

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of September, 2014

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Hard choices for the PML-N

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Sep 01, 2014

Having survived a tumultuous, disastrous weekend, the PML-N government somehow still has the opportunity to try and salvage the situation and save the democratic system from collapse.

Whether it will be able to do so will in large part depend on whether Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is willing to lead from the front and act decisively and quickly.

There are at least two things Mr Sharif needs to do: rally the democratic forces in the country to save the democratic system; and approach Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri to bring them back to the negotiating table.

In calling a joint session of parliament for Tuesday, the PML-N will be hoping to once again demonstrate that the political class is emphatically and solidly on the side of democracy – and that the unconstitutional and unjust demands of the anti-government protesters should not be given in to.

While the mainstream political parties in the country are largely in agreement with the government on the need to protect the democratic system, there is a great deal of unease at the PML-N's continuing mishandling of the political crisis.

Rather than grab the initiative and control the evolving political narrative, the PML-N strategy is a defensive one: the government continues to insist it is open to talks with the PTI and Mr Qadri but, especially when the possibility of a negotiated settlement recedes, seems far too comfortable relying on heavy-handed tactics by the law-enforcement agencies to repel street pressure.

Right or wrong, the time has passed when the PML-N could escape the present situation without making any concessions.

The PML-N will now have to make some big concessions – so why not approach the PTI and Mr Qadri with the big concessions that could entice them back to the negotiating table?

Despite their maximalist positions, both Mr Khan and Mr Qadri surely have various pressures that may make them amenable to a negotiated exit.

As the falling out between Mr Khan and PTI president Javed Hashmi yesterday demonstrated, Mr Khan cannot simply keep increasing the pressure on the government in any way possible without experiencing some kind of backlash from his base.

As if to underline that the PML-N leadership can and should do better, the army leadership put out a statement late last evening deploring the violence that occurred over the weekend and encouraging the government to seek a negotiated settlement.

If anything, it indicates that the army leadership is willing to give the prime minister a little more time before imposing a solution of its own.

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Perhaps what the prime minister and his team need to absorb is that the country has witnessed scenes far worse than what occurred on Saturday and yet seasoned and mature politicians have eventually found a way to resolve many past political crises.

Where there's a will there's usually a way.

Published in Dawn, September 1st, 2014

Violence must be probed

By [Editorial](#)

EVEN as the stand-off between the government and its opponents continues, the shocking, terrible events of Saturday evening as anti-government protesters and a brutal police force fought it out on Constitution Avenue need to be urgently investigated to prevent a repeat in the hours and days ahead.

Several confirmed deaths, hundreds injured, many more bruised and battered – whatever the legality or otherwise of what the protesters were attempting, they should not have been met with the kind of violent force that the civilian-run police of Islamabad and Punjab used against them.

The PML-N governments at the centre and in Punjab almost seem determined to make police violence a defining aspect of their rule.

Also Read: [Battleground Islamabad: Imran vows to advance as clashes continue](#)

Surely, having had weeks to prepare for any eventuality and having already experienced the disaster that was the Model Town incident in June, whoever was managing the police response on Saturday ought to be sacked, and worse.

Yet, as with so much else in the terrible morass that has become the PTI/PAT siege of Islamabad, it was also the two anti-government leaders, Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri, who proved to be reckless in the extreme with the lives of their supporters on Saturday evening.

Mr Khan's inflammatory rhetoric was specifically designed to whip his supporters into a frenzy – and for the so-called PTI tigers to take on the law-enforcement personnel and defeat them, as Mr Khan had vowed would happen.

But whatever Mr Khan did, he was comprehensively outdone by the premeditated and deliberate violence unleashed on the signal of Mr Qadri to his supporters.

If anything, it appeared that a naive Mr Khan had been lured into escalating an already dangerous situation into outright violence by a conniving Mr Qadri.

While both the PTI and PAT supporters marched towards the police lines, it was really the male PAT workers who appeared determined to trigger violence.

Organised, armed with non-lethal weapons, working in unison and to a plan, it was the PAT workers who lured women,

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children and helpless PTI supporters into the line of fire and from there it was the PAT workers who fought most of the pitched battles with the police through the night.

Mr Qadri and his PAT workers have much to answer for.

Dealing with Mr Qadri's violent agenda though is the government's responsibility. While guns were not used, deaths and injuries still occurred on Saturday.

That is simply a terrible performance by the police yet again.

Published in Dawn, September 1st, 2014

Army's questionable decisions

By [Editorial](#)

Updated Sep 02, 2014

A supporter (R) of PAT chief Tahirul Qadri, shakes hands with a soldier from the Pakistan Army, during the Revolution March towards the prime minister's house in Islamabad September 1, 2014.— Photo by Reuters

The carefully constructed veneer of neutrality that the army leadership had constructed through much of the national political crisis instigated by Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri has been torn apart.

Also Read: [ISPR statement reactions: Balanced, ominous - hedged?](#)

First, came the army's statement on Sunday, the third in a series of statements in recent days on the political crisis, which quite astonishingly elevated the legitimacy and credibility of the demands of Imran Khan, Tahirul Qadri and their violent protesters above that of the choices and actions of an elected government dealing with a political crisis.

Consider the sequence of events so far. When the army first publicly waded into the political crisis, it counselled restraint on all sides — as though it was the government that fundamentally still had some questions hanging over its legitimacy simply because Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri alleged so.

Next, the army crept towards the Khan/Qadri camp by urging the government to facilitate negotiations — as though it was the government that was being unreasonable, and not Mr Khan and Mr Qadri.

Now, staggeringly, the army has 'advised' the government not to use force against violent protesters and essentially told it to make whatever concessions necessary to placate Mr Khan and Mr Qadri.

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It is simply extraordinary that it is the PAT and PTI supporters who want to break into and occupy state buildings, but it is the government that has been rebuked.

It's as if the army is unaware — rather, unwilling — to acknowledge the constitutional scheme of things: it is the government that is supposed to give orders to the army, not the other way around.

The government has already issued its order: invoking Article 245.

On Saturday, as violent thugs attacked parliament, it was surely the army's duty to repel them.

But the soldiers stationed there did nothing and the army leadership the next day warned the government instead of the protesters — which largely explains why the protesters were able to continue their pitched battles with the police and attacked the PTV headquarters yesterday.

If that were not enough, yesterday also brought another thunderbolt: this time from within the PTI with party president Javed Hashmi indicating that Mr Khan is essentially doing what he has been asked and encouraged to do by the army leadership.

It took the ISPR a few hours to respond with the inevitable denial, but a mere denial is inadequate at this point. The functioning of the state stands paralysed because a few thousand protesters and their leaders have laid siege to state institutions.

Where is the army condemnation of that?

Would the army allow even a handful of peaceful protesters to gather outside GHQ for a few hours?

The army is hardly being 'neutral'. It is making a choice.

And, it is disappointing that choice is doing little to strengthen the constitutional, democratic and legitimate scheme of things.

Published in Dawn, September 2nd, 2014

Rock and a hard place

Reprehensible as it is, the reason why the police turned their ire on journalists as Islamabad's Constitution Avenue descended into chaos over the weekend is not hard to understand.

Amid stone-pelting, tear-gassing and with a baton-charge under way, the knowledge that footage of these scenes would shortly be splashed across television screens across the country would sit like a canker.

Pakistan's police aren't averse to using brutal methods when they feel the situation requires it, and few would welcome incontrovertible proof of it.

Also Read: [On Constitution Avenue, journalism is a crime](#)

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One cameraman says that he heard someone shout “beat up the media people”, and he was thereafter chased down and beaten severely.

All in all, at least 28 media persons were beaten up and injured, several despite having identified themselves with their press cards.

This episode is a sad reminder that journalists in Pakistan face a unique set of challenges while executing their jobs; the norms that have been developed to protect men and women in the media around the world are routinely flouted with shameless impunity here.

Were that not the case, how would it be possible to understand the fact that the two personalities at the centre of the scenes of destruction and unconstitutionality, Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri, felt that it was acceptable for them to hurl threats against journalists, media houses and their owners, and incite violence against them?

That said, media persons are also left vulnerable to attack by the actions and inactions of their employers and managers.

The question to be asked is, why were they so near the scene of action, as police and protesters fought it out, that they ended up becoming involved?

Why were they not at a safe distance, where neither side could mistake them for being part of the other?

Sadly enough, in the thirst for ratings and the lust for footage that is thought to increase viewership, Pakistan’s news

channels tend to put pressure on those out in the field to get as close as possible to the action — regardless of the dangers.

Then, they all too frequently fail to provide the gear that is essential in situations where conflict might develop: flak jackets, protective head-gear, and so on.

Why this neglect? Should journalists not have the right to expect that the organisations that employ them will look out for their safety and welfare, and not expect them to put themselves in danger?

Published in Dawn, September 2nd, 2014

Endangered temple

Published in Dawn, September 2nd, 2014

THE discrimination, often outright victimisation, suffered by religious minorities in Pakistan is well documented, and the violence that breaks out in this connection regrettably frequent.

It is not just the growing narrow-mindedness in society that leads to prejudice, what is of equal concern is that we have on our law books clauses — such as the so-called blasphemy law — that allow discrimination and harassment.

The white stripe on the national flag designed to represent Pakistan’s numerous minority-religion groups is ignored by both state and society.

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But there are also other, less obvious, ways in which the country's lack of ownership of and concern for such sections of the citizenry plays out.

Also Read : [Historic temple's days may be numbered](#)

Consider, for example, the prospect faced by the Maharishi Valmik Swamiji Mandir in Chaklala Cantonment, Rawalpindi, and the Hindu residents that live in the Gracy Lines area.

The 79-year-old temple is in active use and the only place of worship for Hindus in the vicinity. But the authorities want to build an educational and housing complex, and the demolishing of several Hindu residences is imminent.

While as yet no written notice has been issued concerning its demolition, devotees and others have reason to believe that the worst may happen.

There can be no argument that the temple must not be touched, given its importance to the Hindu community of the area as well as its historical significance.

Development is necessary, but not at the cost of citizens' rights and the country's heritage.

More than that, the authorities need to take heed of the signals being sent out by their uncaring attitude towards threatened structures that are dear to members of minority religions.

For, this is not the first time or the only place where such a move has been contemplated, or even executed. Would Muslim places of worship impeding 'development' be treated with

similar nonchalance? All places revered by the country's various religious communities must be treated equally.

The state must think of all faiths as equally sacrosanct.

Thar drought

Published in Dawn, September 3rd, 2014

The Thar region is once again in the news for the drought and starvation that are taking their toll on the inhabitants.

Though its geography and harsh climate make this arid corner of Sindh more vulnerable to disaster than other regions of the province, the absence of timely state intervention has aggravated the situation.

As reported, a drought-like situation is persisting in Thar as the area has hardly seen any rainfall during the monsoon season, which is nearing its end.

Difficult climatic conditions have added to the people's woes as a number of suicides — many said to be triggered by poverty related to the drought — have been reported.

What is equally worrisome is that there is not enough fodder for livestock.

Also Read: [Poverty causing people to kill themselves in drought-hit Thar](#)

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For Thar's desert dwellers, livestock is an essential part of their existence and can mean the difference between life and death.

And while Tharis do migrate to other parts of Sindh to find seasonal work, reports indicate that some families are leaving their native areas permanently.

Drought-like conditions were also experienced earlier this year, with a number of children reportedly dying from malnutrition.

Though there was some controversy over the exact number of deaths, this time locals say that unless steps are taken, the effects of the drought may be even more severe.

Also Read: [Thar drought situation termed alarming](#)

A similar lack of water and fodder has been reported from parts of Jamshoro and Dadu districts.

The Sindh government has said it is taking steps to address the situation in the affected areas, and is providing wheat to the population.

While the provision of food and water will temporarily stave off starvation, a plan needs to be put in place to save the area's livestock as well.

Hence supplying fodder to the people's animals must also be a priority.

And as drought is not uncommon in Thar, for the long term policies need to be framed so that the people and livestock in

the area are protected from the devastating effects of natural disasters.

Continuing impunity

Published in Dawn, September 3rd, 2014

Though civil society and all those in Pakistan who favour the rule of law have been campaigning hard for an end to enforced disappearances, little has changed on the ground.

The state is believed to be either complicit as elements within the security establishment allegedly abduct citizens, or it is powerless to stop the forces involved in this atrocious practice.

If such impunity continues, it will severely affect efforts to build a state that operates within the parameters of the law.

To mark the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances observed last week, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon remarked that the practice "cannot be tolerated in the 21st century".

He added that numerous states worldwide had started secretly detaining people as part of counterterrorism efforts.

Also Read : [It's time to end enforced disappearances: UN chief](#)

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In a related statement, the International Commission of Jurists, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were critical of Pakistan's lack of efforts at ending such abductions.

The rights bodies said the state had failed to: establish the facts about the missing persons; to bring those involved in their abduction to justice; and to compensate victims and families.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has also observed that while such disappearances have decreased in Balochistan, the number of incidents in KP and Sindh have gone up.

Despite the international and local outrage, it appears as if the practice is far from being stamped out.

Recently, missing persons' campaigner Amina Janjua claimed that 91 people had been killed in different detention centres in KP.

She said there were over 40 such facilities in the province in which around 2,000 people were being held.

On the other hand, the bodies of three missing Baloch men were discovered on the outskirts of Karachi last week.

Activist Abdul Qadeer Baloch said the names of the men were on the list of the missing persons. And we must remember that the mystery of mass graves discovered earlier this year in Balochistan's Khuzdar district remains unsolved.

The missing persons' issue has persisted despite the intervention of the Supreme Court; this shows an utter contempt for the law by those responsible.

If the state suspects a certain individual is involved in militancy or terrorism of any kind — whether of the separatist or Islamist variety — a case must be lodged and due process followed, giving the accused the right to defend himself.

Abducting people and thereafter dumping their corpses is a completely unacceptable counterterrorism tactic.

Economic impact of street politics

Published in Dawn, September 3rd, 2014

ISLAMABAD may be shut, but Pakistan is open for business.

Factories are humming, raw materials are moving freely on the roads, people are commuting to and from work, cellular communications remain uninterrupted.

The rupee has seen some declines, more likely due to developments intrinsic to the markets themselves rather than the crisis.

Forex reserves are broadly stable, the stock market has seen good days and bad throughout this affair, and there have been only marginal declines.

Also Read: [Stocks fall as political strife continues](#)

Even the collection of taxes and recovery of bills in the power sector are normal, despite calls for ‘civil disobedience’.

Attempts to spread the rallies to Lahore and Karachi and other cities have floundered and there has been little disruption in day-to-day life anywhere else in Pakistan, with no general strikes, no closures of roads and petrol pumps, schools or offices, no halt in public transport.

Beyond this, however, the damage is huge, difficult to quantify, and of a lasting nature.

Those looking in from the outside are asking how sturdy the political system in Pakistan really is.

Talks with the IMF are at a standstill, and it is likely that the next tranche will be delayed. The World Bank is worried about the future of its massive Country Partnership Strategy, worth \$11bn and announced just this April.

Meanwhile, government work has ground to a halt, and although the machinery continues to function in the rest of the country, the ministries and secretariats and committees are all on standby.

In short, whereas daily life is largely untouched, the strategic outlook for the country has suffered a considerable blow.

This is the exact opposite of what street politics is meant to do.

Crippling everyday life yields maximum political dividends and leaves no lasting damage, but harming the strategic outlook

brings no political rewards and causes lasting damage to the economy.

This is why street politics usually targets the operation of daily life in the cities rather than fighting in the streets of the capital. In this case, however, the reverse has happened — we saw fighting in the streets of the capital while it was business as usual everywhere else.

It is disheartening to note that this confrontational strategy was used by the PTI, a party that drew ample support from professional and corporate circles — precisely those who are heavily invested in the strategic outlook — and a party that prided itself for its focus on the economy.

They should have reconsidered the decision to resort to street politics if they lacked the capacity to credibly wage the fight. Once the passions wane and the rallies disperse, perhaps the party leadership should reflect on the consequences of their actions.

There are some amongst them who were hailed as exemplars of professional excellence, and those people will now need to explain the merits of their decisions to a very sceptical audience.

Asylum seekers' plight

Published in Dawn, September 4th, 2014

The anguish of the Pakistani asylum seekers in Sri Lanka can only be imagined.

After several weeks of uncertainty, a court in that country has allowed the authorities to deport a number of individuals, comprising Ahmadis, Christians and Hazara Shias, who were seeking refugee status on the grounds of religious persecution in Pakistan.

They are among a group of around 150 Pakistanis rounded up in June by the Sri Lankan government and kept in detention camps while their fate was deliberated upon.

Also read: [Sri Lanka court gives green light to deport Pakistani asylum seekers](#)

According to the UNHCR, which has complained it was not allowed access to the asylum seekers to assess their claims, 128 of them have already been deported since then, after the Sri Lankan government dismissively categorised the group as 'economic migrants'.

The process was halted when human rights groups criticised the haste with which the authorities had seemingly washed their hands of the issue.

The case was turned over to the court which has by its decision validated Sri Lanka's official stance that these individuals were a threat to the country's security and public health.

Given the asylum-seekers' religious affiliations, the veracity of their claims can scarcely be overstated. Sri Lanka would have done well to take a humane view of their quest for refuge; its indifference to their plight goes against the spirit of legal and moral obligations towards vulnerable groups.

In any case, now that avenues of escape for them appear to be closed, it is incumbent upon Pakistan to ensure their misery is not further compounded when they return by them being dragged into legal tangles based upon the deportation reports issued by Sri Lanka.

Already, the Pakistan Foreign Office has done them a disservice by saying they have 'badmouthed' Pakistan in Sri Lanka, a statement that dispenses with logic (for why would they seek asylum had they not been driven away by intolerable injustice here?) and compassion, for it has tarred them as 'unpatriotic' — a dangerous label in a milieu where minorities are anyway seen as second-class citizens.

War against education

Published in Dawn, September 4th, 2014

The political turmoil in Islamabad seems to have eclipsed all other crises in the country.

Amongst these is the religious extremists' assault on education in Balochistan, which is gaining ground.

A school in Turbat, district Kech, was torched by an outfit calling itself 'Al Jihad' late on Monday.

Also Read: [School set on fire in Kech district](#)

The militants left pamphlets in the area warning people not to send their children to English-medium schools and to only educate them at madressahs.

The principal of the targeted school has said he had been receiving threats from unknown individuals for several months. This is far from the first incident of its kind in Balochistan.

A school was set on fire by unknown assailants in Panjgur a few days ago while a number of educational institutions were attacked in the same district in May.

At that time, a group calling itself Al Furqan al Islami had claimed responsibility for the violence; then, too, the militants had issues with the teaching of English, while they also railed against coeducation.

The attacks led to the lengthy closure of schools in the area while a number of parents reportedly relocated to Quetta and Karachi so as to continue their children's education.

Due to the conflict between the state and separatists in Balochistan, other critical issues — such as the attacks targeting schools — are not getting the requisite attention. But what is particularly disturbing is that some Baloch activists have said that religious extremists opposed to women's education, who they allege are supported by the state, are responsible for the terror campaign against schools.

They have also said that the same extremist elements are trying to spark sectarian conflict within Baloch society. While sectarian violence against Balochistan's Hazara Shia population has continued for quite a few years, members of the Zikri community were targeted in Awaran last week after a considerable length of time.

As it is, the state of education in Balochistan is miserable.

One figure suggests that over two million children are out of school, while the separatist insurgency has resulted in many non-Baloch educators leaving the troubled region. Unless action is taken against those organising violent forays targeting schools, religious extremists will only be emboldened.

We have witnessed militants turn hundreds of schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Fata to rubble.

The Balochistan government must act now while the security agencies, which have a heavy footprint in the province, must help the administration bring to justice the militants involved.

Parliament's hour

Published in Dawn, September 4th, 2014

After too many days of the spotlight being on scenes of violence and extra-constitutional demands, there is reason now to let the attention be captured by a legitimate, sovereign body: parliament.

Nevertheless, the members of the assembly debating and drafting the resolution to address the crisis would be served well by a little humility and reflection.

Also read: [Focus shifts from protesters as nation tunes into NA session](#)

As a strong counter-narrative emerges from the debates at the joint session of parliament — and as the protesters grow weary of the fight — there will be a strong temptation to be dismissive of the protesters and their demands.

Certainly, the methods and rhetoric employed by the PTI and PAT should be rejected.

The use of insurrectionary language and imagery, and the clashes in the streets, might to some give the protests the look or feel of a popular uprising of some sort, an effect that was clearly intentional.

But despite the sound and fury, it's also true that with or without a 'scriptwriter', this is ultimately a political conflict and must be resolved using political means.

And there is no forum better than parliament for the resolution of political conflicts.

The PTI has provided the government, and more generally parliament, with an opening in Shah Mahmood Qureshi's speech before the joint session.

He specifically said that they "wish to resolve this crisis" and spoke at length about the sanctity of parliament. More importantly, he referred to continuing talks and said nothing about the resignations his party's MNAs have already submitted.

The government needs to acknowledge this opening and find a way to build on it rather than get into a point-by-point debate on all the other issues that he also raised. Most importantly, parliament should resist casting this affair in 'them vs. us' terms.

The PTI and PAT have created this binary distinction, but a sustainable compromise depends on parliament rising above it.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's absence while Mr Qureshi spoke sent the wrong signal — of disinterest, for example.

The prime minister has a right to be offended by some of the rhetoric the PTI has hurled in his direction in the last couple of weeks, but taking personal umbrage at the theatric stunts of politics is not — let's face it — good politics.

What would make for good politics at this time would be to respond to the signal that the PTI has just sent: that it is willing

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to return to talks and seek a negotiated path out of this situation.

Parliament needs now to show further maturity, and advance a concrete package of suggestions that go beyond what has been put on the table thus far.

On the government's side, it can give a pledge to parliament: if, after appropriately defining the terms, the judicial commission does indeed find evidence of "massive rigging" as alleged, the government will call for midterm elections.

The 'vulgarity' argument

Published in Dawn, September 5th, 2014

WOMEN young and old, some with heads bare and others covered, swaying to the music, singing, cheering or with eyes moist with emotion, the definitive female presence at the PTI and PAT protests in Islamabad has been quite remarkable, and life-affirming.

After all, this is a country where grotesque depredations against women to deprive them of their agency make regular headlines. Moreover, these women — particularly those who have arrived from other cities — have persevered through the daily discomforts and indignities that are inevitable in a society where the norms of public space are geared to men's convenience. It was perhaps inevitable then, that the bogey of 'vulgarity', which is conveniently dredged up not only to

shame women but also the men associated with them, would be repeatedly raised during the course of the protests by some of the august personalities that populate our political sphere.

Among those who have voiced their outrage that our culture is being 'undermined' by the women's assertive visibility in the public domain and that 'indecent' is being promoted by those 'dancing' to music, are Hamza Sharif and, at the joint session of parliament currently under way, Maulana Fazlur Rehman as well as —surprisingly — Aftab Sherpao.

The topic has also agitated the minds of many a participant at television talk shows and generated debate on social media. It is extremely unfortunate that despite the political discourse having broadened considerably over the course of democracy taking root in Pakistan, a process in which the extent of women's participation is an important marker of success, the urge to define their behavioural parameters in the political sphere remains as robust as ever.

It springs from the same mindset that prevents women from casting their vote in some parts of the country on the excuse of 'cultural constraints'. Pakistan is not a homogenous society with a uniform culture, and the attempt to score political points through specious arguments suggesting otherwise is an affront to all women in the country.

Military's figures

Published in Dawn, September 5th, 2014

AFTER a considerable silence, the military has spoken about the ongoing operation against TTP militants in North Waziristan.

Going by the statistics released by the army on Wednesday, it appears that a significant number of militants have been killed in Operation Zarb-i-Azb, while the terrorist infrastructure has also been neutralised.

The army says 910 suspected militants have been killed since the operation commenced in June while 27 'factories' used to produce IEDs and other munitions have been destroyed. Over 80 troops have also died in the line of duty. The army says it has carried out over 2,200 counter terrorism operations countrywide in the wake of the action in the tribal belt, which is why, it believes, there has been minimal backlash. Indeed, the latter observation is valid — before the operation was launched there were fears that there would be a vicious terrorist backlash against any state action deemed hostile by the militants.

Thankfully, the only major terrorist attack witnessed since Zarb-i-Azb began was the assault on two airbases in Quetta last month. However, the operation will only be judged a success in the long term if the militant infrastructure is permanently dismantled and those with blood on their hands brought to justice.

Meanwhile, the banned TTP has contested the military's claims, saying only 25 to 30 of its fighters have been killed, adding that its bomb factories had been shifted to 'safe places'. The militants may be on the run, but a clear victory against them can only be achieved if they are put out of business altogether. For example, despite counter terrorism operations conducted in Bajaur and Swat in the past, these areas have yet to return to complete normalcy.

In a related vein, the US military leadership has offered its own view of the operation in North Waziristan. Senior US generals have said it is "too soon" to evaluate the action in the tribal areas. They have observed that Pakistan will have to "clear, hold and build" the territory that has been taken back from militants.

They have a point. But what the Americans in Afghanistan and the government in Kabul can do on their part is to prevent militants on the run from taking refuge in the areas bordering Pakistan, while the latter must challenge those using its territory to fight Kabul. Most importantly, the US can help Pakistan rebuild North Waziristan in order to help bring the troubled area into the national mainstream.

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Generosity of spirit required

Published in Dawn, September 5th, 2014

WHETHER the de-escalation of the political crisis is a temporary phenomenon or a permanent one only the days ahead will reveal.

There is certainly pressure building on Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri to end their protest and seek some kind of deal on electoral reforms with the government, but the PTI and PAT chiefs have so far displayed fickle behaviour. Consider how last Saturday, in the space of a couple of hours, the situation along Constitution Avenue changed from optimism that a deal may be imminent to dark violence after Mr Khan and Mr Qadri teamed up and unleashed their supporters.

Yet, there is a sense that the protesters are running out of options. A steady rain in the capital yesterday added to the problems facing the PTI and PAT because the focus remained on the joint session of parliament instead of what Mr Khan and Mr Qadri said or did.

If the de-escalation is to be permanent, however, the PML-N will have to demonstrate magnanimity of spirit that has been lacking for the most part. To be sure, Mr Khan, Mr Qadri and their respective protesters have appeared undeserving of sympathy. But the onus on the government is greater — Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his government are the custodians of the democratic project and must do whatever they can to bring all political forces, even implacable foes, closer into the political mainstream.

Contradictory as some of the PTI rhetoric has been — contrast what Imran Khan has routinely said from atop his shipping container with what Shah Mehmood Qureshi said inside parliament — the PML-N should focus on the pro-democracy and pro-parliamentary words of PTI leaders and find some common cause. Even now, it would make much sense to offer some generous concessions to the PTI and PAT in return for the withdrawal of their demand for the prime minister's resignation and a quick end to the protests, thereby allowing the country to move on from this most damaging of episodes.

The PML-N ought to pay heed to what has made the present de-escalation possible: activating parliament in defence of democracy and widespread revulsion at the PTI's and PAT's aggressive, violent tactics over the weekend. The anti-democratic forces in the country are still strong, but they no longer have carte blanche. To achieve their goals, the anti-democratic forces need a political foil, a government that makes repeated mistakes and is low on public goodwill.

For much of this crisis, the PML-N has been that political foil, a bumbling opponent that has compounded virtually every problem it has had to contend with. Now that life is flowing out of the anti-government protests and flowing back into a government that had seemingly been clinging to survival, the PML-N must take advantage of the opening to build bridges in the larger interest of democracy.

Nisar's tirade

Published in Dawn, September 6th, 2014

Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan's disparaging remarks about Senator Aitzaz Ahsan were completely uncalled for. The hard-fought moment of unity that was to be parliament's finest hour has now been blemished by the clash of egos.

It could not have been easy for members of the treasury benches, particularly Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his notoriously insular inner circle, to hear the speech with which Mr Ahsan opened the joint session of parliament on Tuesday.

But it would have been to their benefit had they appreciated his words of support, and left the rest for later.

Mr Sharif should know that his conduct and demeanour — and that of his ministers — are under intense public scrutiny at the moment.

People want to know what lessons the PML-N ministers are drawing from this tough test of nerves and will.

If they emerge from this affair a little more humbled, a little more sensitive to the virtues of inclusiveness, and a little more responsive to the needs of the ruled rather than to the prerogatives of the rulers, that in itself would be a promising new start.

The apology proffered by the prime minister to a justifiably annoyed Mr Ahsan for the conduct of his minister was indeed a positive sign.

It showed that he is alive to the perils of the moment. But it was characteristically muted and failed to undo the damage done.

The apology only served to highlight the fact that the prime minister has yet to effectively advise his ministers on the importance of remaining calm and not being provoked by the opposition's observations and criticism.

After all, a few bruised egos are not too big a price to pay for putting this whole matter to rest.

Unfortunately, Mr Sharif's government is perceived as cliquish, insular and withdrawn, with a style of governance in which all too often personality trumps policy.

It is about time that the government understood that people are looking for a change in attitudes and performance.

Getting bogged down in a tit-for-tat exchange of allegations and belligerent rhetoric with other political parties precisely when the latter are preparing to rally around parliament and, by extension, the government, fuels the impression that it will be business as usual — or worse — once the dust settles.

Both parties in this battle of egos should let go of the matter, and the prime minister should lead the way in this.

Rain disaster once more

Published in Dawn, September 6th, 2014

The country had been experiencing an unusually quiet monsoon — until the crippling downpour in Peshawar on Aug 21.

In fact, the rain that has lashed parts of Kashmir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab this week has added to the situation the familiar elements of helplessness and resignation.

Some 80 deaths have been reported so far, the water levels in the rivers are rising and many districts in northeastern Punjab and the area above it are in imminent danger of flash floods.

Also Read: [Death toll touches 86 as torrential rains continue](#)

Submerged and paralysed by water, Lahore and Rawalpindi are being cited as examples of how not to prepare for heavy rain.

Meanwhile, further into the districts, the challenge of rescue and of controlling rain damage is formidable.

It is on such occasions that the rural areas that otherwise exist on the periphery of national attention make an appearance. News from ‘distant’ villages indicates large-scale destruction and experts warn this may be only the beginning of the trouble unleashed by the skies.

It may take time to quantify the damage caused by these initial torrents, and the death count could turn out to be less. But there

is no dispute that the authorities have a huge crisis on their hands.

They have no option but to put off all else and get down to fighting the rain and flood.

The Punjab chief minister has said his government will tap all resources to counter the challenge and his counterpart in KP has also committed his government to pledging the best it has.

These two gentlemen, however, are severely hampered by the absence of the lower tier — the local governments — which could have been useful in combating the floods.

The absence of local governments is not the only evidence of how we keep delaying what is necessary until disaster strikes.

The country has witnessed frequent floods.

The most devastating of these in the recent past was the 2010 deluge that caused large-scale destruction and sent experts scurrying to study remedies for the future.

A summing up of what preventive actions could have been taken to avoid or minimise this latest emergency will again unmask inefficiency and sluggishness.

But while this standard exercise can be put off for the moment, a few other points can be repeated. In today’s world, large dams and smaller reservoirs are considered essential to controlling the river flow. This is where Pakistan has made slow progress.

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It may not be a practical solution in the case of each river, but where it is, the need is to proceed with urgency.

Also, encroachments are the first to be exposed to a river's rage. Narrowing the path of the rivers results in tides which are ready to boil over.

It is crucial that when containment is discussed the issue of encroachment is seriously addressed.

Split in militant ranks

Published in Dawn, September 6th, 2014

Cracks within the militant edifice in Pakistan seem to be widening as the banned TTP and Jamaatul Ahrar, a splinter group that parted ways with the parent outfit recently, have been engaging in an intense war of words.

In a 'charge sheet' released on Thursday, Ehsanullah Ehsan, now the JA spokesman, claimed that "the killers" of some leading militants, as well as 200 Mehsud fighters, were "sitting beside" TTP supremo Mullah Fazlullah.

Also Read : [TTP commanders form new splinter group 'Jamatul Ahrar'](#)

Ehsan had more unkind words for the TTP chief, saying that Fazlullah lacked leadership qualities and that militants were fast abandoning the TTP ship being steered by him.

There seems to be some truth to Ehsan's assertion about Fazlullah's growing isolation as it appears that numerous militant factions from different parts of Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are now gathering under the JA banner.

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

In fact, the Umar Khalid Khorasani-led group from Mohmand, which has thrown in its lot with the JA, has been active in launching terrorist attacks in recent weeks.

But the militant mudslinging has not been one-sided; earlier the Fazlullah-led TTP had poured scorn on JA's fraternising with 'suspicious' groups and had criticised the new outfit for causing dissension within jihadist ranks.

Of course, in the murky world of militant politics, betrayal, power struggles and intrigues are not unknown. For example, there were some rumblings when Fazlullah took the TTP reins, while Hakeemullah Mehsud and Waliur Rehman had also reportedly locked horns at one time.

It is likely that the military operation in North Waziristan has aided in widening the militants' internal split.

But the time to celebrate is not here yet as the militant threat has not dissipated; its nature has simply changed.

After all, it is entirely possible that breakaway factions will be even more ferocious than their mother outfit.

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The security establishment will need to closely follow developments, keeping an eye specifically on Jamaatul Ahrar.

The state's counterterrorism policy needs to be tailored in accordance with the capabilities of the various strands of militancy emerging in the country.

Lahore submerged

Published in Dawn, September 7th, 2014

MUCH of Lahore is currently inundated and a large number of homes, especially those in low-income localities, have suffered damage because of the incoming floods. All damage to infrastructure in the city is in addition to the tragedy of numerous rain-related deaths in the provincial capital and north-country generally.

Most of the deaths occurred because of roofs and walls collapsing as the heavens opened up, an indictment of the enforcement — or, more accurately, the lack thereof — of building codes. But the flooding in Lahore in particular, a city that is used to the annual monsoon deluge, holds certain crucial lessons for the authorities here as well as in other cities.

The last time Lahore witnessed flooding on a comparable scale was in 1996, when the situation was so dire that people had to be rescued from their homes in boats. Following this experience, city authorities invested heavily in putting in place storm drainage networks and buying related machinery. Since

then, even through the flood years, Lahore has remained relatively free from the long-term accumulation of water.

Of course, after a downpour water would collect in some places, but it did not overwhelm the drainage network. So what happened this time around? True, the recent rains were heavy and sustained, but this time certain other factors have compounded the crisis.

One factor is linked to the city's needs for drainage. These have, over the years, outstripped the capacity of the drainage network which has not been developed at a commensurate pace. City development, if it is to be sustainable in the long term, is a constant balancing act.

Every new building, road expansion or constricted green space has an impact on other areas of the city. For example, an extra lane for motorists means, as we see in parts of Canal Road, less green space which is vital for absorbing water. Without holistic and thorough planning that takes a broad view, situations such as the one currently faced by Lahore are inevitable.

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Chinese whispers

Published in Dawn, September 7th, 2014

THE cancellation of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan has added to the anxiety being felt by investors — foreign and domestic — in Pakistan.

The cancellation, as well as the manner in which it has been announced, is a reminder of the steep cost Pakistan is paying for the current power struggle in the country.

It is symptomatic of the chaotic response that the government is giving to the challenge posed by the continuing protests that the announcement came on the personal Twitter feed of a senior government minister while official circles were busy denying the news. Then the Chinese foreign office refused direct comment on the matter, only saying that since the visit had not been officially announced, the question of any cancellation did not arise.

More than 36 hours later, Pakistan's Foreign Office finally issued a formal announcement of the visit being put off. In the intervening period, speculation and rumour filled the air, and many of the privately posed reasons behind the cancellation will continue circulating long after the dust has settled.

More damaging has been the question of the fate of the \$34bn worth of projects the president was said to be bringing with him. The government is saying these 'investments' have

suffered a setback, whereas PTI chief Imran Khan has been loudly responding that these projects were never 'investments' to start with, they were loans, and compared their terms — 7pc — with those offered by multilaterals like the World Bank and the ADB.

Both parties are being disingenuous at best. The funds in question are not investments, they are more like project financing that require the machinery in question to be procured from Chinese entities. And comparing their terms to those offered by the multilaterals makes no sense since the latter do not want to touch coal-fired power plants due to environmental concerns.

Pakistan's next best alternative is private financing, which if the returns on the last Eurobonds are anything to go by, are close to 7pc. The uncertainty is further aggravated by Moody's announcement that Pakistan's Fund programme might be disrupted by the protests.

The stalled talks on the fourth review with the Fund are a further reminder that large stakeholders from outside are waiting for the protests to be resolved. The government needs to do a better job of communicating the facts to prevent rumours and speculation from taking over.

The intransigence continues

Published in Dawn, September 7th, 2014

WEEKS into a crisis and after many rounds of negotiations between the government and the PTI, the intransigence of both sides is striking.

The PTI chief Imran Khan has publicly once again declared that his party will not leave Constitution Avenue until Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif resigns — a claim that could be true, but may also have something to do with keeping the pressure on the PML-N negotiators.

Meanwhile, Mr Khan's negotiating team has told the government that it wants a judicial super-commission, backed by a presidential ordinance and having extraordinary powers, to announce binding judgements in the case of even individual constituencies where the May 2013 elections are disputed by the PTI.

The difference between the super-commission demanded by the PTI and the judicial commission offered by the PML-N is not trivial: the PTI's proposal would bypass existing rules, including constitutional ones, in a way that would turn the electoral and criminal systems on their head. Surely, while the overall goal of the PTI may be to prove the electoral fraud it has alleged and to reform the electoral system, putting the horse before the cart is not in the greater interest of the democratic system.

Yet, for every bit of foolishness and intransigence the PTI can demonstrate, the PML-N seems willing to outdo its political foe. Quite remarkably, at this late stage, the PML-N negotiating team has once again closed the door to recounts in selected constituencies. That was the original demand of the PTI, a demand the PML-N dithered on until the PTI demands increased, before Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself publicly suggested that re-examining the results in selected constituencies could be done.

Quite why the PML-N would backtrack now on a pledge made in public by the prime minister is difficult to fathom — unless the PML-N is reverting to type and once again misreading the situation. Following PTI president Javed Hashmi's bombshell allegations and the robust defence of the democratic system in the joint session of parliament, the PML-N had regained some of the space it had lost during last weekend's violence on Constitution Avenue. Feeling a little more confident, perhaps the PML-N decided now is not the time to make any concessions to the protesters.

That would be a mistake. The joint session of parliament has made it clear that while the opposition fully supports the democratic system, many a party in the opposition has reservations about last year's results too. To close the door on vote recounts as the PML-N negotiators have done is to not only rile up the PTI, but to potentially provoke the ire of the opposition. While the PML-N has democratic allies, it does not have carte blanche. Misreading the mood of parliament could end up giving the protesters outside parliament another lease of life.

Harder push for solution needed

Published in Dawn, September 8th, 2014

It was a quiet weekend on the political front, but perhaps in a crisis that is as confounding as it is protracted no news may be good news — at least nothing untoward happened over the weekend.

The Aitzaz Ahsan-Nisar Ali Khan war of words that had overshadowed the joint session of parliament looks to be over after the interior minister addressed the media on Saturday and did not instigate further trouble for the PML-N.

Meanwhile, the PTI and PAT returned to the respective sites they occupied in the red zone on Aug 19 likely to try and dodge further trouble with the Supreme Court which has been unhappy about the protests significantly disrupting access to state institutions housed on Constitution Avenue.

Also read: [Parliament unity in disarray over Chaudhry Nisar row](#)

The PTI and PML-N negotiating teams also steered clear of controversy and eschewed tough, unnecessary public statements.

Notwithstanding Imran Khan reiterating that he will accept nothing short of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's resignation it appears that serious floods in parts of the country may have

dampened the appetite for theatrics and hyperbole on both sides, at least temporarily.

A quiet weekend though does not mean that the PML-N can afford to show anything but urgency in dealing with the PTI and PAT.

The government would be mistaken if it thinks the longer the crisis is drawn out the more life will flow out of the protests.

The at times paltry numbers gathered during the day at the PTI and PAT protests venues can quickly swell if Imran Khan or Tahirul Qadri decide to move towards Prime Minister House or parliament, as they did two Saturdays ago.

Moreover, and perhaps most crucially, it is not known where the army leadership truly stands on the issue.

If the army leadership were to stop treating the government and the protesters as co-equals and clearly come out backing the government, the danger to the democratic system at least would pass and make the matter of dealing with the PTI and PAT demands that much easier.

Also Read: [Stalemate persists, but negotiators keep hopes alive](#)

The veneer of army neutrality though still remains — which is surely a large part of the reason why the crisis continues and why the protesters and their leaders may yet do something reckless.

At this point, it is perhaps important for the civilian interlocutors who have been trying to bridge the differences

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between the government and the PTI/PAT to redouble their efforts.

The PPP and Jamaat-i-Islami leadership in particular have put in a lot of effort already and may find that a concerted push at this stage could bring the government and the protesters to the middle ground that has proved elusive so far.

But with the joint session of parliament set to resume today, other parties could also try and play a role in resolving the impasse.

The joint session went off track towards the end of the week; perhaps this week parliament can get down to doing some serious work.

Anti-IS coalition

Published in Dawn, September 8th, 2014

Foreign military intervention in the world's trouble spots is not always a sustainable option. In the past few decades, we have seen slow-motion disasters unfold in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya thanks to military intervention planned in distant capitals.

We have seen Nato and its allies bombard countries and engineer regime change, but efforts at 'nation building' have failed miserably.

Now, it seems a fresh military adventure is in the offing.

Following the recent Nato summit in Wales, a new coalition has been formed to counter the self-styled Islamic State.

Led by the US and containing other major Nato members and Australia, the coalition will also try and bring Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikhdoms on board.

There can be little argument with the premise: the Islamic State is a vicious transnational terrorist outfit that needs to be defanged for the security of the Middle East and the international community. The problem is with the modus operandi.

We must ask if a Western-led military incursion is the best solution to eliminating IS. While American jets have already bombed extremist targets in Iraq, there are several plot holes America and its allies have not plugged.

It was indeed the Iraqi government that had asked for US air strikes to target IS. But any attempt to successfully neutralise the extremist group will need the support of regional states.

While Turkey is already a coalition member and the Saudis are being wooed, other regional countries are being ignored.

Also Read: [US forms new coalition to fight IS](#)

The Americans have said Iran and Syria will have no role to play in the coalition, despite signals from Tehran and Damascus that they are willing to confront IS from a joint

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platform. Ignoring these two regional countries would be a definite folly.

Iran, Saudi Arabia and the West all see the extremist outfit as a common enemy; why, then, isolate Tehran when it wields considerable influence in Baghdad and shares a long border with Iraq? Keeping Bashar al-Assad out of the picture also defies logic.

Also Read: [IS fears make Gulf monarchies set aside differences](#)

As much as the West dislikes the Syrian strongman, it is parts of his country that IS occupies. Attacking IS in Syria while simultaneously aiding the anti-Assad opposition will only add to the anarchy that prevails in that hapless country and may actually end up helping the militant organisation.

Perhaps the most effective way in which the West and its allies can counter the group is by cutting off its sources of manpower and funding.

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The great unwashed

Published in Dawn, September 9th, 2014

Listening to the way some politicians talk about the protesters in Islamabad, one would think the biggest problem we face at the moment is that the pristine grounds of the parliament building have been sullied by the arrival of an unwashed multitude.

For instance, Minister Ahsan Iqbal opened his speech in parliament by referring to the large numbers camped out on the lawns, and complained the protesters had made the parking lot inaccessible.

PkMAP chief Mahmood Khan Achakzai, too, had contempt for the protesters' drying their laundry on the front fence of the Supreme Court.

Also Read: [SC's objection to 'dirty laundry' ignored](#)

Privately, political figures from the PPP — whose populist slogans revolve round lifting people out of poverty — have also showed their disdain for the camped protesters who have now been pushed out of parliament's grounds by the authorities.

These attitudes reek of snobbery unbecoming of elected officials.

There was a time when only bureaucrats held the masses in disdain while elected politicians showed awareness of the citizenry's toils.

Also Read: [In pouring rain, Qadri lashes out at parliamentarians](#)

But it appears that the establishment of democracy has caused our leadership to retreat further behind their hermetically sealed walls of privilege.

Even at the best of times, Constitution Avenue remains inaccessible to those whose interests are supposedly served from there. It is exempt from load-shedding, its roads are never flooded, and ordinary people dare not venture too close.

The protest encampments on the lawns of parliament, then, represent the reality of a nation whose rulers have failed to live up to their promises of improving the lot of the people.

No doubt, those leading the protesters have a flawed approach to achieving their goals, and showed themselves remarkably contemptuous of the inviolability of the country's most representative forum when they permitted their armed rioters to run amok in parliament's precincts.

However, that is no excuse for the attitude of our politicians.

They must recognise that they are the representatives of the people — the same men, women and children who hung their laundry out to dry in front of the Supreme Court.

Poor flood planning

Published in Dawn, September 9th, 2014

Far from the sound and fury in Islamabad that is agitating many a politician's mind, the hapless millions watch as vast swathes of land are inundated by the rivers Chenab and Jhelum in flood.

The speed at which the current tragedy has unfolded is astounding; up until just before the weekend, the relevant authorities — while concerned about the levels of rain that the northern parts of the country were receiving — continued to believe that this year, Pakistan would not suffer flooding on a large scale.

And true, the eastern rivers Ravi and Sutlej have not yet shown any signs of being unable to cope with the volume of water.

Also Read: [Deadly monsoon: Pakistan's climate change policy remains stagnant](#)

But in central Punjab, the area through which the Jhelum and Chenab wind their way, havoc has been wreaked: many thousands are marooned, dozens upon dozens of settlements and villages inundated, and cattle, livelihoods and lives have been washed away.

With the memory of the catastrophic floods of recent years still fresh, many are wondering why the present calamity was not better predicted, flood warnings were not issued with more urgency, and mitigation measures not undertaken speedily.

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District administrations are now swinging ponderously into action and in some areas the army has had to step in to assist.

But surely, prior experience should have meant that Pakistan would now have a system in place to effectively deal with floods.

Also Read: [No lessons learnt in flood-hit Pakistan](#)

A few villagers confessed to the media that they did receive warning of rising water levels and that they were asked to evacuate.

But, as they pointed out, would anyone abandon residences and belongings believing that they would be protected or helped by the government and administration?

Surely the rulers can do better than focusing all their attention on the political manoeuvrings taking place in the capital city.

The task immediately at hand is to rescue those who are stranded or marooned, and ensure that adequate food, shelter and medicine are made available. Beyond that, though, there is still time to take measures to mitigate more damage further downstream in Sindh where the waters are headed.

As is usual, prior to the monsoons some routine measures had been taken, such as the desultory silting of a few — but by no means all — canals in the extensive irrigation network. But that has not proved very effective, and may not stave off further damage now.

The relevant sections of the administration and bureaucracy, both at the federal and provincial levels, need to urgently review the situation on the ground and plug in the gaps on a war footing.

Without that, there is risk of downstream areas being trapped in the same situation as the one prevailing in central Punjab.

Further, Pakistan needs to critically review its understanding of what the monsoon weather pattern is evolving into, and revise its preparedness in that context.

Extremism within the ranks

Published in Dawn, September 10th, 2014

Much secrecy shrouds the foiled militant attack targeting the navy's dockyard in Karachi.

Though the attack occurred on Saturday, the maritime force released only sketchy details about the incident on Monday.

But while there was no official word on who the 'miscreants' — as the navy described the assailants — were, the banned TTP's spokesman, Shahidullah Shahid, said on Tuesday that his outfit was responsible for the assault with "support from inside" the navy.

Also Read: [Taliban claim attack on Karachi navy dockyard](#)

At the other end, security officials say that Al Qaeda carried out the attack — again with help from within the naval force.

Regardless of which militant group targeted the naval facility, if claims of insider help are correct, it would reinforce the view that weeding out militant sympathisers within the armed forces is as daunting a task as eliminating battle-hardened terrorist groups.

Also Read: [Terror attack thwarted at Karachi Naval Dockyard](#)

Unfortunately, there are a number of cases where those with links to the armed forces have been involved in attacks targeting the military.

For example, former army medic ‘Dr’ Usman was said to be one of the main planners in the 2009 militant assault on GHQ.

Also, dreaded militant Adnan Rasheed, known for various terrorist exploits, including a failed attempt on Pervez Musharraf’s life, was a former air force man before he turned his guns on the state.

Even in the navy’s case it was reported that information from within the service was provided to those involved in the 2011 Mehran base raid.

So concerns of insider links are valid, as such attacks bear out. With the army conducting a counterterrorism operation in North Waziristan, the military is especially in the cross hairs of militants of all stripes.

Yet, there has been little focus on de-radicalisation efforts within the services.

The increased use of religious language and symbolism in the forces began during the Zia era; however, today the problem has morphed into something far more complicated — and dangerous.

The foremost challenge is to conduct a thorough internal audit of the armed forces to identify any personnel with links to terrorist groups. If such connections are established, firm disciplinary action is required.

The second — and admittedly more challenging — step is to initiate a long-term de-radicalisation process within the forces.

While the military’s top brass — including the serving army chief — has spoken about the threat posed by extremism in general terms, very little has come out, at least publicly, about extremist sympathies or trends within the ranks.

The forces will need to candidly assess the situation and understand where the problem lies and thereafter initiate a process to counter the extremist narrative.

This will not be easy as for decades both society and the forces have been influenced by ultra-conservative trends.

But unless remedial steps are taken soon, the presence of extremist sympathisers within the military will only increase, creating a complex new security crisis for Pakistan.

By-election message

Published in Dawn, September 10th, 2014

THE by-election in Dera Ismail Khan is a vindication for everyone. The PTI victory in PK-68 can be seen according to the way one wants to see it.

That the PTI chose to contest is a confirmation of how its fate is tied to democratic politics.

Sending a new PTI man to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly, which is in turmoil at the moment because of the threat of en masse resignations by PTI members, will surely aid those voices who ask Imran Khan to, above all, respect his own mandate.

The advice would be for him to use his party's presence in the various elected houses to the collective benefit of the people.

Also Read : [PTI wins KP by-poll](#)

Indeed, in the wake of this fresh evidence of his popularity, Mr Khan, in the present crisis, could also be accused of following a policy that has verged on insulting the people's trust in him.

On the other hand, with the application of equally simple logic, the election can also be used to build an argument against the anti-Imran Khan theories that are circulating today.

Even though it involves just one provincial assembly seat, the by-election victory counters the assertion that the PTI's

popularity ratings have dropped because of its leader's refusal to budge from his demand for the prime minister's resignation.

Mr Khan's candidate was pitted against a formidable opponent supported jointly by the PPP, the ANP and the JUI-F.

All three parties have traditionally had a good presence in Dera Ismail Khan.

Nevertheless, the PTI candidate won by a respectable margin, which indicates the possibilities that lie ahead for the party and its potential both as the challenger of the old and a harbinger of change.

The victory is in line with the PTI leadership's effort to project the party as the sole agent of change, and emphasising through this contest that the old system is in dire need of reform — even if the party's role in the present crisis has been a controversial one.

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Abject surrender

Published in Dawn, September 11th, 2014

TWO words best describe the reaction of the law-enforcement personnel who were supposed to guard the Dera Ismail Khan jail when TTP militants stormed it last July: abject surrender.

This is the gist of a new report looking into the incident issued by an inquiry committee formed by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa administration.

This is the second report investigating the D.I. Khan disaster; while the earlier probe was a much more detailed analysis of what went wrong, the new report, finalised recently, has a more specific focus on the role of police and jail staff.

Also Read: [Action against 58 officers recommended](#)

It certainly minces no words about the lack of resistance put up by the law enforcers. To recall, a band of militant raiders stormed the facility in a well-organised foray and succeeded in freeing over 250 prisoners, including a number of dangerous terrorists.

The D.I. Khan affair followed the 2012 Bannu jailbreak, in which militants were able to free over 400 inmates. The report says that the D.I. Khan jailbreak was not due to intelligence failure — an intelligence agency had apparently issued an alert — but because police and jail staff did not put up a fight.

A particularly troubling finding of the inquiry committee is that many amongst the jail staff were sympathetic to the raiders and apparently facilitated the jailbreak.

Also Read: [Pakistani Taliban free over 175 inmates in DI Khan jailbreak](#)

What is absolutely shocking is the finding that over 50 jail staffers with “doubtful credentials and dubious characters” were transferred from Bannu and posted at D.I. Khan jail. It is incomprehensible how individuals with suspect backgrounds were posted at a facility that contained dangerous militants.

It also points to a grave and growing problem we have highlighted in these columns — that of the presence of individuals with sympathies for extremist causes within the security forces and law-enforcement agencies.

The report has summed up the performance of the police in a frank, damning fashion. However, it offers no new recommendations about what action to take — apart from calling for the dismissal of some police officers as well as penalties for others who were seen as most responsible for the debacle.

It also fails to follow up on the recommendations made by the earlier inquiry report. It is not clear if the KP administration has taken any action against the errant officers.

Simply issuing a hard-hitting report and not taking subsequent corrective action can do little to improve a dangerous situation.

Without doubt the D.I. Khan and Bannu jailbreaks are just two of many major security lapses this country has seen.

Like so many incidents before and after them, they have exposed the weaknesses in the national defence and law-enforcement structure, at the same time highlighting the remarkable organisational capabilities of the militants.

Unless the state learns from its mistakes, adapts its law-enforcement and counterterrorism strategy to the needs of the time, and holds those responsible for lapses to account, it will be extremely difficult to prevent further terrorist atrocities.

From China, with love

Published in Dawn, September 11th, 2014

MINISTER for Water and Power Khawaja Asif wants us to believe that China is standing by with \$34bn worth of ‘investments’ for Pakistan if only matters would settle down.

He insists that the funds are “not a loan” and will “not show up on Pakistan’s balance sheet”.

But scepticism remains regarding the government’s claims, which many think will not stand up to scrutiny. For starters, we don’t know the breakdown of the \$34bn figure.

Nowhere in its regular cache of economic documents does the government go into any meaningful detail about it. The finance

ministry’s latest Economic Survey has a small box with a simple list of the various energy and road projects, but says nothing about the amounts for each project or about the terms.

Also Read: [Postponement of Chinese president's visit will not affect ties: senior diplomat](#)

In its revised determination for an upfront tariff for coal-fired power projects issued on June 26, Nepra said investors can include a 7pc financing charge against Sinosure fee in their project cost “in case the investors avail Chinese financing” — this is the fee for reinsurance against default for borrowing from Chinese banks. This clearly indicates that at least some of the funds in question are in fact loans for private parties to set up coal-fired power plants, using Chinese technology.

If a sum of \$34bn has indeed been arranged by the government as Chinese ‘investment’, and a signature is all that remains, then one would think it would feature more prominently in chapters on growth, investment, energy and infrastructure.

It would be included in documents like Vision 2025, for instance, where a small section on the Pak-China Economic Corridor again lists areas as disparate as agriculture, energy, tourism and media for “investment and economic cooperation”.

Also Read: [Imran’s remarks about Chinese assistance rejected](#)

According to the document, the projects “will be financed through substantial inflow of foreign investment and disbursements”.

So the question remains: what mix of “investment and disbursements” is contained in the \$34bn figure claimed by the government? And how does the figure break down between the various projects? The government’s claims would be less open to politically motivated attacks if there was more transparency in the details of the projects.

The minister’s credibility would also benefit if he could clarify whether or not the entire amount of \$34bn is “investment”, and if so, what exactly is the status of the “early harvest” projects being incorporated under the Pak-China Economic Corridor initiative.

[The crisis after military action](#)

Published in Dawn, September 12th, 2014

AS Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan enters its fourth month, has army chief Gen Raheel Sharif hinted that the operation may have to be expanded to other areas or simply reiterated that the slow progress in North Waziristan will continue until the entire agency is cleared?

On Wednesday, the ISPR reported that Gen Raheel has pledged that terrorists will be pursued to the “remotest corners” and military action will continue until all militant “sanctuaries are taken out”.

Also Read: [Gen Raheel meets Chief of Air Staff](#)

What is known is that clearing and holding territory by the military in North Waziristan is incrementally moving ahead, but that it may take a while yet — perhaps several months more — before the military can claim to have regained territorial control of the agency.

In addition, what is often speculated — facts being difficult to independently verify in a war zone that is sealed off — is that many militant groups have already melted away from North Waziristan and re-established themselves elsewhere in Fata.

So can the so-called decisive operation in the agency really be a turning point in the fight against militancy unless, after Zarb-i-Azb succeeds in retaking control of North Waziristan, the fight is taken to new sanctuaries established elsewhere?

The military leadership though prefers to share information in a piecemeal manner with the country and seems more intent on the public relations aspect of the war than sharing meaningful information on the overall strategy to fight militancy.

Also Read: [Countrywide actions avert Zarb-i-Azb backlash: ISPR](#)

Set aside the issue of what comes next for a minute though and consider what the military’s plan is for the ground it has already covered — and reclaimed.

With devastation left in the wake of the military machine cutting a swathe through North Waziristan, there is simply no question of IDPs returning to their homes unless a massive

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rebuilding effort is undertaken in the towns and areas shattered by the war machine.

Yet, there is simply no word from the military about when and how the rehabilitation effort will begin. Surely, equally important as ensuring that the territory is properly cleared and secured is to make certain that the civilian population can return as quickly as possible and pick up the pieces of their lives.

Ghost towns do not amount to territory that is held and secured in any meaningful sense.

Inevitably, when the question of the return of IDPs, rehabilitation and reconstruction is raised, the question of quite where the civilian administration is must also be debated.

Displaced inevitably and enormously by the presence of a massive war machine in Fata, the civilian administration stands marginalised.

To revitalise it, to get the administration back into some kind of shape to address the urgent needs of a returning population — when the population does return — the civilian administration itself will need to be revived first. Is there even any thinking happening on that front, in either military or civilian circles?

More sectarian targets

Published in Dawn, September 12th, 2014

THE spectre of sectarian killing continues to haunt Karachi. Professionals — especially doctors — as well as leaders of religious organisations and their members, teachers, small-time shopkeepers, etc, have all found themselves targeted on account of their faith.

On Wednesday, at least two individuals lost their lives to sectarian killers. One of the victims was Dr Maulana Masood Baig, son-in-law of the founding chief of Jamia Binoria al-Almia, Mufti Mohammed Naeem. On the face of it, his murder could be seen as a tit-for-tat response to two recent killings.

Also Read: [Cleric, trader & activist shot dead in 'sectarian attacks' across city](#)

Last week, Allama Ali Akbar Kumaili, son of Jafria Alliance Pakistan chief, Allama Abbas Kumaili, was shot dead. Before that, in July, a senior lawyer and son-in-law of prominent Shia scholar Allama Talib Jauhari was killed while on his way home from court.

However, looked at in a larger context, Dr Baig's murder is consistent with what appears to be a shift in strategy by those carrying out this deadly campaign; targeting family members of prominent clerics.

Also Read: [Son of Shia scholar Abbas Kumaili gunned down in Karachi](#)

Usually, while most high-profile religious personalities — those considered most at risk — qualify for the highest security detail, their relatives are comparatively vulnerable.

They are ‘soft targets’ going about their daily business; mundane practicalities of life make it difficult to perpetually be surrounded by a phalanx of police mobiles. Allama Kumaili, for example, was accompanied by only two guards when he was targeted while going home from his ice factory.

Yet more vulnerable, of course, are those hapless millions who have no security at all.

And here another trend has been evident over the last two years or so, which is the targeting of victims regardless of the presence of accompanying women and children, which has resulted in the deaths of several family members as well.

Last month, a Shia man and his daughter were killed and his wife and another daughter injured in a sectarian attack in Khuda ki Basti locality.

While one can scarcely hope for a ‘code of honour’ among those who commit murder in the name of religion, it seems that the benchmark of savagery has risen still further.

And why should it not? For, while the usual platitudes emanate from official quarters, the much-vaunted Karachi Operation has been unable to stop sectarian killers running amok.

Granted, the tentacles of sectarianism are many, deep-rooted and diffuse — but that in itself demands a comprehensive,

coherent and nationwide strategy which appears nowhere on the horizon.

[A perilous path](#)

Published in Dawn, September 13th, 2014

It may, rather will, drop out of the news cycle quickly enough, but the claim that the attack on a naval facility in Karachi last weekend was facilitated by insider information and/or help has profoundly troubling implications for the armed forces.

To wit, the problem is neither new nor unheard of: for years, perhaps even more than a decade, the problem of militant ideology penetrating the ranks of the armed forces — often but not only the smaller forces, the navy and the air force — and terrorist recruitment taking place time and again has bubbled up, only to be quickly taken out of the public arena by a military that zealously suppresses its less savoury secrets.

Only a thorough and honest reckoning with the problem will ensure that the armed forces are able to put their own house in order.

Also Read: [Dockyard attack an inside job: minister](#)

Unhappily though, that would require more transparency and scrutiny than the military leadership is perhaps willing to allow.

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Sunlight can be a disinfectant, but it also makes clear where blame must lie and which heads must roll — something most institutions reflexively oppose.

Mostly what is reported in the public arena is that infiltration of the armed forces are isolated incidents that are quickly and emphatically dealt with.

But tracing the origins of the problem suggests that the military is either in denial of the true scope of the problem or is unable to do much about it.

Two phases are of critical importance: the Zia era, when Islamisation of state, society and the armed forces was official policy and vigorously pursued; and the Musharraf era, when an about-turn was attempted, sparking much anger and fury over the alleged betrayal of the now-established ideological roots of the armed forces.

In addition, the profound changes in Pakistani society, from which the armed forces are drawn, made it more difficult to sell to the forces the theory of a professional military with non-religious, non-ideological roots devoted to the protection of the country's territorial boundaries.

Instead, increasingly, the forces were seen by military personnel as the first and foremost defenders of an ideological, religion-based version of what Pakistan ought to be.

The road from there to active support for militancy within sections of the armed forces may not have been a straight line, but it was short enough.

If the confusion is to be done away with, both the Zia and Musharraf eras need to be re-examined unflinchingly.

The alternative — the inadequate alternative — is what Gen Musharraf's successors have hit upon: label anyone attacking the Pakistani state and its security apparatus as anti-state — without doing anything to explain why the Zia Islamisation was misguided and the Musharraf policy was clumsy.

The latter choice will cause insider attacks to continue, and the corpus with its head buried in the sand may eventually be decimated from the inside out.

Disaster compounded

Published in Dawn, September 13th, 2014

Yet again, large parts of the country stand inundated. And yet again, Pakistan's disaster management authorities have been caught napping.

Now that the scale of the disaster has become evident, officials from all quarters, including the prime minister, can be heard expressing regret and giving out assurances that not only is the government doing the best it can, but that it had also prepared as well as was possible before the deluge and that mitigating the effect of natural calamities remains a priority.

How far from the truth this is — indeed, what outright falsification this is — can be easily gauged by one hard fact:

the National Disaster Management Commission, which is headed by the prime minister and is the forum at which the highest-level decisions can be taken about disaster management, has not met since 2012.

Also Read: [Disaster management 'not a priority'](#)

A 10-year plan to improve the country's capacity to cope with future disasters in the wake of the 2010-2011 floods that was formulated at the last NDMC meeting in February 2012 has yet to be ratified because the commission has not bothered to meet since then.

Among the officials who have utterly failed to make this issue a priority are, other than the prime minister himself at whose call the NDMC meets, the four provincial chief ministers and governors, opposition leaders from the Senate and National Assembly, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff committee and representatives of key government departments such as the railways and the motorway authority.

All of them are supposed to attend when an NDMC meeting is called, and should presumably be aware that drawing attention to disaster management is part of their duties.

But having the state and government wake up to its responsibilities in Pakistan has historically been a daunting task, and those who have sworn to act for the benefit of the citizenry often prove to be enduringly hard of hearing when it is time to make an effort.

Also Read: [Rains, floods claim 231 lives, says NDMA](#)

If this is the level of interest shown by top government functionaries regarding an issue fundamental to the citizens' welfare and safety, and national economic prospects, there can be little wonder that matters have reached this pass — yet again.

And little hope can be harboured for any positive change in the foreseeable future. The country has now seen floods in 2007, 2010, 2011 and 2014. How much havoc will the next one be allowed to wreak?

Polio emergency

Published in Dawn, September 14th, 2014

WHEN the world embarked on its fight against polio decades ago, amongst the most iconic images coming from Pakistan was that of the then prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, administering the drops to her child.

Since then, millions upon millions have been poured into the initiative and in much of the world, the dreaded virus has been eradicated altogether. In Pakistan, though, things have gone far from as planned.

Also read: [Ecneec approves Rs33bn polio plan](#)

This now remains one of the world's three polio-endemic countries — the others being Afghanistan and Nigeria — and,

much more frighteningly, the only one where the crippling disease seems to be on the resurgence.

For years now, Pakistan has received aid in cash and kind from all sorts of donors, and has been materially helped by international polio eradication initiatives, because it was recognised that a polio-free world cannot be envisaged unless all countries are taken along; this state's abysmal rate of success — even though matters reached such a pass that the WHO was forced to issue a travel advisory for unvaccinated travellers in May — would suggest that it has all been money and effort down the drain.

Since the fight is too important to be abandoned, though, helping hands continue to reach out. On Friday, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council approved a Rs33bn emergency plan to battle the virus.

The plan is made possible through loans running into millions of dollars from sources including the Islamic Development Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency, with the tab for interest on these loans being picked up by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Under an agreement with the lending agencies, the loans will be converted into grants if Pakistan succeeds in eradicating polio. It can thus be argued that for an already indebted country such as this, there is an economic reason to urgently ramp up its efforts. That said, however, Pakistan needs to wake up to the fact that its interests stand compromised in all sorts of ways by the increasing incidence of polio.

Over 20 cases have been detected this month alone, and the count for this year so far is soaring near the 150 mark. Punjab and Balochistan, which had earlier been thought to be polio-free, have also seen the myth shattered. The new emergency plan simply has to be made to work; the lackadaisical approach of the authorities must not lead us into quarantine.

[Army, protesters and the government](#)

Published in Dawn, September 14th, 2014

AN emphatic set of statements by DG ISPR Gen Asim Bajwa during a press conference on Friday may help roll back some of the persisting criticism that the army leadership is directly or indirectly backing the anti-government protesters camped out on Constitution Avenue in the federal capital.

At the very least, whatever the truth to criticism directed at the army previously, it appears that the army leadership has, going forward, decided against direct intervention or open involvement in the ongoing political crisis.

Also read: [Army not meddling in politics, says ISPR](#)

To the Sheikh Rashids and Shujaat Hussains of the political class, this is surely a setback. Many an ardent admirer of military rule and unabashed supporter of the army's role in politics have openly invited the military to either take over or

keep the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif pinned to the mat — self-serving advice at best, given that it is the military that would have to deal with the fallout from a derailment of the democratic process.

Now, with the army speaking more firmly and candidly of its commitment to the democratic process, the air of conspiracy and intrigue can hopefully begin to clear.

Yet, in a depressing re-enactment of many of its earlier missteps, the PML-N appears to have interpreted the lifeline handed to it by the army leadership as an opportunity for renewing pressure on the anti-government protesters.

Two things will eventually need to be done by the government: the protesters will need to be peacefully moved away from the present sites they occupy; and those involved in violence on Constitution Avenue and attacks on state property will need to be identified, arrested, charged and prosecuted. Anything beyond that would be an excessive, unnecessary and unwise use of force — and a potentially fatal mistake by the PML-N. Unhappily, the PML-N often appears to have its priorities mixed up: rather than focusing on doing what it will take to strengthen the democratic process and salvage the government's mandate, the PML-N leadership seems more inclined to flex its muscles against the protesters.

Perhaps the PML-N leadership mistakenly has come to believe that the protests are really a numbers game — that if Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri had managed to bring a crowd in six figures into the streets of Islamabad, the government would have fallen. But it is not and never has been a question of a numbers game.

Even when whittled down to a few hundred protesters, Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri have had their voices amplified nationally through the media.

Even if the numbers at the PTI's rally surge over the weekend — assuming the government backs away from its disruption tactics — that would not fundamentally weaken the government's case and the democratic argument that much can be negotiated, but not everything the protesters want. Strategic patience, tactical nous and generosity of spirit — the PML-N still appears to lack all three.

[A US-led coalition](#)

Published in Dawn, September 15th, 2014

AN America-led coalition to take on the Islamic State (IS) — formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham — is now a reality, with regional states appearing more than willing to be part of it.

The idea had been floating around for quite some time, but on Friday the White House clinched the issue when it said America was “at war” with the IS the way “we are at war with Al Qaeda” and its affiliates.

Also Read: [US General Allen to head anti-jihadist coalition effort](#)

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A day earlier, President Barack Obama announced his country would lead “a broad coalition to roll back” the IS’s military offensive, because it was a terrorist organisation “pure and simple”.

Arab support for the coalition idea came on Thursday in Jeddah, where US Secretary of State John Kerry and 10 Arab countries pledged to “do their share in the comprehensive fight” against the IS.

Mindful of domestic criticism for involving America in another war in the Middle East, President Obama said on the 13th anniversary of 9/11 that America would “degrade and ultimately destroy” the IS through air strikes.

The array of regional states on America’s side is impressive: six Gulf Cooperation Council countries, besides Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.

But Syria and Iran are not there, while Turkey has said it will not allow its airbases to be used for strikes against IS.

Read more here: [China gives cautious response to Obama's Islamic State call](#)

That means [Arab support will be non-military](#) — stopping the flow of funds and fighters to IS and rebuilding “brutalised communities”, as a communiqué put it, and it is America which will have to bare its military teeth.

Regrettably, America’s record leaves little room for optimism. It destroyed Saddam Hussein’s regime and helped in the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime.

The result is the anarchy we have been witnessing in Iraq and Libya, while Afghanistan is a story unto itself.

If the IS’s mass murderers are to be checked and destroyed, real efforts will have to come from such regional heavyweights as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

[Dangerous possibilities](#)

Published in Dawn, September 15th, 2014

In certain national security circles, the renunciation of violence inside Pakistan by the leader of the TTP Punjab aka the Punjabi Taliban, Asmatullah Muawiya, will be greeted with satisfaction, even glee.

Luring the Punjabi Taliban back towards the mainstream of society and politics has been a long-term goal of a section of the Pakistani security establishment; the thinking being that the former allies of the security establishment are merely misguided and can be persuaded to lay down their arms and lead peaceful existences again.

From here, it would hardly be a surprise to see Muawiya being propped up for a political role, the route of former jihadis into politics being a well-trodden one now, including the likes of Fazlur Rehman Khalil, Hafiz Saeed, Malik Ishaq and Masood Azhar.

Also read: [Punjabi Taliban call off armed struggle in Pakistan](#)

At the very least, the next Difa-i-Pakistan Council agglomeration can look forward to recruiting Muawiya to whatever cause is deemed worthy of agitation next.

Whether or not Muawiya and his companions do end up making the journey from violent militants to respectable citizens, it is really the thinking of the Pakistani security establishment that needs to be scrutinised.

The Punjabi Taliban are essentially Kashmir-centric and sectarian militants who turned their ire on Pakistan itself after then-Gen Pervez Musharraf put the security establishment's jihad policy into cold storage and even banned many of the groups that the Pakistani state had long patronised.

Some of the worst attacks against sectarian targets and the security apparatus have been carried out by the Punjabi Taliban over the years.

Also Read: [Punjabi Taliban shift focus to Afghanistan](#)

The Punjabi Taliban are a very different breed of militants as compared to, say, the Fata TTP, whose origins and, arguably, even present motivations are largely tied to the army's presence in the tribal areas.

The Punjabi Taliban are ideologically committed militants who believe in a global jihad complex, which is why their announcement of ending their so-called armed struggle inside Pakistan has left the door open to armed struggle being waged outside Pakistan.

Satisfaction then at the latest development in the world of militancy here can only mean one thing: the policy of good militant/bad militant continues and the security establishment continues to see some kind of a significant role for the religious right and good militants in the national discourse.

That is deeply troubling because it suggests that no lessons have been learned, and it sets the stage for even greater problems down the road.

By seeking to mainstream rabid ideologues wedded to violence and the overthrow of the Pakistani state, the security establishment is creating a pincer in which the state and society will eventually be caught: on the one side the armed militants who refuse to give up violence; on the other the political militant handed a ticket to mainstream society and politics.

Surely, that is a pincer that no state or society can survive for very long.

Everything that Muawiya and his ilk stand for is in direct opposition to what Pakistan ought to be. It is a ruinous strategy that seeks to empower them further.

Talks, not theatrics

Published in Dawn, September 16th, 2014

As the country awaits some kind of good news, some kind of an exit strategy from a national political crisis with seemingly no end, the chief protagonists themselves appear strangely comfortable with the impasse continuing.

Instead of the focus being on urgently moving forwards in talks between the two sides, both the government and its opponents, the PTI and PAT, seem more interested in taking aim at each other.

As ever, Tahirul Qadri has led the way in strange and unnecessary antics: this time first calling for a campaign of defacing currency notes with anti-Nawaz Sharif statements, only to hours later withdraw the campaign as it appeared to have dawned on Mr Qadri that defacement would render the currency notes useless and so cause monetary losses to his supporters.

It is not yet known quite what will become of the hunger strike that Mr Qadri also announced on Sunday.

Meanwhile, Imran Khan decided to take the law into his own hands and free PTI supporters detained by the Islamabad police in the early hours of yesterday.

Also Read: [Dar warns Qadri against 'misleading' people on scribbling notes](#)

Apparently, Mr Khan has realised that his national fame makes it possible for him to waylay police vehicles and free detained individuals — and then berate the police.

Of course, anything the PTI and Mr Qadri do, the government is often able and willing to best them. Seemingly emboldened by the pro-democracy army statement over the weekend, the government has taken to arresting protest organisers and PTI and PAT supporters on technical grounds.

Also Read: [Case registered against Imran Khan for releasing arrested activists](#)

Suddenly remembering that Section 144 is still in force in the federal capital and that loudspeakers cannot be used beyond certain decibel levels is truly the stuff of farce — and all that more depressing given that this is what a federal government has been reduced to.

What should be done — though whether it will be done is another matter altogether — is for the advanced stage of talks between the government and the PTI and PAT teams respectively to be moved along quickly and decisively.

If the government is unable to make the PTI and PAT listen to reason on their own, then it should bring other opposition politicians directly into the talks instead of keeping them on the periphery.

If the PTI and PAT are appalled at the government's push against their supporters, then they should focus more on talks instead of public theatrics and provocative statements.

A negotiated settlement ought to be the only acceptable solution to all sides.

Left behind as Asia forges ahead

Published in Dawn, September 16th, 2014

INDIA has just inked a set of agreements with Vietnam. Earlier this month, Shinzo Abe of Japan became the first Japanese prime minister to visit Bangladesh, a tour that included a stop in Sri Lanka. He brought along with him an entourage of 22 Japanese businessmen looking to do business in both countries.

And this weekend, China's President Xi Jinping concluded a visit to the Maldives, where amongst other engagements, he contributed a written piece to a local newspaper that talked of a 21st-century "maritime silk road", and said, "China welcomes Maldives to get actively involved" in building this trade corridor.

He then headed for Sri Lanka, where the maritime silk road is already in substantial evidence, with a Chinese deep sea port as a key factor in a sea lane that connects Southeast Asia with the rest of the world.

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Japan this past Saturday, meeting Shinzo Abe and giving him his own message of "come, build in India". Both sides agreed

to set up a dialogue process involving their foreign and defence ministers to create a long-term, sustained process of cooperation on strategic and economic concerns.

Soon the Chinese president will sit down with Mr Modi in discussions that will touch on the sources of tension between these two giant economies, as well as the wellsprings of opportunity that exist.

A Sri Lankan diplomat, observing the whole round of meetings and summits and state visits taking place around Asia all month, described it as a "complex tapestry of relations" that is being woven in the region ever since India's new prime minister was elected.

Asia has been abuzz with activity throughout the month so far, weaving itself together, talking, building and positioning its assets and relationships in a complex multi-player game that is all but set to emerge as the dominant theatre of Great Power rivalry.

There is much tension across the region. A festering border dispute and suspicion of each other's motives animates much of India's relationship with China. In the rest of Asia too, rising China inspires as much trepidation as it does awe.

Now consider what Pakistan has been busy doing since last month: indulging in political bickering, listening to scathing speeches with little purpose, and making hardly any attempt at a solution.

For decades now, we have remained mired in conspiring against each other as a globalising world has raced ahead.

Now, as globalisation draws to a close and a new world dominated by regional trading blocs begins to take shape before our eyes, we still remain busy in scuffles and speeches and point-scoring.

At some point this behaviour must end. At some point we must learn to respect the rules we have laid down for ourselves, learn to demarcate our interests into strategic, political and economic domains, and pursue each separately.

VIP culture

Published in Dawn, September 17th, 2014

TAKEN as a principled stand, it must have felt good even if it wasn't an earth-shattering victory. Taken as an indication of which way the wind is blowing, it has much deeper implications.

On Monday night, PIA flight PK370, supposed to take off at 7pm, was delayed after boarding.

Though the airline blamed technical issues, and later suspended two employees for "unnecessary delay", passengers were given reason to believe that the aircraft was awaiting the arrival of some VIPs.

Also Read: [Passengers expel Rehman Malik, PML-N MNA from flight over delay](#)

This is just one part of the shameful VIP culture that exists in the country where public convenience is routinely sacrificed at the altar of the whims of the good and the great.

Over two hours later, the passengers' anger had reached boiling point. When PPP politician Senator Rehman Malik, and PML-N MNA Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, came on board, a hostile crowd refused to let them stay.

Video footage shot on mobile phones has since gone viral. It shows passengers in a temper.

There are cries of "shame shame", but mainly there is a palpable sense of people goaded beyond their capacity. It is not about one instance alone, but — as one passenger puts it — a result of 68 years of "all this".

Another calls to Mr Malik, "Come down to earth, sir." What drives this resentment is obvious: over the decades, the privileged political and other classes have acquired a carapace of disdain towards the people in whose name they rule, hurting them not just through sins of omission but also of commission.

Also Read: [PIA suspends staff over delay in take-off](#)

Further, they are seen to operate with a preposterous sense of entitlement.

This, coupled with the lack of governance and people's frustration, has created a situation that could turn ugly at any time. With calls for change in the capital these days, it is time the ruling classes looked inwards and started to improve their attitude.

It is their evident contempt for the citizenry that has created the constituency in which the desire for ‘something else’ is beginning to resonate.

LNG import: some questions

Published in Dawn, September 17th, 2014

After almost a decade of trying, LNG imports are now closer to becoming a reality. In a recent news conference, Petroleum Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi said the project is “in its final stages” and even mentioned the prospect of an early commissioning.

Moreover, the government appears to have done the groundwork to develop a consensus around the allocations from the new gas, giving the vehicular CNG sector a large share of the imported gas, while diverting its allocations from domestic gas towards other sectors.

In time, the minister said, all of the imported gas may end up allocated for vehicular use, freeing up domestic gas for the remaining stakeholders.

Also Read: [Imported LNG to help save billions: minister](#)

Some of the numbers floated by the minister need closer scrutiny. For instance, it is not clear how the imported gas will be only 5pc to 8pc costlier than the existing price.

If the minister is referring to the price at which the gas will be sold to consumers, then clearly there will be a subsidy element.

But if he is referring to the landed cost of the LNG, then it needs clarification what price the government is anticipating to pay in the spot markets, where prices are almost double what they are for domestically produced gas.

Likewise, the savings of \$2.5bn in imports of oil that the minister claims will be realised as a result of allocating all imported gas for vehicular use needs to be explained.

Is his government thinking of sharply increasing the number of vehicles running on CNG after this decision is implemented?

If so, this would be adding to the folly of having encouraged the vehicular use of natural gas in the first place.

Also Read: [200mmcf of imported LNG approved for CNG users](#)

The ministry should release a breakdown of the numbers behind these claims, giving details of the cost at which the gas will be sold to the CNG station operators, and what cost they will be selling it on to end consumers.

If a subsidy is involved, it should also be made clear at the outset, as should data on how the \$2.5bn of savings on oil import has been computed.

Nevertheless, it is encouraging to note that the government has finally managed to put some momentum behind the LNG import project.

September, 2014

The idea has languished in our political culture of recriminations for far too long now.

Admittedly, all parties involved do not feel fairly treated, particularly those who believe that their bids for the project were denied due consideration on political grounds.

But it is a positive sign for the country that the first consignment of imported gas may soon arrive to breathe new life into our energy-starved economy.

From here on, the overriding priority is to ensure fair play in decisions on allocations, and transparency and reform in pricing matters.

In the final analysis, our gas woes will only end once we learn to price the precious resource appropriately.

The distrust continues

Published in Dawn, September 18th, 2014

Pakistan blames Afghanistan. Afghanistan blames Pakistan.

Violence on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border continues. It is a dangerous trend that has evolved in recent years with no end in sight.

As the foreign ministries of the two countries sparred over the implications of Punjabi Taliban leader Asmatullah Muawiya's

announcement that his group will no longer commit violence inside Pakistan, but continues to believe in jihad elsewhere, Pakistani security personnel came under attack from Afghan-based anti-Pakistan militants.

Also Read: [FO allays Afghan fears, calls for end to terrorists' havens](#)

While a further escalation in tensions seems unlikely — barring some kind of unexpected and brazen attack on either side of the border — neither is a de-escalation apparent. That is in part because of the domestic political dynamics at work in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan, a contested presidential election result has cast a dark shadow over the much-hyped hopes for the poll being a major part of a peaceful and stable country emerging in the post-2014 phase.

In Pakistan, meanwhile, the ongoing political crisis has further put on the defensive a government that had very limited input on the Afghan policy anyway.

Yet, immediate political situations in both countries aside, there is a bigger problem here: joined at the hip as they may be, neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan has figured out quite how to address the other's legitimate security interests in a mutually beneficial manner. Instead, fear dominates.

Also Read: [Cross-border attack repulsed; 11 militants, 3 soldiers killed](#)

Pakistan worries about an Afghanistan where regional rivals gain ground and about a porous border from which trouble can be exported to Pakistan.

September, 2014

Afghanistan worries about Pakistan using the Pakhtun-Islamist nexus to keep the country in a state of semi-disarray and, in many ways, as a vassal state.

Even developments, good and bad, over the past decade inside both countries have not greatly changed those fundamentals.

Pakistan, suffering from a home-grown insurgency, has tried to distance itself from a policy of using non-state actors, but not decisively broken away from it as yet.

Afghanistan has seen many economic and social changes — including the configuration of power in Kabul — over the last decade that while strengthening the non-Pakhtun segments of the population, has only papered over ethnic divisions rather than worked to genuinely alleviate them.

Ultimately though, both Afghanistan and Pakistan have a straightforward choice: cooperate and deny space to militancy in the region or suffer even more from policies rooted in fear.

If the latter occurs by default, it would be a mistake to believe that eventually — once Afghanistan and Pakistan realise the folly of their ways — the effects will be reversible. Militancy changes the social fabric, it impacts societies in ways deep and pervasive.

It is not like a war fought by armies that return to the barracks. Overcoming fear is never easy, but Afghanistan and Pakistan must find a way to do it.

Execution moratorium

Published in Dawn, September 18th, 2014

Until the death penalty is phased out in Pakistan, a moratorium on capital punishment is the best alternative. But while a de facto moratorium has been in place since 2008, as recent developments in a case being heard by the Lahore High Court's Rawalpindi bench show, there is no legal or official cover to justify the freeze on executions.

Hence unless a clear policy is enunciated by the state, executions may resume soon.

On Tuesday, the LHC stayed the execution of Shoaib Sarwar, convicted for murder, as his counsel had argued that the man had already been in prison for 18 years.

Also Read: [Court stays what would've been first execution in six years](#)

Earlier in August, when the government was asked to produce documents to prove that the moratorium was still in effect, it was unable to do so.

No civilians have been executed in Pakistan since the unofficial moratorium came in effect six years ago, though a military man was convicted for murdering a fellow soldier by a court martial and hanged in 2012.

As a matter of principle, this newspaper opposes the death penalty.

Apart from the fact that it is a cruel and irreversible punishment, too much is wrong with the Pakistani legal and law enforcement systems to even remotely consider capital punishment.

Though the goal of abolishing the death penalty in this country may still be quite far off, the second best option is to enforce a permanent moratorium.

Also Read: [HRCP for stay of execution](#)

Currently, there is much confusion regarding the official status of the freeze on executions. While government officials have in the past said they are reviewing the moratorium and legislation is being considered to convert death sentences into life terms, of recent the state has been silent on the issue.

But the problem is too big to be left on the back burner.

There are over 8,000 prisoners currently on death row in Pakistan, which has one of the largest such populations in the world.

While the execution of the convict in Rawalpindi was stayed by the court, a more consistent policy is needed in this regard, instead of dealing with the issue on a case-to-case basis.

The government needs to clarify its stance, preferably giving legal cover to a permanent moratorium. In the long term, along with the eventual abolition of capital punishment, the criminal justice system must be reformed so that individuals are made to pay for their crimes through punishments that are in consonance with human rights principles.

Debt market pendulum

Published in Dawn, September 19th, 2014

For years, debt market watchers have been warning that the maturity profile of the government's domestic debt is getting dangerously short.

At one point, all bids for T-bills were coming in the three-month tenors, creating serious rollover risks.

The State Bank and the IMF had both warned of this extreme concentration in short-term paper, raising the spectre of a disorderly default given the size of the rollovers the State Bank had to manage every quarter.

There was one year in which almost Rs1tr was being rolled over every quarter. Moody's warned of an "event risk" in sovereign debt on bank balance sheets, and even downgraded the credit rating of all major Pakistani banks as a result.

Also Read: [Selling of third party products by banks](#)

Last year, as part of a debt management strategy, the government was urged to move into longer tenors.

Now the herd mentality of our financial markets has created a stampede into longer tenors the likes of which we haven't seen in years.

The pendulum is moving so inexorably away from short-term treasury bills towards the longer-term Pakistan Investment

Bonds that the numbers are a little startling. For instance, one PIB auction in 2011 that attracted a total of Rs42bn in bids was described as an “overwhelming market response” in subsequent press commentary.

But today, the last PIB auction drew almost Rs200bn in bids, and other auctions this year have seen that amount rise to Rs425bn.

Also Read: [The lure of Pakistan Investment Bonds](#)

This turning of the tide would be welcome if it was driven by confidence in the government’s financing plan.

But as it turns out, this move is largely explained by the lure of higher returns on PIBs, which offer three percentage points above T-bills, and the continuing reluctance of banks to increase exposure to the private sector.

The government should ensure that the banks’ appetite for easy money is not whetted so easily. Perhaps it is time to force the banks’ hand into engaging with the private sector as well.

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Talking to the military

Published in Dawn, September 19th, 2014

AS the current political stand-off continues and crisis has seemingly become the new normal, there are a few — perhaps too few — individuals in the political spectrum looking past the present situation and suggesting fixes for the institutional dilemma that is civil-military relations.

Senators Raza Rabbani and Farhatullah Babar have in the course of the past week reminded everyone of the most obvious — but also perhaps one of the most surprising — of democratic deficits: no parliamentary oversight of national security, with a committee not even existing in name, as it does in the case of the defence committee, which nominally oversees the functioning of the military.

To be sure, the present crisis is as much about Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri as it is about yet another PML-N government that once more has prickly relations with the army leadership.

Also Read: [PM chairs meeting over implementation of CCNS decisions](#)

But electoral reforms — the core constitutional and democratic demand of at least Mr Khan — are perhaps more within the realm of the possible as compared to reform of the power structure of the state itself at this stage.

Consider how both senators have framed their comments on the need for a national security committee in parliament: rather

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than immediately go to the issue of civilian oversight of the military.

They have cautiously talked about the need for having a proper, institutionalised means of communication between the military and parliament.

Clearly, much of the careful language is meant to assuage military leadership concerns of being made subservient to a political class that perhaps many in the armed forces still consider ill-equipped and unsuited to making decisions on matters of national security.

But the PPP senators are right. Without a formal, regular channel of communication between the military and parliament, old suspicions and beliefs — on both sides — will never really change.

And without old suspicions and beliefs giving way to a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the other, neither the civilian nor the military side will truly be able to move the power structure of the state towards the constitutional ideal of civilian supremacy over the armed forces.

Unhappily, the PML-N government appears to be uninterested in the idea of structural reforms. Consider the one change that has been effected: revamping the Defence Committee of the Cabinet [and renaming it the Cabinet Committee on National Security](#) that was supposed to have its own secretariat and work with a full-time staff on policy matters.

Today, the CCNS stands almost forgotten.

Instead, it is the fate of retired Gen Pervez Musharraf that is talked about when it comes to debate on the future of ties between the PML-N and the army.

When personalities, and not institutions, dominate the agenda, crises become all that much more difficult to avoid or manage. But is the PML-N willing to listen?

No sign of the census

Published in Dawn, September 19th, 2014

Going by the Election Commission of Pakistan, the decision on a new census rests with the Council of Common Interests.

A body formed under Article 154(3) of the Constitution, the CCI is a forum for sorting out differences among the constituent units.

On the census issue, however, the CCI's inaction seems to stem not from differences but from some kind of a tacit and deplorable agreement among the provinces and the federal government.

Also Read: [ECP wants control over polling staff, fresh census](#)

At its Wednesday's meeting, the ECP rightly said that a "realistic delimitation" of constituencies could not be held without a fresh census because of the demographic changes

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since the last census held in 1998 — when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's party was in power.

While a general election was held last year, only Balochistan has had the benefit of a local bodies' election, the other three provinces apparently joining hands in an unholy alliance to deny democracy to those at the grass roots.

The provinces alone are not to blame.

The CCI is headed by the prime minister, whose party rules Punjab, which like Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has defied the Supreme Court's ruling of March 9 asking the provinces to hold LG elections within five months.

Also Read: [LG polls forgotten](#)

Even when the situation was relatively 'normal', the three provinces did not care to hold LG elections; now with the Islamabad sit-ins and the floods ravaging Punjab and heading towards Sindh — even if potentially less destructive now — the provincial governments have a readymade pretext for avoiding LG polls.

Normally, a census must be held every 10 years as recommended by the UN; in Pakistan's case, we have not held it for 16 years.

A census is needed not just for delimiting electoral constituencies but also for economic planning.

With dwindling water resources, a yawning energy deficit, and an expanding population with higher expectations — and an

acute security problem to boot — Pakistan needs a fresh census to give planners the essential tools for future projections. Without the census data, they would be operating in a vacuum.

The reason why the three provinces are afraid of holding a census and local bodies' elections is obvious: they are not sure which way the people would vote.

A 'wrong' verdict would undermine the ruling parties' right to govern and perhaps strengthen elements that want fresh general elections.

It is this fear that stands between the nation and the census, with the imperatives of economic planning being sacrificed at the altar of partisan interests.

Flood warning fiasco

Published in Dawn, September 20th, 2014

IT did not have to be this way. This is the fourth major flood to have hit Pakistan since 2010, and in each case the cause has been heavy rains.

The first flood alert issued this year by the Pakistan Meteorological Department was on the morning of Sept 3, more than three days before the arrival of the flood peak at the Marala headworks on the Chenab, where the river enters Pakistan from India.

That same evening, a meeting was convened by Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif to discuss flood preparation plans, with almost the entire government machinery present, including the chief secretary. But the Federal Flood Commission seems to have taken its time waking up to the flood alert. Its first record of a meeting since the alert was issued is on Sept 6, by which point the flood peak of 900,000 cusecs was only hours away from the Marala headworks.

Also read: [Thousands rescued as floods hit Sindh](#)

Moreover, a report published in this paper detailed how the various government bodies, led by the FFC, preferred bickering over turf when they should have been coordinating their response. It appears the country has learned no major lessons from the previous three flood episodes, preferring to act only once disaster has struck.

More distressing is the lack of effort going into flood forecasting. Our forecasting models are designed to anticipate the arrival of rains more for crop management than for flood warning. The Met Department did issue an advisory of a low pressure system forming over Rajasthan as early as Aug 28, but its technology and models could only warn of “scattered thundershowers with heavy to very heavy [rain]falls in isolated places in the upper catchments of rivers Ravi, Sutlej and Chenab” as late as Sept 2.

The flood alert was issued the following day, which turned into a flood warning on Sept 4, only two days before the flood peak arrived. Yet today, meteorological models exist that can provide up to 10 days of flood warning with very high probability. Bangladesh has been using such a system

successfully for almost a decade now, which has on two occasions given accurate forecasts of floods 10 days in advance.

Yet more troubling are the things being said in some places. Describing the floods as an “Indian water bomb” plumbs the lowest depths of ignorance. Instead of pointing fingers at India, what is needed is a serious approach for sharing of meteorological and hydrological data to enable more accurate forecasting.

Better coordination amongst government departments is also critical. Currently, it is not clear who has the responsibility to coordinate the response once a flood alert has been issued. The Met Department ought to take better advantage of the latest scientific knowhow to upgrade its forecasting capabilities. With this being the fourth flood in recent years, it’s a travesty that none of this has yet been done.

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Protecting women's vote

Published in Dawn, September 20th, 2014

SOMETIMES, when obduracy springs from antediluvian notions of 'honour' and 'tradition', it makes sense to spell out the obvious. And the proposal by the ECP, to expand the scope of "undue influence" to include agreements to restrain women from either voting or contesting an election, falls in this category.

At present, Section 81 of The Representation of the People Act, 1976 which deals with "undue influence", does not specifically refer to such agreements, although it does define "harm" (threatened by those exercising undue influence) as comprising "social ostracism or ex-communication or expulsion from any caste or community".

Punishment for "undue influence", which falls under "corrupt practice", is imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, or a fine of up to Rs5,000, or both. The new proposal calls for empowering the ECP to declare an election void partly or entirely if it finds women voters disenfranchised under such an agreement, and to order filing of a complaint in court against those who are party to it.

Also read: [Proposal to curb practice of stopping women from voting](#)

In the lead-up to last year's general elections, the ECP had stated it would go the extra mile to ensure the participation of women. To its credit, it did follow through on its pledge to

some extent. For instance, it ordered re-polling at two polling stations at Battagram after receiving reports that women voters registered there were not allowed to cast their ballot on election day.

However, not a single woman reportedly turned up to vote on the day of re-polling either, highlighting the intractability of a problem that is reinforced through threats of social ostracism, not to mention outright violence. Shamefully, political parties, even those who speak of women's rights otherwise, are also often guilty of colluding to deprive women of their right of franchise.

In the case of the Battagram re-poll, the ECP took no further action. The proposed electoral reform, however, should give the body the legal cover to never again accept such an outcome as a fait accompli.

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Lessons from Scotland

Published in Dawn, September 21th, 2014

The ‘nays’ have it. On Friday, it emerged that Scotland’s just over 300-year-old political union with England will survive, with more than 55pc of Scottish voters casting their ballots against independence.

It was a spirited campaign. The ‘yes’ camp, led by the ruling Scottish National Party, promised voters a more just welfare state free from Westminster’s influence, while the British establishment pulled out all the stops to convince Scots to vote ‘no’, saying that Scotland and the UK were ‘better together’.

We must appreciate the democratic manner in which the matter was decided. The issue was resolved through the vote; unfortunately, in countless other instances around the world we have seen attempts at separation either succeed or be put down by force after much bloodshed and acrimony.

Pakistan’s own loss of its erstwhile eastern wing remains a bitter, painful memory. However, while the Scots will stay with the UK, other independence-seeking regions the world over have been emboldened by the exercise. For example, Spain’s autonomous Catalonia region may opt for a similar referendum, but unlike the UK, the central government in Madrid has vowed to oppose such a move.

Scotland’s case is an interesting one. In most instances separatist feelings are fuelled when a region suffers from poverty and discrimination and the denial of rights, or receives

step-motherly treatment from the centre. Though Edinburgh’s relationship with London was not quite perfect, Scotland did not suffer from the usual causes that encourage separatism.

There are lessons in the referendum for the rest of the world, including Pakistan. Firstly, even the most divisive of questions can be dealt with in a non-violent fashion provided democratic methods are used. Secondly, even prosperous and relatively peaceful regions will desire separation if they feel their voices are not being heard.

To prevent separatist feelings from growing, states must ensure maximum devolution of power right down to the local level, as well as the protection of cultural, political, economic and, most important, the human rights of every citizen.

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Bilawal, finally

These are not the times for politics — this has been the PPP slogan of late. The refrain takes on an entirely new meaning now that the vow to not do politics is accompanied by the PPP co-chairman's presence among people affected by the floods.

The pledge for political restraint was not entirely unwarranted. The political situation in the wake of Imran Khan's war on the system demanded sobriety. The question asked, however, was whether the PPP was going too far with its support for the prime minister — to a point where it posed a danger to itself.

The PPP leadership was staying away from the ground, especially in Punjab, which was bad politics. With Bilawal Bhutto Zardari venturing into the flood-hit areas of Punjab together with his visits to parts of Sindh, it is an attempt at better politics.

The PPP politicians in Punjab have been long waiting for their leader to show up. The party is faced with a serious revival challenge in the province and its support has fallen drastically. It has in recent times been accused of failing to make even a basic effort at exploring any space emerging out of the tussle between the PTI and PML-N.

So eerie has been the PPP's dormancy that some well-known party names in Punjab have been asked when they planned to switch to other available choices. Those among them who want to be with the PPP in its tough hour in the province would be

happy that Mr Bhutto Zardari has at last found the lost map to their neighbourhood.

All they can hope now is that the tour by their leader of Chiniot, Lahore and Multan is followed by more such visits and a sustained campaign aimed at kind of a reinvention of the PPP. For now it is only a ripple, not a splash

Mr Bhutto Zardari's presence in Punjab is essential to any renewal plan the party must follow, but his challenge in Sindh, where his party is in power, is of a different nature. He must reorganise and sympathise and show solidarity in Punjab; in Sindh he must do all these things and then must provide governance as well.

He has to find ways to project himself as an heir who cannot just stir emotions but who can also improvise and use the system to deliver efficiently. The rule has not changed: His delivery in Sindh will help his drive in Punjab.

Power sector billing blues

Published in Dawn, September 21th, 2014

If a suggestion by the prime minister's special assistant is accepted, the government may be poised to induct tens of thousands into an already bloated workforce in the power bureaucracy.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had tasked his special assistant, Musadik Malik, to investigate the causes behind the rise in public anger over power bills in August.

The power bureaucracy had complained that a shortage of meter readers was hampering its ability to generate accurate bills, forcing them to rely on a practice known as 'presumptive billing', where instead of reading the meter, a bill is issued on assumptions based on past bills.

The practice is commonly used to inflate bills in order to meet recovery targets. Presumptive billing allows recovery agents in the bureaucracy to elevate people's bills, and unless there is an outpouring of complaints, the higher amounts collected pass unnoticed.

Mr Sharif was told in a cabinet meeting in August that a 10-year-old ban in the recruitment of meter readers had hampered the power bureaucracy's ability to issue proper bills. In response, the prime minister had asked his special assistant to investigate.

Mr Malik has now completed his assignment and reportedly is about to submit his report. In the report he will counsel lifting of the ban on the recruitment of meter readers. Another source in the power bureaucracy has told this newspaper that the requirement of meter readers is in the "tens of thousands".

The process of induction, training and deployment is likely to be long mired in allegations of political favouritism, and prove expensive in the long run in terms of the jump in pay and the benefits that will accrue as a result.

Already the lion's share of the expenses incurred by the power bureaucracy is on account of personnel pay, including benefits and salaries. The move to induct meter readers on this scale is likely to multiply the financial woes of the power bureaucracy. One can only hope that the forthcoming report gives a clear picture of the cost that will have to be borne if their advice is implemented.

Ultimately, the power sector's inefficiencies will only be overcome with more holistic reform, instead of isolated, ad hoc measures. Reforms must begin at the top, with accountability to independent boards as a cornerstone.

They must also emphasise transparency, and the shutting down of all spaces of discretionary decision-making within the bureaucracy. A regular disclosure regime which mandates the bureaucracy to release a set of data on a regular schedule is essential. And lastly, the reforms must use power of technology.

Meter readers are an antiquated notion in this era of smart meters that can report their readings back electronically. The

bureaucracy's resistance to using this technology should be questioned. Ad hoc measures will surely fail if not accompanied by reforms in the larger system.

Politics & development

Published in Dawn, September 22nd, 2014

NOTWITHSTANDING the ongoing sit-ins in Islamabad — which have by now settled into something that more closely resembles routine rather than crisis — since the elections in 2008 there is some evidence that, politically, Pakistan has made several crucial gains.

It is noteworthy that an elected government managed to ride out various crises and complete its full term in a country where civilian rule has historically always been cut short. This was followed by the peaceful handover to another elected government.

These past few years have seen several important pieces of legislation and long-awaited constitutional amendments, including the reduction of discretionary presidential powers and the 18th Amendment to the Constitution.

Some might even hold up with triumph evidence of some of the country's leading politicians and largest political parties having learned, through their years in the wilderness during the Musharraf era, that the politics of constantly undermining one

another are detrimental in the long term, and that it is the system that is of paramount importance.

Recognition of the latter, after all, is what led the majority in parliament to stand behind the embattled government as Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri threw down the gauntlet.

But has this growth in political maturity translated into solid gains on the ground for this country's impoverished and beleaguered citizenry? The short answer is no — or not yet, anyway.

For the average Pakistani, life remains a matter of scaling mountains of challenges. This is the unfortunate reality that was underscored by a UNDP report discussed in Islamabad on Friday — the Human Development Report 2014.

Placing Pakistan at the 146th position amongst the 187 countries ranked, it points out that this country's human development index has been stagnating over the past five years, meaning there has been extremely slow growth in the building of citizens' capacity.

This importance source of information regarding Pakistan's hard realities is confirmed by even a cursory glance at our towns and cities. The task ahead for the state and the government at the helm is therefore clear: as the political system grows stronger, they need to urgently put themselves to work by investing in the people, in measures that will improve the capacities of the workforce and bring about social and economic uplift.

It needs to be recognised that progress is required in tandem, on all fronts; work in isolation will not achieve the desired results.

Afghanistan deal

Published in Dawn, September 22nd, 2014

THE election deal secured in Afghanistan by the international community yesterday cannot really be called democratic, but at least it has given the country a chance to establish relative peace and stability.

Unhappily, three elections into a new era aspiring towards democracy, the Afghan electoral process remains hostage to back-room deals, powerbrokers and warlords. Without forgetting Pakistan's own struggles with democracy over more than six decades, the most worrying part about the post-2001 Afghan political system is that it does not quite give an impression of being sustainable.

Know more: [Afghan Elections 2014](#)

If elections are to be a complete sham — the winner was announced yesterday by the Independent Election Commission chairman without even sharing a final vote count — and do not incrementally move towards the goal of transparency and fairness, then surely at some point behind-the-scenes powerbrokers inside Afghanistan may dispense with the façade altogether.

Without belabouring the point, much of Afghanistan's governance travails over the past decade have been because the electoral system was betrayed to install Hamid Karzai as president the first time round and then betrayed a second time as Mr Karzai turned on his original benefactors to secure more and more power and perks for his political partners and himself.

Of what use is a so-called democratic system if it leads to the most undemocratic of actions? The international community and Afghanistan's power elite have once again sacrificed principle to salvage the veneer of stability and forward movement. Having said that, the experiment to put into effect a national government with both Pakhtun and erstwhile Northern Alliance elements seems to be the only option worth trying.

At least the incoming government team will be led by the two men who Afghans have an overwhelming preference to be ruled by. Quite how president-elect Ashraf Ghani and possibly his number two, incoming chief executive officer Abdullah Abdullah, will get along in office remains to be seen. It is better though to have a peaceful settlement rather than chaos and civil war, as many of Mr Abdullah's allies have been tacitly threatening.

The big issues that will confront the two men are well known, as is their priority. First, the post-2014 future of the international presence, led by the US, in Afghanistan will have to be quickly settled. Almost as important as residual troops in Afghanistan will be the international community's financial commitments to the country. Second will be a serious push in the peace process with the Afghan Taliban, while ensuring that the Afghan National Security Forces do not cede too much

terrain to the former. Third, relations with Pakistan and the problem of a porous border and militant sanctuaries on both sides of it. Fourth, Afghanistan itself, with the incoming government having to prove it can govern better than Mr Karzai. Together, these factors constitute a towering challenge.

Monetary policy statement

Published in Dawn, September 23rd, 2014

THE State Bank's monetary policy statement for the July to September period makes for confusing reading. All the caveats that peppered previous announcements are gone, and no mention is made of how key reforms in the energy and fiscal side are progressing.

There is only a cursory mention of the rapidly deteriorating trade deficit, which increased by 83pc from the corresponding period last year. Plummeting levels of FDI are merely mentioned in one phrase, but there is not a word on the causes or implications of this.

Bank lending to the private sector turned negative in this period, while government borrowing from the State Bank rose — a worrying sign for continuation of the nascent recovery in real economic activity. Yet the monetary policy statement makes no mention of it. In fact, one has to look in vain in the statement for any update on the nascent recovery being touted by the government all year, save for one bland claim that “real economic activity is expected to continue”.

On all the critical issues facing the economy the State Bank is suddenly silent. In both the May and July statements, it endorsed the idea that a recovery was under way in real economic activity, but cautioned that “challenges and vulnerabilities” remained, and further reforms were necessary for it to be sustainable.

While those statements were not exactly shining examples of lucidity, this time even minimal hints and caveats of announcements past are conspicuous by their absence. The impression one gets is that the bank is too fearful to speak at the moment, given the politically charged atmosphere in the country, and prefers to mumble its pronouncements. Some of this reticence is understandable.

These are, after all, sensitive times. But questions of credibility still linger, because it appears the bank is bartering away its hard-won autonomy without even a fight. If not, then an explanation should be furnished about why the concerns raised in earlier pronouncements have been dropped so easily this time round.

PTI show in Karachi

Published in Dawn, September 23rd, 2014

THE PTI's urge to expand its protest resulted in a sizeable rally in Karachi on Sunday. The change in locale from Islamabad where Imran Khan has been holding his dharna for the last five weeks entailed a necessary adjustment of target for the party.

The 'Go Nawaz Go' slogan remained the rallying call but underneath it much of the rhetoric was aimed at no longer just the PML-N. Mr Khan had been earlier unsuccessfully wooing the PPP in his campaign to oust Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Now he lambasted the PPP for exploiting rural Sindh in the name of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. He was not overtly critical of the MQM — although earlier the PTI had accused it of poll irregularities, the main plank of its current campaign as well. But his message was that if the people of Sindh were able to unite and rise above ethnic politics, the emerging collective would be large enough to work as an effective third force in Sindh.

The MQM has shown signs that it realises the importance of the PTI's challenge. And the PPP could always do with a nudge or two from a possible opponent. Consequently, whereas it is difficult at the moment to measure how far the PTI can go in Sindh, there is significance in Mr Khan carrying the battle to the province.

The labels do not matter much. Call it the politics of change or populist politics, so long as it brings greater choices to the

people, the PTI will have a role, and Mr Khan's opponents should not underestimate him.

At the Karachi rally, Imran Khan indicated he was planning to have similar shows in Lahore and elsewhere in the country. This belies an attempt by the PTI chief to try and play to his strength — cashing in on the PTI's popularity among the middle class in various cities.

His dharna has kept him and his party centre stage since mid-August but many believed that the sit-in was not the most advisable mode for the PTI; instead, they favoured a series of public meetings all over Pakistan, which to their mind were easier organised and less taxing on the party. Now, the public meetings elsewhere in the country will complement the sit-in in Islamabad, where the numbers of participants have fluctuated. These are not bad tactics in the attempt to show the extent of support for the PTI.

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Challenge for new ISI chief

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SO endemically controversial has become the ISI director general's post in recent years that if incoming DG Gen Rizwan Akhtar were to simply leave office at the end of his term with his reputation neither bolstered nor harmed, it would count as a success at this stage.

Consider the deep controversy that Gen Shuja Pasha had generated by the time he retired in 2012: a one-year extension the year before, the Osama bin Laden raid and 'memogate' are just some of the stunning lowlights, with persistent rumours of meddling in the political process dogging the latter part of his tenure.

Know more: [Lt-Gen Rizwan Akhtar named new ISI chief](#)

Now Gen Zaheerul Islam is set to leave office as an ongoing national political crisis he has been accused of engineering by some quarters rumbles on. So perhaps if the new director general were simply to keep a distance from politics and avoid national security crises, it would be an improvement over his predecessors.

Yet, while politics and the ISI are no strangers, the politicisation of the ISI in recent years has obscured a more fundamental challenge: getting the strategy against militancy right and helping restore internal security.

In that regard, Gen Akhtar's counterterrorism experience in Karachi as DG Rangers and counter-insurgency experience in South Waziristan as a commander will give him the kind of skill that can be invaluable in tackling the problem operationally.

The bigger challenge though may be less to develop a comprehensive strategy to fight militancy and more to wean the military leadership off its old habits of security policies rooted in fear and ambition. There is also a sense — all but confirmed in recent years — that the ISI has in some ways grown almost independent when it comes to its parent organisation, the armed forces.

When reasonable and rational observers of the military and the political process begin to speculate whether an army chief has full control over the ISI or whether even a DG ISI has full control over his sprawling organisation, there is surely cause for concern. Gen Akhtar has many challenges ahead of him, but none may be as important as signalling that the armed forces are not a house divided.

Finally, there is the inevitable question of civil-military relations. Even in the very announcement of Gen Akhtar's appointment can be detected a further sidelining of the civilian government with the ISPR choosing to announce the 'posting' instead of the Prime Minister's Office issuing an official statement.

If form is so completely ignored, then what does that say about the substance of ties between the PML-N government and the military leadership at the moment? If Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif did not attempt to install a favourite of his own, did the

military reciprocate by at least offering the prime minister a choice of three names? Or has the military simply indicated that the military decides and Mr Sharif complies?

War on minorities

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IT should have been just another Sunday service at the All Saints Church in Peshawar a year ago. As it turned out, it was the prelude to a massacre, the worst attack against the Christian community in Pakistan, when twin suicide bombings at the end of the service claimed around 90 lives and injured over 100 people.

The carnage sparked a wave of revulsion among Pakistanis, and expressions of solidarity with the community were swift in coming. Although attacks on such scale along religious lines have not occurred since then, the war on minorities in this country grinds on relentlessly.

In fact, it could be said that it is expanding, claiming yet more victims and also from communities hitherto left comparatively unscathed by religious extremism.

In Peshawar itself, the small Sikh community has been repeatedly targeted this year. Five Sikhs have been killed in as many months, with two fatalities in the first week of September alone. In a remote corner of Balochistan, armed men attacked a group of Zikris in their place of worship, killing six and

injuring several others. Although persecution of the Zikris — a little-known Islamic sect — had surfaced during Gen Zia's time, when religious extremism was actively harnessed and patronised to further strategic objectives, this was the first direct attack in more than two decades on their lives.

Meanwhile, a reprehensible conspiracy of silence by the state surrounds the murder of Ahmadis — whose persecution is institutionalised in Pakistan — even when a woman and two girls from that community were killed in a ghastly mob attack in July.

The crux of the problem is the state's refusal to take proactive steps to control the menace of religious extremism: banned/extremist organisations extend their influence to areas so far untouched by communal strife; hate speech is freely disseminated; the blasphemy law is used as a tool of persecution; school curricula contain derogatory references to minority communities. While the government continues in a state of torpor, this fire has begun to consume the very foundations of the country.

ECP revelations

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SELF-INDICTMENT or an expression of helplessness, the Election Commission of Pakistan has reconfirmed fears about the system by which lawmakers are elected.

In an assessment report — which has taken its time coming — about the May 2013 general election, the ECP has identified some problems that resulted in the polls being perceived as far from ideal.

Much of the blame for the ‘mess’ had already been put on the frequently maligned returning officers drawn from the judiciary. There is, however, a lot more in this self-analysis that shows the rot is much deeper and wider than it appears, and brings the working of the ECP under a dark cloud. It exposes serious flaws in ECP operations, and a remedy should go beyond the oft-made suggestion that the returning officers be put under its control.

Now to the crucial question of whether the ECP’s admission and its mild complaints of having to be unnecessarily dependent on others, including the judiciary, bring the 2013 election into doubt. It is impossible to argue that this self-assessment will not embolden those campaigning against vote rigging in the last polls. They have time and again been asked to back their slogans with evidence, whereas the proof they have cited in support of their allegations has been dismissed as insufficient.

The ECP’s own report about its failings is a boon for the campaigns of both the PTI and PAT. It is an official seal on information about polls irregularities accumulated through various sources. The PTI, which has been fighting various cases within the system to prove its claims about rigging, and PAT, which wants not reform but a change of system outright, would now be justified in saying they have a case that demands not only a probe but prompt action, even if some poll results have to be nullified.

The PML-N government on its part has maintained that the ECP-led system which organised the polls was not its invention. But that does not, or should not, prevent an honest scrutiny of the last polls. It might no more be sufficient to say that these things do happen during elections or that it is in the interest of democracy to ignore May 2013 and wait for the next polls in 2018, which could be conducted under a reformed, reinvigorated ECP. Those who term May 2013 a fraud would be energetically and with some justification be pushing for a mid-term solution.

The Syrian campaign

Published in Dawn, September 24th, 2014

IF a few cruise missiles and bombing sorties were all it took to neutralise battle-hardened terrorist groups, the world would be a much safer place. However, this is not a practical solution, which is why we must greet with caution the start of the US-led bombing of the self-styled Islamic State in Syria.

Tuesday's air strikes mark the first time the US, aided by its allies in the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, as well as Jordan, have engaged IS in Syria. An aerial campaign targeting the militant group in Iraq has been under way since August. However, in the latter case the government in Baghdad had asked for American help.

In Syria's case the regime — which has been fighting a brutal civil war against a clutch of opposition groups, including extremist outfits — has mostly been kept out of the loop. Damascus says it was “informed” about the American strikes inside Syria. However, there has been no coordination between Bashar al-Assad's government and Washington.

The Western camp and its allies have long called for regime change in Syria, which is why the US-led coalition finds itself in a dilemma. When the Syrian civil war began over three years ago, the rebels, including many extremist factions, received considerable outside help to battle Mr Assad. Now that some of these fighters have helped form the nucleus of IS and grown into veritable Frankensteins, and are out of their masters'

control, it is difficult for the West to bury the hatchet with Mr Assad and join forces against the militants.

Many questions remain about what will follow in Syria. After all, even some senior officials in the Western camp have said victory against IS will be difficult without ground forces. And with the US and many in Europe uneasy about putting their own boots on the ground, the million-dollar question is: who will do the dirty work in the field? If plans are being drawn up to arm and train the 'moderate' Syrian opposition, two questions emerge: how moderate are these forces and what are their fighting capabilities? It is largely true that most of the best fighters in the Syrian opposition have come from extremist factions. So would the West be replacing one set of obscurantists with another?

The rise of IS has doubtless been facilitated by geopolitical machinations trumping logic and respect for the sovereignty of others. The best solution appears to be for the US and its allies to abandon plans for regime change in Damascus and work with Mr Assad to effectively counter IS and other extremists in Syria.

Iran and Russia also need to be engaged considering their close relationship with Mr Assad, to form a more formidable anti-IS front and to convince the Syrian leader to agree to a negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis with the non-militant opposition once the dust settles.

Suicide attack in Peshawar

Published in Dawn, September 25th, 2014

IN the fight against militancy, a military operation in North Waziristan Agency was always considered a necessary step and blowback in Pakistan proper a likely price that would have to be paid. Now, with the military's Operation Zarb-i-Azb well into its fourth month, the blowback that did not immediately materialise appears to have finally arrived, and possibly may rapidly escalate.

The suicide attack on a senior commander of the Frontier Corps in Peshawar on Tuesday has indicated just how potent the Taliban threat still remains: from target selection to reconnaissance to pairing suicide bomber with munitions, the TTP still has all the elements necessary to cause much damage.

It is possible to point to the escape of the senior FC commander as a sign that the TTP threat is waning, but in the world of terrorism an essential truth is that the militants only need to succeed once in many attempts to land a massive psychological blow.

Yet, to definitively succeed against terrorism and militancy, the state will need a wide-ranging strategy involving many arms of the state, not just the armed forces. The weakness of the present strategy was underlined yet again on Tuesday as the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee vowed to eradicate terrorism in the country and to work tirelessly to develop and execute an effective strategy against terrorism.

That sentiment may be noble, but to what extent does it reflect reality? The military can operate in Fata, where it is waging a counter-insurgency with nearly 200,000 troops, and it can operate under the protection of Article 245 in the cities, doing selective counterterrorism operations. But does the fight against militancy need a military-led strategy or a civilian-led one? No military strategy can tackle the roots of the problem of militancy nor can any militancy strategy change the social dynamics that make violent ideologies so appealing to sections of the public.

Moreover, with some doubts about whether the long-standing policy of the security establishment of differentiating between good and bad militants has truly been abandoned, is the state really poised to effectively fight militancy?

Unhappily, while the focus is on military-led approaches, the civilian set-up remains ill-equipped to even understand the dimensions of the militancy problem. The previous PPP-led government was clear in its language, but more than just ambiguous in its actions.

Now, the PML-N is often accused of tolerating or even collaborating with militant elements to keep the peace in Punjab — a misguided notion of peace given that it has only allowed the infrastructure of jihad (the mosque, madressah and social welfare networks) to grow without any oversight or control. Surely, where brave soldiers fight on the front lines in the war against militancy, their courage and sacrifices should be recognised and applauded. But the fight against militancy will not be won with guns alone.

Redrawing boundaries

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NEVER short of solutions for this country's numerous crises, MQM chief Altaf Hussain recently weighed in on two sensitive topics that are bound to spark debate.

Speaking late on Monday, the Muttahida supremo called for the formation of a government of technocrats at the centre for two years in order to carry out "ruthless accountability". Earlier, he had called for the creation of four new provinces in Sindh.

As far as the formation of a technocrats' administration goes, this is not a new suggestion and has been often cited as a silver-bullet solution for Pakistan that would, in effect, roll up the democratic project. Coming to the division of Sindh, this is a potentially divisive issue and all political forces need to think carefully before publicly airing their views in this regard.

For one, there does not seem to be much weight in the argument that Sindh should be divided along administrative lines. For example, at a multi-party conference held in Karachi on Tuesday, organised by the Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan and the Qaumi Awami Tehreek, all parties present — both those sitting in the Sindh Assembly and those without elected representatives — said they opposed the division of Sindh.

Although the PPP, which considers Sindh its power base, was not invited, it has also spoken clearly about its opposition to any redrawing of the provincial borders. This points to

concerns that such a division of Sindh will disturb the delicate ethnic balance that exists in the province, and could unleash communal passions.

What Sindh does need are empowered districts, whose elected representatives deliver good governance and security to the people. For this, elected local governments are essential; unfortunately, both the PPP and MQM have done little to revive the local bodies' system in Sindh. But if the Muttahida feels strongly about the issue, let it take the debate about new divisions to the Sindh Assembly. The house — with elected representatives from all parts of Sindh — is the best forum to discuss the matter.

Gas infrastructure cess

A MESSY situation is developing in the gas sector. The previous government had introduced a 'Gas Infrastructure Development Cess' to be imposed on all consumers except for domestic.

A list of rates applicable to each category of consumer — from fertiliser to CNG to industry — was attached to the original legislation, which ultimately had to be passed via the finance bill. The idea at the time was to use the cess to raise funds for building additional pipeline capacity, particularly for imported gas. In its first year of operation, the amount of money to be raised from the cess was budgeted as Rs8bn.

This rose to Rs30bn subsequently. Today, the amount to be raised under this cess has risen further to Rs145bn, a staggering sum, making the cess comparable to some of the largest non-tax revenue heads in the government's finances. From the very beginning, the cess became a controversial enterprise, thus making it necessary to seek its passage into law via the finance bill, where it did not need to be debated in committee.

More recently, the Peshawar High Court has found the cess to be illegal, and ordered the government to reimburse all money charged under it. The matter went to the Supreme Court, which found that "the cess could not have been introduced through a money bill" and upheld the judgement of the Peshawar High Court.

The court's order has hit the government hard. An option being explored is to seek an act of parliament to provide the cess with legal cover, while using a presidential ordinance in the interim period to keep the revenues coming. If the ordinance stands up to legal challenge, and if the government is successful in arranging support in parliament for the cess, the matter may yet reach smooth closure. But should the plan hit a snag, the blow to government finances could be substantial.

A snag could come in the form of parliamentary parties insisting that the cess be classified as a tax, which would entitle provincial governments to their share in it under the NFC Award. In substantial measure, the mess is the result of failure in gas price deregulation. Reforms in gas pricing are important to avoid landing up in difficult situations of this sort. If the government draws the right lessons from the whole affair, perhaps the headaches created would have been worth it after all.

Extent of militancy

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The outgoing Peshawar corps commander Gen Khalid Rabbani has spoken candidly about the national dimension of the militancy problem, squarely indicating that regions outside his operational command of Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have a potent, and varied, mix of militancy that needs to be tackled urgently.

By citing militant hotbeds in other provinces, the commander of the military's ongoing Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan Agency should not be seen as trying to deflect responsibility, but should be applauded for attempting to put the fight against militancy in its proper context — which means regarding Zarb-i-Azb as an important, but by no means final, step in the right direction.

Unhappily, few lessons appear to have been learned from the experience of Fata and KP, where militancy festered for years in plain sight until it exploded about a decade ago. Now for years the country has heard about a growing militant network in Punjab, Balochistan and Sindh, but for the most part such warnings have met with the same dire apathy that once greeted those about what was brewing in Fata and KP.

In many ways, the next phase of the fight against militancy — and this phase will come whether the state decides to take the fight to the militants or vice versa — presents an even bigger challenge than Fata.

That is both because the non-military tools — civilian-led law enforcement and counterterrorism forces — are either non-existent or unable to perform adequately. Moreover, the militants themselves are more integrated within society in the provinces, living, recruiting, fund-raising and contributing welfare schemes to the communities in which they live.

A bigger challenge with less effective resources to fight it — that is essentially the dilemma that militancy outside Fata and KP presents. Yet, Gen Rabbani left a few things unsaid and they concern his institution. For one, while highlighting the need for so-called intelligence-driven operations requiring cooperation and coordination among a host of provincial, national, military and civilian agencies, Gen Rabbani left unsaid what the eternally fraught civil-military relations, especially in light of recent events, have done to the possibility of cooperation and coordination.

For another, has the military leadership really dropped the idea of a distinction between good and bad militants across Pakistan? Operation Zarb-i-Azb itself has left a question mark over whether that is truly the case. Surely, the civilian-led dispensation must perform better. But can it if the old power centre is still unable to fully move on?

Fate of Afghan refugees

Published in Dawn, September 26th, 2014

MUCH hinges on the success of the new power-sharing deal in Kabul, including the fate of over a million Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Along with the success of the ‘unity government accord’ between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the return of the Afghan refugees to their homeland will be determined by how stable conditions are after the foreign forces leave.

Right now, the prospects for swift repatriation don’t look very bright. At a recent workshop organised in Peshawar by UNHCR and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, participants were told that while 19,000 Afghans returned home in 2013, this year so far only 4,800 refugees had been repatriated.

This is despite the fact that the UN refugee agency has increased cash assistance to the displaced Afghans and provided them transport to cross the border. The slowdown is fuelled by fears of what may happen in Afghanistan in the months ahead. For its part, Pakistan, which hosts around 1.6 million registered Afghan refugees (and reportedly over a million unregistered individuals), has much on its plate already, including hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons.

Pakistan has been tackling the Afghan refugee crisis for over three decades; the UNHCR has acknowledged it as the “largest protracted refugee situation globally”.

This newspaper believes that repatriation should be voluntary — keeping in mind that without peace in war-torn Afghanistan, the refugees may not want to return. While the UN and those countries that have been militarily involved in Afghanistan must support Pakistan’s efforts to care for the displaced Afghans, there are steps authorities within the country can take to mitigate the problem.

For one, better border management is needed as currently, individuals can slip into Pakistan without much hindrance. People have been known to take money offered by the UN, leave for Afghanistan and soon find their way back to Pakistan. Additionally, there has been no coherent refugee policy at the national level, which is hampering efforts to effectively address the problem.

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Challenge within

Published in Dawn, September 26th, 2014

IT is not what President Barack Obama said at the UN General Assembly that matters; it is the horror of the situation in the Middle East that must prod the Muslim world into asking itself — to borrow the title of historian Bernard Lewis’s celebrated book — what went wrong?

The American leader’s focus in his speech on Wednesday was on a joint struggle that would “degrade and destroy” the self-styled Islamic State, which he called a “network of death” that was using rape as a weapon to subdue civilians, beheading journalists and killing children.

Forty nations, Muslim and non-Muslim, were fighting this menace, whose reprehensible actions, he said, “no God condones”. The president’s rhetoric was aimed at two audiences — the American people, who were assured that there would be no boots on the ground; and the Muslim world. So that the latter should not misunderstand his motives, he stressed that “we reject any suggestion of a clash of civilisations” and that a “belief in permanent religious war is the misguided refuge of extremists”. Then he appealed to the Muslim world to focus “on the extraordinary potential of their people, especially the youth”.

Nobody can say when the war on the IS will end and what twists and turns it will take during what appears to be just the beginning of America’s third war in the Middle East in 25 years. But one thing is obvious — it is the people of the Arab-

Islamic world who have suffered, and will continue to suffer, the consequences of their failure to take on the extremism and bigotry which were bound to take root in an atmosphere characterised by the lack of freedom and democracy. That some provocations and humiliation came from outside — as in the case of Palestine, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Kashmir — goes without saying.

But it was the Muslim rulers' failure to meet these geopolitical challenges that created frustration among the masses and gave space to the extremists now questioning and threatening the fundamentals of civilised living. Nowhere is the failure to break out of the cycle of stagnation and discard the baggage of history more evident than in the oil-rich countries' inability to transform themselves into progressive societies.

The disparity between Muslim societies and others is stark, as pointed out by former president Pervez Musharraf in a speech some three months before 9/11. For instance, while the GDP of the Muslim world was between \$1,200 and \$1,300, Japan's stood at \$5,550; while the Muslim world had 380 universities, Japan had 1,000; the number of PhDs a year was 500 in Muslim world, while India alone produced 5,000 annually.

This means the Muslim world doesn't have the tools — military or educational — to take on the extremists. Instead, it depends upon help from those very powers which directly or indirectly encouraged the monster of militant extremism now ravaging the Muslim world.

Vigilante 'justice'

Published in Dawn, September 27th, 2014

'WHO will watch the watchmen?' — from the Latin 'Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?' — an expression usually alluded to in the context of political corruption, manifested itself literally in Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail this week when a prison guard shot and injured an inmate convicted of committing blasphemy.

The victim, an elderly British-Pakistani with a history of severe mental illness, was sentenced to death on the charge of blasphemy in January this year. The assailant evidently resorted to an elaborate ruse to get close to his target, who had been kept in a separate high-security barracks set aside on the jail premises for those accused or convicted of blasphemy.

It is a particularly profound betrayal when those deputed to guard a life attempt to take it. And when that act is driven by notions of serving a 'higher cause', then legal safeguards, right to due process, etc are rendered meaningless, which is a dangerous situation for any society to find itself in.

However, we have been hurtling along this self-destructive path for some time. The murder of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer at the hands of his own guard who turned on him for advocating changes in the blasphemy law, not to mention the rapturous adulation with which the killer was greeted by many members of the legal fraternity, was a watershed moment.

It signified the ultimate triumph of fevered passion over reason, vigilante justice over rule of law. Things have come to such a

pass that blasphemy accused are hard-pressed to find lawyers willing, and brave enough, to defend them, especially after the murder in May of Rashid Rehman, who was threatened by fellow lawyers for defending such an individual.

Even judges, especially in the lower courts, are reluctant to be seen as giving any relief to blasphemy accused. In fact, revising the blasphemy law, although necessary, would perhaps not be enough in this noxious environment: only a sustained counter-narrative on multiple levels can change a mindset that sees virtue in committing violence in the name of religion.

The threat lingers

Published in Dawn, September 27th, 2014

THERE are numerous factors that contribute to Karachi's chaotic matrix of violence. While political, ethnic and sectarian violence is witnessed far too often, as is street crime, ever so often we are reminded of the deadly capabilities religious militants in the city continue to possess.

The bombing that targeted SSP Farooq Awan's convoy on Thursday night in the Defence Housing Authority area was an example of the latter. Though the police officer was lucky to have survived the assault, two passers-by succumbed to their injuries. The Jundullah group — not to be confused with the Iranian militant outfit with the same name — reportedly claimed the attack and senior police officials have also observed that the assault was the group's handiwork.

Though Jundullah has in the past caused considerable havoc, with the 2004 assault on the then corps commander's convoy being its most high-profile exploit in Karachi, Sindh police officials say the group has made a resurgence of late after lying low for over a year. The recent killing of a Shia cleric and an attack on a police vehicle have also been attributed to the group.

Thursday's attack highlights two important points. Firstly, despite the year-old law-enforcement operation in the city, terrorist groups in Karachi very much retain the capability to carry out high-profile attacks.

The bombing of SSP Awan's convoy, as well as the raid on the navy dockyard earlier this month, show that unless the planning and operational capabilities of militants are neutralised through pre-emptive, intelligence-led action, they will continue to possess the capacity for destruction. Secondly, the attack exposes the vulnerability of those officers in the front line of the fight against militancy.

SSP Awan was actively working against militants and had escaped at least two previous attempts on his life. Chaudhry Aslam and Shafiq Tanoli — two other officers known for their active involvement in counterterrorism operations — were brutally killed by extremists earlier in the year. While all men and women of the police force need to have sufficient training and equipment to protect themselves from terrorists and criminals, those officers who are actively taking part in anti-militancy operations in Karachi need specific protection. If officers are left with inadequate protection and are killed or injured in action, it will only demoralise the force and embolden the terrorists. Hence pre-emptive action to uproot

militant networks from Karachi, coupled with added security for officers involved in counterterrorism campaigns, is essential.

Kashmir at the core

Published in Dawn, September 28th, 2014

SPEAKING at the UN General Assembly session on Friday was a Nawaz Sharif different to the one who had earned much flak from the hawks in Pakistan for his India vision of a few years ago.

He was then an opposition leader who wanted to present himself as a moderate Pakistani politician. Now he is a prime minister who must represent his state's interests which are made up of much more than a politician's wishes.

Pakistan and India are back at a place from where they have to build from scratch. And if internal Pakistani dynamics, such as Mr Sharif's tenuous ties with the security establishment, have contributed to the responses today, India's desire, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to act as an 'emerging superpower' has also deterred dialogue between the two countries.

Last month's cancellation of the foreign secretary-level talks by New Delhi, which deplored Pakistan's contacts with leaders from India-held Kashmir, had heralded the suspension.

In fact, the ground was being prepared for that eventuality and recent engagement between the two countries, when not cold, has been too heated. There were far too many incidents of firing on the Pakistan-India frontier if we are to cite just one significant reason for the deterioration in ties — and the gifts the two prime ministers exchanged were too bereft of substance to be of any long-term value.

Pakistan's stance on Kashmir is based on a solid principle. The emphasis has varied, but Kashmir has been very much there influencing attitudes at the talks even when it was being kept out for the sake of confidence-building.

On its part, New Delhi has also stuck to its guns over the disputed territory. Consequently, dialogue, which is always the best way forward and which in this case was kept going not least by the efforts of international powers, has been under constant threat. The basic reason for this engagement in recent times was that in a changed world, Pakistan and India could not continue their hostile ways if they hoped to keep pace with economic development.

For many on this side of the border, the increasing insistence by Mr Modi's India to dictate is rooted in the belief that India today is economically powerful enough for international players to side with it — tacitly and openly.

That would mean greater pressure on Pakistan which has an image problem and a host of economic problems to deal with. But this formula disregards the fact that Islamabad cannot ignore or compromise on Kashmir. There is no denying that Kashmir is a central issue, but the only way it can be dealt with is by including the Kashmiris in the discussion — rather than

using them to sustain nationalistic refrains. That fact must not be lost sight of.

[A novel plan for PIA](#)

Published in Dawn, September 28th, 2014

A NEW plan is in the offing to bifurcate PIA into two companies and sell one of them to an international party. The plan would split PIA's sprawling operations into two — creating an airline on one hand, and putting ground operations such as hotels, catering and ground handling in a separate compartment. The airline can then be sold off, while the other operations could be consolidated for sale later.

This is, indeed, a novel idea and it should be given the space to succeed. Earlier efforts to privatise the state-owned airline have come to grief because of strident opposition from the labour unions who fear mass layoffs, and, reportedly, even from the Ministry of Defence which has large interests in the airline. The concerns of the labour unions are well understood, and layoffs at a time of high unemployment should be avoided to the extent possible.

But all other considerations for retaining the airline as a national asset have now been overshadowed by the sorry state of the carrier's affairs for a number of years now. The fact that the airline has a workforce of 17,000 for a fleet of 36 aircraft, 10 of which are grounded, is evidence enough of its inefficiency. The accumulated losses, that had crossed Rs186bn when the plan was originally formulated in January, have left the airline with a debt burden of Rs276bn. This has

made debt service one of its largest expenditure heads after operating costs.

Having come this far, and stoked the embers of expectation, the government must now see through the successful implementation of the plan. Retaining PIA as a national carrier no longer appears workable, and if a viable path exists to divest the airline without sparking mass layoffs, then the plan deserves a chance.

It is also worth noting that PIA would be amongst the first regional national airlines to be successfully privatised. However, it is equally important that mistakes of the past with regard to privatisation be avoided. Principal amongst these is wasting the proceeds. Since the government is intending to raise almost \$4bn via its privatisation plan this year, it is crucial that we have thorough transparency on how those funds are utilised. The law requires them to be used for drawing down debt, not for financing the current account deficit. This must be ensured. Frittering away hard-fought gains has been a national failing for far too long now.

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‘Objectionable material’

Published in Dawn, September 28th, 2014

IT is fair to say that the mix of ideology, religion and selective history taught in our public schools often leaves students unable to cope with the realities of the modern world. Some critics have even said that the curriculum is the main reason for the Pakistani population’s steady drift towards intolerance.

Yet whenever efforts are made to reform the curriculum, powerful forces that insist on keeping intact the narrative in textbooks — one that was largely constructed in the Zia era — become active in order to mould the minds of the next generation. As reported in this paper on Saturday, the PTI-led government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has buckled under pressure exerted by Jamaat-i-Islami, its provincial coalition partner, and has decided to remove ‘objectionable material’ from primary school textbooks. We would assume any matter that promotes hatred and intolerance would fall under the category of ‘objectionable material’, but the Jamaat, it seems, has other ideas.

Reportedly, the party has issues with the presence of pictures of Christmas cakes and little girls without dupattas in schoolbooks, as well as the mention of ‘good morning’, instead of ‘As salaam-o-alaikum’. Moulding the curriculum so it is culturally appropriate is understandable, but these objections seem ridiculous. If anything, we need greater mention of other faiths and cultures in our textbooks so that our children are taught to appreciate diversity.

Perhaps the JJ and PTI should make an effort to educate youngsters about the values of harmony, tolerance and brotherhood so that their impressionable minds are exposed to an alternative narrative to counter the hate and poison that surrounds them. Also, there is much that needs to be fixed in KP’s education system before the administration starts worrying about Christmas cakes in textbooks. While some improvements have been made under the PTI’s watch where the management of the education system is concerned, matters largely remain the same. Additionally, much of the infrastructure, including girls’ schools, damaged by militants needs urgent attention. Instead of non-issues, it is these areas that the provincial government should be concentrating on.

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Assessing losses

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A STORY is being propagated that the economy has suffered massive damage due to the protests in Islamabad, and the floods in Punjab.

Most recently, the finance secretary appeared before the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Revenue, and complained that the economy, the image of the country, investor sentiment and inflation all had been adversely impacted by both events.

Investors have shelved their plans; the rupee had slid from Rs98 to Rs103 to a dollar; the IMF had delayed its tranche; and inflation would probably be fuelled “on account of supply disruption of commodities due to dharnas and rallies” as well as the recent floods. He also touched on the external trade deficit, although it is far from clear how this might be linked to the floods or the protests.

In short, everything was going fine until the floods and the protests came along and upset the apple cart, we are being told. All of these claims strain credulity.

The story should be received with a large dose of scepticism because there is sufficient evidence that the economy was sputtering long before the floods and the protests descended on us. How have the dharnas contributed to inflation, or to supply bottlenecks, except in the opening days when the government tried to choke all movement in an effort to stop the marches?

Moreover, the Fund as well as the State Bank had flagged the fragile nature of the recovery that the government was boasting of, and as late as July, the central bank was voicing scepticism about the growth story.

The trade deficit was flagged as an issue much earlier in the year, and the value of the currency at Rs98 to a dollar was considered untenable from the very beginning. The build-up in the reserves was a positive sign all of last year, but it had also been underlined as driven by “one-off inflows” early in the year.

The circular debt had returned to its previous levels by July, and the power tariff subsidy had to be revised upward by almost 50pc midyear. There is little doubt that the floods and the protests have dented the economy, but it is also important to keep in mind that the government’s growth story was in significant trouble long before these events materialised. The Senate standing committee should bear this in mind when taking stock of the secretary’s testimony.

No end in sight

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IT'S a strange kind of impasse the country is trapped in. The PML-N government is trying to limp on from the ongoing crisis, but in a peculiar way: the government appears to think that if it ignores the PTI and PAT protesters, they will disappear in time.

Meanwhile, the PTI and PAT have been busy adjusting their anti-government protest strategy, with Imran Khan switching his attention from the sit-in on Constitution Avenue to a travelling protest each week in various parts of the country.

Clearly, the big loser in all of this is the country and any prospect of governance taking centre stage anytime soon. Consider that a summer of turmoil has morphed into an autumn of discord – and still there is no end in sight. Surely, this is not a sustainable scenario for a state and society contending with deep and complicated problems that only keep growing with time.

Part of the problem was and remains the PML-N itself. Even when it attempts to create a veneer of semi-normality, the government seems to be undone by itself.

The UN trip of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif last week could have been an opportunity to put forward a confident face, to show that the government is thinking long-term about economic, political and social issues back home. Instead, the trip was lacklustre with little real planning or foresight seeming

to have gone into it. Perhaps that was because the trip was not a certainty until the last moment and most work at the UN General Assembly's annual session is planned weeks and months in advance. But it does betray a larger point about the government's performance so far: the promise and expectation has been so much higher than actual delivery.

In area after area, be it the power sector or administrative reforms or parliamentary performance, the PML-N simply seems mired in old ways, unable or perhaps unwilling to forcefully move the democratic project ahead. Unhappily, the PML-N still does not appear to understand that as the chief custodian of the democratic project, the onus falls on the party to strengthen democracy and improve governance in a manner that can address the wellspring of discontent among the population.

Yet, for all its shortcomings and placidity, the PML-N is in truth confronted by an opponent who is difficult to contend with.

For all his claims about wanting to rewrite the social contract and to improve governance, Imran Khan's quest comes down to a single issue: ousting the PML-N from power so that the PTI has another shot at capturing power.

Raging against injustices – of which there are many, pillorying an under-delivering state – which it does, excoriating a government for not truly being democratic in spirit – which it isn't, is all well and good, but it leaves a fundamental question unanswered: what is Mr Khan's concrete and measurable plan for change? It's not even that the PTI-led

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government's performance has been less than stellar, but that Mr Khan does not even attempt to flesh out how, on what time scale and in which areas reforms would be prioritised and delivered.

Without any of that, how is the PTI any different from the status quo it lambastes?

Apology and after

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PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's message to party workers and followers is reminiscent of the sentiments of a general who is striving to keep his troops together for the next battle.

In an open letter, he has apologised to those who may have reason to part ways with the PPP and has asked the disillusioned to stay put a while longer, making it incumbent upon himself and Asif Ali Zardari to take some drastic steps towards the party's revival.

The PPP has not only been reduced to a regional party, more or less confined to Sindh, its support is considered emotionally inspired. It has drawn widespread criticism for not keeping pace with the people who have far more at stake today than backing a political party purely out of their love for the 'martyrs' the party has produced.

Declaring one's intention to take up where Ms Benazir Bhutto left off can only be meaningful if the PPP is willing to back its words with reorganisation along practical, result-oriented lines all over the country.

The old stories about how the PPP once swayed Pakistanis across various divides are now mere opium that can only make those at the party's helm oblivious to the current realities.

It was easier for the PPP in the 1960s during the years leading to its founding. The repair now is a much more sensitive job, not least because others have been more inventive and mobile than the PPP, and the debate about whether or not they have moved in the right direction is a luxury which Bilawal Bhutto Zardari cannot afford at the moment.

The simple reality is that the people have found themselves choices and a new force to challenge the long-time PPP opponent — the PML-N — that had over all these decades provided an automatic justification for the existence of the PPP. The PTI is a challenge to grapple with. Imran Khan appears to have eaten deep into the PPP support base particularly in Punjab comprising anti-PML-N pockets — and the PPP's policy of playing the appendage of PML-N is further harming its cause.

To say that apologies are solutions would be as futile as dismissing this message by the PPP chairman as an instrument of surrender.

For whatever it is worth, his letter does provide broad lines of policy and identifies the PPP with the 'left-wing' forces. It falls short of stating the obvious about who controls the politics in

the country, but at the same time does promise resistance to “right-wing parties” that “appease” the extremists.

For practical reasons, the edgy PPP jiyala would be hoping that these appeasers in the new party rule book would include both the PTI and PML-N. Though this is a dangerous course, this ideological focus is as crucial to Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and his party’s rise as to the effort to organise at the grass roots.

Confident consumers

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ALL is not as gloomy as it might appear. Investor confidence might be plummeting and the country’s savings rate may be the lowest in the region.

We might be slipping further in competitive rankings, and the outlook of our credit rating may be hanging by a thread tethered to the IMF. But our consumers are amongst the most confident in the world.

“Pakistani consumers are generally optimistic” finds a report by the research company Nielson. The State Bank’s own consumer confidence index reports a rising score between July last year and this year. Given that wage levels have been stagnant over this time period, while inflation has hovered around 8pc, these results can be a little puzzling.

How are people spending more when they are earning less? The erudite find answers in the parallel economy, the so-called informal sector, which perhaps surged while the rest of the economy barely moved at a rate of 4.1pc. The key word here is ‘perhaps’, because there is no reliable way of knowing for sure what is going on in the informal sector.

But to those less encumbered by the methodological baggage of the erudite, no evidence is required beyond what a pair of eyes and ears can provide.

Perhaps Pakistanis are spending more today because they don’t know what tomorrow will bring. And the less they know about the shape of tomorrow, the more likely they are to use it all up today.

Saving and investment are for fools and squirrels when you live in a present, where tomorrow always falls in a faraway land. Here it’s all about the quick score and flaunting what you have.

Let others worry about sending a mission to Mars; we can simply announce a housing colony up there and start trading plot files right away. So through all the turbulence, let us rejoice over the wind in our sails that has kept us in such fickle stead through the fiercest of storms — and let a million malls blossom.

A broken system

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IN Pakistan, one of the major factors contributing to rampant lawlessness is quite simply that criminals don't get caught. And if they do, weak investigation and prosecution means that soon enough, dangerous individuals are back on the streets.

In fact, the data collected by the Faisalabad police serves as an eye-opener to indicate just how rotten the system is. Information collected by the district police reportedly shows that over the last five years, around 8,000 suspected criminals have been released for a number of reasons. Some of the suspects were apprehended for alleged involvement in crimes ranging from murder to robbery.

The reasons for their release will be familiar to anyone with an idea of the workings of Pakistan's law-enforcement and criminal justice systems.

The suspects were let off because witnesses were too afraid to testify, while even investigation officers and judges faced threats. Alarming as the figure seems, considering the moribund state of the law-enforcement and prosecution systems countrywide, the numbers for the district should not be too surprising.

Due to massive holes in the system, the Faisalabad police have resorted to ad hoc measures to detain suspects, such as applying Maintenance of Public Order laws. This comes across as a relatively more tolerable way of keeping suspects behind

bars, given that our law enforcers are known to use other, extra-legal methods, to 'get rid' of troublesome suspects.

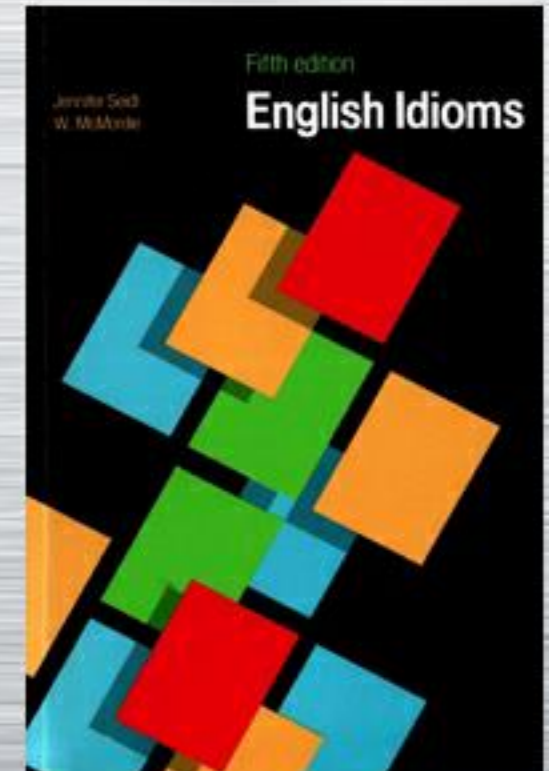
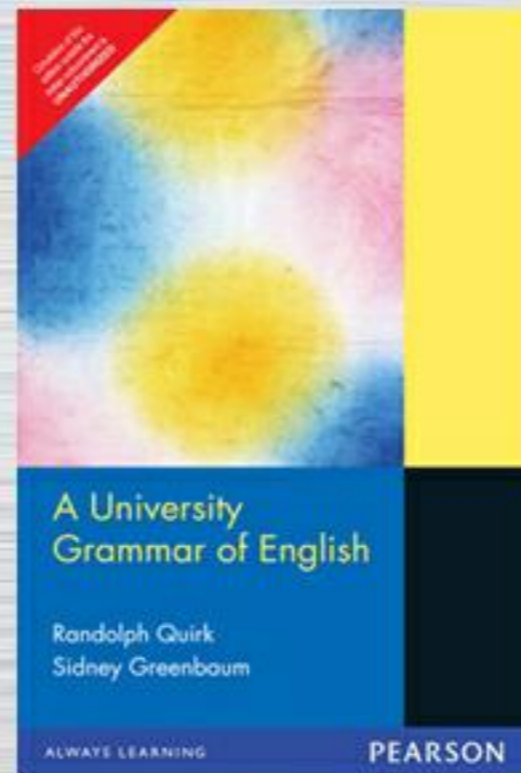
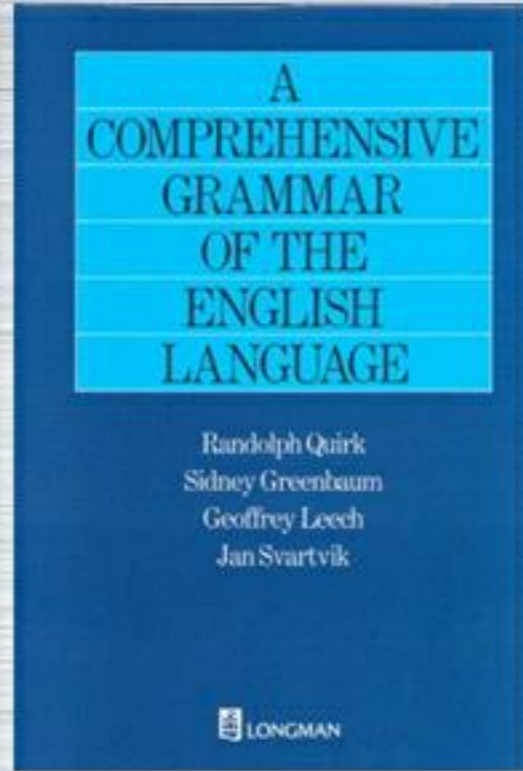
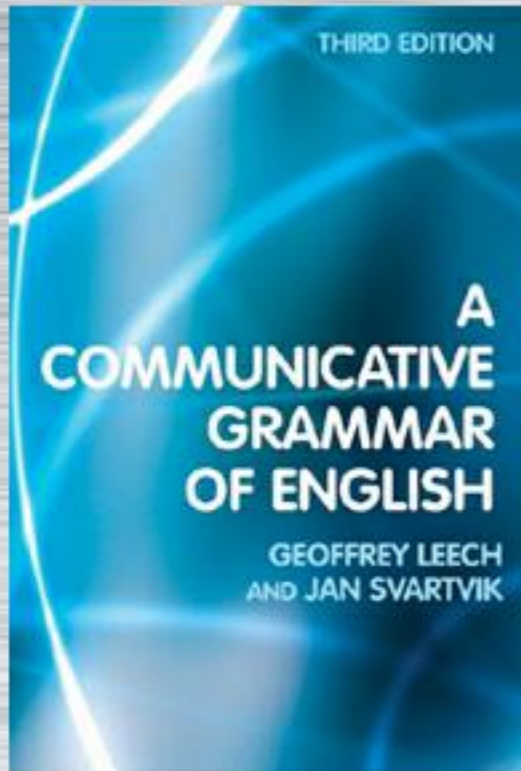
To assess the situation perhaps a similar district-level exercise could be carried out countrywide. In each district, the police should make public the number of suspects released, along with the reasons why. This would give reform efforts benchmark figures to work with.

The next — and more difficult step — involves improving the capability and capacity of police forces to investigate crime. Today, mostly archaic methods — that largely rely on confessions, statements and informers — are used to build a case.

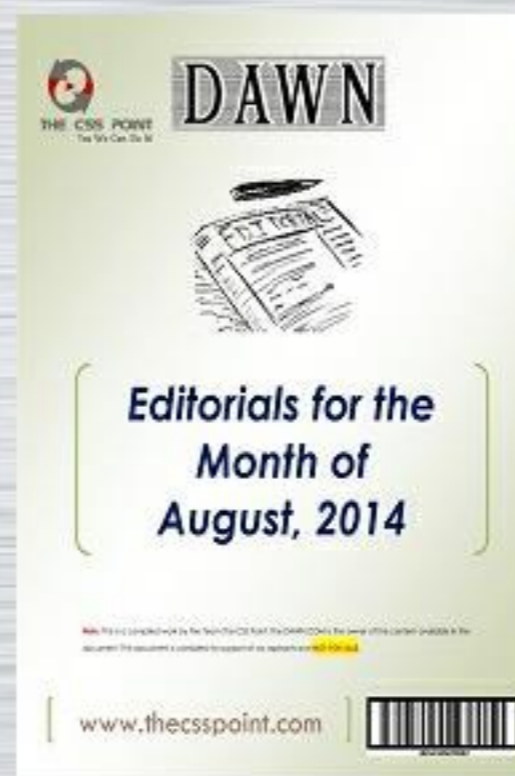
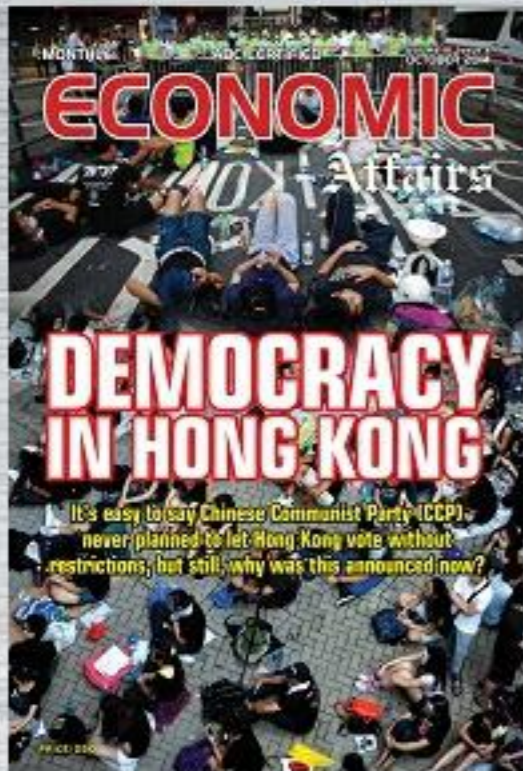
Officials have often cited the need for using forensics to aid investigation efforts, hence it is time noble intentions were transformed into action and scientific investigation techniques introduced at the grass roots. And as the investigation system is modernised, the prosecution system also needs to be overhauled.

The need for effective witness protection programmes has long been highlighted in the country, yet progress is painfully slow. Unless the state ushers in long-lasting changes in the investigation and prosecution systems, it will be unable to provide justice to the people and law and order will continue to plummet.

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