

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of October, 2015*

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## Enter Russia

WITH Russia now playing an active military role in Syria, it is difficult to say what direction this bloody conflict will take.

On Wednesday, reports emerged that Moscow had conducted its first air strikes inside Syria after Bashar al-Assad had requested Russian military help to fight the self-styled Islamic State.

Expectedly, the reaction from many Western officials has been circumspect; a US-led coalition has also been carrying out anti-IS air strikes for the past year while purposely keeping the Syrian regime out of the loop.

*Know more: [Russian parliament approves anti-IS airstrikes in Syria](#)*

Throughout the Syrian civil war, which has now entered its fifth year, Russia — along with Iran — has been the Assad regime's principal foreign backer as Damascus has fought a brutal campaign against an opposition dominated by extremist outfits, including IS.

At the same time, it is also true that Russia has strategic interests in Syria as it maintains a naval facility at Tartus, giving Moscow access to Mediterranean waters.

Clearly, the Russians appear serious about their anti-IS campaign, as they have recently cemented an intelligence-sharing deal with Iran, Iraq and Syria to target the self-declared caliphate. Russian media has also reported that China is sending 'military advisers' to Syria.

The million-dollar question here is: how will the Western bloc and its allies — including Turkey and the Gulf Arabs — react to Russia's entry into the Syrian theatre?

After all, while the West and its coalition partners oppose IS, they have no love lost for Bashar al-Assad either and publicly advocate regime change in Damascus.

In fact, over the past few days there was clear disagreement over the Syrian question at the UN between Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin: while Mr Putin said the best way to defeat IS was to strengthen Mr Assad's hand, Mr Obama favoured a 'minus-Assad' formula.

While the Syrian regime and the rebels have both indulged in atrocities during the course of the civil war — which has been dragging on since March 2011 — and indeed while Mr Assad is no democrat, is regime change a viable option?

Washington and its allies should study the recent history of Iraq and Libya: while Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qadhafi were brutal dictators, their ouster via external intervention resulted in the virtual collapse of the Iraqi and Libyan states. Nations must have an organic relationship with democracy; it cannot be implanted from abroad.

The way forward in Syria would be for all regional and global powers — under UN aegis and keeping the Syrian government on board — to combine forces to dismantle IS. Once this is achieved, a negotiated settlement to the Syrian conflict should be the goal, bringing the Assad regime and the democratic Syrian opposition to the table to work out a solution.

Already, as per UN figures over 250,000 people have died in this conflict, while over four million have fled abroad. Without a peaceful settlement, the Syrian people’s nightmare will only continue.

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## IMF assessment

THE short statement released by the IMF board following the eighth review of the ongoing Fund programme is better understood for all the things it does not say.

Take as an example the board’s view of the fiscal situation, which has been the subject of much controversy lately within the country.

The board does not say that the fiscal situation has improved, preferring to restrict itself to an anodyne comment that “[t]he authorities’ commitment to strengthening Pakistan’s fiscal position is welcome”. It goes on to add that further steps “remain

key” to delivering on this commitment, laying out the usual recipe of “broadening the tax base and strengthening tax administration”.

*Also read: [IMF announces immediate disbursement of \\$504m to Pakistan](#)*

The inability of the board to note anything more than a “commitment” to strengthening the fiscal framework is what should be noted.

Likewise with the progress on many other fronts. It notes an improvement in the foreign exchange reserves, but says “additional efforts are needed”.

Similarly, on central bank autonomy, the board calls for the “early adoption of pending legislation”, a matter that has been dragging for many years now. Also with the required amendments to the anti-money laundering legislation, which the government had committed would be passed by the end of September, the board notes that it “remains an important policy priority for the authorities”.

The statement refuses to view the controversy surrounding the fiscal numbers declared by the government at the end of June, which is to be expected. But the more detailed review documents that should be released soon would be deficient if they did not tell us more about how the Fund is looking at this affair.

The board has placed its priorities for Pakistan on record; these include power-sector reforms and privatisation. The fact that the

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board said very little about the external sector and the quality of the improvement in the reserves as well as rising external debt is an important gap.

At its core, the Fund's main priority is to ensure Pakistan's creditworthiness before external creditors, but this is an important area of concern domestically, especially given the continuing Eurobond issues this fiscal year, and more should have been said about it beyond "additional efforts are needed to strengthen external buffers".

Does the growing resort to borrowing count as such "additional efforts", or is it in fact weakening the external framework over the medium term? Sadly, we are left to guess for ourselves.

*Published in Dawn October 1st, 2015*

## Law and lawyers

THE law in Pakistan is sometimes far from safe in the hands of lawyers.

A section of the country's legal fraternity — notwithstanding a number of courageous and upright individuals within its midst — has evolved into a formidable pressure group and many of its members have, time and again, thought nothing of flouting even fundamental rights to achieve their objectives.

Their tactics have ranged from threats and coercion to blatant thuggery. Sometimes, aside from regular citizens, their own colleagues are the target of their ire.

*Also read: [Altaf media blackout: Lawyers demand cancellation of Asma Jahangir's license](#)*

At the Lahore High Court on Tuesday, for instance, a group of lawyers protested against Supreme Court advocates Dr Khalid Ranjha and Asma Jahangir for representing the MQM in a case against the media blackout of party chief Altaf Hussain ordered by the LHC last month.

The protesters, who said that the MQM was behind the murder of several lawyers in 2007 during the movement for the restoration of the judiciary, demanded that the lawyers' licences be cancelled.

Defence by legal representation of one's choice is constitutionally guaranteed and considered an essential pillar of the right to fair trial.

For their part, lawyers should be able to represent whomsoever they wish without fear of repercussions on a personal or professional level. Their right to do so, however, is far from sacrosanct.

When it comes to 'crimes against religion', for example, some lawyers themselves harbour contempt for due process.

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Advocate Rashid Rehman was threatened by his own colleagues for defending a blasphemy accused, and was later murdered — the case remains unsolved.

There is also reportedly an unwritten consensus in some local bar associations that if a lawyer is party to a case, no lawyer from that bar — at the risk of severe censure — will represent the opposing side.

In the present instance, Dr Ranjha and Ms Jahangir are defending a basic tenet of democracy — freedom of speech — that everyone, including the MQM, is entitled to, regardless of their politics. The two lawyers should be commended for placing principles above narrow, parochial interests.

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## PM's peace proposal

IT may not quite be a four-point potential solution to the Kashmir dispute that was once mooted under the now retired Gen Pervez Musharraf but Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's proposed four points to stabilise the disputed region are worth considering.

Ahead of the prime minister's address at the 70th UN General Assembly, the Foreign Office had indicated that Mr Sharif would concentrate on the Kashmir issue, though it had not

indicated how it would try and revive global interest to help address the dispute.

*Also read: [PM urges India to pledge not to use force under any circumstances](#)*

After the Ufa debacle, with the Indian government insisting on talking only about terrorism, the Pakistani government changed tack and had begun to once again focus mostly on Kashmir.

The fear, then, was that Pakistan and India were returning to a period of talking past each other instead of talking to each other. Seemingly aware that Pakistan had to offer concrete proposals to tackle Indian intransigence, Mr Sharif and his team have come up with four interesting points that have something for both sides.

The immediate out-of-hand dismissal of the proposal by the Indian government has only underscored that the problem is really the India government's apparent rejection of the very idea of talks with Pakistan.

Prime Minister Sharif's trump card was to call for the formalisation of the 2003 ceasefire agreement that was verbally agreed to and adhered to for the better part of a decade.

Given that the mechanism has already been tried and tested and produced positive results for many years, it is a sound offer.

Furthermore, to make such a call from the podium of the UN General Assembly hall and to request that the United Nations



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Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan step up its verifications suggests that Pakistan really does want to put a stop to the year-long violence along the LoC and the Working Boundary.

While the demilitarisation of the disputed region and the withdrawal of troops from Siachen are perhaps longer-term goals that can only be realised once a full-fledged peace process is resumed, they do articulate a vision for what a normalised region could look like.

The challenge for the Pakistani government will be to carry forward these proposals and press them in other forums.

As the immediate and fierce Indian response indicated, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in no mood to go beyond its talking points of terrorism and attempting to link it to Pakistan.

To push for bilateral normalisation when one side — a side courted by the outside world for economic and diplomatic reasons — is determined to talk only on its own terms is a very hard task indeed.

The problem, as ever, is compounded by the sense that the outside world is somewhat sympathetic to the Indian claim that Pakistan continues to tolerate anti-India, pro-Kashmir jihadists on its soil.

A tension-free region must also be a terrorism-free region. A zero-tolerance policy is still awaited here.

## Pemra's statement

THE state, it seems, would like the media to move in lockstep with its international ties.

Prompted by the government, Pemra has sent an SMS to news channels critical of allegations being levelled on certain programmes that mismanagement by Saudi Arabia was to blame for last month's tragedy at Mina.

The statement said: "They need to be reminded that Article 19 of the Constitution restricts comments that may affect relations with friendly countries."

*Know more: [Pemra warns against criticism of Saudi response to Mina tragedy](#)*

Although no legal action has as yet been threatened in case of non-compliance, it has been made clear unofficially that the matter is so important for the government that those concerned would ignore it at their peril.

Pemra had issued a similar warning to television channels five months ago, when talk shows were holding animated discussions on the Yemen crisis and Pakistan's refusal to send ground troops as part of a Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi uprising in that country.

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Interestingly, the notice on that occasion also mentioned “the electronic media’s contribution towards image-building of nations”.

Contrary to Pemra’s perception, however, “image-building” — whether of nations, institutions or individuals — is not the media’s job, but that of public relations firms.

The duty of the media is to inform the public: in order to do so in as balanced a manner as possible, there must be discussion and debate on the issues at hand. Of course, news channels should ensure that such exchange of views remains temperate and civilised; and one can justifiably argue that Pakistani media does at times need to be reminded of its obligations on this score.

Moreover, freedom of speech is indeed subject to some broad, constitutionally mandated limits — “any reasonable restrictions” as the document describes it — including the one pointed out by the regulatory authority, but public interest and the qualified privilege of fair comment that arises from it should take precedence over considerations about ‘offending’ any country.

After all, the death of nearly 800 pilgrims — the worst disaster to befall the Haj in 25 years — merits calls for a transparent and thorough investigation. If the government cannot bring itself to ask any questions, its move through Pemra to muzzle the media is entirely unreasonable.

On a related note, one could also ask what constitutes a ‘friendly’ nation. For it is difficult to ignore the fact that another

ostensible ally is regularly subjected to vitriol in the media — without any attempt by officialdom to dial down the invective.

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## Champions Trophy

AFTER much suspense and speculation, the Pakistanis have at last been ensured a berth in the 2017 ICC Champions Trophy by virtue of their eighth position in the recent ODI rankings issued by the world body.

At the start of 2015, there were many bumps and obstacles for Pakistan to surmount on its way to securing a place in the high-profile event in England.

The stunning 0-3 loss to Bangladesh had seen them subsequently slipping to ninth spot in world rankings and with the West Indies breathing down their neck, their qualification dream seemed a distant one indeed.

*Also read: [Pakistan’s Champions Trophy berth confirmed in new ICC rankings](#)*

However, Azhar Ali and his men, sensing the gravity of the situation, put their act together to beat Zimbabwe at home and Sri Lanka on its own turf to win back the coveted eighth spot in ICC rankings before the Sept 30 deadline expired.

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Pakistan's gain, though, has proved to be a loss for the West Indies that, for the first time, has failed to make the grade in an ICC event. Once a dominant force in world cricket, the West Indies team is now a struggling bunch.

But while Pakistan can breathe easy for the moment, to languish at a lowly eighth position is still worrisome for pundits of the game who would ideally like to see the country feature among the top five ODI nations.

To fare consistently at the international level, Pakistan will have to improve its game. The batting is still very wobbly and the fielding remains below par, the two areas which have yet again been exposed during the ongoing tour of Zimbabwe.

It is for the coaches and experts to work on the mental strength of the players and to make the team a well-oiled unit by finding the right combination for every contest.

With the competitive England series to follow in a week's time, Pakistan must use the Zimbabwe matches as a launching pad and iron out the rough edges before facing Alistair Cook's formidable army.

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## Regulating INGOs

INTERIOR Minister Nisar Ali Khan had suggested that the new policy to register International Non-Governmental Organisations and regulate their activities would be tough but fair — and on Thursday he announced a set of measures that clearly lived up to the former.

Whether they will be fairly implemented is something that only experience will tell.

The problem with the government's interest in imposing a new regulatory framework on the INGOs was less that the state is not entitled to do so — it clearly is and all entities working with the public should be regulated — but its apparent motives in doing so.

The fiasco over Save the Children, the INGO whose operations were to be shut down for vague official reasons, but whose real sin was believed to have been an alleged link to Dr Shakeel Afridi, had suggested that the real purpose behind the new regulations was to be able to circumscribe any activities of INGOs that the security establishment was not comfortable with.

*Also read: [Over two dozen INGOs access online registration site](#)*

Consider that the interior minister has now stipulated that INGOs will not indulge in money laundering, terror financing, weapons smuggling, anti-state activities or maintain links with proscribed organisations. If any of that has indeed been a problem in the past, it would be a very serious violation.

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The right course of action would be to publicly proceed against such organisations for violating the law and bring it to the attention of the global community of INGOs. But there has been no evidence provided by the government of any such activity.

Instead, there have been allusions to INGOs operating outside their official remit and in areas that are allegedly sensitive. In the real world, that is often code for working with vulnerable communities in areas that are affected by the kind of militancy and violence that the state considers a challenge.

The problem is that areas hit by violence and militancy are often precisely the type of places where vulnerable populations reside — and that is often the very purpose of INGOs: to reach people that the state is unable to help or unwilling to prioritise assistance towards.

Ultimately, for true security in a multidimensional sense, there must be a balance between people-centric security and a militarised version of it. Not only do INGOs often provide valuable assistance to the most vulnerable people, they also act as a bridge to the international community.

Pakistan needs to engage with the outside world rather than cut itself off from it. In some cases, the new regulations turn on its head the real security dilemma: it is INGOs and their international staff that are often at threat from extremist elements in society here.

In treating INGOs with such suspicion while disregarding their real security issue, the government will make it even more

difficult for them to operate in this climate. Common sense and compassion are needed to guide policy.

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## UAE labour reform

MILLIONS of migrant workers from South Asia, including Pakistan, work on construction sites and in other sectors of Gulf sheikhdoms in order to support their families.

Yet, these migrant workers lead less than ideal lives and are often subjected to exploitation by local employers, and have few options for reporting abuse. However, as reported recently, the United Arab Emirates has taken steps that — if implemented in earnest — may improve the conditions for foreign workers.

*Also read: [UAE unveils migrant labour reforms](#)*

These changes, due to take effect from Jan 1, would make job terms and contracts more transparent, while also providing options for breaking contracts and changing employers.

Across most of the Gulf, foreign workers are employed under the kafala system; in many instances, this virtually makes them the property of their employers — with hardly any rights and widespread chances of abuse. Hopefully, the changes proposed

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by the UAE authorities will be adopted in letter and spirit; other Gulf states should also attempt similar progressive changes to improve conditions for their foreign workers.

In actuality, what is needed is a change of mindset in these states; instead of being treated like chattel, foreign workers must be given respect and due rights, in accordance with international labour conventions.

Organisations such as the International Trade Union Confederation have been highly critical of the Gulf states' attitudes towards foreign workers. In the UAE, working conditions have at times deteriorated so much that labourers have taken to the streets — an unusual and a brave move as protest is not tolerated in the Gulf.

Payment of wages can be delayed while living conditions for blue-collar workers are quite appalling. Living far from home and in deplorable conditions, it is easy to understand how workers' patience can boil over. Qatar has also been criticised as reportedly hundreds of migrant workers have died over the past few years as the sheikhdom experiences a building boom in preparation for the 2022 football World Cup.

Thanks largely to their wealth by way of the petrodollar, the Gulf states seek everything that defines the modern world: skyscrapers, cavernous malls, state-of-the-art airports and all the other trappings of modernity.

Yet they must realise that along with the infrastructure they seek to replicate, they should also consider the rights most Western states have given to working people. It is about time that the men

who toiled to build the modern Gulf metropolises are given their due.

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## Rangers' hour

GIVEN its vast reach, radio has often been the most practical means of connecting with the people. A certain mullah even became a cult personality in Swat some years ago on the strength of his radio broadcasts.

*Also read: [Radio show Rangers Hour begins today](#)*

But while religious figures frequently use the airwaves to increase the size of their flock, it is not often that one hears of a paramilitary force taking to that medium to communicate with citizens. But then, nothing is beyond the energetic custodians of the law in Karachi, the Pakistan Rangers Sindh.

Senior officials of the force are set to be on air twice a day, five days a week on an FM radio show called Rangers' Hour to engage with residents of the city who can call in with suggestions or to lodge complaints.

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Four years ago, the Rangers had set up a helpline for citizens but this is the first time they are venturing into such a mode of interaction.

Governance, like nature, abhors a vacuum. And it is in a vacuum of governance that the Rangers have expanded their footprint. When the Karachi operation began in September 2013, the federal paramilitary force had a clear-cut mandate — to purge the metropolis of terrorists holding its citizenry hostage.

Over time, however, the force broadened its ambit — with the overt support of the military — to tackle militant wings of political parties as well as white-collar crime, thereby stepping on some very sensitive toes in the provincial government and the opposition.

Fierce allegations ensued from the affected quarters that the Rangers were exceeding their authority and “violating provincial autonomy”.

Sadly, the sound and fury was largely about self-preservation, and many citizens of Pakistan’s largest city — witness to the brazen loot and plunder of its resources by those who should have been its custodians — are likely to resoundingly welcome the paramilitary’s foray into ‘solving’ their problems, with nary a thought for the decay of civil institutions that lies therein. It seems as if every day is Rangers’ day in Karachi.

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## Dossiers on India

FOR many years, the Pakistani state has alleged — sometimes credibly, sometimes seemingly less so — that India is involved in stoking violence and terrorism inside Pakistan. Of particular concern have been Balochistan over the last decade, Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for several years now, and Karachi for at least a couple of decades. Never before, however, has the state here tried to formally substantiate its allegations. That changed this week with the handover to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s office of three dossiers containing evidence of Indian involvement in Karachi, Balochistan and Fata. The dossiers were originally to be handed over to Indian officials, but after the cancellation of the NSA talks and with no meeting transpiring on the sidelines of the UNGA, the Pakistani government appears to have decided to take up the matter with the world body itself.

It is hoped, especially since the dossiers are to form the basis of a renewed push by Pakistan to internationalise its troubles and disputes with India, that there is indeed substantive and serious evidence contained in the documents. While the outside world, and global powers in particular, have been courting the Indian market, and India has been ramping up its diplomatic ties with the world, the fact is that as a nuclear region, potential conflict between India and Pakistan is a continuing worry for the global community. As such, bringing to light evidence of Indian attempts to destabilise Pakistan, a country already wracked by many hues of militant violence, could possibly galvanise international attention towards the continuing and dangerous tensions in this region. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s

policy of effectively not talking to Pakistan is perhaps as much a danger today as the threat posed by non-state actors — when the state itself closes the door on dialogue, all manner of hawkish and non-state elements in both countries tend to get mobilised.

Fortunately, the handover of the dossiers has not led the Pakistani government to also shut the door on dialogue. As Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz reiterated, his government prefers to address all issues through dialogue. But what last week's events — be it the prime minister's meetings with world leaders; the four points mooted by him in his UNGA address; or the dossier-related actions — do not amount to is a coherent plan for any kind of forward movement. If anything, the petulant reaction of the Indian government to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's four points suggests that bilateral tensions are unlikely to subside or dissipate anytime soon. Perhaps, though, in the meantime, the Pakistani side can work on bringing the various institutional actors on the same page when it comes to its India policy. The gap between the approaches of the civilian government and the military establishment is noticeable — and wholly unwelcome.

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## Throwing it away?

THE purpose behind privatisation, we have always been told, is that the state should not be in the business of running commercial enterprises. When the state does so not only does the enterprise run inefficiently, it also incurs tremendous costs in the form of subsidies and miscellaneous liquidity injections — costs that ultimately place an unbearable burden on a fiscally strapped government. This was the thinking behind privatisation, and in the name of this belief, successive governments have been selling state-run enterprises for almost a quarter of a century now. The process stalled when the Supreme Court intervened to halt the sale of Pakistan Steel Mill in a famous judgement 10 years ago, and all we have seen since then are divestment of shares in a few enterprises.

For better or for worse, the process is supposed to begin anew with a series of privatisations scheduled for this year in the power sector, and most importantly, a renewed commitment from the government to sell Pakistan Steel. However, an odd proposal has come up, and strangely enough, it is being entertained. The decision by the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation to offer the beleaguered steel mill to the Sindh government violates every tenet of the philosophy that lies behind privatisation. Does the Sindh government have a good track record of running commercial enterprises, or steel mills? Does it have the capacity to turn the enterprise around? All along we have been told that privatisation is not about jettisoning state assets simply to relieve government expenses, it is also about finding a credible buyer who will not strip the entity of its assets but will make the necessary investments to return it to

profitability. It is a little perplexing how the cabinet committee decided that the Sindh government makes for a credible investor given its image and the absence of a track record in running manufacturing enterprises. The deal is likely to inject new life into the impression that the current spate of privatisations scheduled for the year has motivations beyond the original philosophy. In order for this deal to be transparent and credible, the government needs to explain how the provincial government of Sindh is better suited to run the steel mill than the federal government, what sort of a turnaround plan exists, and whether or not the province possesses the fiscal strength to make the investments necessary for the process.

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## Musharraf's talk

IT seems that our infatuation with 'saviours' in uniform remains unwavering, even after the uniform has long been set aside. So it is with retired Gen Pervez Musharraf who has been holding forth on several forums and, in the process, burnishing the argument for the military's apparently 'reluctant-but-necessary' foray into politics. Delivering a talk in Karachi titled 'Pakistan's past, present and future', the former president spoke of how during his own tenure he had refrained from imposing martial law and instead introduced a civilian-run system watched over by the military so that civilians could be prodded to deliver; "there are no angels in Pakistan," he said.

It is regrettable that our military has yet to realise that its hand on the wheel, both overt and otherwise, can only take the ship of state off-course. Each khaki intervention — invariably on the pretext of 'saving the country' — has progressively undermined political institutions to a point where civilian misrule has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the denunciation of the democratic system a national pastime. The unvarnished truth is that democracy has never been allowed to take root in this country; elections have been manipulated and governments destabilised; and many of the so-called political mafias have flourished with the encouragement of the establishment that has used them for its own cynical purposes. There are indeed no 'angels' in this country, as Mr Musharraf pointed out — but that is not only true of the civilians. At the same time, it must be said that the political class has contributed in full measure to its own degradation by its flagrant disregard for the needs and aspirations of the people. Moreover, the judiciary — the upholders of the law and Constitution — has more often than not through Pakistan's history, given legal cover to interruptions in the democratic process instead of strengthening its institutional underpinnings. Lastly, the media — divided and corporatised — has also taken the path of least resistance instead of exploring the long-term, corrosive effects of military 'oversight'.

*Published in Dawn, October 4th, 2015*



## Constitutional courts

WITH the Senate set to begin a new session today, a relatively old issue is likely to come on the agenda again: the establishment of a constitutional court to sit alongside the Supreme Court and to deal specifically with matters of constitutional interpretation, as envisaged under the Charter of Democracy.

The historic 2006 agreement between the PPP and PML-N mooted the idea of a constitutional court in response to what was politically perceived to be a problem with the superior judiciary: under military dictatorships, the superior judiciary tended to validate distortions to the constitutional scheme of things.

The CoD purported to address that problem by recommending that for a six-year period, “A Federal Constitutional Court will be set up to resolve constitutional issues, giving equal representation to each of the federating units”.

With the regular Supreme Court left to deal with so-called regular criminal and civil cases, judges nominated to the constitutional court by parliament were to work on removing the distortions in the Constitution and implementing its federal character, which envisaged a great deal of autonomy for the provinces, unlike the more centralised structure introduced by Gen Pervez Musharraf and previous military dictators.

A constitutional court was always going to be an awkward fit for a system rooted in common law, which does not easily recognise the difference between constitutional matters and ‘regular’ criminal and civil cases.

In truth, the idea of a constitutional court itself had a hint of political expediency to it — an ad hoc way of dealing with lopsided institutional structures that kept civilian politicians at a disadvantage.

The PPP, which is again pushing for the issue to be brought back on the political agenda, also revived the idea of a constitutional court when it was struggling with the hyper-activism of the Iftikhar Chaudhry-led Supreme Court.

The PML-N is now apparently opposed to the idea of creating a constitutional court. What these partisan manoeuvrings overlook though are two things. One, the charter of democracy, while implemented to a great extent, still has important parts of it that remain to be operationalised. In particular, accountability and oversight of military-run institutions have been stillborn.

Two, for a parliament that has sanctioned military courts because the ordinary criminal justice system was deemed too flawed to deal with terrorism-related issues, there remains a shocking lack of parliamentary interest in reforming the criminal justice system.

The political energy that may be about to be directed at supporting or opposing the creation of a constitutional court would surely be better spent focused on basic judicial reforms.

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## Bias in textbooks

TO create a more tolerant and inclusive society, it is essential that textbooks contain lessons that foster a spirit of unity rather than fuel divisions.

However, as experts pointed out at a seminar on the curriculum held in Islamabad recently, textbooks of both public and private educational institutions in Pakistan contain material that promotes prejudice.

As one participant of the programme put it, our books did not reflect “love, respect or plurality”, and highlighted divisions instead.

There is, of course, much merit in what the academics highlighted, as Pakistan was a relatively more tolerant place several decades ago than it is today. While the rise of and the free rein given to extremist religious groups in the country has had a role to play in making society less tolerant, the state is largely to blame for promoting a narrow, exclusivist ideology through textbooks.

For instance, it is often pointed out that Pakistan Studies lessons can be problematic in their narrative of the Pakistan Movement; in many cases Hindus are demonised as a community in our textbooks while describing the background of Partition.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa administration — under the previous Awami National Party government — tried, for example, to interpret the Pakistan Movement in a more progressive and less

exclusivist manner. Yet these efforts were reversed when the PTI came to power in 2013, reportedly at the behest of the Jamaat-i-Islami, the party’s coalition partner in the province.

Another issue of concern is that of making non-Muslim students study Islamic material, especially in primary classes.

While Pakistan is a Muslim-majority state, it also has people of other faiths living within its borders, which is why it is unfair to make non-Muslim students memorise Islamic prayers or learn the majority population’s religious rituals.

Perhaps the key to reforming the system and inculcating more tolerant values in our textbooks lies with the provinces, as they have the power to interpret the curriculum.

Textbooks must be purged of all material that promotes hate against any religion, sect or nation and the goal must be to impart lessons that will aid the intellectual growth of students, not make them merely regurgitate ideological slogans.

Moreover, textbook-writing should be the domain purely of subject specialists and must be free from political meddling.

There is much that is wrong with our education system; one essential area that can help set it right is to promote a progressive curriculum that favours peace over bigotry.

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## NSS returns

INFLATION may be on a sustained downward trend and interest rates are being cut as a result, but cutting the returns on national savings schemes should be avoided.

The government has already slashed the returns on many NSS instruments, although thus far the reductions are marginal in size.

Everybody knows NSS instruments are used by the pensioners and others in their old age who have no other source of income, and expecting them to take a cut in their standard of living because the discount rate is being slashed or CPI inflation is coming down is unfair.

Neither of these economic indicators have much bearing on their lives, which is squeezed enough as it is with no other reliable savings instruments available on the market.

By squeezing out all avenues to reliable investment of their savings, the government basically creates an environment that forces small savers into the hands of speculative sharks, like stock brokers and property developers.

With few if any choices for stable returns, retirees and pensioners are more likely to be tempted by the speculative opportunities offered in these sectors.

This not only exposes them and their nest egg to dangers they are not equipped to understand, it also results in a wasteful deployment of the country's investible resources.

The voracious appetite for informal pyramid schemes, for example, stems from this paucity of options for reliable savings. An economy that forces its pensioners, widows and older generation more generally into the hands of speculative sharks is not one that we should aim to build.

Already the amounts being placed in NSS have been dropping precipitously since November of last year, indicating that a large flight from stable savings instruments has occurred.

Other savings instruments have had withholding taxes imposed upon them. The government should find other avenues to stabilise its fiscal accounts rather than targeting the largely voiceless community of elders that most needs these instruments to live their lives with dignity and some modicum of comfort.

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## America's flawed military approach

The shocking aerial bombing of a hospital run by Médecins Sans Frontières in Kunduz, Afghanistan, by US forces has bloodily underlined several problems with the American military approach in the region and the waging of counter-insurgencies generally.

To begin with, the horror of what was inflicted on the MSF-run hospital has been compounded by the reluctance of American officials to immediately and clearly acknowledge that, no matter what the circumstances, it is simply unacceptable for its forces to bomb a hospital.

*Know more: [US planes bomb Kunduz hospital; 19 killed](#)*

Worse yet, there have been shameful indirect suggestions that the bombing while regrettable may have been justified in the heat of the battle because Afghan Taliban fighters had either sought cover inside the hospital premises or were continuing to attack US and Afghan forces from inside the hospital.

Kunduz, it should be emphasised, had already fallen last week to the Afghan Taliban in a spectacular collapse — it stretches credibility to argue that events in and around the MSF hospital on Saturday were somehow pivotal to the retaking of Kunduz or the defeat of the Taliban.

However, the American refusal to condemn the incident and try and shield its military from strident criticism is a regrettably familiar reaction. Be it the night raids inside Afghanistan that former president Hamid Karzai so fiercely opposed or drone strikes in Fata that the US government pretended never killed civilians or even extraordinary events like the Salala incident in Mohmand Agency in 2011, apologies are usually late or never delivered when locals are killed.

The reaction tends to be very different when Americans, such as the kidnapped Warren Weinstein, are accidentally killed by US military operations.

True, the US military does try and avoid or minimise civilian casualties, unlike the militants and insurgents, who often deliberately target civilians. But there is also a clearly different and very necessary burden on any state that is fighting an insurgency — to win, the state must be seen to hold itself to higher standards of behaviour and discipline than the insurgents and militants.

The whole point to the US military operations in Kunduz — nine months after combat operations were to have officially ended — was to try and help the Afghan state reassert its legitimate control of the city. That aim has surely been seriously undermined by the hospital bombing.

Inadequate as the initial US response has been, there are lessons that others can draw from the experience. Clearly, no matter how bad the news, it is important that it be made public rather than buried. Information aids accountability and can help improve tactics. Contrast the widespread coverage of the Kunduz disaster

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with the virtual media blackout of the Pakistani military operations in Fata, especially Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan Agency. The state claims of sustained progress and non-existent civilian casualties should be weighed against the reality that the operation still continues 15 months on.

*Published in Dawn, October 6th, 2015*

## Raiding hospitals

IT is becoming increasingly common, at least in the city of Karachi, to hear of law-enforcement agencies raiding hospitals and detaining doctors and staff.

These raids are often carried out because suspected militants are thought to be receiving treatment at the hospital; in other cases, the hospital administration is believed to be involved in corruption.

A series of raids over the last few days at a number of private hospitals in the city saw suspected militants being taken into custody; in at least one case, a doctor and some members of the hospital staff were also detained, allegedly for administering medical treatment to militants.

Take a look: [Doctor, wounded militants held in raids on three Karachi hospitals](#)

In the most recent of such raids, a patient nabbed from a hospital in Karachi's Bahadurabad locality reportedly gave police information that led to the detention of suspects from other locations; the law enforcers were also told that around 100 Taliban fighters wounded in the tribal areas were being treated in various health facilities in the city.

In this particular case, police claimed to be acting on a tip from intelligence agencies that some of the staff from the hospital in question was extending treatment to militant fighters without alerting the authorities that they were required to do.

In response, police say that they are preparing a set of recommendations on administering medical treatment to patients whose injuries suggest they may be linked to militant activity.

This is very sensitive ground, and the agencies preparing these recommendations must take due care to ensure that they do not put doctors and other medical practitioners in a position where they have to violate one of the central pillars and the ethical foundations of the medical profession: their obligation to extend treatment to anyone who seeks it.

Apprehending suspected militants when they try to flee or seek treatment for injuries is a necessary part of the ongoing fight against terrorism, but doctors must not be forced into a position where they have to judge the patient first before extending medical help.

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Such a dilemma also creates a perverse incentive for doctors to look for reasons to deny treatment on suspicion that the patient may be linked to militant activity.

The fight against terrorism and extremism must continue, and in times to come it will undoubtedly take us deeper into uncharted terrain. And yet, the ethical foundations of other professions, especially medicine, must be respected in the course of carrying on this fight.

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## PIA deadlock

ALTHOUGH talks between the PIA pilots' union Palpa and the aviation division to resolve the dispute between the flag carrier's pilots and management failed to achieve a breakthrough on Monday, it is hoped that the inconvenience passengers have faced over the past several days does not continue.

Since Thursday, due to the labour dispute and the pilots' decision to go 'by the book', dozens of flights have either been cancelled, delayed or rerouted, though the Haj operation has remained largely unaffected.

Know more: [CCP takes notice of increase in air fares](#)

Palpa wants numerous issues resolved, including the implementation of an agreement reached some years ago, at the same time blaming the current debacle on the airline administration's "mismanagement". Reports on Monday indicated that aviation officials have instructed the pilots to continue with work and conduct negotiations without preconditions.

A disturbing corollary of the PIA slowdown has been the fact that private airlines have reportedly jacked up their fares exorbitantly knowing well that passengers have few other options. It is also true that many of the flights affected by the pilots' go-slow programme were to smaller stations not served by private carriers.

Taking industrial action is the right of workers if all options fail. However, in critical sectors — such as aviation — care must be taken so that this option is exercised as a last resort, mainly because the cancelled and delayed flights hurt the common flyer the most. As it is, the flag carrier is not exactly delivering a stellar performance. Such disruptions in the normal operations hurt its reputation even more.

The state must consider the just demands of the pilots' union, while Palpa must also keep ground realities and the airline's financial health in mind. PIA is suffering from numerous ills, yet the key to its revival lies in the basics: delivering on-time, affordable service with a focus on customer satisfaction.

As for the private carriers that increased fares astronomically, the aviation regulator needs to look into the matter to ensure airlines do not fleece passengers in times of crises.

## Power-sector transparency

THE aftermath of two events has underscored the dire need for more transparency in the power sector.

One is the noise created around the Nandipur project, and the second is the annual report of Nepra, the power regulator.

The Nandipur project was supposed to undergo a comprehensive and impartial probe; but according to the latest reports, the government has not been able to find anyone willing to head a committee inquiring into the matter.

A separate inquiry committee initiated by Nepra has also been questioned by the head of the project itself, while a private-sector auditor has refused to conduct a technical audit, saying its expertise lies only in financial matters.

*Also read: [Nepra sticks to report on power sector deficiencies](#)*

So we have a situation where the project is now undergoing two separate financial audits, one by the Auditor General of Pakistan and the other by a private-sector company — however, no technical parameters will be scrutinised.

Nepra's annual report, on the other hand, raised important technical issues in the power sector, including overbilling through time-of-use meters, which are used by a very small number of consumers in any event, as well as questions

regarding the choice of power plant to operate given the variable levels of their efficiency.

The water and power ministry has questioned Nepra's capacity to draw the conclusions it has in the annual report. As if to underline the ministry's objections, Nepra has reportedly refused to undertake a technical audit of a number of power plants. It says that it does not have the mandate to perform such an exercise.

The ministry, in a separate request, had asked the regulator to undertake an energy cost audit of various power producers to determine which ones were operating at their stated level of efficiency, and therefore what adjustments might be necessary to their tariffs.

The all-round failure of independent bodies, whether government, semi-government, independently constituted inquiry commissions or private-sector companies, to probe various issues in the country's power generation shows the sheer opacity under which the entire power sector operates.

Transparency is needed in every area of the sector, from technical audits of generation to transmission and distribution issues, to billing and recoveries, so that a reliable picture can be built of the state of affairs within the sector.

But regrettably, given the present circumstances, the events of the past few weeks show that such a picture is totally absent today.

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The power sector is far too large an entity to be centrally controlled by a couple of ministers and the bureaucracy.

It needs institutional reforms that create the right incentives to maximise efficiency and minimise costs.

Strengthening the regulator and increasing the role of private-sector professionals in the running of the sector as a whole are crucial ingredients of such a reform effort, but sadly, they appear to be a distant dream at the moment.

*Published in Dawn, October 7th, 2015*

## A vulnerable minority

PERSECUTION can be overt at times, subtle and insidious at others; and most people would likely agree that it is an ugly, despicable thing. However, there is one minority community in Pakistan — the Ahmadis — against whom persecution of both kinds not only exists but is celebrated as a virtue by sections of the majority.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan held a consultative meeting with members of the community on Sunday to explore the issue and perhaps, in the process, attempt to hold up a mirror to society's unconscionable collusion in discrimination against them.

*Also read: [Eleven members of Ahmadi minority killed in 2014: report](#)*

On the occasion, examples were cited from various aspects of life, including educational institutions and the workplace, where they are subjected to humiliation and harassment, as well as in the media — where hate speech against them may have even incited the murder of some members of the community.

The HRCP panelists recounted Pakistan's legislative history whereby adherents of the minority faith were declared non-Muslim through a constitutional amendment in 1974; that was later followed by Gen Ziaul Haq making it a punishable offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslim, to refer to their call to prayer as 'azan' or their places of worship as 'masjid'.

The HRCP deserves to be commended for highlighting an issue that the conscience of society has long buried. Years of institutionalised discrimination against the Ahmadi community and its persistent vilification have led to a situation where even the mass murder of its members in Lahore on May 28, 2010 failed to elicit the kind of public outrage that such carnage should have merited — and has done so in the case of similar attacks on adherents of other minority faiths.

But then, why should one be surprised at such callous indifference when the state, duty-bound to protect the fundamental rights of all its citizens, has left the community's right to religious freedom entirely at the mercy of what the majority considers acceptable?



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This carte blanche is best reflected in Section 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which stipulates that an Ahmadi is liable to sanctions if he “in any manner whatsoever outrages the religious feelings of Muslims”: such an open-ended law cannot promote the cause of justice.

Now that there is a realisation that religious intolerance has spawned many of the problems that Pakistan is grappling with today, there must be a resolve to eliminate it in all its forms — without exception.

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## It's just not cricket

Mr Sartaj Aziz's pronouncement on cricketing ties between Pakistan and India tells us that it is not always useful to mix politics with sport.

The adviser to the prime minister on foreign affairs and national security says there can be no cricket between the two countries under the current circumstances.

His words are a troubling sign of just how long it could take for the two countries to prepare the ground for even a tentative exchange. And if anyone in recent times had high hopes of cricket playing its customary and often celebrated role of bridging the gap, these have been effectively dashed by those

who make or implement national policies in New Delhi and Islamabad.

*Also read: [Sartaj Aziz rules out possibility of cricket series with India](#)*

This is a tangle beyond the reach of the game to sort out, the recent flurry of statements predicting no-play for an unforeseen period of time between the two sides.

If anything, it appears that both sides are using cricket as a metaphor to convey just how determined they are to stay at a distance from and hostile to one another.

Although there were long years of no matches between the two sides, Pakistan and India have ‘clashed’ on the cricket ground in the worst of times. In the period beginning the late 1970s, the two countries found ways to play with each other even when some patriots would rather have them fight it out on the borders.

Thus, the inability of Delhi and Islamabad — represented as they are by the BCCI and PCB — to play today demonstrates just how bad the relationship is.

It would be pointless to wish for cricket to be seen as an independent entity that can chart its own course away from the trajectory of Pakistan-India ties that is determined by the growing unease between the two neighbours at the political level.

It is unfortunate how politics affects sporting ties. But that is the way it is. As Mr Aziz remarked, some thawing at the political level is absolutely necessary before cricket can take over.

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## When a nation came together

Ten years have elapsed since the Kashmir earthquake of 2005. The temblor jolted this country into the realisation that nature's wrath knows no boundaries.

The death toll almost touched 75,000 according to the official count and more than 86,000 according to unofficial figures.

It was one of those moments when most Pakistanis would remember what they were doing when they first heard of, or experienced, the quake. Over the next few days, the news filtered in slowly of the sheer scale of the devastation.

Many of us remember the dramatic appeal from the United Nations for a relief effort on the magnitude of the Berlin airlift, the riots around aid distribution points in the most affected areas and the traffic jams on the roads as citizens from across the country mobilised to rush food and other supplies to the quake-hit spots.

It would be well worth it to remember a few other things too. First and foremost is the warning from the world's leading geologists who study this region that this earthquake "may not

have released more than one-tenth of the cumulative elastic energy that has developed since the previous great earthquake in the region in 1555".

There are more to come — either tomorrow or 50 years from now. With a clear warning that more such events will occur in the decades to come, the biggest lesson from the 2005 destruction is that preparedness is key. Fortunately for us, preparing for earthquakes is not as difficult or complicated as it is for other types of natural disasters such as floods.

At the top of the list are building codes to ensure that dwellings and other structures can withstand the shock of a temblor. In the two cities at either end of the epicentre of the 2005 earthquake, hardly any concrete structures survived; many of those that did were rendered unusable.

Ten years after the catastrophic event, there is a patchy track record of implementing earthquake-resistant building codes. The Development Authority of Muzaffarabad, for example, has certainly promulgated new codes and state buildings have adhered to them, but many private dwellings continue to violate these. The same is true in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

*Also read: [Lessons from Nepal for Kashmir](#)*

The state played a largely laudable role in the rehabilitation of the affected areas, even though important gaps between the promises made at the time and what was eventually delivered persist to this day.

Out of a total of Rs207bn that were pledged for reconstruction, about Rs140bn were eventually disbursed. The job was gargantuan, but, by and large, the government of the time rose to the occasion. Whatever the general opinion of his rule may be, Gen Musharraf provided a sturdy guiding hand when the staggering scale of the crisis fuelled a sense of panic in the country.

However, less than five years later, the floods of 2010 would prove that no lasting lessons were learned in how to manage natural disasters.

The earthquake reminded us of our insignificance compared to the forces of nature that envelop our lives so completely. But the aftermath, which brought countless tears to countless eyes, brought out the best in each of us as people scrambled to contribute in any way they could.

Doctors trekked across dangerous mud slopes to reach affected communities while journalists dropped their pens and joined in the search for survivors under the rubble. Edhi volunteers cut a trail of sheer bravery as they crossed impassable terrain with large convoys of relief goods, being the first to arrive in many locations.

At relief collection points in the cities, people reported that even beggars were coming forward to share their meagre takings — even if much of the effort may have been hasty and ramshackle, and there were stories of how some made money off the misery of others.

The help that Pakistan received from the world community was also significant. But 10 years on, let's not forget how the people of Pakistan pulled together to face a terrible calamity, registering for generations to come that the bonds of common empathy that bind them to each other are alive and well — and stronger than any force of nature, and certainly stronger than any politics or any ideology that seeks to tear the people apart.

*Published in Dawn, October 8th, 2015*

## Qadri judgement

MUMTAZ Qadri is an unrepentant murderer who killed Salmaan Taseer, then governor of Punjab, in cold blood for the vilest of reasons.

The Supreme Court has done the right and brave thing by upholding Mr Qadri's murder conviction — and reinstating his conviction under anti-terrorism laws that the Islamabad High Court had wrongly set aside.

Four and a half years on from one of the most shocking events in this country's history, justice has been done and been seen to be done.

Now, Qadri should live out the rest of his natural life in a prison — and jail authorities should take measures to ensure that the special treatment allegedly afforded to him no longer continues. This paper is opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances and Mumtaz Qadri is no exception.

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It is enough punishment for an individual to spend the rest of his life in prison, cut off from the rest of society; there are no cogent reasons for why the state should take an individual's life.

In truth, there should never have been any doubt about Qadri's conviction. The very fact that there were doubts points to the political and social realities on the margins of the country today.

The Islamabad High Court judgement upholding Qadri's murder conviction, but setting aside the anti-terror conviction exemplified the problems surrounding the case.

The Punjab governor was murdered to try and suppress for all time any debate about the controversial applications of the country's blasphemy laws. In assassinating Salmaan Taseer, the murderer, Mumtaz Qadri, was attempting to intimidate and silence the country itself.

The assassination was the very definition of terrorism — a national political motive rooted in a very perverse understanding of religion. Had the so-called Qadri exception that the Islamabad High Court had seemingly endorsed been allowed to stand, defence teams around the country would have invoked them in the case of sectarian attacks and the murder of non-Muslims.

The Supreme Court has corrected that potential historic wrong and it is hoped the detailed judgement will elucidate on how and why what Qadri did constituted terrorism.

To truly honour Salmaan Taseer's memory, however, the country's blasphemy laws need to be revisited. No rational

individual can suggest that the law is not seriously abused and has a flawed construction when it comes to blasphemy.

Disproportionately, the blasphemy laws have been invoked against the poorest in society and among non-Muslims — a negation of the constitutional equality guaranteed to all individuals. But the effects go deeper.

Today, the mere allegation of blasphemy can result in instant death at the hands of a charged mob.

A distorted set of laws has allowed extremist elements to intimidate and repress an entire society. That must not be allowed to continue.

Perhaps the next step to recovering the nation could be to revisit the conviction of Aasia Bibi.

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## Ministers' criticism

THE remarks by two federal ministers at a seminar reveal a flustered state of mind. The minister for water and power lashed out at the Planning Commission and the power sector regulator Nepra.

He described the former as “detrimental to the national interest” and said it “should cease to exist” if problems of the country are to be solved. He then went on to criticise Nepra, saying it was “not a good regulator” because it had failed to ensure that K-Electric met its performance standards.

He also had words for the Nepra chairman, suggesting the government may have made a mistake in appointing him to the key post. The petroleum minister joined in the criticism and even dragged Ogra, the oil and gas regulator, into the whole affair.

There are a number of things we can say about this rather odd attitude. First, the episode reveals that the respective ministers are getting increasingly anxious about the pace of progress in their respective domains, and appear to be externalising their difficulties by diverting blame to other agencies, like the Planning Commission and the regulators.

Such a posture casts their own ministries and performance in a negative light and creates the impression of a government that is increasingly feeling cornered as it struggles to build a track record by which to be remembered.

The government is now past the midpoint mark of its term, and if key ministers of the cabinet are venting their frustration on other government departments, it only underlines the paucity of progress they have to show for their own time in power.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the quality of the ideas presented by both the ministers leaves much to be desired.

The Planning Commission lost its position as a central pillar in the economic management of the country in the 1970s, and the finance ministry emerged as the focal point of economic decision-making in the 1980s, under the leadership of Ghulam Ishaq Khan.

One consequence of this shift in power from the Planning Commission to the finance ministry has been the loss of a long- or medium-term horizon for decision-making, with economic policy now largely focused on firefighting to meet annual targets.

Another consequence has been the entry of politics into economic management, something that this government and its predecessor have both acknowledged to be a serious problem.

And if K-Electric has failed to reach performance standards, one obvious question arises for the ministry of water and power that has two seats on the board of the company to which it has appointed mid-level officers with a poor track record of attendance at board meetings.

How well has the ministry itself exercised the powers it has to steer K-Electric towards improving its performance? Both ministers, it seems, could benefit from some serious introspection.

*Published in Dawn, October 9th, 2015*

## ‘Unknown Rangers’ ads

IT may be a case of “unknown” Rangers but, to borrow a phrase from a memorable statement once uttered by an American politician, there are also aspects of it that are “known knowns” — facts people are aware of (but which the Rangers would rather they were not).

However, the furore over the advertisements placed by some Sindh Police officials that appeared in various newspapers on Tuesday, each with a picture of an ostensibly missing person and alleging that “unknown Rangers” had picked them up, threatens to overshadow some very real concerns.

But first, to the appropriateness of the means whereby the information was disclosed: the Rangers’ ire at what they perceive to be an effort to malign them is justified to an extent. It is virtually unheard of for one law-enforcement agency to take such a step at an official level that undermines the credibility of another.

*Take a look: [Row over ad about ‘unknown Rangers’](#)*

The move appears even more inexplicable given that the police and Rangers have been leading a joint operation since September 2013 to crack down on criminal/terrorist elements in Karachi, an operation that has led to an appreciable decline in heinous crimes.

There could, therefore, be some merit in the suspicion that this is an attempt to damage the working relationship between the two forces by quarters feeling threatened by the operation.

Nevertheless, while the intention behind placing the advertisements may certainly be questionable, it has thrown the spotlight on an issue that demands redressal.

There are persistent reports of people being arrested and detained by law-enforcement agencies without presenting them in court within 24 hours as required by the law. In a number of instances, individuals have been in custody for a month or even longer without their families having any intimation as to their whereabouts or well-being.

The law-enforcement authorities’ actions are particularly egregious because there is legislation giving them powers of detention for up to 90 days at their discretion, albeit after notifying the court. But in these circumstances, when citizens’ rights appear to be in abeyance, what recourse do the families of the missing individuals have?

Also, the people of Karachi must have ownership of the wide-ranging operation being conducted in their city; to this end, there should be a forum set up comprising some of its most eminent citizens to give their input and prevent the excesses that may in future unravel the gains made thus far.

*Published in Dawn, October 9th, 2015*

## Music to the ears

BUILDING tradition takes time and the interplay of various factors over long periods.

The ‘right’ ambience is achieved with commitment and adherence to a theme which is sustained to a large extent by the venue.

Events are usually associated with the places they are regularly held at as they become the go-to fixtures on our calendar. An example is the Open Air Theatre at Bagh-i-Jinnah in Lahore which is linked to events arranged by many organisations. Prominent among these events is the All Pakistan Music Conference.

*Take a look: [7 years later: All Pakistan Music Conference returns to Bagh-i-Jinnah](#)*

The facility, called the pahari in local parlance, symbolises so much. It has been the promoter of various tastes and shades and genres in culture — poetry, music of all kind, drama, dance, all offering resistance to the many prudes among us who scoff at artistic expression and fail to appreciate it as among the finer things of life.

Holding these annual events under the aegis of the music conference, an entity now 56 years old, has been a proud entry in the records of the Open Air Theatre.

The convention was broken a few years ago, much to the chagrin of fans who were used to being treated to the conference in the familiar environment of the pahari. It was decided that the security situation did not allow the holding of the event at its usual venue.

The shifting was interpreted by some as a big retreat in times when so much else was also being shunned and ‘avoided’ and put off until better days. They now have reason to celebrate the resumption of the open-air experience supervised by the music conference. And this is just the beginning.

They would be justified in hoping that the trend will continue into the winter season and beyond — into months when Lahore is in its full spring bloom. Restoration of cultural normality in the city as well as everywhere else in the country is essential to the return of a lifestyle that the people had built up over the years. The tradition must continue.

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## Response to Mina tragedy

THE congregation of a large number of people at any one spot needs regulation through certain standard operating procedures and mechanisms for safety.

The annual gathering of Muslims at Makkah for Haj is the largest such coming-together in the world, and it was generally understood that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was doing everything that it could through its wealth and resources and its access to technology and knowledge to facilitate the pilgrims.

True, catering to the needs of some two million people at one location can never be a flawless exercise. But the double tragedies that have marked this year's Haj, especially the fatal stampede at Mina that killed 769 people (independent news reports now place the figure at nearly 1,500), has eroded trust in the management capabilities of the Saudi authorities.

*Take a look: [Pemra warns against criticism of Saudi response to Mina tragedy](#)*

Clearly, despite the considerable resources the kingdom has invested in the pilgrimage proceedings, much more still needs doing — eyewitness accounts speak of the shortage of ambulances and medical staff, the absence of wheel-chair ramps and emergency SOPs, and the indifference of some of the wardens.

Together, they speak of too much being left to chance. And, as the horrified world has been reminded, disaster can strike at any time.

Oddly enough, unlike most other affected Muslim-majority states, Pakistan's response to the tragedy has been one of indifference.

The perceived lack of agitation in governmental circles, despite the fact that, officially, the death of 89 Pakistanis has been confirmed by the religious affairs ministry while 43 remain missing, prompted opposition members to boycott Senate proceedings on Thursday.

Leader of the Opposition Chaudhry Aitzaz Ahsan went to the extent of calling the government callous. Indeed, other than routine protestations of grief and promises of compensation, the Pakistan government's most visible move in the aftermath of the Mina tragedy has been for the electronic regulatory body, Pemra, to ask television channels not to direct criticism against Saudi Arabia.

Such inaction coupled with a head-in-the-sand approach to mismanagement of the pilgrimage is shocking. The government must not only take a proactive approach, it must be seen to be doing so.

For the Muslim world in general, this should provide the impetus to create a more active lobby for drastic improvements in the management of Haj proceedings.



While the statements put out by Iran in this regard have claimed headlines across the world, criticism of Saudi management has also come from countries such as Indonesia, Turkey, Lebanon and Senegal. The Nigerian house of representatives has called for a takeover of the investigation into the disaster. Whether that is possible or not, certainly the investigation announced by the Saudi government needs to be transparent, thorough and, above all, impartial.

The scale of the recent tragedy demands a strong response. After all, Muslims all over the world consider the Ka'aba their own.

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## AIIB visit

THE recent visit by the president of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank raised issues old and new for the government.

The new challenge was his emphasis on including India in the CPEC vision, thus opening up the doors of the corridor towards the growing economy to the east.

Previously, too, Chinese President Xi Jinping had mentioned this in his speech before parliament when he visited Pakistan. The idea should not be dismissed.

If the true promise of the corridor is to be realised, it will be necessary to include Pakistan's neighbours — both east and west — in it. Of course, there are significant hurdles to this.

*Take a look: [Corridor plan to benefit regional states: AIIB chief](#)*

In Pakistan, the military establishment is reluctant to viewing India through any lens other than one of rivalry, and in India a right-wing government is similarly averse to responding to any overtures for talks and advancement of peace.

For now, therefore, it is enough to note that the proposal to open access to the economic corridor for India has credible commitment at the highest levels in China, and if there is any party in the world that can encourage a change in thinking in this country at least, it is the government in Beijing.

The old issue raised was the Diamer Bhasha dam. The AIIB chief was asked to provide the financing for investment in this mega project which Pakistan has been pursuing for many years.

Thus far all major multilaterals have balked at funding it, saying that it lies in 'disputed' territory and would, therefore, require India's approval.

It is likely that the real reason for their reluctance lies elsewhere, and it is equally likely that the AIIB will also eventually refuse to fund this project.

For one, India opposes the project and is the second largest shareholder in the bank. For another, the AIIB is unlikely to

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want to commit to such a vast project with massive uncertainties hanging over it, for fear of being pulled into a quagmire so early in its career.

It would be better for the government of Pakistan to draw up a more realistic list of projects that they would like to see funded through the AIIB, and use the early years of the bank to build a relationship rather than go for broke with a proposal for a mega dam.

There is no shortage of infrastructure requirements in Pakistan, and realism shouldn't be very hard to pitch.

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## KU's overreaction

IT'S a brouhaha that really shouldn't have been. Model Ayyan Ali, who is out on bail in a case of currency smuggling, was invited as chief guest to the inauguration of a student-owned fast food venture in August at the Karachi University.

Her visit, given her undertrial status, gave rise to much heated debate on social media over the propriety of the exercise.

The university responded by stating that the administration was unaware of the invitation extended to Ms Ali and issued show-

cause notices to the two students concerned for taking the initiative without obtaining official approval.

*Also read: [KU cancels student's admission for inviting Ayyan Ali on campus](#)*

However, apparently after pressure was brought to bear from a student political group, the disciplinary committee looking into the matter decided to impose severe sanctions — that too without even giving a proper hearing to the students concerned.

On Monday, one of them was expelled; both have been barred from entering the campus or enrolling in an academic programme offered by the university.

It's not often that Karachi University is in the news for controversies of this kind, one devoid of violence and warring student political groups.

One can question the wisdom of inviting Ms Ali to inaugurate the event, though perhaps at the cost of ignoring the golden rule of regarding a person innocent until proven guilty; particularly so when several other Pakistanis accused of far worse continue to be feted and accorded red-carpet treatment.

Even then, had the university administration believed that the students were at fault, its response is disproportionate to the 'offence': the show-cause notices followed by a strong reprimand should have been sufficient to make the point.

What message is the university sending by disrupting the education of young men guilty of little more than an error of judgement, if that, while students who engage in violence and strong-arm tactics on campus get away scot-free?

Moreover, if the administration was indeed in the dark about what must have been a high-profile event, then it too is partly to blame.

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## Return of the MQM

AFTER a two-month absence from the Senate, the National Assembly and the Sindh Assembly, the path has seemingly been cleared for the MQM's return to these august houses. Following various ups and downs, the federal government and the MQM announced on Friday the signing of a memorandum of understanding that will lead to the setting up of a grievances redressal committee to look into the Muttahida's complaints about the actions taken by the law enforcers in Karachi. This was a key MQM demand standing in the way of the party's return to the elected houses. In particular, the party wants its grievances, related to alleged extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, addressed.

The development shows that better sense has prevailed on both the government and the MQM, and that the path of rigidity has been abandoned in favour of political maturity. The two-year-old operation in Karachi has yielded results and violence has come down. However, throughout this period the MQM has

raised serious objections about the alleged abduction, torture and killing of its workers and sympathisers at the hands of the law enforcers. While action must be taken against all militant and criminal elements in Karachi — regardless of their political linkages — it should remain within the bounds of the law and fundamental rights. Hence the Muttahida's genuine grievances must be addressed by the state so that the operation is free of accusations of bias and high-handedness.

Looking at the bigger picture, the MQM's return to parliament should be accompanied by some serious introspection — the party would do well to review its mistakes over the past three decades. Indeed, the MQM is a political reality in much of urban Sindh — a fact that must be acknowledged by both Islamabad and Rawalpindi — and arguably still enjoys a considerable vote bank despite its fluctuating fortunes of late. Yet it is also true that for long, the party has tolerated a militant wing within its ranks and used clearly undemocratic methods — enforced shutdowns, forcible collection of 'donations' etc — to establish its strength on Karachi's streets. A clean break from such unsavoury activities is now advisable. To its credit, the party has worked for the civic uplift of Karachi, and has the ability to make use of its roots within urban communities to push forward a transparent development agenda as the only 'weapon' to win over the electorate. With local government elections in Karachi due in December, the focus will hopefully be on electioneering for the third tier of government. Will the local leadership rise to the occasion? With Altaf Hussain — the party supremo who is facing a money-laundering investigation in the UK — the MQM's Pakistan-based leadership ought to be ready to take decisions should events so dictate. The Muttahida has plenty of

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seasoned hands within its ranks that are able to steer the ship in case it runs into choppy waters.

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## IMF review

A SENSE of déjà vu is becoming inescapable when reading the IMF reviews of Pakistan's ongoing programme. The latest review documents, released earlier in the week, read just like the previous review. The government is still struggling to implement its privatisation agenda and restructure public-sector enterprises, still talking about a plan to reduce the circular debt while relying on power surcharges to meet debt-service costs, still debating the passage of amendments to upgrade the Anti Money Laundering Act, and still making promises to pass legislation to enhance central bank independence. One thing that the staff review, followed up by the conference call with the mission chief, has done is to address the questions around the deficit numbers from last fiscal year. However, this is increasingly looking like a pointless controversy. The fund team says they have taken a close look at the numbers and adjusted deficit upwards by 0.1pc of GDP, adding that "we do not have any evidence of intentional wrongdoing on the side of the authorities". Beyond intentional wrongdoing, the whole controversy becomes little more than a debate around accounting conventions.

A new element in the review is the discussion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Significantly, the Fund has poured a bucket of cold water on the expectation that implementation of

the CPEC projects will drive growth. "Any demand-driven economic expansion as a result of project implementation is expected to be limited," the report says, since investment is likely to be offset by higher imports. The growth prospects resulting from CPEC will come later, once the infrastructure is in place and able to support a higher level of economic activity. That crucially hinges on the larger macroeconomic environment and how conducive it is to supporting investment and growth. Moreover, proper implementation of the projects, which includes managing the risks contained within them, will be crucial, and here too the government's track record is weak. But with only one more year left to go for the programme, the impression is that the government is struggling with the structural reform agenda. Some successes have indeed been scored, like the interest rate corridor implemented by the State Bank or the legislation for the Credit Information Bureau; but these, in a sense, are the low-hanging fruit. The real test comes with the mammoth privatisations, and broadening of the tax base, and in those areas the successes have yet to come.

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## Women's cricket success

THE performance of the Pakistan women cricketers against their Bangladesh counterparts in the recent home series deserves high praise. The national women's team, under the astute leadership of Sana Mir, won all the four matches including the two T20 games and two ODIs to yet again prove their supremacy over their Asian rivals. Young middle-order player Bismah Maroof and spinner Anum Ameen stood out during the matches, all of which were held in Karachi. The credit for the series primarily goes to the Bangladesh Cricket Board which sent its women's team here following foolproof security assurances from the Pakistan Cricket Board. Besides being competitive, the incident-free matches in the series have greatly helped to strengthen a positive image of Pakistan in matters of security and sport.

With international matches not a very frequent event for Pakistan's women cricketers until early this year, things were not looking up. However, with the world cricket governing body, the ICC, issuing women's cricket rankings for the first time ever this month, the picture is slowly changing for the better now. The launch of the new rankings underscores the ICC's long-term commitment to investing, incentivising, promoting and publicising women's cricket — in fact there has been a substantial increase in public interest and participation, as well as a marked improvement in the standard of the international game. Sana Mir's charges are now all set to tour the West Indies next week for a full series comprising seven games. On its way back from the Caribbean, the Pakistani women's team shall visit the United States to play two friendly T20 matches which will give the players valuable experience ahead of the Women's T20

World Cup lined up in India next year. Placed sixth in the international rankings, the women cricket team's recent success against Bangladesh will hold them in good stead during the tough assignments ahead. The talent and drive are there. The cricketers now need the wholehearted and consistent support of the PCB to thrive internationally.

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## Beyond the by-elections

BY their very nature, by-elections tend to be quiet affairs, with relatively muted campaigns and below average voter turnout. But not all by-elections are equal.

Yesterday, three seats were contested in Punjab. However, the only one that appeared to matter nationally was NA-122 in Lahore.

The reasons are fairly obvious: NA-122 was one of the four seats that the PTI had insisted was rigged in May 2013; the loser in the general election was Imran Khan; and the winner, Ayaz Sadiq, was rewarded for his 2013 success with the office of the speaker of the National Assembly.

*Also read: [PML-N reclaims 'Takht-i-Lahore'](#)*

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All of that meant that there was intense interest, hysteria even, surrounding the Lahore by-election. So intense, in fact, that the only close approximation to yesterday's events was the April by-election in NA-246, the MQM stronghold in Karachi that was retained by the party in unprecedented circumstances.

Given all the hype, therefore, it was only right that yesterday attention turned to the voter himself and the will of the people.

The trend in the two National Assembly seats contested yesterday appear to be in line with pre-election speculation. The Okara result, where independent candidate Riazul Haq Juj appeared in the lead, would be shaped primarily by local factors — and the inability of the PTI, PML-N or the PPP to impose party discipline and rally supporters around the party candidates.

In Lahore, a victory for Ayaz Sadiq will be portrayed by the PML-N as a validation of the 2013 general election. The more meaningful outcome though would be that the National Assembly would have been spared a potentially disruptive search for a new speaker.

To the credit of the voting public and the activists of the political parties involved, yesterday's elections were held in a quite orderly and mostly trouble-free environment. Less salutary was the role of the party leaderships themselves, particularly of the PML-N and PTI.

While keenly fought electoral contests ought to be the sign of a healthy, vibrant democracy, there is a sense that the PML-N and PTI leaderships allowed ego and personal rivalries to overwhelm common sense and regard for the political process itself.

Over the top campaigning created a sense that yesterday's elections were make or break for both sides, when in fact they were never going to alter the parliamentary equation or reshape the political landscape. Unhappily, the PML-N and PTI appear more keen on campaign rhetoric than the real need: electoral reforms ahead of the 2018 general election.

*Published in Dawn, October 12th, 2015*

## Ruling party rifts

CLASSIC signs of a leadership vacuum are emerging in the cabinet's ranks. Ministers are openly talking about their inability to deliver on key objectives in their areas of responsibility, and pointing fingers at their colleagues and other government departments as the reason.

A blame game amongst the ministers, poor performance and mounting frustration make the government appear disarticulated, uncoordinated, and increasingly factionalised.

The ministers of petroleum and water and power have both launched a broadside against the Planning Commission and two regulators, saying they are working at odds with the objectives of the government, and in some cases, even pursuing personal goals.

*Take a look: [Rift surfaces in govt over handling of uplift projects](#)*

The Planning Commission has shot back that it will continue to monitor the implementation of public-sector development projects without granting any favours, and carry on with overseeing the implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects without succumbing to pressure.

Meanwhile the Punjab chief minister has made public his opposition to the finance minister's pet proposal of a withholding tax on bank transactions by non-filers of income tax returns.

A complex jigsaw of factionalism and internal rivalry within the ruling party is revealing itself, with reports of important differences between the Punjab chief minister and the finance minister, and between these two versus the ministers of petroleum and water and power.

The Planning Commission, by virtue of being the focal ministry for all CPEC projects, is caught in the crossfire. Whatever the state of the 'palace intrigue' may be, it is disheartening to see it breaking into full public view with such bombast — because it clearly suggests that the biggest victim will be governance. This kind of factionalism is highly destructive, and can easily lead different parties to start playing an obstructionist role in each other's affairs rather than focusing on their objectives.

The prime minister should realise that such frustrations need to be nipped in the bud before they become unmanageable, assuming they haven't reached that point already.

Ironically enough, the latest salvo in this war of words amongst his own cabinet members was fired when the prime minister was

in Sheikhpura, telling a crowd that his government would eliminate the power crisis during its five-year term and the opposition should not play an obstructionist role in this ambition.

Given what was going on in Islamabad even as he spoke these words, it seems that the opposition need not do a thing to obstruct this goal.

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## Mental health concerns

AS far as governments in Pakistan are concerned, whether at the federal or the provincial level, little progress is ever made without an agonising stop-start process.

With World Mental Health Day having passed on Saturday, it is worth taking up the matter of legislation and its enforcement meant to protect sufferers of this malady.

For those with mental health disorders, Pakistan is indeed a difficult terrain to traverse. For most of the country's existence, the relevant legislation was the Lunacy Act of 1912, despite the fact that medical science in this area has been a firmly established discipline for decades.

*Take a look: [Sindh govt yet to establish mental health authority](#)*

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This legislation in Pakistan was finally replaced with the Mental Health Ordinance 2001 upon pressure from NGOs. However, this remained unimplemented until the health sector devolved to the provinces. And though Sindh took the lead amongst the provinces by passing the Sindh Mental Health Act 2013, it has yet to take the basic steps that will allow proper implementation of the law.

The (provincial) legislation requires the setting up of a 14-member mental health authority comprising a judge, health-sector representatives and appropriate medical specialists.

This is required to develop and establish new standards for patient care, present recommendations to improve existing mental health centres and set up a board for inspections, amongst other things. None of these, according to experts, are in place, and without them, the mentally ill remain vulnerable to abuse in an atmosphere where empathy and understanding are absent.

Can figures in authority take the lead in fulfilling the requirements under the law? Surely, the rights of such sufferers should not be denied simply because they are unable to lobby for themselves.

Further, given the trauma this nation and its people have suffered over the past decade or so as the security situation unravelled and terrorism took root, the need for a solid mental healthcare infrastructure may be far greater than is currently recognised. For that to take shape, implementation of the law is necessary.

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## Lessons for PTI and PML-N

The votes have been counted, the results are in — but have the protagonists learned anything?

Elevating politics to a gladiatorial contest has many downsides and the extraordinarily intense, often hyperbolic campaigns in Lahore demonstrated the problem with the direction that national politics has taken.

Sadly, the PTI remains the chief culprit, and it is with that party's leadership that the story must begin. For years now, the PTI's politics of agitation have held the country virtually hostage. The historic Lahore rally that brought hundreds of thousands of residents out on the streets and caused a political earthquake occurred four years ago this month.

Ever since, the PTI has relentlessly pursued its confrontational, aggressive brand of politics. For its efforts, the PTI has won a great deal of support and established itself as the second-largest political party in the country. But the party appears to have hit a wall, both in terms of ideas and public support.

*Also read: [PML-N, PTI in introspective mood after close contests](#)*

Ultimately, what did the PTI achieve in Lahore? It picked up an extra provincial assembly seat, PP-147, and gave the May 2013 winner in a National Assembly constituency, NA-122, a brief scare.



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Perhaps Imran Khan believes that the PTI's best chance at success in the next general election is to keep the political waters churning at all costs until then. But it does not appear to be working.

The PTI does not seem to be getting any closer to its goal of overthrowing the PML-N from its dominant position in Punjab. That is likely because the party has increasingly become a caricature of its original self.

When the PTI suffers repeated electoral losses, it is because the democratic process is flawed and corrupt; all opponents of the PTI are either corrupt or anti-Pakistan; only the PTI represents all that is good and true about politics and politicians. The PTI's brand of politics has become self-indulgent and pitiful. The voting public does not appear to be impressed.

However, neither is the voting public as impressed with the PML-N as the party would like the country to believe.

Despite having mobilised federal ministers and family members, the duo of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif were unable to score the convincing victory in Lahore that they so clearly craved.

Given the relentless negativity of the PTI and the allegedly pro-people, delivery-focused governments of the PML-N at the centre and in Punjab, the PML-N should have comfortably won both the Lahore by-elections and the one in Okara too.

The PML-N leadership's obsession with the PTI appears to have blinded its leadership to problems in both substance and message when it comes to the PML-N's governance record. The public appears to be looking for something more than either the PTI or the PML-N is offering at the moment. Both parties would be better off listening to the public more and raging at each other less.

*Published in Dawn, October 13th, 2015*

## Terror in Ankara

SATURDAY'S deadly blast that killed at least 128 people and injured over 200 in Ankara couldn't have come at a worse time for Turkey.

Tensions across the nation are high. Last June's general election stripped Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party of its majority in parliament, and no party was willing to share power with him, forcing the president to go for another election.

While the fanatic hordes of the self-styled Islamic State occupy large chunks of territory near the Turkish border, the nation's decades-old Kurdish issue has resurfaced with greater intensity.

*Take a look: [At least 86 dead in attack on Ankara peace rally](#)*

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One major upset in the June election was the stunning political success of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), which crossed the 10pc vote barrier and entered parliament. More unfortunately for the country, the truce with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) broke down, thus renewing a 30-year-old conflict which has claimed over 40,000 lives.

This has aroused intense nationalist feelings across Turkey, though his opponents accuse Mr Erdogan of deliberately escalating the war on the PKK to cash in on anti-PKK sentiments and deny the HDP another electoral triumph.

To make matter worse, a large number of Kurds from Turkey have joined Syrian Kurds and managed to occupy some territory on the Turkish border. This adds new dimensions to a complex situation, for it is Syrian and Turkish Kurds who have offered the most determined resistance to the IS.

Yet, for Mr Erdogan it is the Kurdish insurgency rather than the IS that is the problem.

Who bombed the Ankara rally is not yet clear. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu suspects four parties, including the IS, but the IS has yet to claim responsibility.

The opposition's charge that the government caused the blasts shows Mr Erdogan's growing unpopularity with a wide cross section of the people — hard-line Turkish nationalists, liberal elements unhappy with his authoritarian methods and the followers of the Gulen movement among them.

All this is happening at a time when Moscow's role in Syria has assumed greater proportions, with Russian planes violating Turkish airspace. The bitter polarisation centring on Mr Erdogan's personality and the worsening regional situation call for a calmer Turkey.

We can only hope that Mr Erdogan will learn to be more realistic, that the Nov 1 election will give a clearer parliamentary picture and that this will lead to a cohesive coalition government, which is able to give Turkey stability, consolidate the country's economic gains and wage a determined war on terrorism.

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## Countering hate speech

WHEN the month of Muharram draws near, the state usually swings into action in order to keep the peace during this sensitive period.

The measures adopted by the administration include restricting the entry of certain preachers in volatile cities and towns. This year, too, the government appears to be taking no chances, as the state is keeping an eye on the movement of controversial clerics.

As reported on Monday, the entry of 190 ulema has been banned in Rawalpindi division during Muharram, which starts later this

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week. The inter-provincial movement of clerics has also been banned. Ulema from various sects have been included in the list of those to be denied entry into Rawalpindi.

*Also read: [Entry of 190 ulema in Pindi division during Muharram banned](#)*

Restricting the entry of controversial ulema is essential if peace is to be maintained during Muharram.

After all, religious passions run high during this period; even the slightest irresponsible comment or provocation from the pulpit can spark widespread trouble, especially in the age of social media where rumours and half-truths can spread like wildfire.

Rawalpindi is, of course, particularly sensitive — the garrison city witnessed communal violence during 2013's Ashura when controversial remarks were reportedly made from a mosque loudspeaker. However, there are other potential flashpoints across Pakistan where the respective administrations must take similar steps to prevent hatemongers from exploiting religious sentiments.

Yet while it is true that Muharram is a particularly sensitive time, the state should be taking action against those involved in spreading hate speech around the year.

For example, if the Punjab government can zero in on these 190 individuals during Muharram, it — along with the other provincial administrations — should be keeping a watchful eye on such elements during the rest of the year as well.

Hundreds have reportedly been rounded up on hate speech charges under the National Action Plan, but there is clearly room for greater vigilance on this count. Indeed, there should be zero tolerance for divisive elements spreading sectarian and communal poison 365 days a year.

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## Intolerance in India

FREEDOM is under threat in India and many of its right-thinking citizens are speaking out against the wave of right-wing violence and repression.

On Monday, no less a figure than L.K. Advani was moved to condemn what he said is “an increase in cases of intolerance” and suggested that democracy itself was under threat in India.

There is genuine reason for alarm. Some of the violence and intimidation has been Pakistan-related, with Shiv Sena activists in Mumbai forcing the cancellation of a concert by Ghulam Ali recently and, more menacingly, dousing in black paint the organiser of a talk featuring former Pakistani foreign minister Khurshid Kasuri.

But much of the intolerance and extremism is directed inwards, at India's rich cultural and religious diversity.

This year alone, two progressive voices have been silenced forever with the murders of Govind Pansare, in February, and

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M.M. Kalburgi, in August. Both men were known for their opposition to religious extremism and had spent much of their lives championing progressive causes.

The lynching of a Muslim man in a village outside Delhi for allegedly consuming beef shocked not just India, but the world. In India-held Kashmir, communal tensions have been stoked by the revival of a long-dormant law banning the sale and consumption of beef.

Worried by the rise in religiously inspired extremism and by the indifferent attitude of the federal government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's vibrant civil society is pushing back.

More than 40 intellectuals and writers have returned literary awards or written open letters to protest the rise in intolerance and the assault on free speech.

Last week, Nayantara Sahgal, nationally recognised writer and a niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, announced her decision to return her Sahitya Akademi (academy of letters) award in a public letter titled *The unmaking of India*.

In her letter, Ms Sahgal has condemned Prime Minister Modi for remaining silent about the "reign of terror" that has been unleashed in India and offered her support to "all dissenters who now live in fear and uncertainty".

The growing public outcry is a welcome sign that India's history as a constitutionally protected secular democracy will not be

erased by a single election or by extremists emboldened on the fringes of society.

Welcome as the pushback is, much more will need to be done if India is to protect its cultural diversity and pluralism.

This country's long, painful slide towards extremism and intolerance suggests that if problems at the fringes are not addressed quickly by state and society, extremism can become mainstream and fiendishly difficult to roll back.

The Pakistani experience has also made terribly clear the destabilising effects on the region when intolerance and extremism is on the march nationally. In India's case, the rise of the right-wing could have even more toxic effects regionally.

The alarm bells are ringing; India needs to reaffirm its commitment to pluralism and diversity.

*Published in Dawn, October 14th, 2015*

## PPP's decline

THE PPP today behaves almost like a pauper who has spent all his fortune but who clings on to grand descriptions. It talks about past glory, of sacrifices, of its struggle against martial law.

It promises a new charter, even some kind of a revolution. Unfortunately, the party has very little to show for all this huffing and puffing; it has only progressed backwards and is sinking deeper with every move that it doesn't make.

We may interject that this state of the PPP is more specific to Punjab. The fact is, however, that once the journey towards oblivion has begun in Punjab, decline elsewhere — in Sindh — cannot be far off.

*Also read: [PPP's Punjab leadership was in favour of by-poll 'boycott'](#)*

Indeed, given just how easily the PPP set-up in Sindh can be ridiculed, the slip in the home province has long begun for the party of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, or whichever PPP leader one would like the remnants to be associated with at the moment.

In Punjab, the sharp dip in the PPP's vote bank may appear deceptively of recent origin. In fact, the rot had been setting in for long. It is easy to select certain incidents and trends from many and string them together to arrive at the same conclusion: the erosion of the popular choice that the PPP embodied.

Take the latest, the by-election in NA-122 that had the PPP candidate winning 803 votes.

As symbols go, the constituency comprises areas from where Benazir Bhutto had won in 1988 — her first election — and also localities from where Sheikh Rashid, the 'father of socialism', had lost in the same polls.

The areas in NA-122 in a sense then not only show how the PPP has failed to keep its original aura, they offer proof that Ms Bhutto's influence has also withered away. So far as recent evidence goes, it is under Asif Zardari's leadership that this popular choice has been dealt the most staggering blow.

The corruption tag that has discredited the party has been there for long even if public awareness is much greater now. It is above all the so-called policy of reconciliation, translated into inaction and meekness, which has, sadly, reduced the party to a toothless entity.

It was the people who kept the PPP alive, often in spite of the Bhuttos and Mr Zardari — especially so in Punjab where it was left to flourish organically without much organisation and local leadership. The people's desire no longer seems to be there.

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## Power sector debt

A REPORT from the finance ministry to the IMF details the increase in the circular debt in the three months till June of this year, and the picture is hardly inspiring.

The power sector is defying all efforts to cap its accumulation of debt. Even though losses in the year 2014-2015 remained constant, at 18.7pc according to the report, collections declined by 1pc.

The circular debt increased during this time, despite tariff increases applied during the year, by almost 12pc in just the three months ending June.

*Also read: [Power sector circular debt rises to Rs313bn](#)*

According to this report, the circular debt now stands at Rs648bn, up by Rs33bn in merely three months.

This may not be a stellar increase by standards of the recent past, but the fact that it comes after high-profile efforts to cap the circular debt, to audit its details, to address it through ramped-up recovery efforts and tariff hikes, it is a quite a disappointing turnout.

The circular debt is being fed by a number of factors, the report notes: the stock of past amounts, disputed amounts with the IPPs, non-recovery by distribution companies as well as penalties by the regulator for failure to meet performance

targets, arrears on subsidy payments, debt service obligations and court stay orders on surcharges.

The fact that almost three years into its term the government is still struggling to control these challenges shows that the problem is systemic, and that nothing short of deep-rooted reform of the incentives that permeate the power sector entities will be enough. The scheduled privatisations for this year may not be enough.

A larger multiyear tariff framework will be required, and much of the space for tariff increases has already been taken up by surcharges to help pay for the costs of carrying the circular debt.

The government needs to ramp up its efforts to address the systemic roots of the problem rather than become bogged down in managing the day-to-day consequences that rise out of the myriad dysfunctions that plague the power sector.

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## IS in Pakistan

There's no mistaking it any longer: the self-styled Islamic State is making inroads in the country.

In a militancy-riven landscape like that of Pakistan, where violent extremist groups have had a long run virtually unimpeded by state action until recently, this signifies a dangerous new dimension in the war against terrorism.

However, the stance adopted by the authorities suggests they are either deliberately underplaying the threat, perhaps for public consumption, or else are unmindful of the wider ramifications.

*Take a look: [Police claim tracing 53 'IS-inspired' militants](#)*

According to statements by law-enforcement agencies this week, investigations into the Safoora Goth carnage in Karachi in May have uncovered the existence of a number of terrorist groups “inspired by IS’s ideology”; notwithstanding Sindh police’s denial that it had issued a list of suspected militants linked with these.

The IGP Sindh informed the Senate Standing Committee on Interior that the group responsible for the Safoora Goth massacre is also associated with IS and that its commander had since fled to Syria.

From the outset, the state has emphatically denied the presence of IS in Pakistan; doing otherwise is especially inconvenient at a time when it is seen as taking proactive steps against terrorism.

Law-enforcement authorities are still at pains to point out there may not be any direct links between militants in Pakistan and IS, the entity fighting in the Middle East.

Even if true, that is an inconsequential detail: it is the group’s ideology that matters, and the danger lies in the fact that Pakistan’s militant networks are a natural constituency for this pan-Islamist and violently sectarian ideology.

Moreover, IS has also staked a claim to this region — which it refers to by its historical name of Khorasan — as part of its expansionist agenda; and its territorial gains in Syria and Iraq, where it is putting its ultra-radical ideology into practice, offer a template for terrorist groups in Pakistan.

Among these is the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, one of the main perpetrators of sectarian carnage in the country, whose links with the ‘IS-inspired’ militants have been disclosed by the police.

Others likely to be seduced by the IS model are disaffected elements from comparatively, or nominally, peaceful organisations aspiring to more ‘robust’ means of achieving their objectives.

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It seems that even urban, educated youth are not immune, evidence of how Pakistani society as a whole has drifted to the right over the years.

Extremism is not static: if allowed to fester — whether by design or by ill-considered policies — it will spawn ever more radical versions of itself.

The trajectory of terrorism both in the international as well as the domestic arena is illustrative of this.

Many local outfits that began with state-sponsored jihadist objectives have displayed increasingly reactionary, even anti-state, tendencies.

Some, it seems, are still being tolerated, as long as they toe the line. If Pakistan is to definitively change course, there must be no room for such elements on its soil.

*Published in Dawn, October 15th, 2015*

## Landslide tragedy

THE tragic loss of 13 lives in a landslide in Karachi should serve as a wake-up call to the city authorities that the rackets that have grown around land and property development are growing increasingly deadly.

This is not the first, nor is it likely to be the last, time when the many dysfunctions around the provision of land and housing in the city have led to tragic consequences.

The abandonment of its obligation to provide low-income housing and arrange supply of land for the purpose by the city authorities, and their overseers in the provincial government, has created an informal market of land grabbers and irregular settlements which are dangerous places to live. The abandonment of this key responsibility is revealed in the absence of any master plan for the city, as well as any semblance of local government.

*Take a look: [China-cutting blamed for deadly landslide](#)*

Those who cannot afford to live in a planned locality get pushed into irregular settlements, with the result that today almost half of Karachi's population lives on 8pc of its land, on these irregular settlements, or katchi abadis as they are known.

This lack of planning or any overarching authority in the city has given rise to a highly dysfunctional land market, which pushes poorer segments of the population into housing that is of dubious title, and often located in dangerous settings.



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The tragedy in Gulistan-i-Jauhar on Tuesday morning is an example of what happens when people are left to fend for themselves in their search for affordable housing in a large metropolis.

In other examples, violent land mafias with political patronage have caused the search for affordable housing to turn into a violent struggle over a vital and scarce resource.

Political parties have found this struggle to be a lucrative source of funds for themselves, creating a nexus between violence and politics that lies at the heart of the cities' instability.

It is not possible to break this nexus with a head-on assault, like the Rangers tried to do with their raids on various city landowning authorities, supposedly for the purpose of breaking the links between crime and politics.

What is needed is an institutional approach, which involves more local government, and clearer adherence to a master plan that is built principally around the needs of the poor. Until that happens, the sad fact is that we will continue to see more tragedies of this sort.

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## Younis Khan's feat

IT is impossible to keep Younis Khan out of the news. Only a few days ago, there were veiled suggestions in the media impressing upon him the benefits of a 'timely' retirement.

Then his example was being cited to criticise the callousness with which the PCB often treats those who have represented the country creditably.

Now he is back with his customary nonchalance stroking his way past the record of the highest number of Test runs for Pakistan held by the unsurpassable Javed Miandad.

*Take a look: [Batting ace targets 10,000 runs](#)*

An idea of the sportsman's personal achievement and his contribution to national cricket can be had from the fact that it took him some 20-odd games less than Miandad to compile these runs.

The feat is even more remarkable given that in the latter half of his career the determined Khan from Mardan has had to deal with the additional challenge where there have been no matches in Pakistan.

Whereas players are generally expected to excel in domestic conditions, Pakistan has been forced to host even its 'home' games in foreign lands.

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Also impressive is the fact that a bulk of Younis's runs have been scored in trying conditions in the third or fourth innings of Test matches. This reflects a strong character and inspires confidence in his pledge to become the first Pakistani to score 10,000 Test runs.

His fans will be hoping that he is allowed to chase this target. They want the next leg of his journey to be smooth and as free of favours as has been his career so far.

But then, you are never sure with Younis Khan, who has a knack of finding himself in situations that require him to call upon his qualities as a fighter.

It is not too difficult to place him in the company of Pakistanis struggling for personal and national honour and at the same time, more than occasionally, expressing their frustration and anger at the system they are disciplined by. This is what adds an extra reason to the celebrations.

*Published in Dawn, October 15th, 2015*

## Cooperation in Asghar Khan case

PRIME MINISTER Nawaz Sharif recording his statement before an FIA team suggests that the government is in fact serious about complying with the October 2012 Supreme Court judgement requiring the framing of charges against and prosecution of individuals linked to the stolen election of 1990.

It is all the more extraordinary because Mr Sharif himself was the direct beneficiary of that rigged election, winning a first term as prime minister by leading the IJI coalition that was manipulated to victory by the then army chief, Aslam Beg, and the then ISI chief, Asad Durrani.

*Also read: [PM records statement in Asghar Khan case](#)*

Yet, a history-setting trial is still far from certain. For one, the FIA inquiry has yet to record the statement of Aslam Beg. Whether Mr Beg intends to eventually cooperate with the inquiry is not known, but at the moment he does have a fairly credible reason for not doing so: the review petition against the Supreme Court judgement filed by the former army chief has yet to be decided.

The Supreme Court should expedite its hearing of the review petition so as to allow the FIA to meet its target of completing the inquiry by year end.

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More troubling is the assertion by the interior minister that some military personnel were not cooperating with the inquiry.

While the minister did not clarify if he was referring to only Mr Beg or other individuals, it is known that a number of other former ISI and military officers have already appeared before the investigators. Are some other officers though not cooperating with the FIA?

Perhaps the interior minister will clarify the comment he made on Wednesday. If a serving prime minister can record his statement before the inquiry team, then why not military officers?

Reluctance to cooperate would be particularly unfortunate given that the military itself is pursuing the accountability of politicians in Sindh.

The present military leadership has made some effort to kick-start an accountability culture within the military by acting against generals involved in the NLC scam — though the punishments left much to be desired. It is hoped that the FIA will be facilitated in the Asghar Khan case inquiry.

The Asghar Khan case matters. Not just for historical reasons, but to reiterate that elections must be a reflection of the will of the people, not state institutions.

In an era when elections are routinely questioned and results challenged, it is worth remembering that true mass rigging has

been seen in this country in the past — and such institutional threats have not been buried forever.

The PML-N government has shown some courage in its handling of the Asghar Khan case. The case, after all, is a potent reminder of the past democratic failings of many of the party's leaders today. If civilians can face up to their past mistakes and submit to the law of the land, then why not the military?

*Published in Dawn, October 16th, 2015*

## Discordant governance

THE recent moves by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to stamp his leadership on a fractious cabinet are welcome, but more is going to be required in the days to come if the ship of government is to be put back on an even keel.

The latest meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Energy saw a few decisive decisions, and an earlier meeting between the prime minister and the minister for planning also saw a firm and unambiguous statement of support for the oversight functions being performed by the Planning Commission.

Removal of the managing director of the Nandipur power plant, that has become an albatross around the government's neck, had become necessary following the prolonged failure to make the plant operational and to rectify its problems.

The managing director was unable to fix the problems of the plant, and had also failed to locate a contractor to run the project, despite being given a number of opportunities to do so. The step itself comes a little late in the day, and had this been a purely private-sector project, it would in all likelihood, have been taken much sooner.

But the step is a modest one compared to the scale of the challenges that the many failures of the Nandipur project have thrown up.

For one, the whole episode, coupled with other failures to smoothly implement large projects in the public sector, has cast a cloud over the capacity of the government to implement the bouquet of CPEC projects under its charge.

The rivalry between the ministers playing out so publicly is also unlikely to recede following the prime minister's rebuke — the challenge requires a chief executive who is less aloof from the affairs of state, meaning Mr Sharif will have to change his style of leadership if he wants his government officials to focus on solving problems rather than settling scores with each other.

The Nandipur project has become an emblem of the government's ineptitude, and a lightning rod for its internal wrangling.

Fixing the problem is a big task now, but it is also important to remember that the many failures that went into the making of this debacle will not go away even when the project is finally operational.

Eventually, what needs to be fixed is not just one power plant, but the way the government operates — a mid-course correction that will take more than just a lecture.

## Stir in Jerusalem

For the past several weeks, the city of Jerusalem has been witnessing a rising spiral of violence.

While much of the international media attention has focused on stabbings and violence blamed on the Palestinians, as well as the Israeli reaction, there has not been a great deal of discussion on the root causes of the current clashes between the Arabs and the Jewish state.

While violence is indeed unacceptable, the fact is that the Palestinian reaction stems from Israeli attempts to encroach upon the revered al-Aqsa mosque as well as the repression and extrajudicial killings of Palestinian citizens at the hands of Tel Aviv.

*Also read: [Israel sets up checkpoints amid uprising fears](#)*

Israeli forces had entered the al-Aqsa complex in September; thereafter, there has been a campaign of provocations carried out by extremist Jewish groups calling for the destruction of one of Islam's holiest sites.

Moreover, there have been few attempts by what the Palestinians term the 'settlers' regime' in Tel Aviv to control the Jewish

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extremists. Israel, of course, has a long history of violating the sanctity of Palestine's holy sites, and has no regard for Palestinian lives.

Israel's response to Palestinian violence has been, characteristically, brutal. Even the UN secretary general has reportedly asked Tel Aviv to review its tactics when dealing with Palestinian protests.

While at least seven Israelis have died in the current violence, around 30 Palestinians have been killed.

Clearly, if the situation is not controlled there is a risk that the violence will spread; in fact, there has been talk of a 'third intifada' breaking out.

It should be remembered that the second intifada was sparked by the provocative visit of Israeli leader Ariel Sharon to the al-Aqsa mosque in 2000.

To contain the unrest, there must be no change to the status quo of Jerusalem's holy sites, while Jewish extremists must be prevented from stirring up trouble in this highly sensitive city that is revered by all the Abrahamic faiths.

Until the long-term status of Jerusalem is decided judiciously, the threat of violence will always loom.

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## Obama's change of plan

IT was a pillar of US President Barack Obama's foreign policy: he would finish the wars he inherited, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and would leave office with no American troops fighting wars abroad. But it was not to be.

The drawdown plan in Afghanistan that Mr Obama had previously announced has been changed. Now, US forces will stay at their present levels, just under 10,000 troops, until late 2016 or early 2017 and thereafter a residual force of some 5,500 troops will be maintained.

Previously, the drawdown from the present level of troops was to have commenced this year and by the end of 2016 some 1,000 troops were to be left behind mainly to protect the US embassy in Kabul.

Effectively, the US president has left it to his successor to decide what to do about Afghanistan — and it will be no easy decision.

To begin with, much will depend on whether the foreign train-and-assist mission will be able to improve the quality and resilience of the Afghan National Security Forces. There are few grounds to be optimistic on that count.

However, even the small US military presence will likely help blunt the worst effects of the Afghan Taliban insurgency. As was seen in Kunduz, the air power of the Americans and coordination with the Afghan special forces makes it difficult for the Taliban to hold a big city.

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In effect, President Ghani's unity government has been handed a lifeline. The US has committed to ensuring the post-Bonn Afghan state does not collapse. Beyond that, however, and yet again, President Obama does not appear to have a real strategy for Afghanistan.

With US troops active in the battlefield, Afghanistan may not be taken over by the Taliban. But the Taliban are terrifically resilient. The drawdown of US troops last year in Afghanistan led to the most intense and widespread of Taliban summer offensives this year. What is to happen between now and 2017 that will make the Afghan state more viable and likely to survive? President Obama had no words on the subject.

It is fairly clear though what needs to be done in Afghanistan: political reconciliation between the Taliban and the government and an improvement in the quality of government.

It is not at all clear, however, how to achieve that. As far as governance is concerned, the unity government seems to be an insurmountable hurdle — President Ghani may seem like he wants to improve governance, but he cannot get past the intense and endless politicking that is blocking his ambitions.

Meanwhile, with the Taliban attacks more intense than ever and Pak-Afghan ties still turbulent, there does not seem an immediate and obvious path to the resumption of dialogue.

Of course, the US remains immensely influential — if it so desires, reconciliation with the Taliban can be made a priority for all sides again.

*Published in Dawn, October 17th, 2015*

## 'Collateral damage'

AMID constant reminders about the need to work diligently under the National Action Plan, there is some activity against militants in Punjab since the killing of the provincial home minister Shuja Khanzada in a suicide attack two months ago.

Frequently, there are reports of police and the intelligence agencies targeting suspected militants linked to terrorist outfits in different parts of the province from Rahim Yar Khan at one end to Rawalpindi on the other.

Most raids on the hideouts of suspected militants are said to be conducted on the basis of 'credible intelligence' that has been collected by different agencies, particularly the ISI.

Yet some eyebrows have been raised over the 'collateral damage' that some raids have left in their wake.

A raid by the provincial counterterrorism force on the hideout of a suspected militant linked to the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi in a village on the outskirts of Rawalpindi late Wednesday night resulted in six fatalities.

Among the dead were two minor boys and an elite force commando.

Police claim the suspect and commando were killed when two women present lobbed hand grenades at the raiding party. It was asserted they then blew themselves up together with the two children by detonating a suicide jacket.

Some reports suggest that an exchange of gunfire between the suspects and police also followed three explosions. What actually happened may never emerge because the law-enforcement and intelligence agencies tend to keep the details of such raids to themselves.

There is an ongoing debate about how far ‘collateral damage’ can be prevented. But the fact remains that some more planning and care can help avert the loss of innocent lives, especially when it is being claimed that an operation is being conducted on the basis of foolproof intelligence.

One big purpose of intelligence is to isolate the suspects as far as possible before they are approached.

With the fight against terrorism and militancy likely to expand to the more populated urban and semi-urban areas of Punjab, the chances of greater collateral damage must be minimised by adhering to the old rule about isolation and strike.

This is a very sensitive topic and there is a cogent argument for pursuing militants aggressively and speedily. However, since allegations of a force overreaching itself in the heat of the moment are common, it will also be in the interest of fair and clean operations that the planners tread with caution.

## Shoaib Malik’s return

Shoaib Malik is back with a bang. The 33-year-old all-rounder, who scored a monumental 245 against England at Abu Dhabi this week in his first Test match for Pakistan in nearly six years, has perhaps silenced his critics with his emphatic return.

The lanky Sialkot-born player, hailed as the best young all-rounder on the horizon at the time of his Test debut against Bangladesh at Multan in 2001, has made great strides this year in both the T20 and ODI formats to make the critics sit up and take note.

That said, his prolific scoring was still not considered good enough to merit his inclusion in a well-settled, star-studded Pakistan Test side that is now ranked among the top four teams in the ICC ranking following victories over Bangladesh and Sri Lanka on their own turf.

*Take a look: [Shoaib Malik: Wearing the inside out](#)*

But as the idiom goes, luck favours the brave. Shoaib Malik received a welcome nod from Test skipper Misbah-ul-Haq as replacement for young off-spinner Bilal Asif who was sidelined due to a suspect bowling action last week.

Azhar Ali’s lingering toe infection and ace spinner Yasir Shah’s freak back injury on the eve of the first Test suddenly saw the cricketer inducted into the playing eleven at Abu Dhabi as an all-rounder and he grabbed the opportunity to play the innings of his life.

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Back in 2007-08, following a controversy-riddled two-year stint as Pakistan captain, Shoaib had spent several years languishing in the domestic first-class cricket scene without making much of an impression.

However, people close to him vouch that he owes much of his recent success in international cricket to the influence of his wife Sania Mirza, the current world doubles tennis champion.

A word of caution though: he needs to prop up his bowling skills to become a permanent part of the Pakistan team. The docile tracks in the UAE are unlikely to assist him in this. However, given the determination he has shown in making a grand comeback for Pakistan, not much appears beyond Shoaib Malik.

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## Welcome deal with Russia

THE growing ties between Pakistan and Russia are a welcome development. An agreement to build a natural gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore, capable of carrying gas in quantities large enough to bridge the growing deficits in Punjab, is only the first step, and more agreements to promote trade and investment should follow. Pakistan has very large requirements for infrastructure investment, and the private sector will not be able to fulfil these given the complex set of risks in the country. Most of our future infrastructure requirements are far more likely to

be met through bilateral deals involving governments rather than through incentives offered to private investors. The entry of Russia as a partner in our infrastructural growth is thus a very positive step indeed.

It is helpful to remember though, that states do not get directly involved in the economic affairs of another country without some sort of geopolitical interest at work. In Russia's case, these interests are clearly built around promoting stability in Afghanistan, and choking extremist activity within Pakistan. President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly warned of violence and militant activity in Afghanistan spilling over into Central Asia and potentially into Russia as well. Pakistan has a special role to play in promoting stability in the region, and a closer relationship with Russia should help further align our interests around the maintenance of stability in Afghanistan and the elimination of extremist threats from our midst.

It is also important to bear in mind that infrastructure investments, particularly in the energy sector, will not yield any benefit if they are not accompanied by domestic reforms, particularly in the pricing regime for natural gas and other fuels. The case of the LNG import terminal, which is continuing to function under ad hoc supplies, is a case in point. Imported gas will be a non-starter in Pakistan so long as it faces a large price difference with domestic gas. For the pipeline that the Russians are offering to build to be a real opportunity, the mistakes of the LNG terminal must be avoided. A lot of homework will be necessary before gas flows can materialise, including price reforms, and the government ought to focus on these right away. A proper model for importing the gas, from third-party access rules to pipeline capacity, and sharing of costs will need to be



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developed. The project should also seek to eventually take input from the Iranian gas supposed to be piped through the IP pipeline. That project should not be allowed to fall by the wayside as a consequence of the deal with Russia. There is much to look forward to in Pakistan as our advantage of location comes into sharper relief, but the right decisions at home will be key to ensuring that the benefits from this advantage materialise in a smooth manner.

*Published in Dawn, October 18th, 2015*

## Flawed drone strategy

IT has long been suspected that the US has exaggerated the accuracy of its drone strikes programme, with critics claiming that a far greater number of civilians have been killed than admitted by the US government. Now, with new revelations by The Intercept, an online publication created to report on the Edward Snowden documents and other US national security-related issues, it has become clear that the drone programme is dangerously flawed. While the missiles themselves may be accurate in the sense that they strike what they are meant to, there are significant problems with the intelligence on which targets are hit. From errors in target selection — killing the wrong person — to the circumstances in which a target is struck — how many other individuals are nearby and whether they can be considered legitimate targets — the programme appears to be rife with problems. What is particularly alarming is that new

documents concern drone strikes carried out by the US military — which was thought to be relatively more transparent and, therefore, rigorous in its application of force than the ultra-secretive CIA campaign believed to control drone strikes inside Pakistan.

Now, with Pakistan having deployed and used an armed drone in Fata already, the mistakes of the US programme are perhaps being replicated here. The American experience suggests that when a new platform for waging war is acquired and then used against the most serious of national security threats in remote areas, troubling results will usually follow. Armed drones can be useful and can have a significant impact; the first three leaders of the Pakistani Taliban, for example, Nek Mohammad, Baitullah Mehsud and Hakeemullah Mehsud, are all believed to have been killed by US-operated drones. But there are genuine risks, posed not least by the backlash that can be caused by errant missile strikes. In the Pakistani case, that problem is compounded by the near-total absence of independent and verifiable battlefield information. The absence of public information tends to encourage impunity, a great deal of which can come from the belief that a just war is being waged against mortal enemies of the state. The US programme includes the president himself in the chain of command and yet many civilians are believed to have died. In Pakistan, who is authorised to select targets and who can authorise the firing of a missile? The people deserve to know what war measures are being taken in the name of the public interest.

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## Passport hassle

THERE was a time, not so long ago, when one of the primary and recurrent nightmares faced by the citizenry was having government-issued documents made or renewed. The offices that handle applications for identity cards, driving licences and passports, etc, used to be characterised by chaos. Thankfully, the situation has improved greatly. Several interventions during the years past, the most notable of which has been the computerisation and creation of the integrated National Database and Registration Authority, have resulted in a system where having documents issued or renewed is on the whole an exercise both sane and uncomplicated. The final frontier was the passport office, which lagged far behind the gains made by Nadra and other departments. Even here, though, some progress has been made: the facility of issuing machine-readable passports has been extended to some consulates and, the occasional shortages of booklets notwithstanding, the waiting period for issuance has been shortened. On Friday, a machine-readable passport facility was inaugurated at the Foreign Office in Islamabad, where, additionally, human resource will be trained to process the documents at Pakistani missions abroad.

This is a welcome step, but the Directorate General of Immigration and Passports needs reminding that there is one glaring deficiency that needs urgent rectification. This is the requirement that passports can only be renewed in the city from where they were issued — which makes no sense at all given that the data has all now been digitalised, cross-referenced with the Nadra database, and should be able to be accessed electronically from anywhere in the country. Given the Pakistani

citizenry's increasing inter-city migration and travel, this is an outmoded and very inconveniencing situation. There is no reason why a person should have to travel to another city merely to have his or her passport renewed, especially when so such hassle exists in terms of identity cards — both of which fall under the purview of the interior ministry. It is high time the system were changed and made more convenient.

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## Odd foreign policy priority

The houbara bustard is a highly regarded bird, but perhaps it too would be surprised to learn that it is a cornerstone of Pakistani foreign policy.

That rather astonishing claim has been made as part of the federal government's attempt to have overturned a Supreme Court edict last month banning any governments, provincial or federal, from issuing special hunting permits.

With the migratory season beginning next month and Arab leaders likely keen on securing their hunting permits here, the government appears to have been prompted into action, but in a typically ham-fisted manner.

*Also read: [Inviting Arabs to hunt is pillar of foreign policy: govt](#)*

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To be sure, there are several legal issues here, both regarding the status of the houbara bustard and whether the Supreme Court order overstepped its authority by issuing the blanket ban.

While local classifications can be manipulated by the authorities it is worth noting that the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the particular variant of the bustard hunted in Pakistan as ‘threatened’ — a classification below ‘endangered’ and ‘critically endangered’.

Moreover, the government’s review petition appears to make a reasonable case that wildlife laws grants the classifying authority to provincial governments. There is little indication that the existing classification of the bird in Balochistan, Punjab and Sindh is contrary to scientific evidence.

The problem is not that limited hunting of the houbara bustard is unacceptable. The problem is that — as the federal government has so crassly indicated in its review petition — governments here are keen to oblige Arab royals and leaders. That means issuing excessive hunting permits and doing nothing to ensure hunting parties comply with the conditions of the permits and not grossly exceed their quotas.

It was those excesses that led to a petition against the Sindh government’s decision to grant hunting permits last year and appears to have prompted first the Sindh High Court and then the Supreme Court into protecting a bird whose numbers are declining.

It remains to be seen how the Supreme Court will deal with the federal government’s objections to the hunting ban. Already,

however, in linking the ban to struggles on the foreign policy front with the Gulf and Middle Eastern countries, the government has opened itself to ridicule.

A far more sensible approach would have been to submit, along with the core legal arguments, a detailed plan on how the provincial and federal governments would ensure that only limited hunting in strict compliance with licence conditions will be allowed and what fresh conservation steps will be taken to protect the migratory birds.

The houbara bustard is a national treasure, not a cornerstone of foreign policy. Perhaps the PML-N needs to rethink its approach to policy, local and foreign — it increasingly appears feckless in both.

*Published in Dawn, October 19th, 2015*

## Muharram security

THOUGH sectarian violence has come down relatively in Pakistan, the authorities must remain on their toes to prevent acts of terrorism as the climax of the Muharram mourning period — Ashura — approaches.

There are indeed signs that the state is taking the threat seriously as a number of law-enforcement operations have recently

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managed to zero in on suspected militants who were reportedly planning to attack Muharram gatherings.

In Peshawar, police said on Friday they had recovered several suicide jackets that were to be used to target mourning processions. Two suspects have also been arrested in this connection.

*Take a look: [Security forces foil terror bid in Peshawar](#)*

Elsewhere, law enforcers say the suspected militants killed in Rawalpindi's Dhamial area were also planning to target mourning processions. Security sweeps have been conducted in various parts of Balochistan as well.

All of the above developments indicate that the state is relying on intelligence-led operations to prevent incidents of terrorist violence. This is, naturally, the best way to proceed as trying to stop a suicide bomber or gunman as they are about to strike is incredibly difficult and risky. The key is to neutralise militants far before they are able to attack.

The raids in different parts of the country show that intelligence-gathering has improved. However, it would be premature to assume that all bases have been covered: sectarian militants may currently be down, but they are far from being out of commission.

The infrastructure that sustains and supports hate groups is arguably intact, even though many of the leaders of such outfits may be in custody or keeping a low profile. Moreover, with

increasing talk of the presence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State — a virulently sectarian outfit — in Pakistan, a new threat has been added to the already existing ones.

Potential recruits to the cause in this country may be willing to carry out terrorist atrocities to 'impress' the IS core in the Middle East.

Hence, the state needs to sustain and expand its intelligence-led efforts to neutralise the threat of militant attacks. Muharram security — with large crowds gathering for processions and majalis in numerous locations across the country — is a major challenge every year.

Yet this year it will be an even more demanding task as the authorities have pledged to stamp out extremist violence under the National Action Plan; sectarian terror groups will, therefore, be looking to prove they are still a force to be reckoned with despite the state's efforts to uproot them.

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## Held Kashmir's status

FRIDAY's decision by the high court in India-held Kashmir on the status of the disputed territory constitutes a rebuff to the hard-line BJP government's attempt to alter the facts.

Besides declaring that the special status guaranteed to India-held Kashmir under Article 370 was permanent, the judges said the "limited sovereignty" it enjoyed was "beyond amendment, repeal or abrogation".

The judgement pointed out that the special status had its "roots" in the instrument of accession. For the uninitiated, let us point out that the instrument of accession was signed by a maharaja who had earlier signed a standstill agreement with Pakistan, giving the latter the right to control the railways and post.

Take a look: [J&K retains limited sovereignty, says high court](#)

It was on the basis of this instrument of accession signed by a fugitive maharaja that India sent troops to the Valley and has since occupied it in violation not only of various UN resolutions but also of the pledges given by several government leaders in India, including governor general Lord Mountbatten and prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Even though Indian governments have routinely reneged on their commitment to a plebiscite based on the demand for Kashmiri self-determination, they have had the common sense to let the territory maintain its 'special status' as guaranteed by the Indian constitution.

One of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election promises was to do away with the constitution's Article 370 and thus incorporate the Muslim-majority territory into the Indian Union.

Friday's decision should make it clear to Mr Modi that Kashmir's special status is justified, that the territory under Indian occupation is part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, that it was India itself which took the dispute to the UN, and that the only solution lies in giving the Kashmiri people the right to self-determination.

It is time Mr Modi concentrated his energies on controlling the communal tension which the increasing influence of Hindutva has triggered in India besides addressing the rights violations in IHK which international human rights bodies have repeatedly condemned.

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## PM's visit to US

PRIME Minister Nawaz Sharif's second visit to the White House to meet US President Barack Obama will occur in markedly different circumstances than the first one two years ago.

Then, the recently elected third-term Pakistani prime minister had talked of his government's "domestic and foreign policy strategies" — marked externally by a focus on Afghanistan and internally by the emphasis on the so-called four 'Es' — economy, energy, education and (combating) extremism.

Since then, the prime minister's strategies have either failed to materialise or their implementation has stalled. More worryingly, for the civilian dispensation and the democratic project, Mr Sharif has appeared an increasingly peripheral figure in shaping key national security and foreign policy issues.

The prime minister's only meaningful foreign policy/national security initiative has gone nowhere owing to the hostility of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the objections of hawks in the Pakistani security establishment.

The visit to the US could — sadly, the conditional nature of that 'could' must be emphasised — help Mr Sharif re-establish his relevance to foreign policy if a pragmatism and shrewdness hitherto not on display by civilians is demonstrated.

The increasingly narrow security-based relationship between the US and Pakistan may be a product of the Obama

administration's greatly diminished interest in the Af-Pak region now that a vast majority of US troops have left Afghanistan, but there remain several non-military, civilian-led areas in which cooperation between the US and Pakistan can be improved.

The energy crisis remains a massive challenge, but the Pakistani government appears not to have prioritised technical assistance and investment from the US in the electricity sector. Surely, given that the US has long been one of Pakistan's top trading partners, there is scope for both commercial and government-to-government cooperation.

In addition, with exports struggling and the once-talked-of increased Pakistani access to US markets seemingly having fallen off the agenda, now may be the time to revive serious negotiations on that front. On the security front, too, there is much that can be discussed by the civilian government: building the counterterrorism capabilities of the provinces in urban Pakistan will surely be attractive to the US.

Does, however, the Sharif government have any interest in going beyond the reiteration of banal statements and acting as a mere conduit on issues now firmly under the military leadership's control?

The run-up to this week's prime ministerial trip has so far only offered evidence to the contrary. A huddle of senior ministers virtually on the eve of the trip suggests a desultory, ad hoc approach.

Usually, the agenda for a head of state/leader of government meeting is shaped months in advance and finalised many weeks

ahead. If there are any meaningful discussions, they may well be on Afghanistan and nuclear matters it appears. But are the DG ISI's weekend trip and the rumoured upcoming visit of the COAS to the US more relevant in that regard?

*Published in Dawn, October 20th, 2015*

## Textile rescue package

IT has been more than a decade now that the large growth rates in the textile sector came crashing down, and every year since then, save for an anomalous one when the price of cotton yarn spiralled in the international markets, successive governments have been saying the same thing about the revival of this sector: productivity and quality need to be improved before the fortunes of the textile sector will change.

In each case, the demand from industry representatives has been broadly similar, and the same divisions have stymied an effective government response.

The industry has almost always asked for relief on energy pricing and taxation, whether through zero rating of exports or the more expeditious handling of refunds. And in every case, the government has found that the divisions between the spinning sector and the broad swath referred to as the 'value-added sector' have pulled it in opposite directions.

*Know more: [Value-added sector slams govt for giving no relief](#)*

The same story is repeating itself again today, as calls for a textile rescue package mount. Industry representatives are disappointed they will have to wait a little longer to hear back from the government on energy pricing, which is difficult to reduce given the constraints on the fiscal framework.

And they are strongly divided on the impact that the 10pc regulatory duty will have on the industry, with the spinning sector saying it will have to be positive for exports, and the value-added representatives pointing out that prices of yarn in the local market have already begun to shoot up, and in the finer categories of yarn the rise is quite substantial.

Not many in the industry have the option to avail themselves of the benefits of the DTRE scheme, they argue, meaning the duty exemptions available will only be accessed by very few. Their arguments are sound, and supported by available data.

The measures adopted by the government are more likely to benefit the spinning sector at the cost of the value-added one. Although the result might be a slight increase in exports, the quality of that increase will leave much to be desired.

In order to get out of this mode of constant haggling, the government should use the moment to impress upon the textile exporters' lobby the benefits of improved efficiency and quality. Sadly, however, as the experience of the last decade has amply illustrated, that remains an ever-receding goal.

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## Sarwar goes international

IN an effort to home in on the issue, the PTI has been responsible for an unnecessary expansion. Earlier, the party called for reforms from within, generally shunning influences from the West.

Now it is no longer shy to call for foreign intervention. The man in charge of PTI activities in Punjab, former governor Chaudhry Sarwar, has been heard threatening to take the case of alleged rigging to the European Union and beyond — in fact, to the ultimate supposed arbiter of all things, the United Nations.

Mr Sarwar, who is inclined to draw on his experience as a British lawmaker, has apparently been frustrated by instances of vote-shifting from NA-122 that his party says it has unearthed in the wake of its defeat in the by-election earlier this month. Could this be a joke? Or an empty threat at the most?

Also read: [PTI may knock on EU, UN doors for 'justice'](#)

If it was either, the maker of the testament betrayed no such weakness. At least one person who was present when the ex-governor made this startling revelation about his party's possible future plan believes — or has been led to believe — that he was warning in all earnestness.

For a country that has been forever indebted for direction to the foreign-returned, this would most certainly be taking Pakistani politics to a new level.

There have been many examples where those who claim to have lost trust in the Pakistani system have announced their intention to internationalise an issue.

Whereas the UN has invariably been the preferred adjudicator in many of these cases, the complainants have been less entrenched in the system here in comparison to where and how the PTI stands today.

It seems that Chaudhry Sarwar, who joined the PTI after an obviously eye-opening stint with the PML-N in the important position of Punjab governor, has been rather too late in wanting to invoke the good offices of the EU and UN.

The rebel PTI has since developed some interest in the system and could become the recipient of some unwanted frowns over Chaudhry Sarwar's adventurous international tours.

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## Growing intolerance

The BJP and Shiv Sena are both allies and competitors: joined together in government at the centre and in Maharashtra, but competing for the vote bank.

As the junior partner to the BJP and thought to be drifting to the margins in terms of relevance and popularity, the Shiv Sena now appears to be keen to grab the headlines in the only way it knows — letting loose its activists and indulging in vandalism and Pakistan-bashing.

Thrice now in a week, Shiv Sena activists have tried to bully and intimidate — and even assaulted in the case of Sudheendra Kulkarni, the host of the Mumbai leg of former foreign minister Khurshid Kasuri's book tour — public figures and officials seen as friendly to Pakistan or working towards normalisation of ties between the latter country and India.

*Also read: [From saffron to red: Welcome to Modi's India](#)*

On Monday, it was the PCB leadership's turn to be harassed in the city as Shiv Sena activists raided the BCCI headquarters ahead of a meeting to discuss a cricket series. Only after the personal intervention of the Maharashtra chief minister, the BJP's Devendra Fadnavis, and the provision of extra security was there some respite.

Yet, how much of the growing climate of intimidation and fear in India is because of the BJP's unwillingness to condemn

intolerance and Hindu extremism, indeed, in several instances directly encouraging it?

In many ways, in returning to its old habits, the Shiv Sena appears to have taken its cue from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's own brand of right-wing politics. Consider that at various points the BJP government in New Delhi has deliberately stoked anti-Pakistan sentiment and campaigned aggressively for the so-called Hinduisation of Indian politics.

A dangerous precedent was set last year with elections in India-held Kashmir. That result produced a historic PDP-BJP alliance, but it did so only after the BJP had further communalised politics in the disputed region.

Empowering and encouraging right-wing religious extremists may win short-term political benefits for a government, but this is at great cost to both state and society — costs that materialise relatively quickly.

The Pakistani experience, where there have been similar experiments with fusing religion and politics, ought to be a sobering example.

For the moment, however, neither the Shiv Sena nor the BJP leadership appear likely to be deterred. Secular, progressive Indians are beginning to raise their voices and condemn the distorted politics and religious extremism, but Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government continues to enjoy significant popularity.

Ideally, the BJP's popularity should give it the political space to condemn a junior partner's unacceptable behaviour. But in this case, the BJP's silence outside Maharashtra — where political considerations are provoking a response — appears to be either a tacit acceptance of the situation or a signal for the Shiv Sena to continue with its dangerous provocations. India may not yet be on a knife-edge, but it is tilting in the wrong direction.

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## Quetta bus explosion

ON Monday night, the spectre of violence revisited Quetta, as an explosion on a bus heading to the outskirts of the provincial capital killed at least 11 people. The identity of the perpetrators of the deed remains a mystery.

What complicates matters is that several strands of violence — principally sectarian and separatist — intersect in Balochistan, so it is difficult to pin the blame without conclusive proof — even though the Young Baloch Tigers claimed that the blast occurred during the shifting of explosives meant for another target.

*Also read: [Quetta bus explosion: a family in mourning](#)*

Soon after the tragedy, the Balochistan home minister ruled out the possibility of a sectarian attack. A final verdict can only be arrived at once a proper investigation has been carried out.

Violence of all shades has indeed come down in Balochistan after the National Action Plan was launched earlier this year.

Before this, however, there was a constant cycle of violence in the province. For example, the two major sectarian bombings of 2013 — which targeted members of the Shia Hazara community — claimed over 200 lives between them.

Moreover, separatist violence was also widespread, with 'settlers', migrant workers and personnel of law-enforcement agencies being routinely targeted.

And while much of the sectarian and separatist violence has been contained, as Monday's tragedy shows disruptive elements still have the capacity to cause harm in Balochistan. It must also be considered that this is a highly sensitive time of the year across the country, with Ashura just around the corner.

The authorities, including the Balochistan administration, have said they have taken extensive steps to secure Muharram-related events. Yet the bus explosion points to the fact that loopholes exist in the security plan.

The administration will need to redouble its efforts in order to keep the peace as the climax of Muharram approaches, especially considering that even localised acts of sectarian

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violence or terrorism have the potential to destabilise the rest of the country.

In the longer term, the government of Balochistan must review counterterrorism efforts across the province.

The authorities ought not to be complacent and should in fact build on whatever progress has been achieved thus far.

The people of Balochistan have seen far too much bloodshed and violence over the past few years, and all efforts must be made by the state to ensure that the horrific days of targeted killings, bomb blasts and general insecurity do not return to the province.

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## Road safety

EVEN the most cursory glance at the state of traffic in Pakistan's cities and towns is evidence enough that if there are any regulations at all, they are mostly along the lines of 'chaos rules'.

Particularly in the larger metropolises including Karachi and Lahore, it seems beyond the capabilities of the authorities to, for example, ensure that basic road safety laws are followed.

Beyond anecdotal evidence, there is cause for further concern: according to the Global Status Report on Road Safety 2015, released recently, Pakistan is amongst the minority countries in the world that do not have integrated death registration data for traffic accidents.

*Know more: [90pc road traffic deaths occur in developing countries: report](#)*

This essentially means that, at a national level, the country is not even keeping track of the trends and projections in this area.

True, there is a National Transport Research Centre but it receives no funding in the national budget. Neither have we managed to formulate a national road safety strategy or come up with a fatality reduction target. Shockingly, it seems that even regular inspections of the road infrastructure have not made it to the agenda of our administrators.

The list of failings is a long one, and the report finds that even where laws exist — such as seatbelt and motorcycle helmets requirements — they are poorly enforced.

Obviously, part of the blame must fall on the authorities that are directly concerned with traffic management; even so, it is hard not to sympathise with them given the monumentally difficult challenge they face.

And policymakers too have underperformed; for example, they have generally failed to make well-planned urban mass transit systems a priority.

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Nevertheless, it is a matter of some astonishment that road users themselves refuse to make either their own safety, or that of others, a priority.

Thousands of lives are lost every year in traffic accidents; yet that has not elicited from either the citizenry or its administrators any semblance of a strong response.

Manifestly, conditions on this country's roads will improve only when there is a lobby for it.

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## No security for prosecutors

THE decision by two special prosecutors appointed by the Sindh government to go public with their fears and grievances and dissociate themselves from the trials of several accused who are already in state custody is as damning an indictment of the shambolic criminal justice system in the country as there can be.

The Safoora Goth bus attack was one of the vilest and most shocking of terrorist attacks in the history of militancy and terrorism in the country. Forty-five innocent civilians lost their lives in the attack.

There was global condemnation of the massacre and international offers of support; the national and provincial civilian leaders as well as the military leadership were galvanised into action and hunting down the perpetrators.

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

Indeed, many suspects have been caught and await trial conducted by an anti-terrorism court. And yet, for some incomprehensible reason, the special prosecutors at the heart of the cases have neither been provided the security nor even paid the fees that they requested and were promised.

Even if, for the sake of argument, the special prosecutors have acted in haste or overreacted, it is the responsibility of the Sindh government to ensure that there is regular and meaningful supervision of the investigation and judicial process.

The very reason why the criminal justice system has an appallingly low conviction rate is because the basic steps are frequently bungled, at the investigation and prosecution stages.

The question is, who was responsible for coordinating with special prosecutors Mohammad Khan Buriro and Mubashir Mirza? Who was responsible for providing them security? Whose job was it to liaise with the police and the Rangers to ensure that Mr Buriro and Mr Mirza were adequately protected?

Surely, the people responsible cannot be nameless and faceless individuals — they should be identified and held responsible.

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Thus far, the PPP-led government in Sindh has referred only a relatively small number of terrorism cases to the military courts where matters remain opaque.

The PPP only reluctantly endorsed the 21st Amendment and the party remains opposed to the death penalty, which seems more likely to be applied in the military courts.

There could also be a political aspect, given the party's struggles with the military leadership in the province in recent times.

Yet, the net effect of its decision could have been a positive one — the Sindh government could have worked to revamp the prosecutorial and criminal justice systems in the province and improved its capacity for dealing with terrorism and militancy cases. But, as the complaints of Mr Buriro and Mr Mirza now suggest, this has not happened.

The Sindh government is not alone in its irresponsibility — in fact, not one of the other provincial administrations, and not even the federal government, has shown any interest whatsoever in carrying out criminal justice reforms.

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## CII's pronouncements

HAVING held a two-day meeting over Monday and Tuesday in Islamabad, the pronouncements of the Council of Islamic Ideology are in the news once again.

Amongst the subjects commented on during this 200th session were whether religious law required that a woman's hands and feet be covered at all times.

The council reiterated its stance against co-education, and CII chairman Maulana Sherani told the media that he wanted to revisit the status of Ahmadis through a lens that has the dangerous potential to create further divisions; on his agenda, too, it seems is a discussion on the imposition of religious tax on Pakistani non-Muslims.

*Also read: [Sharia doesn't ask women to cover face, hands or feet: CII](#)*

Sometime ago, the council faced strong criticism when it rejected the usefulness of DNA evidence in rape investigations. These are just a few of the comments made from time to time by CII members that leave many puzzled over their relevance.

The CII is tasked with advising the legislatures on whether or not a law runs contrary to Islamic thought. Its recommendations are in an advisory capacity only.

But the question to be raised, once again, is whether such a body is really needed in the context of a country whose federal and provincial legislatures are filled with hundreds of elected lawmakers, all supposedly capable of, and indeed mandated with, the task of coming to the correct decision whenever any issue crops up.

These lawmaking bodies have in recent years done good work through framing legislation that takes Pakistan towards the light; amongst the several examples are laws related to child marriage, the protection of women, and ‘honour’ killing.

It should not be forgotten that over the course of its history, Pakistan has experienced a number of interventions that have resulted in the polity and even legislature being steered in the direction of social and religious conservatism.

Moves by the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government to placate the right-wing lobby resulted in considerable losses being inflicted on liberal and inclusive forces.

A few years later, efforts by the Gen Ziaul Haq regime to ‘Islamise’ the country had far-reaching, knock-on consequences.

Given this, one of the greatest challenges in Pakistan’s journey towards progress is that it must cover many miles in the face of the determination of some sections to look towards the past.

The time may have come to wrap up the CII that appears out of touch with the many pressing problems Pakistan faces in these turbulent times.

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## Islamabad’s ‘pride’

ANYONE who has passed through the Benazir Bhutto International Airport in Islamabad will agree that its new ranking as the world’s ninth worst airport — previously it was the worst — is a well-deserved ‘honour’.

An international airport that chokes up with the arrival of more than one flight at the same time rightly deserves to take pride in this accomplishment.

From the approach, to the parking and entry into the terminal building, the airport can give any bus terminal in the country serious competition when it comes to the quality of planning.

*Also read: [Islamabad airport now ‘9th-worst in the world’](#)*

The check-in counters are a reminder of what bank branches looked like back in the era of nationalised banks, and the departure lounges are fit to be used as cattle pens.

Boarding a flight is an equally frenzied experience, especially if it is raining, because this international airport in the capital city

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of a nuclear-armed nation does not have passenger boarding bridges or any covered approach to the aircraft.

It is probably a good thing that the passengers surveyed for the list never used the VIP lounge because over there they have no such issues.

Over there, the tea is always steaming hot and the biscuits as crisp as the uniforms of the waiters who serve them. Had the group which compiled the list of the 10 worst airports in the world from a survey of passengers included any of Islamabad's legion of VIPs as respondents, it is likely the little airport with a big name would never have found such 'distinction'. That would have been grossly unfair.

It is high time that the tacky marvels of Islamabad, products of chronically malnourished aesthetics, be acknowledged for what they are, and the airport is as good a place to start as any.

So let's take some pride at this distinction, even if it is a little dubious, and let's also take heart from the thought that soon the new terminal will be ready, and this distinction will be lost forever. Better late than never.

*Published in Dawn, October 22nd, 2015*

## Accountability of politicians

CORRUPTION allegedly committed by elected and other public officials has stubbornly remained in the news, and rightly so.

True, the National Accountability Bureau is flawed in its design and operations, and there are accusations that governments have used it as a tool to carry out political witch-hunts.

But it is also true that a bigger problem was created when NAB effectively ceased operating for several years. Now, prompted by the superior judiciary, the media and general interest in accountability of public office holders, NAB is swinging into action.

Unsurprisingly, the politicians — and political parties generally — caught in the cross hairs of accountability are decrying NAB's stepped-up operations. The PPP in particular, though it is not alone, has voiced all manner of apprehensions about accountability.

The ruling party in Sindh, which governed at the centre for five years until 2013, has only one question: why just us? The party has seemingly even given up pretending that the party leadership is not mired in problematic financial malpractices; all the leadership seems to have by way of a defence is that the misdeeds of others are going unpunished.

For the PPP, and also the other political parties that protest whenever accountability nears their own leaderships and party

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officials, there is perhaps a need to restate the obvious. Corruption is costly.

Corruption erodes the state and hurts the average citizen. Corruption is neither inevitable nor something that cannot be restrained. And perhaps the most obvious fact: it is the job of elected officials to fight corruption, not fend off accountability.

When governments ignore the crucial aspects of governance, everyone is harmed. It is not surprising that countries with the rule of law and the efficient enforcement of rights tend to be more prosperous.

If a former minister for communications Arbab Alamgir and his ex-MNA wife are accused of acquiring assets beyond their known sources of income — those illegal sources of income, if proven eventually, will have come at the cost of ordinary businesses and taxpayers' money.

Worse, if a former Sindh education minister Pir Mazharul Haq, has in fact compromised on thousands of teaching jobs in the province, he has helped perpetuate for another generation the great injustice that is the country's public education system.

Surely, no sensible person can deny that allegations of corruption have been used in the past as a means to defame and marginalise politicians. Is the country really seeing a repeat of those unsavoury past practices?

*Also read: [NAB formally starts probe against officials, politicians](#)*

If the democratic project is to be strengthened and sustained, it is the politicians themselves who have to lead the way. Why is parliament not urgently taking up the issue of a new, independent, powerful accountability organisation?

Why are the major political parties not acting internally against elements accused of corruption? The plain truth is that when politicians do not do their jobs, it is the country that suffers.

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## Army 'supervision'

IN Pakistan, few will argue that when it comes to civil-military relations, the men in khaki have the upper hand.

But while the security establishment has indeed encroached upon ground that falls purely under the purview of the civilian side of the state, it is also true that the civilians — through their sins of omission and commission — have left a vacuum that has been filled by the military. Let us consider the conduct of elections.

On Wednesday, the secretary of the Election Commission told a news conference in Karachi that "all political parties and stakeholders" have demanded the deployment of army troops



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and Rangers' personnel during the polling process for local government elections due on Oct 31 in eight districts of Sindh.

The official said that due to the threat emanating from tribal enmities in Sukkur and Larkana divisions, the men in uniform would be deployed not only to provide security, but also for the transportation of election material and transfer of results from presiding officers to returning officers.

Indeed, where there is a threat of terrorism or militancy, the presence of security forces is required to provide safe cover to citizens to exercise their democratic right. But is the situation in the aforementioned districts so bad that troops will be required to supervise transportation of election material as well as the results?

In fact, it seems as if the state is making the deployment of army or paramilitary personnel during polls a part of the electoral process.

The security forces were deployed during the recently held by-polls in Punjab, while they will also reportedly be posted in that province during LG elections.

We must ask if routine election security is beyond the ability of the police. Or do these moves signify the civil administration's unwillingness or inability to do its job — just as the state has retreated in the field of counterterrorism?

The conduct of elections — above all things — must be a purely civilian exercise without army 'supervision'. If there are flaws

in the electoral process, and there are indeed many, then it is the civil administration that should be working hard to rectify them.

Or else, the political class as well as society at large should not complain when the armed forces take over more and more governance and administrative duties.

After all, it is the civilians that are failing to do their job and leaving the field wide open.

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## Solar tariff feud

AFTER an encouraging start, the growth of utility-scale solar power projects in Pakistan has hit a snag. The regulator wants to bring down the upfront tariff, which was determined at Rs14.2 in January on a levelised basis.

The first upfront tariff drew an enthusiastic response. Reportedly, Nepra wants to reduce this to Rs9.25 for the next generation of solar power projects, a large drop of more than 30pc. Investors, many of whom have already obtained Letters of Interest and have been waiting for the award of their tariff, say that the lower tariff makes their entire project unfeasible.

For whatever reason, much of the benefit of the higher tariff was availed of by projects in Punjab. Now the representatives of other provinces, especially Sindh, are furious that when their turn comes to undertake solar power projects, the regulator suddenly wants to effect a drastic reduction.

There is merit to the arguments being presented by the investors. The reported reduction offered by Nepra is difficult to justify.

They argue they want to equalise the tariff in Pakistan with neighbouring countries, but in the January determination they threw out all such considerations and decided to use the cost structures submitted by one Chinese company, which was setting up the first solar plant at the Quaid-i-Azam Solar Park in Punjab, as the basis for the entire tariff regime.

The Sindh government ought to have said more during the hearing for that tariff, but sadly it missed its chance. Nevertheless, a drastic reduction a few months down the road will only strengthen the perception that the government wants a few pet projects in Punjab to benefit and to stymie other provinces in the process.

A reduction may indeed be called for, but drastic reductions at this early stage of solar takeoff in Pakistan will damage the positive momentum that is building up behind the enterprise.

Nepra should listen carefully to the arguments presented by the intervenors in the hearing on Oct 15 before making a final decision.

## Meeting with Obama

IN the end, the meeting between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and US President Barack Obama appears to have gone as expected: mundane pledges to shore up the democratic system without any meaningful economic or diplomatic breakthroughs, and a great deal of conversation about regional security issues.

If the meeting appears to have gone off relatively smoothly, it may be because the core issues discussed are largely out of the control of the prime minister. While the joint statement emphasised the civilian nature of the meeting and specifically stated “President Obama and Prime Minister Sharif expressed their desire to expand the bilateral relationship in areas outside the traditional security realm in recognition of the multifaceted issues facing both countries”, the specifics of non-security cooperation were relatively thin and trivial.

The dearth of substantive civilian issues that were discussed can be gauged by the laudatory words in the joint statement for the domestic reforms programme reportedly undertaken by the PML-N government — ‘reforms’ and ‘successes’, including in the power sector, that will have come as news to most Pakistanis.

As indicated in the immediate run-up to the meeting, the substantive issues discussed were threefold: Afghanistan, terrorism and nuclear/strategic. While the language was diplomatic, the emphasis on Afghanistan was clear.

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The US wants Pakistan to help curb Afghan Taliban violence in Afghanistan and to nudge the new Taliban leadership to talks with Kabul.

While that is to be expected, the unhappy truth is that it is Mr Obama himself who appears to have no real strategy in Afghanistan.

When the most significant economic and military actor has no strategy to speak of, it compounds the difficulties faced by Afghanistan's neighbours — all that while readily acknowledging that it is in the genuine national interest of Pakistan to help stabilise Afghanistan and prevent the Taliban from returning to power there.

Time and again, the US has linked the terrorism issue to Pakistan needing to do more against anti-Afghan and anti-India elements. But then, there is little effort to try and help Pakistan find a viable partner in peace in the regional relationship with Afghanistan and India.

While Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has been a forceful advocate of improved ties with Pakistan, his government is fundamentally unstable because of the unity coalition and an inability to improve governance issues.

On the India side, the US president may have emphasised that an improvement in Pak-India relations is essential, but there is little sense that the US government will lean on India to curtail its aggressive rhetoric and engage in purposeful dialogue with Pakistan.

It does appear that a stable Afghanistan-Pakistan-India triangle is not part of Mr Obama's legacy plan. As for the nuclear discussion leaked to the US media ahead of the talks, it seems that the more relevant Pakistani guest in Washington may be Gen Raheel Sharif soon.

*Published in Dawn, October 24th, 2015*

## Day of mourning

DISTRESSINGLY, it has become a characteristic of today's Pakistan that places and occasions of faith, devotion and prayer are regarded with trepidation.

As sectarian and militant outfits have gained ground, the mourning processions taken out on Ashura have frequently found themselves in the cross hairs of the militants.

The December 2009 attack in Karachi that left over 40 people dead stands out for the scale of its atrocity, but it was only one amongst a series of incidents designed to frighten and intimidate a community and the population at large — even if religiously motivated violence has, overall, come down in recent months.

Such bleak thoughts will dominate the minds of the citizenry today, given that the month of mourning has already been marred by tragedy. Late last evening, a suspected suicide

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bombing targeted a Muharram procession in Jacobabad, Sindh, killing at least 20 people.

A day before, at least 11 people were killed when a suicide bomber hit an imambargah in Balochistan's Bolan district. The sectarian contours of these tragedies are obvious. This will only exacerbate the pressure on law-enforcement agencies today, and in the days to come.

Security has been beefed up across Balochistan and the rest of the country, but it is worth mulling over a comment made by provincial Chief Minister Abdul Malik Baloch: terrorists had fled to far-flung areas, he said, because of strict Ashura security in the cities.

This may well be taken as fairly accurate. In the larger cities and towns, the measures taken to protect Muharram processions are stringent and visible, though it can only be hoped that they are sufficient to stave off danger.

However, millions of people will be taking out processions all over the country today, many of them in small towns and villages. More citizens may be taken aim at by extremists looking for 'soft' targets on which to unleash horror.

Whether an attack takes place in a well-guarded city or in a more vulnerable remote community, the emotions inflicted on the citizenry at large are the same: fear, panic and grief — all of which are enhanced by the bloodied images that spill across screens and newsprint in the aftermath of the incident.

Here is where those who enforce the law must rise to the challenge, daunting though it is. All of the citizens of Pakistan are entitled to being provided equal and sufficient security by the state.

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## Glacier clean-up

A SMALL group of young volunteers decided on their own to make a trek up the Baltoro glacier to Concordia — described by many mountaineering guidebooks as the most stunning mountain destination in the world — for an unusual purpose.

They went to pick up the trash left behind by years of trekking by mountaineering expeditions that make this journey every year. By their own telling, the youngsters emerged from their trek with more than 2,500kg of trash, although the figure needs to be verified.

In any event, their effort draws attention to an important problem: Pakistan's glaciers are some of the most spectacular in the world, and attract a very large number of trekkers every year.

Yet the refuse left behind by these expeditions is rarely ever removed, and it piles up at an altitude where it does not degrade naturally due to the absence of bacteria at that altitude.

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With the passage of time, this problem has become increasingly severe, and if the figure given by the young group of volunteers for the quantity of trash they removed from Concordia and the Baltoro glacier is correct, then the amount of waste accumulating in such pristine and delicate environments is truly alarming.

The Gilgit-Baltistan administration should make arrangements for the proper disposal of trash at important campsites along the way.

More imperative, it should inform visitors to these areas about the hazards of leaving their trash behind. Many times it is the long trains of porters who accompany these expeditions that prove the most careless.

Making local communities aware of the problem is also a priority. Pakistan's natural beauty has left many people astounded, and the group that took it upon itself to remove trash from Concordia is to be congratulated for putting in the effort.

However, such work should not be left to volunteers; instead, it should be scaled up properly to ensure that the pristine and beautiful mountainous terrain of the north no longer remains sullied by garbage.

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## NSA appointment

IN the appointment of recently retired army general Nasser Khan Janjua as the country's new national security adviser are two stories.

The first story is the military's attempt to wrest away seemingly any space from the civilian government in the national security and foreign policy domains. In capturing the NSA slot, there are several advantages to the military.

The NSA is an important job and offers direct access to the civilian side of key foreign countries, which only awkwardly have been able to officially liaise with the military thus far. As NSA, Sartaj Aziz played a frontline role in reaching out to Afghanistan and India — and did so in a manner that reflected the civilian government's priorities.

*Know more: [Janjua appointed NSA](#)*

Arguably, in the case of India, that was what led to the debacle that was Ufa; it is difficult to imagine Mr Janjua being at Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's side and an Ufa-type declaration being approved by the Pakistani side.

Moreover, if talks do go ahead between the Indian and Pakistani NSAs, they are now likely to have a very different tone and tenor than if a PML-N appointee were to lead those talks.

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Furthermore, when security dialogues with the US, Afghanistan and key allies of Pakistan take place, the military will have direct and immediate input in that process.

The other story, however, is the failings of the civilians. It was Prime Minister Sharif's decision at the time of the cabinet formation in 2013 to retain the foreign and defence ministry portfolios for himself that set in motion a chain of events that have led to the present sorry state of affairs.

Compounding that original mistake, Mr Aziz was made both special adviser on foreign affairs and NSA — merging foreign policy with national security to no obvious benefit and allowing both the Foreign Office and the NSA position to suffer.

Then, it was the listless foreign policy performance of the government that created the opportunity for deep military intrusion.

The government is bereft of foreign policy ideas, as demonstrated once again by the White House meeting with US President Barack Obama last week.

Even on India, the only foreign policy issue the prime minister has shown sustained interest in, there have been a series of errors, culminating with Ufa, which has virtually eliminated any possibility of civilian initiatives on India.

If the military has eagerly grabbed space for itself, it is partly because a three-term prime minister and his veteran advisers

have proved utterly inept in the foreign policy and national security domains.

The question now is, what new domestic repercussions will there be with Mr Janjua's appointment.

Coming straight as the recently retired general is from Balochistan, how much influence will he exert on government policy and indeed its approach to the troubled province? Worryingly, the government may find itself further squeezed out, even domestically.

*Published in Dawn, October 26th, 2015*

## **Education budget**

IN return for a commitment that Pakistan would double its education budget in three years, American first lady Michelle Obama announced at a recent White House event, to which the prime minister's daughter Maryam Nawaz Sharif was invited, a \$70 million contribution towards the goal of educating adolescent girls in Pakistan.

Accepting the dollars is the easy part. But now comes the hard part: delivering on that commitment. If the event 'Let Girls Learn' was nothing more than a photo op and a public relations stunt, accompanied by the announcement of funds, then the matter ends there. But if we are serious about the commitment

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the Pakistani government has apparently made, there are a few things that must be borne in mind.

*Also read: [Spending for education to be doubled by 2018](#)*

This is not the first time such a pledge has been given. Two years ago, the planning minister Ahsan Iqbal gave the same commitment, saying the government intends to double the education budget in five years.

A few months earlier, the minister of state for education had said the same thing. Two years later, very little progress on this goal is visible. The provincial governments too have repeatedly given commitments that they will double the education budget, but to this day there has been no real forward movement.

Back in 2012, the KP government, for example, committed itself to doubling its education budget in one year, and for at least two years before this education allocations were enhanced by more than 40pc each year. But allocations hit a plateau since when the education budget increased by a meagre 31pc in the full three years subsequently.

The example of the provincial and federal governments shows that there is a strong verbal commitment to increasing education expenditures, but a real gap in actually delivering on the pledge.

It is important to ask here — when Ms Sharif is all smiles at Ms Obama's promise of funds for a small project to increase access to education for girls in return for yet another commitment —

how this latest pledge is different from the numerous similar ones given in the past.

Does the government have a plan for bringing about these increases, in coordination with the provincial governments who actually control most of the country's spending on education? At the moment, the answer appears to be 'no', but we can still hope that in the months and years to come we will discover otherwise.

*Published in Dawn, October 26th, 2015*

## Pakistan Post

THEY say the world turns and we must turn with it. Yet there are some parts of the past that it is difficult not to be nostalgic about — even when new realities are more convenient.

Few in the country, for example, would be able to contemplate without fond emotion the Radio Pakistan of old, the songs of Noor Jehan or Mehdi Hasan weaving their way scratchily through the evening air in towns and villages that had yet to be overtaken by traffic.

*Take a look: [Training for Pakistan Post staff](#)*

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A similar case can be made for Pakistan Post; the wait for the dak was once the standard duty given to small children in every household, rural or urban.

As the postman heaved into view, there would be trepidation: might he perhaps bring a loving missive from a faraway brother or husband? The anxiously awaited money order from the son in the city? Perhaps the book or magazine that had been ordered many weeks ago?

Sadly, most of this belongs to a lost world now, the red and yellow postboxes — once ubiquitous in cities and villages — now vandalised where they exist at all.

It is not that Pakistan Post did not put up a fight: services were improved, and in the cities GPOs and post offices were spruced up.

Still, perhaps the combined challenges posed by new technologies and private courier companies with deep pockets were always going to be too much.

Nevertheless, a Pakistan Post official told the media on Thursday that a new, comprehensive plan to revitalise the department had been chalked out, including staff training, electronic money transfer and tracking facilities etc.

The aim is to bring the entity up to international standards of customer satisfaction. This is welcome news indeed, and it can only be hoped that the postal authorities deliver on their promises.

Urbanisation or digitalisation notwithstanding, there is plenty of scope for the department to make itself relevant again, especially where the remote and rural communities in the country are concerned. It must be wished godspeed.

*Published in Dawn, October 26th, 2015*

## Jolted again

As if on cue, the earth shook one more time in October, 10 years to the month after the devastating quake of 2005. The great jolt of 2015 may compare with the quake of 2005 on the Richter scale, but on ground its aftermath has been very different.

This time, even though more than 100 precious lives were lost, there was mercifully no catastrophic damage and no calamitous loss of life on the scale we saw in 2005.

Of course, the main reason for this is that the epicentre of yesterday's temblor lay further away from densely populated urban centres, as well as the far greater depth at which it occurred. But there is no escaping the memories of 2005 it seems, and certainly no escaping the lessons that those memories left behind for us.

*Take a look: [Over 200 dead as 7.5 magnitude earthquake jolts Pakistan](#)*



Our country is built atop a zone of “heightened seismic hazard”, to use the language of geologists, and even after 2005, geologists had warned that only a fraction of the massive pent-up energy that has built up in the labyrinthine network of fault lines that we live on, had been released. The risk of more large earthquakes persists they said, and building codes needed to be strictly enforced to ensure concrete structures could withstand another shock. The jolt of 2015 is a reminder that this was no idle talk.

The scale of the devastation may have been lesser this time, but nevertheless it cannot be ignored. In some cases, we had a narrow miss, as the footage that showed the elevated portions of the Rawalpindi metro bus route shaking, made clear.

Landslides were reported in some parts of the Northern Areas, with a particularly big one at Nagar, but fortunately none near habitable areas and no glacial lake outburst floods were caused by the quake.

We were lucky, in spite of the considerable damage and hardship for untold numbers of people, but one is inevitably left wondering whether the structures built since 2005 have been constructed specifically to withstand a stronger shock.

Sadly, some channels chose to bring religious scholars on air and ask them what people could do to better prepare themselves for natural disasters. The response, predictably enough, was that people ought to become more pious and pray harder.

The jolt of 2015 is an unambiguous reminder that an earthquake can strike again at any moment, and that little can be done to prevent this in a zone of heightened seismic hazard.

An earthquake can strike at almost any place in the country. And if its epicentre should be any nearer, or its depth any shallower — factors that are entirely up to nature — then the consequences could be far more devastating than they were this time.

Let this episode jolt us into the awareness that it is high time we woke up and took disaster preparedness and response more seriously.

*Published in Dawn, October 27th, 2015*

## Blair’s confession

EVEN though he has confessed to his Iraqi transgressions more than once and apologised for them, it is for the first time that Tony Blair has admitted that there is an “element of truth” to the allegations that the rise of the self-styled Islamic State is linked to the 2003 Anglo-American invasion.

One can understand his claim that he is not sorry for Saddam Hussein’s fate — maybe, many people agree with him — but what is astonishing this time is his candid admission that “we” made a series of strategic mistakes that went into planning the invasion of a country that is located in the heart of the Middle East.

*Know more: [Iraq war contributed to rise of IS, says Tony Blair](#)*

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Basically, he spoke of three mistakes — wrong intelligence, flaws in planning and mistakes in “understanding what would happen” after Saddam Hussein was eliminated.

For more than a decade, the world has been aware of the faulty intelligence on which the Anglo-American invasion was based after the Western media exposed the truth about the doctored dossier and the “uranium trail”.

As a rule, any invasion based on wrong intelligence should fail — which wasn’t the case this time, for the Anglo-American invasion was a tactical success which destroyed the remnants of the Iraqi armed forces and ended the Baathist regime.

However, what turned out to be tragic for Iraq and for the region were the mistakes that “we” made not only in planning but in “our” understanding of what would happen after Hussein was ousted.

Throughout the confession, the former prime minister spoke of “we” and “our”, which obviously refer not only to his team but also to Britain’s allies across the Atlantic.

What Mr Blair failed to emphasise were two important points: one, the Baathist regime had welcomed the UN’s decision to send an inspection team to Iraq to find out whether it possessed weapons of mass destruction; and two, inspection team chief Hans Blix reported to the UN he had found “no smoking gun”.

The Bush-Blair duo still decided to go for the military option. What followed the success of the invasion is before us in the form of the IS.

Its meteoric success in warfare in 2014 was preceded by a great tragedy for Iraqi civilians, who were subjected to ‘sanctions’ that resulted in deaths still not fully counted.

The general view is that the invasion of the cradle of civilisation was launched either to destroy a country which Israel thought posed a security threat to it, or to control Iraq’s oil, or both.

*Published in Dawn, October 27th, 2015*

## Dengue deaths

THE tragedy of this country is not its inability to counter formidable challenges, but its irresponsible behaviour in terms of matters that are fairly easily resolved.

Unfortunately, the latter are not considered deserving of the requisite political will. Consider the case of dengue fever, the potentially life-threatening illness that is contracted through mosquito bites.

*Also read: [Dengue death toll rises to 10 in Rawalpindi](#)*

The outbreak can be widespread, as it was during the summer of 2011, when over 300 people lost their lives. Subsequently, fumigation drives were initiated along with an awareness-raising campaign.

Four years on, though, it is evident that the issue has not been dealt with firmly enough to bring it entirely under control. So far this season, in the Rawalpindi/Islamabad area, over 2,500 cases have been reported and the death of a teenager in Holy Family Hospital on Sunday brought up the number of lives lost to 10.

Lahore has fared better with only one death so far, but dozens of people have been infected and are in need of treatment; Karachi has so far seen at least seven deaths, and the reporting of dozens of cases.

There are two problems in the government's fight against dengue. First, there is the lack of consistency in carrying out fumigation drives and the areas they cover.

*Take a look: [Woman dies of dengue fever as Karachi death toll climbs to seven](#)*

Where, on the one hand, there are locations where spraying has never taken place, or has taken place too sporadically to be effective, on the other there are examples of folly such as that in Attock last month when dozens of schoolgirls fainted because of over-spraying in poorly ventilated premises.

Secondly, and much more shamefully, even now — several years after 'dengue' has become a familiar term in every

household in the country — it is still being reported that the contraction of the virus is not necessarily being properly identified in medical facilities, and that medical staff are slow in conducting tests and providing treatment.

Until these loopholes are plugged, more will continue to die. Is it too much to ask that provincial administrations sort themselves out?

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## Earthquake response

AS the dust from Monday's earthquake begins to settle, the death toll has been rising and the wounded continue to trickle in from remote areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Thus far the governments at the centre and in KP have done a commendable job of keeping themselves focused on the response to the disaster, and the prime minister's intention behind visiting the affected areas, particularly with the KP chief minister accompanying him, makes for all the right optics.

The announcement of a relief package is also timely and the professed intent to coordinate with the KP government before finalising it is also praiseworthy.

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*Also read: [Pakistan in the most active quake zone, says US Geological Survey](#)*

The lead role to be played by the National Disaster Management Authority in coordinating the damage assessment is important.

It is heartening to see that here too coordination failures with the provincial disaster management authorities do not appear to be turning into a sticking point as they have in the aftermath of past calamities.

But the continuing arrival of wounded people from remote locations to Peshawar is worth a second look. Large parts of Pakistan's topography are mountainous, and the habitations in these areas are vulnerable to even the mildest of shocks, whether seismic or climatic.

In some measure, this is dictated by facts on the ground: habitations in these areas are small and scattered widely, and distance poses a formidable barrier given the terrain. Roads are in poor condition; infrastructure and service delivery are barely present.

Yet, these communities bear the brunt of the natural disasters striking Pakistan in recent years, from the 2005 earthquake, to the floods of 2010, to the most recent glacial lake-driven flooding in Chitral in July. And now the earthquake too has hit Chitral harder than any other place; in fact, the majority of the almost 4,000 homes reportedly destroyed are in Chitral.

The work thus far has been decent, but two areas clearly need attention to strengthen the response next time.

One is greater attention to the habitations in the mountains, where deficient access and infrastructure as well as the poor quality of services serve as strong drivers of vulnerability. The other is clearer SOPs in dealing with a natural disaster in real time.

The lesson here is the strong vulnerability of mountain communities, which are considerable in number, as well as the lack of an SOP to determine when a state of disaster exists and who takes over at that point to coordinate the response, and what tools will be made available to that lead agency.

Once the crisis stage is over and the wounded are treated and the departed have been laid to rest, it would be a good idea for the government to work on these priorities to ensure that next time, should the scale be larger, the authorities are not overwhelmed.

*Published in Dawn, October 28th, 2015*

## Syrian solution

OVER the past few days, a flurry of diplomatic activity has been taking place to try and resolve the Syrian crisis.

On Monday, the Omani foreign minister was in Damascus for talks with Bashar al-Assad to discuss ways to end the brutal Syrian civil war raging since 2011.

Meanwhile, last week major international and regional powers met in Vienna to discuss Syria; representatives from Russia, the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey convened in the Austrian capital, though the talks themselves remained inconclusive.

The primary sticking point has been the future of Mr Assad. While Russia wants the Syrian strongman to be part of any transition process, the US appears to have little patience with him. And while the international community tries to resolve the crisis around the conference table, the violence in Syria itself continues as Russia conducts its air war — now a month old — against the self-styled Islamic State and other opponents of the regime, and the US and its Gulf allies continue to support groups fighting the government in Damascus.

True, the diplomatic manoeuvres are a positive sign, but it is unlikely they will deliver results unless the US and Russia — the two principal international actors in this theatre — loosen their rigid positions.

For example, Moscow should tone down its support for Bashar al-Assad while Washington should review its calls for regime

change. The fact is that a middle path is needed that can pave the way for an end to violence — over 250,000 people have been killed while more than 10 million have been displaced — and help usher in a representative set-up.

Without doubt Mr Assad has become controversial, yet a violent overthrow may cause more problems than it will solve.

The examples of the foreign overthrow of the former strongmen of Libya and Iraq are before us — after the violent removal of Muammar Qadhafi and Saddam Hussein, their respective states have struggled with chaotic conditions.

This should by no means be taken as an apologia for dictatorship; rather, what is needed in Syria is an organic, indigenous and gradual transition towards democracy.

For any chaotic, foreign-backed removal of the Assad regime may create a vacuum that can be filled by IS, or by groups that share the latter's mediaeval ideology.

Here the foreign friends of both the Syrian regime and the opposition must play their part and convince their allies to compromise and reach a negotiated, peaceful settlement to the civil war.

## Karachi mass transit

IT seems almost too good to be true: a part of a mass transit system for Karachi will be ready and operational within a year.

On Friday, the chief of the Karachi Infrastructure Development Board informed Sindh Governor Ishratul Ibad at a meeting that work on two lines of the Bus Rapid Transit System would begin next month and be completed within a year.

The people of Karachi should keep their fingers crossed, because they have been duped by successive governments over this issue for decades. The announcement also indicates that the Japanese-aided project to revive the Karachi Circular Railway has finally been abandoned after more than a decade of what can only be called a wild goose chase.

Now, going by last week's briefing, work on the Green and Orange lines will begin simultaneously next month and be completed in a year. Having waited for decades for a decent, comfortable and cheap mass transport system commensurate with the city's size, Karachiites would love to see the day when at least two of the four BRTS lines will start operating.

The federal and provincial governments should see to it that the cooperation between them doesn't fall victim to politics or bureaucratic wrangling, because both are funding a line each.

As the history of several mass transit schemes for Karachi shows, donors walked away frustrated because Islamabad and

Karachi failed to demonstrate the political will that was needed to execute a rail-based project.

Undeniably, there were many hurdles, including the stupefying scale of encroachments on KCR lands. That problem will affect the BRTS project too, because the dimensions of the illegal occupation of public lands are so overwhelming that it will need a determined bid by the government to clean it up.

We hope the deadline regarding the completion of work will be maintained and the people of the nation's biggest city will finally have at least the kind of mass transit system that Lahore and Rawalpindi-Islamabad have.

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## Climate change warning

ONLY days before the earthquake, an unusually early snowfall cut off large parts of the northern areas from the country, forcing an emergency evacuation of thousands of people.

The last people to be recovered were seven policemen who had been trapped for many days and had to be flown out in an army helicopter on Wednesday.

Parts of Naran were buried under four feet of snow, and, according to officials, this was the earliest snowfall in the area

since at least 40 years. This is not the first unusual weather event this year.

Earlier in July, a heavy downpour created flash floods and glacial lake bursts in Chitral valley, leaving a trail of destruction across the district. Unusual weather patterns of this sort are becoming more and more frequent, and almost always hit the mountainous areas the hardest.

Pakistan has enjoyed the blessings of nature since its earliest years. The abundant water flows in our river system and groundwater reservoirs helped fuel an expansion in agriculture that made the country self-sufficient in food in its first 25 years.

They also helped create the first large-scale power generation in the country. Our gas reservoirs have fuelled our industry, breathed life into our power plants, warmed our homes and fired our stoves for decades now and account for almost 50pc of all domestic fuel consumption.

They have largely cushioned us from the vicissitudes of the global oil market. But nature is a fickle mistress, and today, we are hearing warnings that Pakistan is on the front lines of climate change, and it sits in the shadow of the most seismically active fault lines in the world. There is, of course, no relationship between seismicity and climate change.

It would be a good idea for the leadership, as well as opinion makers of every stripe, to wake up to the full spectrum of challenges that climate change presents.

This spectrum runs from the most visible changes that can bring crises such as flooding and heatwaves in their wake to slower and more invisible changes such as the disruption of cropping cycles and agricultural yields.

It is time to heed the warnings being sounded repeatedly around the world that nature's mood is changing, and the dangers facing Pakistan are enormous. Perhaps it is time to approach these challenges with the same doggedness with which our leadership tapped the bounties of nature back in the 1960s, by making food self-sufficiency a national goal to which all other economic objectives had to be subordinated.

Nothing short of a national effort on the same scale is required today to take stock of the emerging spectrum of challenges and come up with the measures and resources required to face them.

Time is short. The freak occurrences of today will grow to unmanageable proportions soon. We must begin our efforts immediately to prepare for a turbulent tomorrow.

*Published in Dawn, October 29th, 2015*

## Insensitive discourse

A NUMBER of discussions are going on at the national level in the aftermath of Monday's devastating earthquake.

These include analyses of how well different organs of the state have been able to respond to the disaster, as well as debates on the ability of our infrastructure to withstand future temblors.

However, another conversation also continues and refuses to die down; this one suggests that the massive quake was 'divine punishment' for Pakistanis' 'sins', and in order to prevent such calamities, we as a nation must repent.

Much of this has been stated by ulema on TV while an advertisement published in a section of the press on behalf of the Jamaatud Dawa-linked Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation puts out its own black and white perspective. In the ad, JuD supremo Hafiz Saeed explains that the quake was the result of multiple transgressions by this nation, including an interest-based economy, 'obscenity', 'vulgarity' and 'un-Islamic systems'.

While all groups and individuals are free to express their opinions as long as these do not violate the law, such comments, especially at a time like this, are insensitive as well as irrational.

Primarily, it is unwise to link geological and natural phenomena such as earthquakes and floods to the strength, or lack thereof, of our moral character.

The temblor was a geological event, and the earth has been experiencing similarly destructive natural phenomena since time immemorial.

Of course, as many reports have pointed out, people started reciting verses from scripture when the quake struck — this is a natural reaction during such terrifying moments. But to say that Pakistan was rocked by an earthquake of great magnitude because its citizens have done 'evil' is unacceptable.

It is also unfortunate that the government has not come up with any counter-narrative to dispel such absurd notions.

The state should emphasise the fact that the quake was an act of nature and focus on telling the nation how it intends to improve infrastructure and disaster-management procedures to protect citizens from future calamities.

Groups like FIF have indeed been active in disaster relief — in times of national emergencies help is welcomed by the affected, even if it comes from elements that are inspired by a narrow ideology, and even though this is the primary responsibility of the state.

However, ideology and disaster relief must be delinked and such groups should be actively discouraged from giving sanctimonious sermons about morality while helping the victims of the earthquake.

*Published in Dawn, October 29th, 2015*



## Cross-border attack

THE killing of seven Frontier Corps personnel near the border with Afghanistan in South Waziristan is a grim reminder of the tensions in the region that, if not managed carefully, can explode.

Thus far the incident does not appear to have forced a hardening of rhetoric by either side, and the Pakistan military has not contradicted speculation that the attack was the work of Afghan-based anti-Pakistan militants as opposed to Afghan border security forces.

That suggests an unwillingness to allow the overall Pak-Afghan relationship to deteriorate once again — something that should be welcomed cautiously.

While Afghanistan does allege that there are continuing occasional, small-scale incidents involving Pakistani fire into eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan does complain of problems with the Afghan border forces, the overall situation between the security forces — at least along the border — appears to be much more stable compared to the recent troubles.

Yet, border incidents are a manifestation of a much wider problem: Pak-Afghan ties themselves. After a tumultuous few months, the bilateral relationship appears to be stabilising once again — but for how long and whether this time genuine and sustained breakthroughs are possible is not known.

The fighting season in Afghanistan is nearing an end; US troops are committed to remaining into 2017; Mullah Mansour seems to have established his leadership; the insurgency is wider and deadlier than it was a year ago; Pakistan insists it is still committed to bringing the Taliban to the peace table; and the Afghan unity government is yet to demonstrate it can put aside internal struggles.

These factors indicate that the possibility of an early and meaningful resumption of dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government seems neither worse nor necessarily better than it was earlier.

To make the unlikely possible, however, the old rule still applies: Pakistan and Afghanistan must work on bilateral ties.

Perhaps because it appears that outside powers, particularly the US and China, remain keenly interested in peace, some positive developments may be possible after all.

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## Rethinking ties with Iran

A VISIT by the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, Ali Shamkhani, to Pakistan has shone a brief spotlight on a common security concern of both countries: the possibility that the self-styled Islamic State has found a toehold in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region generally, and the commitment to ensuring that IS does not grow into a significant security threat in the area.

In that shared threat may lie the seeds of closer security cooperation between Iran and Pakistan and a greater Iranian role in stabilising and securing Afghanistan — both developments that ought to be welcomed, if handled with care.

*Know more: [Iran's role in Afghan talks welcome, says Aziz](#)*

Already in Afghanistan there has been a convergence of interests of the Afghan, Pakistani and American governments.

The fear of IS has surely played some role in the serious efforts to find a political solution to the crisis of the Afghan Taliban and the government there. Iran, sharing as it does a border with Afghanistan and long having influence in the country, could be yet another international piece of the jigsaw puzzle that is finding a sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

To the extent that Tehran can be encouraged to participate in and Pakistan can help make space for Iran in the diplomatic push to find a durable peace in Afghanistan, the state here should do whatever it can.

Beyond that there would be need for a fundamental rethink of the relationship with Iran if bilateral trade and investment are to be ramped up and the security relationship expanded beyond historically narrow concerns.

While Mr Shamkhani and his Pakistani hosts stressed that the goal is to widen and deepen overall bilateral ties, Pakistan has largely viewed the Pak-Iran relationship in the context of ties with Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, the US.

Unhappily, despite the US moving towards a thaw with Iran and even inviting it to participate in talks on the future of Syria, the Pakistani state seems to be moving in slow motion when it comes to the fast-changing economic and security climate with regard to our neighbour.

When Iran was eager to supply gas and electricity to Pakistan as it struggled under US-led sanctions, the authorities here appeared to have given too much weight to US concerns and effectively shelved many mutually beneficial economic programmes.

Now, with the US likely to be less forceful about closer ties between Pakistan and Iran, it appears it is the original concern regarding how Saudi Arabia may react that is coming to the fore. While much is made of the PML-N government's perceived closeness to the Saudi regime, the security establishment in the country too has old and close ties to the regime.

At some point, however, the political government and security establishment may want to consider if global politics is really the zero-sum game that they appear to approach it as.

## Fear of the taxman

THE Anti-Money Laundering Bill that the government has been struggling to translate into legislation limped towards its goal on Wednesday, when the Senate Standing Committee on Finance approved a heavily amended version.

The bill now goes to the House for debate, where it can be amended further. At issue were the provisions in the bill that would make tax evasion and fraud crimes on a par with money laundering, and cause those who have been accused to be denied travelling rights till their names are cleared.

Granted some of these provisions are draconian and the credibility of the tax bureaucracy is tainted with many allegations of corruption and misuse of powers to victimise individual politicians.

*Also read : [Senate committee refuses to include fiscal offences in Anti-Money Laundering Bill](#)*

This was the reason why the bill had stalled in the Senate to start off with, and these were the concerns raised during the debate in the standing committee, with three senators particularly alleging that the powers to pursue tax fraud were more likely to be misused to settle political scores.

A diluted version of the bill was then passed, where the draconian powers to punish tax evaders were largely cut out.

It would be easier to sympathise with the views aired by the dissenting senators were it not for the fact that politicians in Pakistan have become notorious worldwide for refusing to even file their returns, let alone pay anything in taxes.

A brief glance at the parliamentarians tax directory on the FBR website shows that even after years of being exposed as tax evaders, these same senators and MNAs are continuing to file paltry amounts in taxes even as they live in palatial homes and move about in expensive four-wheel-drive SUVs.

Kamil Agha, who was one of the three strong dissenters, filed Rs46,617 in taxes last year. Fateh Muhammad Hassani filed Rs386,792, meaning his taxable income would be less than Rs400,000 per month.

In fact, of all the senators, 17 have a zero in front of their name on the tax directory, and many others have declared a taxable liability of less than Rs100,000, putting themselves in the lowest income bracket eligible for tax.

What exactly is the principle these senators are defending? Is it to preserve democracy by not vesting too much power in one arm of the bureaucracy to prevent its misuse? Or is it simply their 'right' to accumulate wealth and assets without any accountability whatsoever? It is hard to say.

*Published in Dawn, October 30th, 2015*

## Media in disasters

OVER the course of the past decade or so, Pakistan has experienced so many disasters that helpful responses should have been in place by now.

Sadly enough, it seems that this is a polity that is loath to learn lessons. Consider, for example, the scene reported from Peshawar's Lady Reading Hospital on Monday when hurt and distressed people were being brought in for treatment in the wake of the earthquake.

Patients found that the entrance to the accident and emergency department was choked with mediapersons and the DSNG vans of various television channels, all vying to get closest to the scene of tragedy.

*Also read: [Earthquake brings back horrific memories](#)*

This, sadly, is considered 'action' in today's cut-throat world of competition over ratings and viewership. Inside the facility, doctors and nurses rushing to tend to the injured found cameras and microphones crowding rooms in which they had no business; further, considerable impediments were posed by the presence of large numbers of the general public and frequent visits by various VIPs.

Such was the disturbance that the chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pervez Khattak, who himself visited the hospital, advised the media and the general public to stay away; his words

were echoed by the district nazim, again as he was talking to the media at the facility.

Such a scene of counter-productiveness has become the norm rather than an aberration in Pakistan, whether the disaster is a bombing, an accident or any other incident. And it ought to be admitted that it is the electronic media that tends to lead in the display of such intrusive and impediment-causing behaviour.

Fierce competition leads to the employees of various media houses indulging in one-upmanship, always to the detriment of those affected by tragedy.

The situation could very easily be rectified, should media houses agree amongst themselves to respect the red lines and to rein in their workers. Will they though? Too often, they have proved that their commitment to Mammon surpasses that to humanity.

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## Local ambition

THE first phase of local government elections in Sindh and Punjab today is the much-awaited and essential next step in the process of the democratisation of Pakistan.

This election has taken a long time coming, with the provincial governments in Karachi and Lahore appearing to do everything within their power to delay this basic grass-roots exercise.

For all the vows about representative governments made from the podiums of the political parties which are running Sindh and Punjab, their reluctance is an admission of just how far the democracy caravan has to travel before its safe future can be predicted with any degree of confidence.

The change must come and this is precisely why the LG election in the two biggest provinces of the country is something to be celebrated. The flurry of activity in the areas which are going to vote today also includes some unwanted elements.

There has been violence and there are, as per the norm, allegations that the provincial governments are trying to drastically influence the polls.

Eyebrows have been raised because of the participation in the election of people who are not seen as having immaculate reputations.

On view are clannish tendencies and money is a huge factor; many of the less resourceful souls have been complaining about how their campaign has been overwhelmed by the sheer weight and glare of money.

There are issues where minorities and other marginalised groups such as women feel that they are denied due space to promote their aspirations and candidacy and prevented from playing an active role in running and improving the system of governance at the basic level.

Much before these concerns, there have been reports indicating that some work was needed to make the voting lists more comprehensive and error-free. There are challenges, complaints, accusations, systematic weaknesses, social fetishes and more.

Yet there is also an air of expectancy about these polls. Primarily, this is due to the fact that the exercise brings out popular ambition and that, with all its drawbacks, local politics engages the common man in a manner more direct than is possible during the elections for the national and provincial assemblies.

This is a brand the people should be able to relate to naturally and one they should be pushing for in order to have a more assertive role than they do in the higher tiers of governance.

The local grass-roots ambition must be nurtured to boost the effort to instal real, transparent, basic-level people's rule. This is going to be a tough battle.

Those who have been so unwilling to hold the local government polls are going to try and concentrate powers in their hands at the provincial level. Let's believe this is an irreversible process.

As the popular ambition at the grass roots grows stronger, it is for the higher tiers to reconcile themselves to sharing of power and responsibility.

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## Broad money spikes

THE latest release of monetary data by the State Bank shows some odd trends.

Government borrowing from the banking system shows a massive spike, going from Rs9.8bn in July to September last year to Rs497bn in the same period this fiscal year.

Meanwhile, currency in circulation, meaning the total amount of money circulating as cash rather than being held in bank deposits, shows a sustained increase, rising by 71pc over last year's levels during the same period.

Bank deposits show an accelerating decline, demonstrating a negative monetary impact of almost 40pc from the same period in 2014.

On the surface these developments look a little alarming but closer scrutiny reveals that the government is shifting the base of its borrowing away from the State Bank towards scheduled banks. So despite a massive increase in borrowing from the banking system, net borrowing comes in at Rs166bn, only slightly higher than last year's figure for the same period.

The main reason for this is the retirement of Rs329bn of debt taken directly from the State Bank in years past, which is highly inflationary and that is being shifted towards commercial banks as part of a large debt management plan.

The figures may not contain any cause for alarm, which is a relief, but they serve as a reminder nonetheless that the government's indebtedness continues to rise even as it enters the last year of its programme with the IMF.

Almost Rs1.6tr remain to be shifted to bank balance sheets as part of the same process in the months to come. This is creating a perverse incentive for the banks that can see almost endless risk-free lending to the government for the foreseeable future and are therefore left with no incentive to undertake private-sector credit expansion.

The results are all too apparent: deceleration in deposits and negative credit to the private sector, which basically means people are shying away from bringing their money to the bank, and businesses are retiring loans rather than taking them.

Overall, these trends point to a very unhealthy state of affairs in the economy, and the root cause of the malaise is largely fiscal in nature.

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The fact that these trends persist even as the government has crossed its halfway mark, and the fund programme is entering its twilight months, does raise some valid questions about the sustainability of the economic turnaround the government claims it has brought about.

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## Conservation of Lahore

CITIES are complicated, organic entities, and changes to their makeup must never be conceived of in broad brushstrokes; it is better to put plans on hold until all the potential consequences of their execution can be assessed in detail.

Unfortunately, it would appear that the administrators of Lahore, the historical timeline of which spans several centuries, have not even reached this rudimentary level of reasoning.

The Punjab chief minister's pet project, the (relatively) new metro bus system, had already been facing criticism on several counts — there are concerns about it changing the face of several localities with its elevated pathways, while many have asked whether this was the most expedient use of money.

Now an even more worrying dimension has been added. The route identified for the metro train project, work on which was

started recently, is such that several buildings and sites of great historical significance will be affected.

These include the Shalimar Gardens which is on Unesco's World Heritage List, and the colonial-era General Post Office. Even the Chauburji, whose grace has survived the centuries, and that, unfortunately, has been reduced to the centrepiece of a massive traffic roundabout in a densely tangled area, will not be spared it seems.

The issue has been taken up by several prominent citizens and organisations, and on Thursday a meeting convened by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan urged the government to review its urban development and other plans so that the principles of conservation are adhered to.

These crusaders for heritage and the environment are rightly arguing that poorly thought-out steps cannot be undone, and the direction in which the city is being taken will strip it of its soul.

The Punjab and Lahore administrations do urgently need to take all such reservations into account and to have the moral courage to go back to the drawing board if required.

City development and mass transit systems are vital, but there is no gainsaying the fact that irreparable harm can very easily be caused by them too.

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