

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of November, 2014

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Contents

| | | | |
|--|----|------------------------------|----|
| Misogynistic outrage..... | 3 | Thar drought..... | 26 |
| Balochistan arms' haul | 4 | PM in China..... | 27 |
| Dithering on new ECP chief..... | 5 | The IS threat | 28 |
| The Gullu Butt case | 6 | OGDCL divestment..... | 29 |
| Return of populism | 7 | CEC consultation..... | 30 |
| Militant magnets | 8 | FIR reform | 31 |
| Wagah attack | 9 | PTI chief's proposal..... | 32 |
| Muharram security | 10 | IMF review | 33 |
| Swedish recognition..... | 11 | Militancy in Khyber | 34 |
| Cricket triumph..... | 12 | War on education | 35 |
| Militancy: is the state prepared? | 13 | Roads as death traps..... | 37 |
| Time to talk..... | 14 | Unmerited appointments | 38 |
| A chilling episode of mob violence | 15 | Arafat's legacy | 39 |
| Wheat support price..... | 17 | Government vs industry | 40 |
| A changed path for ISI..... | 18 | Historic first..... | 41 |
| The missing case | 19 | Land mafia's impunity | 42 |
| Forced conversions..... | 20 | Wrong move..... | 43 |
| Pentagon's view | 21 | Gas allocations | 44 |
| Senseless bloodletting..... | 22 | IDPs' predicament..... | 45 |
| And now Facebook | 23 | Pro-women legislation | 46 |
| Census delays | 24 | Tirah beheading..... | 47 |
| Jamaat's proactive role | 25 | Electronic voting | 48 |
| | | Militant currency..... | 50 |
| | | Bogus housing schemes | 51 |

November, 2014

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----|---------------------------------|----|
| Ruling on appointments..... | 52 | Melting glaciers..... | 78 |
| Ties with Afghanistan..... | 53 | Acid attacks on the rise | 79 |
| Crimes of ‘honour’ | 54 | The sectarian volcano..... | 80 |
| Role of IB..... | 55 | Growth engine is stalling | 81 |
| State Bank’s assessment..... | 56 | A debating forum | 82 |
| Scourge of slavery | 57 | Promoting tolerance..... | 83 |
| Social reform ‘charter’ | 58 | Thar reality check | 84 |
| Financial confusion | 59 | Simply democracy | 85 |
| Unease over PTI rally | 61 | Children pay the price..... | 86 |
| Removal of book..... | 62 | Sukuk bond | 88 |
| Transit trade abuse | 63 | Cricket tragedy..... | 89 |
| Terrorism rankings | 64 | Danger to media | 90 |
| Circular debt rises | 65 | Powering Saarc | 91 |
| Unhealthy export | 66 | Status of language | 92 |
| Accord with Russia..... | 67 | Security for citizens | 93 |
| Sargodha deaths | 68 | JUI-F leader’s killing..... | 94 |
| Trial ‘delay’ | 68 | Golden PTV..... | 95 |
| A political field wide open..... | 70 | | |
| Will Obama help? | 71 | | |
| Slipping tax base | 72 | | |
| Neglect of heritage | 73 | | |
| Gas decision deferred | 74 | | |
| Complacency as threat recedes | 75 | | |
| Army chief’s US visit | 77 | | |

Misogynistic outrage

THE magnificent obsession with the female form continues in our hallowed halls of power. This time it was the opposition leader Maulana Lutfur Rehman in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly on Thursday who dredged up the issue of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's women supporters 'dancing' at the dharnas.

He was taking up the cudgels on behalf of his older brother, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, whose sensibilities have been similarly offended by the sight of the 'daughters of the nation' swaying to catchy music. Pandemonium ensued as PTI representatives in the House demanded that the maulana withdraw his remarks.

It seems that for the JUI-F, and others of its ilk, a perfect world would be one in which women are preferably neither seen nor heard, where they are no more than faceless, nameless repositories of patriarchal concepts of honour.

As far as this paper is concerned, one of the more positive aspects of the dharnas staged by the PTI (and, until recently, the Pakistan Awami Tehreek) has been the huge number of women who participated in them, regardless of whether or not they appreciated the music in a way acceptable to the maulanas.

Given that the public sphere in Pakistan is predicated upon the convenience of men, many women braved

immense discomforts for weeks on end by dint of sheer determination.

Here, one could also recall the grit and resolve shown by the Baloch women who traversed 2,000km on foot across the country some months ago to bring attention to the issue of the missing Baloch. For despite the many egregious rights' violations against women in Pakistan, their political participation appears to be increasing.

That is a fact that the JUI-F and other religious parties will, however reluctantly, have to come to terms with. It should really not be that difficult an endeavour, considering the number of issues that require the application of the same level of outrage they muster so easily at the sight of women refusing to conform to their misogynistic notions of propriety.

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Balochistan arms' haul

THE 'foreign hand' is a familiar scapegoat in Pakistan, often trotted out by the authorities in the aftermath of internal disturbances or acts of terrorism. Yet these allegations are rarely corroborated with hard evidence linking disruptive activities to external players.

But the cache of arms and explosives unveiled in Quetta by the Balochistan home minister on Thursday could indicate an exception.

The massive haul, which reportedly consisted of around 4,000kg of explosives along with a host of other deadly paraphernalia, was recovered in raids conducted in different parts of the province, including areas near the Afghan border.

The provincial home minister linked the weapons to Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies, saying these states were involved in supporting banned militant groups in Balochistan and that the explosives were to be used during Muharram.

This is not the first time government officials have named India and Afghanistan as alleged backers of terrorism. Former interior minister Rehman Malik, while in office, claimed he had 'solid evidence' of these states' involvement in Balochistan, adding that he had raised the issue with the Indian authorities.

Mr Malik repeated these claims last week, following the failed attempt on Maulana Fazlur Rehman's life in Quetta.

We believe, considering the sensitivity of the claims, that it is the interior minister who should have briefed the nation about the weapons' haul.

If there is indeed solid proof of foreign involvement in Balochistan's security situation, his ministry must give additional details, while the Foreign Office must take up the issue with the capitals concerned. As we see, in geopolitics, it is the amoral concerns of realpolitik rather than principles that guide a state's policies.

So it is entirely possible that foreign players are meddling in Pakistan's internal affairs, just as others at times blame this country of stirring trouble in their backyards.

The point is that it is our lack of vision and lawlessness that gives internal and external actors a chance to exploit the situation. Whether it is the separatist insurgency in Balochistan, the Islamist militancy in Fata, or sectarian terrorism and ethnic violence in Karachi, these sore spots can be exploited because the state has failed to frankly and judiciously address these problems.

Leaving these open wounds to fester will only make them more vulnerable to foreign interference. So while we need to be vigilant about external intervention, we primarily need to set our own house in order.

Dithering on new ECP chief

WHEN the chief custodians of the democratic process — the ones elected to office via that very democratic process — show little regard for the constitutional and legal imperatives of their office, it is hardly surprising when other institutions of state intervene and order parliamentary leaders to do their job.

Since July 30, 2013, when Fakhruddin Ebrahim resigned from the post, the country has been without a permanent chief election commissioner.

To fill that post — occupied on an interim basis by now three successive justices of the Supreme Court — Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Khurshid Shah must agree on the names of three candidates, who must be drawn from the superior judiciary (serving or retired).

Thereafter, a special parliamentary committee must convene to select one of the three candidates as the next chief of the Election Commission of Pakistan. But that seemingly simple process has not yet taken place because it appears that neither the opposition nor the government is in a particular hurry to do so.

Quite why that is the case is one of those continuing mysteries that constitute the elected representatives'

cavalier attitude towards the very system that helps get them elected to public office.

It is though in every way unacceptable — and the Supreme Court is right to be vexed by the situation. For the Supreme Court, there are at least two problems the non-existence of a permanent ECP head has created.

One, a judge of the Supreme Court, usually the senior-most judge after the chief justice, is constitutionally required to be the acting commissioner — meaning that the Supreme Court is deprived of the full services of one judge.

It is also a cause of awkwardness for the court, given that electoral matters handled by the ECP are frequently litigated and reach the Supreme Court for adjudication.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court is suffering from the perception in some quarters that in certain matters the court has not been as forceful in ensuring the executive adheres to the letter and spirit of the Constitution as the court was, say, two or three years ago. In particular, the court's long, thus far in vain, struggle to get provincial governments to hold local government elections is a sore point — and something the appointment of a permanent ECP chief could go some way to resolve.

The government and the PPP, meanwhile, have resorted to the fig leaf of suggesting they want to finish the process of electoral reforms first — an excuse that would be more credible if either side showed any interest in getting the reforms process under way.

November, 2014

With the PTI seemingly determined to trigger via resignations a spate of by-elections, a permanent ECP head has become all the more important. Will parliament nominate one by Nov 13 or force the Supreme Court into the unpleasantness of withdrawing the acting commissioner?

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The Gullu Butt case

Shahid Aziz aka Gullu Butt possesses the ability to stir debate. Earlier, he was in the spotlight after footage of him smashing cars in Model Town, Lahore, on June 17 this year was telecast.

Then he was accused of being an agent aiding the police in intimidating the Pakistan Awami Tehreek. And now the point of discussion is his conviction by an anti-terrorist court.

Also read : [Gullu Butt sentenced to 11 years in prison](#)

Aziz has been given an 11-year term and asked to pay a fine of over Rs100,000. Immediately after the verdict on Thursday, PAT officials reacted by saying this punishment for an individual, who has been projected in the media as temperamental and as someone who might have been moved by an overbearing sense of political affiliation, was not their objective.

And as the PAT spokesman reiterated the demand for satisfactory legal action against those responsible for brutally extinguishing 11 lives that June morning, there have been calls by others who fear that the Gullu Butt case might be used to eclipse the real crime in this instance.

Over and above the Model Town incident, this conviction is already being cited as an example of how the law is quick to pounce on some while it is unable to bring others to justice.

Also read: [On trail of Gullu Butt](#)

This is a strong counter-argument, one whose proponents risk being chastised for taking their cynicism to a level where they might be perceived as opposing the conviction of a man whose crime was so obvious.

The point that needs to be pondered is that Pakistan could be rid of much of its scepticism if the law was to move with equal efficiency and purpose in the case of everyone put on trial or booked by the police.

In reviews of the present case, eventually the critical question might be about the need for the courts to not in any way be affected by any notions of populism and to keep their focus tightly fixed on dispensing justice to all with an even hand.

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Return of populism

After a long hiatus, populist politics is making a comeback, in the opposition as well as the ruling party. Throughout the 1990s, opposition politics meant castigating the government for raising the price of fuel and electricity and reducing subsidy expenditures.

Every privatisation measure was opposed for giving away state assets at 'throwaway prices', and the Independent Power Policy was harshly criticised by the first PML-N government for fixing tariffs too high.

This style kept successive governments hamstrung and unable to undertake the reforms necessary to adapt to a rapidly changing world. The results were disastrous.

Also read: [Senators hold sit-in against privatisation policy](#)

Every government struggled with a growing fiscal deficit, sagging growth and high inflation. The country had outgrown some of this style of politics in recent years, although echoes of it were still heard during the tax reform efforts of the previous government.

Today, we are back to the 1990s style of politics of opposing all reforms for the sake of opposing them.

For instance, the PTI says they oppose the government's privatisation of state-owned enterprises at 'throwaway

prices' even before any reference price has been generated.

Also read: [Imran claims credit for petrol price drop](#)

Some amongst their leadership have even dropped suggestions that some of the investors in the privatisation effort could be Indian nationals, without an iota of proof.

They are not happy with the decrease in fuel prices, saying the cuts should have been deeper, and promise that they will make electricity cheap if allowed to rule. This is vintage 1990s politics, of purely the sort that stalled our reform efforts for over a decade.

For its part, the PML-N is proving itself devoid of any skill and political instinct in dealing with this retrograde onslaught.

For example, announcing the fuel price cut from the platform of the prime minister is designed to give the impression that it is he himself who has ordained this decrease out of a spirit of benevolence and generosity.

Talk of a possible payout to power consumers, as well as gas allocations on political grounds speak to the populist posture the government is trying to adopt.

What is lost in all this is a coherent path forward.

A cut in fuel prices and an investigation into overbilling in the power sector were warranted, and not a favour to anybody.

November, 2014

Instead of competing on who can hammer prices down more, the parties ought to be competing on who has the more effective vision to do what we all know is necessary: disengage the state from the task of setting prices and generating investment, strengthen its regulatory capacity, and invite the private sector into the field with proper safeguards for the public interest.

It is not clear whether we were any closer to this path last year, but what is evident is that we are now being buffeted further and further away from it today.

The price will be paid by our future generations.

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Militant magnets

The fact that Iraq and Syria have become magnets for radicalised Muslims from across the world has been largely confirmed by a UN report, parts of which were recently published in the Guardian.

It says that “foreign terrorist fighters” from around 80 nations have left for the blood-drenched battlefields of the Middle East to take up arms for the self-styled Islamic State and other extremists.

According to CIA estimates, there are anywhere between 20,000 to 30,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, with large

numbers of them hailing from Western as well as Muslim states.

Also read: [UN warns of 'unprecedented' number of foreign jihadists](#)

Meanwhile, in a related development, MQM chief Altaf Hussain has raised the alarm about the possible presence of IS in Pakistan; speaking on Friday, the Muttahida chief said that IS flags and graffiti were ‘evidence’ of the radical group’s activities in this country.

There are numerous reasons why disenchanted young Muslims from the West as well as Muslim nations are being attracted to the IS banner.

Some of these militants, both men and women, have failed to integrate into their Western environs and suffer from an identity crisis, while others are fleeing repressive, failed or failing Muslim regimes.

The common tie that binds them is the dream of becoming part of a utopian ‘caliphate’ that they believe the Islamic State is building. Regardless of their motivations, their home countries have not done enough to stop the flow of jihadis into the Middle East.

Also read: [IS bigger threat to Pakistan than Taliban, Al Qaeda: Altaf](#)

Not only are these fighters destabilising the region, they will become major security threats should they decide to return home, further radicalised and with battlefield experience.

November, 2014

As for Mr Hussain's warning, it is true that IS paraphernalia and graffiti have been reported from parts of the country, while prominent local militants such as Shahidullah Shahid and Omar Khalid Khorasani have expressed their admiration for the militant group.

However, rather than proving IS has a presence in Pakistan, these developments reflect splits within the banned TTP, while militants are simply expressing support for an ideological ally which has achieved enviable battlefield success.

Yet the IS threat cannot be dismissed entirely.

Authorities need to monitor whether local and foreign militants are moving back and forth from Middle Eastern combat zones.

As far as defeating IS goes, we feel a regional effort — spearheaded by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran — is still the best solution for defeating the extremists rather than a US-led air war with a token Arab presence.

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Wagah attack

IT was an attack that was waiting to happen. While few would have thought that the Wagah border, where an aggressive closing ceremony each evening is meant to whip up nationalist fervour, would be the target of the biggest attack yet by militants since the start of the military's Operation Zarb-i-Azb, it is also true that it is the security forces and installations that are usually singled out by the militants.

However, while ordinary civilians often end up as victims because they happen to be near the venue, yesterday's suicide attack raises the possibility of those who had come to watch the ceremony being deliberately targeted because of their perceived support for the security forces.

The attack has claimed dozens of lives, and the focus at the moment should be on ensuring the injured survive and that the families of the dead are taken care of. After that though the hard questions will have to be taken up once more — if the state's security and foreign policy apparatus is willing to reflect on what the Wagah incident could mean for the country going forward.

The country clearly continues to be stalked by a complex, overlapping and dizzyingly varied militant threat. If internal security — peace, stability and the conditions for economic and social progress — is elusive it is because the state — the sum total of the civilian government and army-led security establishment — has an inadequate approach.

Even with the best policies in the world, Pakistan will not overnight become internally stable and secure. Operation Zarb-i-Azb has been treated as some kind of panacea in certain quarters, when, without a supporting anti-militancy narrative, it can only amount to surgery on a limb of a body with many afflictions.

Whoever it is that sent a bomber to kill Pakistani civilians (in these early hours the separate claims of Jundullah and Jamaatul Ahrar cannot be independently verified) the fact of the matter is that Pakistan has far too many groups with options when it comes to killing Pakistanis.

Until those groups are eliminated and until the steady, seemingly endless supply of suicide bombers, fidayeen fighters and sundry other militants is shut down, Pakistanis will not be safe. Unfortunately, there is little to suggest that the state knows how to rid Pakistan of the religious extremism, militancy and terrorism that has blighted this country for decades now.

Finally, insecure, often defenceless, as Pakistanis are inside their own country, the site of yesterday's attack is also a reminder that Pakistan's borders — east, west and southwest — are major flashpoints. Peace externally and security internally is the only recipe for a stable Pakistan.

Muharram security

EXCEPT for some incidents of violence in Karachi, the relatively few sectarian attacks in the month of Muharram so far have allowed the focus to remain where it should be: on the sombre commemoration of an important period in the religious calendar.

Yet, it is today and tomorrow — on Muharram 9 and 10 — that religious sentiment will be at its height in the country and, therefore, it is over these two days that the state's security apparatus must be at its peak vigilance.

The lamentation of broader societal trends and the spread of virulent and armed sectarianism on the fringes of society that has rendered what should be peaceful days of religious commemoration the fraught and dangerous period it has now become in Pakistan are focal points.

But on these two days, the goal of the state should be to ensure that the vast security, intelligence and law-enforcement apparatus across the country is able to keep the peace nationally — to ensure that no violence takes place anywhere, because sectarian hostilities have the potential to spread regionally, provincially and even nationally.

In the massive undertaking that will be the security precautions during these two days, the army will also have an important role to play. While soldiers are not policemen, there are many sensitive areas in the country

November, 2014

where the presence of troops can help manage sectarian tensions and stop them from spilling over.

Moreover, the military's intelligence agencies are perhaps uniquely well positioned to detect and interrupt sectarian militant activity and so will need to be on the highest state of alert.

Of course, the focal point will be the Muharram processions and the routes along which they will move. By now, the process of securing routes and ensuring the safety of participants in the religious commemoration should be a highly developed feature. But as last year's tragic events in Rawalpindi demonstrated, the slightest deviation from established security procedure can have the most terrifying of consequences. On days such as these it is not just the overwhelming presence of security personnel that matters but also the fact that the security apparatus needs to be alert and focused.

The state owes it to the people who will come out of their homes to commemorate an important event in the religious calendar that the citizenry remains safe and protected from violence.

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Swedish recognition

WHILE Israel's angry reaction to the Swedish decision to recognise the Palestinian state is understandable, America's response, unfortunately, highlights once again the efforts of the strong Israel lobby that influences Washington's policy on the Middle East. By its "brave and historic" decision, as affirmed by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Sweden joins hands with 134 UN members who have already recognised the Palestinian people's right to a sovereign state on their soil.

This right has been officially recognised by America in the form of many international agreements, one of them being the Declaration of Principles which Bill Clinton, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin signed on the White House lawn in September 1993.

This was also a right which President Barack Obama affirmed in his historic broadcast to the Arab-Islamic world from Cairo on June 4, 2009. His speech warned Israel against continuing with settlements activity — something which the Likud government continues to ignore with contempt.

The Swedish decision comes in the wake of the British parliament's resolution on recognising the Palestinian state. Even though the resolution is non-binding, it unmistakably reflects how Europe has begun to see the Arab-Israeli issue and the enormous sympathy which the Palestinian people have gained worldwide because of

November, 2014

Israel's periodic Gaza raids, the primary victims of which have been civilians.

While Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's hawkish foreign minister, criticised the Swedish decision, America called Stockholm's recognition premature and pleaded for a solution through direct negotiations. No one opposes talks, but Israel has made a mockery of the peace process and gone back on solemn agreements.

The assumption of power by a hard-line government headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has turned the peace process farcical. Even though previous Israeli governments have committed themselves to a two-state solution, Mr Netanyahu has sabotaged this sensible formula and insists that Israel be recognised as a Jewish state, which will include entire Palestine.

The State Department statement shows how America stands isolated from the world on the question of an independent Palestinian state.

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Cricket triumph

The series win against the Australians in the UAE heralds the beginning of a new era for Pakistan cricket.

The emphatic manner of our players' victory against a formidable Australia after a gap of 20 years indicates a turnaround in the fortunes of Pakistan which barely a month ago was struggling to hold its own in international cricket. The successive defeats in Sri Lanka followed by a 3-0 whitewash at the hands of the Aussies in the ODI series last month had pundits of the game all but writing off Pakistan for the Tests.

However, the same critics are now running out of superlatives in describing the excellent effort put in by Misbah-ul-Haq and his men for rewriting the record books with their prolific scoring against Australia. And for once, it is the Pakistani batsmen who stole the limelight.

Leading the way was Younis Khan who scored three hundreds in four innings including a double century to make his mark as a top batsman in world cricket. His performance clearly rubbed off on his mates, including skipper Misbah who made a hurricane 56-ball century in Abu Dhabi to equal the world record held by Vivian Richards since 1986.

Three players — Younis, Misbah and Azhar Ali — accomplished the rare feat of scoring a century in each innings during the series, while opener Ahmed Shehzad

November, 2014

and wicketkeeper Sarfraz Ahmed also reached the three-figure mark.

In bowling too, there was much to celebrate for Pakistan as veteran Saeed Ajmal's loss became young Yasir Shah's gain. The talented leg-spinner formed a lethal duo with Zulfiqar Babar against the Australians.

The defeat of the latter, meanwhile, has raised some serious questions about their ability to cope with the turning pitches in the subcontinent as well as in the Middle East.

It is now imperative for Pakistan to keep up the tempo and extend its winning streak against New Zealand in the upcoming series so that it can become a formidable contender in the World Cup 2015.

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Militancy: is the state prepared?

In the aftermath of Sunday's devastating bombing near the Wagah border crossing, many questions have to be asked as dozens of families bury their dead and several more begin the long task of looking after the injured.

Worryingly, few of the questions have any clear answers. To begin with, with the blowback from the North Waziristan military operation now seemingly gathering pace, how well is the country's intelligence and law-enforcement apparatus positioned to deal with the threat?

The army-led security apparatus took a great deal of credit for so-called intelligence-led targeted operations in the cities and towns around the time Operation Zarb-i-Azb was launched in the summer, and they did seem to blunt the urban terrorist threat for a while at least. But the militant threat ebbs and flows and without sustained, focused and relentless pursuit, the state will always find that a period of calm is followed by a period of intense attacks. Militant groups regenerate and, more problematically, tend to splinter over time, leading to ever-more virulent offshoots.

Has the security apparatus of the state really kept up the pressure on urban militant groups, in the same way it did in the early days of Zarb-i-Azb?

November, 2014

Next, both the site of the attack and the duelling claims of responsibility for Sunday's carnage present a fresh challenge. It does appear that the border Rangers at Wagah were the target and perhaps the suicide bomber exploded himself among civilians because he was unable to get closer to a bigger security target or larger group of security personnel. But the bomber did blow himself up among a large number of civilians, which means it cannot be ruled out that the so-called soft option — civilian victims — was the original plan.

If soft targets and civilian-centric attacks are once again becoming the principal focus of militants, then the country may have to brace itself for another wave of terror that will be fiendishly difficult to prevent. The only effective way of stopping a militant attack on a civilian target — necessarily open and accessible to the public — is to find the militant cells and dismantle them.

How far though have the state's resources, especially on the civilian-led law-enforcement side, really been developed to make that possible?

Lahore, possibly the richest, best resourced and fawned over of all the provincial capitals, has suffered some serious attacks in recent years and yet further attacks continue to be a very real possibility — as the Wagah episode has proved.

Finally, with two separate groups claiming the Wagah attack, how much is really known about which groups are active in Pakistan and which militant ideologies are proliferating? Perhaps, as some politicians have called for, the government needs to give parliament a detailed

briefing on the state of militancy in Pakistan today. To fight the militancy threat, knowing its contours is a prerequisite.

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Time to talk

IMPASSE though there may be in the ongoing struggle between the PML-N federal government and the PTI, at least the government appears to be waking up to the reality that it is an undesirable state of affairs.

Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid suggested over the weekend that the PML-N is willing to restart talks with the PTI on, presumably, electoral reforms and reviewing the disputed results from May 2013.

The information minister could not resist a dig at Imran Khan, suggesting that the PTI chief should unshackle his chief negotiator Shah Mehmood Qureshi, but it does indicate that the government is thinking of ways to find a negotiated settlement to end the anti-government protests that have dominated the national political discourse since the summer.

Problematic as many of the PTI's tactics and some of its demands have been, the fact remains that there is much

November, 2014

in the party's original set of demands that are worth acting on.

Elections in Pakistan may have incrementally improved in terms of transparency and acceptability, but they remain far from being free and fair — even if the PTI's allegations of mass and systemic rigging in the last election still stand unproven.

There are genuine barriers to entry for those aspiring to represent the public and the ideal of every vote counting hardly applies because illegitimate ballots do corrupt the process and not every vote that is valid is properly accounted for.

Addressing the deep-rooted electoral problems would go a long way in improving the quality of democracy in the country. The PML-N government seems largely uninterested in reforms, but perhaps it would do well to consider that much of the aura of an unexpectedly decisive electoral win in May 2013 would not have dissipated in little over a year as a result of a sustained protest campaign by the PTI if the elections had been more transparent and individual results conclusively verifiable.

Yet, Mr Rashid also has a point: the PTI needs to return to the negotiating table and understand that electoral reforms should be the focus of talks rather than the ouster of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Overreaching itself, seemingly because of Mr Khan's intransigence, means that the party has achieved virtually nothing in substantive terms. The PTI needs to revisit its

own strategy: the politics of protest may produce a spectacle, but it does little to actually improve the democratic system in the country.

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A chilling episode of mob violence

TWO impressions stood out as yet another frenzied mob took the law into its own hands in Kot Radha Kishan, an hour's drive from Lahore, in Kasur district.

The first impression highlights the similarities between this latest incident and previous killings by mobs in the name of religion. The second one relates to the heightened degree of cruelty which characterised the mob's actions.

While there is as yet sketchy information about the incident, it has a chillingly familiar ring to it: an individual (in this case members of the Christian community were involved) is accused of desecrating pages of the Holy Quran; angry Muslims set about punishing those they deem guilty.

In the background, as is often the case, lurk details as to how, at the root of the violence, is a money dispute that

November, 2014

spiralled out of control, with the minority community becoming an easy target for members of the dominant faith. But what sets this particular instance apart from other occurrences of its kind are the reports about the intensity with which this latest mob-pronounced sentence was executed.

Shama and Shahzad fell to their attackers' frenzy on Tuesday morning, but initially, there was some confusion about exactly how they had been killed.

There was word that the couple, expecting their fourth child, had been thrown into a burning brick kiln. An attempt was made to 'correct' the version that they had been killed before their bodies were disposed of in the oven.

Since then, the incident has been widely taken notice of. The Punjab chief minister has ordered an inquiry, as he does frequently, without offering any guarantees or generating any hope that the guilty will be brought to justice this time round.

There have been condemnatory statements issued by various groups and individuals, including the prime minister. Once again the vulnerability of our religious minorities to the law and society is the topic of discussion.

The question being asked is: will this be the turning point so desperately required to deter Pakistanis from perpetrating violence on those who are too weak to defend themselves and who scarcely have an opportunity to explain and clarify?

The chances of that essential course correction taking place in the wake of the killing of Shama and Shahzad are not very bright — the process is long and gruelling and needs the unqualified resolve of those in government.

Over time, the mob has intensified its violence in direct proportion to the government's laxity and helplessness.

What our politicians have failed to do so far is take notice of their own failure to fulfill a responsibility. Instead, what the rulers have done is to instruct the police to investigate a territory which the law enforcers are unequipped to handle and too scared to venture into. What is needed is leadership, not just statements, from the top.

Published in Dawn, November 6th , 2014

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Wheat support price

THE government has increased the procurement price of wheat to Rs1300, an increase of Rs100, saying that the step has been taken to help the farmers.

Additionally, a regulatory duty of 20pc has been imposed on wheat imports since the price of the staple food item, which is also one of the country's largest crops, has fallen steeply in global markets since May of this year.

The idea is to protect the farmer from the damaging effects of a steep drop in global markets as well as an increase in prices of agricultural inputs. Both steps are going to further fuel food inflation for urban consumers.

The government's claim that it is acting to protect the interests of small farmers is being received with scepticism.

Small farmers find it very difficult to access the benefits of the support price since the procurement machinery tends to give red-carpet treatment to large landowners with political clout. If the steps are indeed being taken to help farmers, further reforms should also be pursued in tandem.

Besides the procurement price, critical agricultural inputs such as agri credit and fertiliser distribution are appropriated mainly by the large landowners.

Reforming the procurement machinery as well as fertiliser distribution to ensure that the state support provided through these is properly targeted is essential.

Crop insurance is virtually non-existent in Pakistan, and it should also be made a priority since it can significantly contribute towards documenting the sector, as well as improving the targeting of agricultural subsidies and support prices.

If the government is serious about helping farmers, then it should follow up its steps to safeguard farmer incomes with reforms to ensure better targeting of its initiatives. If the next wheat procurement season is again marred by allegations that large landowners have walked off with the lion's share of the benefits of the price increase, it will cast a dark shadow over the government's credibility on such a sensitive issue.

Published in Dawn, November 6th, 2014

A changed path for ISI

WITH the exit of DG ISI Gen Zaheerul Islam this week, the last vestiges of the Kayani-era approach to security and politics can perhaps also be left behind.

Much though will depend on the path army chief Gen Raheel Sharif decides to take. By the end of his six years as army chief, retired Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani had presided over an unmitigated political disaster at the ISI, with successive ISI chiefs taking on the political government of the day.

First, Gen Shuja Pasha engaged in open warfare with the PPP-led government and tried his utmost to turn the so-called Memogate episode into the political downfall of then-president Asif Zardari. Later, Gen Pasha, now retired, became embroiled in allegations about the rise of the PTI.

Gen Zaheerul Islam appeared initially to take a more apolitical line than his predecessor and notably the May 2013 general election saw little interference by the ISI. But then the ISI under him also became embroiled in a staggering alleged conspiracy to topple the PML-N government through anti-government street protests led by Tahirul Qadri and Imran Khan.

That alleged conspiracy was never proved and as the outgoing ISI chief made his farewell call on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday, there was little sign anywhere nationally that the PML-N government is in

imminent trouble. Yet, the general, like his predecessor, will leave office under a cloud of suspicion.

The challenge for Gen Raheel Sharif will be to put the ISI back on the right track. The intelligence agency may be a powerful and vast entity, but it is not bigger than its parent organisation, the armed forces, especially the army.

In an ideal world, the ISI would be reporting to the prime minister and taking its policy directions from that office, so the question of political interference would not arise. But recent events have amply demonstrated, as if a reminder were needed, that the Pakistan of today is far from an ideal world, especially in the civil-military arena.

Gen Sharif, and incoming ISI chief Gen Rizwan Akhtar, would do well to consider how much a politicised ISI hurts the organisation's core mission of gathering intelligence on threats external and internal to the security of the state and safety of the public.

The ISI can become a vital state institution for reasons that are good rather than the endless controversies it seems to plunge itself, and the country, into. Generals Sharif and Akhtar could provide that better direction.

Published in Dawn, November 6th, 2014

The missing case

AFTER being in the spotlight for a few months, the case of the missing persons no longer occupies a central position.

In fact, the Supreme Court last took up a missing persons' case in early July when it ordered the constitution of a five-member larger bench for further hearing. Since then, the clamour for the truth behind these disappearances that occurred over the last few years has died down, almost as if some kind of conclusion had been informally arrived at — whereas nothing has emerged in public that can satisfy the calls for an inquiry.

Now Amina Masood Janjua of the Defence of Human Rights has moved the Supreme Court for the formation of a “high-powered” commission to investigate the deaths of 98 victims of alleged enforced disappearance.

She has cited three cases where, according to her petition, the bodies of three missing persons were found after the latter had been kept at internment centres.

The petition seeks the inspection of internment centres set up under the Action in Aid of Civil Power regulations, and the immediate release of people “who are innocent”.

The case is worthy of focus by those who are looking for justice, especially as, in addition to the existing unsolved cases of disappearances, new ones continue to crop up.

For instance, only the other day, it was reported that five bodies recovered from Karachi were of Baloch men from Hub. The men were believed to have gone missing 18 months ago.

As Iftikhar Chaudhry moved closer to the completion of his term as chief justice of Pakistan, Ms Janjua's voice became hard to ignore in the missing persons' case. As chief justice, Mr Chaudhry was very vocal about his commitment to discovering the truth behind the disappearances, even when he was unable to take great strides towards an answer.

The gradual fading of the affair from the public arena after his retirement might encourage an argument that the interest shown during his tenure was personal and not institutional.

It is also a fact that the change of faces has been accompanied by changes in the law that make an investigation extremely difficult when the finger is pointed at actors of the state.

The Protection of Pakistan Act gives new powers and immunity to the security officials to carry out their work. But the existence of this law should not prevent a genuine, just search for the truth about enforced disappearances.

Published in Dawn, November 7th, 2014

Forced conversions

“WE only facilitate their wish. We don’t impose our own will on them.” The bland statement masks a world of obfuscation as a result of which the marginalised of the country receive what, sadly, experience has taught them to expect: to be either directly victimised, or live in circumstances in which they feel victimised.

The statement by the spokesperson for the Bharchundi Shareef shrine in Daharki, Sindh, was in reaction to questions raised by the family of Anjali Kumari Meghwar about the attached seminary’s possible involvement in the girl’s abduction, forced conversion to Islam from Hinduism, and subsequent forced marriage.

After nine days of making a fruitless attempt to convince their area’s local authorities to focus on their plight, Anjali’s family came to Karachi and met the city police chief on Wednesday.

Her father insists that she was kidnapped from her home in broad daylight, and that hers was not a conversion by choice. He has with him Nadra and school documents that put her age at 12.

In the context of Anjali’s family, and many others like them, it is true that free choice stands compromised. It can only be conjectured how much pressure is felt by members of minority religions in a society where issues of faith are increasingly becoming the focus of violence.

Caste too can effectively become a stigma that holds entire communities in oppression. And, while it is as yet too early to pronounce upon Anjali’s case, it is a matter of record that the same complaint of forced conversion has been voiced before, that the caretakers of this particular shrine have also faced this accusation previously, and that an immediate and thorough investigation is needed.

That said, the case of 12-year-old Anjali should be very simple to resolve: forcing underage marriage has been criminalised in Sindh since last year, and the family have named the man to whom they claim the girl was married. For any government even halfway committed to the cause of the marginalised, the equation should not prove too difficult.

Published in Dawn, November 7th, 2014

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Pentagon's view

A REPORT by the US Department of Defence with critical comments on Pakistan's alleged use of "proxy forces to hedge against the loss of influence in Afghanistan and to counter India's superior military" has elicited a sharp response by the state — and perhaps rightly so.

With army chief Gen Raheel Sharif due to visit the US this month, following an equally important visit to Afghanistan yesterday, the report is being perceived here as a snub to an important military ally that has at long last launched a military operation in North Waziristan and has consistently asserted in recent months that the long-term goal is to eliminate all terrorist and militant sanctuaries on Pakistani soil.

As ever, the truth lies somewhere in between American petulance and Pakistani prickliness.

First, the basic facts. The report in question, Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan, is a biannual one compiled by the Pentagon after consultation with other senior US officials, including the secretary of state, director of National Intelligence and the administrator for USAID.

The last report, published in April 2014, had much the same language on Pakistan, but did not have a reference to "proxy forces", ie non-state actors/militants, or "India's military superiority".

Clearly, whoever inserted the newer language meant to send a stronger message. At the same time, the last report, in March, before the launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb, contained the following comment, "Pakistan did not take significant action against Afghan or India-focused militant groups".

So while the language has somewhat hardened in the current report, the overall sentiment is the same: Islamabad is not doing enough to promote regional stability. That is, the threat of militancy and terrorism emanating from here towards Afghanistan and India is not diminishing, even as the country is progressively taking on terrorists and militants focused on attacking Pakistani state and society.

Even if true, and arguably the Pentagon's characterisation has some truth to it, it is only part of the story. A more balanced view would have taken into consideration Islamabad's legitimate security concerns, not least the issue of reverse sanctuaries, ie Pakistan-centric militants finding refuge in Afghanistan and launching attacks inside Pakistan from across the border.

In addition, the issue of Afghan forces firing into Pakistan has become one of the main concerns in the military-to-military relationship in recent months.

The "irritants" in the Afghan-Pakistan bilateral relations are bidirectional, rather than the unidirectional as the Pentagon report has suggested.

On the Pakistan-India relationship too it is worth asking why a US report on the situation in Afghanistan has

November, 2014

throwaway comments on “India’s military superiority” and proxies that are “India-focused”.

In 13 years of seeking, needing and enjoying Pakistan’s cooperation on certain issues in Afghanistan, the US foreign policy establishment still does not appear to have much a clue of when it comes to broaching difficult subjects with Islamabad.

Published in Dawn, November 7th, 2014

Senseless bloodletting

It will take us some time to absorb the full horror of the recent mob-murder of a young Christian couple at a brick kiln not far from Lahore.

The murkiness of the blasphemy allegation, the suspicion that the incident was sparked by a financial dispute, and the chilling manner of the couple’s death make the criminal deed all the more horrific, especially as it involved a frightening herd instinct.

Just days after the murder, we witnessed a similar episode of shame and sorrow: on Thursday, in Gujrat, an assistant sub-inspector killed a detainee with an axe at his police station, later saying that the victim had uttered blasphemous words.

The police say there is no evidence of this claim, and that their colleague was enraged at the insults hurled at him by the murdered man who was said to be mentally unsound.

Yet that makes the underlying point all the more significant: increasingly, suspicions of blasphemy are not only creating dangerous and frequently deadly flashpoints of violence, the charge itself can be, and is, easily misused to mask other motives.

If ASI Faraz Naveed from Gujrat felt that the law and his colleagues might view his crime in a more lenient light if he cited blasphemy as the motive behind the murder, it is only because all too often that has proved to be the case.

Pakistan has witnessed assault after assault on this count, each one eventually brushed under the carpet — even in those cases where it is evident that the charge was falsely used to cover up other, more ulterior, motives.

The law itself is problematic; its existence has emboldened individuals or mobs to take the law into their own hands and set out to slaughter. And when this happens, fear spreads through entire communities, often forcing them to leave their homes and flee en masse.

It is essential to find some way to stop the violence and bloodletting that follows blasphemy accusations.

Such a pass has been reached that lawyers and judges involved in blasphemy cases find themselves a target, and let it not be forgotten that Mumtaz Qadri, the

November, 2014

murderer of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer, was in the news recently because he incited a prison guard to attack another detainee.

Correcting the path is, no doubt, a daunting task; yet, it must be done if Pakistan has any aspirations at all of being counted amongst the world's more progressive nations.

Published in Dawn, November 8th, 2014

And now Facebook

THE release of Facebook's latest Government Requests Report has laid bare the Pakistani government's priorities when it comes to the internet. Requests from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and IT ministry to restrict content on the social network increased nearly tenfold in January-June 2014, as compared to the previous six months.

Additionally, the report cited 116 government requests to access data from user accounts, of which 35.34pc resulted in the production of 'some' data.

Even this limited glimpse into the dialogue between Facebook and the state reveals that the regressive block-and-ban policies that continue to prevent our access to YouTube are now being applied to the biggest social

network in local cyberspace, with Facebook complicit in the act of censorship.

Also read: [Analysis: What you cannot see on Facebook](#)

Equally worrying is the fact that Pakistan's over 17 million local Facebook users may have their privacy invaded by state agencies based on the cases put forward, and Facebook's understanding of local laws such as the controversial Protection of Pakistan Act.

Similar to the YouTube ban, this censorship and invasion of privacy appears impossible to challenge. There is no notice from either Facebook or the government. There is no transparency in the process, no mechanisms to redress or challenge actions taken by either party.

The 'deal' between Facebook and the state remains unknown, despite the fact that basic rights — access to information, free speech, privacy — are being trampled upon.

The lack of transparency and accountability also leaves this clandestine system open to misuse and abuse, especially given the government's track record in cyberspace so far, and Facebook's limited understanding of Pakistan.

While extremist outfits organise freely and spread hate speech on Facebook, the few identified content restrictions have all targeted liberal, progressive voices such as the rock band Laal whose Facebook page was banned. With this seemingly ad hoc, arbitrary process of

November, 2014

of inward migration in the country, with people from the other provinces moving into Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur, ethnic sensitivities have been fanned.

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Census delays

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November, 2014

So how do we move forward given these political apprehensions? Perhaps we can find some answers in the example of India where the government enacted a freeze, via a constitutional amendment in 2002, of delimitation of seat shares until the year 2026, irrespective of the results of the census. This released the exercise from all political apprehensions.

A compromise of this sort can work for Pakistan as well to allow a clean census to proceed. The politicians can retain their status quo, and policymakers can have the updated data they need to build sound policies upon.

Published in Dawn, November 8th, 2014

Jamaat's proactive role

The Jamaat-i-Islami chief seems to be succeeding in his efforts to craft a new role for himself and to give his party a more proactive one at a time when the politics of sit-ins has polarised the national scene.

The meetings Sirajul Haq has been having with a variety of leaders in government and opposition and a review of his speeches would show consistency in rhetoric and policy, with a perceptible distancing from confrontational politics.

The fact that Mr Haq realises that JI policies need to be 'corrected' is itself an indication of the pragmatist in him.

Read| [JI to build Pakistan into Islamic welfare state: Siraj](#)

As pursued by two of his predecessors, JI policies tended to show a tilt towards such populism as was permissible within the party's ideological framework.

The 'best' of this populism with an over-emphasis on a display of street power came in the wake of the US-led war on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan when Qazi Hussain Ahmad was the chief.

This West-specific xenophobia was pursued with greater energy by Syed Munawwar Hassan, his successor, and seemed to colour the JI's perception of all national and international developments.

More regrettably, the JI looked at militancy and religious extremists through this prism and stuck to a policy that seemed to run counter to the national consensus on the need to take the menace of terrorism head on.

Today, the JI is part of the KP government, and that serves to inject sobriety into its policies. But that alone doesn't explain the subtle change in thinking.

As a realist, Mr Haq knows that the JI's parliamentary representation is not necessarily a true barometer of its space in society; it is a mainstream party with a large middle-class base.

And yet, reflection is needed by the JI leadership on the party's controversial political past and the reasons behind its failure to muster enough support to make an impact in parliament.

November, 2014

Without such introspection, Mr Haq, for all his pragmatism, may not be able to do much to improve the Jamaat's image in the eyes of the public and improve the party's chances at the polls.

Published in Dawn, November 9th, 2014

Thar drought

The situation in Tharparkar is dire because of the drought the desert district in Sindh has witnessed for the second consecutive year.

The harsh climatic conditions have also affected the district of Umerkot. Unfortunately, the handling of the grim situation by the PPP government in Sindh has left much to be desired.

On Friday, provincial minister Manzoor Wasan denied issuing an inquiry report on the Thar drought a day after details of the document found their way to the media.

Mr Wasan described news of the report as "a heinous conspiracy against PPP and the Sindh government".

The report had angered Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who issued show cause notices to Mr Wasan and the Sindh chief minister while a Bilawal House spokesman criticised the document as "immature".

Read: [Minister's report on deaths in Thar angers Bilawal](#)

Both the apparent leak and the angry denial reflect the chaos and lack of cohesion within the Sindh government.

It almost appears as if internal rifts and power games within the PPP are affecting governance when the party should be focusing on making an honest effort to investigate the disaster in Thar and to suggest remedies.

It is understandable why the PPP leadership would feel uneasy about any criticism that it had failed to satisfactorily tackle the issues in the region, as it has always maintained that things were under control.

But it needs to confront the circumstances in a straightforward manner and worry less about the damage to the party's image that an honest appraisal of its performance in Thar might incur.

Considering the controversy that shrouds the now denied report, a fresh, unbiased investigation into the situation prevailing in the desert area is required, preferably overseen by institutions and individuals that are not influenced by and have no interest in political power games.

As independent observers have noted, the situation in Thar is far from normal, with hundreds of drought-related deaths reported since last year, as well as rampant malnutrition, especially amongst children, and livestock deaths. Hence the Sindh government cannot brush aside criticism.

A third party — and not a serving minister or government official — must look into the issue, point out weaknesses

November, 2014

in the administration's service delivery mechanisms and suggest solutions. Perhaps reputable NGOs familiar with the area can be given the task.

What is certain is that the suffering of Thar's people must not be lost sight of due to political squabbling and infighting. An effective long-term response is needed to address Thar's problems.

Published in Dawn, November 9th, 2014

PM in China

China's growing trade and investment partnerships around the world have stirred up debate about the motivations behind the process. Some view it with alarm, arguing that other strategic interests are sure to follow.

Others take a more benign view, saying that China's growing economic partnerships around the world are purely commercial ventures and nothing more than a search for markets and raw materials, primarily energy and minerals.

This debate hangs over Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's ongoing visit to China. News that has come out speaks of "more than 20 agreements" signed between the Pakistani and Chinese leaders, in power and communications and the development of an industrial estate.

Read: [Pakistan, China ink 19 agreements on energy, basic infrastructure](#)

But there is also mention of the prime minister's commitment to "continue to resolutely fight the East Turkestan Islamic Movement terrorist forces" as well as a resolve to "jointly maintain regional peace and stability", referring specifically to Afghanistan.

Is Pakistan's deepening relationship with China transactional in nature or strategic? And what objectives is it seeking to advance?

In his trip to India last month, President Xi Jinping signed onto \$20bn worth of deals. Across Africa, China's trade and investment has been growing, centred mostly on energy and minerals but diversifying rapidly to other products as well. In Latin America, Chinese investment touched \$11.4bn in 2012, up from \$120m in 2004 — a spectacular increase.

China's overseas investments are growing at a rapid pace worldwide, as is its trade, and the Chinese are building a constantly evolving institutional architecture to manage this growth, with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank being the latest addition.

The process is driven by the growing accumulation of capital in the country that needs profitable avenues for reinvestment.

In Pakistan we tend to bring a needless amount of emotion into our China conversation, if it can be called that. Pakistan is not some special case being nurtured by

November, 2014

China for emotional reasons, but simply another place where Chinese capital, backed by state-supported credit on state-supplied terms, is entering in search of profits.

The overwrought rhetoric used in Pakistan to describe the China relationship needs to change towards a more mature and more pragmatic language. In the old days, Pakistan's place in China's foreign policy was to serve as a counterfoil to India's growing military might. In exchange, a few infrastructure projects were provided.

Today, the relationship has grown beyond India to include action against militant groups on Pakistani soil, as well as securing peace in Afghanistan.

Alongside these commitments, a large number of infrastructure projects are being offered, but on terms that are largely commercial, not concessional.

This growing partnership may carry tremendous benefit for Pakistan, but it would be a mistake to view it as brotherly assistance. Instead, our energies should be focused on safeguarding our own economic interests through it, to ensure that we're not simply exchanging dependence on one great power for another.

Published in Dawn, November 9th, 2014

The IS threat

A report prepared by the Balochistan home department and sent by the provincial government to the security agencies has claimed a significant increase in activity by the self-styled Islamic State inside Pakistan.

Since the report became public, the Balochistan government has tried to downplay its contents and senior officials have suggested that there is no real IS problem in Pakistan, at least in Balochistan.

Yet, at the same time as officially denying the existence of IS in Balochistan, the chief minister and home secretary accepted that groups with similar agendas to the IS do exist in the province. And therein lies the problem: IS or no IS, the country's militancy problem is complex and continuing.

Moreover, while IS may not yet have a substantial presence in Pakistan, the militant landscape here is favourable to its goals in several ways. Many of the key players in the militant groups today have an agenda and set of targets that easily fits within the IS framework. And the IS brand is international, giving a boost to local outfits in their quest for relevance and importance in the crowded world of militancy.

In at least one regard, what the Pakistani state should do is fairly clear: be forthright about the IS threat and the extent of the group's activity in Pakistan.

Ultimately, the point of militant groups is to be visible, so major ingress by IS, were it to happen, would be known once attacks start occurring and the group began to take responsibility for them. Far better than that would be to have the threat explained beforehand – because tracking the threat would also mean having a strategy to deal with it if and when it explodes in a big way. Yet, the Pakistani state appears to be stuck in an old pattern of confronting the militant threat: do nothing, or very, very little, until the threat grows so big that it is impossible to ignore – and infinitely more difficult to fight back against.

Much the same had happened with Al Qaeda when it began to seek local partners and shape the jihad discourse among militants, giving it an international context and flavour that is significantly more dangerous than localised variants.

Were IS to gain more than a toehold in Pakistan, the perils are fairly obvious: IS could go far beyond what Al Qaeda, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi or even the TTP have achieved here. Which would mean a terrible and even higher price that the Pakistani state and society would have to pay for IS's existence here. With its overt and ferocious sectarian agenda, an IS in the ascendant could unleash forces within society that are too frightening to even contemplate.

Miss the warning signs now or fail to deny it space within Pakistan now and it may not be long before IS becomes the mother of all militant problems.

Published in Dawn, November 10th, 2014

OGDCL divestment

AFTER touting its achievement in attracting large foreign inflows in the first half of the year, the government now finds itself in the embarrassing position of acknowledging that there is limited international interest in its planned divestment of shares in the profitable OGDCL.

Part of this lack of interest has to do with circumstances in global markets that are jittery due to an announcement by the Federal Reserve that the era of low interest rates is about to end. Investors have become more sensitive to vulnerabilities in their portfolios, and Pakistan hardly presents a picture of solidity as an investment destination, particularly given the squabbling that has broken out around the divestment.

It is fair to expect that the government should ensure a fair price for the sale of state assets, but the opposition misled the public in characterising the divestment as privatisation at a throwaway price, even before a price had been announced. The lack of investor interest would suggest that the government did not price the shares too low.

For its part, the government also failed to get its message out clearly. By the time it clarified that the transaction was not a part of the privatisation process, it was too late.

It also failed to explain why the transaction was necessary in the first place. Was its purpose simply to

November, 2014

raise money? A divestment of shares does not bring any strategic benefit because management control does not change. Was it simply to satisfy the IMF?

In which case, why was the Fund so insistent in the first place? It is worth noting that the decision to postpone the deal was announced while talks with the Fund on the fourth and fifth review were under way in Dubai. Clearly, the postponement did not serve as a sticking point in those negotiations, suggesting that the Fund is perhaps not as insistent as implied by some. Given the uncertainties that have arisen around the deal, though, it is probably a wise decision to postpone the transaction for now.

Published in Dawn, November 10th, 2014

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CEC consultation

AT long last, after the Supreme Court's recent intervention, the country looks set to get a permanent chief election commissioner.

Consultation, as required by law, between the PML-N government and the PPP-led opposition, including the PTI, has progressed smoothly, belying the careless, almost lazy, assertions of politicians since July 2013 that the CEC appointment needed a lengthy schedule and sustained dialogue on a range of issues.

To be sure, the constitutional requirement that the CEC must be "or has been, a judge of the Supreme Court or is, or has been, a judge of a high court and is qualified ... to be appointed a judge of the Supreme Court" is not an ideal scenario and can be reassessed under a package of electoral reforms parliament is meant to be working on. But far worse are the consequences of not having a permanent CEC, as the country has not since July 2013 when Fakhruddin Ebrahim quit.

Without a permanent CEC, most major decisions of the Election Commission of Pakistan are put on hold and more controversial issues avoided. For example, an acting CEC who is a senior member of the Supreme Court is unlikely to make major or aggressive policy decisions on delimitation exercises, electronic voting or more forcefully implement electoral laws, given that most of the issues are likely to be appealed in the Supreme Court itself.

November, 2014

Though having being nudged into action by the Supreme Court, the country's political leadership is demonstrating once again that, when pushed, it can still work together to fulfil the constitutional duties of the people's representatives.

It is the dignity of the process that is striking: all sides have put forward their nominees and expressed their reservations about certain candidates without resorting to political mudslinging. Even the PTI has participated in consultations among the opposition in the National Assembly — and notably all other parties have acted in a mature way by welcoming the PTI contribution rather than mocking it for its inconsistent stand on resignations from parliament.

Extending from the ongoing consultations on the CEC appointment, the PML-N could use the opportunity to draw the PTI into further, parliamentary negotiations on electoral reforms and how to legitimately and legally address PTI reservations about results in specific constituencies in the May 2013 elections.

A demonstration of magnanimity by the PML-N could yet convince the PTI leadership to abandon its collision-course style of politics.

Published in Dawn, November 10th, 2014

FIR reform

THE Punjab government is working on a plan to simplify the process of registering a 'genuine' First Information Report. The larger purpose of this effort is to discourage registration of false complaints and prevent the harassment of innocent people during investigation and trial.

The initiators of these reforms have suggested that the report of a crime filed electronically, by telephone, or in person should be treated as an FIR.

Police investigators will be required to probe the complaints and send only those cases for trial where there is adequate evidence against a suspect. No suspect will be arrested unless the police can prove his or her involvement in the reported crime. Prosecutors will be authorised to drop cases that are false.

Read: [FIR 'reform' on Punjab govt radar screen](#)

The question is: are FIR reforms alone sufficient to make the country's rotten criminal justice system deliver?

In Pakistan, it seems the entire criminal justice system hinges on what should not be treated as more than a 'report of information' about the commission of a crime or the occurrence of an incident.

Since our police, prosecutors and judges rely so much on the contents of this document, many policymakers think

November, 2014

that they can revamp the country's criminal justice system and provide 'swift justice' to the people through merely simplifying the FIR registration mechanism.

Indeed, it is crucial to reform the process of FIR registration to give confidence to the people so that they can approach the police with their complaints without any fear.

But its significance in criminal investigation and in court trials should not be overstated. Thus, the policymakers in Punjab should look at their planned FIR reforms only as a first step towards a total overhaul of the criminal justice system and not as an end in itself.

The changes in the FIR registration process will not work unless they are followed by wider police reforms, and substantial improvements in crime investigation and court trial procedures.

Also, prosecutors and judges will have to stop overemphasising the FIR's contents during the trial process.

Published in Dawn, November 11th, 2014

PTI chief's proposal

THE latest big rally in Imran Khan's ongoing multi-city tour produced two surprises, one rather unpleasant, the other a genuine opportunity to help bring the anti-government protests to an end. First, the unpleasant part.

The suggestion by the PTI chief that a Supreme Court-led commission to inquire into the conduct of elections in May 2013 should include representatives of the ISI and MI is nothing short of staggering and bizarre.

Quite simply, it is these very organisations, and especially the ISI, that has historically queered the electoral pitch against democrats and civilian politicians. In fact, the last major electoral-related case that was adjudicated on by the Supreme Court — the Mehrangate scandal and the rigging of the 1990 election in favour of the IJI coalition led by Nawaz Sharif — led to the very highest levels of the army leadership, including a former army chief and DG ISI, being held responsible for essentially the buying of an election.

Read| [ISI and MI should sit on commission to investigate vote rigging: Imran](#)

Even leaving that history aside, what legal role does the ISI or the MI have when it comes to electoral matters? What is their official expertise in a matter that must be decided along laid-down legal criteria? All that Mr Khan appears to have done with his peculiar suggestion is

November, 2014

reinforce the impression that the PTI wants the army to have a role in politics and elections.

Yet, unwise as Mr Khan's first suggestion is, his other new idea is a good opportunity for the government.

By dropping the demand that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif step down or step aside temporarily while the commission conducts its inquiry, Mr Khan has removed the only genuine impediment to a comprehensive deal on electoral reforms and inquiry into specific results of the May 2013 general election.

Mr Khan's new formulation that the prime minister should resign and fresh elections be held if a time-bound inquiry proves electoral fraud is a reasonable one.

Now, the government and the other parties in parliament ought to act swiftly to meet the PTI halfway and do the right thing on electoral reforms.

One sticking point could be what constitutes electoral fraud enough to trigger a new election. Mr Khan's party has tried to keep that bar very low in the past, essentially arguing that any fraud at all would nullify the election. Similarly, malpractice would need to be proved in several constituencies.

Those are not insignificant points, but not insurmountable ones either. The government needs to act now.

Published in Dawn, November 11th , 2014

IMF review

FOR those who wanted to know why the fourth review of Pakistan's ongoing IMF programme was stalled for almost three months, the search for answers continues.

The government and the IMF have just concluded another round of negotiations in Dubai, in which the fourth and fifth reviews were clubbed together, and a statement at the end of the talks was happy to announce that the talks had, finally, ended successfully.

The Fund staff is now ready to recommend to the board that two drawings under both reviews be combined and released in a single \$1.1bn tranche towards the end of next month.

The good news is that there is no major disruption in the programme, except for a delay of a few months which is a minor issue. Despite some challenges, the balance of payments is not so precarious that it cannot afford a few months' delayed disbursement. The not-so-good news is that we are all left guessing at the reasons that led to the delay.

The talks for the fourth review began at the same time as the so-called long march of the PTI and PAT. The talks took place in Dubai with the escalating protests and rising political uncertainty in Islamabad as the backdrop.

November, 2014

Eventually, the talks were left inconclusive, with the Fund saying only that they would be completed in the days to come via video link.

The government blamed the protests for this. Speculation filled the empty space, with theories doing the rounds that the Fund was waiting to see whether the government would survive before committing more money, or that the Fund was demanding tough decisions such as a hike in power tariffs that the government was reluctant to take given the political circumstances in the country.

Those waiting for answers were disappointed with the just-released statement which decided to stick to the usual comfortable language rather than live up to the obligation to keep the key stakeholder in the whole process informed.

That key stakeholder is the citizenry of this country, and it will ultimately bear the cost of living up to the terms of this loan. All we know is that “[d]espite some difficulties” the programme “remains broadly on track”. This is as generic an endorsement as one can get. Heads are also being scratched over the analysis of the economy contained in the statement.

“Economic indicators are improving,” it says mysteriously, at a time when almost everybody is convinced that the government’s growth story has hit choppy waters. On the whole, the statement does little to temper the view that the Fund is operating along political lines.

An interruption in the disbursements is not possible while the US troop withdrawal is under way in Afghanistan, and

tumult in the domestic political scene brings anxieties of its own. Given these complexities, a generic statement following a delayed review is simply not good enough.

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Militancy in Khyber

The recently launched military operation in Bara may have been overshadowed by the bigger, months-old campaign in North Waziristan, but it is an important piece in the overall fight against militancy in the country for two reasons.

One, Bara tehsil’s proximity to Peshawar allows militants based in that part of the tribal areas to have an outside effect on the security and stability of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s capital and largest city.

Read: [21 militants killed in Khyber air strikes](#)

Two, the Mangal Bagh-led Lashkar-i-Islam had established a comprehensive fiefdom that had removed the region under its control for many years from nearly any semblance of being under the authority, or even influence, of the Pakistani state.

Unhappily, neither the army nor the civilian government has tried to explain much to the public about what the state is trying to achieve in Khyber Agency.

November, 2014

Contrast the publicity blitz — though often devoid of facts — that has characterised the North Waziristan operation.

Yet, piecing together what officials have said publicly — as during the Khyber political agent's press conference on Monday — and military officials are claiming privately, it does appear that, unlike other mini operations in the past when the state has declared victory only to launch another mini operation a year or even a few months later, this time the army does mean business.

More resources have been deployed this time round and more thought appears to have gone into planning the operation.

It appears that the plan is to begin by retaking the Bara plains before moving on to the mountainous Tirah region. But it will not be easy, as the loss of over a dozen security personnel in the first days of the operation demonstrated.

While Mangal Bagh's organisation has been weakened by defections and other losses, the TTP breakaway faction, Jamaatul Ahrar, has established a threatening presence in the agency.

Read: [New TTP group 'Jamatul Ahrar' breaks away from Mullah Fazlullah](#)

Moreover, with Mangal Bagh himself believed to be hiding out somewhere along the Pak-Afghan border, perhaps even on the Afghan side, the military has a hardened group of militant leaders to contend with —

even after the elimination of Abu Jandal of the Ahrar faction.

As with all such operations, two related issues are worth highlighting.

One, Bara underlines, as though further emphasis was needed, the failed strategy of seeking to use criminals masquerading as Islamist militants as a buffer against militants fighting the Pakistani state.

While his relationship with the Pakistani security establishment has hardly been a friendly one, Mangal Bagh was certainly seen at various points as a better alternative to the banned TTP.

But such explicit or sometimes tacit deals only allowed for the expansion of militancy in Fata — because the so-called good Taliban or friendly militants always ended up creating more space for the TTP-type, anti-state militants, sometimes even opportunistically aligning with them. Second, there are a quarter of a million IDPs from Khyber — how much is the state doing to help them?

War on education

The ferocity with which Islamist militants have been attacking educational institutions in Nigeria makes the efforts of their ideological comrades in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria pale by comparison.

November, 2014

A suicide bomber in the northern Nigerian town of Potiskum attacked a school assembly on Monday killing almost 50 students.

Though Boko Haram — Nigeria's most lethal extremist group — had not publicly claimed the attack at the time of writing, the outfit has carried out similar attacks in the past.

Read: [Suicide bomber kills 48 students in attack on Nigerian school](#)

The extremist group has burnt down schools, massacred students inside campuses and, in its most audacious attack, kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok in April.

Not just that, the Boko Haram leadership has openly instructed followers to destroy schools.

Also read: [Militants blow up rebuilt school in Bajaur](#)

Of course, Pakistan is familiar with such patterns of violence, as local militant groups, most prominently the banned TTP, have bombed or attacked hundreds of schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Fata, while extremists have also threatened and attacked schools in Balochistan.

In Afghanistan, though things have improved since the Taliban's fall in 2001, the harsh restrictions the militant group placed on girls' education while it ruled Kabul are still fresh in the mind.

Moreover, media reports indicate that the self-styled Islamic State has closed down schools in parts of Syria it controls in order to 'Islamise' the curriculum.

The unfortunate truth is that these extremists are jeopardising the future of countless children in the areas they control.

If left to their devices the militants will create an entire generation of children with little knowledge or skills other than rote learning of scripture and a very narrow interpretation of Islam.

Or the youngsters will be left illiterate.

While Syria is in the midst of a bloody conflict on various fronts and Afghanistan is not very stable at the moment, there is a lot that Nigeria and Pakistan can do to stamp out militancy within their borders. Or else apart from the other effects of militancy, we may lose an entire generation to the obscurantists.

Published in Dawn, November 12th, 2014

Roads as death traps

Yet again, high-ranking officials have expressed regret. And yet again there is every indication that like all earlier tragedies of such nature, the root issues will eventually find themselves swept under the carpet, unresolved.

The horrifying accident that occurred near Khairpur in Sindh on Tuesday morning involved a speeding bus carrying around 70 passengers.

It tried to overtake blind, resulting in a head-on collision with a truck.

Read: [At least 58 killed in accident near Khairpur](#)

Almost 60 men, women and children were killed and several others are now fighting for their lives.

Could this tragedy have been prevented? Yes, had the state made it its priority to spend funds on upgrading the existing network of highways to international standards, even as it built brand new motorways.

Yes, if the state could find the wherewithal to ensure that every person piloting a vehicle has a valid licence and the training that underpins it.

Yes, if the rules that exist piecemeal on paper about vehicle safety standards and the availability of emergency exits, etc, were stringently applied and unfit

vehicles that could prove hazardous to the safety of their own occupants as well as other road users were taken off the roads.

In short, yes, if the state discarded its apathetic approach to road safety.

Unfortunately, during the recent couple of decades, as the traffic-load plying the country's highways and roads has increased exponentially (in part due to the policies of successive governments), the state seems to have thrown up its hands in despair and decided to let anarchy rule.

But while the state must shoulder a significant share of the blame for allowing road accidents to continue unabated, citizens themselves must own up to some responsibility too.

How many can introspect and say with genuine honesty that they are well aware of the traffic rules, that they follow them all the time? How many are there even amongst educated sections of society who feel the rule of law applies to their own behaviour on the roads? Perhaps, then, the Motorway Police have a point in suggesting that school curricula should include a section on traffic rules and concepts of road safety, as they did in Islamabad on Monday.

As any visitor would testify, no matter how brief their stay, the picture that traffic all across the country presents today is indicative of the fact that few people, if any, are aware of even the most basic concepts of regulated road use.

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Unmerited appointments

The Lahore High Court's attempt to determine whether Maryam Nawaz, the prime minister's daughter and chairperson of the Prime Minister's Youth Programme, was installed in the post by following laid-down criteria according to the law and court judgments brings into focus an important issue.

It again shines a spotlight on the PML-N's poor record when it comes to making senior appointments in dozens of state-run or semi-government organisations. It is a typical, though highly inappropriate and thoroughly unnecessary, story: when in opposition, a party laments the incumbent rulers' flouting of the rules, but when in government itself, the party in question does exactly the same thing as its predecessor.

Also read: [Maryam to 'voluntarily' resign from PM loan scheme](#)

In the PML-N's case, the party seems to have surpassed even its woeful predecessor, something few could have believed was possible. For much of its time in office, the PML-N has been pursued by the courts on the appointment front: first, for not making permanent appointments at all and then for not following the rules

that the Supreme Court had laid down in the Khawaja Asif case in June 2013.

The problem with nepotistic or unmerited appointments to the offices concerned is twofold: managerial and regulatory.

On the managerial side, when it comes to loss-making public-sector enterprises or even profit-making ones in search of higher revenues, if a senior post is filled on the basis of loyalty to the PML-N or, as is often the case, the prime minister and his inner circle, then it is easy enough to see that the public interest and the PML-N's party interest may not quite meet — and the appointee may yield to political pressure rather than do what is in the public interest.

On the regulatory front, the problem is even deeper. If top officials in national regulatory bodies are appointed by bypassing or bending the rules, then how can they be expected to zealously guard the public interest in their jobs as regulators? If the PML-N won't do the right thing, then the courts should keep the pressure on.

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Arafat's legacy

IT is an irony that Fatah and Hamas should fail to display unity even when the 10th anniversary of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's death was being observed in the occupied territories.

The Palestinian freedom movement has always been faction-ridden, and Arafat himself headed one of the groups — Fatah. But through his political brilliance and undying devotion to his people's cause, Arafat kept them united under the umbrella organisation, the Palestine Liberation Organisation, till his dying day.

Also read: [Palestinian war of words marks Arafat anniversary](#)

His greatest achievement was to revive the Palestinian issue, which by the 1960s had been reduced to the question of Palestinian refugees. Arafat's military and diplomatic efforts brought the Palestinian issue to the fore. The battle of Karamah in the aftermath of the 1967 war was the PLO's first major military victory and helped consolidate Arafat's image as the undisputed champion of the Palestinian people.

He committed many mistakes, fell out with Jordan's King Hussein and Syria's Hafez al-Assad, and made a huge error of judgement by aligning himself with Saddam Hussein during the Kuwait invasion and appeared politically finished when the Israeli invasion made him and his soldiers leave Lebanon. But they were back

within months, and Arafat — with his headquarters shifted to faraway Tunis — made an extraordinary comeback.

His diplomatic triumph came in September 1993 when those who had branded him a terrorist shook hands with him on the lawns of the White House and initialled an agreement that provided for the emergence of a sovereign Palestinian state.

The Israeli leader who signed it, Yitzhak Rabin, was murdered, subsequent Israeli governments reneged on the agreement, and the hard-line Ariel Sharon reoccupied Palestinian territories vacated earlier as his tanks destroyed Arafat's headquarters brick by brick. But Arafat refused to be cowed. His boundless courage was admired even by his enemies.

He escaped minutes before the Israelis raided his hideout on the West Bank when he had begun organising resistance, and at Camp David 2000 he refused to sign on the dotted line to write off Jerusalem.

The split between Fatah and Hamas came after Arafat's death and serves to highlight his role as the sole leader of his people.

With Israel coming under increasing pressure even from its traditional bankrollers and supporters, it is time Fatah and Hamas honoured Arafat's legacy and realised that it is only through emulating the unity and selflessness shown by their late leader that they can end Israeli occupation and found a sovereign Palestine.

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Government vs industry

WHO are we to believe? The government tells us that the economy is on the growth path while industry associations are talking of plant closures and plummeting investment.

The IMF has weighed in on the government's behalf, saying that the targeted growth rate of 4.3pc is likely to be met this fiscal year.

The finance minister is touting this endorsement, and has gone a step further in reported comments to say they are aiming for a growth rate as high as 5.1pc this fiscal year.

Further, he has pointed to data showing that large-scale manufacturing grew by 5.3pc in August, compared to 4.6pc last year — a meaningful jump. Credit to the private sector, a key indicator for the pace of industrial activity, is “expanding at a robust pace” says the IMF, and the government is only too keen to agree. So far so good.

But if we turn towards industry circles we will hear a very different take on the situation. The largest trade and industry bodies, such as FPCCI and APTMA, have expressed deep concern about the state of affairs in

industry, with the latter saying that 35pc of the county's textile industry has already closed down.

Exports are down by 10pc from the corresponding period last year, as is investment. The OICCI, which represents foreign investors, has also reported a steep decline in investor confidence on the manufacturing side between March and September this year. Whatever good news OICCI had to share on the confidence front came from services, while manufacturing is painting a fairly dour outlook at the moment.

So what is going on? How come the government and the IMF are talking about an uptick in industrial activity while industry representatives are talking of plant closures and collapsing confidence?

How have the government and the IMF worked out that private-sector credit offtake is “expanding at a robust pace” when it actually dropped to Rs4.8bn between July and Oct 24, down from Rs32bn in the same period last year?

It is true that industry representatives have a tendency to highlight only their problems, but the government has a tendency to err by painting everything in rosy colours. So who are we to believe? There was a time when we could look towards the IMF and its periodic assessments of the economy for an independent view, but clearly that is no longer true.

All eyes will now be trained on the State Bank to set the record straight in its next annual report due in December. One only hopes that the bank will not disappoint and give

November, 2014

use a credible picture of what exactly is happening in the manufacturing sector at this crucial juncture when the government attention is returning to the economy as the serious challenge to its legitimacy recedes.

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Historic first

THINGS may be less than desirable in terms of the state of education and scientific progress here in Pakistan, but in other parts of the world, countries are going from strength to strength.

Close to home, India had reason to celebrate in September when its Mars Orbiter Mission successfully went into orbit.

In the US, despite a setback earlier this month, work continues on developing a spaceship viable for commercial travel. And on Wednesday, the European Space Agency achieved something breathtaking: in the climax of a decade-long, \$1.8bn mission, it landed a probe on a comet. The box-shaped, 100kg lander named Philae is meant to get samples from the surface of the comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko, roughly around half a billion kilometres from Earth.

Know more: [Probe lands on comet in space first](#)

Since comets are residue from the birth of our planet's 4.6-billion-year-old solar system, the hope is that some light will be shed on how planets and life are created; the rock and ice that constitute a comet act as a time capsule to preserve organic molecules.

"We are ready to make science fiction a science fact," said the ESA director of human spaceflight and operations, and he was certainly not far off the mark.

Pakistan, meanwhile, is not quite at a standstill when it comes to the research and exploration of space. Today marks the conclusion of an International Conference on Space organised jointly by the Pakistan Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission and the Institute of Space Technology, co-sponsored by the Inter-Islamic Network on Space Sciences and Technology. Suparco, in particular, has for many years been quietly but surely plugging ahead with research and deserves commendation for that.

Of course, the troubles that plague Pakistan are such that it is difficult to make an argument for the country throwing too much of its energy behind space exploration — there are many clear and present dangers to tackle.

Nevertheless, one can at least dream of a time in the distant future when Pakistan, too, may feature amongst the countries that have made space-related breakthroughs.

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Land mafia's impunity

LAND-GRABBING is a national problem, though perhaps the crime is particularly acute in dense urban environments.

While the state's inability to keep a check on the activities of the land-grabbers is condemnable, even worse is officialdom's inaction when it comes to apprehending criminals who threaten or even murder citizens who dare to raise their voice against the rampant practice.

Take the case of the late Orangi Pilot Project director Perween Rahman, who was cruelly murdered in Karachi as she was returning home from work in March 2013.

Also read: [‘Slain activist knew too much about land grabbing’](#)

Despite the passage of over a year and a half, Ms Rahman's killers have still not been brought to justice. It goes to the Supreme Court's credit that the case is still being pursued and has not been lost in the legal maze, and that the court is pressuring the police to nab the culprits.

According to the testimony of a senior Karachi police officer in the apex court on Wednesday, the slain social activist was in possession of a map that detailed illegally occupied land in Karachi — land which had apparently been taken over with the help of political parties.

Following her murder, the police had been quick to point a finger at the banned TTP. Yet the fact is that in Karachi a dangerous mix of criminal gangs and political and religiously motivated militants are responsible for much of the city's violence and lawlessness.

Of course, land-grabbing is amongst the most lucrative of illegal ventures that such elements thrive on. And anyone who has the courage to expose such criminality — as Perween Rahman did — does so while putting their life on the line.

In order to honour her memory and work and to show that the state does not tolerate the illegal occupation of public or private land, those responsible for the murder must be brought to justice.

In fact, the map that was discussed in the Supreme Court should be retrieved and made public, as should details of which political parties or their supporters are working with the land-grabbers.

This, naturally, will not be easy in a country where even state institutions are involved in encroaching upon land that is not lawfully theirs, while corrupt elements within government agencies are in cahoots with the land-grabbers.

Nevertheless, unless Perween Rahman's killers are caught and punished, it will only embolden criminals and reinforce the impression that in Pakistan, the wretched of the earth and those who speak for them can be mowed down with impunity.

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Wrong move

FIRST, let there be no doubt: an anti-terrorism court has issued warrants for the arrest of the PTI and PAT leadership because the PML-N government made a political decision to treat the events of Aug 30 and Sept 1 on Constitution Avenue, Islamabad, as a terrorism-related offence.

There should also be no doubt that anti-terrorism courts were created to deal with militancy and terrorism, not political struggles between an incumbent government and its political opponents.

Also read: [ATC issues non-bailable arrest warrants for Imran, Qadri](#)

Perhaps Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif would have done well to remember that he himself was once upon a time, in 2000, convicted on a terrorism charge in a political dispute: the failed sacking of the then army chief Pervez Musharraf which triggered the coup of October 1999. But the prime minister has preferred to forget personal and political history — and chosen, instead, to embark on a course of events that is both preposterous and shockingly ill-advised.

Consider the backdrop to Wednesday's move by the anti-terrorism court. At the Rahim Yar Khan PTI rally only days earlier, Imran Khan had given the one concession that was needed for a deal on electoral reforms and an inquiry into the results of the May 2013 election.

The PTI chief dropped his demand that the prime minister resign or temporarily stand down while a time-bound investigation into allegations of electoral fraud was carried out.

After that, there really was no hurdle for the government to quickly and seriously engage the PTI in talks again. But the government seems to allow emotion to overrule common sense far too often.

With the threat to the government's survival having receded significantly but Mr Khan seemingly determined to remain a distraction, as with the planned Nov 30 rally in Islamabad, the PML-N appears to believe that now is the time to intimidate the PTI.

Yes, crimes were committed on Aug 30 and Sept 1. Yes, property was damaged, police were attacked and parliament nearly desecrated. Yes, Imran Khan did urge the protesters to storm the so-called red zone and enter Constitution Avenue. But they were political acts and the violence was politically motivated too — none of it met any acceptable definition of terrorism.

Contrast instead the government's muted reaction to the June Model Town incident in which police action led to the deaths of some of the supporters of PAT chief Tahirul Qadri.

November, 2014

A judicial inquiry laid bare the facts and also made clear where responsibility lay. But no one has been put on trial and the Punjab government is doing its best to ensure the initial inquiry report does not lead to further damage for the government.

Model Town was not terrorism, but the Aug 30 and Sept 1 events on Constitution Avenue are: does not that lay bare the contradiction in the government's dealing with crimes committed against its political enemies and crimes committed by those enemies? The government needs to back down.

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Gas allocations

WITH a wave of the wand, the prime minister has decreed that gas and electricity should be provided uninterrupted to industry throughout the winter.

The decision was made immediately following a roundtable event with potential investors in London. It is hard to escape the impression that this was a spur-of-the-moment decision and that the government is likely to start pulling back from it once it feels the heat of protest from domestic consumers having to endure cold temperatures without gas to warm their homes and water.

Also read: [PM orders review of decision on gas supply to textile units](#)

This is the first time a government has tried to prioritise industry ever since the Musharraf-era gas allocation merit order list placed domestic consumers at the top.

Therefore, on the face of it, this looks like a bold decision but its real test will come once the prime minister has to face criticism from domestic consumers, whose voice will be carried via their elected representatives.

Making diversions through executive fiat is nothing more than rudimentary crisis management. What the gas sector needs in order to properly manage the shortages is price reform that encourages the judicious use of the precious resource.

For too long now, domestic consumers have perceived natural gas as a resource that is cheap and abundant whereas in fact it is expensive and scarce. Wasteful appliances proliferate in homes, and will only be replaced by more efficient ones when people become mindful of the cost of the wastage, just like they are in the case of electricity.

End-consumer bills can be kept under control if proper incentives are created for solar geysers, and stoves and heaters are built to burn gas efficiently.

It is also worth asking why a scuffle always breaks out at the very onset of winter among the various categories of stakeholders in the gas sector.

November, 2014

Ad hoc management of this sort is how the previous government had managed winter gas allocations, tweaking the quotas and merit order list along the way, depending on who made the most noise.

This time, there is little doubt that the sheer volume of the protest that the textile body APTMA was able to mount played a role in the decision.

APTMA's representatives are rightfully congratulating themselves on their victory following the announcement, but they should know that this victory will be short-lived. Until deeper reforms are implemented, squabbling over gas allocations every winter will remain a permanent feature of our political economy.

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IDPs' predicament

LIFE for the displaced is far from easy, especially when securing basic needs becomes a constant struggle. Hence the scuffle between IDPs and police at a food distribution point in Bannu on Thursday reflects both the frustration of the displaced persons, as well as the authorities' inability to attend to the displaced persons' needs in a more organised manner.

As reported in this paper, around 17 people consisting of IDPs and policemen were injured when the two parties clashed as the law enforcers attempted to control a rowdy crowd.

Also read: [Clash between IDPs and law enforcement agencies in Bannu](#)

The police say the people tried to loot a truck while the IDPs claim the policemen were not distributing supplies in a transparent manner. While looting and violence cannot be condoned, the IDPs' restlessness is understandable. Most were uprooted when the military launched Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan five months ago.

Living in camps in less than ideal conditions can be a trying ordeal for even the most patient of individuals. In this particular incident, thousands of IDPs had reportedly been waiting for hours for relief goods. In such a situation, with frayed nerves and patience wearing thin,

November, 2014

even the slightest incident can lead to a breakdown of law and order.

To prevent similar incidents, the state — Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's administration as well as the centre — must streamline the relief distribution process.

Indeed, arranging food and shelter in an adequate, respectable manner for around a million IDPs has been a major challenge for the state, while funds are also reportedly tight. But whatever the constraints, the government needs to address the bottlenecks that stand in the way of efficient relief distribution and service delivery.

As of now, there is no definitive deadline indicating when the operations under way in the tribal belt will conclude. For the displaced tribesmen, this sense of living in limbo, coupled with the harsh winter that has begun to set in, will only make a difficult situation worse. Which is why the state must respond in a more sensitive manner so that the displaced people are not further embittered.

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Pro-women legislation

AS many women know, the workplace can be a predatory arena. That is even more so in countries like Pakistan where the right to public space is seen as a male privilege — which is why the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 was a much-needed piece of legislation.

Fortunately, the enactment of this law appears to have largely been followed up by required implementation measures that are ongoing.

Also read: [From world stage to economic center stage: Pakistani women, let the rise begin](#)

Among these is the appointment of federal and provincial ombudspersons specifically to deal with cases of sexual harassment, a step that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have yet to take.

A notice in the media recently by the Punjab ombudsperson on the issue reiterated the legal requirement for public- and private-sector organisations to constitute inquiry committees to address complaints. Further, the notice gave intimation of a province-wide initiative in Punjab to raise awareness about the issue and the legislation pertaining to it.

Two recent cases have sparked some debate on whether the legislation goes far enough. In these, the accused argued that behaviour of a teacher towards an individual

November, 2014

not employed by the educational institution — such as a student — does not fall within its ambit.

Senator Farhatullah Babar made an unsuccessful attempt this week to have this perceived lacuna corrected through an amendment. Many women's rights activists hold that the definition of 'complainant' within the law makes it clear that it is applicable to a student-teacher relationship as well. Indeed, most of the initial cases under this act that emerged in the media pertained to harassment of students by professors, and in none of these was its ambit a point of contention.

At the same time, another view is that there is some ambiguity in the legislation — as there is in most legislation — that leaves scope for interpretation by the adjudicating authority. The provinces would do well to build on the sustained momentum behind the implementation of this law and bring in amendments to finesse it.

This sustained momentum, however, is sadly missing in other pro-women legislation, which in effect renders the laws toothless.

Domestic violence legislation, for example, enacted so far only in Sindh and Balochistan, is one example. Let alone the formation of protection committees required by the law, not even the rules of business have been drawn up under the relevant act in either province.

Another example is the amendment to the PPC in 2011 that criminalised acid attacks: this was to have been followed by a comprehensive act to strengthen the

process of investigation of the crime and conviction of the accused. A bill to that effect has yet to be tabled in any province.

While a lackadaisical bureaucracy has much to do with this, the absence of political will plays a large role in such delays. Without effective implementation, the battle for women's rights is only half won.

Published in Dawn, November 15th , 2014

[Tirah beheading](#)

The gory spectacle of beheading has returned to Fata. In Tirah valley on Friday, militants beheaded a man in the marketplace and ordered that the body be kept there on display until the evening.

The brutal act, the first of its kind in Tirah, was justified by citing charges of spying. The execution-style killing came at a time when the militants, united by a common cause and divided in groups over the details, are under severe pressure from the security forces.

Read: [Militants publicly behead man in Tirah](#)

On the day of the beheading, there was news about a group in the ranks of the militants having surrendered to the security forces.

November, 2014

Also, the capture of men working for or thought to be sympathetic to the militants is routine. An even bigger threat to the militants is posed by military jets which have been targeting their hideouts and taking out well-known militant commanders.

All this leaves the militants desperate for a strong counter-statement, and the killing of a man for spying provided them with a simple, blood-curdling option.

To their mind, this is a convenient way of boosting morale among their ranks and creating fear among the people, both aspects central to the conduct of their business.

It also helps them connect with similarly gruesome images flashed from the Middle East where an effort is on to introduce a new order and globalise the war in the name of religion.

Beheading, as analysts have pointed out, is used to bring out the international nature of the war.

It is an act introduced to Pakistan under the influence of foreign militants and it might not be a coincidence that this latest instance in Tirah has been accompanied by questions about the presence of the self-styled Islamic State in the country.

The incident, while it is seen to be a reaction to the success of the security forces, also brings out the grave dangers the people in the area are exposed to.

The security forces are said to be in control of areas close to where Friday's killing took place whereas some

parts of the Tirah valley are still controlled by the militants.

There has been large-scale displacement and there are calls for more people to leave their homes for safety. Just as the delays in getting out of the danger zone are inevitable, there are bound to be some people who cannot or do not want to leave their home, creating a situation that requires deft handling.

Published in Dawn, November 16th, 2014

[Electronic voting](#)

Casting paper ballots in the era of the internet may appear antiquated, but there is good reason to be concerned about electronic voting technology.

Ultimately, the technology is destined to replace paper ballots, but the path to that goal is strewn with obstacles. No doubt, the technology carries much promise.

It can speed up the casting and counting of votes, as well as open the door to absentee voting, which in a country like Pakistan, that has high rates of internal migration, can bring a large chunk of the public into the electoral process.

Read| [Electronic voting machines can be manipulated more easily: ECP](#)

November, 2014

However, wherever it has been applied, there have been considerable security concerns regarding the system.

In the US, for instance, many states refused to use electronic voting in the 2008 presidential elections after computer security experts showed that the votes could be altered in the system and their verification proves difficult because recounts could not be conducted in the absence of a paper record.

The Netherlands banned the technology in 2006 after the system's vulnerabilities to hacking were exposed by an activist group.

Germany's highest court banned electronic voting in an important judgement in 2009, saying that the verification of votes had become too complex because of it.

In fact, in countries across Europe and states across America, a backlash has been under way against the technology precisely because it makes verification impossible and because security of the software is difficult to guarantee.

In the largest democracy that uses the technology, ie India, there is also a growing chorus of voices cautioning against it.

Given these vulnerabilities, Pakistan ought to be very careful in adopting the technology, especially considering that every major election has been marred by allegations of rigging.

Major state institutions have been found to be involved in electoral malpractices, as in the 1990 elections that brought the IJI government to power.

Securing the ballot and verifying votes are already very large challenges for us, and evidence is mounting that electronic voting, far from being a solution, could in fact aggravate the problems.

Therefore, a graduated path towards adoption of this technology would be preferred. Perhaps the technology can be used initially in elections for the collective bargaining agent of major labour unions in PIA and OGDCL.

The next step could be its use in elections for local bodies, if and when they take place. Voters should be given a choice between paper and electronic ballots.

If the trial runs in these forums are successful, and a large number of voters opt for electronic voting, the next step can be to use the technology in by-elections.

But the technology should be considered for national elections only after it has proven itself in local polls, and there is demonstrated voter preference for casting ballots electronically. It could be many years before we get there, but it may be a good idea to start moving down that road.

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Militant currency

The self-styled Islamic State has added another 'achievement' to its tally as it seeks to meet the criteria that define a modern functioning state.

The extremist group reportedly intends to mint its own coins as per the diktat of 'caliph' al-Baghdadi. IS already has a central leader, a flag and a de facto capital — Raqqa in Syria — while it controls several provinces in that country as well as in Iraq.

Add to this the hordes of well-armed cadres that constitute its militant army.

All these facts underscore the threat IS poses to the Middle East as it seeks to remake the region in its own image. Perhaps all that remains for IS to be considered a 'genuine' country is issuing its own passports and postage stamps. Yet, seriously speaking, the fact is that the group is probably the most well-financed of all contemporary militant outfits, even if the new coins are little more than a gimmick.

Read: [IS to 'mint own coins'](#)

So while the US-led military campaign against the group — which has had mixed results — continues, the international community also needs to come up with practical ways to cut off the Islamic State's finances.

It needs to be identified who is buying oil from fields under IS control and who is facilitating the group's financial transactions. Because while it may be trumpeting its own legal tender, the militant group still very much does business in dollars, euros and Iraqi dinars.

As far as aspirations of becoming a functioning state go, in the age of empire it was possible for marauding hordes to occupy a country and then claim legitimacy over it.

But in the modern era, it is the will of the people that grants governments legitimacy and determines the redrawing of national borders.

Considering the reports from those living under IS rule — as the UN has recently highlighted — the 'caliphate' has unleashed a reign of terror in the territories it controls. Hence any dreams of legitimacy will remain unfulfilled if people continue to be terrorised in the name of faith.

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Bogus housing schemes

WHILE owning a house or apartment in this country is a significant challenge faced by people belonging to all levels of economic power, the property sector is also amongst the most booming of businesses.

Unfortunately, though, perhaps as a result of this polarised reality, the term 'safe as houses' cannot be said to apply here.

Across the country, over the years, there have been cases where people have sunk funds into a piece of property, only to find out later that the scheme that looked so glamorous in advertisements has few chances of ever materialising, or may turn out to be fraudulent.

Also read: [Victims of fake housing scheme get Rs38m](#)

Given this context, the National Accountability Bureau's decision on Friday to regulate advertisements by fraudulent housing societies is a step in the right direction.

During a meeting in Islamabad attended by the NAB Rawalpindi director-general as well as representatives of other relevant organisations including the heads of Pemra, the Rawalpindi Development Authority and the Capital Development Authority, it was agreed that the credentials of housing societies would be verified before an advertisement was published/broadcast, and that

advertisements would not be carried unless the relevant scheme had fulfilled all formalities.

While the media must certainly shoulder their burden, ending the matter here is not going far enough.

Pressure needs to be put on regulatory civic bodies across the country to become much more proactive about their responsibility. But even beyond that, there is a great deal of work to be done.

Zoning and land-acquisition/development are murky areas and the regulations differ from city to city, in addition to the distinction between rural/agricultural and urban land.

Consider, for example, that as cities expand, as new housing schemes are thought up, the land involved is often defined on paper as agricultural, which means that the urban regulatory body might not have jurisdiction.

In short, there is a need to kick-start a process that rationalises land development, and creates formal and cohesive processes at several tiers of governance, and that is uniform at least across each province.

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Ruling on appointments

A SUPREME COURT ruling on Friday has cleared the way for the federal government to appoint scores of “heads of statutory bodies, autonomous bodies, semi-autonomous bodies, regulatory bodies, etc”.

The ruling has denied the government the excuse that permanent appointments had been delayed because the Supreme Court under then chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry during the caretaker government last year had made appointments that much more difficult, even in contravention of the existing law.

Know more: [SC revisits appointments case judgment](#)

Where the former chief justice had required the formation of a commission to oversee statutory appointments, the present Supreme Court has ruled that where the law requires appointments through a certain, specified process, that process should hold sway. But the court has also given the government till Dec 10 to make the required appointments — essentially keeping the pressure on the government while denying it the continuing excuse that inaction is a result of differences between what the rules state and what the Supreme Court had required.

A closer look at governmental inaction when it comes to high-level appointments to public-sector enterprises and regulatory bodies in particular would suggest a very

different cause to what the PML-N has claimed publicly: it simply has not been a priority of the government.

Perhaps the true cause for inaction is over-centralisation, with the prime minister and his team simply overburdened by holding too many administrative responsibilities simultaneously. Or perhaps good governance does not really feature on the rulers’ list of priorities because the focus is more on privatisation and selling off loss-making, even profit-making, organisations and ensuring they are able to operate in the private sector with the minimal of regulatory interference.

Neither answer is good for the public interest; nor should the government be allowed to forcefully push that course.

The fact of the matter is that whether firms are operated by the public sector or the private sector, the public interest is served by ensuring competition and transparency.

Similarly, for public-sector enterprises, whether they are turned around to achieve a higher selling price or for the sake of stemming loss of public money, the people’s interest demands competitive, meritorious and qualified management of those firms.

A senior management that is installed on an ad hoc or temporary basis — and possibly on nepotistic or cronyism grounds — does not meet the demands of the public interest. The government can do better, and now there is no reason for it not to do so by Dec 10.

Ties with Afghanistan

AFGHAN President Ashraf Ghani's inaugural visit to Pakistan may not have yielded any immediate breakthrough or produced a dramatic announcement, but it did at least take place in a more cordial and cooperative manner than the one which characterised Pak-Afghan relations during the Karzai era.

Yet whatever the quiet diplomacy and serious security-related discussions that surely took place behind closed doors over the weekend, a genuine and lasting improvement in relations would necessarily require moves in the public domain too. What, for example, is the state of reconciliation talks with the Afghan Taliban?

Know more: [Let's bury the past and move on, says Afghan president](#)

With 2014 rapidly drawing to a close, all other major events expected to take place this year have been largely navigated. Hamid Karzai exited without too much of a fuss; an election was held and winners eventually found.

The foreign troop drawdown has progressed smoothly, with the Taliban making some gains but by no means being able to overrun the Afghan-led security forces.

Meanwhile, the US got the deal that would allow a residual force in Afghanistan to stay on while ensuring economic assistance continues.

The one significant unknown is the ability of the new, hybrid government in Afghanistan to deliver on the governance front. But all of that will mean little if there is no lasting settlement with the Afghan Taliban.

The Pakistani state has showed some willingness to disrupt sanctuaries of some Afghan-centric militants in the North Waziristan operation, indicating that old policies may in fact be shifting.

Yet the real proof of changed policies and intentions will lie in the state here using its leverage to bring the Afghan Taliban back to the negotiating table. It can only be hoped that quiet diplomacy, bilateral and also international, will produce results soon rather than allow events to overtake opportunities.

In at least one way, events have already complicated opportunities and the bilateral relationship: the militancy threat radiating into Pakistan from Afghanistan.

Without security cooperation, better border management and joint efforts to curb cross-border movement of militants, the problem of Pakistan-centric militants seeking sanctuary in Afghanistan will only grow and make cooperation on the original problem, the Afghan Taliban, that much more difficult. Which is why Mr Ghani's accommodating and conciliatory language on Pakistan is all the more important – a reset in ties is needed to allow for ties to stabilise. The long-term vision articulated by both sides of a region that is a trading hub and economic corridor is the right one. But security will have to be addressed quickly. Without security there will

November, 2014

be no stability and without stability, national potential will not be realised.

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Crimes of 'honour'

When a category of crime draws sustenance from age-old cultural attitudes, particularly those pertaining to the concept of honour and a woman's place in society, legislation alone is an inadequate deterrent. Nevertheless, a beginning must be made, and so it was with the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2004 when, for the first time, 'honour' crimes were defined in the Pakistan Penal Code.

The same piece of legislation also effected an important amendment in Section 311 of the PPC. This section specifies the penalties that can be awarded by a judge regardless of whether or not a compromise has been reached in a case of murder, including honour killings.

Read: [Woman stoned to death outside Lahore High Court](#)

The amendment set a minimum punishment of 10 years' imprisonment in cases where the offence is found to have been committed on the pretext of honour but, crucially, it did not take away judicial discretion in

awarding punishment in such cases, or other instances of murder.

This meant that many husbands, brothers, fathers and other male relatives (victims of honour killing are overwhelmingly female) still manage to evade punishment.

The Punjab government, reportedly spurred by the horrific murder of Farzana Iqbal by her family, in broad daylight, adjacent to the premises of the Lahore High Court in May this year, has now taken an important step towards strengthening the law pertaining to honour crimes.

Also read/ [Honour killing: Men kill mother and step-sisters in Lahore](#)

It has proposed, among other amendments, that the word "may" be replaced with "shall" in Section 311, thereby removing judicial discretion and making the punishment mandatory in cases of honour killing whether or not a compromise has been struck.

Also read: [Move to ensure punishment for 'honour' killing](#)

That such an amendment should be necessary is largely a comment on the cultural attitudes to honour which impact how — indeed whether — such cases are investigated, prosecuted and adjudicated upon. These attitudes hobble the case from the outset.

Quasi legal mechanisms of justice, such as jirgas, often hand in glove with an unsympathetic law-enforcement

November, 2014

apparatus, discourage victims' families from going to court.

The police, a product of the same society that gives rise to such crimes, brings its own biases to the investigation. Delays at the trial stage render a victim's family susceptible to social pressures because of the 'shame' associated with pursuing such cases.

Chauvinistic judges sometimes allow the plea of "grave and sudden provocation" to colour their judgments. The issue must be addressed holistically: plugging loopholes in the law must go together with the sensitisation of police, medico-legal staff and public prosecutors.

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Role of IB

IN the long time that Imran Khan has spent opposing the PML-N government, he has made innumerable allegations.

Many of those allegations have been worthless and forgotten quickly enough, but some have been worth pausing over to understand their implications and possible genuineness.

One of the latter type of allegations was levelled by the PTI chief at the Jhelum rally on Sunday: the Intelligence

Bureau has spent nearly Rs3bn, according to Mr Khan, to undermine the PTI rallies and to erode support among the public and in the media for the PTI's agenda of toppling the government.

Also read: [Nawaz paid IB Rs270 crore to sabotage protests: Imran](#)

While Mr Khan offered no evidence to support his allegation, the historical, and even ongoing, role of the IB is questionable enough, and puts the onus on the government to demonstrate that the IB is run professionally, focused on building its counterterrorism capabilities and is not being used for political purposes.

Instead of drawing on history — suffice to say the IB has been a poorer cousin of the ISI and used by civilian governments to keep tabs on political rivals and to advance governments' political aims — consider what the PML-N government promised when it came to power last year.

After discovering that the IB had suffered years of neglect, especially during the Musharraf era when military-run intelligence agencies were allowed to run amok, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif vowed to reinvigorate the IB and to give it the resources needed to make it the premier intelligence counterpart to civilian-run law-enforcement agencies in the provinces and at the centre.

At first, the IB, led by an untarnished career officer, Aftab Sultan, seemed to do some good work, especially in connection with the Karachi operation authorised by the PML-N last year.

Quickly enough, however, familiar allegations began to be levelled: the IB had lost its way; reforms had stalled; resources promised were not allocated or released; and, most damagingly, the IB had begun to take renewed interest in phone-tappings and the likes of political rivals of the PML-N and even members of the journalist community.

Mr Sultan was then retained on contract earlier this year after reaching the retirement age and while his personal reputation was still fairly unblemished, the extension was an early sign that the PML-N was willing to bend the rules for or accommodate public officials loyal to the prime minister.

Through it all, the IB continued to play a distant role as compared to the military-run agencies in the fight against militancy.

Part of the problem surely is the eternal civil-military imbalance and the deterioration of civilian-run institutions across the board.

But if reforms are a distant prospect and a professional turnaround of the IB unrealistic in the present milieu, at least the IB could be kept away from nakedly political agendas like dealing with the PTI challenge and shoring up support for the PML-N in the media.

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State Bank's assessment

IN its latest monetary policy statement, the State Bank says manufacturing will “remain constrained due to energy bottlenecks”, even as the speculative and trading economy gallops along. Pakistan's exports are falling, due in part to “weak demand” in destination countries, but also because of the falling price of cotton.

The statement steers away from the identifying causes of the drop in exports, saying only that the trend is “further challenged” by these factors. Future growth, therefore, must come from agriculture, it says, pointing to the Rs100 increase in the procurement price of wheat. The statement is silent on the ongoing growth in the services sector, nor does it say much about the real meaning of the steep increases in the stock market. But the picture that emerges from the statement is one of sagging growth in manufacturing, while agriculture remains hopeful and services and speculative trades gallop along.

This composition in the country's growth profile is worrying. Manufacturing is the most reliable engine of growth for our economy, and the biggest job-creating sector. Exports are critical to building sustainable foreign exchange buffers, especially at a time of escalating foreign debt service obligations.

It is important to acknowledge the dire situation developing in the manufacturing sector and in exports and not hide behind growth mirages in speculative trades

and endorsements from Moody's. It is sad that a year and half into its tenure, the party that billed itself as a business-friendly government is, instead, presiding over a steady stagnation in manufacturing and exports, while looking towards the sale of state assets and foreign borrowing as a way to build reserves.

The State Bank has touched the issue very gingerly in its statement, which is still an improvement from its previous pronouncements. This acknowledgement now needs to be built upon by further dilating on the reasons behind, and the possible resolutions of, this troubling state of affairs. Whatever political challenges the government may be facing, these should not distract from the primary obligation to restart economic growth.

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Scourge of slavery

“SLAVERY is a weed that grows in every soil,” said philosopher-politician Edmund Burke in the 18th century. In every soil and in every age, it seems.

Even today, as space probes land on comets and synthetically bioengineered body parts are implanted into patients, slavery — that most wretched of human conditions — continues to hold millions in thrall.

According to the 2014 Global Slavery Index, nearly 36 million men, women and children live in circumstances that can be defined as ‘modern slavery’.

Also read: [Modern slavery affects 35.8 million people: report](#)

These include debt bondage, forced labour, prostitution, forced marriage, etc. The report, by an Australian human rights group called the Walk Free Foundation, presents a ranking of 167 countries. Its findings reveal that the concentration of slavery varies greatly: 71pc of the world's slaves are to be found in 10 of the countries surveyed.

India tops the list where numbers are concerned, with 14 million enslaved individuals, followed by China (3.2m) and Pakistan (2.1m). In terms of percentage of total population, Mauritania leads the ranking with 4pc, while Pakistan with 1.13pc comes in at number six.

November, 2014

Much of that 1.13pc — or two million plus — of our population toils every day under inhuman conditions in brick kilns, in fields, in factories etc across the country, deprived of even the most basic rights, in order to render the lives of the rest more comfortable.

It is not that Pakistan lacks legislation to address the issue. Its Constitution prohibits slavery, forced labour and child labour. A law banning bonded labour, the most common form of slavery in Pakistan, has been in force since 1992.

There also exists legislation against practices such as forced marriage. The problem, as always, is that of powerful lobbies who profit from the fruits of slavery, and the cultural acceptance of 'traditions' such as child marriage; this, coupled with widespread poverty and lack of awareness, allows the privileged to exploit the weak.

For, in the words of former slave and renowned abolitionist Frederick Douglass: "Knowledge makes a man unfit to be a slave."

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Social reform 'charter'

IN the midst of politicking and various crises — both natural and man-made — the social sector in Pakistan, especially where the state's responsibility regarding health and education is concerned, has been relegated to the back burner.

While issues such as putting out-of-school children into the classroom and improving health service delivery inevitably surface during election time, once in power, the political parties do little to back up their lofty promises.

Hence it is good to see Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Khursheed Shah bring the social sector onto the political agenda. As reported on Tuesday, Mr Sharif has responded positively to Mr Shah's suggestion that the health and education sectors need attention and that a 'charter' should be drawn up to address these critical areas.

Also read: [PM asks Shah to formulate charter for social sectors](#)

While factors such as terrorism and natural disasters have kept governments busy over the past few years, it is also true that both the federal and provincial administrations have neglected the social sector, seemingly abdicating the state's responsibility to NGOs and charities.

Indeed, many of these outfits have done commendable work in their areas of focus, but this does not mean the state can be absolved of its constitutional duties that mandate it to oversee the people's social welfare.

If the Millennium Development Goals are taken as a barometer, while progress has been made in certain areas, the overall picture where meeting the goals is concerned is grim.

Punjab has fared comparatively better than the other provinces, but even in this province the situation is far from ideal.

The PPP led the previous federal government, while the PML-N is currently in the driving seat, and both have led Sindh and Punjab, respectively, for the last six years.

Yet what visible improvements have these parties brought to the health and education sectors in this period? The idea of a social charter is a welcome one, provided all political stakeholders come up with workable goals and have the will to pursue them.

Instead of politicians issuing a bunch of fiats, what parliamentary parties should do is consult with area experts to come up with progressive solutions to Pakistan's social problems.

There are numerous dedicated individuals in this country who are doing their bit in the private sector to address social challenges.

The politicians must seek out such individuals, listen to them and formulate a plan. Thereafter, the commitments must be honoured and not discarded with the next change of government.

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Financial confusion

ON Monday, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar surprised his hosts when he chose to discuss a draft law to combat money laundering and terror financing during an event on financial inclusion.

The Digital Finance Conference, organised by the State Bank, was supposed to showcase the steps taken to advance financial inclusion for the millions of unbanked individuals in Pakistan.

One of the principal impediments to financial inclusion has been the onerous burden of documentation that banks require to open an account, as well as stringent know-your-customer policies mandated by anti-money laundering stipulations.

Financial inclusion is increasingly becoming an important goal worldwide, but so is safeguarding the financial system from illicit activity. And sometimes these objectives can pull the financial system in opposite directions.

November, 2014

Also read: [Draft law being prepared to subvert cyber-crimes: Dar](#)

This is why participants at the conference on financial inclusion were surprised when Finance Minister Ishaq Dar chose to discuss the draft anti-money laundering legislation at the venue. It has long been recognised that stringent anti-money laundering and counterterrorist financing (AML/CFT) stipulations can lead to financial exclusion.

Sometimes this happens directly by imposing documentation requirements that the unbanked cannot fulfil. At other times it happens indirectly by skewing the compliance cost in a way that deters banks from taking on low-value and high-volume services for the poor.

By excluding a large number of poor people from the financial sector, these AML/CFT stipulations can, in fact, complicate the task of tracing illicit money, because the unbanked resort to informal financial services that can be harder to monitor.

This is why extreme care is necessary when designing an AML/CFT framework to ensure that it is properly harmonised with financial inclusion efforts.

The critical ingredient is consultation. An AML/CFT framework should be designed with extensive and ongoing input from financial service providers, as well as those knowledgeable about financial exclusion. Pakistan has been struggling to meet international standards of compliance in AML/CFT legislation since 2010. Since then, we've been on the grey list of countries that are

bordering on being non-compliant. The IMF has made passage of AML/CFT legislation an important condition of the current programme.

Last June, an action plan to come into compliance was presented, and now we have until February 2015 to reassure our global partners that it is being credibly implemented, which includes AML/CFT legislation as a key component. But it is not clear yet how much consultation has gone into drafting the legislation, and how it will impact ongoing financial inclusion efforts to advance branchless banking. The fact that conference participants were surprised by the finance minister's remarks on the subject at the Digital Finance Conference does not inspire confidence that the goals being pursued in the financial sector have been properly harmonised. More consultation and fewer surprises would work to the government's advantage in pursuing these 21st-century challenges to the growth of the financial system.

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Unease over PTI rally

HAVING decided that the PTI's anti-government protests are unlikely to topple the government, the PML-N had two options.

The good option was to engage the PTI, address the party's legitimate demands and allow the country to move on from a debilitating and long-running political crisis.

The bad option was to view survival as an opportunity to exert more pressure on the PTI and disrupt the anti-government protest.

Also read: [Govt looking to frustrate PTI's Nov 30 show](#)

A report in this newspaper yesterday suggests that the PML-N has chosen the latter option, ie the PML-N leadership is developing a strategy to disrupt the PTI's planned Nov 30 rally in Islamabad.

In a staggering display of misplaced priorities, government circles appear obsessed with what the PTI is doing rather than governance issues.

Some concerns of the government are legitimate enough. A large crowd in Islamabad near parliament can be a security risk, especially if the PTI leadership riles up the protesters, as happened on Aug 30 and Sept 1.

Moreover, the possibility of a terrorist attack, either on the crowd or using the crowd as cover to break into buildings

housing state institutions, is ever present. Yet, many of those risks could be reduced with professionally managed, lawful crowd-control tactics by law-enforcement agencies and pre-rally consultations with the PTI.

After all, the PTI has held many such rallies in various parts of the country already. And, ultimately, the government has a twofold responsibility here: to ensure the safety and security of the protesters as well as the protection of state institutions. Yet, it appears that political calculations and personal grudges are characterising much of what the government does on the PTI front.

To be sure, part of the problem is Imran Khan and the PTI. The endless protests rather than accepting that democratic change ought to be channelled through parliament along with the overheated rhetoric aimed at the government has created an environment in which rational debate has become difficult.

But it is the PML-N that is in power and, being the chief custodian of the democratic process, it is the PML-N that has to demonstrate the calmness and magnanimity necessary to produce democratic breakthroughs when dealing with protests against the government or even the system.

What those breakthroughs could be are well known by now and repeated many times — robust and meaningful electoral reforms legislated by parliament and an independent and powerful commission to inquire into allegations of fraud during the May 2013 election.

November, 2014

That is where the focus of the government ought to rightly lie. Unhappily, from Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif downwards, the PML-N leadership keeps being swayed by the logic of the hawks.

Effectively though, the government has three years left in office — why not spend that time focusing on governance rather than the politics of protest and what needs to be done to crush a political rival?

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Removal of book

THERE is a strong tendency in Pakistan to try and control public opinion and discourse — whether by fair means or foul.

In the latter category must fall the news about the non-availability of the book Truth Always Prevails by business tycoon Sadruddin Hashwani.

Since its launch a few days ago, there has been much talk about the allegations he has made in the book against former president Asif Ali Zardari, co-chairman of the party that has held the reins in Sindh for the past six years.

While bookstores in most of the country had to order fresh stocks of Mr Hashwani's book because of high

demand, on Tuesday a spokesperson for the author said there had been a “forceful removal” of copies from outlets in Karachi.

When this newspaper followed up, representatives of a couple of prominent bookstores said the book had been ‘banned’ and would no longer be available. One spokesperson claimed the book had been removed from the shelves because it contained derogatory remarks against “some influential national personalities”.

There is no official ban on the book, of course, and a few obvious answers present themselves when the source of the command to pressurise Karachi stores into refraining from stocking the title is pondered.

The move lays bare the truth of politicking in Pakistan. Consider, after all, that in essence there is little distinction between this case, and that of the book written by Malala Yousafzai, which the banned TTP intimidated bookstores in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into staying away from.

However, there is a world of difference between the TTP and the PPP — or so the observer would have thought.

Mr Hashwani has made a number of serious allegations, and Mr Zardari has already served a legal notice on him as he is well within his rights to do.

This dispute now needs to be settled through the courts; bringing extra-legal pressure to bear only reduces the stature of those who resort to intimidatory tactics.

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Transit trade abuse

THE recent disclosure before a Senate standing committee about the alleged abuse of the Afghan transit trade facility by a major courier company raises more questions than it answers.

The Directorate General of Intelligence and Investigation in the FBR has told the Senate Standing Committee on Finance that his department had raided two godowns belonging to a major courier company in July and recovered a large consignment of cargo marked as destined for Afghanistan from Karachi.

On the face of it, such cargo has no business sitting in a godown in Lahore or Rawalpindi, where the raids were conducted. But the Directorate of Afghan Transit Trade in the FBR says it has a fully reconciled record of all containers that left Karachi for Afghanistan over the past one year, and nothing went astray.

Know more: [Smugglers abusing Afghan Transit Trade facility: FBR](#)

Tracker technology in the containers would alert the authorities the moment the truck took an unauthorised route. Diverting cargoes meant for Afghanistan is a practice that now belongs to the past they say, and the only way cargoes from the Afghan transit trade can now enter Pakistan is if they are round-tripped back into the country after entering Afghanistan. Such cargoes are not

carried in containers marked with stickers saying “in transit to Afghanistan”.

Moreover, the individual bringing the charge in this case is the same person who raised the flag on Nato containers going astray a few years ago, a case that turned out to be a red herring. That allegation was very damaging until it was proven to be false.

So the case is an intriguing one, pitting the credibility of authorities from the same government agency against each other. Which directorate are we to believe? Government officials have been known to lie and pursue private agendas of their own, and big corporations are not above indulging in illicit activity to boost their revenues.

What we have here is a dodgy allegation against an equally dodgy trade. Only a fuller investigation, by a third party, into the facts of the raid, and the cargoes recovered from the godowns, will tell us whether the mechanisms governing the Afghan transit trade need to be strengthened, or whether officials in charge of customs intelligence are running a private racket of their own.

In the meantime, the standing committee would be well advised to summon the Afghan transit trade directorate and ask them what they know about this whole affair.

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Terrorism rankings

WHEN planning counterterrorism strategies, it always helps to have credible data handy in order to analyse the nature of the threats.

In this regard, the Global Terrorism Index 2014, compiled by the international research group the Institute for Economics and Peace, offers some important insights into the effects of terrorism on the global community.

For Pakistan, there are some crucial indicators in the study that can help shape policy and create a more robust counterterrorism response.

Of course, the most sobering finding is that Pakistan stands third in the table of countries that have suffered from terrorism, behind Iraq and Afghanistan. The report says that in 2013, there were a total of 1,933 incidents of terrorism in this country taking a bloody toll: there were 2,345 fatalities while 5,035 people were injured.

This is a 37pc jump in the number of deaths and 28pc increase in the number of injured compared to 2012. Last year, the banned TTP was by far the single most lethal militant group, responsible for nearly half of all claimed attacks.

Know more: [Pakistan ranks third on Global Terrorism Index](#)

However, as worrying as these figures are, there has been one development this year that has changed the scenario considerably: the launching of the Zarb-i-Azb military operation in North Waziristan in June.

Militant attacks had begun to decline even before the operation was initiated, especially when the government was seeking a negotiated settlement with the TTP. Yet the operation itself has had a significant impact in bringing down attacks and destroying militant infrastructure in North Waziristan.

Though concrete figures are not yet available, some counterterrorism experts estimate that attacks have come down by around 30pc this year compared to 2013. However, as important as uprooting the TTP from its base is, terrorism in Pakistan will not be eliminated by focusing on North Waziristan alone.

For while the TTP may be in disarray — with internal splits and leaders on the run — the group is not the only significant militant threat in Pakistan. As per the report on global terrorism, after the TTP, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi is the most lethal militant group of those that claim attacks inside the country. And there is little evidence that the LJ's infrastructure is being dismantled in Balochistan or Karachi.

As this paper has often argued, there needs to be a holistic counterterrorism effort. While the TTP is in the state's cross hairs, all other groups that share its violent ideology and tactics must also be tackled.

November, 2014

While action on the battlefield is important, intelligence-led policing is required to disrupt militant activity in cities and towns where targeted killings and other forms of violence continues.

On this front, the government response has been largely lacklustre. For example, the National Counter Terrorism Authority has so far appeared inert and has not been used to its true potential. Unless battlefield successes are complemented by urban counterterrorism efforts, a lasting peace in Pakistan is hard to imagine.

Published in Dawn, November 21th, 2014

Circular debt rises

THE government appears to have lost the initiative in its pledge to eliminate the circular debt. The amount of debt has once again soared past historic highs, surpassing Rs577bn by latest figures, and the receivables of PSO, the state-owned oil company that bears the brunt of the power sector's inability to pay its fuel bills, have also touched the historic high of Rs238bn.

The company is reportedly running multiple defaults on its domestic and international obligations in order to carry this mammoth bill.

All players in the power supply chain — the fuel supplier, the IPPs, the public-sector power plants — are back to square one since this government undertook a massive retirement of the circular debt in its earliest days. That amount was also a record-breaking Rs480bn, much of it raised from borrowing, and the payout was accompanied by promises that the problem of the circular debt would not be allowed to reappear.

Also read: [Circular debt a major challenge to Thar power project](#)

The government was serious this time, we were told. This time there would be reforms, efficiencies would be raised and recoveries improved.

Not many objections were raised because everybody wanted to give the government a chance to deliver on its commitments first, and few saw any alternative given the massive load-shedding that had engulfed large parts of the country. But today, the opportunity presented by that moment, which briefly breathed some life into our power plants, has been squandered.

From here on, the government is left to muddle through, to manage the power crisis on a day-to-day basis just like the previous government did. It is still not too late to undertake the right policy actions to rectify the situation, but it is more difficult now than it was the same time last year.

Tackling the power crisis was the main plank in this government's election campaign, and this is the one area upon which their fortunes hang. Comprehensive action

November, 2014

must begin now, otherwise the cost of delays will only rise.

Published in Dawn, November 21th, 2014

Unhealthy export

IT seems the list of cross-border problems involving Pakistan and Afghanistan is endless, which in turn underlines the need for greater, urgent cooperation between the two neighbours.

On Thursday, there was a news item from Kabul about how Afghanistan is awash with substandard drugs that are made in Pakistan.

The report is based on information from the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee that brings together the Afghan government and the 'international community'. It gives the impression that at least a proportion of these substandard medicines are exported under a legal licence whereas others are smuggled.

Also read: [Smuggled medicine floods Afghan market, says report](#)

According to the committee, up to 300 companies in Pakistan produce exclusively for Afghanistan low-quality drugs that are considered not fit to be sold in the country

of their origin — which would leave many wondering just how bad 'substandard' is in this case.

Whereas some measures are under way to purge Pakistan of spurious and substandard medicines under the drug regulatory law of 2012, the country still has a long way to go before it can claim to be running a successful campaign towards regulating production and the sale of medicines.

To assume that the Afghan evaluation committee is talking about low-quality drugs that cannot penetrate the Pakistani market would mean taking the term 'low quality' to new depths.

There can be no two opinions. These drugs should not be available, not in Pakistan, not in Afghanistan. It is essential for the Pakistani authorities to heed the message from across the border and duly mark it as a problem that needs urgent attention.

All parties involved need to quicken the pace at which they are working. As Pakistan transits from a centralised authority, the provincial units have to move faster in shaping a new system to regulate drugs, towards which a case is pending in the Supreme Court.

And most basic, there needs to be some investment in the infrastructure as well as in manpower. There are currently said to be too few drug inspectors, and quite often it is an accident that leads to the discovery of the sale or consumption of a substandard drug.

The health ministry in Pakistan wants harsher penalties for those guilty of producing substandard drugs, but as a more basic deterrent it has to also improve its monitoring system. An overall improved system will greatly help in discouraging the use of Pakistani territory for the transfer of unhealthy cargo the committee in Kabul claims to have unearthed.

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Accord with Russia

WHETHER or not the new defence pact between Russia and Pakistan is the ‘milestone’ described by the defence ministry, it does make eminent sense for the two countries to come closer as the Eurasian landmass and what Moscow calls its ‘near abroad’ undergo geopolitical convulsions.

As in the past, more so now, Afghanistan remains the linchpin of Russia-Pakistan relations as the US prepares to withdraw from the war-ravaged country without having achieved a mission it never seemed very clear about.

Also read: [Pakistan, Russia sign landmark defence cooperation agreement](#)

Now watching with concerns the shape of things to come in Afghanistan are not only Pakistan and Russia but also China and India. Questions surround the capability of the

new Afghan government. Will it just survive, buffeted like Hamid Karzai’s regime, or will it craft bold and imaginative policies to make a success of the democratic process, attempt to reconcile with the Afghan Taliban and launch Afghanistan’s post-war reconstruction?

With American power in the region in retreat, Russia would like to know where Pakistan stands in post-US Afghanistan — a query Beijing, too, may share, because of its interest in a peaceful Afghanistan whose Wakhan valley borders China’s Xinjiang province.

Clearly then, Islamabad, Beijing and Moscow have a commonality of interest in seeing a stable Afghanistan, with China especially keen to make a major contribution to Afghanistan’s economic development.

Meanwhile, recent aggression at the Line of Control and the Working Boundary as well as the hard-line Modi government taking power in New Delhi last May have only enhanced Pakistan’s fears vis-à-vis India’s involvement in Afghanistan.

Islamabad thus would like to strike a deeper understanding with a Moscow that is mindful of the unmistakable shift in India’s foreign policy and its warmer relationship with Washington.

No doubt aware of its international isolation, Pakistan is keen to broaden and diversify its economic and defence ties with states that have a dominant global role such as Vladimir Putin’s Russia, which has begun to reassert its power, as seen in Crimea and Ukraine.

November, 2014

As evident from Thursday's agreement, Russia is willing to help Pakistan in a variety of sectors, including economy, technology, defence and international security, besides closely cooperating in crafting a common counterterrorism strategy.

With the focus of the world's economic and political power shifting from the West to the East, Pakistan has to review some of the basic postulates of its foreign policy, without disrupting its traditional ties with the US and the European Union.

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Sargodha deaths

SOME 15 newborns have died in Sargodha this week because of lack of facilities at the district headquarters hospital. Allegations of neglect by doctors have expanded to criticism of the government officials' apathy.

Once again promises have been made — among them a commitment to rush to Sargodha 20 incubators, whose shortage, along with that of some other equipment and, most tellingly, of doctors, is said to have contributed to the death of the newborns.

As help is awaited, there are fears that many young lives may still be in danger. The explanation offered by those

tasked with running the DHQ is hardly credible — it is too simplistic to hold premature births responsible.

Child delivery, premature or otherwise, is a basic medical task a DHQ is expected to deal with efficiently. Failure to provide even this would mean that district-level public hospitals have degenerated alarmingly.

There have been calls for quick life-saving interventions in Sargodha from the government, just as there are demands for fixing the official focus where it is most needed.

Trial 'delay'

IN a split — and also unusual and so automatically controversial — decision, the special court trying Pervez Musharraf for treason has directed the government to include three individuals — former prime minister Shaukat Aziz, former law minister Zahid Hamid and retired chief justice of Pakistan Abdul Hameed Dogar — as co-accused.

In effect, this means that the retired general's trial, which has seen the prosecution already present its case, would have to be restarted.

The majority decision acknowledges that the trial of the former dictator may be "delayed" as a result of the order, but argues that the move is necessary in the interests of justice and the court's "legitimacy in the eye of the public".

November, 2014

Also read: [Special court partially okays trial of Musharraf's abettors](#)

To understand the court's logic, reference to paragraph 27 of the order is helpful. Here the court essentially explains that it was the ouster of then chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry (an act in which the three co-accused were complicit, according to the special court) that realised Mr Musharraf's intent of suspending the Constitution and replacing the superior court judges — and not the mere promulgation of several orders by Mr Musharraf on Nov 3 to suspend the Constitution and make superior court judges take a fresh oath under the PCO.

Controversial as the court's order may be, it has all but knocked out the government's strategy to try Mr Musharraf and some serious rethinking will need to be done by the PML-N.

In truth, however, many of the problems now facing the government are of its own creation. To begin with, the government chose to try Mr Musharraf for the November 2007 emergency rather than the original sin of the October 1999 coup.

This left the issue open to the complication now identified by the special court that the replacement of then-chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry with Abdul Hameed Dogar could not be effected by Mr Musharraf alone, given that the Prime Minister's Office and the law ministry had to officially sanction the change and Mr Dogar had to accept his elevation.

In addition, the problem of trying Mr Musharraf alone when the joint investigation team that led to the formulation of charges against Mr Musharraf had mentioned — but left unidentified — abettors was also obvious.

Even if Mr Musharraf was guilty of crimes against the Constitution, why should others not be identified and tried for the very same crimes against the Constitution that Mr Musharraf is being tried for?

Those two mistakes — or perhaps wilful blindness to the facts — have now caused the government's plans to be thrown into disarray.

Mr Musharraf ought to stand trial for staging a coup, in 1999 and in 2007, and all those who facilitated a coup ought to be put on trial too. By being selective, the government is now faced with a lengthy delay in its primary goal, a Musharraf conviction — assuming a trial will ever be completed.

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Also read: [Death toll in DHQ hospital nursery reaches 12](#)

The official tendency, as we all know, is to react to a situation, and quite often insult is added to injury when government functionaries seem to be more protective of the government's reputation than attempting to fulfil their responsibilities towards the people.

November, 2014

Such are the workings of the system which we all believe has to be improved if not altogether discarded in favour of a new effort.

In Punjab, for some time there has been an inclination to address the issues via a short cut under the direct supervision of the chief minister. In the current case, too, a chief ministerial inspection team was sent to Sargodha, and according to news reports, a couple of newborns died while it was investigating.

The inspection's purpose would be half served if the remedial measures it proposes after, hopefully, a thorough probe, are limited to just one DHQ or just one province. Let the tragedy in Sargodha be a turning point that leads to a redefinition of official priorities.

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A political field wide open

Though Sindh's politics is dominated by the PPP in the rural heartland while the MQM calls the shots in large cities and towns, the field appears wide open for other political actors.

This is largely because the PPP and MQM have failed to establish good governance and the rule of law despite running the province or sharing power.

Hence the PTI's rally held on Friday near Larkana was closely watched to see what Imran Khan and his party had to offer the people of Sindh.

Read| [PTI against Sindh's division: Imran](#)

The symbolism was not lost: after having challenged the PML-N by holding demonstrations in Islamabad and across Punjab's cities over the past three months, Mr Khan sought to confront the PPP close to its power base, keeping in mind the PTI theme of changing the 'old order'.

The PTI managed to pull in a respectable crowd and Mr Khan made all the right political noises, saying he did not favour the division of Sindh and that the Kalabagh dam would be unacceptable unless the people of Sindh were convinced of its utility.

November, 2014

While the PTI managed a decent enough show in Larkana, it should remember that one rally does not a movement make, in this case in interior Sindh.

Mr Khan's party, after all, largely ignored Sindh and Balochistan during last year's general elections. It is a good move for the PTI to try and have a base in Sindh, though achieving success at the ballot box will be a formidable challenge.

For one, many of the leaders gravitating around the PTI in the interior are very much part of the old order Imran Khan rails against.

It is not clear whether Sindh's voters would repose their trust in these 'electables', some of whom are refugees from other parties.

No doubt there is hunger for change among Sindh's working and middle classes.

Yet no political group has been able to reach out to the province's small farmers, labourers and other working people to address their myriad problems and come up with solid solutions.

Also read/ [PTI's Larkana rally a failed political show: PPP](#)

While the MQM has failed to move beyond its urban comfort zone (even there the party appears to be losing ground), the PPP has marked its rule with epic bad governance.

Health, education and public infrastructure are in shambles, while the state of law and order can be judged by the fact that even lawmakers are not safe from militant attacks, as was witnessed at an MQM camp in Karachi on Friday. Indeed people still vote for the PPP because the alternatives appear even more unappealing.

Sindh is yearning for change; it needs political forces that can bridge its ethnic, caste and tribal divides and speak for the greater good of the province. Either the PPP and MQM should stop taking their vote banks for granted, or new political forces could rise that speak and work for the common man in Sindh.

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[Will Obama help?](#)

Being billed as another diplomatic triumph for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who himself broke the news to the media via Twitter, President Barack Obama's visit to New Delhi in January constitutes one more milestone in the evolution of a closer relationship between America and India.

Even though many other leaders, including those from Pakistan, China and the P-5, have been guests at India's Republic Day celebrations, it is for the first time that an American president has been invited to the Jan 26 festivities.

Read: [Obama informs Sharif about Delhi visit](#)

For Mr Obama, this will be his second visit to India, and a second meeting with Mr Modi some four months after the bonhomie witnessed during the Indian prime minister's visit to the US for the annual UN General Assembly meeting.

The fact that the Republican sweep of the mid-term elections has virtually turned Mr Obama into a lame-duck president shouldn't serve to diminish the visit's importance.

All said and done, an American president will be there in New Delhi, and that should serve Mr Modi in good stead for the next five years, because it is he who will be dealing with the next American administration, Democrat or Republican.

The prime ministers of Pakistan and India will be there in Kathmandu soon for the 18th Saarc summit, but — going by the recent tensions between the two countries — a one-on-one meeting between the leaders does not seem likely.

Even if there is a formal get-together for record's sake, only an optimist would expect a breakthrough leading to a resumption of the peace process at this stage.

More important, we do not know whether guns will fall silent along the Line of Control and Working Boundary when Mr Obama and Mr Modi meet.

But irrespective of the situation in India-held Kashmir and the outcome of the Saarc summit, Mr Obama should use his presence in New Delhi to convince India to give up its veto on a resumption of the peace process that has been suspended since the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

This veto precedes Mr Modi's assumption of power.

The phone call Mr Obama made to Nawaz Sharif was a gesture, and no more.

Meanwhile, Pakistan will consider Mr Obama's New Delhi visit fruitful if he breaks the ice and helps start the peace process, which will remain static until the leaders of the two countries, especially India, themselves show the will to pursue the path of amity.

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Slipping tax base

THE tax filing deadline has come and gone twice already, and with a third extension, it is puzzling to see that the number of people filing their returns has actually gone down considerably. Last year, about 835,000 people filed their returns, a paltry number to start off with.

And this year that number has dropped further, coming in just above 550,000. On the one hand, this is puzzling because it comes after a strenuous effort to serve notices on more than 70,000 individuals who were non-filers.

November, 2014

Less than 20,000 of those have actually complied.

Read: [FBR urged to extend filing date to Dec 31](#)

It is also baffling because this year the government encouraged the electronic filing of returns, which has simplified the process to a large extent, even though some people found it confusing initially.

In light of the efforts being made to encourage a culture of filing, it is puzzling to see the numbers of returns actually drop so sharply this year.

At some level, this represents a failure of the government's efforts. Part of the explanation may lie in the excessive recourse to withholding taxes to raise revenue.

Raw pressure to increase revenues quickly has led to a large reliance on withholding taxes which creates a sense amongst people that since they are already paying they need not go through the trouble of filing returns. If true, this indicates that raising revenues and encouraging filing of returns can work at cross purposes if not implemented properly.

The extensions in the deadline for filing returns have been warranted given the new systems rolled out this year, but clearly something has gone wrong somewhere else.

Also read: [New rules for filing of tax returns notified](#)

Two mistakes need to be avoided when rectifying this situation.

One is a greater reliance on withholding taxes as the revenue requirements continue mounting.

The second is the temptation to resort to coercive measures to force greater compliance.

Ultimately, a culture of compliance will emerge only if taxpayers find it beneficial to come into the net.

There are no short cuts here, and only a credible tax reform effort can get the job done.

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Neglect of heritage

MUCH is made by people in high office about the country's rich cultural and historical heritage. Pakistan has on paper legislation that should work to protect and preserve its legacies.

On the ground, though, the situation at most sites of historical importance is one of abject neglect. Consider, for example, the case of Taxila, which boasts the remains of several important Buddhist monasteries dating back to ancient times.

November, 2014

The Mohra Moradu stupa and monastery among them is of such significance that it was included in Unesco's list of world heritage sites in 1980, and years ago, sheds were erected to protect the scores of stucco structures there from climate-related deterioration.

Also read: [Ancient sculptures crumbling due to lack of attention](#)

Today, however, these are in a sorry state. The sheds over the stupa and the cells housing the sculptures are damaged, and rainwater as well as seepage have damaged most of the contents that date back to the 4th and 5th centuries A.D.

What the passage of hundreds of years could not do, official neglect is achieving instead: when contacted, the deputy director of the archaeology department said that a preservation project could not be initiated as a result of lack of funds, and that in any case the site had been handed over to the provincial government in the wake of the passage of the 18th Amendment.

This is not the first time the site has been in the news because of the damage it is suffering.

Most recently, late last month, allegations were made by sources in the archaeology department that Buddha statues at the Jualan stupa were being worked upon by non-specialised masons who were making new heads for statues where stucco was originally used, in effect damaging them through robbing them of their authenticity.

That needs to be verified and halted immediately, if true. And those who work with the federal as well as provincial archaeology departments need reminding that while funds may be tight, preserving heritage starts with finding the will to accomplish the task.

Published in Dawn, November 24th, 2014

Gas decision deferred

POLITICAL ad hocism has trumped economics once again. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has deferred implementation of the decision by the Economic Coordination Committee to raise gas prices by 30pc for every consumer save urea producers and small domestic users.

The challenge Mr Sharif faces from rival Imran Khan seems to have worked — in favour of consumers.

Know more: [Sharif defers gas tariff hike](#)

In financial terms, the decision would have helped the two gas utilities obtain roughly Rs69bn from their customers who would be paying almost one-fifth of the additional amount to finance their losses during the last two fiscals on account of inefficient management of the depleting resource and the latter's widespread theft.

The remaining sum of money was meant for pulling the distributors out of the red. Besides, it would also help the

cash-strapped government partially fix the fiscal hole in its budget to obtain \$1.1bn from the IMF next month.

Thus, the gas price raise, if implemented, should bring financial relief to the distributors and the government — though anguish to consumers. Indeed, the gas price increase has its upside and downside. Its implementation would immediately force most middle-class consumers to limit their use of the fuel for heating water and warming homes during winter — or pay a heavy price for it.

The expected drop in domestic use would also mean a significant reduction in the quantity of gas wasted in burning highly inefficient appliances, as well as curb system losses and theft suffered during distribution.

This cut in ‘wasteful’ domestic consumption would make more gas available in the distribution system for the manufacturing industry and power producers to boost sagging growth.

At the same time, however, the gas providers would have another opportunity to hide their inefficient management behind their increased revenues and guaranteed ‘profits’.

It would discourage them from stepping up efforts to bring down their unaccounted for gas level. Simply put, a tariff increase would delay their imminent collapse. But it is not a permanent cure.

Thus, the ECC decision to raise prices without implementing structural reforms is hardly a sensible strategy. We’ve seen failure of this policy in the power

sector, which continues to teeter on the brink despite a massive jump in electricity tariffs a year ago.

Instead of delaying the ECC decision, the prime minister should have ordered the ministries concerned to also implement the required structural reforms of gas distributors and increase the supplies of the fuel to drive economic growth.

Published in Dawn, November 24th, 2014

Complacency as threat recedes

THERE will be no mid-term elections Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has decreed, and his words ought to be taken seriously given that the only constitutional path to mid-term polls lies in Mr Sharif’s agreeing to dissolve the National Assembly.

For now, much of the threat posed by the anti-government tandem of Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri has obviously dissipated.

Notwithstanding what Mr Khan may be claiming in his frequent rallies in the run-up to Nov 30, the Islamabad rally is unlikely to produce the kind of political pressure that can cause a government to fold — barring, of course, a dangerous gamble by the PTI leadership and

November, 2014

the outbreak of violence in the heart of the federal capital, as happened on Aug 30 and Sept 1.

Also read: [Nawaz dismisses elections before 2018](#)

So the prime minister may well be justified in his confidence, though that does not quite answer the question why the government has been unable to truly hit the reset button and start anew on its governance programme, while also taking the steps necessary to address the legitimate demands of the anti-government protesters.

Unhappily, given other comments by senior government officials in recent days, the PML-N leadership seems unable to, or perhaps is unwilling to, move on from the crisis in the summer.

It could be that as long as Imran Khan remains motivated to continue his protests, the PML-N will continue to see the hand of conspiracy in the shadows — thereby remaining distracted and unable to focus on moving the country forward.

Ultimately though, conspiracy or no conspiracy, there is little the PML-N can do to directly shape the trajectory of the anti-government protests — all it can, and should, do is focus on improving its own record in office, thereby solidifying the democratic project and dissipating pressure for mid-term elections.

But even electoral reforms are in the doldrums and a special investigation into specific allegations of electoral

malpractices in the May 2013 poll appears more unlikely than ever.

It is almost as though the government would like to force the PTI into complete surrender rather than accept that the PTI raised a number of legitimate concerns and several of the party's demands would only strengthen the overall democratic process in the country.

Perhaps what Mr Sharif needs to focus on are his own words, "They [the people] will have a chance to vote in or vote out any party" in 2018.

Yet, incrementally more credible and acceptable as the 2008 and 2013 polls were, no honest assessment of elections in Pakistan would suggest that the barriers to becoming a people's representative are reasonable or that the casting and counting of votes is a process free of flaws.

The country's democrats need to create a better democracy if it is to prove sustainable.

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Army chief's US visit

GEN Raheel Sharif's visit to the US has been dubbed a success in several quarters, but in truth little is really known about the substantive issues that were discussed and quite what the metrics of this so-called success are.

A more nuanced, less cheerleader-esque assessment of the trip suggests that Gen Sharif's interactions with a wide range of American officials marked a continuation of a broader trend: stabilising Pak-US relations with a focus on security issues — virtually dictated by the army leadership — and well-meaning but significantly less substantive promises by the US to help Pakistan stabilise and grow its economy.

Also read: [Pakistan, US conclude first phase of key consultations](#)

The trip then was not expected to produce any significant surprises — good or bad — and concluded as such. Yet, it is in the nature of such trips to often produce results much later and it is with that in mind that Gen Sharif's high-level interactions should be assessed.

As with all such trips, even if details are scarce, themes do tend to emerge. After the COAS's meetings with defence and political officials, the two themes that became apparent were: a focus on anti-militancy operations inside Pakistan; and ensuring that the various

pieces of the post-2014 future of Afghanistan come together as harmoniously as possible.

On the internal front, Gen Sharif appeared to strike the right PR notes at least, especially his emphatic comments about Pakistan not seeking to shield the Haqqani network on its soil anymore.

Yet, for all the American focus on the Haqqani network, the military here has a much bigger and more immediate war to fight — against Pakistan-centric militants. And it is here that Gen Sharif demonstrated a bit of openness.

Also read: [Army chief holds talks at Pentagon](#)

The general warned that the fight against militancy would not be won by military operations, no matter how big, but that the countrywide threat needed a sustained and methodical approach by all arms of the state.

Therein lies the central challenge and if the army chief was able to get American commitments for military and intelligence resources to help beef up the state's capacity here, on the civilian and military sides, then that alone would make the trip a success.

On Afghanistan, the signs indicated a growing convergence between the Pakistani establishment and the US administration on the need for stability on both sides of the border and finding ways to reduce cross-border tensions exacerbated by militants seeking sanctuary in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The revelation that the US would continue to participate in combat operations in Afghanistan via aerial attacks and surveillance is especially significant given that drone strikes in Pakistan are believed to be dependent on facilities in Afghanistan now.

So in welcoming the continued American military engagement in Afghanistan, the security establishment here has sent a signal that the future of Afghanistan and peace in Fata will be achieved with US help rather than with the Pakistanis going it alone in both areas.

Published in Dawn, November 25th, 2014

Melting glaciers

A NEW study has drawn attention to the accelerating rate of glacial melt in Pakistan's mountainous north. The problem is grave and has far-reaching ramifications for the country, yet it is as remote from the public mind as the glaciers are from the cities.

By itself, the phenomenon is too obscure for most people to grasp. But seen in the context of overall climate change and global warming, it is a reminder that Pakistan is amongst the most vulnerable countries in the world, and by many accounts, is already in the midst of the massive and turbulent impact of changing climate patterns.

Regular flooding every monsoon is a reminder of these vulnerabilities, but most people see the floods disappear quickly, and the devastation they cause retreats from consciousness as fast as the water does.

Know more: [Study of melting glaciers worries meteorologists](#)

But glacial melt is pointing towards far more profound changes in the climate, whose consequences are more unpredictable and likely to be more far-reaching than the intensifying rains.

The scale of the shrinkage in the glaciers that the study focuses on is surprising, with some glaciers losing more than a kilometre of their total length in the past couple of decades.

The challenge posed by climate change needs to be taken far more seriously than it currently is. This does not have to mean fanning panic. However, steps to mitigate the impact of extreme weather events can be taken.

Given the regularity with which monsoon flooding is visiting us now, it is obvious that better planning can be undertaken so that the damage is minimised. The same holds true for glacial melt.

We cannot reverse climate change. But we can lessen its impact. The best way to do this is to reach out to climate scientists with state-of-the-art tools such as forecasting models, and develop the ability to foresee extreme weather events.

Better cooperation between India and Pakistan is also required to properly develop a strategy to mitigate the impact of climate change, whether in the mountainous north or in the monsoon floodplains.

At least some of the melting observed, for instance, is attributable to particulate matter from the burning of coal and wood in lower elevations, which is carried by the wind and that eventually deposits itself on the ice mass in the mountains. Such problems can be addressed, and mitigative strategies developed, provided both countries learn to take the problem seriously. It is still not too late.

Published in Dawn, November 25th , 2014

Acid attacks on the rise

IF there ever was a situation that could aptly be described without a trace of irony as a fate worse than death, it would be the lives of victims of acid attacks, most of whom are women.

There are few other crimes that have the kind of far-reaching, devastating and often permanent consequences in a world where physical appearance is a vital aspect of an individual's social capital. When Pakistan's parliament enacted the Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act, 2011, it was hailed as an important step in the fight against this type of violence.

Also read: [42 acid attacks in Punjab; victims await justice](#)

The legislation inserted new sections into the Pakistan Penal Code that, for the first time, defined acid attacks and stipulated imprisonment from 14 years to life and a minimum fine of Rs1m as punishment.

However, as a report in this paper yesterday indicates, that scarcely appears to have been a deterrent. In Punjab, which accounts for the majority of cases, acid attacks have actually registered an increase: there were 42 between January and September this year, compared to 35 throughout 2013.

Rights activists have persistently held that the 2011 amendment to the PPC was to have been buttressed by a comprehensive act to address various aspects of the issue — financial compensation for the victim, his/her rehabilitation, the sale of acid, etc.

Crucially, the proposed legislation recognises that victims are in need of urgent and long-term medical attention. Several drafts are in the final stages with various provincial authorities.

Among the suggestions in the draft under consideration in Punjab is that cases be processed within a specific time frame, the fine imposed upon perpetrators go towards compensation for victims and the government be made responsible for the latter's rehabilitation.

It also stipulates the setting up of a monitoring and funding mechanism to enable effective implementation. To ensure that this most vicious of crimes does not go

November, 2014

unpunished and that those at the receiving end are not left without redress, the comprehensive bill must be passed into law without delay.

Published in Dawn, November 25th, 2014

The sectarian volcano

Combating sectarian violence has become a major security headache for a number of Muslim-majority states, including Pakistan.

As acclaimed Iranian-American scholar Vali Reza Nasr told a gathering in Karachi recently, sectarianism today is the most important dynamic in the Muslim world. Indeed, states like Iraq, Syria and Yemen are collapsing under the weight of protracted sectarian conflict.

Read: [In conversation](#)

Unfortunately, the differences have gone beyond the realm of theological debate and now revolve around the distribution of power. Though perhaps not to the same degree as the Middle East's hotspots, Pakistan has nevertheless also been significantly brutalised by sectarian warriors active in all regions of this country.

Many of these forces, mostly created and nurtured in Ziaul Haq's Pakistan to counter the influence of a revolutionary and unambiguously Shia Iran, have today

become uncontrollable and are on 'autopilot'. As fears grew of the 'export' of the Iranian revolution to other Muslim states, certain sectarian and political elements sought to contain it by limiting Tehran's influence — including by supporting sectarian militant groups.

In today's Pakistan, such groups have joined a wider array of Islamist militant actors that threaten the very stability of the country.

The question to ponder for the state — both the civilian leadership and the military establishment — is that are the sectarian militants really uncontrollable? Does the state not possess the means by which to silence their guns, clamp down on hate speech and prosecute their leaders and foot soldiers?

The answer seems self-evident, for if the state wants to put its full might behind an objective, it can get results; the military operation under way in North Waziristan is the most recent example of this.

Perhaps what is needed at the highest levels of leadership is a realisation and admission that the state was wrong to look the other way when it came to sectarian death squads. It is simplistic to think that the communal fires now burning across the Middle East will not touch Pakistan. Due to cultural and religious links, events in that region exert considerable influence in this country.

Yet while sectarianism may have taken root in many Arab states, there is still relative communal harmony in Pakistan. But if sectarian killings continue in this country

— and go unpunished — that coexistence may well transform into a darker reality. Finally, apart from the state, the ulema bear major responsibility for ensuring communal harmony, specifically by confronting clerical voices that fan hatred.

Published in Dawn, November 26th, 2014

Growth engine is stalling

A VERY large wheel is grinding to a halt. Large-scale manufacturing has been languishing at growth rates below 2pc throughout this fiscal year.

Latest figures show the LSM growth rate at 1.86pc, whereas in the corresponding period last year the figure was almost 4pc.

Recall that last year was hardly a stellar success for LSM since this is when uncertainty rocked the money markets and the IMF programme had just begun.

Know more: [Industry expands 1.86pc in July-Sept](#)

Most of the spurt to growth back then came from the renewed supplies of power due to the circular debt retirement, and diversion of gas towards fertiliser, which accounted for a large share of the uptick in LSM back then.

For the figure to slump to below 2pc today, when we were supposed to be harvesting the fruits of the tough decisions supposedly made in the early months of the current government, should be considered a major failing of the latter.

What is puzzling to note is the healthy march ahead in other indicators. For instance, consumer appliances — fridges, air conditioners, etc — are selling like hot cakes. Indicators of consumer confidence remain elevated despite a small dip in August.

The stock market is touching new heights every day, imports are galloping along, and the trade deficit widened by 50pc in the first quarter of this fiscal year despite a large dip in oil prices. Most of the import growth appears to be coming from consumer goods. In LSM as well, the manufacture of domestic appliances has registered some of the highest growth rates.

All this adds up to a rather uneven picture: incomes and investment are falling while consumption and speculation march on. One part of the economy, relating to trade, consumption and speculation, is on the move while the other side, linked to manufacture, exports and investment, is sinking deeper into the doldrums.

This is an appalling state of affairs, particularly for a government that prides itself on being business-friendly. What good is a growth rate that is devoid of investment and employment? What do we call an economy that eats away tomorrow's possibilities in return for a quick buck today?

November, 2014

Opening the door to the enjoyment of imported consumer durables is not the only deliverable in economic management.

The government likes to list the areas in which it claims to have delivered: the stock market, the high rates of subscription in government share divestments, Moody's endorsement, the stable exchange rate and so on.

They ought to take a serious look at manufacturing and tell us how they explain the slump, and what plans they have for its revival.

The government cannot serve speculators and traders alone, then go on to claim an economic revival by pointing to the growth rate. The real test of economic leadership lies in getting the wheels of manufacturing to start turning again.

Published in Dawn, November 26th, 2014

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A debating forum

MORE South Asian summit conferences have been postponed than held. Today, the leaders of the eight-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation meet in Kathmandu for the 18th time, with the end result likely to be anything but spectacular.

Formed in 1985 with seven members, Saarc now has grown to include Afghanistan, which has yet to endorse the Durand Line as its international border with another member country — Pakistan.

Even leaving aside this problem, and the perpetually tense Pakistan-India relationship, Saarc has collectively failed to make any progress. Besides the geopolitical issues, there are some structural problems with the organisation.

Also read: [Saarc summitry](#)

The European Union, for instance, has many big and small economies yet has managed to evolve successful institutions promoting a common agenda.

Closer to South Asia, Asean is again composed of economies of varying sizes. But members have an equal voice and that has contributed to the regional group's success. In Saarc's case, the size of India's economy is more than the combined economies of all other members.

This would present a difficult challenge for economic and social integration, made worse by the fact that literacy rates in South Asian countries are low. The EU has a single currency, and Asean is thinking along those lines, but the very thought of Saarc having a common currency at this point in time appears far-fetched

A review of Saarc's activities reveals it has little positive to show, because South Asian governments have displayed lack of both vision and courage to overcome the obstacles. What Saarc leaders fail to realise is that globalisation is not possible without a high degree of regionalisation.

If they really want to pull their peoples out of the morass of poverty and ignorance, regional integration must be part of national development strategies. Saarc's charter makes it clear that "the objectives of peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity are best achieved in the South Asian region by fostering mutual understanding, good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation" Regretfully, at present, Saarc is hardly more than a debating club.

Published in Dawn, November 26th, 2014

Promoting tolerance

ALMOST every day brings forth evidence of the intolerable predicament of minorities in Pakistan. Either it is the desecration of a place of worship, allegations of forcible conversion, ransacking of a minority residential locality or even the lynching of individuals belonging to minority communities on accusations of blasphemy.

Over the years, as the state has slumbered on, unmindful of its shameful dereliction of duty to safeguard minority rights, predatory groups have taken advantage of a growing right-wing discourse in society to marginalise minorities in all spheres of life.

It seems to have taken no less than the horrific murder in Punjab of Christian brick kiln workers Sajjad and Shama on a blasphemy allegation to shake the state out of its stupor.

Also read: [Minorities protest govt failure to protect them](#)

In compliance with a landmark judgment by former chief justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani that sought to address the persecution of minorities in Pakistan, the prime minister has announced the formation of a national commission to promote religious tolerance and interfaith harmony.

The commission, which is to include representatives of political and religious parties as well as those of minority

November, 2014

communities, will have, among other responsibilities, the mandate to review laws and procedural practices that discriminate against minorities.

If the state actually intends to address the issue with the gravity it deserves, it must take some immediate steps to demonstrate its commitment.

Laws against hate speech, incitement to violence and desecration of worship places are already in place. Mob violence against minorities is almost always preceded by instigation on the part of local influentials/clerics, sometimes over a period of days. Then there are self-proclaimed 'religious' groups that openly call for the murder of members of certain communities.

The impunity with which such peddlers of religious intolerance operate in society must end, definitively and without discrimination. Consider, for example, what impression is created when Sawan Masih, a man found guilty of blasphemy that led to riots in Lahore's Joseph Colony, is sentenced to death, while the trial of the enraged mob that rampaged through the area continues to grind through the courts — with all accused out on bail? That brings us to the blasphemy laws which disproportionately target minorities, and must be urgently reviewed.

It will take nothing less than a far-reaching exercise to purge society of entrenched religious biases that were assiduously cultivated over long decades of ill-conceived official policy and are now bearing fruit. Pakistan must spare no effort to reverse the tide.

Published in Dawn, November 27th , 2014

Thar reality check

SOMEWHERE in between the sensationalised and supposedly exaggerated accounts of the effects of the ongoing drought in Thar, and the Sindh government's misplaced insistence that matters are under control, lies the truth of the matter.

According to one figure, there have been over 400 deaths in the Thar region of Sindh since January, mostly of children under five. However, though the impact of the drought on local people and livestock has been severe, a high number of infant deaths in Thar is not unusual, as medical experts say the area has the highest mortality rate of children under five in Pakistan.

As senior doctors told this paper, this situation has prevailed for the last three decades and it is "periodically unearthed and highlighted".

Know more: [High child mortality rate in Thar no new phenomenon, say experts](#)

Malnourishment is high in the area, while health facilities and the number of doctors are insufficient. So while the drought is a major factor, the situation has been aggravated by the neglect of the desert region by successive governments for the last 30 years or so.

November, 2014

As per a report filed with the Sindh High Court on Tuesday, a probe conducted by a local judge came to the conclusion that it is the lack of medical facilities and potable water that has worsened the situation in Thar. Both the federal and Sindh governments have been censured in the report for failing to effectively manage the long-standing crisis.

It is thanks to the SHC's interest — aided by petitions filed by NGOs — that an accurate picture of the situation in Thar is emerging.

Another report was filed with the court on Wednesday, in which the Tharparkar district administration's relief efforts were criticised for being non-transparent.

Both independent medical experts and the investigators assigned by the SHC seem to agree that the cure for Thar's woes primarily lies in the provision of clean drinking water and well-stocked, well-staffed health facilities to locals. But for this to materialise the provincial government will need to come out of its state of denial and admit Thar has been neglected for decades.

Simply democracy

RETIRED Gen Pervez Musharraf's flawed opinion of democracy that he expressed during an interview with the BBC is certainly not without precedence.

Other Pakistani military rulers before him, especially Ayub Khan and Ziaul Haq, shared similar views:

'Western-style democracy does not suit us.' Ayub Khan spoke of 'Basic Democracies' and developed a constitutional scheme in which the federal parliament and the two provincial assemblies were indirectly elected.

The president himself was elected, and Fatima Jinnah defeated, by an indirect vote cast by 80,000 Basic Democrats. Yet, the moment the field marshal-president was out,

Know more: [Western democracy cannot be enforced on Pakistan: Musharraf](#)

Gen Yahya Khan abrogated the 1962 constitution, and we were back searching for a new form of political existence. Because their regimes had a weak political base, Ayub, Zia and Musharraf had to rely on the bureaucracy, which in due time became a political instrument and perpetuated the status quo.

The result was a rise in regional and ethnic tensions and popular discontent. In contrast, the 1973 Constitution has shown resilience and survived distortions and quasi-judicial nostrums because it was anchored in one sound principle: every government must have the people's mandate obtained on a regular basis — to wit, democracy must not be preceded or followed by any caveats or hamstrung by any reservations.

Pakistan's unfortunate political history, including the 1971 trauma, has made us grapple with the cause-and-effect riddle. Were Pakistani politicians responsible for military interventions or did the military's ambitions make it act?

November, 2014

In other words, was it the quality of politics and politicians that led to the coups or was it the prolongation of military rule that stunted the growth and evolution of a stable political system and compromised the competence of the men who ran it? Why 'Western democracy' doesn't suit Pakistan has never been explained to us, and no viable alternative has been demonstrated.

Let us also note that Muslim countries like Indonesia, Bangladesh and Turkey are functioning democracies. Unfortunately, the military often enough finds support from some right-wing lobby or the other, which objects to parliament's unrestricted right to legislate.

However, all Pakistani constitutions have invariably included clauses that refer to Islamic values as the source of legislation. In addition, the 1973 Constitution gives every citizen the right to go to court and challenge a piece of legislation if it is violative of the Constitution.

What Musharraf said is anachronistic, for last year's general election was a watershed in Pakistan's quest for a democratic polity, because it saw a constitutional transfer of power.

While poll reforms are essential to ensure greater transparency of the exercise, this trend must be allowed to continue uninterrupted. All constitutions and systems must evolve. This should also be the case with our nascent democracy.

The lack of political stability has not only cost us half the country it has also done incalculable damage to national

security, because policy formulation and prioritisation have had an elitist rather than a national perspective.

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Children pay the price

WE all know that the Pakistani state is weak, its writ is limited, and our rulers are indifferent. But there is something particularly heartbreaking about the impact of this decay when it is felt by the most vulnerable members of society: our children.

Particularly when the children themselves are from poor backgrounds, and come from conflict-ridden areas of the country.

The discovery on Wednesday of 26 girls held as bargaining chips in a home in Karachi in a debt recovery exercise is a tragic reminder of how children can become players in games in which they never asked to participate.

The girls were brought to a house whose owner had taken a loan from the management of the madressah where they were enrolled as students.

Know more: [Police recover 36 minor girls from Karachi home](#)

November, 2014

Reportedly, the madressah management sought to impose the cost of the upkeep of the girls on the owner of the house, as well as use the girls as a way to maintain a presence in the house in case it needed to be taken against the loan in the event of default.

Let us consider the myriad failures of our state and economic system that lie behind this story. First is the failure to provide a viable education, which is a constitutionally mandated obligation of the state.

Second is the mushrooming growth of madressahs, especially unregistered ones, most of which have resisted any check on their activities by a government that is only too glad to keep away.

Read: [35 little girls moved to Sindh govt shelter](#)

Third is the failure of the country's formal credit systems to reach the poorer segments of society, leaving people to their own devices when it comes to raising or borrowing money.

And fourth is the decrepit capacity of the state to provide proper mechanisms for enforcement of contracts, leading to growing recourse to such informally arranged mechanisms to collect on a debt.

In the case of the young girls, each one of these factors played a role in turning the children into pawns in a game between adults.

Recall here the number of horrific reports of child abuse emerging from madressahs, as well as Malala

Yousafzai's story that revolved around a young girl struggling to get an education for herself, and data showing the pitiable state of our government-sponsored educational system. Recall also the number of horrific cases that grow out of informal debt, such as the practice of bonded labour.

Also read: [Police recover 36 minor girls from Karachi home](#)

Consider how the brutal murder of the Christian couple in Kot Radha Kishan recently had debt and its recovery at its core. We can stand in silent contemplation of the myriad ways in which the rising tide of informality extracts its price.

But the heaviest cost of this failure of institutionalisation is borne by our children, who have to pay with their futures, their hopes, and far too often, with their tears and their lives.

Published in Dawn, November 28th, 2014

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Sukuk bond

ANOTHER successful bond flotation has had the government patting itself on the back. The rate of return is much lower than domestic debt, even 50 basis points lower than the five-year Eurobond floated in April we are told.

The oversubscription to the offer, enabling the government to lift twice as much as it originally sought to, is a vote of confidence in the leadership of Nawaz Sharif, says the finance minister.

Subscription to the bond from many countries shows this confidence is global, and the quality of investors showing an interest is an indication of the depth of this confidence, we are informed. Pakistan will save on its domestic debt service bill an amount totalling almost Rs5bn, because the interest on the Sukuk is lower than on domestic Treasury bills.

Also read: [Sukuk yields \\$1bn in international bond market](#)

The lack of interest in the OGDCL flotation has been compensated for in this transaction, and our plan to generate foreign exchange as per IMF requirements is back on track.

All around, the government appears pleased with itself, with the prime minister even taking time out from his

engagements at the Saarc summit in Kathmandu to call the finance minister and congratulate him.

All this may be good news but it is worth keeping the celebrations short for now. In fact, let's take a reality check and note that on the same day as the news of the bond flotation arrived in Islamabad, the IPPs sent a notice of default to the government on Rs42bn receivables, the clearest indication that things in the power sector have returned to where they were when the government first came to power.

Also note the words of the OICCI leadership, which was in Islamabad the same day, flagging their concerns about the lack of governance and the general sense of drift in the country as a major stumbling block to further investment.

Meanwhile in the Senate, questions continued to arise over the inordinate delay in the appointment of heads of major regulatory bodies. Raising debt from abroad to hike up reserves is a very short-term measure, even if the response is good.

The government is entitled to feel positive about how the Sukuk bond flotation has gone, but it must get its feet back on the ground quickly and return to the bread and butter issues that are continuing to depress investment and confidence in the economy. Debt-driven inflows are only good news until the bill becomes due.

Published in Dawn, November 28th, 2014

Cricket tragedy

THE tragic death of Australian batsman Phil Hughes on Thursday, following a serious head injury sustained during a Sheffield Shield game, marks one of the saddest hours in the history of cricket.

It is the worst incident of its kind since the death of former Indian opener Raman Lamba in February 1998 after he was hit on the temple by a cricket ball while fielding in a Bangladesh league cricket match.

Hughes, a dashing 25-year-old who played 26 Test matches for Australia, had been looked upon as an exceptional talent on the field since his first class debut in 2007.

He was named Bradman Young Cricketer of the Year in 2009 and his talent was underscored further when he became the youngest Test batsman to score a century in each innings after his impressive debut against South Africa the same year.

Also read: [Waqar fears for Abbott's future after Hughes tragedy](#)

Hughes' untimely death plunged the entire cricketing world into mourning on Thursday with hundreds of thousands of condolence messages pouring in from all over within minutes of the news of his demise. In Dubai, Pakistan and New Zealand aborted the second day of their third Test match in a gesture of condolence while

the Indian cricket team, currently on tour in Australia, cancelled their two-day practice match that was due to start on Friday.

At the other end, the tragedy has raised serious issues regarding the safety of players on the field and the mandatory measures cricket boards ought to take to minimise such tragic incidents.

Earlier this month, Pakistan's prolific young opener Ahmed Shehzad sustained a hairline fracture on the skull after being hit by a bouncer by Kiwi pacer Corey Anderson. While both Hughes and Shehzad were wearing helmets when they were hit, experts have questioned the robustness of the safety gear and its inadequate design which they say is not fool-proof.

And quite rightly, they have demanded that the authorities review certain rules of the game such as short-pitched bowling, etc to avoid similar accidents in the future.

Published in Dawn, November 28th, 2014

Danger to media

THERE is much to criticise in the conduct of vast sections of the media and especially the level of editorial influence many owners of media houses exercise. But let it also be clear that the prosecution of the Jang group ownership and senior employees on charges of hurting religious sentiment smacks of persecution.

Consider that the controversial content that Geo Entertainment aired earlier this year had already been dealt with by the regulators, the channel was fined and even taken off air, and the Jang/Geo group had profusely apologised for any hurt caused.

The matter should have ended there. Instead, it morphed into a witch hunt, with FIRs filed, criminal investigations launched and, finally, a conviction by an anti-terrorism court, a verdict now suspended on appeal in another jurisdiction.

There is nothing in the original mistake by Geo or its subsequent actions that justifies the kind of criminal proceedings it has been subjected to. Indeed, what the media group is being made to suffer so viciously appears to be payback for perceived Jang/Geo transgressions elsewhere. To put it more bluntly, media freedom is being curtailed and the media group is being made to pay for its belligerent views on the perennial civil-military divide.

The great rupture for the media was ostensibly triggered by the Hamid Mir assassination attempt in April, but its roots are much deeper. In the story of the national media's shift from relatively impartial observers to hyper-partisan players in the political process in recent years, Geo is far from blameless.

The group is seen as having sacrificed the editorial independence of its professional journalists and to be thriving on the notion of its kingmaker status on the national stage. Ultimately though, there are two different sets of transgressions: the one almost invented and championed by Geo and mimicked by other media groups; and what has been done to Geo since that fateful day in April.

Even an unsympathetic view of all that the group has attempted in the name of journalism cannot come close to cancelling out the alarm at what the treatment of Geo means for journalistic independence and media freedom in the country. Once state-backed repression of sections of the media in the name of the national interest or to protect the so-called sanctity of certain national institutions begins, the road to perdition for all media has begun. The media in this country must realise this danger and put up a united front against any attempt to silence it.

Published in Dawn, November 29th , 2014

Powering Saarc

THE signing of an agreement at the just concluded 18th Saarc summit to create a regional electricity grid could have far-reaching outcomes if managed properly.

The moment presents a powerful opportunity. But to understand this, it is important to notice a subtle shift that is taking place in the region, which was evident in Kathmandu.

Saarc has long had to deal with an imbalance within it: one very large country surrounded by a number of very small ones. As a result, in the Saarc region, there has been no compelling economic force to push towards regional integration, unlike East Asia or Europe for instance.

Even in North America, access to the vast pool of cheap labour in Mexico did a lot to create a constituency for free trade and investment.

This structural fact of life in South Asia — the sheer asymmetry in the economic weight between one country versus all the rest — has done more to inhibit regional integration than any territorial disputes and geopolitics.

In Kathmandu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi alluded to this by reminding the assembled delegates that his country need not submit to any regional regime governing trade and investment if it did not want to, since

it could pursue its interests through bilateral channels if it wanted to. “The bonds will grow,” he said, referring to growing regional integration in the years to come, “through Saarc or outside it. Among all of us or some of us.”

The offer to create a regional electricity grid is an opportunity to move out from under the shadow of this asymmetry. India has its own reasons for bargaining away some of its dominance in exchange for a regional grid.

The US representative — present as an observer — pointed towards these reasons when she spoke of her country’s “support for an Indo Pacific Economic Corridor”. China’s growing role in South Asia is another powerful impetus for India to do more on regional integration in its own neighbourhood, a fact underlined by China’s delegation — also present as observers — which highlighted its own growing investments in Saarc countries.

Pakistan can now eye the massive potential hydroelectric surpluses of Nepal and Bhutan, with India providing the transit corridor. Pakistan can also become a seller in this market once the massive power surpluses of Central Asia begin arriving here under the CASA 1000 project.

For two years now, a proposal to connect Lahore and Amritsar with a transmission line to carry 500MW of electricity has been waiting for bilateral approval.

As soon as India’s leadership is ready to shed its dour take on Pakistan and talk business, the proposal can

November, 2014

move ahead through talks between the foreign secretaries of both countries.

All internal approvals within Pakistan are in place. The ball now lies squarely in Mr Modi's court.

Published in Dawn, November 29th , 2014

Status of language

COUNTLESS languages have come and gone as human societies have developed over the ages, while if current projections are correct, thousands more will be extinct by the end of this century. Grim as it may sound, such is the nature of the beast.

However, this does not mean communities and nations should start accepting the demise of their languages as a fait accompli.

Pakistan is said to be home to around 72 languages, but in keeping with the global trend most of these tongues face an uncertain future. For example, at a recent seminar held in Gilgit, writers called for the preservation of Gilgit-Baltistan's languages.

While the region's major languages such as Shina, Balti and Burushaski are in danger of extinction, some tongues are already in their death throes.

As one speaker from Hunza told the conference, his native language, Domaaki, had only a dozen or so speakers left. One of the main reasons for the dire straits some languages find themselves in is the lack of state patronage extended to them, as well as lack of interest in their preservation on part of institutes of higher learning.

This is despite the fact that the preservation of languages and cultures is mandated by the Constitution. While some efforts are being made by NGOs in parts of Pakistan to protect endangered languages, these clearly need greater support.

Saving languages is important, for as scholars have pointed out, when a language dies so does a culture. Pakistan is a multilingual country; hence greater efforts are needed by state and society to promote linguistic diversity.

Some parents may be reluctant to educate their children in their mother tongue as job prospects are tied to 'languages of power' — English and Urdu in our case. While learning Urdu and English is important to compete nationally and in a globalised world, local languages must not be left behind and can be given a boost if job opportunities in the media, academia and social services are made available to those who know or learn them.

Published in Dawn, November 29th , 2014

Security for citizens

The PTI and PML-N may have become veterans of squaring off against each other and both sides often seem impervious to advice or good sense, but the stakes are, once again, high enough to merit counselling caution and cooperation in Islamabad today.

In this now long-running saga, both sides sometimes appear to forget that politics aside, there is first and foremost a responsibility towards the citizens to ensure their safety and security.

The PTI has a democratic right to protest and has exercised that right to the hilt, occasionally flirting with the boundaries of what lawful protest entails, but it also has a responsibility towards the thousands it brings out onto the streets in support of its anti-government agenda.

Similarly, the PML-N, as the governing party and chief custodian of the democratic project as a result, has a duty to uphold the law and the Constitution and to protect state institutions.

But every single one of the protesters the government will be confronted by is an individual towards whom the state has a fundamental responsibility: to ensure their safety and ensure that any action taken in the name of security is proportionate, necessary and handled professionally.

Much though will depend on the kind of leadership the two sides demonstrate in Islamabad today. On the PTI's side, Imran Khan has it within his power to whip up dangerous passions or to promote strong but peaceful protest.

Over the course of the three months that the PTI leadership has been protesting near parliament every day, the PTI supporters have by and large been peaceful, and where they have not been peaceful, as infamously occurred on Aug 30 and Sept 1, they were roused into violence by the party leadership itself or the latter had been able to quickly quell small-scale violence by rowdy supporters.

Similarly, two individuals on the PML-N side will be very much under the microscope today: Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan, who is in charge of security in the capital, and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, whose word carries great weight and whose prompt intervention can help events from spiralling out of control, if it were to come to that.

The leaderships of both PTI supporters and the civilian-led law enforcement personnel in the capital today will all need to play their part.

And once Nov 30 passes off, peacefully for the PTI and with restraint by the government, what next?

If that is indeed the case — and surely after months of this political impasse, a single protest can be seen off peacefully by both sides — then the focus needs to switch to defusing the slow-burning crisis by addressing the PTI's legitimate demands on electoral matters and

November, 2014

securing a pledge by the PTI that it will end this destabilising phase in the country's politics and oppose the government inside parliament, not on the streets.

Published in Dawn, November 30th, 2014

JUI-F leader's killing

THE assassination of JUI-F's Sindh secretary-general Khalid Mahmood Soomro in the early hours of Saturday once again raises questions about the reach and deadly capabilities of militants in Pakistan.

The politician from Larkana was gunned down by unidentified assailants outside a Sukkur mosque after morning prayers. He was in the city to attend a gathering the night before his murder.

An active leader and former senator, Soomro was a known name in Sindh's politics, especially in the province's northern part.

Read: [JUI-F Sindh secretary general shot dead in Sukkur](#)

His tragic killing raises a pertinent question: if leaders of parties known to have a soft corner for the ideology of Islamist militants — though not for their murderous tactics — can be attacked so brazenly, what must be the level of threat faced by social and political forces that openly condemn militancy?

Though at the time of writing no claims of responsibility had emerged, while the police also did not name suspects, the JUI-F has been attacked on numerous occasions in the past by militants.

In fact, Maulana Fazlur Rahman, the party chief, has himself survived several attacks, including suicide bombings; the last such incident occurred in October at a rally in Quetta.

Also read: [Two killed as JUI-F chief Fazlur Rehman escapes suicide attack in Quetta](#)

Numerous JUI-F leaders and workers have been slain in Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while Soomro was also targeted in the past.

The primary blame must of course go to the state for failing to clamp down on the perpetrators of such violence across Pakistan.

While militants might be on the run, battlefield successes have not really been followed up with active intelligence-gathering in cities to ensure militants have not infiltrated cities and towns.

A thorough probe is required to establish the facts behind the party official's murder and punish the culprits. Having said that, the JUI-F must also take a firm, unambiguous stand against militancy.

Having lost so many activists to acts of terrorism, the party cannot afford to sit on the fence and go light on

November, 2014

militants of all shades, regardless of any ideological affinities it may share with some groups.

Published in Dawn, November 30th , 2014

Golden PTV

IN general, PTV evokes memories of less complicated, quieter, more tolerant and more organised times. On its 50th birth anniversary last Wednesday, the expression of longing for what has undergone a drastic change was far stronger than usual.

Duly the services of PTV, born out of Gen Ayub Khan's desire to influence his subjects, and owned by the state and exploited by the governments, were eulogised.

[Read: 50 years ago today: Pakistan launches first TV channel](#)

Many of the big names that have shone on the PTV screen ever since its inception in Lahore in November 1964 were remembered fondly.

Many others who worked to establish its clout and maintain its following backstage went uncelebrated.

Once again, this led to calls for meticulously documenting the history of PTV while it was still possible, with the help of its pioneers.

From what information is available, clearly, the creative side of PTV has been strong enough for it to be remembered as more than just a tool for government propaganda. The institution has endeared itself to the people in spite of its use as an official mouthpiece.

PTV was able to shape its distinct identity, resisting the temptation to emulate the powerful medium of cinema in the subcontinent. Since that distinction inevitably involved national ideology, those producing for PTV were required to be subtle and disciplined and skilful in executing their work.

The discipline could well have contributed a great deal to establishing brand PTV, manifest in its famed drama as well as its less hailed musical shows which promoted as well as entertained.

Since it served as the most important forum of national integration, tokenism did creep in here and there, and the high standards PTV founders had set were not always easy to maintain; especially in later years when the institution failed to keep pace with the changing times because those who were managing it were unwilling to free it from government controls.

That freedom was — is — essential to enable PTV to compete with the 21st century wave triggered by the private channels' industry, challenging the old-world

November, 2014

television to match their 'risqué' productions or fade away.

There have been some remedies voiced about how PTV can stay relevant, like the one which asks it to shun the standards borrowed from films and build on its own unique legacy.

But much as the talk for such a revival would have the old heads nodding, the future of PTV in the end is tied to liberalisation of its news policy.

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