

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of November, 2015

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Nuclear deterrence

THE possibility of a civil-nuclear deal between the US and Pakistan may have been prematurely leaked to the media, but with the joint statement following Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit to the White House emphasising nuclear matters and Gen Raheel Sharif expected to visit the US this month, Pakistani officials have noticeably stepped up their public comments about nuclear-related matters in South Asia. Led by the Foreign Office, the official Pakistani comment is on the Indian conventional arms build-up and the emphasis that Pakistan's nuclear doctrine is defensive and shaped by destabilising moves by India. To be sure, the massive Indian investments in its military and weapons-buying spree are of concern and do have implications for peace and stability in South Asia. Yet, it is the increasingly explicit connection between India's weapons build-up and the Pakistani nuclear doctrine that is also worrying.

The adoption of so-called full-spectrum deterrence has been projected by the Pakistani security establishment as a strategic guarantee that Pakistan will be safe from an Indian attack, either small-scale or large-scale. But is that true and at what cost, particularly in terms of risk, is full-spectrum deterrence being pursued? Within the strategic community and at least among senior retired military officials, there are questions quietly being asked — if the Indian arms build-up is unwelcome, isn't the Pakistani counter-response of full-spectrum deterrence exacerbating the dangers and increasing the risk of catastrophic conflict in South Asia? There are serious questions at both ends of what can effectively be termed a new deterrence strategy. Does Pakistan fundamentally

need long-range missiles to hit the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to deny India a secure second-strike capability when Pakistan is not known to have the technology to track Indian land-based missiles? At the low end of the spectrum, which is where the main international concern appears to be, is Pakistan really committed to the idea of launching small nuclear missiles on its soil, even if against rapid Indian invasion forces?

Unhappily, even asking questions of the country's evolving and more muscular nuclear policy is considered problematic by the security establishment. But does the use of seemingly scientific language and the adoption of exotic strategies really make Pakistan safer and better protected? Time and again, be it 1965, 1971 or 1999, the country has woken up to disasters that were created by what were argued to be the most robust of assumptions and infallible of theories. There is surely a case to be made that Indian military build-up is a problem for Pakistan's security and peace in South Asia. But must the answer to those new challenges increasingly and automatically be a nuclear response by Pakistan? Perhaps the more uncomfortable truth is that twice in the new century, the threat of war between India and Pakistan has been triggered by terrorist attacks. To what extent will Pakistan go to neutralise that threat?

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LNG quagmire

MORE than six months after starting the commercial operations of its first LNG import terminal, the petroleum ministry continues to struggle to find a proper arrangement through which to import the vital fuel. According to the latest reports, the ministry and three government-owned companies that operate under it, have asked for a 28pc hike in the price of RLNG for it to be a viable venture. The oil and gas regulator, Ogra, had approved \$8.64 per unit price for imported gas, while the new rate being demanded is \$11.2 per unit. But high-level Ogra officials have reportedly pointed to complications in entertaining such a request, arguing that the law does not allow for revision in the price of RLNG now that it has been declared as a petroleum product instead of gas.

The continuous muddling through in the matter of arranging LNG imports is becoming tiresome. If a hike in the price of LNG is being demanded now, after Ogra has already fixed the import price and after a raft of resignations from the state-owned oil and gas companies by executives who refused to be coerced into signing contracts that were of dubious legality, then it only serves to highlight how the petroleum ministry is writing the LNG script on a day-to-day basis. The big obstacle to LNG imports is the great disparity in price between imported and domestic gas. If important commercial consumers of natural gas — fertiliser, power, vehicular — are getting domestic gas at a heavily subsidised rate, where is their incentive to opt for imported gas? This disparity ought to have been the first thing to address when venturing into LNG imports. The petroleum minister was rather triumphant around the same time last year in announcing that CNG station owners

would now be allowed to import their own LNG consignments and sell them directly to the consumers, without elaborating how the pricing regime would need to be reformed in order to make that happen. Over the year since then, he has tried to address every issue regarding LNG imports, from the technical merits of the proposal to the importance of LNG for the future of Pakistan's energy, without once going into the question of the price reforms necessary to make imported LNG possible. The net result is the quagmire that the project has become, with no clear future on how sustained imports of LNG will work.

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Snap Turkish polls

BARRING an upset, it is difficult to see how another general election within five months can help either Turkey or the man behind this extraordinary decision — Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The results of the June election were a blow to the ruling AKP, for it lost its majority after winning three successive general elections. It still had a plurality and could have run Turkey with a coalition partner. Unfortunately, no party was willing to share power with Mr Erdogan's AKP, even though the cabinet was led by an otherwise likeable prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu. Most observers of the Turkish scene agree that today's polls are unlikely to produce a radically different result, and that changes in the voters' preferences at best will be marginal. In practical terms, this means there could be another period of political void, unless some party agrees in the larger national

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interest to share power with the AKP, which, as most observers agree, is likely to retain its position as the Turkish national assembly's largest party.

The election couldn't have come at a more unfortunate time, for Turkey faces serious domestic and foreign policy crises. The biggest foreign policy issue is the multilateral war in Turkey's underbelly, the menacing rise of the self-styled Islamic State, the mass flight of Syrians to Turkey and beyond, Russia's greater military involvement in the Syrian conflict, the American reservations about Russia's choice of targets, and terror attacks blamed on the IS. Domestically, the breakdown of the truce with the PKK has shattered hopes for a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish insurgency, while Mr Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian style of governance has aroused anger in civil society and polarised the nation. All this has served to undermine Mr Erdogan's achievements, which include the assertion of civilian supremacy and an economy that is the world's 15th largest. The issue is Mr Erdogan's personality. He should give up feeling he is indispensable and should show flexibility when his party sets out to negotiate a stable coalition.

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Violence against journalists

AS the UN marks the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists today, it is worth asking why this particular turn of phrase is being used.

According to UN figures, over the past decade, 700 journalists have been killed the world over during the course of discharging their duties. This averages out to one death a week. In 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming Nov 2 as IDEI — the date commemorates the murder of two French journalists in Mali that year.

Obviously, violence against those who work in the media is far more endemic when the figures beyond the number of deaths are tallied. And as the UN points out, the issue is not just about violence but also the culture of impunity within which the violence is unleashed. "In nine out of 10 cases," the UN notes, "the killers go unpunished. Impunity leads to more killings and is often a symptom of worsening conflict and the breakdown of law and justice systems."

Also read-editorial: [Violence against journalists](#)

In Pakistan, journalists operate in an environment that is far from safe or enabling. Yet, a curious sort of paradox is in operation.

On the one hand, the growth of the electronic and other media, and their general raucousness, mean that there is considerable freedom to report, including on topics that were until recently taboo; the country does not figure on the list of 10 countries

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where the Committee to Protect Journalists has shown the most censorship takes place.

On the other hand, though, violence against journalists is a serious issue, as is the culture of impunity. Since 1994, the CPJ counts 56 journalists killed in Pakistan where the motive was confirmed as related to the work they were doing.

Beyond this ambit, the actual numbers of media workers' deaths rises exponentially. The suspected perpetrators include non-state actors as well as state-sponsored elements, as believed to be in the case of Saleem Shahzad.

Further, journalists — especially in hotspots such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — are regularly threatened and attacked. Many are caught in the cross hairs of both the militants and the security forces.

The way out — on paper at least — is fairly simple. The state needs to investigate and prosecute all cases where journalists are targeted.

The reality, unfortunately, is that the state has failed to demonstrate any resolve.

The killers of Daniel Pearl were tracked down as a result of sustained international pressure, while the murderers of Wali Babar too were tried, found guilty and sentenced after much prodding.

But these are the only two cases where any meaningful progress has been made. In doing so, the state sends out the signal that it will stand and watch as journalists' voices are

silenced. Until this changes, there can be little for Pakistan to be proud of in terms of media freedoms.

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Syria peace proposal

AS the brutal Syrian civil war grinds on, one fact seems to have dawned on the movers and shakers of the international community: unless a settlement is found, the collapse of the Syrian state will create an unimaginable security nightmare.

There are even signs that earlier rigidly held positions are loosening, if only slightly.

A number of major powers met in Vienna on Friday to try and chart a course towards ending violence in the Levant. While the Americans, Russians, Saudis and Turks have been part of earlier peace efforts, the recent meeting significantly featured Iran at the table.

Also read: [Fresh elections needed in Syria, says Iran's Khamenei](#)

Little of substance was achieved at the meeting, yet the fact that global and regional powers that have been backing opposing sides in Syria chose to discuss the issue with each other is indeed positive.

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While Russia and Iran have stood by Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad, the US, Turkey and the Gulf Arabs have been arming, training and funding the opposition.

Hence if these external backers of Syria's warring factions can come to an agreement, there is a strong likelihood that the bloodbath in the Arab country can eventually give way to normalcy.

As it is, Syria is a tangled web, where a variety of geostrategic opponents have been squaring off. This includes the Americans competing with the Russians, as well as the Saudis and Iranians crossing swords in the proxy battlefield of the Levant.

In the meantime, caught between the regime, the opposition and the ruthless, self-styled Islamic State, the Syrian people have had to face an extended nightmare. The fact that Barack Obama has authorised the deployment of US ground troops in Syria will further complicate matters; Russia has already reacted negatively to this.

Getting back to the efforts in Vienna, the international powers have proposed a ceasefire followed by the formation of a transitional government and have pledged to meet again in two weeks.

All parties need to make these proposals succeed. Russia and Iran must not make Mr Assad sacrosanct, while the US and the Gulf Arabs must not insist on regime change on their terms.

Peace in Syria will require plenty of compromises by all parties, and the goal must be to allow the Syrian people to decide their own fate in a democratic manner.

If this opportunity is lost, there are fair chances Syria will collapse further into anarchy and violence — an eventuality few would want to support.

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GSP Plus review

THE review of Pakistan's GSP Plus status with the EU, scheduled for January, will have to run into the issue of the lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty and the resumption of executions following the implementation of the National Action Plan.

The commerce minister has made a round in Brussels to try and persuade EU officials to renew the GSP Plus scheme for Pakistan and is trying to build his case around the 27 UN conventions that Pakistan has ratified and implemented as part of its commitment to secure GSP Plus status from the EU.

Additionally, he has also spoken about the benefits of Operation Zarb-i-Azb and the return of stability to Pakistan, perhaps in an attempt to remind his hosts that there may be special circumstances in Pakistan making it necessary to resort to the death penalty as a means of dealing with terrorism.

Whether or not his hosts will be convinced by this presentation remains to be seen. But as late as July of this year, a resolution

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passed by the Foreign Affairs Council of the EU said that the “EU urges Pakistan to reinstate the moratorium immediately”.

It went on to add that Pakistan is a signatory to three important conventions that “affirm the right to fair trial, prohibit the death sentence for crimes committed by persons under 18 years of age and require prompt and impartial investigation where there is reasonable ground to believe that torture has been committed”.

The resolution clearly stated that implementation of these resolutions “is a requirement under the GSP Plus scheme”.

The GSP Plus scheme has been very beneficial to Pakistani exporters due to the market access it gives to the EU, and its renewal is very important.

The review currently under way and the efforts of the commerce minister are a reminder that decisions made in haste can end up having negative consequences that cascade into other domain.

The state here would do well to consider this aspect of economic interaction.

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First phase of LG polls

THE first round of local government elections in Punjab and Sindh has continued the trend of recent elections: the overall result appeared to reflect voter preferences while the voting process has seen some improvements but also multiple failures.

The decision to hold staggered elections in the country’s electorally two largest provinces appears to have prevented the chaos and mismanagement that was seen in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in May, but there must be questions asked about how a clash between supporters of rival groups in Khairpur ended in the death of 11 individuals.

The Khairpur tragedy must surely not be treated as an aberration — whatever lessons that can be learned should be learned and applied with greater vigour to the next election. Election day violence is not inevitable; it is the failure of administration, as was seen in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa earlier this year.

As for the voting itself, the ECP still does not appear to have full control over the process and independent observers found a familiar plethora of discrepancies and irregularities.

The answer to those problems remains the same: meaningful and deep electoral reforms while simultaneously strengthening and deepening the ECP’s administrative structures. Unhappily, neither of those fundamentals appears to be a priority for parliament.

The results themselves also appear to reflect overall expectations. The PPP swept interior Sindh — though perhaps the reasons for that sweep will be contested.

To the party’s detractors, the PPP dominance is because of the weaknesses of and disarray among its opponents.

To PPP supporters, the skewed media coverage of the party once again overlooked the genuine and continuing support for the party in its core base. In Punjab, the PML-N dominated, seemingly pulling further away from the PTI in both urban and rural areas and now in competition with a new political force in Punjab, the so-called independents.

Once again, the reasons will be disputed. To PML-N supporters, the results will be further evidence of voter satisfaction with the PML-N governance at the centre and in Punjab and dissatisfaction with the PTI’s abrasive and endless politics.

To PTI supporters, the party’s inability to convert its ostensible popularity into winning more seats at all levels of government is because of the absence of a strong local party machine — and, of course, the PML-N’s alleged wanton abuse of power.

Moreover, PTI strategists will no doubt be looking at the rise of independent candidates as an opportunity — clearly, there is a great chunk of voters floating around in Punjab who are unhappy with the PML-N and still looking for alternatives.

From a national perspective, the core goal remains elusive — whosoever wins an election, it must be won fairly and

transparently and the result must be an accurate reflection of the votes cast.

That change will only come through electoral reforms, the present system having seemingly achieved its potential. But it is not clear how that goal can be made a priority for parliament.

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Business rankings

OUT of 10 benchmarks that the World Bank uses to compile its “ease of doing business” rankings, Pakistan has improved its score in only one. And even that is the relatively easy one of “dealing with construction permits”.

The overall decline by two positions of Pakistan’s place in the “ease of doing business” rankings is yet another dent in the credibility of a party that has prided itself as being business-friendly.

The slip in the rankings is most telling in those categories where the slide is the largest. For example, starting a business has become more difficult since last year, as well as availing credit from the formal sector.

Resolving insolvency issues has also slipped, as has the protection of minority business owners and trading across borders.

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None of this will come as a surprise to those who already have stakes in the economy.

Even though some uptick in activity is seen in a few sectors, with construction and associated industries such as cement leading the way, the overall business climate in the country has largely failed to improve in the two and half years of rule by the PML-N.

Bread-and-butter economic issues such as enforcement of contracts or access to credit have not been addressed, and in the case of the latter, the data actually shows a massive crowding out of the private sector from bank credit, where the state is lifting almost the entirety of the bank's available liquidity.

Much of the legislation required to improve contract enforcement, such as the Corporate Rehabilitation Act and the Corporate Restructuring Companies Act, still await passage into law.

Tax procedures need to be simplified, and even after identifying which processes can be reformed to reduce the burden of filing returns, and the introduction of an e-filing system, the government has failed to make serious headway in these areas.

The languid pace of the economic revival, not to mention its lopsided nature, under the current dispensation, owes itself at least in some measure to these failures.

The real test of a government is not in the numbers but on the ground, in the kinds of sentiments it can inspire amongst those

who have the means to acquire stakes and take risks in the economic environment created by the administration's policies.

Thus far, the government appears to be failing this test, as exemplified by the low rate of investment and the decline in the rankings.

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Erdogan's comeback

IN what undoubtedly is a stunning comeback, Recep Tayyip Erdogan proved his opponents and many pundits wrong on Sunday when his party carted off almost 50pc of the votes to regain the AKP's parliamentary majority.

With 316 of the national assembly's 550 seats in his pocket, Mr Erdogan is now in a commanding position to tackle a slew of nerve-wracking crises that have divided the nation and worried its friends.

Several factors combined to make the Turks vote for what has been one of Mr Erdogan's key planks — political stability.

The stepped-up Kurdish insurgency, continuation of the Syrian war, streams of refugees from the south, a faltering economy and terror shocks — especially the Ankara double bombing that killed over 100 people — strengthened the AKP claim that

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only a stable government could pull Turkey out of the cornucopia of crises.

It was a calculated gamble, but there is no doubt it has paid off, for Mr Erdogan has emerged as Turkey's most powerful figure since Kemal Ataturk. Three times prime minister and armed now with an absolute majority, Mr Erdogan looks forward to amending the constitution to make the presidency stronger.

Sunday's election was, in fact, a referendum on Mr Erdogan himself. It now remains to be seen whether his renewed political strength will make him less sensitive to media criticism and enable him to reach out to his political opponents to steer the country out of the crises.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, chief of the main opposition party CHP, asked the AKP to stick to the rule of law, while Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu struck a more magnanimous tone saying, "There is no one beaten in this election. Turkey won, our democracy won".

In his speech acknowledging the AKP's triumph, Mr Davutoglu spoke of the need for amending the constitution and sought all parties' help in fighting terrorism but was candid enough to declare, "The new Turkey will be built under the leadership of President Erdogan".

The president should now work towards lessening divisions.

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Bangladesh murders

THE series of killings in Bangladesh are reason to feel nothing less than outright alarm, both for the country and the region. The brutal murder in Dhaka on Saturday of Faysal Arefin is the latest in a series of grievous attacks on people committed to putting into the public domain secular and liberal ideas.

Arefin was the chief of the Jagriti Prokashoni publishing house, which published the work of Avijit Roy, who was similarly hacked to death in February.

If the crime is horrifying, so is the cold implacability of the perpetrators, who gained access to the office by posing as customers and then locked themselves into a room with their victim before carrying out their intent.

Earlier, the same day, publisher Ahmed Rahim Tutul, also a publisher of Roy's work, and writers Ranadeep Basu and Tariq Rahim were shot and stabbed in another publishing house's office space; the three attackers locked the wounded men into the room before getting away.

These are only the most recent in a series of such attacks — this year alone, four bloggers, accused of being atheists, have been killed. What appeared as randomised acts of mob violence is now taking on the look of a sustained and targeted bloodbath.

The Bangladesh researcher of Amnesty International, Abbas Faiz, has stated: "The situation is becoming increasingly dangerous for those brave enough to speak their own minds."

The Bangladesh authorities need to take note of the fact that the theatre of violence is not just expanding — with publishers now joining the ranks of targets where earlier it was just bloggers — it may also be forging links with other extremist elements such as the self-styled Islamic State (which has claimed responsibility for three other, similar attacks in the country).

The government of Sheikh Hasina has taken an unyielding position against the Islamists including those in the political mainstream; that this might be pushing them further towards the right and towards increased brutality is an indication of just how difficult it is to tackle this issue.

Carbon emissions tax

AN intriguing idea has just been floated by Mr Sartaj Aziz, two-time former finance minister, to implement a carbon tax in Pakistan of the sort that more and more countries are turning towards to help curtail emissions and generate revenue for mitigation measures required for a changing climate.

The senior adviser has suggested that the tax be applied on all fuel prices, perhaps at the rate of one cent per unit of fuel.

The idea is intriguing because a carbon tax is growing in popularity in many countries around the world, and not just advanced economies. But for the tax to be effective it must be structured to be more than just a revenue measure.

Rather, it should be designed with the aim of encouraging efficient utilisation of hydrocarbon fuels by industry, as well as generating revenues, starting perhaps with power producers since they are by far the largest contributors to the country's total carbon emissions.

A carbon tax has been implemented in many countries — Canada, Chile, Ireland and South Africa to name a few. In almost all cases, the tax aims to incentivise consumers of hydrocarbon fuels to be more efficient in its utilisation.

For power producers, the tax can incentivise them to invest in the maintenance of their furnaces, as well as apply due care to manage the quality of combustion with the aim of reducing the carbon dioxide emissions.

The more they curtail their emissions, the more they stand to save on the tax. Beyond this the tax can also generate revenue earmarked for a special purpose: funding mitigation measures for climate change such as paying for superior forecasting technology for anomalous rain systems, and early warning systems for floods.

Such special purpose levies already exist, from telecoms who are required to contribute to a fund designed for ensuring access to mobile communications in remote areas, to special surcharges to pay for gas infrastructure.

In the past, however, the government has succumbed to the temptation to divert the funds raised through these special levies towards budgetary support, a practice that must be prohibited.

The challenges posed by climate change are no less urgent than the priorities these special purpose funds are designed to serve, and there is merit to the proposal to implement a carbon tax to help pay for the mitigation efforts required. The idea deserves to be explored in greater detail.

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Pemra's latest directive

IT may attempt to give the impression of being based upon sound reasoning, but the latest directive from Pemra is illogical and perverse.

In a circular issued on Monday to satellite television and FM radio licensees, the authority strictly directed them “not to give any kind of coverage to any proscribed organisation including Jamaatud Dawa, Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation [and] Lashkar-e-Taiba in breach of obligations under UN Security Council Resolutions”.

Appended to the notice were the names of 60 banned organisations — including the LeT — and another 12 that have been placed on the watch list by the government.

The order, which cited legal provisions in the Pemra Act and the Electronic Media Code of Conduct pertaining to incitement of hatred and glorification of violence to shore up its argument,

also stated that the JuD and FIF — which are on the government watch list — are iterations of the banned LeT.

It is well known by now that in the event of a natural disaster in the country, religious organisations — among them some whose disavowal of armed militancy is suspect — quickly mobilise their cadres to fan out across affected areas to undertake disaster relief.

Often, and unfortunately so, their experience in grass-roots activism gives them an advantage over government agencies in terms of effectiveness.

This is once again being witnessed in the aftermath of the earthquake that jolted Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other parts of Pakistan last month.

Reporting their activities cannot in any way be regarded as incitement to, or glorification of, violence — which is where the Pemra directive defies reason.

It is possible that this ‘ban’ emanates from the authority’s overzealous application of the legal provisions pertaining to media conduct. It may even stem from the establishment’s desire to excise indications of the state’s apparently dual policy towards extremist organisations from the official narrative of a no-tolerance policy against such forces in the country — although the interior ministry has denied any input.

Whatever the impetus that may lie behind it, this attempt at censorship highlights an obvious anomaly. Rather than banning the media from covering them, groups with violent antecedents such as the FIF is said to be, should not be allowed to engage

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in any activities; and especially not in disaster relief because the victim-and-saviour situation is eminently tailor-made for ideological propagandising.

Also, one of the reasons that religious extremism has proliferated in Pakistan is because of the repeated farcical proscription of violent groups who then re-emerge with new names, and continue with business as usual.

In the case of the Let alias JuD alias FIF, this group is indelibly associated with the Mumbai massacre. The hands-off policy that the state applies to it, not to mention the glacial pace at which the trial of the accused — who belong to the LeT — is progressing, is not in the country's long-term interest or regional stability as a whole.

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Judicial reform

INVITING the Chief Justice of Pakistan to address a special committee of the Senate tasked with drafting reforms for speedy justice in the country was a welcome move that was always likely to generate goodwill between two of the three pillars of the state.

Chief Justice Anwar Zaheer Jamali also obliged by being candid about the shortcomings of the judiciary itself while being clear about the judicial domain needing to be respected by other institutions. Few would disagree that there is a crisis of justice in Pakistan.

Too few have access to courts and where there is access, the quality of justice provided is often unacceptable.

Also read: [Laws worthless in absence of enforcement: CJ](#)

The lack of formal justice at the grass-roots level has led to the continuation of a parallel, informal system of justice — with panchayats and jirgas handling as much as 80pc of disputes, according to the chief justice. That twofold crisis — too few are opting for the formal system and the few who do opt for it are served very poor quality of justice — is the one that affects the vast majority of the people.

Resolving that crisis though would require a fundamental shift in attitudes — and a raft of reforms worked out in cooperation with the judiciary. However, on neither front is there much urgency or seriousness of purpose.

Consider that while Chairman of the Senate Raza Rabbani has made it a priority to reach out to the judiciary and to foster dialogue between institutions, parliament itself has no real legislative agenda. That is primarily the fault of the federal government, with the PML-N having a majority in the National Assembly. But it is also the listlessness of the opposition parties that is part of the problem.

In the Senate, Mr Rabbani's enthusiasm aside, there are few senators from any of the major parties who are pressing for legal reforms — applauding a speech by a chief justice does not constitute meaningful input.

The real test of parliamentary resolve is steady and methodical work towards a set of reforms — something akin to the 18th Amendment process shepherded by Mr Rabbani, though in a more transparent manner.

The other aspect is the substance of the reforms themselves — while most agree that the judicial system is broken, the speeches by Mr Rabbani and Chief Justice Jamali on Tuesday indicated a significant gap between the two institutions of what the reforms should be.

For example, the introduction of a scheduling order for trials, as suggested by Mr Rabbani, could curb delays and keep trials streamlined and on track, but the chief justice appeared uncomfortable with the idea and ascribed blame for delays to other issues.

Ultimately, parliament must legislate and the judiciary must implement — but if it happens in a manner where one or the

other institution is resistant to the fundamentals of the proposed changes, the attempted reforms could prove counterproductive.

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Victims without shelter

THE ordeal of many of those who survived the massive Oct 26 earthquake is far from over.

The lack of proper shelter combined with the arrival of winter has compounded the miseries of the quake victims in the northern parts of the country.

In some areas, tents and blankets have not arrived, while the supplies that have reached the affected families are inadequate considering the harsh weather.

Also read: [Shelterless people brace for snowfall, rain in quake-hit areas](#)

This makes the situation critical for the thousands whose dwellings have been destroyed, especially with snowfall and rain, and temperatures falling below zero.

Chitral, Shangla and Lower Dir have been the hardest hit districts. True, the terrain is quite difficult to access, and inclement weather has affected the relief operation.

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Nevertheless, KP's Provincial Disaster Management Authority has been justifiably criticised for its slow response.

Officials say around 15pc of the affected areas have not yet been reached.

The state, it seems, is ill-prepared to deal with even small-scale situations of this sort; and, as this response illustrates, it is at sea when disasters of larger magnitude strike. While the people in the affected regions are incredibly hardy, it is cruel to let them fend for themselves at this difficult time.

One solution put forth by the authorities is to house the quake survivors in schools. We must ask though how many buildings in the affected area are safe post-quake.

One figure says over 500 schools have been damaged in the affected areas. The federal and provincial authorities, therefore, need to step up their efforts to provide relief and safe shelters to the victims, especially those in remote regions.

Only the state has the resources to overcome the obstacle of poor access to reach the affected citizens. Winterised tents and heavy blankets that can protect the people from the region's biting cold should be dispatched to the affected areas without delay, while the survivors' nutritional and health needs must be looked after.

Moreover, as per the prime minister's instructions, compensation for the affected must reach them by Nov 14 so that they can start rebuilding their lives. Without doubt, it is in such times of trial that the intentions and sincerity of the state

towards the people are tested. That is why the administration needs to rise to the occasion and expedite the relief effort.

Published in Dawn, November 5th, 2015

Crash-landing

Sighs of relief went up around the country when no fatalities or major injuries were reported after a Shaheen Airways aircraft carrying almost 200 passengers crash-landed in Lahore on Tuesday.

One shudders to think how the situation could have turned out if matters had slipped out of the pilot's control. The incident is a reminder that in spite of Pakistan's relatively decent track record in air traffic safety, a single mishap can lead to a major tragedy.

A near-miss is cause for relief, but it also raises some questions which the airline and aviation authorities must answer.

Also read: [10 injured as Shaheen Air flight crash lands](#)

For instance, how was the aircraft deemed airworthy in the first place if its landing gear was defective? An aircraft undergoes multiple checks before taking off, and responsibility must be pinned appropriately and the officers responsible for the oversight punished.

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The incident also highlights the relatively lax attitude of private carriers towards air safety and maintaining the airworthiness of their aircraft.

In this instance, the plane was not on a wet lease but owned by the airline itself, which increases the latter's obligation to explain how it was pressed into service with a potentially catastrophic defect.

In the past few years, two major crashes involving planes owned by private airlines have highlighted the lax attitudes towards passenger safety.

A plane belonging to Bhoja Air crashed en route to Islamabad in 2012, while pilot error was cited as the cause behind the 2010 Airblue crash. Keeping a close eye on their profits, private carriers are more likely to cut corners and press defective aircraft into service or pressure pilots into flying without allowing them adequate periods of rest in between flights or without giving them refresher courses and evaluating them for flight discipline on a regular basis.

The incident should not be brushed under the carpet. It is not enough for Shaheen Airways to offer an inquiry. A public inquiry should also be held by the CAA to determine if the airline was lax in its maintenance procedures or pre-flight inspection, and whether or not the pilot performed properly under the circumstances.

There should be zero tolerance for such mishaps. The stakes are far too high.

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Factories of death

The collapse of a factory in Lahore's Sunder Industrial Estate, which buried at least 21 workers and wounded many others, has revealed an important reality about the dilapidated state of Pakistan's manufacturing economy.

While the search for survivors continues at the site of the tragedy, the equally grim search for answers will be a lot less focused. It is horrifying that the factory, which produced polythene bags, employed a workforce consisting largely of children, some as young as seven.

Also read: [At least 25 dead as rescuers scabble through Lahore factory rubble](#)

Equally appalling is the ease with which factory owners can build structures that are dangerous structurally or vulnerable to fires, or which are characterised by lax safety standards that can cause boilers to explode.

In only four years, Lahore has seen all three: workers dying due to smoke inhalation during a factory fire because there was only one exit, and that was through the generator room where the fire began; a boiler exploding in a factory built illegally in a residential area; and now structural failure that caused the building to collapse and bury the young ones toiling within.

The more horrifying story yet is the even larger numbers of workers who continue toiling away in the thousands of factories across Pakistan under conditions that are dangerous and a threat to life and limb.

The principal fault clearly lies with the owners of these establishments, who build their premises without any regard for worker safety. But the blame must also be shared by government authorities who either give permits to such structures, or turn a blind eye to them.

The management of the industrial estates must also be held accountable, since they are in a position to ensure that safety standards are being implemented, and to either demand enforcement from errant owners or report them to government authorities.

All three segments failed in their duties, with the result that rescue teams are digging out our children from the rubble of a monstrous hulk. The tragedy is beyond words.

Pakistan's manufacturing sector has been subjected to some enormous strains over the years, pushing much of it into the informal sector.

Over there, things are even worse, and industrial accidents and hazardous working conditions are the norm. Ultimately, this unchecked growth in informal manufacturing has created perverse incentives to compromise even further on worker safety.

Those in the formal sector find they become uncompetitive against their rivals in the informal space if they follow the letter of the law. Those in the informal space operate with impunity, setting up perilous manufacturing processes in residential areas, exposing their neighbours to dangers they may not even be aware of.

How many other industrial accidents will we experience before we realise that this laissez-faire approach towards manufacturing means we are signing the death warrant of our environment, our residential areas, and in the latest example, our children as well?

Published in Dawn, November 6th, 2015

Pak-Saudi cooperation

CHIEF of Army Staff Gen Raheel Sharif's trip to Saudi Arabia and meetings with the very apex of the leadership of that country has yielded a set of official details that emphasised the need for continuing security and counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries.

After the April lull — when the Pakistani parliament historically turned down a request to participate in the Saudi-led war in Yemen — the bilateral relationship appears to be stabilising and that is something to be welcomed.

Know more: [Saudi king meets Gen Raheel, vows to help eliminate terrorism](#)

Despite differences over the years, the Pak-Saudi relationship is economically and diplomatically important for Pakistan. There is simply no case for Pakistan to isolate itself from the Middle Eastern powerhouse that has been a staunch supporter of Pakistan internationally over the decades.

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Furthermore, in the arena of counterterrorism cooperation, the Pak-Saudi relationship has been a strong one and continues to have the potential for expansion.

The more than a decade of cooperation in the fight against Al Qaeda has yielded a strong partnership and shown that experience can be put to use to fight new transnational threats that can undermine both countries.

As indicated in the ISPR statement, “choking the flow of funds” to terrorists and extremists must remain a priority.

Ultimately, what makes countries safe is the overall combination of policies they pursue. Both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have suffered because of internal policy contradictions over the decades.

For Saudi Arabia, the determination to crush any Islamist challenge to the monarchy was long matched by a zeal to export an ideology that helped breed extremism in other parts of the Muslim world. For Pakistan, the resolve to combat terrorism that hurts Pakistan was for long overshadowed by support for religiously inspired militancy and extremism that targeted neighbouring countries.

The cost of those dual policies has become all too clear — and to some extent led to the elimination of those contradictions in both countries. There are, however, still too many contradictions in the policies that Saudi Arabia pursues.

The caustic exchanges this week between the Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers in the international meeting to discuss Syria have been widely reported — underscoring that Iran and Saudi

Arabia remain further apart than ever and that their relationship could yet determine if the Middle East can be stabilised.

If the goal is indeed the eradication of militancy and extremism and to stabilise a deeply troubled region, Saudi Arabia — and many other countries, including Pakistan — would have to change a great number of their policies.

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Driving sans licence

THE chaos that rules traffic in Karachi is the stuff of legends. At red lights, a stream of vehicles of bewildering variety flows beyond the stop-line with all the discipline of a wave breaking at the shore; one-way rules are followed only if it is so suits the driver.

Illegal parking, non-compliance with rules that govern the use of roundabouts, ignorance of the regulations regarding overtaking lanes — Karachi has all in abundance.

Add to this the fact that, according to the DIG Traffic, there are some 3.8 million registered vehicles in use in the city while over 900 new, private vehicles hit the roads every day, and the magnitude of the task of rectifying the situation begins to loom large.

Know more: [Karachi driving licence campaign postponed till February 2016](#)

As such, if the intention of the traffic authorities had been to provide drivers with reason to really, truly fear the law, then they certainly succeeded — though with unintended consequences.

Over the weekend, it was announced that from Monday, drivers without a valid licence would be arrested and jailed for up to one month under a provision of the Motor Vehicles Ordinance.

That resulted in such a massive rush at the branches of the offices tasked with issuing driving licences that the drive was twice postponed over as many days, and finally on Wednesday called off altogether pending the establishment of new driving licence branches.

It is worth pondering what alerted the authorities in the first place to the problem: according to official figures, it seems only 1.2 million people in the metropolis have driving licences, against 3.8 million vehicles.

Even accounting for licences issued in other cities that is a gap of massive proportions. The question then is, what took them so long to wake up to this correlation?

Had even the traffic authorities given up on the challenge to bring Karachi's traffic under control? If so, we can only welcome the fact that they have roused themselves and decided to put up a fight, and wish them luck.

Investment conference

THE recently held Pakistan Investment Conference in Islamabad has produced more statements than investment. In fact, such affairs have seldom yielded more than a chance to adjust the optics.

The chairman of the Board of Investment, Mr Miftah Ismael, made a list of investments that may come to Pakistan following the conference. However, the list is either unimpressive or it has entries that had been in the pipeline long before the conference. Still, the latter has been a useful forum to address foreign investors who have been shying away from Pakistan for a number of years now.

And some of the statements made by the government leadership deserve to be noted. Chief amongst these is Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's assurance to the assembled delegates that Pakistan possesses strong drivers of future economic growth, and has the commitment at the top to remain a "democratic and liberal" country.

The drivers of future growth, according to him, are the CPEC projects, as well as the government's own initiatives in the energy sector, spanning LNG, solar, wind and coal. For his part, the finance minister used the opportunity to advance a political priority, telling the assembled delegates that an economic reform programme needs to be owned by all political parties and economic policy should not be politicised.

Meanwhile, the prime minister's story has compelling aspects, because it is difficult to discount the importance of the large

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stakes that China is acquiring in Pakistan. With such a strong hand to back it up, Pakistan's prospects of weathering any storm in the global economy are good. But investors will look at more than just the stakes being acquired by a foreign partner.

They may also want to know how this growing partnership is expected to change the landscape for investment in the country.

Telling this gathering that economic policy should not be politicised may have been misplaced, because that is an internal political matter for Pakistan, and whereas most delegates would likely agree with the proposition, they would also concur that parliament is a better place to say this.

Events such as the investment conference serve as valuable forums to advance the country's story, which is an essential ingredient for building investor confidence. It is equally important, however, for the story to ring true with the audience. That will be the big test for the assurances given by Mr Sharif. Follow-up actions can prove useful in the attempt.

Published in Dawn, November 7th, 2015

Improved cricket rating

PAKISTAN'S rise to number two on the Test table after a gap of almost a decade is cause for celebration.

This has come after a display of flair and determination during the just-concluded series against England that Pakistan won 2-0.

The national side's batting effort was led by senior pros Younis Khan, Muhammad Hafeez and skipper Misbah ul Haq.

It was Hafeez who rounded off the 'home' campaign in the UAE with a polished, at times stylish, innings in the third and final Test. By and large, however, Pakistan's batting was effective with the trademark Misbah exhibition of purpose that has brought the skipper much respect and success over the last few years — the Gulf has been the happy venue of much of his advance.

The famous Pakistani flair came mostly from the bowlers. It was the delightful wrist work of Yasir Shah and the occasional bursts from Shoaib Malik, Wahab Riaz and company that provided the more memorable moments in a series that at one stage appeared to tilt in favour of Alastair Cook's team.

Indeed, it was bad light that denied England a dramatic victory in the first Test of the series, and the determined and ever-threatening 'tourists' were very much in it until about halfway into the second Test when the bowling gave Pakistan the decisive edge.

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The advantage was pushed home and the gritty opposition overcome in the final game of the series to provide fans and cricket officials in the country a reason to rejoice.

This is a welcome reprieve in extremely difficult circumstances in which Pakistan has not been able to host big games inside the country. So much was forgotten in the moment of joy; even the severest critics of Misbah and the men under his command thought it necessary to come up with a public statement in their praise.

Let the spirit prevail until the beckoning of Pakistan's next challenge that includes a series against wounded England on their own soil in the summer of 2016.

Published in Dawn, November 7th, 2015

Atmosphere of hate

It is as real as it is alarming: India appears to be at war with itself, while India and Pakistan are drifting ever further apart.

Neither of those realities are good for peace or stability in South Asia. A slew of internationally and nationally regarded Indian artists and activists have now returned various awards bestowed on them by Indian academies to protest against the assault on Indian secularism and inter-communal peace by right-wing forces.

On Thursday, Arundhati Roy was the latest and most prominent of those adding their voices to the growing protest in India. In typically direct language, Ms Roy condemned what she termed "a kind of ideological viciousness and an assault on our collective IQ that will tear us apart and bury us very deep if we do not stand up to it now".

In an article in The Indian Express announcing the return of her National Award for Best Screenplay that Ms Roy won in 1989, she has also written: "Whole populations — millions of Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and Christians — are being forced to live in terror, unsure of when and from where the assault will come."

The response to the anguish being felt and now vocalised by India's right-thinking citizens has been predictable.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who critics point out has refused to condemn religiously inspired violence and has failed to live up to his campaign promise of being the leader of all Indians, has been dismissive of the criticisms.

When a report by Moody's Analytics cautioned the Indian prime minister that he "must keep his members in check or risk losing domestic and global credibility" this week, the government immediately and unusually lashed out at the author of the report and dismissed it "as the personal opinion of a junior associate economist employed with Moody's Analytics."

That was immediately contradicted by Moody's itself, which stood by the comments in the report. While a small incident, it does show the great gulf between practice and promise: the Modi government is more sensitive to criticism than it is to acts of violence against Indians themselves.

Unhappily, the Pakistani response to the assault on Indian secularism and freedoms has also been fairly predictable.

Many sections of the political class, media and civil society here have seemingly revelled in the recent tensions in India because it has allegedly exposed the real agenda of the Modi government and its supporters.

But if that were true, could the rise of a rabid right-wing politics in India possibly be in any way good for Pakistan or the region?

Sadly, myopia appears to reign on both sides of the border. Perhaps most telling is that a Pakistani criticising the Pakistani state is increasingly considered an anti-patriot at home while an Indian criticising the Indian state is considered a hero — and vice versa. The politics of fear and hate appear to be on the march on both sides of the border.

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Ad hoc taxation

A SHORTFALL in the revenue target thus far in the fiscal year means a raft of new taxes is about to be introduced in order to ensure that the government will keep its fiscal deficit target for the year. This was decided during the ninth review of the ongoing IMF programme, and the Fund's mission chief went on to add that these new revenue measures will be classed as "prior actions" to be implemented before the next review. This leaves the government with very little wiggle room, meaning the new taxes will have to be announced soon, and will therefore fall almost entirely on those already within the tax net. Industry representatives now wait with anxiety to discover who will be asked to bear the additional burden. The review overall has been successful, and as expected, the Fund will release the next tranche from the loan programme by December, following approval of the executive board.

The Fund has been shown a revenue generation plan that the government intends to implement to ensure that the shortfall of Rs40bn in the collections target since July will be met by the time of the tenth review. Against this plan, Fund staff has approved the release of the next tranche for Pakistan. Now it is incumbent on the government to reveal what this plan is in all its detail. It is disappointing to witness this sort of ad hocism in the management of government accounts at this stage — by now, it ought to have been a part of our distant past. It harkens back to the days of minibudgets in the 1990s.

For its part, the Fund owes us a clear and unapologetic explanation of where things have failed in the revenue effort of the government. In addition, since the talks in the ninth review

were also part of an Article IV consultation, an annual exercise undertaken to draw up a detailed assessment of where things stand in the economy, a comprehensive explanation ought to be given for the repeated delays in the implementation of a few important structural reform measures, particularly those that are related to the power sector and privatisation. In the past, the Fund has been criticised for soft pedalling its pressure on the government to act on reforms that are vital to reinforcing the underlying sustainability. Whether or not the staff feels this criticism is warranted, they should be more mindful that their professional obligations to the citizenry of Pakistan, the ultimate stakeholders in the enterprise, trump all other considerations. And the citizenry has a right to know how this borrowed money is being utilised, and how much real progress is being made to ensure that the need to live on borrowed money is being reduced. We need a realistic appraisal of how the Fund's resources, and the window of opportunity they have created, are being put to use.

Detainees abroad

WHEN Pakistani citizens encounter legal problems in foreign countries, it is the obligation of the state to provide the maximum possible assistance to them. Unfortunately, quite often foreign missions are found to be uninterested in the plight of Pakistanis who have had run-ins with the law overseas. In a similar vein, the reaction of federal Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan to suspend a readmission accord for illegal immigrants with the European Union seems hasty and void of compassion. Chaudhry Nisar said on Friday that "we will not allow any planes carrying deportees" unless the latter's details have been verified. It is fair to assume that caught between European states that do not want them and Pakistan that refuses to take them back, the migrants will remain in limbo. Suspending the accord is inadvisable; if Islamabad feels the agreement is not being implemented in its true spirit it must take up the issue with the EU and resolve the problem amicably. Knee-jerk reactions will not help anyone, least of all the migrants.

Looking at the broader picture, a proper and sustained policy is needed which can provide assistance to Pakistanis facing legal issues abroad. For example, the Lahore High Court has recently raised the issue of Pakistanis languishing in foreign jails, while members of the Senate have also been critical of diplomatic missions' attitudes when dealing with citizens in distress. One figure says over 8,000 Pakistanis are imprisoned abroad; around half of these individuals are incarcerated in the Gulf states. Often in these countries, the legal system is opaque and labyrinthine, and without the help of Pakistani missions able to provide legal aid according to local laws, navigating it can be a nightmare. In fact, there have been reports of some

individuals remaining incarcerated in foreign jails despite completing their sentences, as well as indications that women and minors have also been put in jail. Those familiar with the issue say some foreign governments don't cooperate with Pakistani missions when it comes to giving them access to citizens in detention. In this case, the matter must be taken up at the highest levels as consular access and the provision of legal help are a fundamental right of every Pakistani. For starters, an accurate database of Pakistanis imprisoned or undergoing trial abroad must be formulated; this can help in the creation of an effective policy designed to offer assistance to Pakistanis dealing with foreign legal systems.

Published in Dawn, November 8th, 2015

Farm politics

HIS opponents are not at all pleased by the sight of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif distributing cheques among the farmers in Lodhran and Sialkot. And they appear to have got it right when they say that this generous gesture will result in the government gaining some valuable points at a time when polls in the two districts are approaching. The government knows this. The opposition is worried about it. The farmers are happy to get some much-deserved and long-awaited attention. What if it is the search for votes that has brought into focus the one who tills his heart out in the field — the farmer would rather cash in on the moment than sulk over how he has been neglected. Away in the cities, where dwellers matter more,

many in the intelligentsia will happily declare that if the party in power was offering relief because of its fear of opposition politics, it is a sign that democracy is working.

According to one view, far from taking issue with the package the PML-N was offering to the farmers, the PTI would have been better off claiming credit for forcing the government to address the woes of the agricultural sector. This is a valid argument that the PTI has applied to situations in the past and perhaps it is still using it as it attempts to woo the voters. Yet again, the discussion on when a government scheme can be called a blatant, opportunistic and unfair bid to garner votes is worth it at this juncture of the country's democratic development. It suits the PTI which, apart from being a party very much interested in contesting power at all tiers, has been running a campaign to improve the electoral system in Pakistan. There is clearly a case for more stringent rules to ensure as fair a contest as possible at all levels. The case is strengthened by the Election Commission of Pakistan's reservations regarding the launch of development schemes too close to a vote.

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Parliament's challenge

TODAY, the National Assembly will re-elect Ayaz Sadiq as speaker of the house.

The PML-N has already flexed its political muscles and turned what should have been the immediate re-election of Mr Sadiq at the start of the new session of parliament into a celebration of the PML-N's electoral superiority over the PTI.

Even the otherwise dignified Mr Sadiq was unable to resist landing a few punches against his political opponents after the bruising battle that was the by-election in NA-122 last month. But what are Mr Sadiq's, and the federal government's, plans for reinvigorating parliament itself?

Almost halfway through its term, the federal government appears to have no legislative agenda – and the National Assembly itself has once again become a desultory body largely oblivious to its constitutional role of oversight of the executive.

Clearly, there is a problem of political will. When it comes to contesting by-elections and purportedly protecting the sanctity of the National Assembly by ensuring that the speaker is not tarnished by rigging allegations or the inability to retain his seat, the PML-N has shown no shortage of enthusiasm.

In the NA-122 by-election campaign, ministers, MNAs, MPAs and Sharif family members were deployed as though the fate of democracy itself hung in the balance. But parliament itself has largely been treated as an inconvenience by the PML-N.

Having delayed the start of the new National Assembly session for an unprecedented three months to ensure Mr Sadiq could return to the speaker's office first, the PML-N has not even made a pretence of unveiling a legislative agenda.

Just two facts tell the story of the PML-N's parliamentary indifference. First, the country still does not have a full-time law minister. The ever-busy Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid doubles as law minister and a group of aides and advisers are steering the day-to-day affairs of the law ministry.

Without a law minister, can there really be a governmental legislative agenda?

Second, the only significant legislation passed by the present parliament has come at the behest of the military – infamously, the 21st Amendment and before that troubling changes to anti-terrorism laws.

Where could the government start? If it wanted to, there is the issue of electoral reforms – something that Mr Sadiq himself should take a personal interest in, given his electoral troubles.

If elections are to be free and fair – and parliament is to be seen as legitimate and representative – there must be electoral reforms. Putting together a parliamentary package on electoral reforms should not take very long; there have been long debates and many suggestions and ideas mooted in recent years.

Another potential area for quick legislative action, given the composition of the Senate and Chairman Raza Rabbani's interest in legal reforms, could be speedy justice reforms. As

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ever, the space for action is vast, if the government demonstrates the will.

Published in Dawn, November 9th, 2015

Rangers' presence

IT is an unfortunate hallmark of governments in Pakistan, whether at the federal or provincial level, that they have been slow in fully thinking through the needs dictated by new realities, and as a result, end up undercutting gains in one area by losses in another.

Consider, for example, the paramilitary Rangers that are present in Karachi in large numbers. For decades now, successive provincial governments have deemed them essential in keeping the peace in this lawless city, starting from the 1980s when a volatile political climate led to the force being ushered into the premises of Karachi University.

Over 25 years later, their footprint has expanded far beyond the university, and since the personnel need space in which to live and work, they have been allowed control of a number of buildings that successive governments ought to have been protecting to the full strength of their capability.

The historic Jinnah Courts, whose grace spreads over several thousand yards in the heart of the city and which is protected under the Sindh Cultural Heritage (Preservation) Act, 1994,

serves as the Rangers' headquarters; the building that used to provide service as student hostel has for years remained out of reach of the public, sealed off by barbed wire and sand bunkers.

Also under Rangers' occupation and serving as a barracks is the Mitha Ram Hostel, which, too, is protected under the heritage protection act.

In April, the provincial government decided to go a step further still and declared the colonial-era sandstone building a sub-jail. The latest premises that seems in danger of falling under the thrall of the Rangers is the historic Radio Pakistan building.

The staff was told that personnel would be stationed here for Muharram-related security, but upon visiting the premises the media found that the men had settled themselves in empty rooms, indicating that temporary might turn into permanent.

In apportioning blame, it would be easy yet incorrect to entirely focus on the Rangers. The fact of the matter is that it is the Sindh government that requires the paramilitary's presence in the city, and it is its responsibility to provide the latter housing and space to plan its operations.

Further, it is the Sindh government's responsibility to ensure that no protected or heritage building comes under threat of any sort, whether from unsuitable use or for any other reason. In the case of these buildings, the provincial government is failing twice over.

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US in Afghanistan

A PLACARD denouncing the US is hardly a novelty in most parts. But when it is hoisted aloft at a protest in Kabul against the stoning to death of a woman in Afghanistan and reads “Ignorant Taliban are the mercenaries of Pakistan and America”, it indicates that more is wrong with US policy in Afghanistan than many Americans appreciate.

While the US has been rightly accused of many errors in Afghanistan in the war it has fought against the Afghan Taliban and in its support for an inclusive Afghan state and society, it is troubling for American policymakers that they have not convinced Afghan civil society that the US stands with them against the Taliban.

That is the only real measure of a counter-insurgency — you cannot lose the very people whose goodwill you are fighting for. Perhaps the protest placard is a sign of fresh divisions in a state and society that is worried about the potential collapse of the post-Bonn Afghanistan and that blames the US for its seemingly soft approach on the Taliban now.

What is undeniable is that yet again the lack of foresight in American policy has ended up poisoning relations with the people of a country that it is US policy to support.

While the US may have belatedly — and rightly — corrected its approach on the Taliban, the Afghans are likely to resent the change of heart. This paper has long argued that it was a mistake to exclude the Afghan Taliban from the national political settlement in Bonn after their 2001 overthrow.

Similarly, it took long for the US to accept that a political settlement between the government and the Taliban was the viable option for stability.

That the US only now has come around to this point of view — when US political considerations made the continuation of a large-scale war effort in Afghanistan untenable — has underlined the fecklessness of American foreign policy.

Pakistan, too, has made many mistakes and there is still ambiguity in state policy towards Afghanistan. But when the American superpower errs, it has lasting consequences.

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BJP defeat

The rejection by voters of the BJP's communal-baiting and incendiary campaign in the Bihar state elections is a victory for right-thinking people everywhere — though perhaps it is too early to know if Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP strategists will reconsider their approach to politics going forward.

Without a doubt, however, the Indian voter has dealt Mr Modi and the BJP a serious setback. While the BJP did lose the prestigious state election in Delhi in January, Bihar, one of the most populous states in India and with significant representation in parliament, is both a key electoral battleground and considered a reliable indicator of national electoral trends.

What is particularly telling about the BJP-led coalition's loss to an electoral alliance led by incumbent chief minister Nitish Kumar is that the loss occurred despite a great deal of effort by the BJP leadership. No less a person than Mr Modi himself was made the face of the BJP campaign — similar to other regional BJP campaigns where Mr Modi has also been front and centre rather than local party leaders being in the position — while BJP president Amit Shah campaigned hard.

Related: [*Bihar steals Modi's firecrackers*](#)

The high-profile campaign made the tone of the BJP propaganda all the more alarming. When so-called beef politics becomes a key talking point and anti-Pakistan sentiment is introduced in a regional election — Mr Shah infamously asked

Bihar's voters if they wanted Pakistan to set off “firecrackers” in the event of a BJP defeat — there is clearly something fundamentally wrong.

Bihar's voters appeared to realise that too. As veteran Indian journalist Shekhar Gupta has written, Modi “needs no more evidence after Bihar that polarisation cannot deliver election victories to him, that in India of 2015 there is no vote for beating up anybody, and that Pakistan and terrorism may be issues of great passion and partisanship on warrior news channels and Twitter but not in the world of real public opinion”.

In the end, as is often the case in regional elections, voters chose to ignore fear-mongering and hysteria and apparently voted with stock issues — inflation, jobs, agriculture — in mind.

Now, Mr Modi and his team have a choice ahead of them. There are several more state elections due where the BJP will have the chance to correct course. But it will not be easy. The fear is not that the BJP has not been opportunistic or desperate in its appeal to communal sentiment so far, but that religiously inspired politics is at the core of the Modi agenda.

The Indian voter has demonstrated an early and decisive rejection of communal politics. Mr Modi would do well to listen to the voter. An India lurching to the right is a threat to domestic cohesion and regional stability.

Instead of trying to vilify Pakistan, perhaps Mr Modi may want to reflect on what the Indian voter makes of the BJP's ugly politics.

VIP culture

A RESOLUTION to expand access to VIP services for the spouses and children of former parliamentarians mercifully fell off the wagon last evening during the Senate session. Three of the lawmakers involved in garnering support for it withdrew their names, and the remaining who had signed it failed to show up when it was brought up for discussion. The country needs fewer VIP services, not more. The resolution in question would have allowed access to the so-called blue passport issued to dignitaries to ease passage through various processing requirements at airports abroad. Reportedly, the resolution had been brought up at the urging of a few former senators, including a former chairman of the upper house, who argued that they faced “embarrassment” at seeing their families undergo additional processing at foreign airports when they themselves were exempted. The senators who supported the resolution initially did so arguing that its impact would be minimal, and that it would not expand the VIP culture at all.

This was a shameful little moment in the upper house, betraying legislative business at its worst. It was an absurd move to bring up this resolution in the first place, and to go around trying to garner support for it. The powers of parliament do not exist to serve the personal needs of parliamentarians, they exist to serve the people of Pakistan. One silver lining in the episode is the scale of the VIP culture that was revealed in the run-up to the resolution’s presentation on the floor. All sitting and former members of the upper and lower house are entitled to many VIP services. According to one senator pushing for support, all government servants above grade 16 enjoy some measure of VIP service, as do members of

the military above a certain rank and their spouses. This creates a separate tier of citizens altogether — one that is seen as above the other tiers. The level of frustration and anger in the public against such practices is clear. The space, culture and perverse incentives they create need to be shrunk, and not expanded. Those who initially lent their support to this disgraceful resolution, only to withdraw it once the heat was turned on, would be better advised to spend their time in the Senate looking for ways to restrain the expansion of the upper tier of citizens, with the ultimate aim of doing away with it altogether.

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Holiday politics

THE cynicism and blatant point-scoring to which politics in Pakistan often falls prey can be seen once again in the decision taken by the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to announce a public holiday on Iqbal Day that was observed yesterday. It came across as a move to undercut the central government’s efforts to curtail the number of public holidays the country currently enjoys. The decision came from the desk of PTI chief Imran Khan, who tweeted “Iqbal Day is different from other days” and that he had asked the KP chief minister to settle the matter. The fact that he stated in the same breath that he disapproved of too many holidays betrays the move as petty politicking on his part.

There is no argument, of course, with the immense significance of Allama Iqbal in the annals of this country's history and today, but the PML-N government took a step in the right direction — though it should have made the announcement much earlier — by choosing to keep the wheels of government and everything else turning. Important days can be observed without public holidays being declared — which in any case number too many on the official calendar. Indeed, the government needs to conduct an exercise aiming to further rationalise the number of gazetted holidays, squeezing them to the bare minimum so that losses in terms of work output and money are minimised. The country's news media has already taken the lead in this. The electronic news generation machine does not stop — in fact, days of commemoration see escalated levels of work judging by the extensive programming on Iqbal yesterday. The print media, too, has drastically reduced the number of days in the year when the presses are silent. This government is led by a party which, during a past stint in power, took the laudable step of bringing the weekly holiday in line with international practice so that the country would not have to lose a day of business. It needs to build on this.

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NAP's patchy progress

THE third 'high-level' review of progress under the National Action Plan since August has produced the same statements of intent that every other such appraisal has generated since the plan began to be implemented earlier this year.

Once again, the list of areas where progress has been found to be lacking is the same: terror financing, madressah reform, moving against proscribed organisations and hate speech.

A patchy track record of action in each of these areas testifies to the immense difficulties facing the state in tackling the roots of militancy in the country.

Also read: [Gen Raheel stresses need for govt cooperation to counter terrorism](#)

It is crucial to address each item on this list if militancy and acts of terrorism are to be truly eradicated. Otherwise, the successes scored by the Rangers in Karachi and Operation Zarb-i-Azb in the northwest will be little more than mowing the grass, only to watch it grow back again.

We don't know what exactly was discussed regarding these gaps in the implementation of NAP, but the impression emerging from all these reviews is that the leadership — both civil and military — appears to be stuck in deciding how to move forward in these areas.

There is little surprise in this. Fighting militants on the ground is a far simpler task than rooting out their networks of supply

and support. The former represents a guts-and-glory type of a fight.

The latter is more cerebral, requiring nerve and brains, as well as the capacity to mould the discourse and regulate the flows of funds and materiel within the economy. In short, the latter task rubs up against all the key weaknesses of the state itself — its civil-military fault lines and the fact that the wheels of the state — its very writ in fact — rarely touches the ground.

The case of terror financing is a case in point. Where the standard law-enforcement bodies of the country have struggled to detect and intercept terrorism funds, the Rangers in Karachi have used extraordinary powers granted to them under an amendment to the Anti-Terrorism Act passed in the run-up to their operation, to apprehend all manner of people — from politicians to political workers and street criminals, to hardened members of banned outfits — and charged them mostly with terror financing simply to be able to hold them for 90 days.

Very few, if any, of those apprehended have actually been charged, and even fewer convictions have been obtained. This muscular approach, with open-ended targeting, is the wrong way to intercept terror funding.

The right way is to ratify those international conventions that will activate the assistance from authorities in central banks around the world to trace the movement of funds, and develop an automated system for flagging potentially troublesome flows in the financial system. Thus far, progress on NAP is patchy, mainly because the implementation has been more brawn and less brain.

SBP Act amended

AFTER delaying the move for many years, the National Assembly finally voted to pass the amendments to the State Bank Act that had been languishing for at least three years.

The amendments seek to create a more independent decision-making process at the central bank, especially regarding monetary policy.

The regulatory framework has also been strengthened by giving legal cover to any interventions that might be needed to come to the aid of a scheduled bank facing liquidity issues.

The biggest change the amendment has brought about is the creation of the Monetary Policy Committee, which has been empowered to “formulate, support and recommend the monetary policy” as well as to “approve and issue the monetary policy statement”.

These powers used to vest in the executive board, but following notification amendments to the law, they will pass to the MPC instead.

The passage of the amendment is an important step, long in the making, but whether or not it will bring about greater autonomous action on the part of the State Bank remains to be seen. The government’s influence over the bank’s decision-making powers has been considerable.

One of the principal conduits through which this influence was exercised was the presence of the secretary finance on the

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board, giving the federal government an important seat at the table where decisions that impact the cost at which it can borrow are made.

The MPC's constitution does not specify a seat for Q block, but three of its members are to be nominated from the board, which could well include the secretary finance.

The amendment is also silent on the matter of publication of the MPC's minutes, which has been flagged as an important ingredient of the legislation by the IMF.

Greater transparency is essential, and if the legislation does not specifically call for publication of the MPC's minutes, the board should certainly require it when they formulate the rules under which the new committee will operate.

We can now look forward to the notification of the law, and the names that are nominated to the MPC, which will give us an early clue to how far the State Bank's autonomy is really envisioned to go. But the real test will be when we all get a chance to read the first monetary policy statement put out by the new MPC, and see if and how it differs from those that the bank has been issuing thus far.

Published in Dawn, November 11th, 2015

Obama-Netanyahu talks

THEY met after more than a year and ritually emphasised the need for peace. But to any observer of US-Israeli relations, it is obvious that peace in the holy land was hardly the agenda when President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held talks at the White House on Monday.

A lot has happened to sour relations between the two. Israel is furious with the Democratic administration for the nuclear deal with Iran because it feels that Washington overruled its objections and has shown haste in signing the treaty.

More shocking for Tel Aviv, the powerful Israel lobby failed to pressure Congress into blocking the nuclear accord, thus paving the way for a gradual easing of sanctions against Tehran.

It is also widely believed that Israel felt that, for all practical purposes, the US-led agreement with Tehran undermined its military option against Iran.

The face-to-face meeting must have been embarrassing for the two because of the unprecedented insults heaped on a sitting American president and secretary of state by Israel's new spokesman, Ran Baratz. On social media, Mr Baratz accused President Obama of "anti-Semitism" and showed contempt for Mr John Kerry, saying he had the "mental age" of a 12-year-old.

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The issue for President Obama has been how to mollify Mr Netanyahu and the Israel lobby to ensure that the White House continues to have a Democratic occupant.

There is, of course, the price Mr Netanyahu may exact, for media reports say American taxpayers' annual dole to Israel could go up from \$3.1bn a year to \$5bn. Against this background, the two made a ritual reference to peace, while violence continues on the West Bank.

Before they met, President Obama said he would try to bring Israel and the Palestinian Authority on "a path toward peace" while Mr Netanyahu spoke of the two-state solution.

The only bit of realism came from unnamed American officials who said President Obama doesn't expect peace in Palestine till he leaves the White House in January 2017.

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Shout at the dollar

THE State Bank has blamed "recent newspaper articles" for sparking speculative sentiments in the money markets that have driven down the value of the rupee in the kerb market.

In a press release, it claims that a few articles have fuelled unease in the markets by questioning the quality of the reserves and the rising external borrowing.

The release aims to set the record straight by pointing out that the country's foreign exchange reserves sit at record highs, and debt sustainability ratios have actually improved since 2010.

Also read: [SBP Act amended](#)

The central bank has been concerned with the recent falls the rupee has seen in the open market, where its value against the dollar has been sliding sharply in the last few days.

Putting the blame on articles appearing in newspapers for this slide is surprising. If the situation in the money markets is so fragile that a few articles in the press can trigger negative sentiment, then clearly the fundamentals are not as sound as the central bank would like us to believe.

Movements of this sort in the exchange rate are rarely caused by retail consumers of foreign exchange, the ones most likely to be influenced by newspaper articles.

They are almost always the result of changes in the thinking of bulk suppliers, such as exchange companies, banks and traders.

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This segment is not likely to be influenced by what they read in the newspapers.

It is entirely probable that the surge in the dollar's value on the open market is the result of speculative activities and not connected to any sudden change in the underlying fundamentals.

The central bank ought to be looking for the reason behind the surge instead of blaming it on articles in the press. Such sharp swings are not new to the country's money markets, and may result from serious weaknesses in the structure of the market rather than critical commentary being aired by the media.

The State Bank should get its focus right when addressing this volatility of the exchange rate.

Published in Dawn, November 12th, 2015

Centre-Sindh spat

WE can all be excused for being left a little confused. A few days ago, the Sindh chief minister accused the federal government of not releasing its share of funds or extending a sovereign guarantee for various projects under way in his province.

The federal government shot back the next day saying if any funds or sovereign guarantees had been delayed, it was due to deficiencies on the part of the provincial government and its lack of capacity to utilise the funds.

The schemes in this regard included the Thar coal power project and the K4 water initiative that aims to double the supply of water to the city of Karachi through additional channels from the Indus river and storages.

Also read: [Qaim takes a swipe at PM over unmet promises](#)

None of the projects involved is minor or cosmetic in nature. In fact, the sheer importance of the projects being mentioned in this unusual exchange of heated words makes it important to understand where exactly the dysfunctions lie.

And that is what is so difficult to understand in this episode. Such affairs can often turn on points too fine for the average person to properly understand. Furthermore, both parties to the dispute have credibility issues.

For its part, the Sindh government has preferred to work with expensive reverse osmosis plants sourced largely through a

single company, without always ensuring proper after-sales agreements for maintenance and replacement of the filters, thus raising questions about the true intention of these deals. Having taken such a cavalier attitude towards its obligation to provide clean drinking water for its citizens, the provincial government is now faced with the uphill task of explaining its sudden outburst in the case of the K4 project.

The federal government is already perceived as a Punjab-based government that has difficulty seeing its obligations through the eyes of any other province, and particularly the city of Karachi.

Is the dysfunction in the execution of these projects stemming from real weaknesses on the part of one or the other party to the dispute?

Or do they stem from entrenched mindsets and ways of carrying on business that both these parties are well known for?

Wherever blame may ultimately lie, what is crucially important is for both the parties in this exchange to make a sincere effort to overcome their differences rather than continue to debate them in public.

The issues at hand are far too important to become bogged down in a game of mutual recrimination.

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Military's complaint

A DAY can make a great deal of difference. On Monday, the prime minister and his senior aides, along with senior military officials, met to review progress on the National Action Plan. The meeting concluded that progress in some key areas was not satisfactory.

Crucially, the official reports of the meeting did not specify what new steps were decided on to improve implementation of NAP in the areas where progress was found wanting.

The next day came the institutional blowback. In a blunt statement following the corps commanders' conference held on Tuesday, the ISPR communicated the military's unhappiness with the extent to which the civilian side of the state is allegedly lagging behind the military side in fighting terrorism and extremism.

Also read: [Implementing NAP is a shared responsibility, govt reiterates](#)

Clearly, it cannot be a welcome state of affairs when the military leadership is publicly assailing the civilian leadership of the country. What compounds that problem is that a day earlier the army chief himself participated in the NAP review meeting convened by the prime minister.

Could the specific concerns the army leadership has about NAP's implementation not have been communicated in private?

There is another aspect to the problem: are the military's claims of success in fighting terrorism and militancy really what they are made out to be? While no one would claim that the civilian side of the state is performing adequately, it is also the case that the civilian shortcomings are in full view of the public.

Is that necessarily so in the case of the military? When it comes to military operations in Fata, for example, are the frequent claims of sustained progress in any way independently verifiable?

While Operation Zarb-i-Azb has disrupted militant networks in North Waziristan and reclaimed territory that militant groups dominated for years, there was never any road map to success declared by the military in advance. That means there is no way of knowing if Zarb-i-Azb is going according to plan and original expectations.

Furthermore, with the majority of the IDPs yet to be resettled, it is not known at what cost the military successes have come. Consider the situation in adjoining South Waziristan, where a military operation launched in 2009 has yet to lead to the full normalisation of the agency.

Finally, presuming the military's intention is to work in coordination with a civilian leadership jolted into action, were Tuesday's statements via the media in any way helpful to the very goal the military is ostensibly trying to achieve?

In the realm of civil-military relations, a civilian leadership is unlikely to be humiliated or coerced into doing its job by the military. Such public pressure may in fact breed more

resentment among the civilian leadership and help thwart the very goal the military is trying to achieve.

Fighting terrorism and militancy must remain a national priority. The civilians need to do more. The military needs to be wiser.

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Nacta revival

INCREDIBLY, Minister of State for Interior Balighur Rehman blithely informed the Senate on Wednesday that service rules for the National Counter-Terrorism Authority have yet to be formulated — six years since Nacta was created, two years on from parliamentary legislation to strengthen the authority and a year since Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif pledged to make Nacta immediately functional as a cornerstone of the National Action Plan.

According to Mr Rehman, the non-formulation of service rules means that fresh recruitments cannot be made to Nacta and only deputation from the surplus pool of state employees is allowed.

Also read: [Nacta is functioning without formal staff, Senate told](#)

This rather astonishing disclosure is all the more incredible for being made in the very week that the military leadership and the civilian government have sparred over the alleged shortcomings on the civilian side of the fight against terrorism and militancy.

Nacta, after all, is the authority that is meant to coordinate between the various military- and civilian-led law enforcement and intelligence agencies of the state.

Does Nacta being stuck in limbo underscore the very point the military has so publicly made this week — that the civilian authorities are doing nowhere near enough when it comes to the fight against militancy?

Or is Nacta being stuck in limbo a symptom of military heavy-handedness and an unwillingness to treat civilian institutions as equal partners?

The truth lies probably somewhere in the middle. While bureaucratic torpor is the norm in all areas of the state, it is the political government's job to set priorities and make sure administrative matters are properly attended to. Section 3(a) of the National Counter-Terrorism Authority Act, 2013, states: "The authority shall be an independent body directly answerable to the prime minister". Section 8 states that there is to be an executive committee chaired by the minister for interior.

Explicitly, then, the buck stops with the prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, and his executive committee chairman, Nisar Ali Khan. Clearly, neither of those two individuals has done what is required of them under the Nacta law.

While the civilians can and should be blamed for the administrative failure to draw up service rules, there is some doubt whether Nacta can truly become the heart of national coordination and policymaking when it comes to fighting terrorism.

For that to happen the military leadership would have to accept the authority of Nacta — and also accept that civilian agencies are equal partners. There is no indication that the military is willing to do any such thing.

From the domination of the Karachi operation to demanding military courts because civilian investigators, prosecutors and courts were deemed inefficient, there are countless examples of the military approach that regards the civilian side of the state as inferior and unsuitable for anything other than taking orders.

A strong, independent Nacta is needed — but for that to happen, both the civilians and the military will need to change their attitudes.

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PM's Diwali message

SOMETIMES, in a society that has become unmoored from the basic principles of humanity, truths that should ordinarily be self-evident need to be articulated.

That is what Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif managed to achieve on his visit to Karachi on Wednesday when he spoke at a ceremony to mark the Hindu festival of Diwali. He stated the importance of unity among all religious communities living in Pakistan, and declared it was his duty to protect the minorities.

“If you are in distress, I will stand by you. Even if a Muslim commits an injustice, I will stand with the victim,” he said. He also appreciated the significance of Diwali, and the message of the hymns performed at the ceremony, and asked the organisers — the minority wing of the PML-N's Sindh chapter — to invite him to other religious festivals as well.

Take a look: [PM vows to protect rights of all religious communities](#)

These are fine words indeed, but they must not be empty words. The burden of the majority has grown heavy over these past few decades, and there is much to be done to reverse the tide of obscurantism that has been allowed to violate the rights of the minorities.

The inclusivity that the prime minister and other government officials accompanying him demonstrated by participating in the Diwali ceremony must be translated by the state into concrete actions in other spheres of life.

Although it is encouraging that a national commission for minority rights has been set up in compliance with the Supreme Court judgement of June 19, 2014, which provides a clear blueprint to address the persecution of minorities in Pakistan, such commissions should also be set up on the provincial level.

They would be better able to monitor the situation on the ground in, for example, cases of forced conversions, restrictions on religious practice, the incitement of blasphemy accusations, etc. Moreover, the evidence of religious prejudice against the minorities is not always writ large on the national canvas in incidents of outright physical violence.

It can be found every day, in towns and villages, in schools and places of employment, through an entire spectrum of slights and humiliations.

The PM on Wednesday lauded the role played by many Hindus in the development of Pakistan, an assertion that could be taken forward by the relevant authorities to include in school textbooks the profiles of role models from the minority faiths.

Pakistan's heroes need not only be those belonging to the majority.

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Worry over polio

THERE'S no denying that the scale of the challenge is enormous: 36 million children under the age of five to be reached, which will be done by 80,000 teams going door to door across the country in addition to thousands of others at fixed centres and transit points.

Yet as the relevant governmental machinery swung ponderously into action on Tuesday, kicking off the National Polio Campaign, there is reason to dwell on the fact that regardless of how daunting the goal seems, it is one that absolutely must be achieved: ensuring that each and every child within Pakistan's borders is vaccinated against polio.

Also read: [Countrywide campaign launched to fight polio](#)

This is a matter of crucial importance not just nationally but internationally. Along with Afghanistan, Pakistan is one of the world's last two polio-endemic countries. The third country that used to be ranked polio-endemic by the World Health Organisation, Nigeria, was taken off the list in September.

This is precisely why there is such anxiety over the polio vaccination effort in Pakistan. Globally, the number of cases reported in 2015 is at its lowest in history, according to a report by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, meaning that never before has the world been better placed to achieve complete eradication. Is Pakistan doing enough?

Though there have been recent improvements in the country's polio eradication efforts, there are reasons for scepticism.

It still harbours the widespread poliovirus and is not managing to close immunity gaps closely enough. Perhaps more worryingly, vaccination refusals continue to be reported, and some children have fallen victim to the disease despite being inoculated, implying that the efficacy of the vaccine had been compromised.

All of this can be explained by the lack of urgency over the issue evident where it matters most — amongst the political leaderships and other people of influence, such as religious leaders and the media. Until this changes, until the aura of polio being a 'soft' issue is stripped bare, it is hard to believe that the goal of complete eradication is within reach.

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Crafting a narrative

IT did not take long for the extreme right to sense an opportunity to claw back some space. At an event held on Thursday at the Darul Uloom Haqqania, clerics excoriated Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for describing this country as “liberal” and called upon the Supreme Court to take suo motu notice of his statement. According to the Haqqania madressah’s head Maulana Samiul Haq, the term “liberal Pakistan” was a violation of the nation’s ideology and he called upon religious leaders to put pressure on the government to implement an Islamic system in the country. Among the participants were several other ‘leading lights’ that occupy the ultraconservative niche on the ideological spectrum. These included Maulana Fazlur Rehman Khalil and Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, founders of the banned organisations Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Taiba, respectively.

It would perhaps be academic to point out that the prime minister had made use of the word “liberal” at an investment conference in the context of the country’s economy, not to describe Pakistani society. Right-wing ideologues such as Maulana Samiul Haq — also known as the father of the Afghan Taliban — and others are chafing under what they perceive as curtailment of the clergy’s influence compared to the carte blanche they enjoyed before the military action against terrorist sanctuaries located in the north. In the months leading up to the operation, they had positioned themselves as no less than brokers of peace between the Pakistani Taliban and the government. The attack on Karachi airport put an end to that farcical exercise; and the massacre at APS Peshawar on Dec 16 brought home, in the most horrific way possible, the

consequences of the decades-long policy of co-opting religious extremists as a tool of statecraft. The National Action Plan approved in the aftermath of that tragedy includes measures that the right wing is loath to concede to, such as the regulation of madressahs; and raids on some of these institutions have caused much resentment. The religious lobby is hitting back in the only way it can — by creating a false equivalence between liberality and moral depravity, between secularism and a repudiation of faith. It is the classic ploy to stoke the fears of a naturally conservative society.

However, while the right wing has fashioned its narrative to suit the circumstances, the government is falling short. There is confusion all around, not least because some of the state’s own actions demonstrate a reluctance to completely discard its old ways. Instead, ‘assets’ that toe the line continue to remain untouched, at liberty to undermine democracy and democratic values, and subvert the tentative counter-narrative that is beginning to emerge. We stand at an important crossroads, where prevarication is no answer. The government must take up the gauntlet and define once and for all, in clear, unambiguous terms, the future — and dare we hope, liberal — course for this nation.

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Myanmar elections

FOR Myanmar, the changes the recently held elections are ushering in are truly historic. Since the early 1960s, the country had been ruled by a military junta. The military only retreated slightly from its commanding position in 2011, when it handed over power to a quasi-civilian set-up. Even today, the men in uniform are seen as the real power running the state. And that is precisely why the election victory of the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy is even more impressive. On Friday, it was officially announced that the NLD had won a landslide — it now controls over two-thirds of the seats in parliament and will choose the next president. Though Ms Suu Kyi is constitutionally barred from becoming president (her children hold foreign passports) there is little doubt that it will be her vision that will guide the NLD. The democracy icon has faced various challenges throughout her career; she was under house arrest for nearly 15 years and often spent long periods away from her family. The fact that she has persevered and stayed true to her cause must be appreciated.

Though the election is being described as the first genuinely democratic exercise in 25 years, it is only the first step towards truly representative rule. After all, the powerful military still controls a quarter of the seats in parliament by default and can veto any constitutional changes. Ms Suu Kyi thus has her work cut out for her to ensure that the military is confined to the barracks and that lawmaking and governance remain within the purview of elected civilians alone. Another serious question regarding the truly democratic nature of the elections is the discrimination faced by Myanmar's Muslims. For example, Muslim candidates could not run for office, while members of

the Rohingya community — who are denied citizenship — could not even vote. In recent years, communal tension has flared in the country, largely exacerbated by ultranationalist Buddhist groups that have fanned anti-Muslim rhetoric. Ms Suu Kyi has long been hailed as a champion of democracy. However, when it comes to anti-Muslim discrimination in Myanmar, she has remained largely silent. Therefore, she must make it a priority to include all of Myanmar's ethnic and religious communities in national life, especially the long-suffering Rohingya. The country is emerging from decades of international isolation and to be fully reintegrated in the world community, it must project an inclusive image.

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Tourism property

A SUMMARY recently sent to the prime minister recommends that a 74-acre stretch of land in Gadani, Balochistan, owned by the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation be “disposed of through open auction”. Similarly, it is being recommended that Flashman's Hotel, located in the heart of Rawalpindi and also owned by PTDC, be leased out. These are just two of the PTDC-owned properties that now and then become the focus of dispute between the federal and provincial governments since the passage of the 18th Amendment and the devolution of tourism as a provincial subject. The government at the centre insists that, as Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid who also heads the PTDC board told this newspaper on Wednesday, the

tourism body is a “private limited company” and ownership of its properties has nothing to do with the devolution of tourism.

In point of technicality, this may be true. That, however, only underscores the federal government’s refusal to adhere to the spirit of the 18th Amendment in this matter. Across the country, the PTDC owns swathes of properties, many that have for decades been run as and are equipped with the necessary infrastructure of prime tourist destinations, guesthouses or resorts. This is especially evident in those parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the north in general that used to be tourist-magnets till Pakistan’s security situation began to unravel. Now that the subject has been settled as being within the purview of the provinces, and with improved security allowing tourism to start picking up again, the centre ought to be helping the provinces put their best face forward by allowing them to take charge of PTDC properties on condition that these are used to promote tourism and will not be sold off. The visitors, domestic as well as international, still constitute only a trickle. To turn this into a flood, all tiers of government need to play supplementing roles with the greater good in mind. It will not do for the federal government to appear mean-spirited in this regard.

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Night of terror in Paris

THE sheer terror of the Paris attacks is difficult to comprehend. Like the Mumbai attacks and the Peshawar school tragedy, there are some crimes that numb the mind for their monstrosity. Nine-eleven was the turning point in the fight against Al Qaeda. Paris may well prove to be the turning point in the fight against the militant group calling itself the Islamic State. If that fight is to be won, however, the nature of the threat must be understood and the instruments and policies used to fight it informed by lessons of the past, particularly those in the global fight against Islamist militancy over the past decade and a half. The eerie similarities between the Mumbai, Peshawar and Paris attacks all underscore a simple truth: radicalised militants view everyone as an enemy — Muslims, Christians, Hindus, non-believers, everyone. Just as Al Qaeda killed indiscriminately, so does IS. Yes, religiously inspired militants claim to be following the tenets of Islam, but they are wrong. And there is no more obvious refutation of that claim than by looking at the identity of the victims of Islamist militancy globally. Al Qaeda was a threat to the civilised world, as is IS now.

Religiously inspired militancy is no ordinary threat, however. Just as once the Afghan jihad morphed into the global Al Qaeda threat and Al Qaeda’s pre-eminence has been usurped by IS, defeating IS alone will not be the answer. Nor will it be easy. As is now widely accepted, a series of errors, spanning the last decade and a half and catalysed by the historic mistake that was the US invasion of Iraq, has led to the rise of perhaps the most formidable militant threat in modern history. How France, other Western powers and the US in particular will

react to the Paris attacks will have potentially long-lasting effects. Already in Syria, there is more of a policy disaster than any semblance of a winning strategy. Moreover, as was seen in the aftermath of the toppling of the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, it is equally important to have a well-informed strategy for stabilising post-conflict countries. Otherwise, all military gains will be lost — and even deadlier threats than Al Qaeda and IS spawned.

Where, though, is the Muslim world in all of this? The destructive competition of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East and the Muslim world in general appears to have stifled any pan-Muslim initiatives. Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia — each has a large population and high stakes in helping defeat militancy. In the Middle East, there are states that could urgently lobby the Muslim world for a united approach. But each and every Muslim-majority country appears to have some reason or the other to not provide leadership — even though Islamist militancy is perhaps a greater threat to the Muslim world than to the non-Muslim world.

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Fata's future

IN most of the rest of Pakistan, Fata is viewed as a rugged no-man's land populated by hardy tribesmen. The tribal region has also attracted negative attention for playing host to an array of militant actors, many of whom have declared war on the state. But often lost amongst these one-dimensional descriptions is the fact that the people of Fata do not enjoy the same rights as the rest of the country and are governed under a largely colonial regime. Yet calls for 'reform' in the tribal areas are getting louder and more frequent. On Thursday, senators from various parties in a special committee meeting criticised successive governments as well as the military establishment for failing to bring the tribal belt into the mainstream. During the proceedings, Federal Minister Abdul Qadir Baloch put forward three options for Fata's future: maintain the status quo and introduce a few legal changes; merge the region with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; or make it a separate province. Some months earlier, tribal MNAs had also called for merger with KP and rechristening Fata as a Provincially Administered Tribal Area.

Whether Fata is merged with KP or made into a separate province, two things must be considered: the changes should be well-thought-out and they cannot be put off indefinitely. After all, Fata's situation is not like Gilgit-Baltistan or Azad Kashmir — ie linked to a future cross-border settlement — and can be resolved relatively easily. What is essential is that Fata's MNAs, the national parliament as well as the KP Assembly work in tandem to arrive at a solution that is acceptable to the tribal population. Central to the final settlement should be the extension of the Constitution and fundamental rights, as well as

Pakistan's judicial system, to the region. Moreover, the changes ought not to be merely cosmetic; the region needs the education, health and economic infrastructure that can help bring it on a par with the rest of Pakistan. Yet those familiar with tribal society caution that change must not be abrupt; it should be incremental, and more importantly, have the input of local people. Much of the tribal region is currently witnessing counterterrorism operations by the military. The state needs to plan ahead so that once the military succeeds in permanently uprooting militants from the region, a viable system of civilian governance can be put in place. Fata must be brought in from the cold without delay.

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PPP's new 'uncle'

IT was a considerable treat for the followers of politics. Imran Khan donned the mantle of the wise elder to lecture Bilawal Bhutto Zardari on how to do politics; in response, Bilawal House sent the PTI chief some urgent reminders about what is — was — a good age to retire. Age has been a problem with both the PTI and PPP. Conventional thinking casts the young as impatient. On the other hand, the hasty steps taken by Imran Khan are often explained away by referring to his lateral entry into politics. Meanwhile, the age of its leaders is a source of some extra trouble for the PPP. But just as ungentlemanly remarks about the very experienced Sindh chief minister, Qaim Ali Shah, are routine, Mr Khan and others have frequently been

found impolitely trying to ridicule the young Mr Bhutto Zardari. He has been painted as a naïve, simple scion who ceremoniously flaunts the pictures of his grandfather and mother.

Let's not dispute Mr Khan's credentials as adviser in this case. Indeed, as an icon for Pakistan's youth for many generations now, he could say from experience when it is apt for a young lad to be pacing himself through a renowned university or a cricket field and when exactly a man is ready, or desperate enough, to try his hand at politics in Pakistan. He can further say that the 'uncle' is only repeating what father Asif Zardari declared not too long ago: Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is inexperienced and not ready for politics. But as he is known to display a childlike innocence and haste in doing things, Mr Khan is, perhaps, unaware of an important piece of history: when it comes to the incentive to fight, a PPP leader can respond to a challenge thrown by an 'uncle' or two. As the PPP seeks to recover its old anger and vigour, it is perhaps hoping to make good use of the presence of a new acrimonious, hostile 'uncle' towards making possible political gains.

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Army chief's US visit

AS the itinerary of Gen Raheel Sharif's visit to the US, makes clear, this will be no ordinary visit. From a democratic perspective, this is discouraging.

While Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's White House visit weeks ago yielded a meeting with President Obama and Maryam Nawaz joined US First Lady Michelle Obama to unveil a female education initiative in Pakistan, there was a sense the more meaningful discussions on national security and foreign policy would occur during Gen Sharif's visit.

Now, with the army chief set to meet virtually every senior security and military official in the US barring perhaps President Obama himself, there is clearly much serious business to be discussed.

While the military leadership has clearly grabbed a great deal of space for itself domestically, the government of Mr Sharif must be faulted too for this unhappy democratic state of affairs.

Have, for example, the prime minister and his senior aides really demonstrated much enthusiasm for tackling the complex problem that is Afghanistan or offered an alternative vision to the security establishment-led policy on Afghanistan?

Also read: [COAS to share ideas with US on Afghanistan](#)

While the domestic civil-military imbalance is worrying, there are also serious national security issues to be addressed.

The Paris attacks have shocked the world and made clear that the self-styled Islamic State's goal is to wage a global jihad on a scale that dwarfs anything Al Qaeda attempted.

Given the precarious security situation in Afghanistan and the widely acknowledged vulnerabilities that the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has to the IS ideology, there is an urgent need for stabilising political actions and greater cooperation in the fight against militancy.

In Afghanistan, that would mean first and foremost reviving the stalled dialogue process between the government and the Taliban.

While Pakistani officials have publicly suggested that the environment is not conducive for the immediate resumption of talks, surely the meetings in Washington this week can go some way to creating the conditions for a quick return to the negotiating table.

As the Afghan, US and Pakistani — and even the Chinese — states appear to have realised over the last year or two, there is a convergence of interests when it comes to keeping IS out of this region.

It will not be easy, however. As background statements by senior security officials indicate, the military establishment also wants to emphasise the challenges that India is posing to regional stability. Be it the so-called India dossiers or talk of a possible civil-nuclear deal with the US or concerns about the size and scope of the Pakistani nuclear deterrent, the military leadership appears keen to emphasise its India concerns.

While India does have the potential to destabilise the region by making unwise choices, it is also the case that the military leadership here appears to be largely in a complaining mode rather than seeking ways to keep tensions in check. A dose of positivity and pragmatism could go a long way.

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‘F’ in education

ASK anyone in a position of political leadership or public service how they feel about educating Pakistan’s young, and the response is predictable. Absolutely essential, they will say, and place education on top of the agenda.

Unfortunately, the hollowness of the rhetoric becomes immediately evident when some grim facts are viewed — even cursorily.

Last week, education campaigners Alif Ailaan released their Midterm Report Card for Members of the National Assembly.

Also read: [Did MNAs improve education in their constituencies? Barely, says new study](#)

This is an effort to assess the demonstrable change in educational realities in evidence since the 2013 elections that put the current lot of politicians in their seats of privilege.

In other words, have our members of the National Assembly taken an interest in and therefore improved the state of education in their own constituencies?

Sadly, this would not appear to be the case. The report card carried out its assessment of public schools on the basis of four heads: school facilities, student retention, gender parity and the student-teacher ratio.

Of the 272 MNAs, only three got an overall ‘A’ grade. That the constituencies of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and State Minister for Education Balighur Rehman scored ‘C’ speaks volumes for the apathy that reigns, as does the same grade for PTI chief Imran Khan — an irony given he is widely considered the most vocal proponent of bringing about change.

The problem, though, is more deep-rooted. Regardless of the sector, improvements can only come about when the stakeholders for change are people in a position to lobby with government.

Who are the stakeholders in public schooling? Overwhelmingly, the voiceless masses — for where in Pakistan could one find a child of parents who are even moderately well-off or influential studying in a public school?

In these circles, of concern are private schools which their offspring attend. And when there is a problem here, loud protestations are immediately in evidence: consider only the recent furore over the high fees being charged in the private sector and the efforts to rein it in.

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Here lies the crux of the matter. Until the representatives of the people have the same choice of educational facilities as is available to those who voted for them, little will change.

Perhaps the members of the house can make amends and create a constituency for the rapid overhaul of public-sector schooling by passing legislation that requires the progeny of all holders of public office to attend government schools.

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Lal Masjid memories

IN Pakistan, the feeling of déjà vu is all too familiar. We seem to be constantly moving in vicious circles, failing to learn from our many errors and, therefore, doomed to repeat them.

To most, the words Lal Masjid conjure up images of the 2007 fiasco that can be considered as the starting point of the current wave of terrorism that confronts Pakistan.

In most countries, the elements responsible for orchestrating a rebellion against the state would be behind bars, or worse. Not in Pakistan.

Take a look: [Security beefed up as Lal Masjid cleric launches fresh movement in Islamabad](#)

Here, one of the masterminds of the Lal Masjid episode — Maulvi Abdul Aziz — is apparently a free man, free to lead prayers and organise marches in the federal capital.

On Friday, he did just that, leading prayers in the Islamabad mosque and thereafter leading a procession.

The cleric announced he was kicking off a campaign for the “implementation of Sharia” in Pakistan, while he railed against “obscenity” and the “interest-based financial system”, as slogans of “jihad” were raised by his devotees.

This series of events bears an ominous resemblance to what transpired in the run-up to the 2007 confrontation, yet it is unclear why the state allowed the cleric to proceed with his plans.

This is a man whose name is present on the Fourth Schedule; he has openly threatened to unleash suicide bombers across Pakistan should he be arrested; he has spoken with great admiration about the murderous, self-styled Islamic State; he has justified the APS Peshawar atrocity by saying it was a “reaction” to the army’s actions.

All of these developments have occurred after 2007. Do such individuals not pose a direct challenge to the stated goals of the National Action Plan? Are they not the public face of the extreme militant right that seeks to remake Pakistan in its own twisted image through the use of blood and hate?

If so, then why is the state allowing them to carry on with their activities as if it were business as usual?

Bugti's invitation to separatists

Any development towards resolving the long-running insurgency in Balochistan is cause for cautious optimism

In a statement issued from Geneva on Sunday, Brahmdagh Bugti — president of the Baloch Republican Party — invited a number of Baloch leaders, including those heading banned pro-independence groups, for negotiations to sort out their differences.

He emphasised the importance of forging unity in their ranks in order to better represent the cause of the Baloch. While requesting that such a meeting be held within a month in Switzerland, where he currently resides in self-exile, the Baloch leader expressed his willingness to participate in the talks via video link if they were held in any other European country.

Also read: [Brahmdagh invites all insurgent groups for talks](#)

Mr Bugti's suggestion is a sound one: it is by now well known there are serious divisions in the hitherto unified insurgency, both over resources and strategy.

When the BRP leader in August said he was prepared to give up his demand for an independent Balochistan if the people so desired, and engage in dialogue with the government provided the military operation was halted and the forces withdrawn,

some separatist leaders voiced their displeasure at his about-turn.

For the provincial government though, it was a vindication of their attempts to bring the 'angry Baloch' to the negotiating table.

After all, Mr Bugti — given his antecedents as the grandson of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti whose death at the hands of the military exacerbated the current insurgency — was regarded as being the most recalcitrant of them all.

However, forward movement on that score hinges upon the Bugti scion's ability to convince his compatriots to forgo their armed struggle in favour of a political settlement, and this appears to be a step in that direction.

At the same time, the factors underlying recent developments should be noted. Mr Bugti's volte-face is believed to be linked in no small measure to the sustained security operations in his ancestral lands, home to the Sui gas field and where new, potentially yet more lucrative energy resources are waiting to be tapped.

Where the government is concerned — not to mention the military with its heavy footprint in Balochistan — the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has been the catalyst for a different strategy: no longer is it enough to merely contain the violence in Balochistan, mostly through brute force that has led to more alienation and reprisals.

That realisation explains the amnesty offered to insurgents renouncing violence, the tactic of playing up the spectacle of

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hundreds of purported rebels laying down their arms in response, as well as the approach to separatist leaders abroad.

For a viable peace, however, the state has to demonstrate the capacity to concede the legitimate grievances of the Baloch, not strong-arm its leaders into a humiliating surrender.

The question is: does it have the vision, or indeed the ability, to finesse a lasting solution from this moment?

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French air strikes

IN the aftermath of last week's atrocity in Paris, it is only natural for France to search for answers. While the country has begun a counterterrorism sweep within its borders, external action has also been taken.

This has come in the form of air strikes by French jets targeting Raqqa, the 'capital' of the militant Islamic State group in Syria.

This is not the first time Paris has participated in military action against IS; it is part of a US-led coalition that has been bombing the militant group in both Iraq and Syria. However, the most recent strikes are being seen as a symbolic move on part of the French government to hit back at IS, which has taken 'credit' for the Paris outrage, described by the French

president as an 'act of war'. The attacks in the French capital were reportedly planned in Raqqa.

Take a look: [France bombs IS HQ in Raqqa, hunts attacker who got away](#)

While IS is indeed a global threat — as the attacks in recent days, from Paris to Beirut, have shown — the international community needs to review its response to fighting the terrorist entity.

For example, beyond fulfilling the immediate thirst for retribution, what long-term effects will the French military action have on weakening and eliminating IS?

After all, the waters of Syria have already been quite muddied by foreign intervention; as mentioned, the Americans have been leading a coalition bombing IS since September 2014, while the Russians entered the Syrian theatre some months ago on the call of the Damascus regime to also target the self-declared caliphate.

Will the French effort add to the effectiveness of these actions? Instead of working at cross purposes, major regional and global powers need to combine forces and, more importantly, work with the Syrian and Iraqi governments to uproot IS.

For example, it has recently been reported that Iraqi intelligence had credible information about the Paris attacks. Considering that Baghdad and Damascus are on the front line in the battle against IS, they must be taken on board by external actors.

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Moreover, Western nations need to look internally at what factors are triggering their citizens to partake in acts of terrorism. For example, many of the suspected perpetrators of the Paris carnage were young French Muslims of immigrant origins.

Rather than making one-dimensional statements about battling terrorism, governments will need to tackle this menace on multiple fronts, including investigating the reasons behind radicalisation, and their long-term solutions.

Published in Dawn, November 17th, 2015

Umar Akmal again

UMAR Akmal is often in the news for on-field feats and failures — and now for off-field activity — just as the Pakistan Cricket Board is good at keeping everyone occupied even when the source of its concern is something other than the game itself.

The two have combined to bring to the audience yet another ‘exciting’ episode. The board acts, wherever it can, as a father whose duty it is to correct an immature son.

The details about why the young cricketer was accosted this time are blurred. Little is known beyond the fact that while in Hyderabad, a post-match outing did not go down well with the PCB’s top minders.

Also read: [PCB inquiry: I had permission to attend party, says Umar Akmal](#)

So incensed were they by reports of “unethical activities” that the selectors were asked to omit Umar Akmal’s name from the team for the forthcoming T-20s against England and serve a show-cause notice on the player.

PCB chief Shaharyar Khan sounded uncharacteristically impatient in one of the initial statements that came out after the action against Umar Akmal. Najam Sethi, another senior PCB official, indicated that whereas the board wanted to investigate the affair, obstacles were being created.

As insinuations go, this apparently meant that the player or those around him were concealing something. But events since then have not quite backed that early viewpoint.

Mercifully, for a country that can ill afford another scandal involving a national cricketer there has been some show of support for the ever-battling player, who is often accused of cockiness that is not always needed and which can — indeed, has already — greatly harmed his career.

This shouldn’t have been difficult to resolve.

The PCB needed to avoid overreacting and if it had some serious initial reports that it thought it had to probe, it needed to go about it as quietly as possible before making a public announcement.

The board was required to show the same caution it has displayed in dealing with other delicate issues to avoid undue

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embarrassment to itself and to the players it seeks to protect and promote.

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CPEC transparency

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor may be a genuine, transformational moment in the country's history, but, as with so much else under the present government, there is far too much secrecy and far too little transparency when it comes to the execution of colossal infrastructure and energy projects.

The sense that the PML-N government appears to be treating the economic corridor projects as some kind of gift to the nation — from the Chinese via the PML-N government to the Pakistani people — has been re-emphasised by a special bicameral parliamentary committee on CPEC.

Committee chairman Senator Mushahid Hussain announced recently that the committee members will travel to Sindh and Balochistan at the end of the month to inspect for themselves the progress on CPEC-related projects — this after stinging criticism by opposition parties and a far from robust defence by government officials of the PML-N's real intentions.

As ever, the crux of the matter remains whether or not the supposedly national CPEC will be used to disproportionately, and unfairly, benefit Punjab at the expense of the other

provinces. It is a potentially explosive inter-provincial issue that refuses to go away — and the PML-N must largely be blamed for the continuing political controversy.

Why is the government so loath to share comprehensive and up-to-date details on all CPEC-related projects with the public? Government officials may claim that there is an avalanche of data available, but in fact it is an uneven drip, drip, drip of information.

For example, why cannot there be a government-run online portal listing the various projects, the sources of funding, the stages of completion and weekly updates to publicly and unequivocally demonstrate that CPEC projects are being pursued evenly and in a cost-effective manner.

In addition to political speculation about a Punjab bias, there are very real concerns about the costs that CPEC projects will impose on the state.

As a report in this newspaper on Monday emphasised, many of the projects are to be financed by Chinese loans to the federal government that will impose significant and long-lasting costs on the state. For every dollar that is received as aid or a grant from the Chinese, there appear to be many, many more dollars that will have to be repaid over many years, indeed decades.

Why are the accounting and the long-term costs not being made public by the federal government?

In addition to the issue of overall costs to the state, and therefore the taxpayer, there is the question about how much of

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the spending on CPEC projects will accrue to Chinese companies and not to Pakistani talent.

While the political and military leadership have rightly pledged absolute support for the safety and security of Chinese personnel working inside Pakistan, there appears to be very little consideration given to employment opportunities for Pakistani or encouraging private-sector investment.

Local employment and investment should be a central objective of the CPEC projects.

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Politics of cricket

IT is unfortunate that, in response to what he saw as India's support for anti-Pakistan elements, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan chose to vent his anger on cricketing ties between the two countries.

Not only did he see such elements on the other side of Wagah working overtime to thwart attempts by Pakistan to host a series against India, he himself appeared to be aware of the power of cricket to score some quick political points.

If in the process, the minister was responsible for rejecting the legacy of his original mentor, he didn't seem to mind it.

The world and idiom has changed since Gen Ziaul Haq, the inventor of cricket diplomacy as it is understood in the contemporary context, charmed his way across the border and into the history books as the man who used the game to defuse serious tensions between two hostile neighbours.

Going by the speed at which fans are losing their trust in the potency of the mixture, more blame may be heaped on the late dictator — for putting cricket on a political course to its great detriment.

Times change. The same mix which helped us avoid a war at that time, casts a dark shadow now, creating a desire for separating politics from cricket.

For many weeks, the PCB was being urged to find a way back to a Pakistan-India game hosted by Pakistan — at home or on neutral territory. When some Indian politicians and groups attempted to attack the touring PCB duo of Shaharyar Khan and Najam Sethi a few weeks ago, it brought greater praise from those supporting the mission at home.

It was thought to be the right, reasonable answer to the madness displayed by those acting as a mob — it was the gentleman's approach to restore a gentleman's game.

Since then, the Pakistani side has been given cause enough to be upset by the Indian cricket board's insistence on having a series against Pakistan in India.

The PCB aptly calls it a breach of agreement. And it could well have continued to press on with the point without the support volunteered by the interior minister. Pakistan must not give up

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its strategy of politely arguing its case without a direct reference to politics as it has been doing.

There is only one way of going about it and that is to hope that the persistence will pay off. As they say, as always cricket will succeed.

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Access to justice

FOR any nation to live up to the claim that it respects and protects the fundamental rights of its citizens, it is essential for it to ensure justice for all.

Sadly in Pakistan, those who are wronged rarely see justice in a timely manner, if at all, especially if they number amongst the most unfortunate of creatures in this country: the ‘common man’.

At a Supreme Court hearing on Monday, the mother of Zain Rauf, who was killed in Lahore in April, told the court that she did not have the means to pursue her son’s murderers. Among the suspects — who were acquitted by a Lahore anti-terrorism court — is the son of a former minister.

Though one cannot comment conclusively on the details of the case, the helplessness expressed by the young man’s mother points to a major societal malaise.

The prosecution has claimed the victim’s family was forced to sign blank papers and was offered “monetary inducement”, while the woman told the apex court she had two daughters and could not fight “influential people”.

The sad fact is that in Pakistan, when disputes arise between two parties, the more powerful one can and does use money, threats and violence to silence the weaker party.

The state does little to protect the weaker segments of society from intimidation, often leading to a miscarriage of justice.

The government must provide capable counsel to those who cannot afford a proper legal defence, while the police need to protect complainants facing pressure and threats.

Unless the poor, the weak and the vulnerable are able to defend themselves in court, or freely testify against their tormentors, justice will never be served. In fact, if the current state of affairs continues, it will only fuel impunity as the powerful and well-connected will literally get away with murder, knowing that their wealth and influence can buy them ‘justice’ or ‘freedom’.

Moreover, it will further alienate the people from the judicial system, and indeed, from the state itself.

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When antibiotics no longer cure

THE general lack of awareness of medical matters, even amongst the educated, can lead to problems that become increasingly entrenched over time.

Consider, for example, the fact that across the country, at all tiers of income, there's a strong predilection among individuals for self-medication — antibiotics and other drugs are often bought over the counter without a doctor's prescription. Indeed, medical facilities and practitioners often note that many patients are brought in for treatment to a dependable facility when their complaint becomes needlessly complicated as they have consumed drugs without consultation.

Also read :[Thinking of taking antibiotics for a sore throat? Think again](#)

Often, the medicine is prescribed by an underqualified practitioner. How serious the scale of the problem is can be gauged by a report produced by the Pakistan Medical Association two years ago that claimed there were more than 600,000 quacks operating across the country.

Add to this the ease with which drugs that should only be taken when prescribed are available in the market and the issue takes on even more serious proportions.

It also illustrates how populations can fall headlong into the vortex of habitual misuse, a ready example being how common

it is for people to decide to take antibiotics for usual complaints such as colds and chills — even though antibiotics have no effect on viruses.

Efforts to legislate and regulate the sale, usage and prescription of antibiotics have been long overdue; the issue has hardly ever registered with the federal or provincial governments at any level.

There is no doubt that the failing is going to receive heightened attention in the coming months and years as the WHO warned on Monday that resistance to antibiotics has reached dangerous levels globally and if left unchecked, “will mean the end of modern medicine as we know it”.

In layman's terms, the overuse of antibiotics (whether prescribed or taken without consulting a doctor) is creating rapidly increasing strains of ‘super bugs’ that are resistant to the medicines, meaning that humanity is hurtling towards a “post-antibiotic era in which common infections will once again kill”.

Among the reasons identified by the WHO in its 12-country survey were widespread misunderstandings about the problem and causes, including the abandonment of treatment halfway, the ease with which antibiotics are available without prescription in many countries, and their indiscriminate use.

Notwithstanding all the other health problems Pakistan is bogged down in, this is one it will have to address — with some urgency.

At the moment, even statistics about antibiotic overuse are patchy, and where they are available, they are worrying. In its September issue, for example, the Pakistan Paediatric Journal warned that antibiotic prescription frequency in cases pertaining to children between one year and 15 years may be as high as 84pc.

WHO has launched its ‘Antibiotics: Handle with Care’ campaign. It is high time Pakistan began to plan along similar lines.

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Railways descent

‘HUMAN error’ is the refuge of officials who are asked to explain a major mishap in Pakistan. All too often the image of an errant pilot or driver is greeted by public calls for reforming the individual — although the suspicion remains that the institution the person worked for is being allowed to get away without a serious investigation.

The latest example is the derailment of the Jaffar Express in Balochistan’s Bolan area on Tuesday, in which the first suspect was the train’s driver who was among the at least 14 people killed. But as evidence emerged that the crash could have been caused by brake failure, the blame wagon changed course in the direction of those responsible for the maintenance of the Pakistan Railways stocks.

Also read: [Death toll from Jaffar Express accident climbs to 19](#)

The finger was pointed at the mechanics who ought to have ensured that the train’s brakes were in perfect running order before they signed the fitness certificate allowing it to set off from Quetta on Tuesday morning. But whereas this may be the routine start to the process of bringing the lazy and irresponsible to justice the exercise will remain incomplete unless there is a deeper probe into the mess that has existed for long in the railways and that goes beyond the fancy vows of those in charge of its affairs.

If initial reports about the accident indicate a casual attitude on part of the maintenance staff in Quetta, it is in sync with the lethargy that has come to be associated with this national service.

The railways minister has been constantly heard making popular noises about turning around the organisation. While some experts have found reason to praise Minister Saad Rafique, those with greater expertise in the field often caution against the much-celebrated surface changes that hide the ugly reality: that the railways’ infrastructure is in a shambles.

The truth is that whatever ‘improvements’ are carried out within the system in the name of safety, speed and reliability, are limited to the more visible and more privileged sections — for instance, the two favourite routes, the Lahore-Karachi and Lahore-Rawalpindi sections.

Areas such as Aab-i-Gum in Bolan stand by and are lost to officials until they abruptly become the news as in Tuesday’s accident when a driver tried to apply the brakes on a long slide.

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If this is human error the blame must rest at the top of the fragile system.

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Shaheen Air probe

IN Pakistan, officialdom usually tends to react to crises in two distinct ways: either the state overreacts, or it does little until a disaster finally strikes. In the case of the Shaheen Air plane that crash-landed in Lahore earlier this month, it appears that the authorities are overreacting where investigation of the flight's pilot is concerned. As reported, the Civil Aviation Authority's counsel has told an anti-terrorism court that a section of the Anti-Terrorism Act has been included in the FIR as passengers had "been terrorised", and to probe possible links of the pilot with "any terrorist organisation". Before we jump to conclusions, let us recall the details thus far. It has been reported that after the crash-landing, medical tests found that the pilot in question had imbibed unacceptable levels of alcohol and was fatigued; it has also been said that the aircraft had faulty landing gear.

Without doubt, pilots bear a major responsibility for passenger safety and there can be absolutely no excuse for operating an aircraft while inebriated. However, there should be a thorough probe into the incident by qualified, non-partisan professionals to determine just what went wrong. Clearly, booking the pilot on terrorism charges seems a tad extreme. Moreover, the

manner in which the individual was picked up by Punjab police personnel from Karachi is high-handed. Law-enforcers reportedly scaled the wall of his residence, barged into his room and manhandled him. If the investigation concludes that he was indeed operating the flight under the influence of alcohol, then he should be penalised according to the law. But, as we have indicated in our editorial today on the train tragedy, any probe into a disaster must go deeper into the malaise that afflicts a utility for the public, in this case the aviation industry. For example, if it is found that non-airworthy equipment was allowed to take off, all responsible must answer. A thorough probe will hopefully do much to help improve air safety in Pakistan and prevent similar incidents from being repeated.

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Islamophobia in the West

THE backlash was expected from the moment the grisly events on Friday evening in Paris last week began to unfold. Muslims across Europe and North America braced themselves for the ‘tsunami of hatred’ — as some of them put it — that they knew was coming.

Those apprehensions have been more than realised in the deluge of threats against the community: venomous phone and online messages; vandalism of mosques, Islamic centres and Muslim-owned businesses; individuals clearly identifiable as Muslim physically attacked; and vigils by Muslims for the Paris victims disrupted by racist, Islamophobic abuse.

Some politicians have capitalised on last week’s massacre to whip up already simmering sentiment against giving asylum to largely Muslim refugees fleeing war-torn Syria.

Governors of at least 26 US states have said they would bar Syrian refugees from resettlement in their states. Poland has called for a revision of the EU policy on the migrant crisis; Hungary and Czechoslovakia reiterated the view that terrorists would slip into the continent amongst the droves of refugees and wreak mayhem.

In short, it is exactly as the militant Islamic State group which carried out the massacre in the French capital, might have hoped.

There have been considerable level-headed analyses in the media along these lines; many individuals — including some

family members of the Paris victims — have also written movingly about their refusal to succumb to blind hatred that can only serve the militant organisation’s ends. However, right-wing hysteria — often underwritten by cynical political agendas — is firmly in the ascendant.

At this juncture, world leaders need to demonstrate statesmanship and a more nuanced understanding of the situation instead of pandering to their base. Referring to the migrant crisis, President Barack Obama has tried to steer the narrative in a more considered direction by saying, “We do not close our hearts to these victims of such violence and somehow start equating the issue of refugees with the issue of terrorism”.

His observation that there could not be “a more potent recruitment tool for [IS] than some of the rhetoric coming out of here in the course of this debate” aptly highlights the danger posed by the non-Muslim world giving in to xenophobic impulses.

President François Hollande too has also categorically stated that Islamophobia will not be tolerated. There need to be far more calls for restraint coming from the West.

At the same time, it is also a fact that Islamist violence in the world today has its genesis in long-festered grievances — unacknowledged, trivialised or deliberately misrepresented — such as the situation in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya etc.

Without addressing these issues in a meaningful way, there can be no real, long-term resolution of militancy.

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Meanwhile, for its part, the Muslim world, through the organisations that claim to represent it, needs to craft a collective, hard-hitting response to the depredations being committed in the name of Islam.

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Nandipur crisis

WHAT happens when a government shoves aside common sense and prudence, and makes an infrastructure project a matter of hubris?

The answer can be found in the auditor general of Pakistan's findings on the Nandipur power project. From the very outset, once the PML-N had made clear that Nandipur would be the project on which it would demonstrate its power-sector credentials and prove it could do what the PPP utterly failed to do, it was apparent that the power project was going to be a high-risk affair.

Already a lightning rod under the PPP, Nandipur had become a symbol of government incompetence, profligacy and worse.

Know more: [AGP faults Nandipur design, decisions](#)

Despite that baggage, or perhaps because of it, PML-N policymakers decided to throw caution to the wind and make outside promises that were going to be very hard to keep. It

was like tempting fate — and the gods were unlikely to be kind.

In the end, as the AGP report has suggested, the PML-N administration has proved to be like many dispensations before it — unwilling to make reasonable pledges and unable to deliver timely and cost-efficient results.

In a way, it is almost beside the point that no gross corruption has apparently been unearthed by the AGP.

Nandipur, in part because of the elevated status the government gave it, but also because of the political opposition's gleeful and exaggerated allegations, has at the midway point of this government become a symbol.

Electricity was the issue on which this government had staked its reputation and ability to deliver quickly and efficiently.

Two and a half years on, aside from a heavy emphasis on power generation — perhaps tellingly similar to the PPP's approach — there has been very little by way of power-sector reforms or overhaul of the transmission and distribution systems.

Were it not for the oil prices bonanza, it is more than likely that the PML-N would be presiding over a similarly collapsing system as under the PPP.

If there is a positive to be found in the Nandipur fiasco, it is that the PML-N, at least at the prime ministerial level, remains willing to acknowledge and confront mistakes and failures. But are lessons really being learned?

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If it weren't for the allegations of corruption and the PML-N's anxiousness to prove those allegations untrue, would there have been an audit into Nandipur? That appears to be unlikely. Which means that future bungling of projects is just as likely as before.

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Nuclear accord progress

THAT Iran has been faithfully implementing the July deal on its nuclear programme has been confirmed by no less an authority than the world's nuclear watchdog.

In a secret report for its board of governors, the International Atomic Energy Agency said Tehran had immobilised thousands of centrifuges at two of its atomic reactors and that it seemed to be hastening the pace of the Vienna accord's implementation.

The Iranian pace of 'disconnecting' the centrifuges at its Fordow and Natanz facilities makes sense, because as part of the deal with the P5+1 nations, the several layers of sanctions slapped on Iran must be gradually lifted. So far, according to the IAEA report, Iran has disconnected 4,500 centrifuges at the two nuclear reactors.

Also read: [Iran to meet Rouhani timetable on ending sanctions-nuclear chief](#)

This means none of the three sites producing enriched uranium for power production is functioning. Under the Vienna deal, Iran must reduce the number of operational centrifuges from 19,000 to 6,100. Of them, Iran was permitted to use 5,100 for power production.

According to the IAEA report, Iran was able to reduce the number of operational centrifuges in a month's time — Oct 18 to Nov 15 — even though immobilising the centrifuges is an intricate and time-consuming process.

The nuclear deal was criticised by hardliners, but by and large the Iranian people welcomed the breakthrough made in relations with the West, especially the US, by President Hassan Rouhani.

With parliamentary elections due in February, the Rouhani regime appears keen to carry out its part of the deal, hoping to cash in on the positive impact the easing of the sanctions will have on the Iranian economy.

During the last three years alone, Iran's oil revenue has gone down by \$160bn, and its overseas assets worth \$100bn remain frozen.

Once the IAEA officially verifies the Iranian measures, sanctions by the UN, US and the EU will be gradually lifted.

The progress on the implementation of the nuclear accord seems to be the only good news from the chanel house that is the Middle East.

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Introspection after polls

THE second phase of the local government elections has by and large delivered the projected results. It has provided expected lessons to everyone — from the political parties to those who conduct the polls to the media. The main message is that it is hazardous to now blame shortcomings on the lack of practice.

There has to be some other, more plausible justification. Or better still, there have to be improvements. The Election Commission, for instance, must no more claim undue allowance for its mistakes. The media must not go on wanting to create excitement while overlooking any false alarm it has set off.

Among the political parties, the PML-N was likely to dominate in Punjab and the PPP was being tipped as ready to prove its firm grip on Sindh. If ever there was an upset in an area possible, it could come about in the PPP's territory.

This is precisely what happened when Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's party suffered a setback in Badin, which should open the door for some urgent introspection and stir pro-people activity.

Zulfiqar Mirza's challenge supports the argument that, given a viable alternative, it is possible to have some kind of an opposition party in the province — other than, of course, the MQM, which is a force in the urban areas.

Without any doubt, with Karachi to have local polls in the third phase in December, and with its positive performance so far,

particularly in the second phase, the MQM has shown signs that it is ready to fight it out politically.

This is a good sign for Sindh and those who believe, ultimately, in political solutions to divisive issues.

The Mirza message from Badin could be that dissidents are more able at confronting their old outfits, which in turn should add to the difficulty that the PTI is facing in Sindh as well as in Punjab. Imran Khan's camp cannot be content with coming second in the biggest province of the country.

In sum, the PTI must find leaders at the provincial level who have clear and genuine chief ministerial aspirations. It cannot do without prominent leaders at the district levels — just as the PML-N would be very keen to protect the highly centralised system.

Having swept Punjab as if out of habit and hence carrying extra responsibility to deliver, the PML-N will be, at one level, careful not to create conditions which could lead to the formation of troublesome groups at the local government level, and that could challenge the party hierarchy.

But the ruling parties would be secure in the knowledge that these local governments are not as empowered as was once envisaged.

Indeed, well-wishers want the local governments to grow teeth fast and acquire strength quickly so that they can press for a meaningful presence among the people who have chosen them as their representatives.

Ethnic profiling

A NEW report by Human Rights Watch makes for a distressing read. Titled *What Are You Doing Here?: Police Abuses Against Afghans in Pakistan*, it paints a dismal picture of the worsening plight of the country's Afghan refugee population.

Pakistan has hosted millions of refugees from Afghanistan since the late 1970s, and it now contains one of the largest displaced populations in the world: the UNHCR counts 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees and about one million undocumented Afghans living here.

True, the status of the refugees was never enviable to begin with; many were relegated to the margins of society to eke out a living as best as they could.

Also read: ['Maltreatment of Afghans peaked post-APS attack'](#)

Nevertheless, for the most part, the state's approach towards the refugee population was at least civilised; even after the Soviets began pulling out of Afghanistan in the late 1980s, and the world's focus shifted to other trouble spots around the globe, the state here did not vociferously demand their return and, instead, continued to spend considerable resources on this hapless lot.

Things appear to be changing now, especially in the wake of the Army Public School massacre in Peshawar last year, which led the state to introduce a slew of security measures designed to crack down on militancy and a religiously motivated narrative.

As documented by HRW, Afghan men are being arbitrarily arrested and beaten, their families harassed, their homes and places of work actively targeted — so much so that some are returning to Afghanistan despite the desperate conditions prevailing there.

This growing sentiment against the refugees, some of whom have been accused by law-enforcement agencies of having links with militant groups, is not incomprehensible: minority communities in other countries, too, are targeted for the perceived sins of a few among them.

But it is distressing that many people here are unconcerned that the Afghans — and even Pakistani Pakhtuns as this newspaper's special report published on Wednesday shows — are being subjected to the same ethnic profiling that they themselves might encounter in the West in these times.

It is the state that leads the narrative. And if it continues to subject the Afghan refugees in Pakistan to discrimination, physical violence and intimidation, it will only encourage other communities to follow suit.

No crime should go unpunished. But holding a whole community responsible for the acts of some among its ranks is not the way to improve security conditions. The state should protect the refugees, not harass them.

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Any hope for Syria?

LET us face a harsh reality: the militant Islamic State group in all its hideousness has made the world forget Syria's human tragedy, for such is the callousness of the global community that the number of Syrian dead has become a statistic — it does not matter whether it is a quarter million or 300,000.

Last week, diplomats from 17 countries met in Vienna and chalked out a road map that will take at least two years to give Syria peace, a provisional constitution and an elected government. However, President Barack Obama and President Bashar al-Assad both disrupted the plan when they made it known what they thought of the Vienna exercise in diplomacy.

Also read: [Hopes for peace in Syria dim after Assad, Obama remarks](#)

The American leader said peace could not be restored unless Mr Assad quit, while the latter believed he could not visualise an election while large swathes of Syrian territory remained under the dissidents' control.

The entry of various Islamist militias into what originally was a struggle between the Baathist regime and pro-democracy forces radicalised the character of the conflict.

Things worsened as IS began an offensive that took the fanatic hordes from Iraq's Anbar province to the Turkish border. Since then, a mysterious status quo has prevailed, with the US-led coalition failing to push IS back.

With Paris now dominating the headlines, only France seems eager to go after IS. America insists it, too, is keen to degrade the group, but there is no evidence that it has succeeded in mobilising its European allies and the Gulf states to put their shoulder to the wheel.

Unless IS is routed in Syria, there is no possibility that any peace plan can progress. Deferring a major onslaught against IS only helps the Assad regime and prolongs the Syrian people's suffering.

At the same time, a large-scale Western invasion could be misunderstood and prove counterproductive, unless regional states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran cooperate and take on the military challenge to roll back the tide of the militant group.

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Signals from Washington

AFTER the hype surrounding last year's trip, Gen Raheel Sharif's second visit to Washington DC as army chief was more workmanlike in tone. Following civil-military tensions that erupted in the run-up to Gen Sharif's trip, it appears both the American hosts and their Pakistani visitor want to send a signal that the security-focused talks were not meant to sideline the political government. They only partly succeeded. The official White House readout on Gen Sharif's meeting with US Vice President Joe Biden referred to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's breakfast meeting with Mr Biden on Oct 22 and seemed to suggest that this week's visit was a follow-up. But such elliptical messages can only go so far. A far more powerful signal would have been sent if the two trips had been merged and the prime minister and army chief travelled to the US together. While there may be problems of protocol with a joint trip and Gen Sharif has specialised military issues to discuss with his American counterparts, a joint set of meetings would have signalled that the civilian set-up is not considered peripheral to national security and foreign policy.

Yet, there are undeniably important bilateral issues to be discussed regardless of the state of civil-military relations inside Pakistan. While details are scarce — the ISPR has offered only the barest of outlines regarding the various meetings and US officials have been similarly reticent — it is likely that the results of the discussions will start to be felt in the weeks and months ahead. Most obviously, given the uptick in activity surrounding the resumption of stalled talks in Afghanistan, there could be some kind of fresh push for peace negotiations. With the Pakistani state having demonstrated its

bona fides when it comes to making talks a possibility, perhaps it is time for the outside powers to take Pakistan's concerns more seriously. While Afghan President Ashraf Ghani still appears to be a potentially credible peace partner, Pakistan has legitimate complaints when it comes to the actions and rhetoric of the more hawkish elements in the Afghan state apparatus. From better border management to curbing the activities of anti-Pakistan militants in Afghanistan to working with Pakistan to nudge the Taliban to the negotiating table, it is also counterproductive to put the full weight of expectation on this country alone. If stability in the region is to be a shared goal, then achieving it must be a shared responsibility.

Lessons must also be learned from the abortive talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban earlier this year. There is a fine line between encouraging the process of talks and rushing it. Immediate breakthroughs are unlikely and the process is likely to be very frustrating for all sides. Hopefully, Gen Sharif and US officials are working towards a road map for a sustained reconciliation process in Afghanistan.

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Militancy far from over

AS three separate incidents in different parts of the country showed on Friday, despite continuing military and law-enforcement operations in the northwest of the country and Karachi, the militant menace is far from defeated. If anything, these attacks show that extremist fighters are lying low and waiting for opportune moments to hit back at the state and society. In the first incident, four Rangers' personnel were gunned down in the Ittehad Town locality of Karachi outside a mosque they were reportedly guarding during Friday prayers. Meanwhile, in the KP town of Charsadda, two traffic policemen were killed in what police officials have dubbed a targeted attack believed to be linked to militants. In the third incident, two workers of a media house were injured when the offices of the organisation came under grenade attack in Faisalabad. Punjab counterterrorism officials had issued a warning that extremists linked to the militant Islamic State group would attack media houses in Lahore, as well as army and police targets elsewhere in Punjab. On the other hand, police officials in Karachi believe fighters from the banned TTP's Swat chapter may be involved in the attack on the Rangers. The group has maintained an on-again, off-again presence in the Sindh capital, and appears to have struck when it found the 'right' moment. The Rangers have led the law-enforcement operation in Karachi that was launched in September 2013 and which has largely zeroed in on religiously as well as politically motivated militants, along with other violent criminals.

Due to advance intelligence, security around media houses in Lahore had been tightened, which is possibly why the attackers

turned their attention to Faisalabad. The lesson, then, from Friday's incidents is that actionable intelligence can be critical in pre-empting or raising defences against terrorist attacks. Therefore, the military and civilian intelligence and security apparatus need to keep an ear to the ground to intercept militant communications in order to thwart future attacks. Moreover, the momentum against militant outfits must be sustained as these groups are far from neutralised. An important element in defanging militant groups in the long run — apart from dismantling their infrastructure and ability to organise — is to prosecute those elements in society who are unabashed cheerleaders of violent religious militancy in Pakistan. The clerics of Islamabad's Lal Masjid, who have again resumed their activities, are a prime example of this breed of militant sympathisers.

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Bangladesh trials

GREAT harm can be wrought if the line separating punishment from vengeance becomes blurred, making it all the more urgent to not just ensure that justice is done, but that it is also seen to be done. Unfortunately, Bangladesh stands poised on the brink of this misstep as regards the controversy that surrounds the trials taking place of people accused of having committed atrocities during the period of the 1971 war. The process of investigating the alleged abuses was initiated in 2010 by the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed with opposition parties maintaining that the trials were being used as a political tool. The government denies this, but given that there are doubts that the proceedings meet international fair trial standards, the distrust remains. This latter point was underscored on Friday when Human Rights Watch, while urging the Bangladesh government to suspend the executions of two opposition leaders convicted of war crimes, said that “Justice and accountability for the terrible crimes committed during ... [the] war are crucial, but trials need to meet international fair trial standards. ... Unfair trials can’t provide real justice, especially when the death penalty is imposed.”

The two opposition leaders whose executions are being referred to here are Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, secretary-general of the Jamaat-i-Islami, and Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, earlier a legislator from former prime minister Khaleda Zia’s Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Both have been handed down the death penalty for war crimes and on Wednesday, the Bangladesh Supreme Court rejected their final appeal against their sentences, paving the way for their execution unless the president grants them clemency on the

basis of their mercy petitions. For the convicted men, the death sentences ought to be suspended in the interests of humane treatment and the irrevocability of this penalty — which this newspaper has always opposed. But for the reputation of Bangladesh itself, it is important that the standards that prevail at these trials be drastically improved and the process be stripped bare of any vestige of political motivation.

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Dossier diplomacy

WHAT happens when those who aren’t supposed to be conducting foreign policy assert themselves and those who are meant to be doing so meekly surrender?

The case of the so-called India dossiers is an illuminating answer. Last week, the adviser to the prime minister on foreign affairs, Sartaj Aziz, caused a stir in parliament and outside by suggesting that the three dossiers prepared for the yet to be held NSA meeting between Pakistan and India did not contain any “material evidence”.

A day later, Mr Aziz tried to clarify his comments while replying to a question in the National Assembly, but the damage was done — clearly, the federal government is not on the same page as the military leadership when it comes to dossier diplomacy. This is unsurprising. It has not been clear

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what the dossiers are meant to achieve in the bilateral relationship.

Also read: [Dossiers on Indian terrorism have irrefutable evidence, asserts FO](#)

To be sure, there is a strong likelihood that there is a great deal of truth to what has been alleged about Indian involvement in Fata, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi.

While the jihad connection and Pakistan's support for the people of Kashmir has dominated the storyline, there is a long history of India trying to find and exploit security vulnerabilities inside Pakistan.

Even the MQM, which long denied any links between its members and the Indian security establishment, has publicly admitted that some of its cadres have received training in India, though the party said it was not its official policy.

Yet, when the dossiers were compiled to take to the NSA meeting, and then when that meeting was postponed they were shared with the UN secretary general's office and US secretary of state, what was it meant to achieve?

Surely, the Indian state – its national security adviser no less — is aware of its intelligence apparatus in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Can the state here realistically hope to deter Indian interference inside Pakistan through dossiers? It is unlikely in the extreme.

More likely, the security establishment here is reacting to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's insistence that talks

with Pakistan hew to a one-point agenda – terrorism. Raking up allegations of Indian meddling follows the old tit-for-tat formula that has helped bog down Pakistan-India relations for decades. But what is the alternative?

The civilian government needs to rethink its dealings with the military particularly when it comes to India.

By reluctantly going along with security establishment demands and later showing its disinterest, the PML-N government is unwittingly sending the wrong signal to India too, making it even easier for New Delhi to reject meaningful talks with a lame-duck government in Pakistan. Internal coherence is a prerequisite for strong external projection. The military leadership needs to absorb that lesson too.

Female franchise

THE more things change, the more they remain the same — unless some brave individuals challenge the status quo, and unless political ambitions are in danger of being thwarted.

The local government elections in Punjab on Thursday were edifying in several respects where female franchise is concerned.

In village Laliani, Sargodha district, residents maintained their execrable, decades-old practice of disallowing their women to vote. Mauza Mohripur in Khanewal district would have also witnessed complete female disenfranchisement, had it not been for one woman, Fauzia Talib, who defied tradition and voted.

Meanwhile, a rather different scenario was observed in the Paikhel union council of Mianwali where women are also prevented from exercising their right of franchise as a matter of course.

Here, a rumour that the ECP would hold re-election in any UC where 20pc of women voters did not cast their ballot, prompted candidates to hurriedly set aside what they earlier considered a venerable tradition, and allow women to vote.

A patriarchal society does not easily let go of customs based on antediluvian notions of honour; it fears that any expression of personal opinion on the part of its women will spill over into other aspects of life and undermine the very bedrock of its existence.

However, the Mianwali incident illustrated how swiftly ‘tradition’ can be cast aside when it is politically expedient to do so, which only serves to highlight the rank hypocrisy that underlies this smokescreen.

Meanwhile, the example of Ms Talib shows there are courageous individuals who are willing to stand up to misogyny and unjust customs: the ECP must reinforce their stand by imposing such sanctions as allowed by law against those who violate the electoral code.

In the run-up to the general elections in 2013, the body had made it abundantly clear it would not tolerate any attempt to disenfranchise women, often achieved through agreements among local candidates and right-wing pressure groups.

To its credit, it has followed through in some instances — with salutary effect. Most recently, it ordered re-polling in Lower Dir’s PK-95 constituency when no women turned up to vote in the by-election on May 7 — a step, it is believed, that led to women being allowed to participate in the Upper Dir by-election a few months later.

For its part, parliament should enact legislation that re-polling must be mandatory at polling stations where results show a less than 10pc turnout of registered women voters.

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Vulnerable Africa

WHILE the Middle East, South Asia and now, increasingly, Europe feature prominently in discussions about transnational Islamist militancy, one region that has been relatively neglected in the debate is Africa.

But as the recent assault on a luxury hotel in Bamako, capital of Mali, by militants reportedly belonging to a local Al Qaeda affiliate shows, parts of the African continent are quite vulnerable to the threat of militancy.

Over 20 people were killed in the nine-hour siege on Friday in the Malian city. Guests from a number of countries were lodged in the hotel when the militants struck.

Know more : [State of emergency declared in Mali](#)

This is not Mali's first brush with religiously inspired militancy; in 2013, radical Islamist fighters tried to take over the vast West African country and were only halted due to French military intervention.

Mali is not alone where the presence of Salafi 'jihadists' is concerned. Across Africa — especially in its northern half — an array of such groups is involved in insurgencies of varying degrees of intensity.

In western Africa, Al Qaeda-linked groups as well as the bloodthirsty Boko Haram outfit maintain a presence. In the north, again Al Qaeda's affiliates operate in the countries of the

Maghreb, while fighters loyal to the militant Islamic State group hold sway in Egypt's Sinai.

In the Horn of Africa, Al Shabaab based in Somalia has been responsible for some of the deadliest violence in the region.

Africa has suffered much due to repressive dictatorships, corrupt autocracies, tribal and ethnic bloodshed and border disputes among states.

The continent does not need an additional source of instability in the form of jihadist groups to further rock the boat. These murderous outfits have spilled the blood of hundreds of Africans; if allowed to establish themselves across parts of the continent they will further terrorise its people, along with destabilising regions located near Africa.

That is why the African Union should take up the issue and formulate a continent-wide strategy to battle the menace of militancy.

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Religious extremism in Jhelum

THE modus operandi was a distressingly familiar one — an allegation of blasphemy, incitement by local mosques, and a frenzied mob venting its rage on the impugned individuals/community.

However, the government's response to events in Jhelum last week could well determine whether this country is indeed making a break from a past replete with condemnable instances of violence in the name of faith.

The incident in question began to unfold on Friday evening when workers at an Ahmadi-owned factory in the city alleged that pages from the Quran were being desecrated on its premises.

Take a look: [Normalcy returns to Jhelum](#)

Announcements made from area mosques further inflamed passions, and a mob — including people from surrounding villages — stormed the factory, setting it on fire.

The next day, an Ahmadi place of worship in nearby Kala Gojran was ransacked by crowds who, after throwing its contents out in the street and torching them, proceeded to occupy the building in the name of converting it into a mosque.

That no one lost their life in the violence is extremely fortunate, and probably due in large measure to attempts by the

administration to get people out of harm's way as well as the fact that the army moved quickly to quell the rioting in this garrison town.

Meanwhile, cases have been filed against around 80 alleged attackers under the Anti Terrorism Act.

However, what happens next is crucial. In post-National Action Plan Pakistan, with its avowals of dismantling the infrastructure of religious extremism that is the recruiting ground for ideologically inspired militancy against which the country is at war, Jhelum is no less than a test case.

It is a test case because it pushes the boundaries of what many Pakistanis consider religious intolerance: the target is a community against which religious discrimination in this country is not just socially entrenched, but also deeply institutionalised — and even celebrated as a virtue in certain quarters.

Are there going to be exceptions to action against all forms of religious persecution? Is not an attack on a place of worship — any place of worship — an attack on the fundamental rights of that community to freedom of religion?

It also bears asking why mosques in Jhelum chose to incite violence at this juncture when the state has been clamping down on hate speech — one of NAP's 20 points — which has a proven record of instigating murder particularly when delivered from the pulpit.

Cases have been filed against a number of clerics on this charge; some have even been sentenced to prison for several

years. In the present instance as well, the full force of the law must be brought to bear against the individuals concerned.

A majority community must use its strength not to oppress minorities — for that is only evidence of its own moral frailty — but to guarantee their inalienable right to live with dignity as equal citizens.

Published in Dawn, November 24th, 2015

Stuck in the past

IT was the most mundane of settings: the inauguration of a small stretch of motorway connecting Khanewal and Multan. But, perhaps in a sign of how recent civil-military tensions have frustrated and irked the civilian government, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif chose that otherwise innocuous moment on Saturday to rake up the past.

According to the prime minister, the coup that toppled the last PML-N government in 1999 had thrown off course economic progress and infrastructure building in the country, and the PML-N was now having to put right the many policy blunders and oversights made in the years since it was last in power.

Also read : [PM inaugurates Khanewal-Multan section of motorway](#)

Clearly, there is some truth in what the prime minister claimed — the Musharraf dictatorship was unconstitutional; democracy suffered; and some of the roots of the energy crisis lie in the decisions made in the early years of this century. But what is the point of dredging up that history just at this moment?

More importantly, notwithstanding the PML-N's zeal for infrastructure and energy projects, is the PML-N really putting the country on the path to sustainable and inclusive growth?

Too often it appears that this government, and the prime minister in particular, are still stuck in the past.

In a week in which the Musharraf treason case is likely to be back in the spotlight, does Mr Sharif have his mind firmly on the challenges of today or is he still trying to settle scores from the past?

The trial of Pervez Musharraf is necessary for a host of historical, constitutional and democratic reasons — but the government has not gone about it the right way or for the right reasons.

Moreover, if there is a lesson to be drawn from the past, it is that democratic institutions need strengthening, both to thwart a military takeover and to ensure that the state is focused on sustainable and inclusive growth.

When it comes to reforms and strengthening institutions, however, this government's record is anaemic at best. Whenever there is a push for change — be it legislative activity or administrative restructuring — it appears to occur at the behest of other institutions.

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Consider how in the days since the military publicly reprimanded the government for the quality of its governance, there seems to have been a spurt of activity on legal reforms.

Perhaps what Mr Sharif should realise is that like the Lahore-Islamabad motorway could not save democracy in 1999, infrastructure projects alone are not the right foundation for a strong democracy.

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Killing of journalist

THE murder in Kohat of Hafeezur Rehman, chief editor of a local weekly newspaper and the president of the cable TV network owners association, appears to be yet another chapter in the saga of violence against this country's journalists.

While it may be too soon to authoritatively say that he was targeted as a result of his profession, this much is obvious: across the country, those whose duty it is to report on events regularly come under fire from extremists — and sometimes even by state-sponsored actors.

Further, the modus operandi of the attack on Hafeezur Rehman was the same as the one employed in the killing in Tank earlier this month of journalist Zaman Mehsud, responsibility for which was claimed by the banned TTP.

Also read: [‘More journalists killed in Pakistan than any other democracy’](#)

Then, two weeks ago, Mohammed Afzal Mughal, vice president of the Balochistan Union of Journalists, was picked up by a law-enforcement agency; he was released the next afternoon, perhaps in part because his plight was immediately made public nationwide by the media.

And last week, the Faisalabad bureau office of Dunya TV was targeted with a hand grenade, leaving three people injured.

Not even a month has passed since the UN marked the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists on Nov 2.

The occasion was in Pakistan highlighted by most media houses that reiterated their call for the government and its justice system to forcefully pursue cases where media employees are harassed.

Yet the only two cases where the murders of journalists have seen pursuit and sentencing are those of Daniel Pearl and Wali Khan Babar, the former as a result of international pressure and the latter after much prodding locally.

The killing of Saleem Shahzad remains unresolved, to say nothing of cases where death has not been an outcome.

Until the state takes measures to end this culture of impunity, few media persons will be able to say that they can discharge their obligations the way they are supposed to.

Regional connections

THE latest Joint Economic Commission session between Pakistan and Afghanistan has ended without any breakthrough, and that is regrettable.

This was the 10th JEC session, and the first one following Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's visit last year; both sides still aired more or less the same views they have always expressed following the extensive talks, and the only progress to show was on paper.

Kabul voiced disappointment at the pace of progress in implementing the 48-point agenda agreed upon during President Ghani's visit, while Islamabad pointed to thorny "security issues" as the main sticking point.

Take a look: [Pakistan ready to help Afghanistan in its quest for peace, says Nawaz](#)

The raft of agreements that now await implementation between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan makes an impressive list now, but the situation on the ground stubbornly refuses to budge.

This makes for a sad sight because both parties involved have much to gain from advancing the mutually agreed agenda for enhancing connectivity between their countries.

Kabul has long demanded access to New Delhi for its trucks, as well as permission to carry commercial cargoes back. India too

has long asked for overland access to Kabul from the Wagah border.

The matter remains stuck due to Pakistani fears that such connectivity could be the means of expanding the Indian presence in Afghanistan, with security implications for Pakistan.

The deep irony here is that greater regional connectivity is the best guarantor of regional security, while at the same time it is perceived as a potentially destabilising element.

Given the extreme reluctance of the government in India to engage with Pakistan at the moment, it appears that hopes for a breakthrough in the near future in the matter of overland transit trade between Afghanistan and India are dim.

But the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan goes beyond India, and so does the dialogue coming out of the JEC sessions.

Talks to advance the import of electricity and natural gas from Central Asia to Pakistan appear to have made much more progress than the question of transit trade, but thus far the projects in question — Casa 1000 and Tapi — also have large security-related question marks hanging over them.

The success of these projects is closely linked to that of the reconciliation process in Afghanistan. And once again, the stakes that are being held hostage by security considerations are far too large to ignore since the energy surpluses of Central Asia are a natural solution to the energy deficits of South Asia.

Crucial to the logjam is the fact that both India and Pakistan feel they can get what they want without engaging the other, a perception that has the potential to freeze the status quo indefinitely into the future.

The just concluded 10th JEC session has illustrated how considerations growing out of an antiquated mindset and a retrogressive brand of geopolitics can stall initiatives that have the promise to solve problems in the 21st century.

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Monetary policy fears

FOR the first time this year, the State Bank has said that “headline inflation is expected to reverse its declining momentum” in the months to come.

On two occasions earlier this year — January and March — the central bank had also cautioned about a possible reversal in declining inflation, but that note of caution was pegged on a hypothetical “increase in aggregate demand” and possible reversal in the downward trend of oil prices.

Also read: [State Bank holds fire on policy rate](#)

All the three other monetary policy statements since March saw continuing decline in inflation in the months that followed.

Moreover, the warning note in the latest monetary policy statement is based on market surveys, meaning it is empirically grounded and not deduced, and therefore far more likely to drive the direction of future interest rate decisions.

If the findings of the surveys that the bank is relying on are borne out, it could prove to be a significant macroeconomic turning point.

The statement falls short of reasonable expectations in its treatment of the developments on the external sector. In September, the bank had flagged exports and foreign direct investment as “imperative for sustainability of external sector”.

This time, after noting “a year on year 10.6pc contraction in exports”, the bank has left us simply with the advice that “continued flow of external resources” is required to maintain stability in the balance of payments. We are not told what to expect regarding this continued flow that appears to be so important.

The State Bank appears to have retreated from its earlier cautionary soundings about mounting external debt service obligations, and it is difficult to escape the impression that this has been done at the behest of the government which enjoys basking in the glow of the reserves that it claims to have accumulated.

This is a pity because external debt service obligations remain a key area of concern, especially given the resumption of Paris Club repayments in 2017 that were rescheduled in the days following the events of 9/11.

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At the end one is left wondering whether the brakes are being applied to the monetary easing on account of any perceived uptick in inflation, or on weaknesses around the exchange rate.

The alarms bells of an impending reversal of a declining trend in inflation are important, but equally significant is the retreat on the vulnerabilities of the external sector, especially in light of the most recent round of volatile movements in the open market.

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Aaliji's passing

AN ending this most certainly is not: Jamiluddin Aali was too multifaceted a person and leaves behind a variety of causes to pursue. He was well known for his patriotism, and his motivational songs will continue to warm the hearts of Pakistanis for all times to come.

He was a crusader of Urdu, and his legacy lives in the shape of the Urdu University in Karachi and much more.

As someone who tried to make a political statement, by virtue of his old association with them, both the PPP and MQM, and even other parties he had no direct links with, could learn the value of perseverance, commitment and some headstrong insistence.

So many are going to miss him; among them will be those who were never shy of reminding Aaliji of his links to the campaign run by Gen Ayub Khan and Qudrat Ullah Shahab to patronise a select group of writers in Pakistan.

They set the pattern in what they saw as the national interest and in a direction that has not always been acceptable to, for instance, those who fought for the rights of regional languages, and others.

As a crucial player acting for the state all those decades ago, Aaliji was a most worthy, unrepentant example for all those who add the suffix of 'infamous' before the Pakistan Writers Guild that was formed more than half a century ago.

After his passing, the debate is likely to expand to what he could have achieved creatively as an individual if political controversies had been avoided and if had resisted the temptation of taking on so much for so long during his productive years.

But while the critics say he could have left behind a more profound literary legacy, the truth is that his work was sufficient to earn him the status of a national icon whose contributions to the Urdu language sprang in part from the patriotic spirit that had characterised the era of independence.

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Climate change: without a vision

As the world prepares for the largest climate summit of its kind, the secretary general of the United Nations has stepped forward with a strong appeal for world leaders to “look beyond national horizons and to put the common interest first”. Unfortunately, his own language describing that common interest was shrouded in ambiguity, revealing the large gaps that remain to be bridged. For instance, when talking about what he expects any binding agreement that emerges from the conference to contain, he steered away from referring to emissions targets, preferring to say only that any resultant accord must “provide clear rules of the road for strengthening global ambition”. This is a vague statement with which to lay out one’s expectations, and it points to the difficulties that lie ahead for the negotiators in Paris if they wish to avoid the pitfalls of the Rio de Janeiro accord in 1992, or the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. Both those agreements failed to reach their goals of cutting carbon emissions worldwide. Whether Paris succeeds where they failed remains to be seen but if, on the eve of the summit, the secretary general himself has a hard time referring to setting targets for cuts in emissions, one can only say that a lot of work remains to be done.

One big difference between Paris and the other two attempts in the past to reach a global accord on climate change is that this time countries have submitted their own climate action plans which detail their vision for cutting carbon emissions starting from 2020, when any accord reached in Paris is supposed to go into effect. As part of the process, Pakistan too has submitted a

document; but it would be something of a stretch to call it a vision. Not only does the document fail to make any commitment to curtailing emissions, it also fails to provide the single-most rudimentary number around which any climate action plan needs to be built: emissions per capita. The document simply states that “Pakistan is committed to reduc[ing] its emissions after reaching peak levels to the extent possible subject to affordability, provision of international climate finance, transfer of technology and capacity building.”

In short, Pakistan appears to be going to Paris with an old proposition: give us the money and we will talk about emissions. It is easy to predict that this gambit will not work. International support for a climate action plan will not come if there is no commitment on emissions cuts in the future. As a front-line state in the growing climate emergency, Pakistan needs to do much more to measure its emissions and present targets for the future without compromising on its developmental goals. Business as usual — trading funds in return for compliance with international obligations — is a bad way to begin the journey down this road.

Published in Dawn, November 26th, 2015

Syrian crisis worsens

THE shooting down of a Russian warplane by Turkey on Tuesday ratchets up the conflict in Syria and underlines the dangers inherent in the lack of a consensus among regional and world powers on the war in the Levant. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has justified the Turkish action, and support has come from President Barack Obama, but President Vladimir Putin has reacted angrily, calling the Turkish action “a stab in the back” in the fight against terrorism. So far, the Russian air force has flown over 1,000 combat missions, but the air strikes have been criticised by America, which says — although this is open to debate — that Russian planes were bombing not the militant Islamic State group but anti-Assad dissidents. Here is the rub — all powers are pursuing their geopolitical aims callously at the cost of the Syrian people. America and France are targeting the IS hordes, the Russians are working to the advantage of President Bashar al-Assad, Ankara’s sole concern is the Kurds doing the fighting against IS, while Jordan, after a brief spell following the burning to death of a Jordanian pilot by IS, is virtually out of the picture. Those pursuing their agendas ruthlessly are the various Islamist militias, especially IS, which continues to remain in possession of large swathes of Iraq and Syria. The only defeat it has suffered is the loss of Kobane to the Kurds.

In the three countries where the Arab Spring has turned into autumn, Syria has suffered the most: over 10 million are homeless, over 250,000 lie dead, and most of its cities have turned into debris. It all began when non-Syrian militias backed by some Gulf powers gatecrashed into what originally was a struggle for democratic rights and have since pursued their

agenda with blood-curdling atrocities to turn Syria into a bastion of the so-called international jihad. The lament is that there is no realisation among those who matter that they should unite to give effect to the recent Security Council resolution authorising “all means” to degrade IS. Two oil powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are pursuing opposite aims, and Turkey has shown no interest in taking on IS. Mr Obama has asked Ankara and Moscow to lower tensions by talking, but that is hardly a solution to the slaughter in Syria. The issue is whether all regional and international players will subordinate their parochial, geopolitical interests to a vigorous and united anti-IS fight, and devise and implement a realistic peace formula for Syria.

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Double standards

It was a moment when the adage about people living in glass houses and being circumspect about throwing stones sprang to mind.

The anguished response by the Foreign Office and Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan to the execution of two opposition politicians in Bangladesh on Sunday referred to their “flawed trials” and the “violation of human rights” that their sentences had constituted.

To anyone not viewing the issue in isolation, the double standard was obvious, and rights activist Asma Jahangir soon called out the government on it.

The former Supreme Court Bar Association president criticised the “disproportionately high passion” that the government had displayed in the matter in comparison with its silence on the unfair trials in which Pakistan’s own citizens were being sentenced to death. Here she was referring to the hangings that have been taking place in the country’s prisons, to the sentences being handed down by the military courts — unprecedented in the opaqueness of their proceedings — as well as to the Pakistanis who are regularly executed on drug smuggling charges in Saudi Arabia.

Ms Jahangir’s stand is a courageous and principled one, particularly given the current hyper-nationalistic environment in which insistence on human rights and due process for all is seen as not only subversive but is perversely projected as collusion with the very militants against whom the state is fighting.

The country’s criminal justice system is known to be deeply problematic. Despite this, around 300 condemned prisoners have been hanged in Pakistan since the government lifted the moratorium on the death penalty last December; contrary to the avowed aim of the aforementioned measure, only a small proportion of them had been convicted for terrorism.

A paraplegic, who had been kept on death row despite his condition, was about to be sent to the gallows yesterday when he was given a last-minute reprieve, though only for two months.

Miscarriage of justice is a reality for many Pakistanis — although not, of course, for those living in their ivory towers.

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Growing gender gap among voters

IN Pakistan, electoral politics — the time-tested vehicle for people’s representation in governance — is gradually assuming a more coherent form.

However, it has not led to a corresponding increase in women’s participation in the democratic process. On the contrary, according to voter registration data released by the Election Commission of Pakistan, the gap between the number of male and female voters in the country has widened from 10.97 million in May 2013 to 11.65m in September 2015 at the start of the local government elections.

Know more: [Male-female voter gap widens to 11.65 million](#)

In other words, there were 86.24m registered voters in 2013, including 48.61m men and 37.63m women. The latest figures show an overall increase in registered voters to 93.06m; within that group however, male voters number 52.36m while female voters add up to 40.7m, revealing that voter registration of women has not kept pace with that of men.

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This is a disturbing trend that has implications for the way the country is governed and the priorities it chooses to pursue.

The blame can be placed squarely at the door of the political parties, who are primarily responsible for registering voters and facilitating the process whereby people can get themselves on the electoral rolls.

Their lackadaisical performance in bringing the number of female voters at par with that of males to reflect the gender ratio in the general population is the manifestation of a cultural bias that is indifferent, at best, to the inclusion of women's voices in the national narrative.

The most trenchant expression of this bias rears its head every election cycle when agreements among political parties are struck in some of the country's more conservative pockets to deprive women of their right to vote.

Although such blatant disenfranchisement is the exception rather than the rule, the political parties' essentially chauvinistic culture also comes to the fore when it is time to award tickets, in which case women are not seen as viable candidates for the general seats.

The 2013 election, for instance, saw only 36 women nominated by their parties for 272 National Assembly general seats. Similarly, females comprise barely 2pc of the candidates directly contesting the upcoming local elections in Karachi.

Ironically, the reserved seat quota for women in the assemblies, which was originally intended to be a stopgap affirmative

action until their participation in the electoral process was fully realised, has engendered complacency among male politicians.

Instead of proactively bringing their female counterparts into the mainstream, they treat the legislative quota as a substitute, thereby relegating women to the sidelines and further perpetuating the concept of public space as an exclusively male domain.

The ECP must step in, perhaps with proposals for female candidate quotas — a measure adopted in several countries — to ensure that politics in Pakistan evolves in the direction of an equal-opportunity space for women, rather than slipping into reverse.

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Khost drone strike

TERROR knows no boundaries and perhaps there is no better recent illustration of it than the US drone strike in eastern Afghanistan that allegedly killed dozens of militants whose bodies were buried in Pakistan.

It is now widely acknowledged that the shrinking space for militants in Fata, particularly since the launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb and the recent Khyber operations, caused many militants to decamp to eastern Afghanistan.

It is also now an open secret that eastern Afghanistan has become a hotbed of both anti-Pakistan and anti-Afghan militancy.

Also read: [Senior TTP commander Sajna reported killed in US drone strike in Afghanistan](#)

Furthermore, the inability of the Afghan security forces to project the state's writ in the border regions appears to be leading to a renewed reliance on American airpower in the area.

To the extent that dangerous militant leaders are being eliminated, such acts should be welcomed whether carried out by Afghan, Pakistani or American forces. In fact, the closer the three states cooperate, the more rapid and lasting the results are likely to be in the fight against militancy. But the drone strike in Khost has also raked up some uncomfortable memories and raised awkward questions.

Reported to have been killed in Wednesday's strike is Khan Said 'Sajna', a TTP leader who, until as recently as last year, was touted to be a moderate Taliban that the Pakistani state could make peace with.

But even then it was clear that Khan Said was not renouncing militancy — indeed, he was only against violence inside Pakistan and remained an enthusiastic proponent of jihad in Afghanistan.

There are likely many officials inside the Afghan state who remain wary of believing the Pakistani security establishment precisely because of the contradictions and ambiguities in Pakistani policy.

Can exporting Pakistani jihadists while simultaneously pledging support for a peaceful resolution of the war in Afghanistan create much goodwill? While Pakistani officials may rightly counter that there is no more ambiguity and that there is no support for any strand of the banned TTP today, the public funerals held in Upper Dir for militants believed to have been killed in the Khost drone strike send the most unwanted of signals.

How was it possible for the funerals to be held in a public stadium and for them to be attended by a crowd of over 1,000 individuals, including at least one local official? Why were the coffins draped in the flags of a Pakistan militant offshoot aligned with the Afghan Taliban? Surely, such unnerving public displays should not be permitted anymore.

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Karachi protest

THE so-called red zone of Karachi — the downtown area where Chief Minister House and Governor House are located— has traditionally been used as a venue for protests and demonstrations because of the proximity of these offices to each other.

But such is the administrators' dread of the people in whose name they govern that shipping containers now line the roads permanently, ready to be used as barricades the moment it appears that the public may be getting too close for comfort.

Also read: [Protesting teachers tear-gassed, baton-charged in Karachi](#)

Such is the antipathy of government servants and politicians towards the electorate that demonstrations in this area have been banned altogether. It was a result of this disconnect — the people's need to make their grievances heard and the administrators' lack of interest — that the area once again saw violence on Wednesday.

Several hundred employees of the Sindh education department, mainly teachers, had gathered to lobby for their demands. The police unleashed upon them the might of a water cannon, tear gas and, according to Karachi South DIG Jamil Ahmed, a "light" baton charge. Some of the teachers were also picked up by the enforcers of the law.

The issue to focus on here is not the legitimacy or lack of it of the protesters' demands, but the fact that a situation that

required political engagement was left to be handled by a branch of government that is trained more in suppressing dissent than the delicate art of negotiation.

Across the world, standard practice at demonstrations of such nature is for a representative of the government to meet the leaders of the protest, hear their demands and at the very least signal a semblance of concern. That this basic operating procedure has fallen into disuse in the country is a measure of the widening, dangerous gap between the people and their representatives.

This is not the first time that unarmed protesters have suffered such violence at the hands of the state; and it will not be the last until those who enter public office learn to behave wisely.

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Ministries' performance

ADDRESSING the National Assembly, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan appeared to urge his fellow parliamentarians on both sides of the aisle to take a greater interest in monitoring the workings of the federal ministries. Indeed, Mr Khan suggested that ministers themselves take the lead by presenting their records in office in parliament and thereby encouraging parliament to critique them. Given the desultory nature of this parliament and the PML-N senior cadre's lack of interest in strengthening parliamentary norms and practices, the interior minister's suggestion could — and that is a very big if — help a mid-term revitalisation of parliament. If the government itself is not interested in reviewing the performance of its cabinet members — already long forgotten are the so-called ministerial performance audits that the prime minister had commissioned and then quietly shelved — perhaps the other parties in parliament could take the lead. There is clearly much that needs improvement on the governance front, and a plethora of reforms could be undertaken. Parliament — the combined National Assembly and Senate — also has a wealth of experience that could and should be put to better use.

The interior minister, however, appears to be fighting an uphill battle with resistance likely to come from his own cabinet colleagues and indifference or narrow self-interest at best to be contended with among the opposition in parliament. With the PML-N, the history of the abortive ministerial performance audits is illustrative. For one, there is a dominant personality in the federal cabinet — Finance Minister Ishaq Dar. There are few ministries in which he does not have a say and many ministers appear helpless when it comes to asserting control

over their own ministries. For another, the prime minister himself tends to keep many of his cabinet colleagues at arm's length, leaving them weak within their own ministries and unable to use prime ministerial clout to get better administrative results. In such an environment, there will be some reluctance on the part of most cabinet members to follow the approach urged by the interior minister. Why expose themselves to harsh public scrutiny when most ministers don't feel a real sense of ownership over their ministries?

The situation among the opposition — who ostensibly should have a great deal of interest in discovering the shortcomings of the federal cabinet — is sadly even worse. Consider the approach of the three main opposition parties: the PTI, PPP and MQM. The PPP and MQM appear unable to look beyond their troubles in Sindh and seem to consider parliament as nothing more than a platform to air their misgivings about how their members are being treated. The PTI, meanwhile, still favours the politics of agitation to the less glamorous work of parliamentary oversight. Parliament surely needs to be strengthened — but the interior minister's call to arms may not be enough to stir change.

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New revenue measures

THE finance minister says he is unhappy about the growth of luxury imports and wants to take steps to curtail them. The steps he envisions just happen to be measures expected to yield almost Rs40bn in additional revenue for the state. Clearly, these are nothing more than measures designed to fill the gap in first-revenue collections, and satisfy the IMF that the government's revenue effort is on track. The Fund has made the passage of these measures a prior action before the staff's recommendation for release of the next tranche from the ongoing programme can be forwarded to the executive board for consideration. So when Mr Ishaq Dar told the National Assembly Standing Committee on Finance that he was unhappy about the growth of luxury imports, it would appear he was not being entirely forthcoming about the real reasons why these measures are being taken. Of course, taxing imports of luxury items is difficult to oppose, but the finance minister should realise that this mushrooming growth of spending on luxury items is in part also a consequence of his own government's policies, which have encouraged imports through a low exchange rate and placing disincentives on savings.

Now a list of 287 items has been drawn up for additional regulatory duties and excise taxes, and the list contains some items that are indeed of a frivolous nature, such as processed luxury foods and cigarettes. But the list contains some items that should no longer be considered luxury items, such as smartphones. A decade ago, smartphones were no doubt luxury items, but as the price for many has dropped to below Rs10,000 and a number of low-income subscribers are starting to use them for free messaging and voice calling, they are

becoming ubiquitous and also fuelling the revolution in telecommunications. They should not be viewed as luxury items anymore. The finance minister should have been asked where the failure occurred in the government's effort which resulted in such a large revenue shortfall, and what assurances we have that the remaining quarters of the fiscal year will not see similar gaps. The whole exercise smacks of ad hocism, and harkens back to the bad old days of the minibudgets of the 1990s. If these measures are not properly reviewed at this stage, there will be no guarantee that in the months to come more regressive revenue measures will not be used to bridge shortfalls.

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Overworked investigators

JUSTICE demands that cases are investigated, prosecuted, and decided in an expeditious yet thorough manner. But in Pakistan the state is found to be lacking on all these fronts. Much has been said and written about the problems of Pakistan's justice system; there is said to be a backlog of around 1.7 million cases in different courts of the country. However, it is also true that the country's police forces have largely failed to investigate cases in a swift and judicious manner. For example, as reported in this paper the other day, it has been stated that the Lahore police only has 864 investigators to probe 73,739 cases. This is a staggering burden for any police department to bear. As an official told this paper, the collection of evidence

and investigation of suspects are demanding tasks, and around 5,000 detectives are needed to make the investigations wing effective. The situation in the country's other police departments is not much better. For instance in Sindh, while the operations and investigations wings were separated during the Musharraf era, they were merged once more under the PPP's watch. This has affected the investigators' performance as many of them, for example, lack proper forensic training. In KP, despite the incumbent government's talk of 'change', observers say the administration is coy about publicly releasing crime figures and only does so after right to information requests are lodged.

There is a causal link between poor investigations and prosecution, and low conviction rates. Firstly, all police forces need to be honest about crime statistics and the number of outstanding cases in their jurisdiction. Underreporting crime will not make it go away. Equally important is the need to have trained personnel in significant numbers to handle the workload and investigate cases along scientific lines. Specialised, dedicated investigators are an essential requirement. What is clear is that unless colonial-era methods of investigation and administration of the police are abandoned, the criminal justice system — already close to collapse — will not change for the better.

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Time to review detention laws

IT has been two years since parliament passed an amendment to the Anti Terrorism Act of 1997 that vested extraordinary powers in the Rangers in Sindh to detain people on suspicion of involvement in terrorist activity, or of facilitating terrorism.

The amendment is called Section 11EEEE, and it was passed to put some teeth into the Karachi operation that had begun only a few weeks earlier.

Since then, the amendment has been used widely to detain all manner of people, from members of political parties to extortionist gangs and individuals belonging to banned outfits, as well as officers of a state-owned gas company.

Originally, the Rangers were the sole agency vested with the powers under this extraordinary amendment, but as of this summer, the Counter Terrorism Department of Sindh Police and the FIA have also been notified to exercise the same extraordinary powers of detention contained in this law.

The powers empower the notified law-enforcement agency to detain for up to 90 days on ground of suspicion alone, and without any judicial oversight.

Dr Asim Hussain is probably the most high-profile individual detained under this law, and the scope and depth of the investigation carried out against him is quite possibly unprecedented.

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But the charges levelled against him in the FIR contain no reference to terror financing, showing that whatever else he might be guilty of, not a shred of evidence appears to have been found implicating him in the original charge under which he was detained.

The case — and many other cases that have a similar pattern — illustrates the dire need for a review of Section 11E of the ATA to ensure that the extraordinary powers granted to law enforcement through it are not being misused.

Thus far no data exists of the number of people detained under this law, yet we know from observing court activity that most of those detained are either released without any charges, or are charged with criminal activity that has little or nothing to do with terrorism.

This apparent pattern makes it important to conduct a review of how well this law has served to advance the fight against terrorism and militancy specifically, for which it was designed.

The review should aim to provide us with answers to three specific questions: how many people have been detained under this law thus far?

How many of them have been charged with an offence? And how many convictions have been obtained?

If the federal government proves reticent in initiating such a review, an MNA should raise these questions as part of question hour in the National Assembly and demand a response from the government.

It is crucial to determine whether the tools designed to fight militancy and terrorism are not being used for purposes other than those they were specifically meant for.

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Grounds for change

THE build-up to change seems to have intensified. Away from Pakistan's own little experiments with various formats of the game, international cricket is currently facing an onslaught of new ideas.

At one place, the debate is about doing away with the toss at the outset of a match and letting home teams decide whether they want to bowl or bat first.

At the same time, the proposal for four-day Test matches has been revived with some seriousness against the backdrop of quick finishes such as the one in Nagpur last week in which India defeated South Africa inside three days.

And if this were not a repulsive enough idea for the leisurely gentleman in white flannels, he is left to frown upon the first-ever day-night Test where he is made to chase an unfamiliar pink ball that cannot, to the conventional mind, ever rival the feel and shine of the old cherry.

Some protest at the death of values and tradition — before the incorrigibly hooked find new ways to reconcile with the new, more instantaneously gratifying offerings inside a cricket field.

On the other hand, there are discussions about the variety available to connoisseurs of the game and to the excited, non-traditional fans. In reality, however, this debate about changes is a realistic reminder that the look of the game may change sooner than anticipated in the past.

Just as Pakistan tries — quite unsuccessfully at the moment — to be equally competitive in all formats of cricket, it can be said that some of the old varieties of the game are being nudged onto the fast lane towards their eventual exit.

It's been a few years since those who proudly stood by the five-day Test were asked to turn up in considerable numbers at the stadium in order to save their favourite format from becoming obsolete.

The response to that warning has been patchy and popular attention appears to be turning towards the faster versions on the market.

So much so that on occasion even the 50-over-a-side brand tie is considered too laborious and time-consuming when an outcome and plenty of revenue can be had from a contest lasting 40 overs. The countdown continues.

A country can have three different teams playing three different formats — Tests, one-dayers and T-20 games.

The game cannot quite continue to have enough spectators for all three categories to prosper.

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Filthy nation

THE disastrous state of affairs that prevails in many sectors in Pakistan is frequently commented on.

The one that citizens and administrations both seem to have become inured to, however, is also the most easily discernible: the abysmal state of the civic apparatus in most cities and towns, the filth that lines our roads, and the rapidly falling standards of the ecology and environment.

The problems have become so big, and so entrenched, that the highest court of the land is diverting its attention to them.

Taking up a case relating to pollution and environmental degradation in Islamabad on Wednesday, a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court rhetorically asked whether it should have to intervene all the time to keep Karachi clean.

Justice Ejaz Afzal remarked that it was difficult to imagine how people were living in some of the smaller towns and cities, adding that there were armies of employees in the departments concerned, who were drawing salaries but sitting idle.

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The judges' comments, acerbic in the extreme, showed the level of their frustration; and, indeed, this must be shared by the vast majority of people who must breathe air that is toxic, drink water that is contaminated and undertake commutes surrounded by piles of burning garbage — all because, as the Supreme Court noted with reference to the polluting industries in our cities, “until it suits them the government turns a blind eye towards the big fish”.

Pakistan must urgently rationalise and strategise in this regard. The answers are simple to formulate; what is needed is strong political will and action on the part of the civic agencies.

Why is Islamabad, for example, a notable exception in terms of the quality of the environment and the relative success in enforcing land-use rules?

The grim truth is that those who are in positions to initiate effective clean-up drives and formulate strong policies are the ones who never walk the city streets. Here too, it is the disconnect between the public and their elected representatives that is at fault.

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Karachi strategy

UNDENIABLE as it may be that the Karachi operation has brought a degree of calm to a historically volatile city and that public sentiment is solidly in favour of the operation, there is in fact relatively little known about the strategy behind the operation.

Spurts of intensive action are followed by periods of relative inaction and while some of that can be attributed to the varying political temperature, it is not very clear what the time frame or indeed overall framework for the operation is.

On Saturday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan in a typically ambiguous statement suggested that the Karachi operation will be expedited, while also addressing the concerns of the MQM and the PPP.

Know more: [Nisar hints at expediting Karachi operation](#)

Most likely, neither the MQM nor the PPP will be very impressed by the minister's assurances given the continuing pressure on the political leadership of both parties. More intriguing was Chaudhry Nisar's suggestion that the pace of the operation may be about to pick up again.

Was the minister hinting at an endpoint to this seemingly most open-ended of operations? Or was it just more political rhetoric?

The Karachi operation is now more than two years old. Given the scale of the problems in the megacity, any attempt to

combat violence and crime was always going to be a lengthy affair. But can a provincial capital, one of the world's largest cities and Pakistan's most populous city by far, be in a permanent state of a militarised operation?

To the architects of the present strategy it may appear that their principal job is to restore order and ensure that criminals are put out of business or behind bars — everything being secondary, including considerations of time.? Yet, the longer the operation continues, the more two things have become obvious.

First, the dominant parties in Karachi and overall Sindh, the MQM and the PPP, respectively, have a support base that will outlive any military-led operation in Karachi.

By seemingly treating both parties as part of the problem and no part of the solution, the architects of the Karachi operation may unwittingly be creating the conditions for the eventual unravelling of the operation's gains.

Second, to protect the gains made over the long term, the federal will have to give way to the provincial and local, ie the military will have to hand over control of the city to strengthened and rejuvenated local law-enforcement agencies.

Permanent military control is not an option, but there does not seem to be any thought being given by civilian leaders such as the interior minister to what the long-term measures should be.

Effectively, by treating the MQM and the PPP as the enemy, the architects of the Karachi operation are risking the spectre of

a permanent military-run operation with even weaker civilian institutions. Surely, that cannot be the goal?

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Children's health

Among the weak and marginalised segments of Pakistani society, children are perhaps the most vulnerable.

Exposed to a multitude of ills, many a Pakistani child has to contend with several obstacles that stand in the way of a normal, healthy childhood. Hence the Supreme Court must be commended for taking up the issue of children's health, particularly the high rates of child mortality in this country.

On Friday, taking up a suo motu notice, the chief justice asked federal and provincial health officials for an explanation as to why the state had "turned a blind eye to the disturbing health situation".

Also read: [SC takes notice of increase in child mortality](#)

Indeed, as organs of the state are usually occupied with 'bigger' matters, it is welcome that the spotlight has been put on child mortality.

There have been improvements over the past two decades in this regard, but the rates of child mortality remain unacceptably

high. According to Unicef figures, one in 14 children die before they turn one, while one in 11 youngsters do not survive till their fifth birthday.

The lack of clean drinking water and poor sanitation have been cited as amongst the major reasons behind these high figures. It is unfortunate that most children die from preventable illnesses and infections, while malnutrition worsens their fragile constitutions.

The state says it has action plans in place and is committed to tackling child mortality. However, the fact is that while officialdom in Pakistan is known to come up with many wonderful plans, their implementation is often found wanting.

In order to reduce child mortality rates, there must be recognition at the very top of the ruling structure that such high rates of childhood deaths are totally unacceptable; this realisation needs to be accompanied by the political will to change the existing situation.

Indeed, both the state and society must take up the challenge of improving children's health with the same seriousness with which we talk about dealing with issues such as terrorism, the economy etc.

The necessary interventions to address the problem of child mortality — such as the provision of clean drinking water and basic health and sanitation facilities across the country — do not require a miracle or the injection of massive funds.

What they do require, apart from proper planning and oversight, is the determination to improve the health conditions

of the people of Pakistan, in particular the children. The state cannot afford to take the issue lightly.

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Sugarcane crushing

ONCE again, sugarcane crushing season has arrived and the matter of setting a support price for procurement threatens to be a thorny affair.

Thus far procurement is taking place under an indicative price in Sindh of around Rs160, whereas Punjab has only just announced its price of Rs180.

Last year, the failure of Sindh to announce its procurement price until very late in the season had consequences in Punjab, and the wide differential that existed between the notified prices in both provinces for a brief period served as a source of tension in the sugar industry, with Punjab mill owners claiming that their counterparts in Sindh were reaping an undue profit from the lower price there and demanding similar treatment by their own government.

Also read: [Farmers and millers grappling with sugarcane pricing issue](#)

The matter was left to fester for far too long last year, and it would be better if that episode were not repeated.

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Key to the whole process is the level of autonomy that the Sindh government can exercise against the power of the sugar mill owners.

Growers make for a substantial lobby in the provincial assembly too, and last year the government dithered between both, unable to make a decision and stand by it until very late in the season.

This year, the matter will be harder to resolve since the entire sector has been hit by collapsing world commodity prices, which have also caused sugar prices to decline sharply, and both lobbies — growers and mill owners — are going to jostle to offload the cost of this decline onto the other.

The Sindh government is likely to have an even harder time this year; this is one reason why it would be a good idea to wake up to the problem quickly and work towards an early announcement of a procurement price.

Punjab has already announced its price, keeping it the same as last year at Rs180, and it would be best for Sindh to follow suit and set a price that does not require the government to subsidise any of the parties.

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