simply not enough. The business community has always strongly resisted attempts to get it to document its dealings with unregistered parties, and if the application of the penalty taxes is going to have any teeth this time round, there will almost certainly be an outcry again.

Likewise, financial institutions successfully led a campaign against a similar provision that mandated them to disclose account-holder information to the tax authorities that was passed in the finance bill of this government's first budget.

When challenging that provision, the banks made the case that its effects would be contrary to its intention, that the measure would encourage the flow of money into property markets where cash is used to settle transactions, instead of coming into the banking system.

The government negotiated and watered the provision down to the point that it became toothless. This is not the only example of a documentation measure being beaten down by the power of vested interests.

Private-sector players are not keen to carry the burden of documentation on their shoulders, and piecemeal measures of the sort announced in the budget will always meet with fierce opposition.

Ultimately, what is needed is a large policy thrust, such as moving to apply the sales tax in value-added mode. It is good that the government is willing to acknowledge the extent of the problem posed by the informal sector, but unfortunately, its approach to the issue will need to be far more strenuous to be credible.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2015

Balochistan killings

A WEEK that began with a multiparty conference in Quetta, convened by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at the request of the Balochistan government after the Mastung carnage, ended with more disturbing incidents of violence, the latest being yesterday's killing of five members of the Hazara community in the city.

A day earlier, four policemen were killed in the Pashtoonabad neighbourhood of Quetta, triggering yet another one of those highly visible, but seemingly ineffective search operations by the security forces.

Yesterday, police officials claimed the arrest of some three dozen suspects in Saturday's killings, but even if the attackers and the ringleaders are among those arrested, a basic reality cannot be obscured: Balochistan's security troubles are as bad, and complex, as ever.

Take a look: [Five Hazaras shot dead in Quetta, protests emerge](#)

Perhaps even more troubling is the response of the state. Rather than try and re-examine its overall security policy and re-adjust the measures used to fight the violence, the state seems inclined to continue with a failed policy and self-defeating tactics.

There appears to be a collective sense of denial – among the leadership of the military, the paramilitaries, the police and civilian authorities – on Balochistan, that a province which has effectively become a vast no-go area for virtually any outsider and a semi-prison for locals is not a province on the verge of recovery.

Consider that when the multiparty conference was held last Tuesday, Prime Minister Sharif spent just a few hours on the ground in the province and the conference itself yielded nothing new, in fact nothing of note at all.

More of the same appears to have become the mantra of the centre, the provincial government and the military, when it is clear that more of the same by the state is leading to more of the same in terms of violence.

Surely, in such circumstances, someone has to take the lead. While it is clear that neither the provincial nor federal government are the architects of the continuing security policy in Balochistan, change for the better will never come unless one or both of those governments start building pressure for the ongoing security policy to be revised.

In all of this though the question increasingly is, where is the different style of governance and change in thinking that the National Party-led provincial government of Chief Minister Abdul Malik Baloch had promised to bring two years ago?

While the Balochistan policy cannot be changed by Quetta alone, the fact of the matter is that the federal government is contending with a host of civil-military issues and security challenges outside the province.

So why isn't the provincial government taking the lead? Leadership does not mean asking the prime minister to hold a multiparty conference, as Dr Baloch did after the Mastung carnage, but in having a road map for peace and the will to follow through on it.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2015

Military operation

AS the one-year anniversary of the launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb approaches, it is helpful to recall just how much has changed inside Pakistan over the last year on the security front — and how much has not.

Consider first consecutive ISPR press releases. First, speaking on Sunday in Colombo to a group of Sri Lankan soldiers trained in Pakistan, army chief Gen Raheel Sharif had this to say: “Referring to the ongoing operation Zarb-i-Azb, COAS said ... we have successfully dismantled their infrastructure and created significant effects. We as a nation are determined to take this surge to its logical end, whatever it may take.”

Then, yesterday, an ISPR press release had this to say: “19 terrorists were killed including five of their commanders in an intense exchange of fire with security forces last night in uncleared pocket along NWA-Afghan border.”

While the two claims are far from contradictory, together they underscore that the challenge in North Waziristan is far from over (as Sunday's killing of seven soldiers in the area shows) — and that for all the gains there, militancy and terrorism are far from being in terminal decline.

Perhaps one of the biggest ongoing concerns about North Waziristan is how little has changed in terms of the media and the public's access to information from the region.

Before Zarb-i-Azb, when large swathes of territory were effectively ruled by militants, it was apparent why there was,

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by and large, a news blackout and only rare access to independent information.

Then, as the military leadership pushed the political government to abandon its campaign to try and secure a peace deal with the banned TTP, there was, for a brief while, a window provided in the military mindset and the strategic approach to North Waziristan. Quickly enough, however, that evaporated.

Today, for example, how many can be sure about the operational endgame in the tribal agency? Has the military or political leadership provided any timelines, however loose, for when the much-expected-but-yet-to-materialise push in the Shawal region will begin? Also, what are the measures being taken to secure the Pak-Afghan border to prevent militants from re-entering?

Finally, and perhaps most critically, what efforts are being made to track down and capture or eliminate militant leaders from North Waziristan whichever side of the border they may be?

In asking these questions, military officials tend to be aggressive in response or dismissive all together.

Clearly, the present army chief did well by launching Zarb-i-Azb. It had been delayed too long under the previous military leadership and the political government's strategy of first trying to secure a peace deal with elements of the TTP had only given the militants yet more space and time to consolidate and regroup.

But if an operation was needed, that surely cannot mean no further questions should be asked. A militarised strategy in North Waziristan or Fata does not appear to have within it the seeds of long-term peace in the region.

Published in Dawn, June 9th, 2015

Blow to Erdogan

EVEN though his party still has a plurality, the outcome of Sunday's parliamentary election is a blow to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ambitions, especially to his appetite for more powers to turn Turkey into a presidential democracy.

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu put on a brave face and said the ruling AKP had won — securing 41pc of the votes — but the harsh fact for him is that, for the first time, Mr Erdogan will have to look for a coalition partner.

While the main opposition party, CHP, must have felt disappointed for getting only 25pc of the mandate, the real gainer is the Kurdish HDP, which crossed the 10pc barrier to secure a place in parliament.

Also read: [Turkey ruling party weighs options after election blow](#)

The credit for this breakthrough goes to HDP leader Selahattin Demirtas, whose campaign strategy went beyond the

grievances of the Kurdish minority and appealed to Turkey's leftist and anti-Erdogan elements. While the HDP leader's claim that the talk of "executive presidency and dictatorship" has come to an end is true, the implications of Sunday's polls are likely to have long-term effects on Turkish politics, especially the consequences, not necessarily negative, of the decline in the AKP's popularity.

To begin with, Mr Erdogan must learn from his mistakes and realise that it was his authoritarian behaviour which alienated a large segment of his erstwhile supporters.

His intolerance of criticism, the persecution of Turkey's vibrant media and his treatment of judges whose verdicts went against the state betrayed paranoia. No wonder, during his 12 years in power 63 journalists were jailed for a total period of 32 years; he was even allergic to the internet on which he was routinely criticised.

The most appalling indication of his authoritarian streak has been his use of the constitutional clause which prohibits insulting the head of state. No one before him has used this clause.

However, during the AKP rule, 105 people, including a 16-year-old boy, were indicted and eight arrested, and two cartoonists had to suffer a prison term for 11 months.

Nevertheless, the AKP will remain a factor in politics for a long time to come. The election results could reduce the polarisation centred on Mr Erdogan's personality, and the presence of non-AKP members in the cabinet could serve as a check on his autocratic tendencies.

On the whole, it is Turkish democracy which is the gainer, for the people have shown maturity by rejecting executive excesses and voting for a liberal polity.

Published in Dawn, June 9th, 2015

Chaudhry Nisar unbound

INTERIOR Minister Nisar Ali Khan's penchant for wading into areas beyond the scope of his ministry has manifested itself again.

In a statement issued last Saturday, he expressed the hope that the government would take proactive measures to help the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

He also denounced the inaction of the international community and "the criminal silence" of human rights organisations worldwide over the victimisation of the beleaguered community which he believed would further fuel extremism among Muslim youth.

Take a look: [Myanmar's abandoned Rohingya — Asia's pariah people](#)

Singling out Muslim countries, he said that the lack of effort to mitigate the Rohingyas' plight or to plead their case spoke "volumes for our apathy and indifferent attitude towards our

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fellow brethren....” Indeed, the Rohingyas of Myanmar are a persecuted community.

Not only do they live under pitiable economic conditions, they also face animosity from a large section of Myanmar society on account of the Buddhist-Muslim divide.

In effect stateless, as Myanmar denies them citizenship, thousands of Rohingyas have attempted to leave for safer shores, only to be rejected by other countries too.

However, in order to be taken seriously, Pakistan’s protest should come solely from the relevant official quarters, and not from the interior minister who has been straying into purely foreign policy matters at a fairly consistent rate.

Last month, he expressed his disappointment at the death penalty awarded to former Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi, while in late 2013, he spoke of “old wounds” being reopened when Bangladesh executed Abdul Quader Molla, a leader of the Jamaat-i-Islami party in that country — his manner was in direct contrast to the foreign ministry’s mild comment at the time.

Chaudhry Nisar would do well to restrain himself and keep to his portfolio when he speaks in a public capacity. And he should also remember that, contrary to his stance, there has been, in recent times, extensive coverage about the Rohingyas’ victimisation in the global media and a rising crescendo of voices in the international community — particularly the West — and from human rights organisations demanding that the issue be resolved without delay.

Gilgit-Baltistan elections

AS results from Monday’s elections for the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly show, the PML-N — with a comfortable majority of the legislature’s 24 directly elected seats — appears set to form the next government in the region.

The PPP, meanwhile, which led the last dispensation, has received a drubbing, reduced to single digits within the Assembly.

Meanwhile, the MWM and PTI, relatively new entrants in GB’s political arena, have made their debut in the legislature. Overall, the respectable turnout and largely peaceful, democratic transition shows that the people have taken ownership of their government as well as the electoral process.

Take a look: [PML-N outshines rivals in GB polls](#)

The PML-N’s success is hardly surprising; considering that the region’s fortunes — particularly its financial fortunes — are linked to the centre; people were expected to vote for the party in power in Islamabad.

Moreover, in its election campaign, the N-League highlighted one of its favourite topics — development — which struck a chord with GB’s people, as the mountainous region has poor infrastructure. Allegations of corruption and misrule during its time in power seemed to seal the PPP’s fate.

Despite the fact that the party has traditionally enjoyed a high level of support in GB, it failed to convince the electorate to give it another shot at governance.

Yet now that the election campaign is over and a new set-up is poised to take the reins, the people of the area will look to their government to deliver on perhaps their biggest demand: genuine autonomy and representation in all spheres.

For example, despite the centre's dominating role in the area, especially through the GB Council, the people there cannot vote in National Assembly elections; hence they have no voice in shaping national policy that affects their region.

Also, the federal bureaucracy is accused by many local politicians and activists of excessive interference in regional affairs. These anomalies need to be rectified. The then PPP government at the centre took a progressive step by issuing the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order in 2009. The time is indeed now to build on this and devolve maximum powers to GB.

The state's traditional position has been to link the fate of GB to the resolution of the Kashmir question, considering the region's historical links to the disputed area.

Yet to wait for a resolution to this seemingly intractable issue is to leave the people of GB in constitutional limbo indefinitely. And besides, if Azad Kashmir can have a semi-autonomous constitutional governance structure, why must GB be deprived of this status?

The elected regional assembly must be more than just a glorified local government set-up and have maximum, genuine powers just as the provinces enjoy.

Moreover, a long-term constitutional status must be given to the region so that its people can fully participate in national life.

The new GB government will need to pursue these goals vigorously with the rulers in Islamabad.

Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2015

Employment data

THE confusion over employment data presented in the Economic Survey persists and needs to be cleared up by the government.

The latest Economic Survey released last week indicates that unemployment has decreased slightly, from 6.24pc to 6pc. The decline is very small, but what is surprising is that unemployment should be coming down at a time when the growth rate is a whole three percentage points lower than what it needs to be to minimally absorb new entrants in the labour force.

June 2015

Some debate around the employment numbers broke out around the Economic Survey announcement, when different figures were circulating regarding this crucial statistic.

Also read: [Minister sees no decline in joblessness](#)

One set of figures, leaked from the Planning Commission, showed unemployment rising sharply, while the other, from the Economic Survey, showed it coming down slightly. The finance minister reacted testily to this development, contending that a reconciliation of the two sets of numbers was yet to be undertaken, but insisted that until then the figures in the Economic Survey would stand.

Now another voice in government, the minister for planning, has gone on record to say that unemployment could not have fallen last year because the growth rate was simply not enough to absorb the new entrants in the labour force.

A closer look at the labour force figures given in the Economic Survey reveals a fall in all numbers related to employment.

The Survey shows that for the first time in more than a decade, the total size of the labour force went down, as well as the number of people employed and unemployed. This is a puzzle in the numbers and runs contrary to what intuition would suggest. What is also mystifying is that the finance ministry and Planning Commission are calculating different numbers regarding employment.

Traditionally, it is the job of the Planning Commission to do the analysis on the raw data gathered by the Bureau of Statistics, but this time it seems there are two parallel analyses

being carried out, with an aim to eventually ‘reconcile’ their findings at a later time.

So inevitably, there is confusion on whether or not the fall in the unemployment rate shown in the Economic Survey should be taken seriously, and the government’s own planning minister appears to agree.

This confusion ought to be cleared up quickly to pre-empt allegations of data manipulation.

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Pension not enough

SENIOR citizens are our future — literally. In so many countries around the world, they stand out for the respectful treatment they are given by both state and society.

Some proof of how Pakistan treats them is available in the queues of pensioners at the bank every month, and in the host of complaints the pensioners always have very valid reasons to make.

They routinely report being denied payment of pension on time by the designated bank, the National Bank of Pakistan.

Also read: [Pensioners in ‘double jeopardy’](#)

According to a news item in this paper yesterday, the pensioners accuse the NBP branches of delaying payments and insisting — in violation of a court order — that the claimants should first open an account with the bank to be able to get the money.

Whatever the reasons behind this decision by the bank, the problem needs to be quickly rectified and, in this age of modern advancement, a solution must be found for good.

If these are routine issues, this is that time of the year when government pensioners are usually found complaining about having been ignored in the annual budget.

This year they are aghast at being given just 7.5pc relief over the monthly allowance that they have been drawing. The fears are that, in the absence of any party taking up their case, the proposal will stay and the increase will be capped at 7.5pc.

Obviously, that is not acceptable to the pensioners who have a point when they say that the logic given — that the current government employees are also being given a similar raise — does not do justice to them.

The pensioners obviously did not get the ad hoc relief given to current employees in the recent past and there is unevenness in the allowances for the serving and the retired. The revision in the case of pensioners has to be rationalised taking into account various factors such as the passage of time since their last drawn salary.

True, it may not be possible for the state to unduly reward those who had given it their best years. Yet, for the pension to

have any meaning, a decent subsistence amount must be kept in mind.

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Indian belligerence again

ONCE again, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government appears bent on raising the temperature in the India-Pakistan relationship.

Once again, it is difficult to discern any wisdom or even common sense in the Indian strategy. Having travelled to Bangladesh as part of his extensive outreach to the region — an outreach that increasingly looks like Mr Modi's attempt to try and isolate Pakistan inside Saarc — the Indian prime minister rather bizarrely harkened back to the terrible events of some 45 years ago that led to the break-up of Pakistan and boasted about the Indian role in the creation of Bangladesh.

Know more: [India will carry out military strikes at any 'place and time', says minister](#)

If that were not enough, Mr Modi decided to go on to attack present-day Pakistan in the same speech in what can only be described as the most un-prime-ministerial terms.

Extraordinarily, what the Indian leader had to say about Pakistan and the history of Bangladesh were not even the most

provocative of statements emanating from Indian quarters in recent days. That rather dubious honour instead goes to a junior Indian minister who suggested that the Indian cross-border raid into Myanmar in response to an attack on Indian security forces in India's northeast late last week could be repeated on the western, ie India-Pakistan border, if necessary.

Consider the breathtaking Indian arrogance on display here, and even naked war-mongering. Mr Modi's comments in Dhaka hearken to a dark past for all sides — Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

To be sure, West Pakistan committed many errors and even crimes against what was then East Pakistan and there has never been any real introspection or accountability for that period here in present-day Pakistan.

Yet, Pakistan and Bangladesh managed to go on to build ties that were reasonably stable and respectful and not even remotely comparable to the almost seven-decade-old effectively failed relationship between India and Pakistan.

Take a look: [Pakistan is not Myanmar, will respond to foreign aggression, Nisar tells India](#)

Is Mr Modi's goal really to try and drive a wedge between Bangladesh and Pakistan? In any case, Pakistan's political and diplomatic leadership have for a while now needed to urgently reach out to the Bangladeshi government of Prime Minister Hasina Wajed because of the attempt by that government to stoke tensions with Pakistan for domestic political reasons.

An India bent on meddling with an already stand-offish government in place in Bangladesh can rapidly become a much sterner diplomatic test than the Pakistani state appears to have realised until now.

The flame-throwing from the Indian side has rather predictably riled politicians here. Instead of allowing the foreign and defence ministries to respond to the Indian provocations, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan decided to wade into the controversy created by Indian junior minister Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore's allusion to cross-border raids inside Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the army leadership too has waded in with a strong statement against Indian interference yesterday. Perhaps the prime minister needs to convene his national security council to draw up a concerted, diplomatic response.

Published in Dawn, June 11th, 2015

Water stress

FOR a society whose livelihood structure is largely built on massive endowments of water, it is strange that Pakistan would be considered one of the most water-stressed countries in the world.

Yet that is a sad reality, and the problem is growing with alarming speed. A new study released by the IMF on challenges in managing access uses Pakistan as a case study “where, despite an abundance of water a few decades ago, lagging policies have raised the prospect of water scarcity that could threaten all aspects of the economy”.

Take a look: [Water scarcity may threaten national economy: IMF](#)

This is not the first, nor the last, warning from the world community that we are moving towards a serious crisis brought on by growing water scarcities primarily because of the way we manage our water resources.

Almost 95pc of our annual supply of surface water is used in agriculture, where underpriced canal water and an untaxed agriculture sector lead to gross overuse of water.

Even though Pakistan is fourth in the list of the top 10 countries in terms of total water withdrawals per year, it ranks very high in terms of water withdrawals per capita, or per unit of GDP. This shows the enormous inefficiencies that our water sector is riddled with.

For too long now, our approach to water issues has been dominated by brick-and-mortar ideas of infrastructure. We have one of the world’s largest water bureaucracies, and the only ideas that ever emanate from it relate to more dams and more hydropower systems.

Nobody denies that Pakistan needs more water storage capacity, but this alone will not help avert the crisis situation we are descending into.

What is also needed urgently are reforms that encourage the judicious use of water through raising efficiencies in the canal system, reforming the rules that govern allocations and price reforms that encourage investment in efficient utilisation of farm water.

The policy software that governs utilisation and allocation of water needs to be reformed, public utilities need to be made more autonomous and passed into the hands of professional management, and pricing reforms are essential.

The study gives the example of Burkina Faso, where pricing reforms ensured that “high-volume users subsidised low-volume users”. There is no shortage of examples from around the world of successful water-sector reforms that didn’t necessarily involve large infrastructure. Time is running out for us to start learning from them.

Published in Dawn, June 11th, 2015

Women pillion riders

BY any stretch of the imagination, riding a two-wheeler in the free-for-all that is Karachi's chaotic traffic is to play Russian roulette with one's life.

The gamble becomes far more risky if one does so without protective headgear. Thus, the announcement by Karachi traffic police that helmets are now mandatory for all motorcycle riders, including women riding pillion, was long overdue. However, it seems safety regulations that should apply across the board can, instead, be gender-specific.

After a public outcry greeted the eminently sensible decision, women have been declared exempt from the rule.

In the absence of an organised and family-friendly mass transit system, one frequently comes across multiple individuals perched precariously on one motorcycle — not to mention all manner of bulky, inanimate objects as well.

Until the government addresses this yawning gap in civic amenities, it is perhaps unreasonable to suggest that the practice of ferrying entire families on motorcycles be discontinued. However, it is certainly possible to make this mode of transport safer.

According to data by the Road Traffic Injury Research and Prevention Centre at Karachi's Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre, those using two-wheelers for conveyance constitute the largest group of road casualties at over 60pc, with pedestrians coming in second.

Motorcyclists and pillion riders are, needless to say, particularly at risk of head injuries. A comprehensive study in India illustrated that the mortality rate is six times higher among motorcyclists without protective headgear.

Moreover, the study also found that the mortality rate among pillion riders was marginally higher than riders without helmets. It is conceivable that women in Pakistan who tend to ride side-saddle are more at risk even in the case of mild collisions.

Given these realities, it should be compulsory not only for women but also children on motorcycles to wear helmets, protests against this notwithstanding.

However, to glide more smoothly over the 'cultural' speed bump, it may be worthwhile to have a media campaign highlighting the importance of wearing helmets, regardless of gender.

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Regressive revenues

IN the debate shaping up around the budget, one of the key themes is its impact on the poor.

There are various measures that people look for in a budget to ascertain its direct impact on the people. One is the raise in the minimum wage and government salaries, which is typically used as a metric to set salary increments in the private sector.

The second area people look at is the impact on the prices of essential goods. Here the budget has direct and indirect relevance — where the former is concerned prices are adjusted for the utilities store corporation and wheat procurement, while the latter pertains to tax measures that might affect some essential foods like cooking oil, or via adjustments made in import duties.

Take a look: [Shah bemoans 'insufficient relief' for govt employees](#)

Another big impact on prices can come from additional taxes or levies on electricity or oil and gas. The third major way the budget can impact the poor is by the implementation of revenue measures that are regressive in nature, meaning their impact is felt heavily by the poor.

This government is racking up a track record of heavy resort to regressive revenue measures as a means of shoring up revenues over three consecutive budgets. In its opening budget it hiked the sales tax rate by one percentage point, the revenue impact of which was estimated at Rs50-60bn at the time.

For a party whose membership played an active role in defeating the previous government's attempt to reform the GST law, mostly in the name of saving the common man from the burden of additional taxation, the PML-N has shown little by way of ensuring that its own revenue measures mostly impact the rich.

In its latest budget, the government has refused to withdraw the elevated sales tax rate it inaugurated in its first budget, and most recently has resorted to heavy use of surcharges on electricity as a way to shore up its commitment to the IMF to reduce power subsidies by almost 50pc.

Untargeted subsidies should indeed be reduced and ultimately eliminated. But they should not be replaced with surcharges.

The overriding imperative on the revenue side must be to broaden the base and get more people to participate in the tax system of the country. Likewise in the power sector, raising efficiencies and improving recoveries must remain the guiding thread to future sustainability.

Resort to hikes in the sales tax rate and heavy use of surcharges to meet fiscal targets is a prerogative of the executive branch of government, but they should be used only as stopgap measures. Unfortunately, the track record the government is building up shows that such stopgap measures become permanent revenue measures resorted to with much relish.

And the net revenue impact tends to be regressive, which is a cause for concern and should be taken up in the budget debate under way in parliament.

Traders in the crossfire

FORCIBLE closure of shops and business establishments as a mode of political protest is a practice that needs to end.

It imposes tremendous costs on the economy that are borne by the common man, and most particularly, by daily wage labour. It is against the fundamental rights of citizens and often gives politics the feel of organised crime.

At the end of the day, this practice gives democracy a bad name, and that ought to be reason enough for all political parties to agree that they will, without compromising on their right to protest, refrain from resorting to the forcible closure of businesses.

Take a look: [Partial shutdown observed in KP over strike call by tripartite opposition](#)

This mode of political protest became the norm in Karachi a while ago, especially when the MQM issued calls for strikes. But recently, we have seen the PTI resort to it in Lahore, while in the latest case, the combined opposition of the PPP, ANP and JUI-F resorted to it in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by issuing a strike call to protest the alleged rigging in the recent local bodies elections there.

The call was for the entire province, and as per reports, it was sparsely observed. Most such calls are difficult to implement, unless the party giving the call commands the hearts and minds of the people enough to convince them to forego a day's earning for a cause, or credibly mobilises the threat of violence

against those who defy the call. Clearly, the combined opposition in KP failed to do either.

The opposition claims police were used to compel shopkeepers to open their establishments in Peshawar, while the government says that the threat of force was used to close down shops in some small towns in parts of the province.

It may be impossible to actually say who is correct in this, and certainly it is not worth anyone's while to try and determine the facts.

However, what is obvious is that shopkeepers are extremely reluctant to close their establishments and forego a day's earnings to protest political causes.

The leaderships of the various political parties should agree that they will refrain from resorting to this practice anywhere, especially since it is used primarily for symbolic purposes while its costs are very real. There are other ways they can find to demonstrate the support they enjoy amongst the populace when protesting.

None should involve threats of violence to ensure compliance, and equally, none should do damage to people's livelihood.

Published in Dawn, June 12th, 2015

Missing Turkish gift

THOSE who have been writing brilliant chapters about the workings of Pakistani officialdom might in the final lap be edged out by the master craftsman Guy de Maupassant.

And yet, the surfacing of the case of the missing necklace does speak volumes for our ability to every now and then make and break a telling story with its own moral lessons.

What is involved at the moment is a necklace which was worn by Emine Erdogan when she came visiting with her husband, the then-Turkish prime minister, in 2010.

Know more: [Missing necklace stumps sleuths](#)

While here, so the story goes, she met a group of flood-hit women about to get married and donated the cost of the necklace she was wearing as a wedding gift to them. A kind-hearted gentleman, who happened to be heading Nadra, was close at hand and he volunteered to pay Rs1.6m for the piece of jewellery — only for the necklace to be bought back by the Turkish people.

However, since destiny had so chosen, Ms Erdogan after receiving it from her people presented it back to the Pakistanis.

There are two versions of the story — at least. According to one account, it seems the necklace was kept in a Nadra ‘warehouse’ from where it, apparently, disappeared at some point. The second version says the piece had eventually landed

in the prime minister’s house during the reign of Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani.

On Wednesday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan called for a probe to get to the bottom of the mystery, prompting a remark by a ‘source’ that the detectives need not look beyond the prime ministerial residence in the capital for a quick solution to the case.

Back and forth, sold and resold and returned and given back and then passed around, there have been many twists in the case so far. It would be anti-climatic if the precious item was suddenly found lying in some obscure shelf. Half a decade old, the mystery is worth another few years.

Published in Dawn, June 12th, 2015

First salvo against INGOs

FINALLY, the axe has fallen on Save The Children. The international non-governmental organisation had been under a cloud of suspicion ever since the alleged involvement of its employee Shakil Afridi in a CIA-mandated fake vaccination campaign in the hunt for Osama bin Laden came to light.

A letter issued by the government's Economic Affairs Division on Thursday ordered the NGO to wind up its operations in Pakistan and gave its expatriate employees 15 days to leave the country.

Know more: [INGO Save The Children ordered to close shop](#)

Later in the day, the organisation's Islamabad offices were sealed. While the government has yet to clarify the reasons behind its action, there is mention of "anti-state activities" committed by the NGO, which was among over two dozen such entities under review by the government to decide whether they should be allowed to continue operating in Pakistan.

Such allegations, if true, are serious. However, their credibility can only be gauged if the government demonstrates without delay that it has taken this drastic step — the first such against an international NGO — after a transparent and unbiased investigation.

Otherwise, it would appear to be yet another manifestation of the state's paranoia, particularly as it grows more and more secretive on the pretext of security imperatives. More often

than not, the term 'anti-state' is code for anyone challenging the official narrative, or going into areas where the establishment prefers to maintain a veil of secrecy and obfuscation.

NGOs are also the favourite whipping boy of conservative social elements, for much of their work involves confronting existing mores, especially where they pertain to the rights of women and marginalised communities. All these elements combine to create a perfect storm against NGOs in the country.

This is not to suggest that NGOs be allowed to function without proper oversight and regulations — a concern that Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan dwelt on yesterday.

There are undoubtedly a number of such entities, both local and otherwise, which squander funds on activities that are of little benefit to the communities they purport to serve, and have sloppy, even questionable, accounting procedures.

At the same time, it must be said, these are charges that many government organisations are also guilty of, without attracting the same level of opprobrium. There may even be some NGOs that engage in 'anti-state' behaviour — that is, as defined in objective terms.

However, a vast majority of them are engaged in work that local governments are either unwilling or unable to do, because of corruption or lack of capacity. International NGOs bring a wealth of expertise with them, which helps build the capacity of Pakistani NGOs and community-based organisations, whose services are sorely needed in the absence of a state unmindful of its duty to its citizens.

Regulations pertaining to them must be rational, clear-cut and fairly implemented. The government's demand that international donors route funds through it for dispersal to local organisations defies the logic behind the need for NGOs in the first place.

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Karachi rackets

THE figure given by the DG Rangers on the amount of money being generated in Karachi through activities like extortion, smuggling, water and land mafias is staggering.

According to an official statement, the DG Rangers told the Sindh apex committee at its last meeting that more than Rs230bn are generated annually from criminal activities in the city of Karachi.

It is not clear how this figure has been arrived at, but media reports from last year gave a similar number.

The facts carried in the statement issued by the Rangers are widely known, so a few questions naturally arise.

Know more: [Billions of black money being used to fund terrorism in Karachi: Rangers chief](#)

Is the ambit of the Karachi operation about to widen beyond apprehending criminals and terrorists? And if the Rangers are preparing the ground to attack the nexus between politics and crime that is such a defining feature of the city's landscape, do they have a clear endgame in mind?

The statement emphasises the links between political parties and criminal activity, but something is strangely missing.

For example, consider the emphasis placed on smuggled Iranian fuel as one of the top four rackets in the city. How does this fuel cross the country's borders that are manned by the armed forces, either Coast Guard or FC?

Why are terror groups with a base in the city absent from the list of participants in these rackets? What about religious seminaries built on encroached land?

Ultimately, the city's peace can only be secured with proper governance that addresses the root causes of violence like poor land supply and informal land titles, and that is something the Rangers cannot do.

The neutrality of the operation is also crucial to safeguard, and the selective list of those participating in these rackets is likely to fuel perceptions that the operation is not being conducted in an even-handed manner.

Reading the statement, one gets the impression that the only problem in the city is the politicians, which may have some truth to it, but it is important to underline that politicians and political parties are not the only organised interests with roots in the city's rackets.

The nexus identified by the Rangers certainly needs to be dismantled, but that measure will lead to peace only when the nexus is replaced by a properly running city administration. It would inspire more confidence if one knew what plan the Rangers have to accomplish that.

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Guns on campus

THE agony of the family of a 12-year-old boy who died in a shooting incident on Thursday is simply unimaginable.

The child, a student of Grade V at a private school, happened to be passing by the staff room when a gun being cleaned by his teacher inside went off by accident.

The emotions of the teacher too can only be guessed at; he first rushed the student to the hospital, and then turned himself in to the police.

Know more: [Teacher accidentally shoots pupil dead in Swat](#)

No doubt the law will take its course, yet the lives of all the people affected will never be the same again, for the most senseless of reasons.

Perhaps this tragedy is only compounded by the fact that the fault is that of a beleaguered and inefficient state. After the

horror that was the assault on the Army Public School in December, both the centre and provincial governments were left casting about in despair.

Across the country, schools were required to add gunmen to their security detail. The KP government decided that employees of educational institutions would be allowed to carry arms on campus, and though it backtracked after vociferous opposition, over the past months several sessions have been held in different cities where law-enforcement authorities put guns in hands that ought to have been holding books.

Accidents were the expected outcome of such dangerous weaponisation; earlier during the year, four schoolgirls were injured in Mansehra when a gun held by a private security guard went off — again by accident. And in Rawalpindi, a college student was similarly injured by a guard who, it was found, had never received training in the handling of firearms.

Sense needs to prevail before more such accidents occur and more blood is spilt. Weapons have no place in educational institutions. And the state must not be allowed to abdicate its responsibility vis-à-vis the security of the citizenry. Why do these two most basic facts continue to elude the authorities' understanding?

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Aftab Masih's execution

Once again, Pakistan has spectacularly failed a basic test of humanity. This one, not on account of frenzied mobs playing judge, jury and executioner but simply because a callous state chose — wilfully and deliberately — not to right an egregious wrong committed against one of its weakest and most disadvantaged citizens.

Aftab Bahadur Masih was a 15-year-old child when he was convicted of murder in 1992, on the basis of a confession allegedly elicited through torture and the evidence of witnesses who have since recanted. After languishing in jail for 23 years, Masih, still protesting his innocence, was hanged in Lahore's Kot Lakhpat jail on Wednesday.

With Masih's state-sanctioned murder, Pakistan has shown scant respect for international law that explicitly prohibits the execution of an individual who was a minor when the crime for which he is accused was committed.

Pakistan's Juvenile Justice System Ordinance 2000 stipulates the same, but the court on June 9 held that it would not apply to Masih as his conviction predated the legislation — a ruling that can only be described as a triumph of technicality over the demands of justice.

Masih's case illustrates the many flaws in Pakistan's judicial system where the resources and contacts of the accused often

determine guilt or innocence, death or freedom. Indigent accused cannot pay bribes to avoid police torture; they cannot afford to pay for capable lawyers and must instead place their lives in the hands of often less-than-competent and overburdened state counsel; and they cannot afford to pay the blood money that can sometimes buy them the plaintiff's forgiveness.

One can safely say that those cheering every execution in Pakistan from the sidelines are not likely to ever experience the utter helplessness of being on the wrong side of the justice system here, let alone feel the hangman's noose tightening around their necks.

Over the last six months, since the horrific APS Peshawar attack in December, Pakistan has sent over 150 death-row prisoners to the gallows.

Although this has damaged the country's standing in the international community, with representatives of the German government pointing out this week that it could hurt investment prospects in Pakistan, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan has stated unequivocally that the executions will continue regardless of global concerns. Significantly, only about 20 of those hanged had been convicted for acts of terrorism, which was the ostensible catalyst for lifting the moratorium.

are the actions of a state content with the mere appearance of justice, with neither the will nor the capacity to address the root causes that underlie terrorism. Instead, it chooses the easy way out to restore the illusion of order and control at the cost of an increasingly brutalised society. The "divine quality of mercy"

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is in short supply in today's Pakistan; in its place, a blind, vengeful rage holds this nation in thrall.

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Punjab budget

THE budget announced by the provincial government of Punjab falls far short of expectations. The provincial finance minister, Dr Ayesha Ghaus Pasha, did a disservice to her credentials as a professional economist by laying the blame for shortfalls in investment spending in the current fiscal year on the federal government, the sit-ins early in the fiscal year and the floods. She ought to have also mentioned that the provincial government's own revenue effort lacked vigour, coming in 31pc below target. Ever since the last NFC award devolved large amounts from federal tax collection to the provinces, all eyes have been on the provincial governments to see what they would do with the additional resources and how effectively they would mobilise their own revenue lines. Thus far, the provinces have turned in an inadequate performance and the latest budget from Punjab makes clear that next year will be equally disappointing. The budget envisages meagre revenue increases, and mostly from low-hanging fruit such as taxing immovable property and levying sales tax in a number of new areas. Envisaged collection under income tax, of which agricultural incomes form a large part, has been increased by 15pc. But in the current fiscal year actual collection under this

head fell short by a full 50pc of target, showing massive capacity weaknesses.

On the expenditure side the budget is a mirror reflection of the PML-N's taste for roads and power plants. The priorities that Dr Pasha used to talk of before becoming finance minister don't seem to have found their way into the budget. In a report she authored on the Punjab budget announced in 2009, for example, she had emphasised that "[p]riority should be given to invest ... additional [NFC award] resources for poverty reduction and gender empowerment". She had also highlighted a need to ensure that "a balance is preserved between rural and urban development" following the increased allocations under the NFC award, "by not diverting too large a share of the additional resources ... to ... large new projects in metropolitan cities". But in her budget announced this week, the allocation for roads and mega projects is larger than the combined allocation for education and health. All that the social sectors get is a promise to raise allocations over the next two years. One wonders what happened to all the talk of poverty reduction, gender empowerment and rural-urban balance. Was it mere words?

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Rangers' maverick raid

CLASHES between institutions are nothing new in Pakistan. But what transpired in Karachi on Friday can only be termed bizarre. As reported in this paper, Rangers' personnel entered a police station in a highly volatile part of the city's Orangi locality and took away a serving police officer. The ugly episode resulted in physical scuffles inside the police station as well as reported firing in the air by the Rangers. Police officials have complained that the Rangers' troopers — some of whom were apparently in civilian dress — “beat up and misbehaved” with police personnel. Though the city's police chief has termed the incident a “misunderstanding”, investigations are under way to determine the facts.

Primarily, this incident points to the arrogance and lack of respect for due process amongst some Rangers' personnel. While the paramilitary force has been granted policing powers in Karachi off and on — especially in support of the ongoing operation against crime and militancy in the metropolis — this episode appears to be a misuse of these powers. If the Rangers suspected the policeman of involvement in crime and had evidence to prove this, they should have coordinated the effort with the police administration instead of giving chase to the man in a manner that would not be out of place in the Wild West. The police station in question is located in an area affected by militant activity; hence if the police had opened fire at the raiding party a major tragedy would have resulted. Storming a police station in pursuit of a suspect is unacceptable. While there are undoubtedly black sheep within the police with links to crime, they need to be identified, investigated and punished within the ambit of the law. Such

reckless tactics send the message that the paramilitary force is not bound by any rules and can even violate the space of another law-enforcement body. The Rangers' authorities must investigate the incident and discipline the personnel involved to ensure this does not set an unhealthy precedent.

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Reversal of INGO decision

THERE is something both farcical and disturbing about the government apparently suspending its own decision to expel the international NGO Save the Children from the country.

Curiously, while Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan wasted little time in presenting himself to the media when news of the expulsion orders broke late last week, news of the government apparently reversing its decision only came yesterday in the form of a June 12 interior ministry letter leaked to the media.

Know more: [Interior Ministry suspends order to close 'Save the Children'](#)

Once again, then, confusion, uncertainty and contradiction appear to have resulted from the lack of coordination and opaque decision-making of the state. Perhaps though this could be an opportunity for change.

As was emphasised in these columns earlier, international NGOs operating in Pakistan need to abide by the law and work

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within the rules laid down by the relevant government departments.

Yet, it is also worth considering that an INGO such as Save the Children, which has been in existence for nearly a century and operates in 120 countries, has contended with some of the toughest bureaucratic regimes in the world.

Is the Pakistan government really seeking to set rules more draconian or harder to abide by than the global standard for INGOs? If so, why? Consider also the lack of foresight that has led to a wholly unnecessary diplomatic crisis for the country.

When the decision was made to expel Save the Children, which ministries and security agencies were involved in the decision? Did none of them anticipate the backlash internationally and prepare for it?

Had a formal investigation been conducted, had a set of specific complaints been drawn up and had Save the Children been allowed to respond to the allegations against it, not only would due process have been followed but the state would not have been forced into such an embarrassing climbdown.

Most worryingly, what does this entire episode, whether Save the Children is allowed to resume operations or not, say about the ability of INGOs in some of Pakistan's most socioeconomically vulnerable areas?

Much has been made in sections of the media and by unnamed security officials about NGOs operating in so-called sensitive areas, particularly Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan. But that is really nothing more than obfuscation.

NGOs and INGOs have long operated in those parts of the country not because of their strategic or security value but because there are vulnerable populations there that the state has failed to provide basic services to.

So is the state really seeking to punish twice over segments of the population — first by failing to provide them what is their right and then by banning others from helping them receive the basics of life?

Surely, humanity and security must learn to coexist, especially since the most insecure areas in Pakistan tend to also be the most socially and economically backward.

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Education in a shambles

NEARLY a decade and a half has elapsed since the Higher Education Commission was set up in 2002. There were great hopes that the body, well-funded and comprised of professionals, would manage to turn the sector around.

With its budget seeing a steady increase over the past several years, the HEC now tends to count its successes in terms of quantity: so many more PhD dissertations, so many universities accredited by it and so on.

But education is all about quality, and whether there has been any real success in this area can be gauged by just one damning report that was released recently: no Pakistani university managed to earn a place for itself amongst the top 100 in Asia in the Times higher education rankings.

Know more: [No Pakistani varsity in Asia's top 100](#)

This internationally recognised scale is based on 13 performance indicators that include teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook, and it rates universities in Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong in the top three slots for the region. But lest it be thought that economic powerhouses would of course produce the best educational institutions, it should be pointed out that universities from Lebanon and Iran are included on this list of academic excellence.

Asked about this dismal state of affairs, the chairman of the HEC Dr Mukhtar Ahmed referred to ground realities such as a

lack of infrastructure, adding though that “we are on the right track”. This certainly sounds hopeful, yet there is evidence to be found to the contrary.

Consider, for example, that the focus on higher education has not been buttressed by improvements in secondary and primary schooling — despite all the warnings.

The country’s school enrolment figures are abysmal as it is; last year, education campaigners Alif Ailaan pointed out that of the children that do manage to enrol, only a quarter make it to Grade 10. As far back as 2011, the report Education Emergency found that there are 26 countries poorer than Pakistan, but send more children to school; at the then rates of progress, no one alive today, it estimated, will see a Pakistan with universal education.

Matters have not improved much since then. Public-sector education is a joke, and standards in private institutions, barring a few that can only be afforded by the wealthy, aren’t well regulated. How can the higher education sector be expected to succeed when even the building blocks aren’t in place?

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Bad development

HAVING been taught by experience, many in Pakistan's more pristine areas tend to view with trepidation the announcement of new development, since it often leads to the evisceration of the location.

This is the state of mind in the hill resort of Nathia Gali and the settlements around the Ayubia National Park near Islamabad, which see during the summer a huge influx of visitors.

This has led various governments over the years to provide improved facilities in some respects, such as better roads and signage etc, but key aspects of management have been left unaddressed.

Also read: [*Nathia Gali and its host of issues*](#)

Now, as reported in this newspaper last week, the Galiyat Development Authority is planning further urban development by creating six new towns, a theme park and large hotels. But when the WWF-Pakistan took journalists to meet with local residents here, vociferous complaints were heard regarding a host of issues that are already plaguing the communities, and which need urgent resolution before incentives are provided for the tourist traffic to be stepped up.

High on the list is the pace at which deforestation is occurring and the effects of the timber mafia, which are denuding these centuries-old slopes. One type of tree, the *Taxus wallichiana* that is also known as the Himalayan Yew, has already become endangered because its wood is used in the building of houses,

graves and furniture, and the numbers of other types of conifers are also falling.

This is a matter of concern not just for this location but also for the lower regions, since these hilltops constitute a vital catchment area for Islamabad, Rawalpindi and the smaller towns in the vicinity.

Related to this is the problem of solid waste management on the hills and mixing of sewage in the springs on the hills, all of which flows down to pollute larger water reservoirs.

The authorities need reminding that any development has to be holistic; without that, there is great risk of irreparable damage to assets of natural and ecological significance.

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Surrender of insurgents

OVER the past few days, some 50 Baloch insurgents have surrendered to the government. On Saturday, two leaders of the banned separatist groups United Baloch Army and Baloch Liberation Army along with 47 companions laid down their arms, while on Sunday two more leaders — this time of the Baloch Liberation Front and Lashkar-i-Balochistan — accompanied by some associates, did the same. The surrender ceremony, followed by a news conference and attended by top officials, was a public relations coup for the Balochistan government which has found itself increasingly cornered by the resurgent separatist movement. The surrendering militants spoke of how they had been misled, and that they had come to realise the duplicity and financial self-interest of nationalist Baloch leaders in exile abroad, and the role played by foreign countries in stoking the insurgency. Government leaders also used the occasion to urge other young Baloch to follow the same path, abandon militancy and join mainstream politics which, they said, was a more viable way to secure their people's rights.

Given the murky situation in Balochistan, it is of course, difficult to state with certainty whether those surrendering are in fact militants or not, or whether this is a ruse — entirely acceptable within the domain of counterinsurgency — to sow division among the ranks of the separatists. It is also possible that some militants have indeed decided to turn their backs on the insurgency. Defections and dissent are part and parcel of militant movements, particularly prolonged ones that become susceptible to internal crises, especially when the avowed objectives appear as elusive as ever. Moreover, the security

forces have made it clear that they are not prepared to give any quarter in their efforts to crush the Baloch insurgency. However, whatever the reality behind the militants' surrender, it does not take away from the fact that the Baloch do have legitimate grievances. These must be addressed, and the province granted the sovereignty over its natural resources that is its right under devolution, but which it does not yet possess in actual fact.

Published in Dawn, June 16th, 2015

Sindh budget

LAST week, the provincial government of Sindh announced one its most uneventful budgets ever. It appears that the province, which is run by the party that proudly devolved resources and responsibilities from the centre via the NFC award and the 18th Amendment, has little idea of what to do with the extra resources, or how to discharge the additional responsibilities that have fallen upon it. Take the revenue effort as an example. Sindh enjoys relative buoyancy in the provincial GST on services since a large share of service providers have their headquarters here. For this reason, the province met its revenue collection targets better than other provinces and has reduced its dependence on NFC resources more than the others have. But there has been very little movement beyond the provincial GST. Property taxes, something that the Punjab is making an effort to develop into a larger revenue head, or agricultural incomes remain largely

untouched as potential sources of revenue for the provincial government.

On the expenditure side, a large outlay for a public transport scheme for Karachi is welcome since the state of urban mass transit in the mega city is woefully inadequate, and it is refreshing to see that much of this will be financed outside the provincial annual development plan. For example, of the Rs56bn funding required for the five metro bus services for Karachi, less than a tenth of the amount will come from ADP resources. Current spending on education has seen a meagre increase of 7.5pc from last year's allocation, where the actual amount spent fell short by Rs7bn in any case. Health has done slightly better, seeing an increase of almost 22pc to Rs54bn, and last year releases slightly exceeded their allocation of Rs43.6bn. Nevertheless, these amounts are low and development spending on these sectors, which tells us about the provincial government's plans to expand and improve the state of service delivery in both areas, remains just over 7pc of the total capital development expenditure, which is also very inadequate. One good thing about the Sindh government, however, is that they put a lot of funds in social protection, which is almost 39pc of the total capital development expenditure, the single largest head, although last year releases fell short of allocations by 46pc. The only thing new in the budget includes the plans for metro buses in large cities, which though welcome, is grossly inadequate considering the massive social challenges facing the provincial authorities.

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Drought forecasts

DROUGHT conditions may be worsening in the country this year and forecasts for rain, particularly in the southern regions, spell trouble for cotton farmers and vulnerable populations in Balochistan and Tharparkar. The newest seasonal forecast comes from the South Asian Climate Forum which warns of "below normal rainfall" in the monsoon season this year, a danger signal for an agrarian economy. Seasonal forecasts are notoriously inaccurate though, and some hope lies in the wide errors of margin that they show. But Pakistan has had a bad experience with the monsoon season since 2010 because every subsequent year has seen large-scale flooding that has affected millions, damaged infrastructure and crops and imposed heavy costs on the rural poor. And in every case, Pakistan has had to ask for international assistance to cope with the floods.

Irregular weather patterns are largely beyond the control of the state, but there are some things that can be done to mitigate their impact. For one, better quality forecasting is needed in Pakistan. Consider that the Pakistan Met Department's seasonal forecast, issued on April 7, predicted average or above average rainfall in all regions of the country until the end of June. A few weeks later, the Indian Met Dept issued its seasonal forecast of a drought, and SASCOF issued its seasonal forecast on April 27 saying below average rainfall would be observed. Now the Met department's chief is being quoted as saying that less rain is expected in the "southern half of the country, which is already in the grip of drought-like conditions". He needs to explain why his own seasonal forecast was wide of the mark.

The most important area to build capacity is in flood forecasting. Thus far we only get 48 hours' notice before a flood alert is issued, and in each of the past five seasons flood preparation was grossly inadequate, largely due to very short lead times. Granted that issuing a flood alert is not a small responsibility, and longer lead times are extremely difficult to get due to the complexity of the weather patterns that go into the making of a storm. Granted also the lack of sharing of hydrological data between India and Pakistan complicates the task further. But models exist that provide longer lead times using global meteorological databases. The models may not be perfect, but it is important that the government start thinking outside the box given the flooding experience of the past five years. This can begin by engaging with the larger scientific community to see how the models being used in Pakistan can be improved, as well as trying to cooperate with India in sharing meteorological and hydrological data for forecasting purposes. Each passing year is proving that the weather is too important a matter to be left solely to the weatherman.

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No reform of justice system

CONSIDER the contrasting events on Constitution Avenue in Islamabad this week.

While a rare full bench of the Supreme Court continued to probe away at the constitutionality of military courts, the National Assembly interrupted its budget session to pass a resolution extending for four months a February presidential ordinance that widened the powers of military courts to try civilians suspected of terrorism and gave them retrospective applicability too.

That juxtaposition — the country's apex court inquiring into actions by the country's apex legislative body that infringe on the fundamental rights of the populace — is an unwelcome reminder of the basic problem that no institution in the country seems interested in dealing with: reforming the criminal justice system in the country.

Know more: [NA extends decree on terror trials by 120 days](#)

This newspaper has repeatedly and categorically rejected both the idea and practice of military courts for terrorism cases as abhorrent and repugnant to the very idea of fundamental rights upon which the Constitution of the country is built.

Yet, there is also an issue of separation of powers — can it be good for the democratic, constitutional system if the Supreme Court were to find for itself a power stipulated nowhere in the Constitution allowing the court to strike down a constitutional

amendment duly passed by parliament and signed by the president?

A political-legal answer has always been apparent: had the country's apex institutions turned to the task of reforming the criminal justice system quickly and thereby made the need for resorting to military courts in certain terrorist cases redundant, a constitutional showdown could have been averted by turning the national focus to a forward-looking, democracy-enhancing mission.

However, that alternative course can only come about if parliament shows some leadership and commitment to democratic ideals.

Instead, parliament is not just continuing with its support for military courts, but is seeking to avoid debate on the matter for as long as it can. What else can explain the choice on Monday to extend the presidential ordinance at the request of the government instead of tabling the ordinance as a bill in parliament?

The Constitution bars parliament from extending the life of an ordinance more than once, so in four months the now-extended ordinance will in any case have to be brought to parliament.

The government appears to be aware that there is still some resistance to military courts among the country's political leadership and so is trying to put off a potentially tricky and embarrassing debate inside parliament until there is no other option. But that only exposes the bankruptcy of the government — and parliament too.

By now, five months since the 21st Amendment was passed, a special parliamentary committee could have exhaustively inquired into the problems with the country's criminal justice system and suggested a raft of reforms with input from the judiciary, legal experts and rights activists.

Yet, there appears to be no one in parliament bold or courageous enough to champion such a cause.

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KP budget

ALL eyes have been on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa this year because throughout this period its rulers have trumpeted themselves as a party of rapid change.

So naturally, the question arises: how much change has the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf brought to the province that it rules?

The latest budget announced by the provincial government provides a good opportunity to take stock. Just like any other province in the country, KP too has relied primarily on the provincial GST, which accounts for more than 60pc of its total tax collection, to increase its revenue effort.

Also read: ['Poor friendly' Rs488bn budget unveiled in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa](#)

Its track record in developing direct taxes has been weak, and the much-vaunted agriculture income tax has contributed less than Rs80m, although in its latest budget it is promising to take this figure to Rs1bn, more than a 100-fold increase.

Additionally, the budget shows a massive increase in arrears claimed by net hydel profits, which were supposed to be brought down to zero last year. This year they are again expecting Rs52bn under this head, making it the single largest revenue head in the entire budget after federal transfers.

Also, the figures show an unusually large increase under forestry receipts which are budgeted to increase more than a 1000-fold, while receipts from housing are budgeted to increase from zero to Rs14bn. It is not clear how this will be achieved.

On the expenditure side, the budget sees large responsibilities and resources devolved to the districts and the local governments, including primary and secondary education as well as a significant chunk of health-related tasks.

Expenditure under general public services shows a jump from Rs72bn to Rs177bn, with most of the increase coming under the head of transfers. Presumably, these are allocations for local government.

The Annual Development Plan is hiked by a meagre 4.5pc from allocations last year, and even here all allocations have either been held constant or slashed to make room for a new share of Rs18bn for local governments.

It seems the PTI in KP is betting heavily on its local governments to be the change it has promised to the electorate, and the budget is the first concrete indication of this. Some uncertainties hang over the financing plan behind this gambit, but if the PTI's experiment with local government is successful, it could well burnish its credentials as a party of change and emerge ahead of its rivals.

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New securities law

AFTER more than a decade of capital market reforms, the new securities law finally makes certain illegal practices in the financial markets criminal offences.

This is a step that ought to have been taken in the aftermath of the March 2005 stock market crash, but unfortunately the government at the time had other priorities.

For the first time, activities such as market manipulation, insider trading, or even issuing misleading statements can be considered criminal offences. The law also requires securities exchanges to safeguard clients' assets and establish a centralised customer protection and compensation fund, a step that ought to have been taken many years ago.

Also read: [Insider trading a criminal offence now](#)

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For too long now, our capital markets have been preying on the weaknesses of small investors to generate outside profits for a handful of brokers.

Repeated stock market crashes did not spur any significant effort at reform. And it is astonishing to think that in spite of a crash in 2005, another in 2006, and a full-scale disaster in 2008 that lead to the market being shut for many months, not a single broker has had to serve a single day in jail.

Now that the law is going to be tougher, it is imperative that the regulator also be headed by a strong individual.

In the past, the power of the stockbrokers had successfully stymied the efforts of the regulator to investigate fraud and take punitive action. With a strong law in place, it would be a travesty if a weak individual is appointed to the post of SECP chairman to neutralise the impact of the new rules.

The capital markets in our country are a classic example of the rapacious energies that are unleashed if modern markets are not regulated with a strong hand.

The government ought to be congratulated for the new law. But now comes the hard part of seeing its implementation through. In other places, the government has shown an aversion to strong independent minds. Hopefully this won't be another example.

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PPP's strained ties with military

If anything has been clear in the murk of Karachi for weeks now, it is that tensions between the military and the PPP have been on the rise.

First, the director general of Rangers in Karachi made an extraordinary set of allegations centring on the multi-billion-rupee nexus between politics and crime in the megacity and then Maj Gen Bilal Akbar's paramilitary forces raided the Sindh Building Control Authority offices in search of proof of the vast alleged land-related irregularities in the province.

On Tuesday, PPP supremo and former president Asif Zardari launched an astonishing verbal attack against the country's military leadership, suggesting that the PPP will not suffer in silence whatever it is that Mr Zardari believes the military leadership wants to inflict on his party.

Also read: [Zardari cautions military establishment for 'stepping out of domain'](#)

But what does the PPP boss really believe? Is he responding to the military's attempt to try and disrupt or sever the alleged links between the PPP leadership in Sindh and the phenomenally lucrative financial, land and other rackets in the province? Or is Mr Zardari trying to push back against the insistent rumours that governor's rule is being contemplated in Sindh?

While it is hard to discern Mr Zardari's motive in lashing out, at least one aspect of the ongoing, and possibly escalating, crisis is all too apparent: the Rangers have drifted far away from the original mandate of simply fighting organised crime and militancy.

Maj Gen Akbar's allegations were in essence a political charge sheet as was earlier Karachi corps commander Gen Naveed Mukhtar's dilation on the city's decades-long drift towards lawlessness. So, have the Rangers attempted to expand their role in Karachi after getting the nod from the country's military leadership, which may have decided the time has come for a bigger military role in Karachi and Sindh generally?

If that is indeed the case, then surely the Sindh government need not just be a bystander in all of this. The Rangers in Karachi can only serve in the city so long as the provincial government endorses their stay there. That would perhaps be a nuclear option, but it also underscores a continuing uncertainty: what is it the military via the Rangers are really trying to effect in Sindh and how serious is Mr Zardari about standing his ground?

There is also the contrast between the PPP's apparent willingness to defy the military in Sindh and its acquiescence at the federal level to consider.

After all, it was only with the PPP's support that the 21st Amendment, and so new military courts, could be approved in the Senate in January. Does the PPP's concern about military encroachment into the civilian domain — including investigating corruption — extend to only matters of Sindh?

If so, there's a startlingly obvious alternative: clean up Sindh, give issues of governance some serious consideration and demonstrate that politicians can lead ably and competently. Will the PPP consider that?

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Iran's proposal

GIVEN that pathogens do not recognise man-made borders, a regional approach to tackling pressing health issues is a sensible move.

A visiting Iranian delegation comprising health ministry and medical education officials has expressed the desire to work closely with Pakistan and Afghanistan in disease control. It has proposed that health centres be set up on both sides of the border between the two countries to prevent the transfer of communicable diseases such as polio and malaria.

Know more: [Iran proposes health centres at border, offers vaccines](#)

It has also offered to provide the oral polio vaccine, which it produces locally, and train Pakistani community health workers and epidemiologists.

Pakistan's initial response to the suggestion has been positive, with the National Health Services minister saying that lessons

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could be learnt from Iran's healthcare system and its polio eradication campaign.

The proposal will need to be discussed with the Foreign Office and the government of Balochistan — with which Iran shares a 900km border — before any further steps are taken.

More than other diseases, polio is the main concern behind Iran's proposal, and for good reason. In recent years, the increasing incidence of wild poliovirus in Pakistan has triggered alarm in the region and beyond.

In 2014, the number of cases here reached 306, the highest since 1998. Iran's excellent primary healthcare system — reportedly accessible to 98pc of the population — has been instrumental in the country being polio-free for well over a decade.

However, its close proximity to Pakistan and Afghanistan — which are among the three remaining polio-endemic countries in the world — means that it must continually be on guard against the risk of polio importation.

Cases in Pakistan so far this year are much less than that in the corresponding period of 2014, largely on account of mass vaccination campaigns of IDPs from Fata from where most of the cases originated earlier, but we cannot afford to be complacent. Iran's experience in polio eradication makes its offer to help Pakistan in its own battle against the disease a win-win proposal.

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Modi's phone call

SOMETIMES, all it takes is a phone call or a handshake to change — temporarily — the tone and tenor of the dysfunctional India-Pakistan relationship.

The last few weeks had been marked by shrill vitriol emanating mostly from the Indian side, which has been matched by equally zealous remarks from Pakistan.

However, thankfully for all those in South Asia who are put off by such brinksmanship and favour the path of peace, temperatures were brought down a few notches on Tuesday when Narendra Modi called Nawaz Sharif to extend Ramazan greetings before the advent of the fasting month.

Know more: [Modi calls Nawaz, extends wishes for Ramazan](#)

Mr Modi talked of the need for “peaceful, friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries”, while Mr Sharif replied in a similarly positive tone. The Indian leader also announced the release of Pakistani fishermen detained in India, which Nawaz Sharif reciprocated with an order to release Indian fishermen detained here.

The good wishes and bonhomie are a welcome departure from the toxic atmosphere that until very recently was prevailing in South Asia.

Earlier this month while on a visit to Dhaka, Mr Modi made impolitic remarks regarding the tragedy of 1971, which expectedly caused an uproar in Pakistan.

Some of the members of Narendra Modi's cabinet have made even more outrageous statements; one junior minister suggested India could cross the western (ie Pakistani) border in case of "disturbances" in the aftermath of a reported Indian raid into Myanmar, while in May, the Indian defence minister said his country would counter terrorism with terrorism.

Early in May, the Pakistani military had claimed RAW was involved in fomenting trouble in this country. Thankfully, this war of sound bites seems to have subsided due to Mr Modi's call.

Yet this was not a Pakistan-specific gesture; the Indian prime minister also extended Ramazan greetings to the Bangladeshi and Afghan leaders, in effect wishing well the leaders of Saarc's Muslim-majority states.

The events of the recent past illustrate how necessary it is for Pakistan and India to address the many underlying problems in their relationship in a constructive, long-lasting manner.

Mechanisms must be evolved so that provocations do not derail the peace process and channels of communication are always kept open.

We hope there will be no more inflammatory statements and jingoism. Instead, the respective leaderships in New Delhi and Islamabad must put their heads together and formulate a plan that can address each other's concerns and pave the way for long-term peace in the subcontinent.

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No sacred cows in democracy

WORRYING as it is for a major political party and the military leadership to be at odds with each other, the reaction of the PML-N government and other mainstream political parties has been disturbing too. In cancelling a meeting with PPP boss Asif Ali Zardari on Wednesday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has sent the wrong signal on the civil-military front. Similarly, words of condemnation by PML-N and PTI leaders in particular of Mr Zardari's fulminations against the military appear to have unfortunately aligned major political parties closer to the military than to the democratic system. Clearly, the swirl of corruption allegations around the PPP and repeated accusations of epic mis-governance in Sindh have at least some basis in fact. The PPP is in need of serious and urgent internal reorganisation and repurposing. But set that issue aside and consider what it is that Mr Zardari really said earlier this week. His words may have been impolitic, his accusations blunt and none of it good for political stability in Sindh — but were any of the former president's claims entirely unheard of or not made by other major political figures at various junctures in history?

By condemning Mr Zardari and making a show of distancing themselves from the PPP, are the PML-N and PTI claiming that blunt and direct criticism of the army is outside the democratic realm? If so, why? Consider that just yesterday a strident attack against the PTI was made from the floor of the National Assembly by a PML-N MNA, Talal Chaudhry. The PTI routinely attacks its political opponents using language that is indecorous and cringe-inducing. So, why is there one set of rules for politicians attacking politicians and another for

politicians criticising the political role of constitutionally apolitical state institutions? What Mr Zardari said earlier this week amounted to a political speech against a deepening intrusion into the political realm by the military leadership — can a politician not criticise what he perceives to be a political opponent?

Perhaps Prime Minister Sharif and some of his sharp-tongued senior ministers should reflect on a recent mistake by the PPP itself. Before the PPP found itself in the military's cross hairs yet again this year, the party had backed the security establishment's crackdown against the MQM. Now, with the PML-N rushing to defend the military leadership in its struggle against the PPP leaders, perhaps the party should consider the possibility of the precedent in Sindh being repeated at the centre in the not-too-distant future? It is entirely possible for politicians to disagree with and even be condemnatory of the PPP's misrule in Sindh without having to align themselves with the military. In the civil-military domain, civilians crossing over to the wrong side of the equation has historically never worked out well for the latter. Surely, the PML-N should not need to be reminded of that.

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Ramazan challenges

EVERY year when Ramazan arrives, two issues are inevitably thrust to the fore in the national conversation. One is the forced deduction of zakat from savings accounts, and the other is the inevitable spiral in food prices that gets unleashed in the days leading up to the holy month. This year, as before, a price spiral is already under way with fruit, vegetables, flour, sugar, pulses and rice prices beginning to rise even before the first day of fasting. The government has limited ability to control this phenomenon since we abandoned price controls many years ago, but it is important to understand how much of this price increase is caused by rising demand and how much by the play of speculation. Price controls are not the answer, but controlling speculation, particularly in food, ought to be an important priority for the government. The best way to achieve this is to reduce the role that cash transactions play in our economy, and encourage greater movement towards documentation. This is particularly important in food transactions. So long as large cash hoards stalk our economy in search of rentier returns, the annual price spirals that come with the onset of Ramazan will continue to stymie whatever efforts the state mounts to control them.

For a state machinery that is unable to prevent speculators from eating into people's food budget, it takes some leap of faith to forcibly deduct zakat from the citizens' savings accounts. In the past, audits have shown widespread malpractice in the utilisation of these funds administered through the Central Zakat Fund or its provincial equivalents. Very little is known about how these funds are distributed, except for a few bland assurances from department officials that every effort is made

to ensure delivery to the neediest. The local zakat committees exercise large discretionary powers in determining eligibility, and the targeting mechanism is very non-transparent. For example, one of the eligibility criteria for the Guzara allowance given by the Punjab Zakat and Ushr Department is that the applicant must “be living below poverty level”, but there is nothing to tell us how the committee determines what this level is. Is it based on income or consumption? And where is the cut-off set? Instead of chasing people’s savings for mandatory zakat deductions, the state should focus its energies on controlling the price spirals in essential foods that always break out around Ramazan.

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Balochistan budget

HOW one reads the latest budget presented by the government of Balochistan depends on how one sees that province. Those who view it as a problematic place, plagued by poor governance, will emphasise the meagre increases in the development budget, the Rs2bn allocation for the purchase of a helicopter, a sharp increase in subsidy for tube wells and the poor revenue performance of the province which meets almost 80pc of its total revenue requirements from transfers from the federal government. Those who view the province and its travails with a sympathetic eye, and believe that the authorities there are managing a fragile situation under difficult circumstances, would be likely to overlook the lack of revenue

performance and excuse the allocation of provincial resources mostly towards current expenditure.

Whatever one’s inclinations may be, it is clear that Balochistan needs a leadership with a vision. This is the fifth budget since the NFC award increased provincial shares in the federal divisible pool, and they are still talking about creating a provincial revenue authority. In the meantime, all other provinces are already well down the road to increasing their own revenue base. The budget lays stress on creating jobs in the private sector as well as 5,000 new jobs in the public sector. Job creation will be challenging given the security conditions in the province. But perhaps more than the security challenge, it is the treatment meted out to private investors that is a problem. The confusion created around the Reko Diq mine has not helped bolster private interest in the province. Other mining investors also complain of the bizarre treatment meted out to them by the provincial government that grants and cancels leases at whim. More than allocations for infrastructure and special industrial zones, the provincial government will need to focus on giving investors a stable policy environment if it hopes to attract private investors to fuel job creation.

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New job for Bilawal?

IF media reports are to be believed — though few things are certain when it comes to this particular subject — Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is on the verge of beginning his parliamentary career by contesting a by-election in one of the PPP's constituencies in rural Sindh.

To the extent that Mr Bhutto Zardari's entry into politics will re-energise a party that has suffered several massive electoral defeats outside Sindh, the move will add to the vibrancy and diversity of national politics. However, entering politics is one thing, nominating the young PPP scion as the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly may be a step too far.

While the peculiarities of political legitimacy and heritage will surely ensure that one day Mr Bhutto Zardari will be the leader of the PPP, he has neither the experience nor, apparently, the temperament yet to handle the job of leader of the opposition in the National Assembly.

Leader of the opposition is not just a ceremonial title — there are constitutionally mandated consultations that the holder of that office must hold with the prime minister when making certain appointments and selecting a caretaker administration. Moreover, leader of the opposition must also consult with and provide space to other political parties in opposition when it comes to debates inside the house and management of various National Assembly committees.

Surely, whatever his talents and whatever his parentage, Mr Bhutto Zardari should consider a slower, more modest rise to

the top of the parliamentary hierarchy, learning from more experienced hands in the PPP such as Khursheed Shah, who has a wealth of experience in parliamentary procedure and customs.

There is another reason why the PPP should rethink handing its parliamentary crown to Mr Bhutto Zardari at this time. Presumably, the PPP leadership is hoping that the young leader's presence in the National Assembly will give the party more favourable coverage and send a public signal that the PPP of the last two parliaments, dogged as it has been by allegations of corruption and incompetence, is transitioning towards a younger, more capable leadership.

But Mr Bhutto Zardari would also be a lightning rod — the subject of mockery and withering criticism by other parties keen to demonstrate that the PPP is really a party of entitlement and rooted in the past. So, not only would the immediate ascension of the young Bhutto Zardari be unwise from a parliamentary point of view, it would possibly end up harming the PPP's image outside its base in rural Sindh instead of rehabilitating it.

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Possible breakthrough

AS the latest developments indicate, it seems there has been some forward movement at last in the Dr Imran Farooq murder case. On Thursday, two men wanted in the senior MQM leader's 2010 murder in London, were picked up from Chaman, the border town on the Afghan frontier, by security forces. The two suspects were reportedly arrested by the Frontier Corps when they tried to enter the country from Afghanistan while an FC official said they had been in that country for some time. This development adds a strange twist to the case, as it had earlier been suspected that two individuals involved in the murder were in the custody of Pakistani intelligence. Are the two suspects — Mohsin Ali and Khalid Shamim — arrested at the Afghan border the same men? Earlier this year, another suspect, Moazzam Ali, had been arrested from Karachi. He was said to have provided logistical support to Dr Farooq's killers. The whereabouts of yet another key suspect, Kashif Khan Kamran, is still not known.

If the men arrested at Chaman are indeed the ones involved in the murder of Dr Farooq, then their capture would be a major breakthrough. However, several questions remain. An important one is, how did the suspects end up in Afghanistan, when it was being speculated earlier that they were in the custody of Pakistani intelligence, apparently whisked away from Karachi airport when one of the suspects arrived at the facility to pick up the two other suspects after Dr Farooq's murder. These missing links need to be explained by the state. Overall, we hope that the capture of the men does indeed lead to the case being resolved and to punishment for those directly involved in the killing, as well as for those aiding and abetting

them. The MQM — which has denied any links to the arrested men — should not have any qualms about pushing for the trial of the suspects so that the killers of the senior Muttahida leader are unmasked and punished.

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Budget debate

AT the conclusion of the general discussion of the budget debate, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar has shown flexibility in agreeing to some of the suggestions made by the Senate and industry groups. He has agreed to withdraw a number of new taxes, such as the sales tax on poultry feed which was going to increase the price of chicken. He has replaced it with a similar tax on the import of poultry feed. Excise duty on beverages has been brought down, along with a steep cut in the sales tax on oilseed and elimination of customs duty on the import of oilseed. The salaries of government servants have also been raised by 11.5pc instead of the 7.5pc announced in the budget, accomplished by first incorporating the ad hoc allowances into the salary, then applying the 7.5pc raise on the cumulative amount.

Other measures are larger in scope. An exemption on income tax has been allowed for the manufacture of mobile phones as well as further incentives on import and depreciation of plant and machinery for this industry. The incentives given for setting up industry in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been

extended to Balochistan as well. The much-feared imposition of 0.6pc withholding tax on all bank transactions by non-filers has been softened by making it applicable only to transactions of Rs50,000 and above. A Rs20bn fund to subsidise fertiliser and a steep reduction of GST on pesticides are welcome measures, but only if they are accompanied by reforms in fertiliser distribution to ensure that the poorest farmers, in whose name this step has been taken, actually receive the benefit. Many other new measures indicate that the government has gone to some lengths to incorporate the feedback received on the budget from its peers in parliament and from industry groups. On the whole, 92 budget proposals were received from the Senate, of which 20 have been accepted in full and 21 on a partial basis.

The level of flexibility shown is not unprecedented, but the good thing is that the changes are being made during the debate in the house rather than after the passage of the finance bill. Many of the documentation measures contained in the budget have survived the general discussion, but they are going to meet serious opposition once they start to be implemented — at that point the government must be expected to stand its ground. It is also good to see that the withdrawal of SROs has survived the discussion. The tumultuous circumstances that obtained in the National Assembly during the session are regrettable, especially since none of the grievances that were being shouted out, leading ultimately to a walkout, had anything to do with the budget. More than ever, it is becoming necessary to ensure that our economic policy is not held hostage to political passions. The budget session was yet another reminder of this.

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Lawyers' violent tactics

IN step with the rising temperatures, lawyers in the country have intensified their campaign to provide cheap justice on the spot.

Consequently, 'heat of the moment' incidents involving them, which even at other times are not infrequent, have registered a sudden jump.

In Lahore alone in the last few days, there have been three instances of the black coats venting their spleen on someone or the other.

Recently, on Friday, the lawyers' ire fell on a district and sessions judge. The victim, reports citing witnesses say, had the gall to ask a gentleman in his court who he was.

Later, the visitor was identified as a lawyer. His colleagues apparently required no lateral identification as they went about establishing their own writ.

Earlier, on Wednesday, it was reported that a group of lawyers had allowed their emotions to get the better of them when they attacked a young man over some driving issue on a busy road.

On Thursday, a policeman was beaten up outside the lower courts in the Punjab capital; he was, reportedly, found guilty of drinking from, and hence 'contaminating', a glass meant to satiate only the lawyers.

This is almost becoming a daily routine, with the lawyers throwing in a few fists to make their argument. In the wake of the movement for an independent judiciary a few years ago, the resort to physical force to make a point became a tendency the lawyers were noted for.

The frequency has increased; and, if anything, the calls for introspection heard earlier have died down. The bar associations are generally reluctant to debate the issue given the internal politics of votes and lobbies.

This is a situation not dissimilar to other professions where politics and vested interests prevent a professional code of conduct from being enforced. But the absence of it is all the more glaring when the violators happen to be those expected to best understand the rules. The lawyers must lead by first getting their act right.

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Power protests

SIZZLING temperatures, no electricity and the fact that people are fasting can combine to try the patience of most citizens. Hence, it is understandable why people took to the streets to vent their frustration on Friday, the first day of Ramazan, in several cities nationwide.

To add to the people's woes, they were not even spared from power cuts during iftar, sehr and taraveeh, even though on Thursday, the water & power minister had categorically stated that there would be no load-shedding during these periods.

The government says a surge in demand has scuttled plans to make iftar and sehr hours free from load-shedding. Indeed, current temperatures in most parts of Pakistan are positively baking, ranging from the low- to mid-40s (Celsius).

Also read: [PM Nawaz expresses resentment over power outages](#)

People's frustration can be well imagined when, after a long, hot day, families gather round the table to break their fast and the lights stay out, while the heat is unbearable. And when the electricity is back, fluctuations can play havoc with electrical appliances.

Moreover, most Pakistanis cannot afford generators or UPS systems, hence prolonged outages during the sweltering, humid, or hot and dry, summer only aggravate the misery.

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On Saturday, the prime minister ordered officials to resolve the issue of power cuts during these hours.

The government has put forward two basic solutions to address the situation; firstly, officials say power supply is being diverted to domestic consumers from industry, while secondly, the state has appealed to the people to reduce their consumption of power.

Both these steps seem logical, as industry's demand for power slows down anyway around and after iftar time, while there is little argument with the plea to reduce consumption.

The water & power ministry has said that the current gap between electricity supply and demand is around 1,300MW.

Keeping this in mind, the state should think about increasing generation to cover the gap as much as possible, while it should also consider diverting gas from industry to power plants to address the energy shortfall.

Some deft management of the power sector is required by the state — beyond just making statements to soothe the public's anger.

The authorities need to prioritise the supply of electricity to domestic consumers during iftar and sehr times and to ensure that the duration of power cuts is kept to a minimum throughout the day as temperatures soar and show no sign of dipping to more comfortable levels in the immediate future.

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Charter of economy again

GIVEN how politics ends up dominating all discourse in our country, it does not sound like a bad idea to have a charter of economy that encapsulates some key areas of consensus and separates economic policy from politics.

The idea has been floated in the past by the government, and most recently the finance minister again referred to it at the conclusion of the general discussion of the budget.

Take a look: [Dar presses for 'charter of economy'](#)

There can be little doubt that the conduct of economic policy needs to be less influenced by politics, and it is worthwhile to recall that the PML-N itself did the most to politicise economic matters when it was in the opposition. Its members were the most vocal in opposing documentation measures, efforts to reform the GST, any manner of privatisation or divestment of shares in state-owned enterprises, or any new revenue measure.

While opposing new initiatives of the last government, the PML-N also invoked every populist trope that Finance Minister Ishaq Dar bristles at today.

For example, the PML-N criticised the then ruling party for raising oil and electricity prices and the then senator Ishaq Dar himself did his best to stymie the RGST by deflecting the debate away from the tax reforms towards other issues such as reform of public-sector enterprises and elimination of tax evasion.

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Then president Zardari had to reach out to Nawaz Sharif directly, through a letter, and ask for his support in economic matters, an overture that was rejected summarily.

Now that his party is in power, the finance minister is perhaps discovering that it is far easier to stymie reforms than to shepherd them through the legislative process.

Yet, in spite of the history outlined here, it would be wise on the part of the opposition to accept the invitation from the government to formulate a consensus around economic policy enshrined in a charter of economy.

If anything, the history of the PML-N in opposition is the clearest proof that such a charter is badly needed.

Continuing the tradition of opposing reform measures simply for the sake of opposition would only keep the country stuck in the same self-destructive cycle.

But developing a charter of economy is going to prove far more complicated than the charter of democracy was. The economy requires the application of different economic policies depending on the circumstances.

Economic policy can be about pursuing growth, or employment generation, or redistribution or consolidation, depending on the governing philosophy of the ruling party and the circumstances that obtain in the country.

Tax policy can be reformed to pursue objectives such as elasticity or equity.

If a consensus can be developed on the broad outlines of the economic policy that the country needs, that indeed would be a positive step. But nobody should underestimate the difficulties involved in keeping politics out of economics, least of all the finance minister himself.

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More effort needed in Afghanistan

AN inaugural Pentagon report submitted to Congress evaluating the post-December transition from leading the war effort in Afghanistan to a so-called train, advise and assist mission named Resolute Support has in diplomatic language spelled out the security and governance challenges in Afghanistan today. Clearly, the massive spring offensive by the Taliban has been a setback for hopes of stability in Afghanistan while the unity government has struggled to get beyond persistent political troubles that have made it all but impossible to improve governance there. President Ashraf Ghani is a leader pulled in many directions with his hands often tied and multiple factors beyond his control. In truth, however, what is playing out in Afghanistan at the moment is partly the result of the US not having a reasonable or realistic strategy there for years now, with President Barack Obama in particular seeming more focused on an exit from Afghanistan than anything else.

Consider the various ways in which the US has contributed to the ever-increasing uncertainty hanging over the fate of Afghanistan. If the unity government is not working out or does not appear to be able to overcome internal differences, is that really a surprise? But it was US Secretary of State John Kerry's dramatic diplomacy that created the unlikely marriage between President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah in the first place. Then, when the White House announced its surge-and-exit plan in 2009, it was apparent straight away that an artificial timeline had been imposed — a timeline within which the Afghan army and police forces simply would not be able to develop the capacity to defend large swathes of the country. Even more problematically, the US long dithered on talks with the Afghan Taliban and then belatedly attempted to nudge along an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned embryonic peace process. Collectively, that history has surely informed the rapidness of the deterioration in 2015.

Yet, the missteps and mistakes of the past should not mean that the deterioration of 2015 cannot be reversed. One consistent positive is that all of Afghanistan's neighbours — and that includes Pakistan — agree that civil war in Afghanistan is not in anyone's interest. Moreover, over the past couple of years at least the US-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral ties have moved in the right direction, with the US and Pakistan stabilising their bilateral links and the Pakistan military-Afghan government relationship witnessing unprecedented cooperation. The China factor too is a new and positive influence, while the spectre of the Islamic State making inroads in Afghanistan could induce the Afghan Taliban to take talks with Kabul more seriously. Key to reversing the alarming deterioration of 2015 though will be realistic goals by the Afghan government and the outside powers. Afghanistan is not going to become a vibrant and

thriving democracy with strong institutions and a sustainable economy anytime soon. A modicum of stability and governance will do — and the route to that clearly lies through a more urgent effort at talks.

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Refugee crisis

NOTWITHSTANDING all the successes touted as hallmarks of the modern age, it is a sad reality that globally, displacement as a result of wars, conflict and persecution is currently at the highest level ever recorded. On Thursday, the UNHCR's annual Global Trends Report, World at War, said that the number of people forcibly displaced by the end of 2014 stood at a "staggering" 59.5 million, compared to 51.2 million a year earlier and 37.5 million a decade ago. The increase, it said, represents the biggest-ever jump in a single year. To put that in perspective, consider this: globally, one in 122 people is now either a refugee, internally displaced or seeking asylum; if this were the population of a country, it would be the world's 24th largest. These figures hold special significance for Pakistan, which hosts some 1.5 million registered refugees from the protracted conflict in Afghanistan. This gives it the dubious distinction of being the country with the second largest number of refugees in the world (the first being Turkey, which is home to 1.59 million Syrian refugees). In addition to this, there are an estimated one million Afghans resident illegally in the country too; as reported on Saturday, an exercise to register them is set

to get under way on July 25 — it will be a six-month process that is to involve the setting up of 21 registration centres across the country.

Here in Pakistan, the Afghan population is generally viewed as a burden, but one that must necessarily be shouldered in the light of humanitarian concerns and the fact that the neighbouring country has not seen peace of any durable shape for over three and a half decades, as a result of conflicts of varying types. Efforts to encourage the refugees to return have met with some success — some 45,000 people have gone back to their country under a UN-sponsored voluntary repatriation programme since January. But the fear felt by many in terms of returning to their own country can be understood, especially since many amongst the refugees' number were born here. Pakistan continues to receive UN support to see to the needs of the refugees, but the fact remains that Afghanistan's affairs need to be permanently settled, with little possibility of a return to conflict before a large-scale repatriation of refugees can be expected. The world has an important role to play in this regard, not least Pakistan and the regional countries.

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Fishermen's release

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's recent phone call to his Pakistani counterpart to convey Ramazan greetings may not have solved the Sir Creek dispute, but it was no less momentous for around 200 Pakistani and Indian fishermen imprisoned in each other's countries. Mr Modi's promise to ensure that Pakistani fishermen detained in his country would return home for Ramazan was promptly reciprocated by Mr Nawaz Sharif with the release of 113 Indian fishermen behind bars here since around nine months. This was immediately followed by India releasing 88 Pakistani fishermen held in its prisons. The freed Indian fishermen were taken to Wagah by train to be sent to their respective destinations, and eagerly waiting families. A report in this paper on Friday offered a glimpse into the hardship their long absence from home had caused; families on the verge of starvation, struggling to make ends meet.

These impoverished people feature in a pantomime that regularly takes place every few months or so between the two neighbouring countries — the release from prison of a clutch of hapless fishermen belonging to one side or the other. The dispute over the maritime boundary at Sir Creek — which is where most of the straying fishermen are apprehended — makes this yet another front for politics to trump the exigencies of life. The fishermen, only looking to make a decent living, are no threat, nor does anyone seriously consider them to be so. Yet they are used as bargaining chips, to be played when the time is right. Surely it did not need the sighting of the Ramazan crescent, or a phone conversation between the premiers of Pakistan and India, to bring the misery of over 200 families to

an end. At least, it is heartening to note that most fishermen are not treated badly during their incarceration. But that is small comfort for those who get caught in the infernal game called politics, much like the struggling fish they catch in their nets.

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Killer heat wave

AS large parts of southern Pakistan endure a heat wave that has killed more than 250 people in the city of Karachi alone — and the figure could be higher if some deaths have gone unreported — many may ask what, if anything, can be done to mitigate the impact of such destructive weather events.

Lashing out against a shortage of electricity, like many chose to do in the Sindh Assembly on Monday, does not take away from the fact that the country is generally not equipped to prevent weather-related tragedies.

True, long hours without power have only exacerbated the stifling heat but what must also be noted is that the majority of deaths have occurred largely in the city of Karachi, whereas the extreme temperatures have been felt from Sukkur to Turbat.

Even in Karachi, the deaths have been reported from the poorest localities — Lyari, Malir, Korangi and Karachi East — and day labourers are disproportionately amongst the affected ones.

The heat has hit all of us, but those who have not been able to survive its impact would not have been helped very much by greater supplies of electricity.

The first question to naturally arise is this: what can people in Jacobabad, Larkana, Sukkur and other towns of Sindh and Balochistan teach the people of Karachi about surviving an extreme heat wave?

Some answers might point towards cultural habits, like dressing appropriately to not expose crucial parts of the body to the direct rays of the sun, and managing work rhythms to avoid the hottest parts of the day. But life in large cities is far more demanding.

Dwellers here require heightened awareness of the various stages of heat injury to know well in advance when it is the right time to rest and find some shade. Perhaps the provincial government can run a quick awareness campaign about the types of symptoms to be on the lookout for, such as muscle spasms, headaches and faintness.

But complicating this effort is the month of fasting and the inability to rehydrate, which is an essential intervention to avert the onset of a heat stroke.

One thing is for sure though. Electricity for air conditioners is not the answer where the problem is the very low thermal efficiency of most of the construction undertaken in the hottest parts of the country. Perhaps raising the thermal efficiency standards of public buildings and mandating thermal efficient codes on new housing colonies and apartment buildings is the more logical first step.

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Perhaps we can learn something from how revised building codes were implemented in the aftermath of the 2005 earthquake to make construction more resistant to tremors, and apply the same lesson to revising building codes in Karachi to promote thermal efficiency. That would be the long road to take, but it would certainly make future heat waves more bearable without causing large-scale power outages.

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In the name of the poor

THE capture by elite interests of a special programme meant to benefit poor farmers in Punjab clearly illustrates where matters are going wrong in the provincial government's way of doing things. A special scheme under the Chief Minister's Package for Poor Livestock Farmers was supposed to provide free vaccination for cattle belonging to needy farmers. But instead, most of the vaccinations ended up being administered to cattle belonging to MPAs of the PML-N, or their relatives and friends. This would not be a noteworthy issue by itself, were it not for the fact that the budgets of Sindh and Punjab particularly are full of schemes of this sort. If such elite capture can be carried out so easily in a relatively simple programme such as this, it is easy to imagine what happens in many other programmes where the handouts can include cash or readily encashable items such as laptops.

The Punjab government has budgeted Rs30bn in its Annual Development Programme for "special initiatives", which include large numbers of schemes that are basically handouts of precisely this sort. This is the largest allocation in the ADP after infrastructure. Likewise, the Sindh government's ADP budgets 40pc of its total outlay on "social protection" measures that include up to 85,000 beneficiaries, we are told, for cash handouts in different forms. In many cases, the targeting of these schemes is very opaque and vulnerable to elite capture. Of course, the possibilities of elite capture should not be used to argue for a complete withdrawal of the state from all such redistributive functions. The poor and marginalised need state support. But more needs to be done to ensure that support meant for these underprivileged communities does not get co-opted by the elites. How exactly this is to be achieved needs further input, but provincial governments relying on massive increases in such schemes should also give more thought to ensuring the protection and sanctity of the rights of the intended beneficiaries.

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Political inertia in heat crisis

EVERYBODY wants to blame someone else — nobody wants to take any responsibility. The chief minister of Sindh showed up in the provincial assembly yesterday only to demonstrate that he was totally unaware of what has been happening in the provincial capital during the days he was away. Once the peak of the heatwave, that has caused more than 700 deaths in Karachi alone, appeared to have passed, the chief minister issued instructions to close “offices, schools and colleges”. Never mind that it is summer holidays and schools and colleges are already shut. He blamed K-Electric, the city’s power company, and its private management for failing to ensure the supply of uninterrupted power during the heatwave, accusing its private management of acting like businessmen, but said nothing about the dismal state of power supply in Sukkur and Larkana, the cities he had just come from, where power riots have been taking place for days and electricity supply is in the hands of state-owned corporations.

But Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah is not alone in issuing bizarre instructions and engaging in a blind blame game in the midst of a crisis. As power load-shedding in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also reached unbearable proportions, Chief Minister Pervez Khattak stood in his own provincial assembly and threatened to burn down the offices of PESCO, the state-owned power utility that serves the province. He did not say how that act would help alleviate load-shedding in the province. Meanwhile, Minister of State for Water and Power Abid Sher Ali threatened to take K-Electric from its private management if it did not improve its performance, and blamed the deaths in Karachi’s heatwave on the power utility. He is

apparently unaware that the power to take such a step does not belong to him or to his ministry. Nor did he explain how the performance of his own ministry, which had promised zero load-shedding for domestic consumers during Ramazan, was any better.

All three gentlemen are major figures in our political galaxy, but their words sound like those of angry little men addled up in the heat of the moment — all thoroughly worked up but bereft of any ideas. Perhaps it would have been better for the Sindh chief minister to cut short his visit to Larkana and return to Karachi to organise relief camps for victims of heatstroke, even if it meant using the party machinery to run and staff them, as has happened on numerous occasions in the past, rather than resort to absurd instructions and a blame game. Where are the government relief camps in the affected localities? Or those run by political parties, or even by medical students? Where is the campaign to spread public awareness about the early symptoms of a heatstroke? All that these irresponsible statements demonstrate is the tremendous disconnect between the political leadership and the people they purport to lead.

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War crimes in Gaza

IT was known for long that both Israel and Hamas had committed crimes against humanity during the Israeli blitz on Gaza last year, but, according to the UN human rights body, some of the actions fell within the category of war crimes. Releasing its report in Geneva on Monday, the UN Human Rights Commission said it had been able to gather “substantial information” that showed both Israel and Palestinian militant groups committed “serious violations” of international humanitarian and human rights laws, some of them constituting war crimes. While Palestinian groups, especially Hamas, fired rockets on civilian targets, the Israeli war machine poured artillery and tank fire on a whole range of civilian targets in Gaza, including apartment buildings, UN-run schools, mosques and shopping plazas. Nevertheless, it would show a gross lack of sense of proportion if Israel and Hamas were bracketed together in the conduct of war. The civilian casualty toll, the firepower used and their effect on the victims give a fair indication of the extent of violations committed by the two sides. Hamas, according to the report, fired 4,881 rockets and 1,753 mortars, while the Israeli armed forces used 50,000 artillery and tank shells besides conducting 6,000 air strikes. No wonder, civilian casualties should be what they were: 2,200 Palestinians, including 550 children, dead, with Israel’s loss being six civilians out of a total of 73 people killed.

It is, however, the after-effects of the war that deserve to be noted, for the UN report warned that the consequences of fighting “in Gaza”, not in Israel, would “impact generations to come”. Obviously, the Hamas rockets would not cause the same havoc which Israel’s 50-day blitz did on Gaza’s

infrastructure together with the devastating impact this had on the Palestinian people’s everyday life. Gaza remains occupied territory, because Israel controls its air, land and sea exits despite the much-heralded “disengagement” by the Ariel Sharon government. For that reason, the occupier and the occupied cannot be placed on an equal footing in moral terms.

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Loss of forestland

EVEN though there is no shortage of examples, the casual attitude with which matters of long-term importance are decided by those at the helm of administration in Pakistan comes as a shock every time. Concern for sustainability and the outlook for the future are thrown to the winds, with political expediency and optics dictating the outcome more often than not. Consider the decision taken last week by the Sindh government to allot 9,000 acres of forestland to the Pakistan Army. That the move relates to a 14-year-old application and the fact that it came at a time when the PPP, which is in power in the province, was at loggerheads with the military establishment, indicates that it was less the welfare of fallen soldiers’ families — who the army says will be the beneficiaries — and more the political climate that proved the motivating factor. The application had formally been forwarded to the Sindh government in 2001, seeking 35,521 acres in the forest lands in Garhi Yasin in Shikarpur district; this is in line with the army’s policy to allot land to the heirs of fallen soldiers, especially in Punjab.

While the policy may be commendable, and the government ought to consider formulating a similar scheme for members of the police force which is at the forefront of combating urban terrorism, the issue here is of allocating forestland — and that too in a province that is already significantly denuded of trees. In terms of Sindh, the bulk of its forest cover — by some estimates, as much as 90pc — is already gone. The last thing the government ought to be doing is giving over thousands of the acres remaining. True, land-use policy requires that the lease-holder can use no more than 80pc of the total holding for agricultural purposes, but even if this rule is adhered to — and that's a big if, given how things work in Pakistan — it translates to the forest in this area being stripped down to a mere shadow of its current size. Instead of sacrificing the forests, the provincial and federal administrations need to be urgently focusing on addressing the issue of deforestation, which is occurring at an alarming rate across the country. There are already several predictions, based on hard science, that this is amongst the countries most at risk as a result of climate change and global warming. It behoves the policymakers to start preparing immediately.

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Islamabad LG polls

IT is quite true that were it not for the superior judiciary's pursuance of the matter, there would be little progress on local government elections, as the political class in the provincial and national legislatures has shown scant interest in this crucial area of governance. While rushing the process or passing flawed legislation to pave the way for the polls can create new problems, an interminable delay can create complications as well. In Islamabad, a strange situation has emerged. As per the Supreme Court's directions, the Election Commission of Pakistan on Tuesday announced the schedule for local polls in the federal capital. The polls are due to be held on July 25 while nominations will be received till June 26. But, there's a major hitch — the relevant LG law for the capital has still not been passed by the Senate and unless the legislation is finalised, it will be very difficult to hold the polls as per schedule. Nearly all parties have criticised the announcement of the election schedule. The law, which has been passed by the National Assembly, is being reviewed by a Senate sub-committee. Those familiar with the process say that as this is the first time local polls are being held in Islamabad, there are many unresolved questions. Among these — which emerged at public hearings — is the extent of power that elected local officials will have.

Two basic things must be kept in mind in this situation: firstly, the polls cannot be put off indefinitely and the law cannot be debated endlessly. Secondly, a badly drafted law will create major hurdles for the incoming local government. The major stakeholders — parliament and the ECP — need to reconcile both of these issues and come up with a workable solution.

While the ECP should consider a fresh schedule in consultation with lawmakers, senators must also give a realistic time frame for the passage of the law. We hope the law is not delayed further so that the federal capital has an elected local government of its own soon.

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Heatwave deaths

EVER since the Sindh government sprung into action on the mounting death toll from the heatwave in the province, a series of absurd instructions have been pouring forth. The latest such announcements come from a late-night meeting chaired by Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah, which decided on the early closure of shops, marriage halls and restaurants, a one-day government holiday, and a protest sit-in against K-Electric and the federal government. Earlier, the chief minister had ordered the closure of schools and colleges, even though it is summer holidays and most of these institutions are already shut. These measures have been used in the past to respond to a sharp deterioration in the power situation, and they have rarely ever yielded measurable results.

But what makes these announcements absurd is that they have very little to do with the deaths from heatstroke. The load-shedding situation across Sindh is very dire indeed, but the deaths from heatstroke are only marginally connected to electricity. The dead consist largely of very vulnerable people,

including the poor, the elderly and day labourers, who had no awareness of the early symptoms of heatstroke or of preventive measures such as rapid rehydration with salts and covering of the head to prevent direct exposure to sunlight. The Sindh government is focusing excessively on electricity as the cause behind the deaths, and not enough on measures that more directly deal with the cause of the deaths. Did the participants of the meeting coordinate with any of the hospitals where the heatstroke victims were being treated or with the Edhi morgue which is saying it is filled to capacity, to find out what sort of assistance they might require? Did they try to determine the identities of the victims to see which groups were particularly vulnerable and what measures could be taken to target assistance to them? Did they coordinate their energy conservation ideas with K-Electric, which might have useful suggestions about how the existing electricity in Karachi can be better utilised? Did they look into the logistics of setting up relief camps across the affected areas, particularly Karachi, with the aim of marshalling volunteers with necessary supplies? It does not appear so. All they did, it seems, was to roll out the same old tried and failed ideas from the past, and announce them with a new gusto. That will hardly work to alleviate the crisis.

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Little progress on MDGs

AN indicator of how low a priority human development is for the state is that there exists a special parliamentary task force on sustainable development goals. This may come as a surprise to many, including elected representatives. Even fewer may be aware that the shift to sustainable development goals — from the earlier Millennium Development Goals — has come under the present government's so-called Vision 2025, an ambitious Planning Commission blueprint for development and economic growth that has found few takers among the country's policy planners and decision-makers so far. The confusion and lack of interest can be gauged by the fact that a meeting of the special parliamentary task force on Tuesday, that was meant to shed light on the issue of climate change and its potential impact on Pakistan, appears to have roamed desultorily into the arena of Pakistan's uneven and unsatisfactory performance in achieving the MDGs. Essentially, the country's elected representatives and the state itself do not appear to have as yet grasped the basics of the huge development challenge that confronts the Pakistani state and society.

Some history and context may help. When the MDGs were mooted 15 years ago, there was a great deal of hope internationally that the eight goals could be substantially met by the developing world. Pakistan has by no means been the worst performer, but it has also at no point taken the MDGs seriously enough to ensure that sustained and meaningful progress has occurred. Of the eight MDGs — eradicate extreme hunger and poverty; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat

HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental stability; and develop a global partnership for development — Pakistan has managed some progress in the so-called targets and indicators specific to each goal. But none of that progress has been adequate compared to the goals, nor is there independently verifiable data to back up the claims of progress made by the government.

The reasons are not hard to fathom: no overhaul of the bureaucracy or administration that must help achieve the goals; no restructuring of the state's finances to free up money for investments in people-centric development; no meaningful national conversation on what people-centric security really means. In the absence of any of that, it is impossible to imagine achieving universal primary education or ensuring environmental stability. Moreover, post-18th Amendment, there is a fundamental shift in terms of responsibilities between the centre and the provinces. Virtually all of the targets and indicators under the MDGs, and now the indicators for the sustainable development goals, are in provincial remit. There, predictably, Punjab is performing better than the rest, with Balochistan the worst off and Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa having decidedly mixed results. So far, human development has not been a priority for the provinces either, but perhaps the onset of local governments may help change that?

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The ‘banned’ outfit

IT is difficult to comprehend why parents of the APS Peshawar carnage victims were shown video clips of militants’ brutality at Wednesday’s Supreme Court hearing concerning the establishment of military courts. The families have been through enough, and one wonders why they had to be shown the recordings when all that was apparently required was their opinion on the 21st Amendment. On another note, the hearing was significant because it has once again brought to the fore the issue of the status of ‘banned’ groups in Pakistan. When Justice Qazi Faez Isa asked if the state had declared Daesh — as the self-styled Islamic State is also known — a proscribed organisation, the attorney general replied that he would produce documentation detailing the outfit’s proscription in court. This is perhaps indicative of the state’s overall method of dealing with the proliferation of militancy. While on paper there are grand plans and designs; when it comes to implementation, the state is largely at sea.

While it is debatable what sort of presence the IS has in Pakistan and how big a threat it poses to the country’s security, the nation needs to know whether it has been officially banned or not. The problem is that many militant outfits thrive because the state has left a grey area where they can operate. Groups like the IS, Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat and Jamaatud Dawa all fall within this category. Are these groups banned? If so, how are they able to organise and how are their leaders able to march in rallies and deliver speeches? Also, while an organisation may be banned on paper, its leadership is largely free to carry on business as usual. This dichotomy needs to be addressed. An authentic list of banned organisations needs to

be made public and must be updated regularly. Moreover, all individuals associated with proscribed outfits must also be watched and their finances frozen. The Supreme Court would be ideally placed to ask the state for a comprehensive, updated list of proscribed groups in the country, and to inquire what steps the government is taking to prosecute the leaders of these outfits. The face of militancy is constantly changing and taking new forms in Pakistan. Up to now the ad hoc approach has failed to secure the country from the menace of terrorism and if matters continue to remain as they are, it will only provide more space for militancy to thrive.

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MQM’s alleged links

THE surge of allegations against the MQM continues, this time the BBC chipping in with claims that have been heard before elsewhere though perhaps not in the detail revealed on Wednesday. Two things in particular stand out about the BBC report alleging links between the MQM and the Indian state: one, that the claims were made by members of the MQM themselves; and two, that a list of weapons — many of the items being of a kind no peaceable political party anywhere could possibly have any interest in — has been recovered from an MQM property in the UK. The MQM response has been as predictable as it is inadequate: the few party leaders who were willing to brave the cameras and microphones on Wednesday dismissed all allegations and hinted at yet another unspecified

plot against the MQM. With more claims and stories almost sure to follow in the days and weeks ahead, perhaps it is time for, first, the federal government to revisit its strategy and second, the MQM to do the same.

Thus far the PML-N government's response to every new twist and turn in the widening and deepening case against the MQM has been either to reiterate its support for government agencies (if the allegations emanate from military-backed quarters) or to pledge to investigate (if they originate in the media or elsewhere). So it is hardly surprising that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday directed Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan to apparently investigate the claims made in the BBC report. If that is unsurprising, it is also thoroughly unacceptable: the BBC report suggests that at least one unnamed Pakistani official is aware of the alleged MQM-India nexus — should therefore the government not be informing the country about what it knows rather than pretending that it is in the dark and committed to finding the truth? Repeatedly in recent weeks and months, the interior minister has hinted at knowledge about the MQM's alleged illegal activities — but always balked at revealing what his ministry is aware of for unspecified reasons. Are Pakistanis forever destined to remain a population that its own elected representatives withhold the truth from?

The other aspect to consider here is the MQM's inadequate response to the growing list of allegations against the party. The essential point is that none of the claims are particularly new or surprising: the MQM's connection to violence and militancy; the MQM's foreign linkages to various states; the MQM's economic exploitation of the cities in which it rules — everything has been alleged over the years and it is commonly

accepted that most of the allegations have at least a kernel of truth to them. What the MQM — which still has a large support base as the April by-polls- in Karachi showed — needs is an overhaul of its politics and internal organisation. It must clean out the worst elements, admit to a flawed past and lay the ground for a people-oriented future.

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Ill-informed remarks

WHETHER it was a faux pas or stemmed from ignorance, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar's statement that Azad Jammu & Kashmir is part of Pakistan should jolt the old hands at the Foreign Office, for it repudiates the very basis of Islamabad's political, legal and moral stand on the more than six-decade-old dispute. Pakistan's position since 1947, when India occupied the princely state, has been that Kashmir is not real estate, that neither Pakistan nor India has a right to it and that it is the people who should decide by a vote what country they consider to be their own. This Pakistani position was recognised by the United Nations through various resolutions and accepted by colonial and Indian leaders, including governor general Lord Mountbatten, prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and New Delhi's representatives at the world body. That Mr Dar should know so little about foreign affairs is rather surprising. Referring to the Indian objections to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passing through Gilgit-Baltistan, which is a part of the larger Kashmir dispute, the finance minister said,

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“What disputed territory? Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir are part of Pakistan.”

GB, whose legal status remains in limbo, and AJK are part of the larger dispute that has been pending with the UN. But what Mr Dar failed to mention was that looking after GB’s administration and economic development will remain Islamabad’s responsibility until the Kashmir issue is finally resolved. His ill-informed claim, therefore, that they are part of Pakistan underlines a regrettable truth: the cabinet does not function as a cohesive policymaking body, and Nawaz Sharif’s retention of the foreign minister’s portfolio has caused enormous confusion in the conduct of foreign policy. Odd as it is, there has been no government clarification, not even the usual claims of having been misquoted. That a federal minister should exhibit such disregard towards a sensitive foreign policy issue reflects adversely on the quality of the leadership. It is not too late to have a fulltime foreign minister.

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Zaheer at the ICC

THE appointment of former Pakistan captain Zaheer Abbas as the president of the International Cricket Council is a rare honour coming Pakistan’s way, besides being a step in the right direction by the world cricket governing body. Abbas, one of the finest batsmen to have represented the country and the game, was confirmed for the coveted post in a landmark decision taken by the ICC in its annual conference in Barbados on Tuesday. The move is a departure from the previous ICC policy of appointing figureheads from the member cricket boards or technocrats for the post and it is understood that the controversial exit of Bangladesh Cricket Board’s Mustafa Kamal earlier this year prompted the world body to rethink its policy. That said, Abbas’s induction is still a hurriedly put together move following the sudden withdrawal of ex-Pakistan Cricket Board chief Najam Sethi from his nomination for the ICC post last month, which he said was a decision in conjunction with the world body’s future plans to involve iconic cricketers.

The president’s post at the ICC, despite being a ceremonial one, poses perhaps the stiffest challenge in Abbas’s career since he faced the tearaway Aussie pace duo of Lillee and Thomson at Sydney some three decades ago. He is likely to find himself on a sticky wicket when it comes to dealing with thorny issues such as the Big Three controversy, security and the corruption issues currently afflicting the game, as well as the cut-throat commercialism threatening to take control. While as a figurehead at the world body Abbas is expected to have a rational and unbiased view of the controversies plaguing international cricket, he cannot remain oblivious to issues

pertaining to Pakistan cricket, which include the revival of foreign team tours and the continued defiance of India to play us either at home or at neutral venues. Abbas successfully countered many a bouncer in his heyday and needs to be just as assertive and skilful in his new job.

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Focus on K-Electric

KARACHI'S beleaguered power utility is once again the focus of public ire following the enormous loss of life from the recent heatwave. The government of Sindh has blamed prolonged power outages as the key factor behind the deaths and some members of the party ruling in the province have demanded that the government retake control of the utility from its private sponsors. The prime minister has, wisely, refused to take such a step, but his government has now announced that it will be conducting a "performance audit" of the utility to see whether or not the private owners have been living up to their responsibility to the public interest by investing in system upgrades and power generation from their own plants. The debate, if it can be called that, arising from the heatwave deaths has therefore morphed into a debate around the government's regulatory will and capacity in providing oversight for the sole privately owned and operated power distribution company in Pakistan.

On Thursday, the government issued formal instructions to Nepra, the power sector regulator, to conduct an audit of K-Electric to determine why the power utility is not utilising its full generation potential to serve its customers, as well as whether it has lived up to its commitment to invest in its distribution system to prevent frequent tripping and technical outages. In its defence, K-Electric is expected to tell the regulator that the irregular supply of gas and the lack of payment from government offices complicates generation, while attacks on its offices and response teams coupled with frequent theft of power lines by scrap merchants has complicated its efforts to bring about upgrade of the system. Besides judging the truthfulness of these claims, Nepra would be well advised to seek a broader mandate for its inquiry. It should also look into the claim being made by the management of the utility that it has successfully lifted the company into profitability. In addition, the power sector regulator should try to determine how regulatory oversight can be strengthened for privatised power utilities following their takeover by new management. This is particularly important as the privatisation of three more power distribution companies is scheduled for this year, and whatever mistakes were made in Karachi's case must not be repeated. There is a strong public interest in power distribution, and the case of K-Electric makes clear that safeguarding this is as important as it is complicated.

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Afghan peace talks

PEACE talks, or even talks about talks, in Afghanistan for many years now have been a case of going round in circles — with the Afghan Taliban in particular always sending mixed messages. Once again, then, with Pakistan Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz making some of the most emphatic and direct claims on attempts by the state here to facilitate talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, the Afghan Taliban have quickly tried to distance themselves from these initial and careful rounds of engagement. Are talks dead before they can even begin? Not necessarily. For one, it is quite common for elements of the Taliban, particularly those with links to the leadership, to engage in talks about talks while the leadership itself remains condemnatory of talks and hews to maximalist preconditions. That is the Taliban's equivalent of talking and fighting, a strategy that seeks to wrest the maximum concessions from the other side if it ever comes to a negotiated settlement.

In the Taliban's case, there is another reason to publicly appear dismissive of talks that have taken place: the annual spring offensive is at its peak and there is little value in sending mixed messages to the rank and file fighting it out over vast swathes of the country. Moreover, this fighting season has brought a new element, a surge of fighters, many of them foreign, who appear to have been dislodged by the military operations in Fata. Were the Taliban leadership to acknowledge even an incidental interest in talks, it would perhaps send the wrong message to the field where the Taliban have made deeper inroads quicker than what was widely perceived. Yet, the same old conundrum remains: the Afghan Taliban, for all their

ability to operate in far-flung areas and inflict significant damage on the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, appear to be no closer to overrunning the country. Kabul in particular appears to be a city where the occasional — though high-profile — Taliban attack is possible, but there appears to be no imminent danger of a governmental collapse or the capital coming under sustained attack. Therefore, with an Afghan president more willing to go the extra mile than anyone else in power, it remains to the Taliban's advantage to also engage in talks.

For its part, the Pakistani state appears to be going through cycles of indecisiveness of its own. All sides agree that Pakistan has influence over the Afghan Taliban, though the security establishment and government here often argue that the degree of influence is much less than it is perceived to be by outside powers and the Afghan government. Yet, at no stage has it been apparent that Pakistan is willing to test the limits of its influence over the Afghan Taliban in the interest of securing a negotiated settlement. Can a meek Pakistan truly influence a recalcitrant Afghan Taliban?

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Budget walkouts

FOUR budgets have been passed following a walkout by the opposition in the National Assembly as well as in the legislatures of three provinces — Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In fact, the walkouts themselves were motivated by factors that had nothing to do with the budget. This is not the first time that budget sessions have been marred by walkouts due to factors extraneous to economics. KP has a bit of a record in this, where every budget session for the past three years at least has seen a walkout. The state of the economic conversation amongst the political leadership is dire enough as it is, but walking out of the budget session in protest has taken matters to a new low altogether.

The budget session ought to be reserved only for budget-related discussions. Political scores can be settled later. The budget and the allocations contained within it are far too important to be held hostage to politicians' outrage. The combined amount contained in these four budgets is close to Rs6.9 trillion, which is not a small sum of money whose allocations are being decided in such a casual manner. And although the Balochistan Assembly did not stage a walkout, the quality of discussion was very poor; the provincial government did not even release the detailed documents of the budget, so it is difficult to see how the legislators were even able to have a debate. Budget debates have historically been of very poor quality in Pakistan, with most members sticking only to rhetorical talking points. But this year has been a record as four of the five assemblies passed their budgets while the opposition walked out, and the fifth assembly carried on a debate without any budget details having been released. It shows a lack of

interest in our political class that appears averse to tackling the real problems that plague the country. This is a deeply regrettable fact in the era of empowered provincial assemblies.

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Islamic State's reach

FRIDAY'S deadly events illustrate the capacity of the self-styled Islamic State to wreak havoc across regions beyond its direct control, as well as the need for a coordinated response from the international community in order to neutralise the extremist movement. At least two of the attacks — in Tunisia and Kuwait — have directly been claimed by IS, while it is unclear which group is responsible for the assault on a French gas factory. A fourth attack in Somalia was carried out by the Al Shabab outfit. The Tunisian and Kuwaiti attacks also illustrate the favoured targets of the so-called caliphate: Westerners and Shias, respectively. Nearly 40 tourists — reportedly mostly Europeans — were killed when a gunman opened fire in a Tunisian beach resort; the attack was confirmed to be the work of IS on Saturday, while this is the second major terrorist assault in the North African country this year. In Kuwait, a suicide bomber targeted a Shia mosque packed with worshippers during Friday prayers. Nearly 30 people were killed while over 200 were injured. This is said to be the oil-rich sheikhdom's worst terrorist incident in many years while the atrocity mirrors two similar bombings of Shia

mosques in Saudi Arabia that occurred over the past few weeks.

Clearly, the threat IS poses is not limited to the territory it occupies in Iraq and Syria. These attacks show it has the capability to inspire cells and lone-wolf attacks much further afield. Only a few days ago, an IS ‘spokesman’ called for attacks during the month of Ramazan. On Friday we witnessed the destructive response to this call. The need is for countries which have suspected IS cells or sympathisers to pool their efforts in order to prevent coordination between militants and the leadership. IS is a transnational threat, hence it requires a response that is not limited by frontiers. Along with a crackdown on the movement’s ability to communicate with supporters, including through the internet and the media, perhaps the most important requirement is to dislodge the ‘caliphate’ from the territory it has occupied in Iraq and Syria. For this, regional states will have to shed their divisions and work with both Baghdad and Damascus. This may be easier said than done, but unless the physical safe havens IS has occupied are taken away from the organisation and its leadership captured and neutralised, many more such atrocities can be expected.

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Balochistan amnesty

IN theory, it is a significant concession by the state, addressing one of the principal demands of militants in Balochistan: along with the release of the so-called missing persons in the province, offering an amnesty to those involved in militancy has been seen as a major step towards the end of the long-running, low-level insurgency in the province. But the announcement by the Balochistan apex committee, a high-level provincial body consisting of government and military officials, of a general amnesty for militants who surrender and the creation of a rehabilitation programme for such militants is unlikely to immediately change the security environment in the province. Unconditional surrenders and handover of arms to the state followed by an attempt to reintegrate armed Baloch into society are not uncommon — indeed, in recent weeks there have been reports of several low-level tribal leaders turning in their weapons to the Balochistan government. The real challenge in Balochistan centres on the militants who, in the vernacular, are believed to have taken to the hills and the non-tribal leaders who are driving much of the insurgency through swathes of Baloch-dominated areas in the province.

Will anyone of those Baloch elements be tempted to opt for even a temporary ceasefire in the wake of the apex committee’s announcements? It seems unlikely. For one, the insurgency itself is believed to have fractured, and splinter groups are harder to induce with state-sponsored incentives as well as more likely to be determined to keep fighting to establish their credentials. More fundamentally, however, none of the rhetoric emanating from the state suggests that there is a rethink of the militarised strategy for dealing with Balochistan’s militancy

problems. Consider just some of the heated rhetoric surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, with blunt vows by both government and military officials to do whatever is necessary to ensure the project comes to fruition. Given that the principal known opponent in Balochistan of mega development projects by the centre are the Baloch militants, how does the tough line taken on the construction of the CPEC chime with an attempt at a more conciliatory, softer approach towards the militants themselves?

Surely, as the recent Mastung carnage and various other attacks over the years have underscored, the Baloch militants' violent approach tends to undermine the nationalist goal of a more autonomous and prosperous Balochistan. Surely also the state has a responsibility to, as was reiterated by the committee, to ensure security by taking on irreconcilable and unwaveringly militant elements. But over a decade of trying to pacify Balochistan by crushing armed dissent has yielded precious little: large parts of Balochistan are today as inaccessible and cut off from the rest of the country as they were a decade ago. Balochistan is a political problem that should be settled through political means — until that reality is accepted, Balochistan will continue to bleed.

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Mass transit

WHAT would in any case have been embarrassing for the authorities was made only much more so by the fact that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had taken such keen personal interest in the project. Last week, as residents of Rawalpindi and Islamabad greeted the rain with relief, some of the stations of the new Metro Bus line were inundated. The underground stations on 6th Road and I.J. Principal Road saw accumulated rainwater that caused the escalators to become dysfunctional. And on the newly built elevated bus roadway between Saddar and Faizabad there was considerable accumulation of rainwater, raising the question of whether the drainage system was adequate — especially given the heavy rains and intense cloudbursts that are common in this area. To be sure, not all the flooding was because of insufficient infrastructure. Nevertheless, there is reason to question whether enough thought, research and planning have gone into the two mass transit systems that are already up and running in Lahore and the twin cities, as well as those that are being planned.

There is no doubt that mass transit systems are urgently needed in most of our big cities. However, public money is being spent. Are cities getting the best bang for the buck? True, the Metro Bus systems in Lahore and Islamabad/Rawalpindi are moving hundreds of thousands of passengers. Nevertheless, questions remain about whether the best routes were chosen. In which city would a subway system be a better and greener solution? What are the merits of rail versus bus? The Shahbaz Sharif government is planning to add the Orange Line Metro Train to the Lahore mass transit system, but hundreds of trees are to be felled. Has a credible study been conducted regarding

the long-term impact on the environment? These questions, like the creation of mass transit systems, are of tremendous public interest. It behoves the government to confide in the people, in an accountable and transparent manner, so that the legacy it so seeks to leave behind is indeed a positive one.

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Justice delayed

THE perils of an inefficient judicial system are all too well known in Pakistan. Any individual or group that has to approach the courts knows that justice, if it is ever served, will be a long time coming. From the apex court to the lower judiciary, but especially in the latter, the backlog is massive, leading from time to time to concerted efforts to clear it. But it is not just a matter of the sluggishness with which cases, and the sheer numbers they constitute, make their way through the system; even after the conclusion of a trial, it is common for litigants to have to wait for months and sometimes even years for the judgement. Hence, the fact that the Supreme Court handed down a judgement on Thursday prescribing a time frame within which courts must deliver their verdicts should be taken as a positive step. As its author, Justice Mian Saqib Nisar, noted, without this final step the entire judicial set-up is rendered illusionary. Litigants will no doubt feel some relief at the apex court's directive that civil courts must deliver their judgements within 30 days of a trial's conclusion, district courts within 45 days, and high courts within 90 days.

A step in the right direction though this may be, there is much else that remains to be done to reform the judiciary. The central fact is that the country's court system is badly broken; from poor investigation to weak prosecution and overworked judges, there are a very large number of problems in the system and most will remain unaddressed as a result of Thursday's judgement. There already exist directives within which several sorts of judicial forums must conclude a trial, but these are overwhelmingly breached. The situation is so dire that it has led the country into quagmires from which extrication appears difficult. Consider, for example, that during the late '90s, in an effort to speed up the progress in certain serious offences, Anti-Terrorism Courts were set up bypassing the regular court system. A decade and a half later, given the backlog that has built up in the ATCs and the low conviction rate secured there, after the Army Public School massacre the government resorted to the deeply problematic decision of trying civilians in closed-door, military courts. Such clouds of illegitimacy can be avoided: effective steps need to be taken urgently to revive the presently moribund courts' system.

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THE Supreme Court on Saturday rightly ruled that a petition seeking to slash the allegedly extravagant sums of public money spent on the President House, Prime Minister House and the various governor houses across the country is a matter of policy and a political question in which the court should not intervene. In the constitutional scheme of separation of powers and separate domains, the court is charged with interpreting the law and issuing authoritative judgements on legal disputes – not determining whether any given policy is good or bad according to some subjective standard. A court aware of its limitations is a court that is well placed to perform its constitutional duty. Perhaps this most recent judgement will guide future benches in not wasting the court’s valuable time in hearing and authoring judgements on what are clearly politically motivated petitions and will instead dismiss them at the outset.

Yet, to say that the court is not the right forum for hearings on the so-called VVIP culture that has taken hold at the very top is not to deny that there is a problem of the country’s leadership, elected and unelected, having become unjustifiably removed from the people. It is not so much the upkeep of buildings and residences – the presidency and governor houses, for example, are symbols of the federation and steeped in history, so must be preserved for posterity. The problem is rather who makes decisions on issues like security arrangements, protocol and overall budgets. Far too often, rather than independent professionals, those decisions appear to be left to the beneficiaries themselves. Take the case of security, surely something that must be taken very seriously given the terrorist threat in the country. But when does high-profile security start to unnecessarily and unfairly impinge on the people’s rights? Of the hundreds of policemen idling around state residences

and the dozens of vehicles in fast-moving convoys on cordoned off roads – how much of that is about pomp and display and how much truly about necessary, efficient and cost-minded security?

At its root, the problem is that those making decisions about VIP lifestyles and security are either the beneficiaries themselves or those who are beholden to the high officials for their jobs. Perhaps a step in the right direction would be to have independent audit and budgeting committees. Rather than, say, the President House draw up its own budget and submit it to the government for approval, an independent committee of relevant professionals should be tasked with drawing up a proposed annual budget. The savings, admittedly, from a national budgetary perspective would be small. But measures that reduce the physical and psychological distance between the people and their elected representatives are worth more than can be counted in rupee terms. The epidemic of so-called VIP culture harms the democratic project. Excess must always be reined in.

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Thalassaemia report

THERE is no denying that this is a country familiar with incompetence, mismanagement and corruption scandals. Even so, the revelations recently made about the Punjab Thalassaemia Prevention Programme are astounding. Consider the following, which are just a few of the findings made by the Planning & Development Department of the Punjab government: the PTPP has been forcing field officers to carry on using expired medical items. “Out of 96,000 vials about 67,000 have expired or are near expiry,” says the report; some Rs17m were spent on establishing a DNA lab but it was never made operational, with the PTPP outsourcing the work to a private lab at a further cost of Rs5.7m; of the estimated 6,000,000 carriers in Punjab of the mutant thalassaemia gene, the PTPP managed to detect only 7,837. And where foetuses were found to test positive for thalassaemia major, the PTPP has no documentation regarding the termination of such pregnancies; in this regard, the report points out, “hypothetically if a single child out of 311 foetuses [that tested positive] has been born, then [the] complete exercise ... will be futile.”

Thalassaemia affects some one in six Pakistanis, and the PTPP was set up in 2009. The initial budgetary outlay was Rs147.4m, revised upwards till it reached Rs196.835m by December last year. Its task was to introduce thalassaemia preventative measures through intervention in 22 districts. That this is its performance speaks volumes for, first, the kind of interest taken by the Punjab government in one of its own initiatives and, second, the level of oversight involved. It is legitimate, here, to point out the waste of a massive amount of funds. But

that would be to ignore the plight of hundreds of thousands of adults and children who continue to suffer from this grievous affliction. Once again, it would seem, the promises of help made to them by their government remain confined to good intentions alone, with their fate abandoned to the promise of easy money.

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ECP's challenge

AS the judicial commission inquiring into allegations of fraud and misconduct during the 2013 general election moves inexorably towards concluding its work, the detailed response submitted by the Election Commission of Pakistan is worth examining. The ECP is not only the constitutional body tasked with the holding of elections, it is also the body that lies at the heart of many of the electoral allegations made by the PTI since May 2013. As such, the ECP not only has a sophisticated insight into the minutiae of organising and conducting elections, it is also well positioned to explain many of the strident allegations against it. The ECP's submission to the judicial commission is quite forthright: while there were fairly widespread procedural lapses by polling officials, nothing has been brought on the record as yet to suggest a systematic attempt to rig the general election, either at a provincial level or nationally. That chimes with what most independent observers have claimed since 2013: that while the general election was not truly free and fair, it produced a result that was acceptable

and credible and an incremental improvement on previous general elections.

The more important point though — at least from an ECP perspective — is to suggest fixes for the procedural lapses that 2013 revealed. Here the ECP tends to deflect more blame than take charge of fixing the system. Clearly, given that presiding officers and returning officers are not full-time employees of the ECP, there are real world limitations to how much training can be imparted and to what extent authority over the POs and ROs can be exercised. Surely, that should not mean that improvement is simply not possible when it comes to the present system. Limitations aside, there is no reason why ROs, who were very experienced judicial officers, should not be able to receive and file the relevant election-related forms — scrupulous attention to detail and strictly following laid-down procedure is at the very heart of the judicial process, after all. There is also the reality that the average RO would have overseen several elections — so there is little reason for amateurish mistakes that the inquiry has revealed at various stages of the counting and collating process. What appears to be the problem is that while the ECP has the legal mandate and relatively strong powers, the commission's officers are reluctant to take a hard line when lapses are revealed. A more assertive, rules-bound ECP would go a long way to further strengthening the electoral system.

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Khan of Kalat agrees to talk

ANY move that appears to break the stultifying impasse in Balochistan is cause for at least some cautious optimism. A report in this paper yesterday revealed that the Baloch leader, the Khan of Kalat Mir Suleman Dawood Jan, who lives in self-exile in London, has agreed to meet a delegation of Balochistan government officials. Prior to this, he will hold consultations with members of the Grand Jirga who, after the death of Nawab Akbar Bugti at the hands of the army in 2006, had sent him abroad to work towards the restoration of Kalat State. In September last year, the Balochistan Assembly passed a resolution to approach the tribal leader and enlist his help in establishing peace in the province.

For the National Party-led government that has been vowing to bring the 'angry Baloch' to the negotiating table, this is a victory of sorts. Aside from the Khan of Kalat's lofty standing in Balochistan's tribal hierarchy, there is the weight of history: in pre-Partition days, the erstwhile princely state — then ruled by the present Khan's grandfather — held a pre-eminent position in the tribal confederacy that stretched across central and southern Balochistan. The government is obviously hoping that Mir Suleman can bring the other angry Baloch — the recalcitrant separatist leaders — to the negotiating table. However, history also records that when the then Khan of Kalat signed the Instrument of Accession to join Pakistan in 1948, it caused much anguish among nationalist-minded Baloch. His progeny too, not least because of their perceived closeness to the establishment, came to be considered as 'traitors' to the Baloch cause as the bitterness exploded into open rebellion several times over subsequent decades.

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Although Nawab Bugti's murder was a watershed that led Mir Suleman to break his ties with the state and himself adopt the separatist narrative, his influence on players in the insurgency is debatable. Not least because for the first time, the separatist movement finds widespread support among educated youth, particularly in the non-sardari southern belt where tribal hierarchy does not inspire the same deference.

Nevertheless, this is a much-needed political initiative after a succession of sterile militarised strategies. In this situation, the removal of precious artifacts from the Khan of Kalat's palace in Kalat town by his son Prince Mohammed, from whom he is estranged, has the potential of scuttling the talks before they even begin. It also gives oxygen to suspicions of state machinations — never far from the surface in Balochistan — in this case to install the son, seen as a pro-establishment figure, as the Khan of Kalat in place of his father. To restore confidence, the government must ensure the artifacts are returned without delay. In Balochistan, with its Gordian knot of complexities resulting from decades of self-defeating policies, even the slightest wrong move could take us back to square one.

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