

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of May, 2015

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Contents

Scarred children 3
Karachi violence 4
Census challenges 5
Testing times for MQM 6
Afghan allegations..... 7
Small investors suffer..... 8
Pemra’s debatable stance..... 9
LNG blame game..... 10
Women voters in GB 12
Loss of space for media..... 13
Faith-based violence 14
Moving mountains 15
Election tribunal’s decision 16
Conduct unbecoming..... 17
Overdue Fata reforms..... 18
Afghanistan: a silver lining? 19
Arrests under NAP..... 20
Thar coal claims..... 21
Army’s allegations against RAW 22
Solar park 23
Balochistan seminar..... 24
Return of cricket 25

Is the economy shining? 26
Election symbols 27
Sindh CM’s threat..... 28
Absence of women voters in by-poll 29
Few rape convictions 30
Tragedy in Naltar..... 31
British Pakistani MPs..... 32
Malnutrition crisis 33
Education report card 34
Missing persons..... 35
Abbottabad raid: a new angle..... 36
Review of the ECL..... 37
Water woes persist 38
Age of unreason 39
By-poll bar on MPs 40
SRO withdrawal..... 41
Attack on Ismaili community 42
Afghan policy change? 43
Circular debt plan..... 45
The extremism within 46
Palestinian state..... 47
Power frustrations 48
CPEC: more transparency needed 49
Karachi operation..... 50

May 2015

Unregistered drugs	51	Cybercrime bill	75
North Waziristan questions	52	Pumping growth.....	76
Art on Tehran’s streets	53	Balochistan’s troubles.....	78
Modi’s China visit.....	53	Protection of minorities.....	79
Naegleria fowleri deaths.....	54	Presence of IS militants.....	80
Where’s the government?	55	Parrikar’s remarks	81
State Bank report.....	56	Commandos in civvies.....	82
Morsi verdict.....	57	Capital flight	83
A malicious campaign	59	Police versus lawyers	84
Fire tragedy.....	60	Attacks on Hazaras.....	85
Documentation of economy	61	Budget in the dark.....	86
Intelligence accord.....	62	Monitoring sermons.....	87
Zimbabwe tour.....	63	Locker security	88
Security for policemen.....	64	FIFA controversy	89
Silencing hate speech.....	65	CI’s latest remarks.....	90
Controversial GIDC move.....	66	NAP going nowhere	91
Militants on campus.....	67	Bad decision by Pemra.....	92
Fake degree scandal.....	68	Art, not hate.....	93
Rohingya tragedy	69	CPEC controversy subsidies	94
Commodifying children.....	70	Massacre in Mastung.....	95
Security expenditures	71	Return of Rana Sanaulah.....	96
Military courts: a political issue	72	Housing finance.....	97
Saudi mosque bombing	73		
Cricket resumption.....	74		

Scarred children

EVEN the most casual of observers would conclude that Pakistan is hard on its young. This is borne out by the report released on Tuesday by the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child.

The State of Pakistan's Children (2014) finds that some 70,000 incidents of violence against children were reported across the country last year, an appalling figure given that the majority of such episodes would go unreported and only those involving egregious force would make it to the police books or the media.

Quoting from an independent report, Sparc said that 3,508 cases of sexual assault against children — girls, boys and in a few cases, even babies and toddlers — were reported last year, up by 17pc from 2013.

It seems that children in rural areas are more prone to being subjected to violence as compared to the urban areas, and that of all the provinces, Punjab has the highest number of child abuse cases.

Added to this is the profoundly grim statistic of some 25 million children aged between five and nine years being out of school, giving Pakistan the dubious distinction of coming in second in the world's out-of-school rankings.

The list prepared by Sparc of excesses against the country's young is a long and shameful one. It is possible here to argue for more legislation, stricter enforcement and greater vigilance, all of which are without doubt needed.

But there is an equally great need to address a societal mindset that sees vulnerability, whether due to age or any other factor, as reason enough to exploit.

There needs to be greater understanding of the fact that children scarred by trauma and fear will grow into damaged adults and, as a collective generation, they may well find themselves even less able to push back against this country's numerous travails than those in charge today.

Creating a viable future has to begin with protecting our children, and Pakistan seems to be failing abysmally on this count.

Published in Dawn, May 1st, 2015

Karachi violence

IT is ironic that on the day the army chief was in Karachi to review progress on the law-enforcement operation, an assistant professor was killed on the violence-prone streets of the unfortunate metropolis.

Dr Syed Waheed-ur-Rehman, who taught at Karachi University and was also a journalist, was gunned down by armed motorcyclists on Wednesday while he was apparently on his way to the varsity.

Also read: [Gen Raheel vows to end reign of 'mafias' in Karachi](#)

While the army chief appeared to be mostly pleased with the results of the operation thus far — and it is true that levels of violence and bloodshed have been down in Karachi over the past few months — it would be premature to declare an end to the mission at this point, especially if the resurgence of violence over the past two weeks is anything to go by.

Two weeks ago, American academic Debra Lobo was attacked reportedly by religious militants but luckily survived the ambush, while police official Aijaz Khawaja was killed in a targeted attack.

Last Friday saw the slaying of activist Sabeen Mahmud while Dr Rehman's murder is the latest in this grim series. The city police chief has said Dr Rehman's killing may be linked to that of Dr Shakeel Auj, who was gunned down in the city last year.

The academic's slaying on Wednesday brings to five the total number of university teachers killed in the metropolis in two years.

The authorities in Sindh, particularly Karachi, must ensure that action against violent elements has long-lasting effects and offers more than just a temporary respite from bloodshed.

Yet it is surprising that in such a critical meeting on law and order held on Wednesday, Sindh's elected civilian leadership — particularly the chief minister — was not invited.

This is the second time the military has kept the provincial leadership out of the loop where law and order is concerned. This is unacceptable as with an elected government in place, keeping the highest civilian official in the province away from the discussion on countering violence sends the wrong message.

Sindh's leadership must also share the blame for quietly stepping aside and not asserting its mandate. Whatever its shortcomings, the provincial government has a central role in maintaining law and order and must be strengthened, not bypassed.

The security establishment must understand this and realise that in Karachi's complex urban environment, without the input of the police and the civilian political set-up long-term peace is not possible.

Published in Dawn, May 1st, 2015

Census challenges

AFTER lying in limbo for almost seven years, it looks like the census exercise is finally moving again.

The government's announcement that the census will be held by March 2016 is a welcome development, and going by the work that is being assigned and the funds that have been allocated for the demographic exercise, it does seem as if a credible effort is finally getting under way.

The announcement of a date, as well as a budget and the National Census Apex Committee add some credibility to the venture.

Know more: [Census in March next year](#)

But at this early point, it is important to bear in mind that the delays have been caused because of powerful factors that are all too likely to challenge the execution of the census from an early stage.

Two sticking points are particularly important. One is the change in the seat share of each province in the National Assembly, which hinges on population data. The second relates to provincial shares in federal revenues, 82pc of which are weighted according to population.

Since the new census is likely to change the population share of the provinces, it is reasonable to suppose that each province stands to see its share of seats in the Assembly change in a way

that will have far-reaching implications. This is also true for revenue-sharing.

At heart is the extent of in-migration in Sindh, which if accurately counted, would not only raise the province's share of total population significantly, but also show that the internal ethnic composition of the province is changing in important ways.

Now that the ruling PML-N has decided to take on this conflicted exercise, it is its responsibility to execute the census in a way that allays the concerns of both the provinces and the political parties whose fate is tied up with the underlying population figures of the status quo.

It is also worth noting that this is the third such exercise the PML-N government has taken up in the year thus far, the other two being the NFC award and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, both of which also have powerful interprovincial politics revolving around them.

If the PML-N can successfully execute these jobs without stirring up a hornets' nest of interprovincial issues, it stands to credibly put to rest the perception that it is a party that runs the affairs of the country with the interests of only one province in mind. But if it should trip on the way, it could give new life to allegations that it is a provincial party.

The choice now lies with the PML-N. It remains to be seen if the party is able to preside over contentious interprovincial issues in a manner that is perceived as fair and above reproach, and thereby establish itself as a worthy custodian of national issues. One can only wish the government the best.

Testing times for MQM

WHILE the MQM has much to answer for, especially where its reputation for the use of strong-arm tactics is concerned, what cannot be condoned is the summary media trial the party is being subjected to.

What transpired on television screens on Thursday was nothing short of a media circus. A Karachi police officer, SSP Malir Rao Anwar, claimed in a press conference that two MQM workers had been arrested and had made some stunning disclosures.

The officer claimed the men were “trained by RAW” to carry out terrorist activities in Karachi and that a network of “60 to 70 target killers” allegedly belonging to the party was active in the metropolis.

The policeman added that the Muttahida should be banned for being ‘anti-state’. The party has said the allegations are “baseless and manufactured”.

Also read: [Altaf's remarks on army to be legally pursued: ISPR](#)

Indeed, the past few weeks have been testing times for the MQM, with its headquarters raided by the Rangers, a number of its workers arrested and serious accusations hurled in its direction.

It is true that the Muttahida’s patriotism has been questioned before, especially during the operations the party faced in the 1990s.

In fact, its ‘Indian links’ are often cited by the establishment to boost its ‘anti-state’ credentials. The allegations the police official made are serious; however, the way in which they were publicly conveyed is questionable.

It sets a negative precedent, allowing state functionaries to pass judgement on political parties. It is unacceptable for a police official to make accusations in such a manner, in effect passing a guilty verdict upon the party.

At the same time, MQM chief Altaf Hussain’s late-night reaction following the disclosures was also intemperate and unbecoming of a prominent political personality.

The MQM’s reputation is not unearned, as it has in the past forcibly shut down Karachi whenever it feels it has been wronged, while accusations of the party collecting extortion money have also persisted. If the state has serious evidence against the MQM, it needs to present this in a court of law and pursue the legal course.

Resorting to publicity stunts, or using other methods to crush the party, will only backfire, as the results of the NA-246 by-poll demonstrated recently.

The MQM has a significant vote bank in urban Sindh and is a reality that cannot be wished away. Having said that, the party needs to do much more to clear its name and convince the public that it now fights its battles solely through the ballot box.

May 2015

Meanwhile, the state must ensure that action against violent elements in Karachi is across the board and not targeted at one party.

The MQM is not the only group that is believed to harbour violent elements within its ranks. Other political parties and religious groups have faced similar allegations. Hence the state must take unbiased action — and through the right channels — to bring all lawless elements to justice.

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Afghan allegations

THE annual spring offensive of the Afghan Taliban tends to ratchet up diplomatic tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This year, with the Pak-Afghan relationship seemingly on the mend, it had been hoped that what was expected to be the toughest fighting season yet for the Afghan National Security Forces would not turn into a spat between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

However, with the official Afghan Taliban declaration of the start of the spring offensive little more than a week old, those hopes have already been dented.

After the Afghan interior ministry's spokesperson alleged that militants from Pakistan had crossed over into Afghanistan to join the spring offensive, the spokesperson for the Foreign Office struck back, denying the Afghan interior ministry official's accusations and suggesting that the best course for both countries was closer cooperation and coordination. Therein lies the crux of the recent problem.

When Pakistan launched operations in North Waziristan and the Tirah region, the military here expected that anti-Pakistan militants would try and escape to Afghanistan and hoped that the Afghan state would either cut them off on the border or capture them inside Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the Afghan government expected that Pakistan would do more along the Pak-Afghan border to prevent the Afghan Taliban's spring offensive being reinforced by Pakistan-based militants, some of whom, having been eased out of their sanctuaries here, were always likely to join the fight in Afghanistan.

Neither the Afghan government's nor the Pakistani state's expectations have been responded to adequately by the other side, so now both countries are turning to an old and familiar blame game.

The best response is indeed closer cooperation and coordination, especially on border management, but the old issue of trust appears to be thwarting that.

There is also the much bigger issue of reconciliation inside Afghanistan that appears to be going nowhere — an impasse that is beginning to show in terms of the undiplomatic

May 2015

accusations Pakistan and Afghanistan are once again beginning to indulge in.

From the Afghan perspective, President Ashraf Ghani's unprecedented outreach to Islamabad has not yielded the desired cooperation in terms of leveraging Pakistani influence over the Afghan Taliban to nudge them towards the negotiating table.

From the Pakistani perspective, despite Operation Zarb-i-Azb, Operation Khyber-II and the Peshawar school massacre, the Afghan state has not responded as urgently to Pakistan's security concerns in its hour of need as it could have. Trust, as ever, appears to be the one commodity in short supply on both sides.

Published in Dawn, May 2nd, 2015

Small investors suffer

TWO events shaking the financial markets have left small investors in the lurch. One is the amalgamation of KASB bank into Bank Islami following its seizure by the State Bank for being persistently undercapitalised and flaunting regulatory guidelines.

The other is the collapse of ACE Securities, whose owners have decamped with their clients' money.

In both cases, the regulators are promising stern action, and going the extra mile to prove that their actions were timely and strict. And in both cases, it is small investors and depositors who have borne the brunt of the damage, and are finding themselves voiceless in the whole affair.

Also read: [Regulators to act against ACE Securities](#)

The silence surrounding the collapse of ACE Securities is surprising to say the least. The media is largely ignoring the story, and the community of stock brokers, who are otherwise very enthusiastic about wooing small savers into the volatile stock market, are also refraining from any comment.

In the case of KASB bank, some coverage has been given to the bank's takeover by the central bank authorities, but the troubles caused to small savers and shareholders of the bank have been mostly ignored.

This is all the more surprising given the populist hues that economic issues are normally given in media coverage. The

May 2015

implications of both events are enormous, in that they illustrate the vulnerabilities that small investors face when dealing with our financial system.

If the message is to beware of doing business with small banks or entrusting your funds to small brokerages, then it is all the more damaging because it encourages concentration in big enterprises in a sector already too heavily dominated by large players, who are famously stingy for sharing the returns they make with clients' money with their clients.

Both the media and the regulators need to step up their efforts to highlight and safeguard the interests of small investors. The credibility of our financial markets could be at stake depending on how things work out in both cases.

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Pemra's debatable stance

There were no winners in the verbal spat between the MQM chief Altaf Hussain and the army leadership via the ISPR.

But Pemra's belated intervention has ensured that the losses have multiplied.

By invoking a rule prohibiting the dissemination of hate speech in censoring TV news channels, the regulatory authority has perhaps unwittingly but very wrongly acted in a manner prejudicial to free speech and political speech in the country.

At least three points need to be made here. First, while Mr Hussain's words were thoroughly deplorable and inexcusable, do they actually amount to hate speech? Hate speech implies some kind of incitement to violence against a community or group of people.

[Read: Pemra perspective: Treacherous anchors, nudity and national interest](#)

Does criticism — even vitriolic criticism — of state institutions amount to hate speech? The army leadership was clearly angered by Mr Hussain's comments, as has Mr Hussain been angered by the recent, and at times farcical, attempts by the military to clamp down on the MQM.

Pemra's role as a regulator is to keep the public interest paramount — not intervene on behalf of state institutions in a way that will have a chilling effect on the media.

May 2015

Second, Pemra's selective interest in applying the law — and then applying the law wrongly — needs to be explained. Why is it not permissible for a politician to criticise the military when politicians routinely attack each other in televised broadcasts?

Consider the routine tirades of PTI supremo Imran Khan against the PML-N, the ECP, a former chief justice of the Supreme Court and sundry other public figures accused of colluding to allegedly manipulate the May 2013 general election.

Also read: [Pemra asks channels to exercise caution](#)

Pemra has remained quiet through the most dramatic and direct of allegations by the PTI. Perhaps Pemra did want to act in some instances and was counselled not to by the PML-N government.

And the PTI's right to untrammelled political speech was correctly respected by Pemra. But the point of double standards remains: politicians and civilian institutions are freely attacked, but criticism of military policies is still very much taboo.

That is not healthy for the state, for democracy and for the military itself. As arguably the most powerful institution in the country, the military shapes both domestic and external policies on many fronts. Most of the criticism directed at the military is precisely about its policy interventions.

Curbing criticism of the army is therefore tantamount to suppressing legitimate dissent.

Third, what are Pemra and the state doing about the presence of genuine hate speech — sectarian and pro-militant — in sections of the media and many parts of the country?

Curbing hate speech is an important pillar of the National Action Plan drawn up in December, but there has been as yet no meaningful attempt to implement the law — despite the fanciful statistics the interior ministry routinely produces on actions taken. Mr Hussain's impolitic words were surely not the place to begin.

Published in Dawn, May 3rd, 2015

LNG blame game

In a sharply worded piece of writing, as well as at a news conference, the petroleum and natural resources minister has sought to clarify his position on the chaotic opening of Pakistan's first LNG import terminal.

It has been a month since the last LNG vessel docked at the new import terminal, and since then confusion has shrouded the project on many fronts, including pricing disputes and sharing of responsibility to make payments.

The minister's response has clarified a few issues certainly, but it is important to note that those issues were never the ones in contention.

Read: [Power sector blamed for snags in LNG import](#)

For instance, he devotes significant space to trying to establish that LNG imports are the most preferred option for Pakistan in the immediate term to bridge growing deficits due to dwindling supplies of domestic gas.

This point is not seriously contested, and does not need to be clarified at such length. He also points out that his government has successfully erected an LNG import terminal “in record time” primarily because they used an “unbundled approach” that separated the terminal operator from the purchaser.

This is true, although it still needs to be explained why gas has not flowed through this terminal in almost a month now.

Also read: [Gas company chief ordered to sign LNG deal or pack up](#)

On that point, the minister blames his colleagues in the water and power ministry, who, he argues, have failed to place orders for further consignments for their power plants.

Hopefully, this doesn’t signal the beginning of a blame game between ministers, which would be an embarrassing sight.

But more importantly, if it’s true that the minister is having a hard time finding parties to place spot market orders for LNG, the one big weakness of the “unbundled approach” stands exposed.

Also read: [LNG muddle persists](#)

At the core of the problem that has the minister so visibly frustrated is the enormous price difference between imported LNG and domestic gas.

Power plants find furnace oil to be a cheaper option at the moment, and there is little hope that fertiliser plants would be interested in using LNG as a substitute for the heavily subsidised domestic gas they receive.

Clearly, the government will need to be the buyer at the moment and mix the imported LNG with pipeline gas and let the final gas tariff for all stakeholders reflect the incremental cost. The sad part of the story is that the homework necessary to make this arrangement work was not done before the terminal started commercial operations.

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Women voters in GB

Women's rights are always negotiable, at the altar of expediency, and on the pretext of tradition.

In Gilgit-Baltistan, attempts are being made to exclude them from the democratic exercise of electing their representatives to the GB legislative assembly.

A jirga comprising 40 religious scholars and five local elders held in Deral valley on Thursday decided that women registered in that constituency will not be allowed to vote in the elections scheduled for June 8.

The reason given — predictably enough — was that ‘cultural norms’ did not allow women to vote in elections. The candidates of the PML-N, PPP, PTI and JUI-F who were also reportedly present, demonstrated their zealous support for ‘upholding’ antediluvian ideas that further entrench female disempowerment, a dangerous trend in an already chauvinistic social milieu.

Read: [Candidates served notices for barring women from G-B polls](#)

This expression of misogyny rears its ugly head at every election cycle. In 2013 as well, such illegal pacts had been made in several parts of the country.

The Election Commission of Pakistan had at the time unequivocally stated it would ensure every possible protection to the women’s vote.

Indeed, it ordered re-polling at two polling stations in Battagram from where it had received complaints that registered female voters in the area had been disenfranchised.

However, the problem refuses to go away. Hidebound traditions, particularly those that control decision-making by the female half of the population, do not disappear quietly and there is no shortage of self-serving politicians whose party manifestos may claim to champion women’s rights, but who demonstrate supine acquiescence in the face of local right-wing pressure groups.

The GB Election Commission has issued a code of conduct for the upcoming elections, the same one that applies to the rest of the country, and which states that any agreements either preventing women from standing as candidates or casting their ballot are prohibited.

The election commission must strictly implement this code, and apply all the sanctions at its disposal against those who conspire to deprive half the population of their right to vote.

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Loss of space for media

IT is rarely a good thing when the news media itself becomes the story. Yesterday, May 3, marked World Press Freedom Day and it is with the heaviest of hearts that it has been reported that the media is under sustained and unprecedented attack.

Consider the gamut of threats that reporters and other media personnel must face today: the possibility of assassination; frequent harassment; threats and intimidation; and virtually no chance of the culprits being identified and punished.

All for simply trying to bring the news to the public. In some areas, particularly Balochistan and Fata, the space for the media to operate independently and freely has been virtually eliminated.

Also read: [Pemra's debatable stance](#)

Vulnerable district correspondents in far-flung areas have all but been silenced, with their parent media organisations being unable to protect them.

Even in the metropolises, a range of threats have made the job of reporting and bringing the news to the public unacceptably dangerous. In several cases, reporting too closely on certain subjects deemed undesirable by non-state and state actors has become a virtual death sentence.

It was not always like this. Despite the Pakistani media suffering through several dark periods — the era of dictator Gen Ziaul Haq was particularly difficult — space to report

independently and relatively freely was progressively won and defended by journalists.

The high point, ironically, came under the last military dictator, retired Gen Pervez Musharraf, who for a combination of reasons — institutional self-interest and others — helped unleash a wave of new media that added much vibrancy and choice to an old media with already solid foundations.

Ever since, however, it has been a quickening spiral downwards with the media under threat on at least two fronts. The violent, direct threat has come from terrorists, militants and extremists who want to use the media's reach to manipulate the national discourse in their favour.

The principal legal, and occasionally violent, threat has come from the state itself, which continues to treat certain issues and subjects as no-go zones for the journalistic community.

Against neither of those threats are the journalists able to adequately defend themselves, not least because the state, instead of being an ally and an emphatic advocate of a free press, seemingly prefers to muzzle them.

With the situation so grim, can there be much hope of a turnaround? Prima facie, there is not. That comes down largely to the negative role the state itself is playing. What the state should be doing is dedicating more resources to make journalists safe and to find and capture those who attack them.

What the state is in fact doing is drafting ever more draconian laws limiting free speech and putting fresh curbs on the media.

May 2015

The grim mood on World Press Freedom Day here looks set to continue.

Published in Dawn, May 4th, 2015

Faith-based violence

PAKISTAN'S shortcomings when it comes to protecting religious minorities as well as followers of various Muslim sects are well known.

Yet when these inadequacies are amplified on the world stage the effect is more sobering. And as a recently released annual American report on religious freedom indicates, 2014 was hardly a year to remember for Pakistan on this count.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom report says that "Pakistan represents one of the worst situations in the world for religious freedom".

Take a look: [US report assails Pakistan over state of 'religious freedom'](#)

In fact, the report recommends that Pakistan be designated a "country of particular concern", which can trigger economic sanctions under American legislation.

The document says Shias, as well as Christians, Ahmadis and Hindus experienced violence in the country, while it also

highlights the reported forced conversions of Hindu girls to Islam.

It is also critical of this country's blasphemy laws. It should be mentioned that the report is not Pakistan-specific and mentions other countries as well; for example it says that India, under BJP rule, has witnessed increasing acts of violence against that country's Christians and Muslims.

But the embarrassing prognosis of Pakistan's problem of religious violence should make the state take a long, hard look at what is wrong and how to fix it.

So far, the current year has also shown no signs that those who kill in the name of faith are a spent force; the Shikarpur and Peshawar imambargah bombings, as well as the Lahore church attacks, serve as deadly reminders of their potency. The major problem, as the report points out, is that hardly any of the perpetrators who commit acts of violence on religious grounds, as well as the individuals who incite and support them, have been brought to justice. In fact, over the last few weeks we have seen groups with overtly sectarian, violent agendas march in cities across Pakistan. With such groups still on the prowl, the argument that the establishment is taking action against religiously motivated murderers is seriously dented. The state must realise that unless it acts against religious zealots who practise and preach violence, not only will Pakistan continue to get a bad press internationally, but such violence will have a detrimental effect on communal and sectarian relations within the country. To show the world as well as its own citizens that it will not tolerate religious violence, the Pakistani state must permanently put jihadi and sectarian groups out of business.

Moving mountains

WITH what words does one bid farewell to a spirit as noble and strong as Rajab Shah, one of Pakistan's most accomplished mountaineers and the first to scale all 8,000-metre peaks in the country?

Anybody who ever met him or any of his brethren amongst Pakistan's mountaineers will tell you of the weather-beaten faces and eyes tintured with the splendid serenity of the mountains amidst which they all grew up.

But these would be mere words for some of the stoutest people that our country has ever produced. Pakistan's mountaineers have racked up a list of accomplishments that leaves the worldwide mountaineering community deeply impressed sometimes, but their efforts have been greeted with silence by the rest of the country.

Also read: [*K2: The king in the north*](#)

Rajab Shah was a legend amongst them, famous for his humility, his quiet focus, and superhuman strength.

When not ascending peaks, he could be found in the Pamir mountains near his village, tending his herd of yaks. He came from Shimshal, one of the world's highest habitations at 4,500 metres, a small village of not more than 4,000 people. This village, tucked away in the Karakoram beyond the jeep track until recently, has more than 50 people today who have ventured into what mountaineers call "the death zone" above 8,000 metres.

Rajab Shah buried his youthful son years ago. He had fallen to his death from a rock face when the rope he was tethered to snapped.

Of all the burdens that he carried with superhuman fortitude in his many ascents, none weighed heavier than this. The rugged mountains of the northern areas — from Shimshal to Hunza to Baltistan — have produced many legends of his ilk, and it is a pity beyond words that this country has so little to say to them, or even about them.

Pakistan's mountaineers are amongst the finest human beings this country has produced, and it is high time we found our voice to honour their accomplishments, and learned to acknowledge and encourage their enterprise.

Published in Dawn, May 4th, 2015

Election tribunal's decision

IT is not the end of the legal road for the PML-N and Railways Minister Saad Rafique now that an election tribunal has ordered re-polling on the seat won by Mr Rafique in the May 2013 election. But it would have been better for politics in general and the PML-N in particular had the latter accepted that it was the end of the legal route and time to take the matter back to the political and electoral arena.

Unhappily, the PML-N appears to have dug in its heels, preferring to challenge the election tribunal's verdict and trying to avoid a by-election in its Lahore stronghold — this just days after the cantonment local government election established that the PML-N has commanding support in large swathes of Mr Rafique's constituency, NA-125.

Know more: [PTI's struggle bearing fruit, says Imran Khan](#)

While it remains within the right of the PML-N to pursue the legal route, there are several reasons why accepting the tribunal's verdict and gearing up for a by-election would have been preferable.

NA-125 is no ordinary seat. In the run-up to the May 2013 polls, it was considered a key battleground between the PTI and PML-N, with the demographics in the constituency suggesting sizeable support for the PTI.

The PML-N too considered NA-125 to be a vulnerable seat and Mr Rafique campaigned frenetically to avoid a humiliating loss in the city where the Sharifs have long personally involved

themselves in the selection of party candidates and steering election campaigns.

When Mr Rafique won a resounding victory on May 11, 2013, it initially came as a surprise to many — if not the victory itself, certainly the wide margin by which Mr Rafique defeated the PTI candidate, Hamid Khan.

Subsequent reports from the constituency suggested two factors worked to Mr Rafique's advantage in NA-125: Hamid Khan ran a listless campaign, while the working-class voters in the constituency abandoned the PPP and voted for PML-N.

Still, Mr Rafique's margin of victory was shocking enough for the PTI to never quite be able to digest it — and to make NA-125 the centrepiece of the PTI's allegations of electoral fraud, along with the constituency won by now speaker of the National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq, who defeated Imran Khan in Lahore.

That history is enough to suggest that if an election tribunal finds discrepancies in NA-125 — whether orchestrated by Mr Rafique or owing to the incompetence or laxity of election officials — it makes little sense to continue to dispute the issue in the legal arena.

Better a quick by-election to re-establish the PML-N's bona fides in the constituency or allow the PTI to claim a victory it feels it was unfairly deprived of in 2013.

As for the PTI, perhaps this will strengthen its belief that the election tribunals and the judicial commission can and will act

May 2015

boldly when evidence is marshalled in support of the PTI's claim.

At the same time, the PTI should accept judgements that go against its claims of electoral fraud.

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Conduct unbecoming

IN Pakistan, it has been observed that some politicians, instead of setting a good example, can display bizarre, deplorable behaviour.

Former Sindh home minister and estranged PPP leader Dr Zulfiqar Mirza — never one to shy away from controversy even while he was in office — has for some time not been on the best of terms with the party, especially its top leadership.

Things came to a head on Sunday when cases under the Anti-Terrorism Act were registered against the former minister and a number of his supporters after Dr Mirza raided a police station in Badin following the arrest of an aide.

Know more: [Partial shutdown in Badin after Zulfiqar Mirza's strike call](#)

His posse broke open the facility's door and managed to get the detained man freed while Dr Mirza also exchanged harsh

words with a police official present. Before this episode transpired, he and his supporters reportedly forced shops that had remained open to pull down their shutters.

The PPP has also reacted, with party supporters demonstrating against Dr Mirza, while members of the party's women's wing held a hard-hitting news conference in Karachi, in which the former minister was warned to stop criticising the party leadership.

Things remained edgy on Monday as Badin witnessed a partial shutdown on Dr Mirza's call, while local PPP leaders threatened to give shutdown calls of their own if the maverick politician was not arrested.

Dr Mirza's police station raid is completely unacceptable. As a former home minister and parliamentarian, he should know better than to take the law into his own hands. If he feels that he and his supporters are being unlawfully victimised, he needs to employ legal methods for his and their defence.

The PPP would also do well to refrain from issuing vitriolic statements and penalising his supporters. Dialogue is the way forward, and the party and Dr Mirza should consider this as a means to settle their disputes.

Issuing inflammatory statements, and worse, using illegal methods to 'protect' aides and supporters will help no one, while giving endless strike calls and counter-calls will serve little purpose.

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Overdue Fata reforms

IN hindsight it is readily acknowledged that Fata, notwithstanding political developments regionally and within, was perfectly positioned to become an incubator of extremism in large part because of the state's exclusionary policies towards it.

Following the realisation, which has come at a high price for the nation, there has been much talk of 'mainstreaming' the area so as to end its isolation on multiple fronts — constitutional, legal, political, administrative, economic etc.

The Fata Reforms Commission, set up nearly a year ago by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governor, presented its recommendations last week.

Know more: [Fata reform body skirts around real issues](#)

Briefly, its suggestions include: another commission should be formed to look into constitutional reform, the members of the Frontier Tribunal increased from three to four — and the body headed by a retired high court judge — councils set up in every tribal agency and frontier region, and a governor's council established with representation from the aforementioned councils as well as from parliament, etc.

All in all, the outcome is a sad reflection on our ability to think outside the box, and discard discredited formulas.

Much like other task forces set up earlier with the same mandate, the Fata Reforms Commission has played it safe,

proposing cosmetic measures that evade core issues while retaining the archaic, unrepresentative form of governance and the highly discriminatory Frontier Crimes Regulation that prevails in Fata.

As per Article 247 of the Constitution, no act of parliament applies in the tribal areas without the president's approval nor does the jurisdiction of the country's superior courts extend there.

Without correcting this fundamental anomaly, reforms in other spheres in Fata are meaningless and that, by extension, hobbles the long-term strategy against fighting extremism in the country as a whole.

In fact, the conditions under which the military is reportedly allowing some IDPs from North Waziristan to return home are based upon the concept of collective responsibility, on which some restrictions had been placed in 2011 by amendments to the antiquated FCR.

There is no effort by the state to examine various options as to Fata's future political status — a separate province, an entity along the Gilgit-Baltistan model, or part of KP — and chart a viable road map towards it.

The lack of commitment to this vital issue can also be seen in the fact that the Fata reforms sub-committee formed under NAP in December has so far met only once, and made no effort to coordinate with the Fata Reforms Commission.

Published in Dawn, May 5th, 2015

Afghanistan: a silver lining?

TWO days of talks — not peace talks, but akin to exploratory talks — between representatives of the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban facilitated by Qatar and the Pugwash Conferences have yielded at least some positive headlines on Afghanistan.

This is a relief considering that news from that country has been, of late, dominated by the spring offensive of the Taliban and a deteriorating security situation. There are at least three points to be made here.

First, as ever, the signs from the Taliban camp are mixed. That the talks took place at all suggests that there are at least some in the camp who wish to at least consider what can be offered to them at the negotiating table.

Know more: [Afghan representatives agree on reopening Taliban political office](#)

Hence the reiteration that “the delisting of blacklisted Taliban would facilitate the peace process. Political prisoners should be released”, in the official Pugwash report.

There is also an oblique mention in the report of the possibility of revisiting the “structure of the political system (and the constitution of Afghanistan)”. In terms of possible concessions by the Afghan Taliban, there is mention of the “value of education for both men and women”.

However, it does appear that there remains within the Taliban a significant group that is opposed to the very idea of negotiations. “Everybody agreed that foreign forces have to leave Afghanistan soon” is effectively code for representing the views of the hardliners among the Taliban, who have long argued that they can achieve total victory and once again establish their version of an Islamic caliphate.

It remains to be seen how the debate between the hardliners and the moderates among the Taliban is resolved. Second, there is a growing sense that Pakistan does not have — or will not use — leverage with the Afghan Taliban in order to nudge them towards the negotiating table.

The view offered from Pakistan is increasingly a more cautious one: what the world, the Afghan government and the US in particular, expected of Pakistan, the latter never really had to offer to begin with.

The view from outside Pakistan, and particularly in Kabul, is likely to be far more sceptical, with the suspicion remaining that Pakistan continues to ally itself with the strategic goals of the Afghan Taliban. The truth likely lies somewhere in between.

Third, there is the question of modalities: if talks ever advance to the stage where peace can be negotiated, what would a power-sharing agreement in the south and northeast — strongholds of the Taliban and its allies — look like?

Tinkering with the constitution would only resolve the legal aspects of it. On the ground, in practice, could a government in Kabul and the Afghan Taliban find a way of carving out

separate zones of influence under the banner of a united Afghanistan? Further talks expected to take place next week may provide more answers.

Published in Dawn, May 6th, 2015

Arrests under NAP

NUMBERS, devoid of context, tell only half the story. So it seems to be with the figures presented by the interior minister in a briefing to the Senate on Monday, during a debate on a resolution calling for effective implementation of the National Action Plan.

His contention, while admitting that much remained to be done, was that the security situation in the country had improved substantially as a result of actions by the law-enforcement agencies.

To buttress his claim, Chaudhry Nisar also presented some statistics during his speech. He said, for example, that the security forces had carried out over 3,000 “intelligence-based operations” during the last four months in which 37,666 people were arrested, including many hardened criminals.

Know more: [Senate for more effective steps against terror](#)

All of them, he added, had been presented before the courts. According to him, they included 4,666 individuals arrested for

spreading anarchy and delivering hate speeches while misusing loudspeakers.

At first glance, the figures seem impressive; but, to borrow a phrase the minister himself used on the occasion and one that is becoming something of a buzzword — the ‘logical end’ of these arrests is shrouded in mystery.

How many among the huge number arrested, for instance, have actually been charged with a crime, something that can happen only after evidence has been uncovered to support the suspicion under which they were arrested?

How many are being prosecuted or have been successfully prosecuted thus far? The lack of public outcry or court petitions against the detention of their loved ones by what would be thousands of aggrieved families, suggests that a positive spin is being given to the data brought on the record.

There is a growing realisation that there has so far been no progress in several key areas of NAP, including madressah reform and terror financing, and a question mark hangs over the long-term prospects of eradicating extremism.

Thus, even in the case of Karachi where, to quote Chaudhry Nisar in the Senate, targeted killings have fallen by 84pc, murders by 38pc, extortion by 37pc and robberies by 23pc, it would be plausible to ask if this is so because many criminals have fled the city, taking refuge elsewhere until it is safe to re-emerge and resume their activities within a still-intact infrastructure of terrorism.

May 2015

The nation deserves to be kept abreast of the progress under NAP; only the unvarnished truth through properly contextualised data will suffice on a matter of such public importance.

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Thar coal claims

GIVEN how serious the power crisis in Pakistan is, and how deep it runs, it is astonishing to see the casual claims that are continuously being made by those at the top in the Ministry of Water and Power, as well as the government leadership.

The latest in a long line of such claims comes from the Minister of State for Water and Power Abid Sher Ali, who tells us that 660MW of electricity will be generated from Thar coal by the year 2017 — just two years away.

Before this, many PML-N leaders had made the poll campaign promise that they would “end load-shedding” within six months, but after coming to power, extended the period to 2018.

Take a look: [Production of 660MW electricity from Thar coal to start by 2017 end: minister](#)

The previous government had their Dec 31 date to live down throughout their tenure, and at one point the chief minister

Sindh had claimed that electricity from Thar coal would be generated within six months after allotting a block there to an unknown party from the Gulf.

So, we should, perhaps, take the latest claim with a pinch of salt. For one, the transmission line to carry that quantity of electricity has not even begun to be laid down. Secondly, water arrangements for the power plant, which will require massive quantities of freshwater to operate, have not been made.

Third, open cast mining will be required in Thar where the overburden is large and soft. This is a far bigger project than most who have tried to execute it realise, and it is unlikely that all the homework required to ready it for commercial operations in two years can be done in that period.

The power sector has long attracted wild and misleading claims by various leaderships, and it is high time that the practice of creating false hopes, which are feeding cynicism in society, ended. We do not need feel-good statements; we need actual answers that we can bank on about the future of the country’s power sector.

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Army's allegations against RAW

A ROUTINE army corps commanders' conference has resulted in a rather extraordinary allegation: "The Conference also took serious notice of RAW's involvement in whipping up terrorism in Pakistan," according to an ISPR press release after Tuesday's conference.

Given the forum from which the allegation has emanated, it cannot — nor should it — be easily dismissed. For years, Pakistan and India have traded accusations about RAW and ISI fomenting trouble in each other's vulnerable and unstable regions.

Inside Pakistan, there has been a consistent set of allegations that Fata, Balochistan and Karachi have been the area of particular focus of the Indian intelligence apparatus.

Also read: [RAW instigating terrorism, says army](#)

With a political and security transition in Afghanistan well under way, Iran edging towards the lifting of suffocating US-led sanctions and the army heavily engaged in Fata, the regional dimensions of Pakistan's security situation are surely informing the army's concerns.

The principal question is where to go from here. A statement of condemnation by the army leadership is insufficient. Both from the point of form and substance, the next logical step is for the federal government to take the lead here.

Press releases by the ISPR are not a good way to conduct bilateral relations, especially with a neighbour accused of instigating terrorism inside Pakistan. Where the evidence exists, it should be gathered by the civilian government, assembled in clear and convincing manner and taken up at the highest diplomatic levels.

It is surely not enough for a minister or two to chip in with verbal condemnations of RAW and the Indian security establishment.

Sound bites and posturing for domestic audiences are not going to help keep Pakistan safe. There is an additional element here: the principal goal of the government should be to restart the dialogue process with India.

Where intelligence agencies may be creating mischief and stoking trouble, the only long-term answer is to try and restart a process that can lead to normalisation of ties. The seriousness of the army leadership's allegations notwithstanding, shadowy struggles between the intelligence apparatuses in the two countries should not overwhelm the broader need for finding common ground.

Finally, there is an internal dimension to the problem too: wherever it has been alleged that Indian involvement has been detected, it has come in areas long mismanaged by the Pakistani state itself.

Fata, Balochistan and Karachi have all suffered from the abdication by the state of its basic duties towards the people of those areas.

May 2015

As the corps commanders' conference stressed, the key is to press ahead with the fight against militancy internally. But a militarised strategy will never work — not in Fata, Balochistan or Karachi.

At best, it will cause violence to temporarily subside, as seen after previous significant operations, only for it to re-emerge elsewhere or in a different form in the same places. Ultimately, internal security is about the right internal and external policies.

Published in Dawn, May 7th, 2015

Solar park

FOR a country that has spent several years in the grip of debilitating power crises, and for a government that took up the reins of management on the back of the promise to remedy the situation as speedily as possible, the inauguration on Tuesday of the first unit of the Quaid-i-Azam Solar Power Park in Bahawalpur must hold out some hope for the future.

What is now up and functional and providing 100MW of much-needed electricity to the national grid is just one part of what is planned as the eventual output of QASP whose generation capacity is to be increased to 1,000MW over two subsequent phases.

Take a look: [PM Nawaz inaugurates country's first solar park](#)

Once completed, the park is to constitute one of the major solar power projects in the world, and the fact that the ground has now been broken means that Pakistan has taken its first foray into a large-scale source of electricity generation that is renewable as well as sustainable. And, there is little doubt that the effort put in by the Punjab government, which spearheaded the project with Chinese assistance, must be appreciated.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif seemed in an exuberant mood as he inaugurated the project, talking about the number of jobs the solar park would provide and announcing a gift of Rs20m for the workers there. He also described as a great achievement the fact that the Shahbaz Sharif government managed to get a 'discount' of Rs2m from the Chinese company involved.

However, no business entity makes an investment unless the figures line up as they should, and this is a very sound commercial investment for the Chinese company.

The tone of the government's self-congratulatory note might be understandable; nevertheless it bears mentioning here that though this promise appears to have panned out, too many have proved false earlier.

It would assuage the citizenry's and critics' doubts better were the team tasked with addressing the energy crisis seen to be focusing urgently on the next step in the process of making this country more energy-secure.

Apart from the further phases planned for QASP, several other power-generation initiatives are also either already under way or in the pipeline.

May 2015

Given the scale of these, and the large sums involved in their execution, there must be the strictest possible vigilance in terms of transparency and accountability at all levels. The country's energy needs are far too pressing to brook either delay, or smokescreens.

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Balochistan seminar

GIVEN the topic — enforced disappearances in Balochistan — the seminar planned at the Karachi University on Wednesday was unlikely to be a tame affair.

But as it turned out, tired old tactics of suppressing dissent ensured more sound and fury, a bigger audience and greater publicity than it would have garnered otherwise.

Until it actually happened, no one could be certain whether the event, featuring Mama Qadeer, Farzana Majeed and Mohammed Ali Talpur as speakers, would even take place.

Know more: [Seminar on Balochistan missing persons held at KU despite curbs and fears](#)

The university administration had informed the organisers on Tuesday that they would not give permission for it to be held.

On the day itself, the door to the arts auditorium — the originally intended venue — remained locked, and many of those not working or studying onsite who wanted to attend had to resort to creative tactics to get around security personnel hampering their access to the campus. In the end, defiance won the day and the seminar, now more in the nature of a protest meeting, went ahead.

While one would have to laud the tenacity of the organisers and the participants in insisting on their right to free expression, it says much about how repressive our society has become that the administration of a major seat of learning in the country shied away from hosting a discussion on a topic of national importance.

Academic institutions have a duty to encourage debate even on 'controversial' issues, rather than toe the official line — although one could well ask, if there is such a thing as an 'official line', does it not imply that critical thinking itself is controversial?

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that KU being a public institution had some valid concerns, and had it chosen to, the administration could have resorted to harsher measures, courtesy the Rangers personnel hovering in the background, to disperse the gathering.

But that would have meant compounding the error that began with the cancellation of a similar talk at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. It is fortunate that saner counsel prevailed.

Published in Dawn, May 8th, 2015

Return of cricket

FOR any other place, it would seem insufficient: a 10-day tour by a not-too-strong international side limited to one venue and comprising only limited-over games.

But this is Pakistan, which has not hosted a Test-playing team since the attack on the Sri Lankan cricketers in Lahore in March 2009. Alistair Campbell in his role as managing director of Zimbabwe Cricket has been here and he has given a ‘satisfactory’ report regarding security arrangements.

Take a look: [Zimbabwe security delegation clears Pakistan tour](#)

Despite a warning by an international players’ association, signs are that the tour will begin later this month.

Earlier, when teams from Afghanistan and Kenya toured Pakistan, their movement was kept to a minimum and utmost care was taken to ensure their security.

The effort to bring the Zimbabweans to Pakistan was probably given a boost during interaction between the cricket boards of the two countries during the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand that concluded in March this year. The coming together must have been facilitated by the need on either side for a revival.

Just as Pakistan cricket has been denied due exposure because of its inability to host international sides — a consequence of the militant attacks here — Zimbabwe has itself been

embroiled in political problems in recent years. If Pakistan is desperate to play a Test-status side at home, the Zimbabweans would be looking to use this opportunity to give a much-needed boost to the game in their country.

They are going to get a commitment out of Pakistan for a tour of Zimbabwe sometime this summer. Besides, Zimbabwe may have other reasons to play against Pakistan — the last time the team toured Zimbabwe they lost a Test and a one-day international to the hosts.

Looked at through this lens, the Zimbabweans touring Pakistan will be doing a favour to themselves. But unnecessary emphasis on this point would deprive the current PCB approach to the subject of the modesty and focus that is so desperately needed for a return to normality.

The goal should be to create a successful model in Gaddafi Stadium over these 10 crucial days, which could then be expanded for the benefit of Pakistan and for the good of international cricket to which Pakistan has contributed much excitement over the years.

The country must pass this test. The world will be watching closely. So will Pakistan’s cricket fans. And so should the people responsible for smoothly organising the tour.

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Is the economy shining?

FOR at least a year now, a pattern has been coming into increasingly sharper relief. As key indicators in the economy — reserves, growth, inflation — show an improvement, the government has been quick to claim credit for having turned the economy around.

But a chorus of voices, with weighty credentials and a presence in the domestic print media, has been regularly voicing grave doubts about the veracity of the turnaround, pointing out that these are superficial developments and underlying weaknesses remain.

Meanwhile, institutional voices such as that of the IMF and the State Bank have equally consistently been providing an upbeat assessment of the direction that the economy has taken during this period, and praised the government's handling of it.

Take a look: [Govt keen on passing benefits around: Dar](#)

With the passage of time, this dialogue — if it can be called that — has taken on an increasingly strident tone, especially when some members of the domestic chorus started calling out individuals connected with the latter institutions for failing to provide an honest picture of the state of the economy.

The institutions in question, lacking partners in the local media, were at a disadvantage in the whole debate, especially since their capacity to speak was hamstrung by bureaucratic considerations.

But today, the institutions have been joined by powerful voices from the international media and credit rating agencies that have endorsed the positive picture of developments in Pakistan's economy and piled praise upon the government for bringing about these changes.

There is little doubt that the government will make much of these endorsements and the resultant ratings upgrades, and we should not be surprised to hear them invoked in the budget speech as vindication of the government's handling of the economy.

The domestic critics of the government's performance now have some choices to make. Allowing their critique to sometimes become personal in tone is unhelpful since it detracts from the larger substantive point they have been making all along.

This is important to understand because the debate between the sceptics and the optimists is now set to take centre stage as budget time approaches.

So let us begin that debate by emphasising that economic management is not judged on the basis of a few indicators alone.

Yes, Pakistan has pulled back from the brink of a balance of payments crisis. Yes, the near total shutdown of the power system in March 2013 has been overcome. But it should also be remembered that the circular debt still remains; that investment is down while consumption is up; that the tax base has probably shrunk instead of increased; that FDI has

May 2015

shrivelled while repatriation of profits has ballooned; that the rupee may be stable but exports have fallen; and so on.

The positive developments that the government, and its chorus of approvers, wants us to believe are indeed real, but the devil is in the caveats.

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Election symbols

DEMOCRACY is about equality. For all people to be equal, the signs and symbols representing them must also be seen as equal.

It is perhaps what the Election Commission officials had in mind when they selected poll symbols for candidates participating in the upcoming local government vote in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It appeared to be a nondiscriminatory choice that must have involved some long, deep thinking and a little bit of imagination.

It is a pity that there are far too many candidates out there to be given the symbols they favour. Instead of understanding that it is impossible for election officials to keep everyone happy, they have felt aggrieved at being given what they look upon as a raw deal.

Take a look: [Some LG election symbols embarrass candidates](#)

At the same time, while it is indeed a difficult challenge to come up with thousands of electoral symbols, we can sympathise with complaints of some of the candidates on this score.

On a lighter note, many of the objections raised are more a reflection of the negativity that resides in the minds of these aspiring leaders of grass-roots Pakistan.

Only someone who has no idea about the medicinal properties of a vegetable would protest the bestowing of such a very awami or popular symbol upon him. Next, take the bottle which has been hit so hard. Why attach stigma to something that symbolises purity as well as that what the poll managers must always talk about: transparency.

Someone has the cheek to dismiss the flute and the accordion as anti-culture, but how can they in the same breath reject the moustache, which is as much and as macho a sign of our collective resolve, and our frequent resort to man-only democracy as we have flaunted at any time?

There are some symbols more acceptable than others, agreed. But all too often, our aspiring leaders have given themselves away. Had they been convincing enough, they might have in many instances persuaded their voters to see the election symbols as positive emblems of their identity.

Published in Dawn, May 9th, 2015

Sindh CM's threat

IN a dismal reminder of just how unprincipled, myopic and against the public interest politicians can be at times, Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah suggested on Thursday that his provincial government was considering having Zulfikar Mirza tried in a military court.

Consider the many ways that Mr Shah's threat is an affront to good sense and the standing of the PPP itself.

To begin with, military courts are indelibly and forever linked to the historic injustice done to the founder of the PPP, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and the country itself when Bhutto's conviction was upheld by a handpicked Supreme Court under the military dictator Ziaul Haq.

Know more: [Cases against Mirza may be sent to military court: Qaim](#)

Given this fact, it is surprising that any leader within the PPP, or even outside it, should suggest that a political vendetta be settled by a military court.

If that decades-old history is not reason enough for restraint, recent events suggest that the Sindh chief minister was totally out of line.

The 21st Amendment to the Constitution may have been passed with the PPP's support, but the party endorsed it very reluctantly and only after it had been made very clear that the military courts would only be used against religiously inspired

terrorists and then too against those who fit the so-called 'jet-black terrorist' classification.

The chief minister, of course, knows this history, is aware of the present nature of military courts, and understands the PPP's stance.

What is also clear to anyone with even a passing interest in politics or understanding of the PPP's internal dynamics is that the spat between Mr Mirza and the current leadership of the PPP in Sindh is about a former insider finding himself on the outside and intra-party battle lines being redrawn.

What happened in Badin this week was deplorable and Mr Mirza's role in confronting the police and trying to effect a strike was illegal. But was it terrorism? And did it even remotely reach the standard of acts that can be adjudicated upon by military courts?

Perhaps some supporters of the Sindh government and the anti-Mirza PPP camp would suggest that the chief minister was merely trying to get Mr Mirza to stand down and to de-escalate the crisis the former Zardari loyalist seems determined to intensify.

But even in the murky world of Sindh politics, Mr Shah's threat was less a shot across the bow of Mr Mirza and more an affront to all that the PPP professes to stand for.

Published in Dawn, May 9th, 2015

Absence of women voters in by-poll

NOT one woman, not one single woman out of 47,280 registered women voters exercised her right to vote.

The apparently hugely successful boycott by the women in Lower Dir of the by-election in the PK-95 constituency on Thursday is the most significant fact that emerged from that electoral contest.

The result itself, with the Jamaat-i-Islami candidate Izazul Mulk Afkari emerging victorious, was a foregone conclusion.

Take a look: [Women remain indoors as JI wins Dir by-poll](#)

The seat had fallen vacant after the JI emir, Sirajul Haq, was elected senator in March; he had won from the constituency in the 2013 election by a margin of 12,000 votes.

More instructive, however, is the fact that then too Lower Dir was among those areas where women did not exercise — either partly or wholly — their right of franchise which is protected by law.

On that occasion, agreements had been struck between local chapters of various political parties to bar women from casting their vote.

This time, however, the JI chief and the ANP candidate denied that any such pact had been made. Indeed, the district election

commission officer said that announcements were made from mosque loudspeakers asking women to exercise their right of franchise.

There are two possible explanations for what transpired on Thursday. One, in the wake of a more robust response of late by civil society and the ECP to female-disenfranchisement pacts, retrogressive elements determined to preserve traditional male privilege by excluding females from decision-making processes are using more subtle methods than they did earlier.

Second, local chapters of political parties have done little to motivate women to exercise their right to vote, or to persuade men of the importance — not to mention legality — of women doing so. In fact, both hypotheses are interlinked, for the members of these local chapters, after all, belong to the same conservative social milieu.

Nevertheless, their parent parties, among whom the PPP and ANP flaunt their ‘progressive’ credentials partly on the basis of their support for women’s rights, cannot disavow responsibility for the craven surrender of those rights to reactionary pressure groups — whether in Lower Dir or elsewhere.

They must take a proactive stance against patriarchal traditions that make a virtue of disempowering women; it is precisely such an environment that gives sustenance to horrific crimes such as honour killing, vani/swara etc and perpetuates the disadvantages for females in health and education sectors.

The ECP must order a thorough inquiry into the total absence of women at the hustings in PK-95; a re-poll should be held if

May 2015

the indication of even indirect tactics to disenfranchise women is discerned.

In its draft bill on electoral reforms before election 2013, the ECP had included the requirement for re-polling at polling stations with less than 10pc turnout of registered women voters.

Parliament should demonstrate real commitment to half the population of Pakistan by enacting legislation along these lines.

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Few rape convictions

In the 20-month period between June 2013 and February 2015, 4,960 cases of rape were registered all over the country, according to figures provided by the minister of state for interior to the Senate on Friday.

Only 219 people of a total of 6,632 booked in these cases have been convicted. Punjab topped the dubious list. Some 4,322 rape cases were registered here and of the more than 5,700 accused, only 209 were convicted.

The high instance of complaints to the police in the country's biggest province could mean that the victims here were comparatively less intimidated by cultural factors that discourage the registration of such cases.

Or it could be taken as an alarming indication that Punjab has not been that successful in the fight against conditions that have encouraged rape, which experts often explain as an act by the powerful to subjugate and humiliate the weak.

In any case, the gap between the number of registered cases and the number of convictions everywhere in the country reconfirms the long-held suspicion about the inability of the system to provide justice to those who dare to speak up.

Read: [What you need to know about Pakistan's new Anti-Rape Bill](#)

These are staggering figures, especially given all the taboos associated with the reporting of rape cases that ensure that a large number of them are never brought to the notice of the police. The breakdown provided in the list shows just how difficult it is to move towards a conviction once a formal complaint has been made. It is also horrifically clear that the system chases those who are able to survive the shock and pressure immediately after a rape incident. It creates hurdles for those seeking justice at various levels. It guards the rapist, and exposes loopholes that can easily be exploited by a combination of resources and a daunting shaming process which stigmatises the raped. Parliament that has repeatedly demanded to be apprised of the statistics on rape must next take up the responsibility of leading the fight against this most serious of crimes.

Published in Dawn, May 10th, 2015

Tragedy in Naltar

The tragic helicopter accident in Naltar Valley, Gilgit-Baltistan, is also a tragedy for the diplomatic community in Pakistan. Deaths of the Norwegian and Philippine ambassadors and the spouses of the Malaysian and Indonesian envoys are in addition to the three deaths of Pakistani armed forces personnel operating the helicopter.

Moreover, among the nearly dozen or so other passengers on board, several diplomats have suffered serious injuries. What was meant to be a confidence-building exercise — the trip was organised as part of an effort by the Foreign Office and the military to showcase the country's scenic north and its tourism potential — turned into a horrifying event. There is though much courage in adversity.

Read: [Norway, Philippines envoys killed in helicopter crash, army claims no terror attack](#)

The sombreness and dignity with which the international community, particularly those of the countries whose diplomats have been affected, have reacted to Friday's tragedy should be noted: this beleaguered nation has many friends internationally who do wish it well, a reality sometimes lost in the noise of geopolitics.

For Pakistan, there remain a host of unanswered questions — inevitable in the wake of a tragedy, though perhaps worryingly familiar.

To begin with, however, it was reassuring to see the military and the Foreign Office cooperate smoothly with each other and in a compassionate manner with the affected foreign missions.

The authorities also worked well to quickly make public the news from the crash site, dispelling the notion that the Taliban had sought to create that the helicopter crash was an attack by the banned TTP.

In present times, high-profile accidents or deaths quickly attract speculation, so it was necessary to quell those from the outset.

Perhaps, though, in the determination to refute TTP propaganda, the authorities here overstepped the mark. As the global experience of aviation crashes suggests, it is almost impossible to immediately and authoritatively identify the cause of an accident — irrespective of how many witnesses there are on the ground or survivors on-board.

To claim a technical malfunction of some sort, as several officials did on Friday, is to prejudge the source of the accident.

Also read: [Bodies of Naltar chopper crash victims flown to Nur Khan Airbase](#)

Answers will only be forthcoming once the Pakistan Air Force inquiry board meets and begins the search for answers. That is the stage at which the preference for secrecy by the state ought to be resisted.

The public here deserves to know the full truth, as do the families and governments of the countries affected by the crash. A thorough investigation followed by full disclosure is extremely rare in Pakistan — but that is the only way for systems to improve, and accountability, if necessary, to be pursued.

Seven people are dead, a rare and serious incident with diplomatic repercussions has occurred, false claims of responsibility have already been made and military aviation is involved — this is precisely the incident in which the state should seek to set new standards for transparency.

Published in Dawn, May 10th, 2015

British Pakistani MPs

While the Conservatives defied pollsters and carried the day in the recently held British elections and will now form a majority government, for Pakistanis there is something else to cheer about: this election year 10 British Pakistanis have made it to the House of Commons.

The members represent Labour, the Tories as well as the Scottish National Party.

This is said to be the most diverse British parliament ever; a number of Indian and Bangladeshi members will also sit in the Commons. While the first person of subcontinental origin to sit

in the British parliament was Dadabhai Naoroji back in the late 19th century, in the modern age it wasn't till the late 1980s that British Asians started to make their presence felt inside the Commons.

Read: [Ten of Pakistani origin make it to British parliament](#)

Since then, their numbers have grown steadily, while former Punjab governor Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar was the first Muslim and Pakistani-origin MP. However it has been pointed out that while the number of minority MPs may be rising in parliament, the Commons is not as diverse as the electorate.

The election of these British Pakistanis is certainly a good sign. It shows that British citizens of Pakistani origin are engaging with their political system and have to a considerable degree integrated with the local culture. It also shows that despite the scaremongering of the far right in Europe, multiculturalism seems to be working in the UK.

For example, the election indicates that British society largely accepts diversity and that voters are willing to vote for persons of colour.

This level of acceptability cannot be found in many other parts of Europe. Having said that, there are a number of challenges that remain where the integration of Muslims, including Pakistanis, into British society is concerned.

Read: [Cameron's Conservatives win big in surprise UK election](#)

For one, extremism remains a major issue, as borne out by the alarming number of British jihadis — said to be in the hundreds — who have made it to the battlefields of the Middle East.

Also, many immigrants, while enjoying the benefits of the British system, hold local laws and traditions in contempt. Islamophobia remains a problem too as the hard right in Europe seeks to demonise all Muslims for political ends. It is hoped that the increased presence of Pakistani-origin MPs in the British parliament will help address many of these outstanding problems in a progressive, judicious fashion, since these individuals serve as a bridge between the British system and their community.

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Malnutrition crisis

FOR several years, now, the alarm bells have been ringing but have largely been ignored by policymaking circles.

It has been four years since a survey conducted by Unicef and the Sindh government likened the levels of malnutrition in northern Sindh to those prevailing in sub-Saharan Africa.

While this was due in part to the devastating floods that had occurred a few months earlier, in March 2011 the World Bank found that as a result of inflation the country's poorest families were spending 70pc or more of their total income on food alone.

Take a look: [‘Food fortification’ planned to overcome malnutrition](#)

Years later, the situation has not improved. Indeed, it has grown to such disturbing proportions that it is no longer possible for the authorities to ignore it.

Last week, during an inter-provincial meeting in Islamabad chaired by the health minister, Saira Afzal Tarar, the director nutrition, Dr Baseer Khan Achakzai, pointed out that nutrition indicators had deteriorated over the past decade; according to him, 43.7pc children below the age of five in the country are stunted, 15.1pc wasted, and 31.5 underweight because of the lack of proper nutrition.

At the meeting, it was decided that the way forward lies in fortifying food, particularly wheat. In fact, the meeting was

May 2015

told that this staple provides the most calories for Pakistanis, but that 60pc to 80pc of its nutrients are lost during the milling process.

Fortification, then, is one answer and the state needs to embark on the project with speed. However, other means of addressing the crisis must also be put into operation.

Most obviously, it is necessary to initiate a large-scale awareness-raising campaign to give nutrition-related information.

Small studies have from time to time found that poverty alone is not the problem; malnutrition has been found even in households that can afford sufficient food, simply because of people's lack of awareness about a proper diet and food nutrients.

Adding vital vitamins to staples is not enough; the citizenry also needs to be told what vitamins and minerals are, and which foods contain what.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2015

Education report card

THE state of public education in Pakistan has been abysmal for years. But instead of just bemoaning the sorry condition of this critical sector, it is more constructive to spot the many weaknesses of the system and work towards rectifying these inadequacies.

And reports such as Alif Ailaan's District Education Rankings help identify the weak spots. The advocacy group recently launched the 2015 edition of the rankings, examining the state of education in the country's 148 districts and agencies.

This effort is important as it gives a district-wise picture. The overall prognosis is that while some parts of the country are marching on despite obstacles such as weak infrastructure and limited resources, other areas are either stagnant or deteriorating further.

Take a look: [State of education not any better this year](#)

Sindh's performance, for example, has been described as "poor" and the report is critical of the provincial government's failure to address the situation. Even in Punjab — which tends to lead on many counts — the study says there are "stark" differences between the province's southern, central and northern districts.

Azad Kashmir, on the other hand, has overtaken Punjab and now stands as the second best-performing region. In fact AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan have been praised for trying to improve their performance despite poor infrastructure. Balochistan's

performance can be described in one word: “abysmal”. On a brighter note, the study praises the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa administration for improving its enrolment, retention and gender parity indicators.

The key problems as identified by the report are that learning outcomes in Pakistan are poor and that education quality remains low. In other words, for the most part, our children are not getting a quality education in the public sector even if they make it to school and manage to stay in class.

One area that has been highlighted for improvement is the allocation of funds. The country currently spends just around 2pc of GDP on education, whereas the desired figure is at least 3pc. But even the money that is spent is not delivering satisfactory outcomes.

However, as some areas are making an effort to improve themselves — GB, Azad Kashmir and KP, for example — it may prove beneficial to see what sort of practices these governments have adopted to address the education crisis.

Clearly, unless the provincial administrations make it their priority to deliver quality education to all children in all districts, there will be slim chance of Pakistan’s education emergency abating anytime soon.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2015

Missing persons

TO his credit, the chief minister of Balochistan, Abdul Malik Baloch, continues to be a leader who speaks relatively candidly on issues few politicians are willing to discuss openly. But when the admission is about total failure on the missing persons’ front, candidness offers cold comfort.

Speaking at a book launch in Karachi, the chief minister claimed that his government is still in talks with the so-called angry Baloch — effectively, the soft and hard separatists — but said that there has been no progress on the issue of the missing persons.

Take a look: [Balochistan CM concedes failure in tracing ‘missing’ persons](#)

While the admission will have come as no surprise to political observers, consider the sheer enormity of it.

Two years into a government that was elected on the promise of change, seven years into the transition to democracy and over a decade since the fifth Baloch insurgency began and that soon moved away from the traditional tribal centres to one across a swathe of middle-class, non-tribal Baloch areas, the chief minister of the province is effectively admitting that he has no control over a fundamental issue that has for years fuelled the anger of the Baloch.

Dr Baloch also had other dispiriting words: he essentially appealed to the centre to give more information to the people of Balochistan on its plans for Gwadar and presumably the

May 2015

road network that will be needed to make the port in Gwadar a trading hub.

But the centre is run by the PML-N that is a partner of the chief minister's National Party in the Balochistan government.

In fact, Dr Baloch became chief minister because Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif preferred that the provincial government be led by the PML-N's junior partner in terms of seats in the Balochistan Assembly. That Dr Baloch has to turn to the media to try and elicit answers from his coalition partner in Balochistan is perhaps emblematic of how far the NP government has fallen in terms of the promise it held a mere two years ago.

Also read: [Seminar on Balochistan missing persons held at KU despite curbs and fears](#)

In Balochistan, a carve-up of sorts can be seen. The big economic decisions have been ceded to the civilian-run federal government; all the security decisions have been retained by the army-led security establishment.

This has rendered Dr Baloch's task of reaching out to the disaffected Baloch near impossible. If the chief minister cannot even influence the decision to produce to their families, let alone the judiciary, the disappeared people in the province, what can his standing really be in any negotiations with the separatists?

If Chief Minister Baloch does appear to be fast becoming a peripheral figure, a great deal of the blame should fall on the centre.

The PML-N government appears to all but have given up on trying to influence the security policy towards a province blighted by a dirty war between separatists and the military.

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Abbottabad raid: a new angle

It is a story that will not go away — and rightly so. A new, sensational account of the run-up to the May 2, 2011 American raid in Abbottabad that killed Osama bin Laden alleges that not only did the then army leadership know of the American raid beforehand but that the Pakistan Army had imprisoned bin Laden for many years in the city.

The Seymour Hersh account in the London Review of Books appears to mainly take aim at US President Barack Obama's and the White House's version of the events that led to the killing of the world's most wanted terrorist.

Know more: [Ex-intelligence man told US about Osama's hideout: author](#)

But in doing so it attempts to take apart the standard story proffered inside Pakistan — that the army leadership had no knowledge of the Al Qaeda chief's presence in Abbottabad nor did it in any way facilitate the American raid to kill him. In the days to come, there will surely be official denials and sundry attacks made on Mr Hersh's version of events.

Careful scrutiny of the LRB story is in fact required as it contains several perplexing theories and an alternative version of events. But neither should it be lost that Mr Hersh appears largely sympathetic to the Pakistan Army, both in the LRB piece and in comments to this newspaper yesterday, and that the central premise of his article is to dismantle the Obama administration's version of events.

It is clearly not a hatchet job on Pakistan. Which leaves at least three basic points to be made here. First, where is the official Pakistani version of events, the Abbottabad Commission report?

[Take a look: Pakistan may have shared OBL's location with US: Former ISI chief](#)

Buried after initial promises that it would be made public, one version of the report has already seen the light of day via a leaked copy to Al Jazeera. That version alone contains a deep, systematic, even fundamental critique of the manner in which the ISI operates.

Surely, it is morally and legally indefensible of the state to hide from the public the only systematic inquiry into the events surrounding perhaps the most humiliating incident in decades here. National security will not be undermined by the publication of a report; national security was undermined by the presence of Osama bin Laden on Pakistani soil.

Second, it is long overdue for parliament to have oversight of the intelligence apparatus. The military itself projects its intelligence wings as omnipresent and omniscient — surely, it is parliament that ought to be omnipotent, able to inquire into

anything done by any branch of the state in the name of public security and the national interest.

Nor is it really a question of who will bell the cat — if parliament were to indicate any interest, the military would be unable to fend off oversight entirely. Finally, the Hersh report underlines an age-old truth: while supreme civilians may not always be truthful, they are always accountable — something a military-dominated set-up can never be.

Published in Dawn, May 12th, 2015

Review of the ECL

BY the government's own admission, some of the 7,500 names currently on the Exit Control List have been languishing there for decades and even include individuals who found themselves placed on it for reasons of personal enmity.

This was revealed by Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan on Sunday while dilating upon an impending and long overdue policy review of the ECL. According to him, if the relevant departments and agencies are unable within one month to justify the inclusion of the individuals on the list, these names will be removed.

A new policy, he added, was being prepared to regulate and standardise the process. Among the revisions being considered is for the names placed on the ECL — other than those of

individuals belonging to banned outfits, army deserters and those associated with Pakistan's nuclear programme — to be included for three years only, and subject to a review every six months.

Take a look: [Misuse of ECL](#)

There is much about the process of including people on the ECL that smacks of darker times when political witch-hunts were far more brazen and unabashed — not surprising when one considers that the system is underpinned by a holdover from the Gen Zia days known as the Exit from Pakistan (Control) Ordinance 1981.

According to this law, the government has no obligation to give the individual being considered for inclusion on the ECL any opportunity to show cause; indeed it can, in the public interest, refuse to disclose the reason for taking such action at all.

Moreover, the ordinance says that an order to prevent anyone from travelling out of the country “shall not be called in question before any courts or other authority”. Such opaque provisions are an open invitation to abuse.

That would have been the case even more so had the courts, regardless of the ouster clause in the law, not entertained petitions from those seeking relief from their inclusion on the ECL, and given relief to many of them.

Nevertheless, the list continues to function as a handy tool to rein in ‘undesirable’ elements and victimise those whose patriotism may be suspect.

For instance, although the interior minister has said recently that the government has not placed anyone on the ECL for political reasons, the case of Baloch activists Mama Qadeer and Farzana Majeed falls firmly in that category.

The procedure for inclusion in the ECL should be made more transparent, and its modus operandi rationalised without delay.

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Water woes persist

WITH temperatures sizzling, the woes of citizens in many parts of Karachi have been aggravated by the ongoing water crisis.

As it is, the supply of water the metropolis receives is not enough to meet the requirements of this huge city.

Yet a tussle between the Karachi Water & Sewerage Board and K-Electric, as well as negligence on the part of state institutions, has made matters worse. K-Electric claims that KWSB owes it dues worth over Rs36bn.

As a result, the electricity provider has been resorting to load-shedding at the water utility's pumping stations. But there is another twist to this tale.

Also read: [Tanker operators blame water crisis on govt officials](#)

As reported on Monday, some leading civil and military institutions and individuals in Karachi owe KWSB around Rs40m for water supplied in 2012-13. According to a report prepared by the auditor general of Pakistan, the Rangers lead the list of defaulters, while others who need to pay outstanding dues to the water utility include the local corps commander, the Sindh governor as well as the chief minister. Of course, state institutions not paying their bills is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan, regardless of the bad example it sets for citizens.

Nevertheless, KWSB needs to improve its recoveries; the relevant minister recently told the Sindh Assembly that the utility's recoveries were much less than the amount the water board billed each month.

And for this to happen, it is essential that the state institutions that owe KWSB money pay their bills without delay, and refrain from defaulting in future. When the ordinary citizen fails to pay his bills on time he is swiftly penalised; yet for the powerful it seems no such rules apply.

KWSB must also settle its account with K-Electric as soon as possible, while the latter should refrain from cutting power to pumping stations as this causes much hardship to the people of Karachi. In this battle of giants, the common man should not have to suffer for no fault of his own.

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Age of unreason

THE realisation is dawning slowly and inexorably: the horror that was Dec 16, 2014 was no turning point. The curtain has not been brought down on extremist elements; not only do they remain free to propagate hatred and intolerance, those in their cross hairs still have no recourse but to fend for themselves.

According to a report in this paper, senior educationist and member of the government-appointed advisory committee for curriculum and textbook reform, Dr Bernadette L. Dean, has had to flee Pakistan after a hate campaign was unleashed against her by an unnamed political party.

Take a look: [Senior educationist Dr Bernadette leaves Pakistan after receiving death threats](#)

She was accused by those against her work of being “an enemy of Islam” and “a foreigner woman who has single-handedly made changes to the curriculum and textbooks that made them secular”.

The campaign against Dr Dean is only the latest in a series of attacks against educationists in the country. Less than a month ago, Debra Lobo, an American national and professor at a medical college, was attacked and seriously injured in Karachi. Even more recently, a Karachi University professor, Dr Wahidur Rahman, was gunned down in his car.

In a time of unreason — for what is extremism but unreason? — clichés are handy instruments for religious zealots to exploit.

Dr Dean's stellar credentials and long years of service to her country, as former principal of two leading colleges in Pakistan, professor at Aga Khan University, and presently director of the VM Institute for Education, offered her no defence. That she was part of a committee with whose other members she had co-authored the revised textbooks that were reviewed multiple times before being approved, was of no consequence.

Nor was the fact that the Islamiat sections were authored only by Muslims, considered a valid argument. Dr Dean's very faith rendered her a 'foreigner', her every action suspect.

In a country of unfettered extremism, every attempt to stem the slide into obscurantism is met with resistance, every voice raised in defence of moderation, plurality and intellectual curiosity is silenced, often at the point of a gun. Parween Rahman, Rashid Rehman, Sabeen Mahmud — these are but a few among the many voices of reason that we could not afford to lose.

Instead of protecting those that are Pakistan's best hope of clawing back the space ceded to right-wing forces, the state remains shamelessly in retreat.

Why has action not been taken against the quarters threatening violence against Dr Dean? Why have they been allowed to put up banners with words that are an incitement to violence?

Then again, this is the same country where banned organisations have been taking out processions even after Dec 16 and threatening law-abiding citizens.

Cosmetic measures, even at this point where nothing less than a single-minded cleaning of the Augean stables is required, will take us even further into the abyss.

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By-poll bar on MPs

THE code of conduct for by-elections has always been a contentious subject. The usual complaint is that the government's side uses its position to influence the polls.

The government is often accused of exploiting the official machinery at its disposal and announcing development schemes on the eve of the contest to secure an election or swing it in its favour.

The Election Commission of Pakistan, that recently held a few by-polls that were praised for their fairness, is apparently seeking to ensure a level playing field for competitors in three forthcoming by-elections — two in Punjab and one in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Take a look: [ECP bars PTI chief from campaigning in by-polls](#)

The ECP has issued a code of conduct that prohibits the announcement of any new development scheme in an area that is to have a by-election after the poll schedule has been announced. That is not at all a bad condition — indeed, the

May 2015

tendency to buy votes with resources at the government-backed candidate's disposal has to be discouraged.

Also the commission bars anyone who holds office in the government from participation in electioneering after the announcement of the poll schedule.

To the list of officials, which includes the prime minister, the chief ministers, ministers and advisers to chief executives at the centre and in the provinces, the ECP has added the name of the president.

But it is not this inclusion, of the head of the state and not a member of government, which has raised objections — even though the presence of the president in the list of those barred does reflect the extent and depth of polarisation in the country.

As it strives to make the by-polls as free and fair as possible, the ECP has gone on to extend the ban to lawmakers in the national and provincial assemblies.

Not surprisingly, that has attracted instant criticism from the opposition, and in all likelihood will generate a heated exchange if not a full-blown controversy.

In the current situation, the extended ban is going to hit the PTI and its leader Imran Khan who are considered to be the main rivals of the PML-N in the by-polls. It will be difficult if not impossible to find a precedent for this summary placing of halters around the necks of the lawmakers other than those with ministerial posts.

The ECP's intentions and its mission for a reformed electoral system aside, it seems to have overshot the mark in this instance.

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SRO withdrawal

THE finance minister has announced that the power of the Federal Board of Revenue to issue exemptions for specific parties from various types of taxes is being withdrawn.

This power was exercised via an instrument known as the Statutory Regulatory Order and to date so many SROs had been issued by the FBR that people had lost count.

Last year alone, the total tax lost due to exemptions was estimated by the finance ministry to be Rs477bn, with SROs accounting for more than Rs380bn of this amount.

Also read: [PML-N gives new lease of life to tax exemptions](#)

This is a staggering number and it is good that the government has finally mustered up the courage to roll back these exemptions.

It begins with withdrawing the power to grant SROs from the FBR, thereby closing off the discretionary decision-making that had devolved enormous power to the tax bureaucracy.

May 2015

The next step will be to roll back the hundreds of SROs that have already been issued, which is when the revenue impact of the exercise will begin to be felt and the distortions introduced into the tax code begin to be eliminated.

This is a step that has been urged upon the government for almost three decades now, dating back to at least the National Taxation Reform Commission of 1985 if not earlier.

The fact that it is now going to be implemented — first via a presidential ordinance in the days to come, then written into law via the finance bill — indicates the government might be getting serious about tackling the structural bottlenecks that have hampered the revenue effort for so long now.

If the government can undertake this reform measure in earnest, and make a strong effort to pass legislation for State Bank autonomy as well as ramp up its attempts at broadening the tax net, it will be able to show the sceptics that it is serious about undertaking difficult structural reforms. The latter are the real measure of progress. There should be no backpedalling on this promise any longer.

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Attack on Ismaili community

IT is the vibrancy and plurality of Pakistan that the militants wish to destroy.

In targeting Ismailis in Karachi, the militants have grotesquely reiterated their message to the country: no one — absolutely no one — who exists outside the narrow, distorted version of Islam that the militants propagate is safe in Pakistan.

The Aga Khan has spoken of “a senseless act of violence against a peaceful community”. In their hour of desolation, it is only right that the Shia Ismaili community’s supreme leader has taken a dignified line and sought to comfort what will surely be a deeply anxious community.

Take a look: [43 killed in attack on bus carrying Ismailis in Karachi](#)

There is though clear sense recognisable in the attack. As the Peshawar school massacre delivered a devastating psychological blow to the country, so will the Karachi attack prove to be an immensely demoralising episode.

And as the Peshawar school massacre forever altered the basic school-day routine of tens of millions of Pakistanis, so yesterday’s attack will tighten the already suffocating blanket of fear over various Muslim sects and non-Muslims. The darkness continues to engulf this country.

The brutal attack against the Ismaili community also raises some very specific questions in the context of Karachi and the security policy being pursued in the provincial capital.

Clearly, whatever the state has done over the last 18 months in Karachi, there is no rational expectation that no more terrorist attacks will occur or that all terrorist attacks will be foiled. But there is a sense that the militarised strategy being pursued in Karachi is the wrong one — and that the focus of that militarised strategy, ie the MQM's militant elements — is too narrow.

There are still areas — several ethnic ghettos — in Karachi that remain effectively cut off from the rest of the city and where law-enforcement personnel only enter on occasion.

A strategy based on raids, arrests and, if necessary, killings can never rescue such neighbourhoods from the militants. Then, there has been virtually no discernible action against the extremist mosque-madrasah-social welfare network that serves as an indoctrination and recruitment nexus for militants.

Simply breaking up existing cells of militants does little to ensure the next generation of militant cells and groups are not being created.

In addition, what of the capacity of an intelligence apparatus that has to keep track of a wide spectrum of threats in Karachi?

Surely, that is a task too far for the military-run intelligence agencies alone. There are occasional noises about the civilian-run intelligence and law-enforcement apparatus being part of

the operational and strategic loop, but few believe that to be the case anymore.

Finally, for all the problems with a military-dominated security policy in Karachi, why has the Sindh government allowed itself to become near irrelevant?

The civilian side of the state needs to be more influential and assertive in the security domain, but in Sindh it appears that the government has nil interest in such an endeavour.

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Afghan policy change?

FIRST, the good news. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Kabul visit with army chief Gen Raheel Sharif and DG ISI Gen Rizwan Akhtar in tow, and his emphatic, unprecedented denunciation of violence by the Afghan Taliban is the clearest sign yet that the Pakistani state is edging towards a far-reaching change in its Afghanistan policy.

The symbolism in particular was striking. The prime minister spoke alongside Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the present-day leader of the governance structure that inherited power from the Afghan Taliban in 2001, and criticised what has long been considered by the security establishment here as a loyal ally of the Pakistani state — the Afghan Taliban.

May 2015

Know more: [Don't destabilise Afghanistan, PM warns Taliban](#)

If words and symbolism alone do not make policy, there is at least a genuine sense now that Pakistan's consistent, years-long articulation of wanting to turn the page on Afghanistan may have some substance to it. Consider also that Gen Sharif separately announced via the ISPR the resumption of a road-building project — Torkham to Jalalabad.

This underscores Pakistan is also looking to Afghanistan as a trading partner and not viewing it simply as a security conundrum.

Now, the perhaps not-so-good news: it will take a lot for the change in attitude to be replicated by a change in posture and policy on both sides.

Both the Pakistanis and Afghans have immediate and medium-term demands of each other.

For Pakistan, the issues of anti-Pakistan militants finding sanctuary along the Pak-Afghan frontier and better border management remain urgent priorities.

The security establishment here appears to believe that securing Fata and thwarting major terrorist attacks inside the country can only be assured if the banned TTP is denied space and resources everywhere.

The ability for some of the TTP leadership and its cadres to cross the Pak-Afghan border with relative ease and find sanctuary in Afghanistan therefore continues to be a key concern of the army.

On the Afghan side, the immediate concerns are to tamp down the massive so-called spring offensive of the Afghan Taliban and to bring the latter to the negotiating table as quickly as possible.

The Afghan difficulty with Pakistan lies in the extent to which Pakistan believes, or claims, it can help address Afghan concerns — and vice versa.

Past experience suggests otherwise. But then past experience has not had a civilian and military leadership on the Pakistani side and a president on the Afghan side who are willing to engage with each other to this extent.

Published in Dawn, May 14th, 2015

Circular debt plan

THE government has agreed with the IMF to implement a plan to reduce the circular debt next year to reportedly half of what it is today.

The circular debt has been a millstone around the neck of the power sector for almost a decade now, and this is not the first time that the government has announced its intention to reduce it.

Still, this time what is different is that the plan that has been announced sounds a little more realistic than before — if only because ordinary folk will be footing the bill.

Take a look: [Govt, IMF agree plan to end Rs600bn circular debt](#)

Going by the details that have emerged, particularly from the interactions of the Fund team with the media, the plan involves reducing the subsidy outlay by not passing the full benefit of oil prices to the consumers, the privatisation of some power-sector entities and a multi-year tariff that incorporates larger system losses into the tariff.

What this means is that the circular debt is to be eliminated by passing on the costs to the consumer, through higher power tariffs, particularly to pay for theft, as well as lower reductions in oil prices at the pump.

The idea is to improve the financial health of the three distribution companies to make them attractive for investors at the time of privatisation.

Nobody denies that better management of energy-sector entities is necessary to deal with the chronic power crisis and the best way to accomplish this is to increase the role of the private sector. But doing so at the cost of the customers is debatable.

At the very least, the details regarding the multi-year tariff ought to be made public, either by including them in the Letter of Intent for the next tranche of the Fund programme, or through the Nepra website.

Approval of the tariff should also be done through a public hearing by Nepra where representatives of the public ought to be allowed to air their reservations.

Reducing the circular debt is a national priority. But the manner in which this goal is reached ought to have some consensus behind it.

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The extremism within

THE country has an extremism problem. To state that is to suggest the obvious. But the state appears to be either in denial of Pakistan's extremism problem or afraid of its true dimensions.

After each new, grotesque low in the militants' war on Pakistan, the state responds in the same manner. Emergency meetings, long huddles, promises to double down on the existing militarised security strategy — and some vague promises about doing something about the peddlers of hate. Then, unsurprisingly, as the media gaze turns to the next scandal or atrocity and the memory of the previous attack recedes, nothing of substance is done to crack down on extremism.

That is a fundamental problem because there is an extremism continuum: from the doctrines of intolerance and hate on the non-violent end of the spectrum to the armed militants who perpetrate atrocities such as the Peshawar school attack and the Karachi bus attack. Simply eliminating armed militants will lead to little long-term success when there is still in existence a vast network of extremism busily indoctrinating the next generation of jihadis.

Consider the basic indoctrination that may have led to the murder of some 50 Ismailis in Karachi on Wednesday.

At some point, the killers would have been taught to believe that the victims were deserving of death for their religious beliefs. Perhaps that indoctrination came within the narrow

confines of life as an Islamist militant: the physical and psychological training of the killers done directly by the group responsible for the attack. But it is easy for the seeds of that indoctrination to have been laid in any number of ways by the vast extremist mosque-madrasah-social welfare network that blankets this country.

Even the largest, seemingly benign alleged centres of learning routinely spew hate against other sects, other religions and even peaceable followers of the same sect deemed too soft on others.

Pore over the literature, listen to the speeches, scan the online message boards and forums where minority sects in Islam are routinely declared non-Muslims, and it will become apparent where the seeds of mistrust that can lead to violent hate are sown.

Can the intelligence set-up be truly unaware of this? Militancy does not exist in a vacuum — it never has and it never will. It was possible for men to fire bullets into peaceful citizens on Wednesday because there exists a milieu that allows hate to masquerade as religion.

Surely, the answers to the extremism problem cannot be the same as the strategy to fight militancy. The first approach is essentially preventive in nature; the latter, curative. Prevention is more difficult — the extremism-fuelling narrative and infrastructure are far more diffuse than militant groups.

And it requires greater will — a willingness to reach into the heart of society and re-engineer it. If it is not fought, however,

May 2015

the country may find itself winning the battle, but losing the war.

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Palestinian state

ON Wednesday, the Vatican recognised the state of Palestine in a new treaty, giving legal cover to the Holy See's earlier support for the Arab nation.

The Vatican's deputy foreign minister said he hoped the move would help establish "an independent, sovereign and democratic state of Palestine".

Given the Holy See's standing in the world, the move is yet another moral victory for the Palestinian people. Predictably, Israel has responded negatively to the Vatican's recognition, with its foreign ministry saying the move "will not promote peace".

Know more: [Vatican recognises state of Palestine in new treaty](#)

Quite to the contrary, the move is the latest in a series of international developments that have supported Palestinian statehood — a just and historic demand that is an absolute pre-requisite for there to be a lasting peace between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East.

In 2012, the UN General Assembly had adopted a resolution recognising Palestine as an observer non-member state, with the vast majority of the global body's member states voting in favour. Moreover, several European states have also expressed support for Palestinian statehood; the British, French, Irish and Spanish parliaments have all voted in favour of recognition while Sweden has already recognised Palestine.

So whatever Israel and its supporters in the world may say, clearly global opinion is inclined towards Palestinian statehood.

Yet despite the international diplomatic support for Palestine, Tel Aviv seems unmoved and continues to regularly unleash atrocities upon the Palestinian people.

In fact, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's right-wing prime minister who was recently re-elected, has indicated he is simply not interested in a two-state solution. It is hoped that this widespread support for Palestine in the international community will send a strong message to Tel Aviv and its global patrons that the question of Palestinian statehood cannot be put on the back burner indefinitely.

Today, Palestinians will be observing the 'Nakba' — or 'catastrophe' — which marks the foundation of Israel and the start of the Arabs' cruel banishment to the political wilderness.

For almost seven decades the Israeli state has heaped scorn and humiliation upon Palestinians, and far too often resorted to spilling their blood in displays of manifest brutality.

It is time to undo the injustices meted out to the Palestinian people — the best way to do this is for Israel to accept a viable two-state solution which gives the Arabs a just deal. Tel Aviv must respect world opinion and commit itself to the peace process.

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Power frustrations

THE minister for water and power appears to be rather frustrated in his efforts to increase recoveries, and is now blaming the province of Sindh for not paying its dues.

The federal government has been asking the provinces for a while now to reconcile their outstanding power bills and pay the agreed amount.

According to the minister, Sindh is the only province that has still to agree to its amount outstanding, and has most recently refused to pay on the grounds that the federal government has imposed a “ban” on further wind and solar projects.

Also read: [Sindh govt backed out of power bills reconciliation, says Abid](#)

If this is so, then it is an unreasonable position on the part of the provincial government. What does any policy on wind and

solar energy have to do with paying outstanding electricity bills?

Nevertheless, the minister says that the provincial government has agreed to an outstanding liability of Rs13bn.

Earlier his ministry had demanded Rs66bn from the provincial government as outstanding dues. On Wednesday, the Senate saw angry scenes as opposition senators walked out saying the centre had disconnected power supply to water pumping stations in Hyderabad, shutting down water supply to large sections of the city.

The minister of state for water and power demanded that the provincial government clear its outstanding dues of Rs56bn in order to get the power supply restored. Needless to say, this bickering must end.

The ministry must realise that they are giving different estimates for the amount owed by the provincial government in different places, and their language in pursuing their recovery effort is pointlessly aggressive.

The Sindh administration must also realise that government is serious business, and power comes with responsibility. That responsibility includes settling their bills and not linking payments to other issues.

Both parties to this dispute need to calm down and adopt a more mature tone when addressing each other. And everybody needs to realise that the payment of power bills is an important obligation and must not be trifled with.

CPEC: more transparency needed

AFTER a substantial delay, the government finally convened a meeting of the leaders of all parliamentary parties to discuss the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The attempt to take the various political parties into confidence on the CPEC is a good move, but there is still plenty of room for further measures.

For one, the meeting did nothing to address concerns with regard to greater transparency and disclosure on the projects that come under the CPEC. Given that three quarters of the total investments planned for the corridor are in the power sector, it is surprising to see how little is known about the technical and financial parameters of these projects.

Know more: [Nawaz chairs APC to allay China-Pak corridor fears](#)

Some of the projects are coming under the upfront coal tariff whose details are on the Nepra website. But specific tariff petitions are absent for many of them. This is surprising because the government has repeatedly gone on record to say that the power projects come under the latest power policy, which mandates disclosure of the details.

Since many of the projects are private-sector ventures, it is necessary to know what sort of debt-to-equity ratios have been

envisioned under each, and how much of the debt will be foreign and how much of it local.

Further, since the whole corridor is a long-term venture, running until 2030, it is also necessary to know what the sequencing is in the timeline. Why are solar and hydel projects being approved rapidly in Punjab while Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which have much interest and potential in both areas, are left out by virtue of their chief ministers not being included in the delegation visits to China?

The opposition parties are correct to flag all the problems in the manner in which the project is moving ahead; but the prime minister has done himself no service by casting all those raising questions as “enemies of the state”.

Such language betrays a simplistic mindset. Prime Minister Sharif should understand that as a democratically elected leader he has to earn the confidence of the people’s representatives in the National Assembly. He can hardly demand it by using intimidatory rhetoric.

Meanwhile, the planning minister has tried to allay concerns about a route change by releasing a map showing the various roads planned under the corridor.

This is a positive step, even if a tad late. Nevertheless, the demands for greater transparency go beyond maps with squiggly lines on them. Can the minister also share the terms of reference under which the long-term Monographic Study on Transport Planning is being conducted, and tell us why the current PSDP contains allocations under CPEC only for the eastern route and not any other?

May 2015

A systematic approach to answering all questions is needed and the government should take its disclosure obligations far more seriously than it has thus far.

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Karachi operation

THE “scourge of terrorism is taking its last breath”, and Wednesday’s atrocity in Karachi exposed the “desperation of the terrorists”, President Mamnoon Hussain told a gathering in Islamabad on Thursday.

Unfortunately, Mr President, the reality appears far grimmer. If anything, the massacre of close to 50 Ismaili Shia Muslims in the metropolis is reflective of the calculated, methodical brutality of the militants. The killers knew exactly what they were doing, had done their homework and carried out the outrage with impunity.

As opposed to this, it is the state that appears to be at sea. Considering the revulsion the attack has created within Pakistan and abroad, the government is putting on a brave face and trying to talk the talk. But the key question is: will this latest tragedy spur long-lasting counterterrorism action, specifically in Karachi?

Also read: [Imran Khan likens Rangers operation in Karachi to 'treating cancer with Disprin'](#)

Both the military and civilian arms of the state have made numerous references to the involvement of foreign intelligence agencies in destabilising Karachi. Solid evidence needs to be produced on this count and thereafter, the matter needs to be taken up through diplomatic channels.

The state has also pledged to intensify the Karachi operation; at a high-powered meeting on Thursday attended by the army chief and DG ISI, along with the Sindh governor and chief minister, it was decided that action in the metropolis would be taken against violent elements of all stripes.

The operation, initiated in September 2013, till now has produced less than stellar results. While Karachi did indeed experience a brief period of relative calm, targeted killings have resumed, while the bus attack is a stark reminder that the militants’ infrastructure in the city is very much undisturbed.

It is hoped the state will examine the flaws in its strategy thus far and attempt to rectify them. For example, as per the optics — especially of the last few months — it appears as if action has largely been directed at one political party.

Will the dragnet be expanded to include sectarian and jihadi groups that, on paper, are banned or on the watch list, but openly and defiantly display their street power?

Will the state be able to resist the pressure tactics of the extreme right when suspects are probed? These major questions need to be answered by the captains of the operation in Sindh in a transparent manner if a sustained campaign to rid Karachi of militancy of all shades is to have any chance of success.

Unregistered drugs

SHORT CUTS create copycats. Thus, in a city and province where conventional and legal procedures are thought to be too tedious, it is only logical that a hospital should choose to cut corners and administer unregistered medicines to patients in its 'effort' to treat them.

Some patients have apparently reported a drug reaction, which has led to a familiar response: question not our sincerity — trust us. This episode rings a bell, or more appropriately, sets alarm bells ringing.

The hospital in question is the Punjab Institute of Cardiology in Lahore. Three years ago, more than 100 people being treated at the medical institute died under 'mysterious' circumstances.

Know more: ['Unregistered' drugs for PIC patients](#)

It was later found out, without the disclosure leading to any great upheaval in the public health system, that the unfortunate patients were victims of an unregistered drug. The clear message sent out in 2012 stands ignored in 2015.

There are three unregistered medicines being used at the PIC in Lahore according to a story in this paper on Friday. Some health officials, who otherwise insist that the administration of the medicine is not widespread, informally admit that doctors at public cardiac facilities in other Punjab cities may also be prescribing the same to their patients.

Additionally, the medicines, which are procured from an unknown source outside the existing system for the distribution of registered medicines, may be 'available' to resourceful practitioners at some private hospitals.

The problem is quite clear: an unregistered drug avoids due scrutiny and might not have been screened for quality. An unregistered drug also does not have a record regarding its origins and distribution.

The problem exists, yet there seems to be no one who is accountable for the making and supply of the drug if something goes wrong.

For instance, what if a dose is found to be adulterated or spurious? The blame will ultimately fall on the government. The latter must formalise the use of medicines for the health of the public it is treating.

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North Waziristan questions

News from North Waziristan, when there is any, tends to underscore the problem with much of the information from the region — there is too little of it; it is difficult to independently verify; and both government and the military spokesperson tend to offer the barest of details.

On Friday, the ISPR issued the following statement: “In precise aerial strikes 15 terrorists including some foreigners were killed last night in area ahead of Datta Khel in North Waziristan Agency.” Who were these foreigners? How was the military able to identify the victims so quickly? What, overall, is the status of Operation Zarb-i-Azb?

Yesterday, Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid claimed that the operation will continue till the elimination of the last terrorist in the region. How many terrorists are there left then? Time and again, all that officials pronouncements and claims do is raise more questions than provide real answers.

Read: [Air strikes kill 15 in North Waziristan](#)

To be sure, there is some understanding that Zarb-i-Azb has already impacted the ability of militants to act with impunity, caused many of them to scatter and, with the likely Shawal phase of the operation, will go a long way to recover what had effectively become an agency where the state had ceded control to the militants. But territorial control — clearing and holding in counter-insurgency parlance used by the military — is only the first step. What comes next?

In the other agencies, military operations have been successful in reclaiming territory from militants, but then three things have subsequently become apparent. One, the militants resurfaced in other parts of Fata. Two, without a long-term presence of the military in the areas cleared of militants, there is no hope of normal life resuming for the resettled populations. Three, the menace of IEDs and other indirect attacks spikes.

In the case of Operation Zarb-i-Azb, and following on from the separate Operation Khyber-II, there is the additional question mark of what happens if all of Fata is cleared when the border with Afghanistan remains incredibly porous. Better border management is a priority of the military, but can border management really become effective without a fundamental realignment with the Afghan state?

So, in addition to the absence of anything but the scantest of operational details from North Waziristan, there remains the bigger issue of how Operation Zarb-i-Azb fits into the overall counter-insurgency and counterterrorism policy of the state.

A militarised strategy without significant and capable civilian support is unlikely to do more than cause the arc of violence to be reduced over the short and medium terms. Neither the military nor the government appears to be doing much thinking about the structural and governance changes needed in Fata.

The tribal areas should not be allowed to return to their pre-insurgency status, a land disconnected from much of the rest of Pakistan and maintained as a buffer from Afghanistan.

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Art on Tehran's streets

It might be making a dent in the city's coffers, but there is no doubt that it would improve the commute no end: some 1,500 city-owned billboards across Tehran, which like their kind in any of the world's cities normally carry disparate and often clunky advertisements, are currently displaying reproductions of famous artwork from around the world. From Monet's Rouen Cathedral to Rembrandt's Landscape with a Stone Bridge and Ogata Korin's Flowering Plants in Autumn, the decision has effectively transformed the Iranian capital into a giant open-air exhibition. During this 10-day interlude, 200 copies of work by international masters are claiming citizens' attention against some 500 works by Iranian artists. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei goes to work passing by a representation of the 19th century Indian Fisherman, by Albert Bierstadt, which stands just a few blocks away from his office.

Take a look: [Copies of famous artworks replace ads on Tehran billboards](#)

The idea provides reason to dwell, once again, on the fact that though Iran is similarly if not more faith-oriented as Pakistan, it remains proud of its interest in culture and history. While the showcasing of work by Iranian artists is to be expected, the fact that world masters are included sends out the signal that this country will not reject the cultural or artistic traditions of others merely on the basis of them being foreign. That is something that speaks volumes for the confidence of society and perhaps of the state itself. In Pakistan, unfortunately, the situation is completely reversed, with merely the circumstance of a cultural production or idea being non-native enough to provoke

unthinking rejection. Consider, for example, the amount of time put in to delineate Pakistani culture from that which is across the border to the east, even though the entire subcontinent draws its roots from a connected place. This could be interpreted as a result of Pakistan's colonial and subsequent history; but it could also be symptomatic of a basic lack of confidence at the level of the self and the state.

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Modi's China visit

While the selfie showing Narendra Modi and Li Keqiang smiling at Beijing's Temple of Heaven was promptly posted on the social media, the Chinese prime minister admitted there were "some disagreements between us" but that India and China agreed that they ought to seek "a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution" to the decades-old boundary problem. Earlier, at a reception at the Great Hall of the People on Friday, the Indian prime minister called upon his hosts to "reconsider" their approach to their bilateral relations, especially to issues "that hold us back from realising the full potential" of their relationship. Notwithstanding this broad admission of the hurdles in the way of a more vibrant economic relationship, the two sides signed 24 documents, including some agreements, worth \$22bn providing for cooperation in a variety of fields ranging from collaboration in tourism, aerospace and education to opening one new consulate each. The two countries also agreed to create a body that would

increase the volume of trade by focusing on cooperation in the development of infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, agriculture and industry in a bid to address India's concerns about the imbalance in trade with China.

Also read: [China, India sign more than \\$22 billion in deals: Indian embassy](#)

One reason for the two countries' failure to realise the full economic potential of their relationship is the Indian establishment's refusal to go beyond the 1962 border conflict and place greater emphasis on the economy part of their ties. Even though representatives from the two sides continue to hold talks on the border dispute, New Delhi has injected tension into the border region by beginning work on an all-weather strategic road which will end at a point where the borders of India, China and Myanmar meet. China says the mountain road should be built after an agreement is reached and the borders are clearly demarcated. As the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman put it, the road would "complicate" the boundary dispute. Instead, it expects India to build a highway that would raise the economic stakes by going from Kolkata through Bangladesh and India's eastern states to reach Myanmar, thus creating an economic corridor. India also continues to host the Dalai Lama, a provocation to China. The truth is that the mistrust between the two countries stems from a sense of rivalry over regional influence, especially, much to New Delhi's annoyance, Beijing's deepening economic ties with Pakistan, and its resolve to play a greater economic role in Afghanistan. Are China and India's ambitions colliding?

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Naegleria fowleri deaths

Responsible societies learn from experience, hence it would be wise to take seriously the potential threats that *Naegleria fowleri* — also referred to as 'brain-eating amoeba' — poses to the people of Karachi.

Apparently, two deaths caused by the amoeba have been reported in the city over the past 15 days, bringing the total number of fatalities caused by the organism this year to three. Last year, at least 14 people lost their lives to complications linked to the amoeba.

Know more : [Alarm as 'brain-eating amoeba' kills two more in Karachi](#)

The organism is found in swimming pools and freshwater sources, while sufficient chlorination of water is considered a sufficient safeguard. However, as studies in the past have shown, a significant portion of Karachi's water has been found to be insufficiently chlorinated.

While there should not be any panic, local authorities must scientifically examine the causes of the recent deaths, as well as test water samples. Failure to do so can cause more loss of life.

Also read: [Naegleria Fowleri: Barricading the brain against the amoeba](#)

May 2015

The authorities should gather proper case histories of the victims to determine if they came in contact with the amoeba through swimming, or the use of tap water.

Above all, major stakeholders — the health department, the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation as well as the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board — must evolve a coordinated strategy to deal with the issue.

Testing the city's water and chlorination levels are essential in this regard — the deaths caused by the amoeba raise questions about the overall quality of Karachi's water. And while discussing public health, it would also be worth examining the situation in other cities, such as Lahore, to see if the state is ready to deal with seasonal illnesses especially major threats such as dengue.

Reports indicate that the authorities in Punjab have been vigilant about preventing a dengue epidemic this year. We hope the administration remains active in all the areas where dengue has been a threat in the past. It is much better to prevent public health emergencies instead of scrambling for answers in their aftermath.

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Where's the government?

THE Karachi corps commander's unprecedented public comments on much that ails the megacity has underlined a basic question: where is the government?

Not the governments over the decades that have failed Karachi, according to Lt Gen Naveed Mukhtar, but the one that has been elected in Sindh to consecutive terms. Where is the PPP in all of this? Where, for that matter, are all the civilian parties with stakes in Karachi?

Even before Lt Gen Mukhtar's remarks, it had become apparent that the military leadership was exerting a great deal of influence in the civilian arena — a degree of influence unseen outside of direct military rule of the country.

Take a look: [Karachi operation is completely apolitical, stresses Corps Commander Karachi](#)

A part of the reason is surely the military's aggressive approach in Karachi, appearing to neither want nor expect even the bare minimum of civilian support. However, a great deal of the blame must surely lie with the political parties themselves.

Consider that in recent times the only energy the PPP leadership in Sindh seems to be truly interested in expending is on internal battles.

With PPP leaders almost falling over themselves to pledge support for party boss Asif Ali Zardari and distance themselves

May 2015

from the aide-turned-rebel Zulfikar Mirza, there appears to be little time to focus on matters of governance.

Of course, the Zardari-Mirza spat cannot explain a remarkable run of neglect.

In charge of Sindh for seven years now, the PPP's seemingly only attempted answer to Karachi's woes was to try and keep the MQM on board — the assumption being that with the major stakeholders inside government rather than outside, it would be easier to manage the differences. But the MQM has been suffering its own crisis of leadership: an increasingly erratic Altaf Hussain, facing multiple challenges to his domination of the MQM and Karachi, appears at times to be unravelling in full view of the city he once had in a vice.

The institutional vacuum that Lt Gen Naveed Mukhtar described is perhaps more relevant today than it has ever been in Sindh.

Yet, there is something worryingly partisan about the corps commander's description of all that ails Karachi.

The institutional vacuum that the general described has not just been "filled by criminals and special interest groups whether political, ethnic or sectarian", but by the military too.

Consider the now two-decade-old presence of the army-run paramilitary Rangers force in the city. That force and its leadership are often — though, for obvious reasons, privately — accused of many of the same things that the political parties and their leaders are.

There is also the awkwardness of Lt Gen Mukhtar grabbing centre stage in Karachi — an astonishing and brazen usurpation of political prerogative and power.

The Karachi corps commander probably saw no irony in describing Karachi's political problems from his self-claimed apolitical perch. Most politicians are unlikely to share Lt Gen Mukhtar's one-sided view of history.

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State Bank report

THE latest assessment of the state of the economy provided by the State Bank paints a mixed picture of how things are faring.

There has been some improvement in the larger macroeconomic picture according to the second quarterly report released on Friday. But a closer look shows that this improvement is yet to kick-start the wheels of the economy.

As an example, the report says that the government has successfully reduced its borrowing from the State Bank; the borrowing has merely shifted towards commercial banks instead where it is crowding out private-sector borrowers.

Take a look: [GDP to remain high despite weaknesses](#)

Off take by private-sector players is lower in the latest data as compared to last year. In some cases, such as commodities, this reduction owes itself in part to the decline in prices. But in other areas, such as textiles, telecoms and power, it owes itself to lacklustre demand for bank credit, a sign of tepid growth, as well as lack of availability of funds due to large government borrowing and low deposit mobilisation by the banks.

On the fiscal side, it rightly points out the government's successful restraint on expenditures, but says that "revenue mobilisation was not up to the mark". Even the successful reduction in expenditures owed itself mainly to reduced interest rates creating lower debt servicing costs.

The silver lining is that development and social-sector expenditures were not cut to restrain costs. Interestingly enough, it appears the privatisation revenues were used for financing the budget this year, whereas they are supposed to be used only for debt retirement. The revenue effort also comes in for a mixed assessment, where efforts to increase the tax net appear to have failed due only in part to declining oil prices.

Tax inefficiencies, leakage and lack of documentation are the main reason given for this failure of the revenue effort.

The report provides a good assessment of the economy at a time when the country is heading towards the budget and the conversation on the economy is set to ramp up. The one major weakness in it is the fact that the report covers only the first half of the fiscal year, the period from July to December whereas previous quarterly reports at this time have provided an assessment for the July-March period.

Many important developments since December ought to have been touched upon. Nevertheless, the report is a welcome addition to the ongoing conversation in the country about Pakistan's economy.

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Morsi verdict

THE shocking verdict by an Egyptian court sentencing to death no less than 100 people, including former president Mohammed Morsi, for a mass jailbreak highlights what Amnesty International rightly calls "the deplorable state" of the country's criminal justice system.

Mr Morsi has already been sentenced to a 20-year jail term, and more cases against him and his supporters are pending on charges that include spying for foreign powers.

Saturday's convictions must be approved by the Grand Mufti, but his recommendation is advisory, and the state can go ahead with the executions even if the mufti rules against the hangings.

Take a look: [Egypt sentences deposed president Morsi to death](#)

More than 100 people, most of them members of the Muslim Brotherhood, already stand condemned to death, and they

May 2015

include the Brotherhood chief Mohammed Badie, who has been given capital punishment in another case.

Even though there are many other dissidents facing various charges, it is impossible to avoid the impression that it is the Brotherhood that is the main victim of the judicial farce, and that the military-backed regime is using the courts to crush all opponents to the dispensation headed by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

The former army chief overthrew Egypt's first elected government and later had himself fraudulently 'elected' head of state.

Mr Morsi, it goes without saying, made many mistakes, and he showed haste and lack of political foresight in trying to amend the constitution without realising that he was challenging forces which were well-entrenched in Egyptian state and society and had a vested interest in the continuation of the status quo.

But those mistakes did not justify a military coup whose outcome has whitewashed all the modest gains democracy had made after the Arab Spring led to the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, followed by Egypt's first transparent election that brought Mr Morsi to power. Mr Mubarak's iron-fisted rule helped the fundamentalist forces, which, unlike the liberal elements cowed by the state, had managed to survive and grow in strength by carrying out social services among the masses.

The results were evident in the election results. This truth must be realised by the Sisi regime, for ideological parties and movements cannot be crushed by force and judicial farce.

Equally astonishing is the world's attitude towards the recent developments in Egypt. Most Western governments, including the US, condemned the coup for record's sake and have maintained normal relations with Cairo, and American aid to the Sisi regime continues.

The Arab world, too, has maintained a silence, and some Gulf countries positively welcomed the overthrow of the Morsi government.

Perhaps the only criticism of Saturday's verdict has come from Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who likened today's Egypt to the pharaonic age.

There is little doubt the Sisi regime will continue for the foreseeable future, but the superficial stability it has given to the country is phoney and unlikely to serve Egypt's long-term interests.

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A malicious campaign

ONCE again, an ill wind is blowing. And once again, the state is demonstrating its pusillanimity.

It all began about two weeks ago when Information Minister Pervaiz Rasheed at a conference organised by the Pakistan Academy of Letters described madressahs as “universities of ignorance” promoting a “culture of hatred and conservativeness [in] society”.

When religious organisations got wind of the minister’s remarks, a storm of condemnation broke, particularly from the Deobandi elements. The Wafaqul Madaris Al Arabia, the board representing the country’s Deobandi seminaries, in a demonstration outside the National Press Club in Islamabad demanded the minister’s resignation and the registration of cases against him.

Also read: [‘Minister’s defamers’ escape after assaulting police party](#)

That, predictably, was only the opening salvo. Since then, the campaign against Mr Rasheed has taken a more sinister, yet very familiar course. Loaded language and potentially lethal labels that are peculiar to the arsenal of the right-wing have surfaced on cue. The minister had ‘ridiculed the ideology’ of Pakistan, read banners in the country’s capital; he was an ‘atheist’ and ‘heretic’ they railed, and called for his execution.

First, let us dispense with the obvious: the religious organisations are well within their rights to register their

protest. However, that right does not extend to levelling threats or using emotive language that in the existing environment can easily be construed as incitement to violence or even murder.

At the same time, it is telling that the banners have only now, after a week of being displayed at various central locations in Islamabad, reportedly been taken down and some individuals arrested and charged with crimes pertaining to defamation and public mischief.

Even in a country where the ‘VIP culture’ is constantly lambasted for privileging the political elite, the government was unable, or unwilling, to mount a prompt and robust response to an unlawful campaign — that too in the seat of government — against one of its own federal ministers by religious lobbies.

Equally disheartening is the deafening silence from politicians in general to come to Mr Rasheed’s defence. Whether cowardice or political expediency is to blame, it is in everyone’s interest to work together to contain these malign forces that seem to mysteriously remain unaccountable to anyone.

A few years ago, a similar campaign led to the assassination of the Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. Much innocent blood has been spilt since then in the name of faith. The state cannot afford to continue taking the path of least resistance.

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Fire tragedy

THE agony of the family in Lahore that was struck with tragedy in the early hours of Sunday is unimaginable: six siblings, ranging in age from one-and-a-half to 12 years, were killed whilst asleep when a fire erupted in their house.

According to initial investigations, there was a short circuit in the air-conditioning unit in one of the rooms occupied by three of the children; the fire spread quickly, presumably due to extensive woodwork, and smoke soon engulfed the room in which the other three were sleeping as well.

No doubt some time was lost before the event came to the notice of area residents; unfortunately enough, the children's parents had left them alone in the house to visit the shrine of Data Darbar.

Once neighbours managed to notify Rescue 1122 and the fire brigade arrived, it seems that matters had already progressed too far. Though the fire was rapidly brought under control, a city government official told the media that by the time the fire services started their work, the flames had already expanded far too much to leave a possibility of saving the children.

Also read: [Initial report shows fire brigade was 'push-start' vehicle](#)

As is usual, an inquiry has been ordered. Following the tragedy, some of the people of the Shadbagh locality where it occurred alleged that the fire brigade had arrived late and, in addition, that some of the workers had shown inefficiency by

failing to open the nozzles on the water pipe and requesting onlookers to bring buckets of water.

These allegations will have to be checked and if such failures are found, strict disciplinary action needs to be taken. This much is already clear, though: the fire brigade vehicle that went to the scene was not in fit condition, and required being pushed to make it start.

How much time was lost because of this detail needs to be investigated. The reality is, unfortunately, that incidents such as this occur with distressing regularity but few lessons are learned by either city administrations or, indeed, the people themselves.

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Documentation of economy

ONE of the most serious challenges that needs to be tackled in the forthcoming budget is the growing undocumented, or informal, sector of the economy.

This is a structural weakness that has been worsening with each passing year for at least the last three decades.

Over the years, successive governments have tried to tackle the problem through policy measures utilising the tax code, or by using simple brute force, or administrative means that make it incumbent upon registered parties to retain identifying information of the unregistered parties they do business with.

Take a look: [Analysis: Battling Ghosts](#)

In every case, the government has had to stand down against a furore sparked as a consequence of its attempts. But the size of the informal sector has only grown, as has its reach. Today, property, manufacturing, trade and services all have large undocumented transactions taking place within them, and cash remains the preferred instrument through which to transact.

This is a big challenge for a number of reasons. For one, the informal sector makes the economy resistant to any policy-induced reform.

Second, the informal sector can host large illicit activity, and the same mechanisms through which transactions are hidden from the view of the tax and regulatory authorities can also be used to conceal criminal activity.

Third, the informal economy resists all attempts at taxation, and the foregone revenue explains a large part of our declining tax-to-GDP ratio, forcing the government to search for foreign assistance to bridge its fiscal shortfalls.

Fourth, the informal economy is highly uncompetitive and traps the economy behind a low-productivity barrier. The list gets longer and longer, but it should by now be sufficiently obvious to all that the continued clustering of economic activity in the informal sector is a very big problem that needs to be dealt with using a strong hand, as well as innovative approaches to incentivise documentation.

The budget this year provides a good opportunity to make a start. Some measures that need to be taken are strengthening the hand of the Federal Board of Revenue for audit and assessment, while reforming the institution to check the abuse of powers by petty officialdom.

But a top-down approach by itself has not worked in the past. New technologies, such as the potential of mobile banking and financial inclusion initiatives, should also be tapped to encourage greater utilisation of digital means of settling small transactions.

The problem is a large one, and will not be tackled in one budget alone. Nevertheless, a strong start needs to be made, and the finance minister would be well advised to consult with private-sector parties to explore innovative approaches to tackling the problem.

May 2015

Continuing to be fearful of the power of informal-sector players is driving our economy deeper into the quicksand, and this drift needs to be arrested immediately.

Published in Dawn, May 20th, 2015

Intelligence accord

IF both sides are committed to meaningful implementation, the landmark agreement between the ISI and the Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security, could fundamentally alter the dynamics of a mutually damaging relationship stretching back decades.

Consider the history here: from the decades that span Khad to WAD and, in its present form, NDS, the Afghan intelligence set-up has been aligned with powers hostile to Pakistan. Meanwhile, the ISI has for decades considered exerting influence inside Afghanistan to be one of its two principal aims, the other being shaping the relationship with India.

For the NDS, with its open partiality for India, to seek to formalise and widen its ties with the ISI is nothing short of historic. While details of the MoU have not been revealed, there is a sense that events since December last year have helped make the historic agreement possible.

Know more: [ISI, Afghan intelligence in landmark deal](#)

In particular, after the Peshawar school attack, the emergency trips by the army high command to Kabul and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's willingness to help Pakistan without imposing preconditions resulted in unprecedented intelligence cooperation — including the much-rumoured access that the Afghan government gave to prisoners in Afghan custody that Pakistan wanted to interrogate.

What happens next though depends much on how the Pakistani and Afghan sides are able to prioritise their respective interests and accommodate the concerns of the other. Both sides have created goodwill with the other despite the odds.

President Ghani has withstood furious opposition inside Afghanistan to continue with his policy of trying to create a new era of positive ties with Pakistan.

Inside Pakistan, the army leadership has pursued better ties with the Afghan government in the face of resistance by hawks in the security establishment who consider the post-2001 dispensation in Afghanistan to be unacceptably tilted towards India.

There are clearly significant camps in both countries that view the relationship as a zero-sum game and in a regional context that focuses on India's relationship with Afghanistan.

There is also, however, some kind of common ground visible: both the Afghan and Pakistani sides need and want better border management to curb the activities of anti-state militants on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border.

May 2015

Intelligence cooperation is key in such matters and if the NDS and ISI can find a way to ratchet up cooperation, it will surely help ratchet down tensions in the overall bilateral relationship.

Published in Dawn, May 20th, 2015

Zimbabwe tour

THIS is a big moment for Pakistan cricket. The Zimbabweans are here. There is an ex-executive of the Pakistan Cricket Board who is obliged to acknowledge all the congratulatory messages on Twitter for apparently having played a part in bringing international teams back to Pakistan.

Then the current PCB chief is showing his gratitude to visitors by welcoming them as they arrive for a practice session at Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium to which the matches in this tour have been restricted.

However, once it is proved that this tour has been organised successfully, there will be more venues. All those who have made it possible, the 28-member Zimbabwean peace troupe more than anyone else, deserve credit. The PCB has done what it could. The baton has now been passed on to the security officials.

Know more : [We are here to support Pakistan, says Zimbabwe Cricket tour head](#)

The security arrangements for the tour that will end on May 31 are elaborate by the look of it. Under ordinary circumstances, the safety umbrella spread over the venue would have been frowned upon.

Security has indeed been one of the major issues that have over time scared the spectators away from cricket matches in the country. But this has to be — in fact, it has been — viewed differently.

The long drought in which Pakistan has not hosted any Test-playing country has created both craving and nerves. This has to be done at a gradual pace, and with the utmost care.

What the hosts are saying essentially is that the focus must be on smooth organisation, not on the shortcomings that are routinely critiqued by the media, and even more than on the actual game. Unavoidably, it will at times appear to be more about security than the game, which it actually is. Yet cricket it is which is to be hailed.

At the media conference held at the Gaddafi Stadium on Tuesday, a Zimbabwean official spoke about the cricketing brotherhood. He talked about cricket being a winner. Seldom has the sentiment been more meaningful.

Published in Dawn, May 20th, 2015

Security for policemen

ACROSS Pakistan, police officers — especially those involved in sensitive counterterrorism work — are at particular risk of falling to the assassin's bullet.

This is especially true in Karachi, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the killings of men in uniform are nothing new.

Yet, these incidents, especially when they go unpunished, demoralise the force and embolden the militants.

Take a look: [DSP gunned down in TTP-claimed attack in Peshawar](#)

Many a fine officer has gone too soon, and on Wednesday another name was added to the growing list of policemen targeted by militants.

DSP Bahadur Khan, associated with the counterterrorism department of the Peshawar police, was shot early in the day and succumbed to his wounds, while his killers managed to flee.

As per reports, the banned TTP has claimed responsibility for the killing. On Tuesday, a police constable in Mingora was also killed; some media reports have suggested that the TTP may have had a hand in that crime as well.

The counterterrorism department is a relatively new addition to the Peshawar police structure and is said to be delivering strong results.

Over the past few months, a number of wanted men have been picked up by the department, and there were intelligence reports that militants would target the police. The murder of the DSP may well be a reaction by militants to proactive counterterrorism action.

While the military is confronting militants in the battlefield, the police have an equally difficult job when it comes to protecting urban spaces from the terrorist threat.

Therefore, the state needs to examine how it can improve security protocols to better protect police officers, especially those involved in counterterrorism work. Whether it is through providing them additional security, restricting their movements or through other tactical and operational procedures, police forces countrywide need to reassess ways to protect those on the front line of the fight against militancy.

In general, the police are a demoralised force. When active officers are easily targeted by militants, motivation levels drop even further, which is why security procedures for the men in uniform need to be reviewed.

Published in Dawn, May 21st, 2015

Silencing hate speech

At least some purveyors of hate are discovering that there are consequences. On Tuesday, an anti-terrorism court sentenced a prayer leader from Kasur to five years' imprisonment for delivering a hate speech at a public gathering.

The case against Qari Abubakar had been filed under the Anti-Terrorism Act on a complaint by a sub-inspector.

The prosecution produced a video recording of the incident to reinforce its argument that the prayer leader was attempting to inflame sectarian sentiments with his words.

Know more: [Prayer leader jailed for five years over hate speech](#)

Reportedly, 21 people have been convicted this year in Punjab for delivering hate speeches, with some of them jailed for eight years. More than 4,000 individuals have been arrested for this particular crime in the last few months, according to Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan in a recent briefing to the Senate.

While the arrest of such large numbers of people in the absence of details as to how many of them have actually been charged or had legal proceedings initiated against them, means little in concrete terms, we now have evidence that some substantive action is being taken.

Even though this is but a drop in the vast swamp of religious intolerance that has to be drained, it is to be welcomed.

For far too long, odious, divisive narratives from the pulpit have been allowed to circulate freely; this has directly contributed to religious intolerance in our society and even, in some cases, to crimes committed in the name of faith.

However, closing the prison gates on individuals who spew such rhetoric is only the beginning: unless properly monitored they can continue to exert a malign influence on those behind bars with them.

It is also pertinent to ask at this point whether similar action would be taken against some of the bigger names in the business of peddling hate, or will only the comparatively small fry be silenced?

Taking the long view, there is another, even more insidious aspect of creating fissures within society along faith lines that continues virtually unabated. That, as pointed out in a conference on Tuesday by the National Commission for Justice and Peace, is the strain of religious triumphalism that runs through our school textbooks that casts aspersions on followers of minority faiths.

Speakers rightly commented that such propaganda has had a profound and intergenerational impact. There is no time better than now to tackle this issue that lies at the root of religious intolerance.

Published in Dawn, May 21st, 2015

Controversial GIDC move

THE passage of the GIDC bill by the National Assembly may have been a display of skilful politics but it was bad economics.

After raising a furore in the Assembly, the ruling party managed to get the backing of the main opposition party to see the bill sail through even as MNAs from the smaller parties were left protesting to little avail.

The passage of the bill was necessary since the fate of the IMF programme hangs upon it. But beyond the compulsions driving the government, it is sad to note that a revenue measure envisioned for the limited purpose of funding new infrastructure in gas transmission and distribution, now appears to be turning into an ordinary revenue head in the budget.

Take a look: [NA adopts gas cess bill as PPP backs govt](#)

This is unfortunate because the cess is, quite plainly, a tacit admission of failure to improve the revenue base of the government.

When it was originally introduced back in 2011, the GIDC was supposed to yield Rs30bn in revenue.

We were told that the funds raised through the levy of this cess “shall be utilised for or in connection with infrastructure development” for the two large pipeline projects to import gas from Iran and Turkmenistan, as well as “LNG or other projects

or for price equalisation of other imported alternative fuels including LPG”.

The language left a number of doors open to enable utilisation of the funds beyond paying for infrastructure requirements for imported gas.

Today it seems the government will lean on every ambiguity in this language to extract every ounce of revenue they can from this measure. No surprise therefore, that in the last budget the government aimed to collect Rs145bn through the GIDC.

Such a massive increase in reliance on the GIDC for revenue purposes would make sense if we saw huge allocations being made for developing gas infrastructure. But the PSDP for the current fiscal year contains no new gas projects.

Where are all the gas infrastructure projects for which such massive sums of money are supposedly being raised?

The gas sector is riddled with costs that come from inefficient operations, such as high losses, and there is some possibility that the funds raised through the levy of the cess will end up being utilised for underwriting these inefficiencies, under the guise of ‘price equalisation’, rather than genuine infrastructure projects.

It is easy enough to see that the state has a dire revenue requirement, and its creditors are driving a hard bargain, leading the government to squeeze the easiest revenue heads harder and harder to meet its fiscal obligations.

Having obtained passage of the GIDC bill through the Assembly with some political skill, can the government now demonstrate some economic skill as well and show us a budget that proposes to remedy the inelastic nature of our tax system?

Published in Dawn, May 21st, 2015

Militants on campus

A week after the brutal slaying of around 50 Shia Ismaili Muslims in Karachi, there seems to be some forward movement in the case.

On Wednesday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan told the media that the mastermind as well as the operatives involved in the bus attack were in custody.

It was also claimed that the suspects were involved in a large number of crimes, including the murder of activist Sabeen Mahmud, the attempt on American academic Debra Lobo's life as well as various other acts of terrorism in Karachi.

Take a look: [From IBA graduate to 'terror suspect'?](#)

Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah held a similarly themed briefing, in which he gave greater details about the men in custody, as well as the crimes they have allegedly committed.

While the men have not been linked to any group, one suspect is said to have been in contact with slain Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden, as well as his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Much of the information has apparently been obtained through confessions, hence it will be up to the joint interrogation team to dig deeper and come up with solid evidence that can be used to prosecute these individuals.

What is of particular concern, however, is that most of the suspects were "well-educated", reportedly having studied disciplines as diverse as business administration, engineering and Islamic studies from reputable public and private universities in Karachi.

While this is not for the first time that claims have emerged of 'educated' militants carrying out acts of terrorism, it certainly raises a red flag that the state and academic institutions in Pakistan cannot afford to ignore.

While the generally accepted stereotype of the Islamist militant in Pakistan is that of the madrasah-going talib usually from an economically disadvantaged background, the recent revelations — as well as past incidents — point to another kind of extremist fighter: the university-educated, tech-savvy jihadi.

Students linked to extremist outfits have in the past been picked up from varsities in Punjab while more recently, a public university in Islamabad was accused of promoting a sectarian doctrine on campus.

Also, many of the Western jihadi fighters currently involved in conflicts in the Middle East come from educated backgrounds.

While it would be premature to label Pakistan's university campuses as hotbeds of extremism, there is certainly a problem with educated young individuals willing to take up the gun in the name of faith.

The general rightward shift of society over the last few decades, as well as the establishment's overt and covert policy of supporting so-called jihad, is partly to blame. These individuals may also be adopting the path of militancy in reaction to perceived injustices against Muslims in different parts of the world.

Whatever the cause, the state — with the help of academia — needs to address the issue of extremism on the campus before more space is lost to fanatical, murderous ideologies.

Published in Dawn, May 22nd, 2015

Fake degree scandal

The New York Times exposé that has rocked the IT and media industries in Pakistan and sent ripples across the political landscape is a story of two halves.

First, there is the central allegation itself: that Aexact, an IT company that has spawned many rumours amidst the self-created hype, is effectively a massive fraud, a fake-degree mill on a scale that the country, and the world, has not seen before.

Second, there is the media angle: Bol network, owned by Aexact, is set to launch soon, but now stands potentially fatally compromised because of the allegations against its parent organisation. Start with the allegations against Aexact.

Read: [FIA raids Aexact offices, takes records and employees into custody](#)

There have long been rumours in IT and business circles about Aexact's business model and quite how it was able to generate the massive amounts of cash that the company appeared to be making. No plausible explanations were offered by the company and it routinely dismissed the allegations as nothing more than rivals' jealousies. Clearly, that status quo is no long tenable.

Fake degrees set-ups are hardly a novelty in Pakistan, but then nothing has been seen before on the scale of the global fraud that Aexact is alleged to be conducting. Nothing less than a thorough investigation by the state — already promised by the federal government — will be able to conclusively resolve the

issue and put to rest once and for all the speculation surrounding Axact.

Hopefully, that investigation will be conducted quickly and transparently.

Take a look: [Nisar urges media to abstain from Axact scandal 'hype'](#)

Second, the situation regarding Bol TV network. The media wars that convulsed the industry last year have reappeared with a vengeance.

Incredible, often tawdry, allegations are being bandied about by all sides, further tarnishing the industry as a whole and damaging the credibility of all concerned.

To be sure, some of Bol's rivals have ecstatically jumped on the allegations made in The New York Times and appear to be doing their best to ensure a potential rival never makes it on air — or leave it terminally damaged if Bol TV does make it on air.

Yet, what of the manner in which Axact and Bol have responded to the allegations? The pugnacious manner in which Axact executives and some of Bol's frontline stars have reacted to the very serious allegations has been cringe-worthy.

Surely, instead of attacking perceived media rivals — it should be noted that the Axact empire is still fundamentally rooted in IT — the company ought to explain its business and financial roots.

Rohingya tragedy

THE tragedy that has been unfolding in the Andaman Sea has only been turned into a spectacle of even more distressing proportions given that it is occurring just out of sight of some of the world's finest beach resorts: boats carrying thousands upon thousands of Rohingya Muslim migrants, mostly from Myanmar but also from Bangladesh, have been subjected to a deadly match between Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Floundering on the high seas and in many cases abandoned by their crew of human traffickers, these vessels carry people that are sick, hungry and urgently in need of rescue — but the three countries mentioned above, that are in a position to provide immediate succour, have been towing the boats out of their own territorial waters to effectively make them somebody else's problem.

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

On board the boats, meanwhile, desperate conditions prevail, with deaths when vessels capsize, people thrown overboard in fights over dwindling food and water supplies, and sickness and starvation.

Thankfully, on Wednesday, Malaysia and Indonesia finally capitulated and offered shelter to 7,000 of these people; yet both countries made clear that the assistance was temporary and that they would take no more. Thailand remains flint-hearted, but it has said that it will not, at least, force boats back out to sea.

May 2015

If this is a humanitarian catastrophe for which the behaviour of the three Southeast Asian neighbours has drawn censure, what can be said of the irresponsible stance taken by Myanmar?

It has denied any role in the crisis and did not join a meeting of regional foreign ministers on Wednesday where the deal to provide temporary shelter was struck.

Yet the reality is that the Rohingya community has for generations been persecuted here, denied recognition, land rights, and subjected to forced labour.

While these people feel they have no option but to flee by whatever dangerous means are available to them, the situation is a blot on the world's conscience. Ways need to be found to convince Myanmar to recognise and address the problem.

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Commodifying children

RESTRAINT and good taste are not the first adjectives that spring to mind when describing the fare dished out on most Pakistani television channels.

Now the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority has taken notice of at least one type of excess shown by some TV channels in their morning talk shows.

In a letter to the Pakistan Broadcasters' Association on Thursday, Pemra said "it has been observed with grave concern that ... morning shows [are being aired] in collaboration with some NGOs, whereby they exhibit the exchange of children of poor families among the rich couples in lieu of money".

Know more: [Pemra warns TV channels against 'exploiting children'](#)

Programming that offended "cultural values, morality and good manners" could result, said the letter, in the suspension or revocation of the channels' licences.

According to a Pemra spokesperson, most of the children presented on the programmes were either street children or orphans, while others belonged to poor families.

Vulgarity takes many forms, and this particular version of it is especially offensive because it is based upon commercial interests preying on human suffering while they masquerade as charitable motives.

For what is the real objective of the channels in question but to outdo each other in the frenetic race for ratings — and by extension, advertising revenue — through resorting to ever ‘creative’ and outlandish gimmicks?

Clearly the end justifies the means. Even if the latter commodifies children as though they were objects upon which to put a price corresponding with their level of misery as perceived by the audience.

A similar stunt, involving babies being offered for adoption on air, created a stir when it first made an appearance on a Ramazan show two years ago.

At least in the present case, Pemra has done the right thing by pointing out its objections to the broadcasters in question.

Last but not least, a word about the audience. What does it say about our society that it laps up and enthusiastically participates in such a crass display of ‘altruism’ at the cost of human dignity?

Published in Dawn, May 23rd, 2015

Security expenditures

IN a series of disclosures, the finance ministry has put out some numbers on how much Operation Zarb-i-Azb has cost thus far, and what sort of expenditure will be incurred in rehabilitating the IDPs and reconstructing the infrastructure destroyed by the war.

The operation itself, thus far, has incurred a cost of Rs45bn. For next year, the total amount being budgeted for the operation as well as the repatriation and rehabilitation of the IDPs is Rs136bn, according to a handout issued by the finance ministry.

Separately, in a presentation before a Senate standing committee, the finance secretary has said that Rs45bn will be required to sustain the operation next fiscal year, as well as paying for the cost of raising the special security force for the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Additionally, they intend to budget a further Rs30bn for repatriation of IDPs and Rs3bn for reconstruction of schools and hospitals destroyed during the war.

A number of questions naturally arise. The figures provided to the Senate add up to Rs78bn, which is still far short of the Rs136bn mentioned in the handout as the funds required for security-related expenditure for next year. That leaves a gap of Rs58bn that still requires an explanation.

This is not a small amount and it needs to be explained.

The IMF has granted fiscal space totalling 0.3pc of GDP to accommodate additional security expenditure in next year's deficit target, but that comes to Rs93bn by the estimates of next year's GDP, where the government has asked for Rs136bn.

Where will the rest come from? And finally, why is the figure for repatriation of IDPs as high as it is?

Given that there are just under 300,000 IDPs from all of Fata, this comes to Rs100,000 per household if we assume that they intend to repatriate all IDPs next fiscal year alone, which itself would be an unrealistic assumption.

Given that damage to housing stock has not even been assessed yet, how have they arrived at this figure of Rs30bn?

It is good that we are finally getting to see some figures on the costs of the security operation. But the expenditure figures that are being shared need careful scrutiny and parliament should play its part in providing diligent oversight.

Money is fungible, and funds given for a particular purpose should not be diverted for other purposes.

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Military courts: a political issue

THE Supreme Court is grappling with a two-fold question: can a constitutional amendment ever be struck down? And does the 21st Amendment to the Constitution, as a result of which a new regime of military courts has been established, meet the criteria for an amendment to be struck down in part or in full?

The sheer magnitude of what was done in January by parliament has thus once again come into focus.

Effectively, parliament created an exception to the existence of fundamental rights in cases to be tried under the new military courts regime.

It has taken away the right of the superior judiciary to enforce fundamental rights in those specific cases. It is a clear abomination, one justified in the name of expediency because the terror threat had reached a magnitude that threatened to engulf state and society.

Take a look: [Can parliament alter Constitution's structure, asks SC](#)

But there is a prior problem for the court here: nothing in the Constitution suggests that the Supreme Court has the power to strike down an amendment passed by parliament. To find that power now, one would have to go against the grain of several past judgments and wade into the speculative realm of a basic structure of the Constitution.

Not every problem ought to have a judicial solution. There is a category of issues that are political questions. Perhaps the military courts regime falls into the latter category — an abomination though they may be, if the superior judiciary finds for itself a supra-parliamentary role, how might that be used by the Supreme Court in future cases, when amendments to the Constitution are not clear-cut violations of fundamental rights?

There is danger in finding powers where none were known to exist before. Parliament is an elected body and the people can express their displeasure with something their elected representatives have done by either unseating them at the next election or mobilising to put pressure on parliament to consider rectifying the original problem.

In this case, the original problem is a decrepit criminal justice system and the need for urgent reform.

Reform is a combination of legislative and executive action. But has parliament demonstrated even the slightest interest in getting the government to focus on criminal justice reform?

It appears that after caving in to pressure from the military to establish the new regime of military courts to try so-called jet-black terrorists, parliament and the government are content with the sunset clause in the 21st Amendment, whereby the parallel regime is set to lapse in 2016.

But inaction on the reform front could prove to be reason enough to demand an extension of the black law in 2016.

It hardly seems likely that the country will be cleared of the very worst of terrorists and their leaders in 18 months' time. If

the ordinary criminal justice system is not in shape to deal with the terror threat by then, then what?

Published in Dawn, May 23rd, 2015

Saudi mosque bombing

These are difficult times for Saudi Arabia. A new king has recently taken the reins of power and is in the process of consolidating his rule. Meanwhile, the kingdom has launched a war against Yemeni Houthi rebels in the south, while across the north-eastern border in Iraq the so-called Islamic State — with its animus for the rulers in Riyadh hardly concealed — remains undeterred. In such tumultuous times, IS is threatening to bring the war inside the kingdom's borders.

On Friday, the outfit claimed a suicide bombing targeting a Shia mosque in Saudi Arabia's eastern Qatif region.

Read: [Deadly suicide blast at mosque in Saudi Arabia kills 21](#)

At least 21 people were killed in what is believed to be the first major IS strike inside the kingdom. In an ominous online message, IS has threatened more violence against Saudi Shias.

With this bombing, the self-styled caliphate has achieved two major objectives: firstly, it has made clear its intentions — and capabilities — to carry out sectarian attacks inside Saudi

May 2015

Arabia. Secondly, it has demonstrated the vulnerabilities of the Saudi state.

Both these objectives were outlined in a recent speech by ‘caliph’ Baghdadi, in which he lambasted both the Saudi Shia, as well as the rulers in Riyadh. According to some reports, hundreds of Saudi fighters have returned to the kingdom after taking up arms for IS in Syria and Iraq.

Clearly, if IS manages to gain a foothold within the kingdom, it will create a new security headache for Riyadh as extremist fighters try and spark a communal conflagration. Already Saudi Arabia’s east — where most of its Shia population lives — is a disturbed region.

Last November, several people were killed when gunmen attacked an Ashura majlis, while the sentencing to death of Shaikh Nimr, a senior Saudi Shia cleric, on charges of sedition has sparked widespread protests and discontent in the Shia region.

Though Riyadh has gone after sectarian militants, considering the latest developments, it will need to do much more on multiple fronts.

When the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts were beginning to unfold, many had warned of the dangers of using extremists to forward geopolitical aims — as Saudi Arabia had been accused of doing in both these conflicts. Now it seems the blowback of these policies — or at least of looking away as militants headed towards these battlefields — is threatening the security and communal fabric of the kingdom.

Firstly, Riyadh must take action against local extremists, particularly those trying to spark a communal confrontation. But also, the Saudi state must look within; both inside the official clergy, as well as elsewhere, there are elements that support a sectarian narrative that is not too far from the ideology of IS.

Moreover, Riyadh must consider making a greater effort to resolve the Syrian and Yemeni crises through dialogue; if both these bloody conflicts are brought to a close, much wind will be taken away from the sails of the extremists.

Published in Dawn, May 24th, 2015

Cricket resumption

It took six full years without cricket at home to unite this country. The T-20 game at the Gaddafi Stadium on Friday was accompanied by chants of joy and expectations across Pakistan and so engrossing was the non-cricketing part of it that it appeared at points during the match as if some Pakistani players were finding it tough to overcome the sentiment and concentrate on the game.

It was an entertaining, brisk-paced game. Pakistan won. But entertainment value and winning were not that important on the night. The intent was to prove to two audiences apart — the outside world and closer to home the spoilsports out to disrupt

May 2015

normal life — our ability to continue our love affair with cricket.

Read: [Pakistan seal victory in first T20 against Zimbabwe](#)

Over and above this, it was a collective statement by people from all regions, walks of life and affiliations to live by our own popular code that has taken so long and so many influences to evolve.

A full celebration will have to wait until the completion of the tour by the Zimbabweans later this month but the organisation of the first game was big enough for statements to pour in from everywhere.

Apart from the greetings that were lavished on the team the spirit of goodwill in this instance extended to the oft-maligned cricket board as well.

Gripped by a sense of expectancy, the fans were willing to forget the ‘blunders’ the board is infamous for, and the board seemed rightfully proud of this achievement. And indeed the prime minister was there to claim a share in the credit.

The statements by the top leadership of the country, while they hailed the return of cricket, could perhaps have carried greater praise for the men of the moment — the brave Zimbabwean team.

Also read: [Zimbabwe cricket team arrives in Lahore on historic tour](#)

The message by the prime minister proudly reminded everyone how government policies against militancy had helped the cause of the game and the people of Pakistan. The people of the country will be hoping the prime minister will have reason to repeat the claim frequently in the days to come.

Published in Dawn, May 24th, 2015

Cybercrime bill

It comes as a matter of relief that the National Assembly Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecom has relented on its earlier inflexible stance and on Friday asked its members to hold consultations with experts to revise portions of the proposed Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill 2015.

The controversy had been brewing for quite some time, and came to a head a little over a month ago when Minister of State for Information Technology Anusha Rehman announced that the bill had been finalised.

Read: [NA committee agrees to re-examine cybercrime bill](#)

But digital rights activists and industry professionals had been insisting that what was about to be tabled was not the draft originally hammered out with input from representatives of the IT industry; they contended that since then, the draft had been amended by a government-led sub-committee, and what was

poised to be passed into law was a loosely worded piece of legal drafting that betrayed a poor grasp on the technical aspects of the internet and digital communications, as well as several deeply problematic clauses that were open to abuse.

Despite hectic lobbying by digital rights groups and other stakeholders, the National Assembly standing committee had so far been refusing to accept that there were any problems and had been pushing for a speedy passage of the bill into law.

Fortunately, better sense prevailed on Friday when, upon the intervention of PPP MNA Shazia Marri, members of the industry-led IT joint action committee were allowed into parliament to have their say.

Also encouraging is the fact that this did not turn into a routine hearing of objections; what had originally been intended as a 90-minute session ended up taking the best part of three hours, with the joint action committee urging the omission of a number of sections from the bill, offering several ways in which to avoid potential human and digital rights pitfalls, and pointing out ambiguities.

These gains need to be worked upon, and the draft scrutinised thoroughly so that the final version does not lend itself to mischief or abuse.

There is, after all, no extreme urgency, and many had been wondering why this piece of proposed legislation appeared set to be rushed through the scrutiny process, as several others have been in the recent past.

The 2007 Pakistan Electronic Crime Ordinance lapsed in 2009, and while there is no argument that the country needs effective laws to check cybercrime, it must take the time to get them exactly right.

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Pumping growth

AS interest rates drop to historic lows and the government announces a shift in its economic policy approach, away from austerity towards fuelling growth, a sense of optimism hangs in the air.

The government is doing its best to remind us all that this fiscal year has been a bit of a turning point, when growth revived, inflation dropped, the deficit was contained and reserves rose.

Furthermore, they want to point towards the growing external confidence in Pakistan's economy as evidenced by the improvement in the country's credit rating and large subscription to debt offerings as well as Pakistani assets in international markets.

Take a look: [State Bank cuts interest rates to historic low of 7%](#)

May 2015

All of this has instilled confidence in the government, undoubtedly, and now we are hearing announcements of a coming change of gear in economic policy.

Falling inflation is a fact and there is little justification for keeping interest rates up as the Consumer Price Index drops to 4.8pc for the first 10 months.

We can assume that the decision to slash interest rates was made independently of the decision to shift from austerity towards growth, but all signs are that there is plenty of coordination between the government and the State Bank in all important policy matters.

Be that as it may, there are grounds for caution ahead. It is true that many macroeconomic indicators are showing an improvement, but that improvement has yet to manifest itself in the real sector of the economy.

Large-scale manufacturing remains mired in low growth, and the external account has shrunk mainly because of a fall in oil prices and not because of any underlying improvement in the country's competitiveness.

All of this was pointed out by the State Bank in its last quarterly report, although it is hard to see what it can do to address these weaknesses.

What is certain though is that without underlying reforms, measures to pump growth in the economy through interest rates and government spending have, in the past, created unsustainable growth spurts that quickly lead to a speculative frenzy.

The stock market spirals, property speculation thrives, money is funnelled to Dubai real estate in growing quantities and inflation begins to rise. It would be a good idea to remain mindful of the pitfalls of using monetary policy as an accelerator for economic growth, particularly in the absence of key underlying reform that promotes the documentation of incomes and the shrinking of speculative trades.

Governments in the past have procured for themselves a short-lived respite by inducing large growth rates in the economy through measures such as the ones reportedly being contemplated, and the finance minister would do well to explain in his budget speech how the actions of his government are different from those of governments past.

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Balochistan's troubles

THE only thing that is clear is that some two dozen people have lost their lives. Beyond that, the details of what has transpired in the Kalat and Mastung districts of Balochistan this week are hotly disputed.

On Friday, Balochistan Home Minister Sarfraz Bugti claimed that the FC carried out a series of anti-terror operations in various parts of the province under the National Action Plan. But on Thursday, several Baloch areas in the province were hit by a strike called by the Balochistan Republican Party, which is claiming that a new operation has been initiated by the security forces in Kalat and Mastung.

And earlier in the week, a spokesperson of the National Party, whose leader is the chief minister of the province, expressed concern that extraconstitutional measures were being taken in the province without the knowledge of the NP — measures that have further undermined the prospects for a political settlement of what is now the longest-running insurgency in Balochistan's history.

Also read: [Strike in Balochistan in protest against operation in Kalat, Mastung](#)

Collectively, those statements amount to putting Balochistan in a fresh state of uncertainty. If Chief Minister Abdul Malik Baloch's own party is in a state of deep unease, but his home minister is aggressively defending the very same acts, what does that say about the state of the political leadership in the province?

The strike that was partially observed in many Baloch areas of the province also indicates that what the FC considers to be actions against militants, many among the Baloch consider acts of political repression and wanton brutality.

Perhaps the only relief is that no further escalation by the state seems imminent. Though with dozens now dead, a brutal response from militant Baloch quarters could cause tensions in the province to spiral out of control.

Perhaps most worryingly, the federal government appears alternately clueless and helpless when it comes to dealing with Balochistan's security problems.

The PML-N government at the centre is seemingly so focused on the Chinese-aided development of Gwadar and the construction of an economic corridor from Balochistan that it appears to have no time for the security troubles there or ideas on how to deal with them.

Surely, a vibrant and functioning economic corridor is a non-starter if Balochistan continues to suffer from a low-level insurgency and state violence.

Simply outsourcing the security dimension to the army-led security establishment is not the answer. Had it been so, Balochistan would not be suffering for a decade since the latest insurgency erupted.

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Protection of minorities

AMONG the many, far too many, attacks on minorities in Pakistan in recent years, the lynching of Shama and Shahzad in November 2014 stands out for its sheer scale of bestiality.

The Christian couple, brick kiln workers in Kot Radha Kishan, Punjab, were accused of having desecrated the Quran. A mob incited by local clerics, beat the couple to death and then burnt their bodies in the kiln where they worked.

On Thursday, an anti-terrorism court in Lahore indicted 106 suspects, after police presented a charge-sheet against them. Included among them are three clerics accused of having instigated the 400-strong mob. The court has also issued a summons for witnesses to record their statements.

Take a look: [Christian couple lynching: ATC indicts 106 suspects](#)

That there finally seems to be some progress in bringing the perpetrators of that horrific episode to account — despite some false starts — is a positive development.

One of the principal drivers of violence against minorities is the impunity with which attacks on them are carried out.

The example of the ransacking in March 2013 of Joseph Colony, a Christian-majority locality in Lahore, is a case in point. The trial of the Muslim suspects in that case is still wending its way through the courts; meanwhile, the Christian

man accused of the blasphemous act that ‘provoked’ the riot has already been found guilty and sentenced to death.

The government must pursue the cause of justice in every instance of violence against minorities, not only the most egregious ones.

Another aspect of the predicament that minorities find themselves in is, of course, lack of security.

Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan on Thursday asked the provincial home departments to conduct an audit of existing security plans for minority communities — both among Muslims and others — and improve them in the light of the findings.

While practical steps are indeed important, to bring about a long-term change law-enforcement personnel must realise they have not only a professional obligation to protect minorities, but also a moral duty based upon the shared values of humanity.

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Presence of IS militants

THE rise of the self-styled Islamic State in the Middle East has been marked by its ruthlessness on the battlefield and resultant occupation of territory in Iraq and Syria, as well as its manifest brutality.

Yet with the declaration of the ‘caliphate’ last year, an even more disturbing dimension became apparent: IS’s desire to expand across the Muslim world, and perhaps beyond.

The extremist outfit’s latest success has been the capture of the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra; reportedly, hundreds of people have been massacred in the aftermath of the IS takeover. Where its expansionism is concerned, two senior foreign military figures have recently stated publicly that IS now has a presence in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

[Take a look: IS recruiting militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Nato general](#)

Gen John F. Campbell, Nato’s commander in Afghanistan, has said IS is recruiting in that country as well as Pakistan while separately, Gen Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan, commander of Iran’s ground forces, has also observed that the group is present in these two countries.

Where Afghanistan is concerned, as the Nato general himself pointed out, some estranged Taliban fighters may be “rebranding” themselves with the IS label. In Pakistan, the situation is slightly different. Here, pro-IS graffiti, the distribution of literature praising the outfit (such as that found

at the site of the recent massacre of Ismailis in Karachi), as well as the pledging of allegiance of some breakaway factions of the banned TTP to ‘caliph’ Baghdadi are all being described as ‘evidence’ of the so-called caliphate in Pakistan.

However, these do not constitute concrete proof. After all, how difficult is it for an armchair militant, or sympathiser, to ensure pro-IS wall-chalkings? Also, anyone with a computer and printer can produce and distribute literature in praise of the ‘caliphate’. As for local militants pledging themselves to Baghdadi’s cause, this may simply be a ruse to raise their profile.

Having said that, these developments cannot be ignored either. For it is also true that there are many in this country’s intricate web of militant and extremist groups that identify with the twisted worldview of IS — especially its virulent sectarianism and extremist interpretation of Islam.

And considering IS’s rapid advances, local supporters may well be emboldened to emulate these ‘successes’. So while it would be premature to say IS has arrived in Pakistan, it would also be wrong to completely ignore attempts to create a presence in this country.

After all, IS ‘recruiters’ have been arrested elsewhere in the subcontinent, for example in Bangladesh. The state must keep a close watch on groups that share the IS ideology.

This can primarily be achieved on the intelligence front, with the state monitoring local militants and sympathisers for any attempt to establish links with fighters in the Middle East. Pakistan already has its plate full dealing with the menace of

May 2015

militancy. It certainly does not need a lethal new player added to the mix.

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Parrikar's remarks

IT is a measure of how outrageous and offensive Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar's recent assertion that terrorism should be fought with terrorism is that it has been roundly condemned inside India itself.

Mr Parrikar's remarks were clearly not off the cuff. In an interview given later the same day to the Times of India, he talked of so-called targeted kills by the Indian army in India-held Jammu and Kashmir, a revelation that the newspaper itself noted was the "first forthright acknowledgement that the army has been asked to undertake surgical strikes against terrorists, rather than conduct random operations".

Remarkably, Mr Parrikar then explained his earlier comments thus: "Many terrorists are drawn into terrorism because of financial allurements ... they are paid money for it. If such people are there, why not use them? What is the harm in using terrorists against terrorists? Why should our soldiers be in the front?"

The answer to Mr Parrikar's rather astonishing question came quickly and from across the political spectrum, including

condemnation by the BJP's coalition partner in India-held Kashmir.

Critics have suggested that what Mr Parrikar has suggested amounts to a return to the horrors of the early 1990s when the Indian military and the so-called Ikhwan, Indian state-sponsored militias, wrought much violence in Jammu and Kashmir.

Perhaps the greater problem is that Mr Parrikar's comments betray an ugly and utter misunderstanding of India's Kashmir problem.

The problem in India-held Kashmir is not militancy, it is the denial of rights to the Kashmiris by Indian security and the political establishment.

Consider that on the day Mr Parrikar made his controversial remarks last week, Indian security forces forcibly prevented a rally from taking place in Srinagar to commemorate the anniversary of the assassination of Mirwaiz Farooq 25 years ago and of Abdul Gani Lone in 2002. That is the real legacy of Indian rule in Kashmir: from peaceful protests to angry demonstrations to, at times, terrible violence perpetrated by all sides.

The denizens of India-held Kashmir do not protest because of Pakistan's support. Political leaders of the region do not call for strikes because of Pakistan's support. The youth there do not turn to violence at Pakistan's behest. They do so because they are repressed and because demanding their rights is seen by the centre as a form of sedition and treachery.

May 2015

Mr Parrikar and other hawks can blame Pakistan all they like — that will never change the reality that India's Kashmir problem is primarily because of India's Kashmir policy.

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Commandos in civvies

SKI masks teamed with civilian gear do not conjure up the image of law-enforcement. Quite the contrary in fact, especially in a city like Karachi which has more than its share of criminal happenings such as kidnappings, muggings and the like, often carried out by masked hoodlums.

That in itself — aside from the latitude taken with standard operating procedure — renders the appearance at the Sindh High Court on Saturday, of commandos from Sindh Police's Special Security Unit wearing casual western wear along with ski masks over their faces, all the more reprehensible and deserving of censure.

Also read: [Rangers escort Mirza home on SHC order](#)

The arrival of the contingent ostensibly belonging to the SSU — we have little choice but to take their word for it — coincided with Zulfikar Mirza's bail hearing inside one of the courtrooms.

The commandos' thuggish appearance was soon translated into action as they proceeded to beat up Mr Mirza's guards and then turned their ire on the journalists' covering the rumpus. They snatched their cameras and roughed them up, resulting in injuries to at least two of them.

The travails of the PPP's former home minister are clearly the unseemly manifestation of a rift between him and his parent party, specifically some heavyweights within it.

The impression of a private dispute being tackled largely through the manipulation of state machinery is reinforced when SSU commandos look, and behave, like a private militia.

The SSU's original mandate was to provide protection to VVIPs, but its remit has since expanded to an active role in counterterrorism and special operations.

No doubt some of these operations are risky enough to require personnel to hide their identity, as do the Rangers now and then.

However, there was no cause for this, let alone for being out of uniform, on this occasion — even if some of the charges against Mr Mirza have been filed under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

The purpose behind the commandos' menacing appearance was to intimidate those present, scarcely the 'professional' approach they claim to practise.

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Capital flight

A RAID by the tax authorities on an ‘investment exhibition’ being held in Karachi shows that the government might be getting serious about netting some of the big fish allegedly engaged in repatriating tax-evaded wealth to foreign destinations.

The raid targeted an exhibition held by a property developer in the Gulf selling luxury accommodation.

The Federal Board of Revenue took into possession a record of those people who had put money down, and questioned company officials about the nature of their business, record-keeping of transactions with their clientele, as well as the channels used by them to remit the funds they gathered.

Know more: [FBR raids ‘illegal’ investment exhibition](#)

Lately, a large and highly visible marketing campaign has been in progress here, offering attractive opportunities to invest in property abroad, usually a sign that capital flight is under way — although it should be clarified that not all the money that goes into property markets abroad is necessarily tainted.

However, in this case the authorities have taken note and appear to be following it up with action.

This is a positive sign, but it must also be remembered that a vast system to facilitate capital flight and round-trip tax-evaded wealth has been consciously built over the decades since the country’s opening up began in the early 1990s.

The system includes a no-questions-asked policy on the source of funds for foreign remittances, opportunities to under-invoice imports, as well as facilitation provided to ‘foreign investors’ in the stock markets.

A vast undocumented economy has grown under the umbrella of these protections, which is hampering the revenue-generating effort of the state in important ways. It is good to see the government getting serious about documenting some of the transactions that have mushroomed under this umbrella. But punitive measures alone will not be enough.

They must be backed up by efforts to credibly close off all implied whitener schemes, remove the clauses from the relevant tax legislation that grant immunity to certain categories of inflows from scrutiny, as well as an unbiased pursuit of the big fish that swim in these waters.

In the days to come, the government’s seriousness of purpose in pursuing this line of action will be revealed once those netted in the raid begin using their contacts to obtain relief. The government must show resolve at that time to not only continue its actions but also widen the scope of its efforts.

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Police versus lawyers

THERE is no doubt that the signs were there all along. The tragic loss of life in Daska was the unavoidable culmination of smaller confrontations between the police and the lawyers over the last many years.

It was only a matter of time before the skirmishes would give way to something far uglier. In fact, the protest that finds the lawyers back on the streets in large numbers will take many days and much effort to be controlled.

The killing of two lawyers in a Punjab town that is generally not so much in the picture otherwise has led to an angry response from lawyers in the province and other parts of the country.

Also read: [Lawyers up in arms against police](#)

In Punjab, the bar association called for a three-day strike, and there are groups within the lawyers' ranks who are ready to opt for a prolonged protest.

Perhaps one casualty of this situation is the debate on professional ethics, on drawing a distinction between coercion and asking for rights.

Unfortunate happenings such as the fatal shooting of two lawyers threaten to make the conversation even more one-sided.

For the government, this incident has come too soon after a joint investigation team report on last year's killing by police in Lahore's Model Town.

The government of Shahbaz Sharif has come under severe criticism over the JIT report that puts down the 14 deaths outside the PAT headquarters to simply a policeman's folly.

Whereas many have termed it the most pertinent example of a rotten system, this time too the administration has stuck to its standard first reaction to a bad occurrence, pinning the blame on a policeman who could not handle the authority vested in him.

The SHO in question is alleged to have ordered the firing on the lawyers resulting in the two deaths, including that of the local bar president who happened to be a member of the PTI.

There are stories in the media that indicate the policeman was not quite in control of his temper, something which will ultimately lead to questions of why and how those who employed him were unaware of this.

Regardless of whether or not the immediate official explanation is accepted, the killing of the two lawyers at the hands of the police on Monday is fresh evidence of just how vulnerable the system has become to abuse by a single individual or to excesses by a group.

That is where the whole political debate is concentrated: the system — or rather the absence of it. There seem to be no bigger villains than the police to portray just how pervasive the rot is. Meanwhile, there are no bigger pleaders for change than

May 2015

lawyers — especially those who not too long ago helped to put in place an independent judiciary.

There are immense possibilities in the confrontation that change-seekers would want to exploit.

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Attacks on Hazaras

THE message for the Shia Hazara community in Balochistan is clear. There is no place for them outside the walls of their guarded enclaves in Quetta; for outside those walls lurks death at the hands of sectarian terrorists who operate with seeming impunity.

On Monday, there were two attacks targeting Hazaras in various parts of the provincial capital, the first one in a central bazaar in the presence of scores of people.

The modus operandi was identical: gunmen on motorcycles — their faces uncovered — picking off Hazaras going about their daily business, running a roadside tea stall, waiting to see a doctor outside a medical complex, etc.

Take a look: [Three Hazara people among four killed in Quetta](#)

A protest by members of the community turned violent and resulted in further casualties. Four people died in the shootings

— three of whom were Hazara — and eight were injured, including two women.

Enraged Hazaras demonstrating outside the office of the IG dispersed only after senior police officials gave assurances of the killers' arrest.

Chief Minister Abdul Malik Baloch called a meeting of law-enforcement officials and relevant ministers to review the situation. It was decided that pillion-riding would be banned in the city and that steps would be taken to ensure that “nobody challenged the writ of the government”.

That there can be such a tepid response, replete with mealy-mouthed clichés and token gestures, to the problem of sectarianism in Balochistan, is revealing.

Apparently, as long as massive attacks that cause devastating loss of life are kept at bay, the target-killing of a few Hazaras here or there is of no consequence. When Usman Saifullah Kurd, head of the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi's Balochistan chapter, was killed earlier this year in Quetta, it was hoped that it signalled the beginning of a crackdown against religious extremists in the province.

However, the infrastructure that supports such groups is obviously still intact, and the myopic policies that give them succour remain in play. The beleaguered Hazaras, meanwhile, continue to pay the price with their lives.

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Budget in the dark

With a week to go before budget day, some outline of what to expect has already come into view. But many crucial details are still missing.

The last cabinet meeting held on Tuesday, for instance, approved the Budget Strategy Paper showing where revenues are expected to come from and what expenditures are being programmed. But the only details to emerge thus far are about the discussion which revolved largely around the two-year track record of the government, along with its inheritance, and the medium-term outlook till 2018.

In a testimony before a Senate committee last week, the finance secretary shared a few details about next year's revenue and expenditure plan.

These included the reform of customs duty slabs, replacement of national tax numbers with CNIC numbers, further negotiations with Etisalat on the release of outstanding amount in PTCL privatisation, and nominal growth in all expenditures except for defence.

The latter is set to receive a boost of 10pc in its normal allocation as well as the additional amount of Rs160bn for expenditures arising out of Operation Zarb-i-Azb and raising forces to protect Chinese investments.

From all the details trickling out, and the string of statements coming from high offices, it appears the budget will be pulling in a number of contradictory directions.

The finance secretary, for instance, told the Senate committee that the budget will continue with stabilisation by restraining expenditures, whereas the finance minister has been saying the budget will shift gears away from stabilisation towards growth. Meanwhile, the prime minister wants realistic targets set for every ministry, and his media wing promises that the budget will “focus on the welfare of the common people”.

There will be “out-of-the-box solutions” to persistent problems such as the circular debt and inelastic revenues — though thus far, from what is coming out, very little ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking seems to be at play.

It is fairly clear at the moment that many important details are still being worked out. The total collection under the Gas Infrastructure Development Cess, as an example, appears to still be under negotiation.

This is emerging as a large revenue head, and without it a viable revenue plan cannot be considered complete. A measure to tax remittances, which was mentioned by the FBR chairman before the Senate committee, was shot down almost immediately following an outcry from the banks.

Given the many different objectives that the budget is supposed to pursue — from consolidating stability to broadening the tax base to documentation measures to kick-starting growth — it would have been reassuring if the emerging details were more coherent.

It would be to the government's benefit to signal a little clarity in the run-up to the budget speech to pre-empt any unrealistic expectation. The week between now and the budget

announcement provides a good opening for showing precisely this.

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Monitoring sermons

MOST of Pakistan's mainstream religious parties have either tended to remain silent on the issue of extremism, or at best offered lukewarm criticism of fanatical tendencies.

Perhaps this is why today, whatever the mainstream clergy's views may be, extremist groups continue to recruit individuals to their cause with ease. Nevertheless, any effort by religious groups to try and stem the extremist tide should be supported, if only to prevent further loss of space to hate-mongers and demagogues.

In this regard, the Milli Yakjehti Council's decision to monitor Friday sermons in order to counter hate speech is a laudable initiative. On Tuesday, the conglomerate of religious parties representing nearly all of Islam's major schools of thought in Pakistan announced in Lahore that in order to promote religious and sectarian harmony, Friday sermons would be monitored and any cleric making 'problematic' speeches would be censured. The council also said clerics would be urged to speak on topics that centred on moral and humanitarian issues.

Know more: [MYC to monitor Friday sermons in mosques](#)

Indeed, the MYC has in the past also made attempts to promote religious and sectarian harmony — most memorably under the stewardship of the late Jamaat-i-Islami emir Qazi Hussain Ahmed — with mixed results. In the current atmosphere, where the mosque loudspeaker has far too often been misused to stir up hatred against different religious communities as well as various Muslim sects, the initiative is timely. But as always the question remains: how effective will it be? For example, over the past months the state has claimed to arrest a number of individuals for generating hate material. Yet we must ask if these efforts have genuinely succeeded in sending a strong message to hate-mongers that their actions will not be tolerated. In the latest initiative, will the clergy's effort to police their own deliver better results? History would suggest otherwise as in the past, well-meaning initiatives — launched with fanfare and similar promises of cracking down on divisive elements — have fallen through as mainstream religious parties have failed to isolate hate-mongers. For example, whenever exigencies have demanded it, some of the MYC's constituent parties have shared the stage with outfits that make no bones about demonising other sects and religious groups. Will the clerics, this time around, have the wherewithal to both publicly and privately condemn such elements? Well-meaning statements are fine, but religious parties will have to practically show they will not tolerate hate speech and will condemn rabble-rousing clerics.

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Locker security

DESPITE a much-touted operation against criminal elements, lawlessness in Karachi continues.

On Sunday night, in the third such incident in the metropolis since 2013, a locker facility of a private bank was broken into and robbed of almost all its contents.

Security camera footage indicates that the lone private security guard who was present on the premises might have been involved.

Take a look: [90 lockers broken open in Gulshan bank heist](#)

The security guard, along with an accomplice, is suspected of using welding equipment to break open 90 of the 100-plus strongboxes in the facility.

Monday morning saw a large crowd gathering outside the bank branch. It consisted of those who have lost huge quantities of cash, valuables and irreplaceable documents.

And unless the robbers are caught and their loot recovered, the compensation these people will receive may or may not be commensurate with what they have lost: locker tenants are not required to disclose what valuables they have deposited.

The frustration of these people is justified; the citizenry as a whole has been left rattled. Insecurity and rampant crime in the city forces people to remove valuables from their homes and entrust them to banks they consider secure. But apparently,

banks are not always safe either — so what is a citizen to do? The onus lies, once again, on the state and its apparatus.

A loosening grip over the law and order situation is what allows crimes to occur on this scale. The incapacities of the police are what led to the emergence of the private security industry, which has produced its own complications. Poor regulation also has a role to play.

A number of bank branches reportedly do not follow the security protocols for lockers issued by the State Bank in 2007, such as locker rooms being adequately secured from all sides. As in other areas, here too the state is simply not doing enough to safeguard the rights of the people. The latter are left to fend for themselves in an increasingly hostile environment.

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FIFA controversy

FIFA, the world's football governing body, has been embroiled in a spate of controversies over the last four years. However, the latest scandal to hit the high-profile organisation is easily the most devastating one.

It has seen two of its vice presidents amongst seven FIFA officials being arrested by the FBI in Zurich on charges of racketeering, money laundering and receiving kickbacks in marketing deals for tournaments.

Though FIFA has since provisionally suspended them, the scam has snowballed into a major row which has shaken the very foundations of the world's most popular game.

Know more: [Football's top sponsors press FIFA to clean up](#)

The allegations are broad and encompass the larger football universe. While the scope of the investigation is important — since the bribery and corruption charges involving more than \$150 million over 21 years are mainly related to tournaments in North and South America — the scandal has come at a time when Swiss authorities are already investigating the awarding of World Cups in 2018 and 2022 to Russia and Qatar.

Moreover, the crisis erupted just two days before the current president Sepp Blatter was due to stand for a fifth term. Mr Blatter, who is not being investigated, was credited with taking the football championship to new lands but the awarding of the World Cups has been hit by bribery claims.

The European football body UEFA, which is considered the strongest amongst FIFA's six continental federations, has been against another term for Mr Blatter because of the controversies that have plagued FIFA over the last four years.

In view of the latest row, UEFA is demanding a change and is supporting Mr Blatter's sole challenger and FIFA vice president Prince Ali bin al-Hussein of Jordan in the elections.

Though Mr Blatter is largely expected to win the elections with the support he enjoys outside Europe, the nasty scandal may well swing the votes of FIFA's 209 national federations in favour of Prince Ali who has promised reforms.

It is indeed sad that major sports are increasingly getting tainted by off-field controversies.

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CII's latest remarks

THE vein of obdurate misogyny that runs through society has been unable to come to terms with any gains, however halting, made on women's rights in this country. One of the most consistent offenders in this respect in the last few years has been the Council of Islamic Ideology.

On Wednesday, following the constitutional body's 199th meeting, its chairman Maulana Sheerani said at a news conference that the current practice whereby courts were dissolving marriages on applications for khula — a woman's right to seek divorce — was not correct. He explained that while a wife is allowed to file a case for marriage dissolution under khula, it could only be granted if the husband agreed to it.

As practised in Pakistan, a woman's right of khula does not require her husband's consent, only that she forgo her dower amount, after which it is mandatory upon the courts to grant her a khula.

This leaves men without much of a choice in the matter, which is perhaps why it so troubles the CII. Clearly, compassion or logic seems to have no place in the CII's deliberations with regard to women, whom it would prefer have no agency where the ordering of their lives is concerned.

Last year, it described laws barring child marriage as un-Islamic, with utter disregard for the terrible psychological and physical toll that the inhuman custom inflicts upon minors.

Although fortunately it is an advisory body whose pronouncements are not binding upon our elected body of representatives, the CII's views resonate in what is essentially a deeply chauvinistic social milieu and offer a crutch for those seeking to roll back women's rights.

A case in point is the Muslim Family Law Ordinance 1961, which has been a thorn in the side of the ultra right ever since it came into existence because it gave women some protections in the sphere of marriage and divorce; especially as these came at the cost of liberties that men had traditionally enjoyed.

They included the unfettered freedom to contract multiple marriages: the MFLO requirement that they obtain permission of their existing wife or wives to do so has been denounced more than once by the CII as un-Islamic.

One wonders why its position on women is so persistently regressive: after all, out of its latest meeting on Wednesday, there also emerged the humane observation that transgenders should be given their share of family inheritance.

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NAP going nowhere

A REVIEW by the country's political and military leadership of the progress made under the National Action Plan has resulted in an unsurprising though troubling admission: in key areas of NAP, the government has accepted that implementation has been far from satisfactory.

Consider the areas in which implementation was found particularly unsatisfactory: foreign funding of seminaries and terrorist groups; proscribed organisations and sectarian groups; hate speech; and madressah reforms.

Taken together, those areas amount to the very foundations of the terrorist and extremist complex.

Know more: [PM chairs meeting to review Zarb-i-Azb, NAP](#)

If funding, indoctrination and organisational capacity are left untouched and the focus is on finding, capturing and eliminating terrorism, it can be reasonably assumed that a new, smarter, more sophisticated generation of terrorists will emerge, a generation that will have adapted in order to survive and thrive.

So the failures identified in the implementation of NAP at the high-level meeting nearly amount to a failure of NAP itself. There is much left to be done clearly.

However, even with the relative successes that were identified — the military-led Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan Agency and so-called intelligence-based operations against

militants in the cities — there is a question mark over how those assessments have been reached.

To be sure, some parts of North Waziristan have been cleared of militants — but is there a strategy to consolidate those gains? If there is, it has not been apparent in the other agencies where large-scale operations have been conducted.

And while the number of terror attacks in the cities are down, the Safoora Goth carnage in Karachi has demonstrated the capacity of the terror network to continue to launch devastating strikes.

Furthermore, there is the old and seemingly intractable problem of the civil-military imbalance. Can the army leadership realistically cajole the government into taking its NAP responsibilities more seriously when in the big decisions — launching Operation Zarb-i-Azb, sanctioning military courts and lifting the moratorium on the execution of terrorists to name a few — there is a perception that the civilian government has been dictated to by the military leadership?

Of course, none of the above absolves the federal and provincial governments of the display of desultory behaviour when it comes to doing their job of helping keep the country secure.

Sometimes, the disregard has verged on the perplexing. Consider that Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan, the linchpin of NAP on the civilian side, had allegedly not been on talking terms with his boss, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, until a meeting this week.

May 2015

How, even seasoned observers of politics here have wondered, was that an acceptable state of affairs, especially post-December and the Peshawar school attack?

Sadly, the prime minister appears to have allowed flagrant indiscipline to go unpunished. Where also were the provincial chief ministers in Wednesday's meeting? Can NAP really be effectively implemented without having the provinces on board?

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Bad decision by Pemra

THE decision by Pemra to disallow Bol TV from broadcasting because of the ongoing investigation by the federal authorities into Axact, the parent company of Bol network, is a strange and troubling one.

To be sure, the federal investigation and the preliminary evidence that has come to light suggest Axact has much to answer for. But an investigation is not a formal legal charge and formal charges and a trial are not a conviction.

As the matter stands right now, Axact is in a world of legal trouble, but Bol is a separate entity against whom it will have to be proved that it has been funded by dirty money before formal action is merited.

In truth, Pemra's actions against Bol do not even reflect that due process was followed. While the official notification was issued by Pemra, there is little to suggest that it acted independently — the federal government having made it clear that it had already decided that Bol should not go on air.

That deep intrusion into what is meant to be an independent regulator is surely unwelcome. Such steps set precedents and perhaps the next time government intervention may be in a more partisan and political issue.

Also read: [Bol TV asked to wait for clearance of Axact](#)

The truth of the matter is that for all of Axact's alleged crimes, the issue of Bol is very much a part of the internecine and escalating media wars in the country. For over a year, various media houses have engaged in open warfare with each other and the Bol saga is a part of that.

Rather than reporting the news, sections of the media have been trying to create it, both publicly and, allegedly, privately putting pressure on the government to dismantle Axact and shut down Bol altogether.

In that dismal and distressing landscape, there is much for all sides to learn. The breakdown of editorial control and the dismantling of the wall between ownership and professional journalists has led to several media disasters already.

Now, with the federal authorities having demonstrated a seriousness of purpose and working without any apparent interference, perhaps the coverage of the Axact issue will be in line with journalistic best practices. Pakistan needs a vibrant

May 2015

and searching independent media. The media has played a positive role in pivotal times in the country's history.

There are quality journalists and ethical owners in the industry even now. Change for the better can come quickly, if given a chance.

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Art, not hate

Karachi residents have long become inured to ugliness on the streets, from the piles of refuse that the city administration has no capacity or will to clean up to unfettered, haphazard construction and the perennial problem of encroachments.

Amongst the more disturbing eyesores is the graffiti that walls across the city end up being smeared with, often consisting of messages of sectarian and communal hatred.

Recently, though, commuters along M.T. Khan Road — one of the busiest thoroughfares in the city — were in for a pleasant surprise: instead of the usual graffiti on the long wall of the container terminal, there is now a series of paintings.

Take a look: [*In Karachi: When hate on the wall disappears*](#)

As an I Am Karachi initiative that is being steered by the fine arts department of the Indus Valley School of Art and

Architecture in collaboration with Abdoz Arts, the admirable aim is to wipe off ugliness from the city's walls, replace it with positive images, and establish ownership of public spaces.

In addition to the Individual-Led Artist Project under way on M.T. Khan Road, there is also the Stencil Art Project and the Wall Project with Children, the last comprised of drawings made by youngsters from low-income settlements, that are being put up in public spaces in their areas.

This is an initiative that should be taken up by the city administration. As it is, public officials have been involved in helping in the implementation of the Karachi project. There is really no reason why, now that a route to a brighter environment has been demonstrated, it cannot be expanded to other cities, too.

There is no argument that Pakistanis need to take ownership of their country and the streets they traverse each day. This is a low-cost scheme that could bring thousands of artistically inclined adults and children out to improve the face of their cities.

That it is able to do so whilst removing messages of toxic ideologies that have been allowed to permeate the social fabric far too deeply would make it even more of a win-win situation.

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CPEC controversy subsides

AFTER months of fiery speeches and denials, the controversy surrounding the route of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor has fizzled out as quickly as it had begun.

It was back in January that the debate suddenly erupted when ANP lawmakers from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa began threatening to turn the entire corridor project into “another Kalabagh dam” if the route was altered in any way and went on to raise the spectre of danger to the federation. Both the KP and Balochistan assemblies passed resolutions against a change in route subsequently, as lawmakers belonging to parties from both provinces joined in.

The federal government reacted angrily at first, arguing that there was no change, and only a reordering of priorities. It went on to argue that it was the Chinese who had requested the eastern alignment to be completed first due to security concerns.

Also read: [Parties pledge to take full political ownership of CPEC](#)

Positions hardened over the months, with government ministers suggesting that those who were driving the controversy were advancing an agenda set by RAW and telling us that complete transparency would be maintained during the implementation of the project. Meanwhile, the threats from lawmakers of both western provinces refused to subside, creating an impasse.

Now it turns out the government has folded its cards in one quick move following the multiparty conference on Thursday.

The western alignment of the route, which runs from Gwadar to D.I. Khan before entering Punjab, will be built first the government conceded and the furore subsided almost immediately.

While it is laudable that the government has not allowed this issue to escalate any further, the speed with which the whole episode fizzled out does raise a few questions. What happened to the government’s claim that the Chinese wanted to build the eastern alignment first? Was that untrue? And what about the work that has already begun?

Will the PSDP for the next fiscal year be reworked to include projects for the western alignment of the corridor?

The rapid retreat that the government made at the conference shows that some of the arguments it was presenting in its defence were disingenuous at best. And it also needs to be kept in mind that in some key areas, the government has not yet lived up to its commitment.

This is particularly the case where transparency is concerned. The website of the Planning Commission continues to present only the sketchiest of information on projects under its CPEC link, along with a map of Pakistan showing only the major cities.

It is not enough to simply allay the concerns of specific lawmakers; these projects and their specifics need to be shared with the wider public as well. Public projects have disclosure

May 2015

requirements in our country, as well as laid-down rules that must be followed.

Now that the controversy has been tackled, perhaps the larger concerns on transparency should be the next focus.

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Massacre in Mastung

THE gruesome trend of killing people on the basis of their ethnic or religious affiliation in this country shows no sign of abating. The latest incident in this regard is the killing of over 20 individuals in Balochistan's Mastung district on Friday.

As reported, gunmen stopped two Karachi-bound coaches and pulled out the passengers; after checking their CNICs to determine their identities, the victims were taken to the nearby mountains and massacred. The victims hailed from district Pishin and almost all of them were Pakhtun.

Such atrocities have occurred previously in Mastung; last year a bus carrying Shia pilgrims was bombed in the district while in 2011, Hazara passengers were pulled off buses and butchered in a similar manner.

Elsewhere, in April a number of non-Baloch labourers were shot as they slept in Turbat. There has also been an upsurge in

the targeted killings of Hazaras in Quetta over the past few days.

At the time these lines were being written, no group had claimed responsibility for the carnage.

Of course, in Balochistan there are multiple strands of violence: sectarian death squads have remained active; Baloch separatists have been censured for targeting 'settlers' while the security establishment has come down heavily on Baloch political activists in the name of crushing the insurgency. External actors have also been accused of fuelling unrest in the province.

The provincial home minister has pointed to the possible involvement of RAW in this incident, while other political leaders have voiced concern that the violence could be linked to destabilising the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

What is clear is that the Mastung carnage is an effort to inflame ethnic discord in the province by pitting the Baloch and Pakhtun communities against each other.

While non-Baloch have been killed in the past, this is perhaps the single biggest incident in which local Pakhtuns have been targeted. In this regard, Balochistan's political leaders did well on Saturday by calling for calm and communal harmony.

The provincial chief minister has said a multiparty conference will be convened in the days to come to discuss the situation. In fact, the entire debate needs to be shifted to the national parliament in order to find long-lasting solutions to Balochistan's security and political problems.

May 2015

Moreover, further investigations need to be carried out to determine who is responsible and if solid evidence of external involvement emerges, Islamabad must take up the issue through diplomatic channels. The perpetrators of this brutal crime must be brought to justice; but this latest carnage must not be used to justify a more intensified crackdown on Baloch political activity.

Balochistan needs a political solution, not a militarised one. While security concerns are key, the political alienation and sense of deprivation that is felt by significant portions of Balochistan's population must also be addressed by the state to prevent further violence.

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Return of Rana Sanaullah

PUNJAB has just sworn in two ministers. One of them is a well-known expert in her area and is holding the crucial finance portfolio.

But if this is deserving of a laudatory comment, the task has to be put off for the moment in favour of another urgent, very remarkable event. No one can be expected to [forget Rana Sanaullah Khan](#).

The redoubtable, no-nonsense politician, who for long maintained a profile second only to Mian Shahbaz Sharif, has

been redrafted to the provincial cabinet after the seemingly very long gap of one year.

Not only that, he has been given the same ministry — law — that was taken away from him in the aftermath of last June's very disturbing police firing incident in Model Town. The firing, which has since been blamed on police and the police alone, had led to the death of 14 Pakistan Awami Tehreek loyalists.

The incident resulted in demands of action against many government figures including the prime minister, chief minister Punjab and some of their closest associates.

Finally, Rana Sanaullah decided to resign, only to be resurrected with full glory at a time when PAT is preparing to mark the first anniversary of the Model Town incident.

Read: [Shahbaz sacks Rana Sanaullah over Lahore tragedy](#)

Mr Sanaullah was forced to quit his post after the PAT protest became more vociferous with time.

His return has prima facie been made possible by a joint investigation team report that absolves him and the other accused — bar one police officer.

PAT and some others have protested the restoration, which seemed to have had little effect on his selectors. PAT leaders have also been saying that Rana Sanaullah has hardly spent the past year without the title of 'law minister in wilderness'.

May 2015

Also read: [Model Town JIT gives clean chit to Shahbaz, Sanaulah](#)

According to them — and some others — he has been away from authority only in appearance and was pulling the strings behind the scenes all this while. Maybe it is a development that suits both the government and the PAT camp. His return may provide the protest the impetus it requires.

Take a look: [Qadri to come back next month](#)

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Housing finance

THE government wants the State Bank to devise a strategy to boost housing finance in the country as part of its plan to provide “dignified houses for the downtrodden” in the country. This is a laudable vision, but the State Bank might need a little help from the government in order to play its part in achieving this dream. Pakistan has amongst the lowest advances for housing finance in the world. The State Bank estimates the deficit in housing stock at nine million units in total, and each year another 300,000 units are added to this number. Banks are already reluctant to raise their exposure in housing finance, particularly for lower- and middle-income groups. Furthermore, most new housing units in the country are located in irregular settlements, where land titles are informally secured. With high levels of informality in land supply coupled

with inherent reluctance on the part of banks to undertake risk-based lending, the State Bank can devise a plan on paper only. For the plan to be successful, the wider problem of informality in land supply will need to be addressed, which is difficult in the absence of local government, and bank lending behaviour will need to be modified.

Clearly, the State Bank lacks the tools to do this. Legislation that strengthens banks’ rights to foreclose on delinquent mortgages will only help in those areas where land title is secure and customers are heavily dependent on their credit ratings to generate their incomes. And bank-lending behaviour is proving a difficult challenge for the State Bank, which does not have the tools to direct lending in one direction or another. The government should be lauded for subscribing to a vision of affordable housing for the lower-income groups of society, but it might be initiating action in the wrong area by directing the State Bank to take the lead in developing a plan. The energies of the private sector must be harnessed to increase access to housing finance for the lower-income groups in society — although the private sector is stubbornly wedded to its pursuit of easy money through lending to government alone. Not just housing, but transport and the larger question of informal manufacturing and agriculture lending would benefit if the resources of the financial system were to flow towards these areas. However, making that happen will require far more than a directive to the State Bank.

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May 2015

May 2015

May 2015