

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of April, 2015

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Party-based LG polls

MOST of the country, apart from Balochistan, which has already conducted the exercise, is finally on the path to holding local government elections, largely thanks to the efforts and persistence of the higher judiciary.

And interestingly, it is also the courts that are actively working to address the anomalies that stand in the way of representative, democratic local polls countrywide.

On Monday, the Lahore High Court declared that non-party polls in cantonments were “unconstitutional” and ordered the Election Commission of Pakistan to hold these on a party basis.

Know more: [LHC orders LG elections on party-basis in Punjab Cantonment Board](#)

This is indeed a welcome decision as there is no reason why LG polls in cantonments — scheduled to be held this month — should be conducted on a non-party basis. For all purposes, most cantonments across Pakistan have today become residential areas much like the ‘civilian’ parts of town where citizens from all walks of life reside along with military personnel, retired or otherwise.

Gone are the days when these facilities used to be located far from population centres and housed only those in uniform. In recognition of these realities, the residents of cantonments must have the right to choose local representatives with political affiliations.

If party-based polls will now take place countrywide, there is no logical reason why party-less elections should be held in the Islamabad Capital Territory.

As per the bill passed in the National Assembly recently, the federal capital is supposed to have non-party polls.

This legislation needs to be reviewed. What is ironic is that while the courts are pushing for party-based polls, the military, in the areas it controls, has shown resistance to the idea, while the PML-N wants party-less elections in Islamabad lest one of its political opponents ends up heading the capital’s local government.

It needs to be realised that non-party LG polls, as well as party-less elections to the national legislature, are amongst the legacies of military rule; a democratic ethos demands that people be free to choose candidates with political affiliations from the local level up.

After much nudging and prodding by the judiciary, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Punjab are all now working to hold the polls before the Supreme Court’s September deadline arrives.

KP is due to hold the elections in May while Sindh and Punjab’s polls are due in September. As we have said before, local polls help instil the democratic spirit at the grass-roots level and local governments serve as nurseries for politicians who can be groomed to serve at the provincial and national levels.

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What is more, the absence of elected local governments for an extended period has had a negative effect on civic life where both infrastructure and services are concerned. Representative rule at the local level is essential to provide timely solutions to people at the neighbourhood and town level, without citizens having to line up before the provincial bureaucracy or lawmakers.

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A role for the OIC?

AS the aerial bombardment of the Houthis in Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition continues and as Pakistan continues to flirt with the possibility of entering the latest Middle East conflict militarily — Defence Minister Khwaja Asif is in Saudi along with representatives of all three services for talks with Saudi officials — there is also an effort by Pakistan to keep the diplomatic wheels turning.

On Monday, the Prime Minister's Office put out a statement that, while not explicitly saying so, suggested an effort to activate the OIC to play some kind of role to bring the conflict in Yemen to an early end and prevent it from spilling over onto Saudi soil.

That is a good idea, not just for a moribund organisation, but for restoring peace in the Saudi-Yemen region of the Middle East.

Take a look: [OIC's role to be sought for ending Yemen conflict](#)

It seems likely that a military solution will perhaps only temporarily quell the Houthi uprising. Therefore, involving the sum total of the Muslim world and using the preeminent forum for Muslim states to attempt a diplomatic solution in the Yemen conflict would, if successful, have all manner of positive consequences for a Muslim world riven by conflict.

There remains though — despite the federal government's best intentions — the first problem of carving out a credible space for the OIC to act as an impartial mediator in the Yemen conflict.

Under the present Saudi secretary general, Iyad Ameen Madani, the OIC has taken a distinctly anti-Houthi, pro-Saudi stance.

The OIC has not only supported the Saudi-led military actions in Yemen but its secretary general has openly blasted the Houthis, blaming them for the civil war and claiming that military action was necessary to save Yemen from “the chaos unleashed on it by the Houthi group and its repercussions for the entire region”.

Given that fierce stance by the OIC's chief, it hardly seems likely that the Houthis will want to negotiate at an OIC table.

However, the OIC's present slant is also a function of it becoming hostage to political bickering and the Muslim world being pulled between two poles, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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If countries like Pakistan were to promote the idea of the OIC becoming a conflict-resolution forum and were to do so without explicitly favouring one side in the intra-Yemen conflict over another, there could be a possibility of making the OIC relevant again.

But then much would depend on the Pakistani delegation presently in Saudi first not committing to fight on the side of the Saudi-led coalition.

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Stock market upheaval

THE strong bout of volatility that just hit the Karachi Stock Exchange shows that the country's capital markets continue to have fundamental weaknesses in spite of a decade of reforms.

According to market players, the volatility began when a foreign fund began pulling out its money, said to be around \$130m, for reasons of its own. The outflow, hardly a large amount, sparked panic which went out of control very quickly. Company fundamentals had no role to play in this.

The month of March saw \$87m pulled out by foreign investors with normality returning when \$2m flowed in on March 30. The amounts are tiny, but the swings they were able to spark were very large, showing the market's vulnerability to sentiment.

Know more: [Stock market plunges by 1,031 points](#)

The community of brokers has already been on edge due to some actions taken by the regulator to stem wrongful practices such as insider trading and front running.

The edginess is a clear indicator that such practices remain an important part of doing business in the stock market, and the powerful storm of sentiment that just swept the trade floor shows the weak footing on which the market stands.

Small investors should continue to look at the stock market as a place to keep their savings, but the vulnerabilities show that it would be better to take a long-term view and not become easily spooked by the wild swings that are the hallmark of the stock market.

Between speculative swings, panic withdrawals and wrongful practices, the stock market remains a good place from where to secure a decent return on one's savings, but only if one has the staying power to remain in the game long enough.

Swings of this sort tend to wipe out small investors with no staying power, and that is one reason why further reforms are necessary to ensure that sentiment remains as tightly chained as possible, and wrongful practices are duly prosecuted. In the meantime, let the buyer beware.

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Young Doctors again

The joke is that many of those in the forefront of the campaign of the Young Doctors' Association for a better service structure in Punjab are no longer that youthful. But it is not funny.

This is an issue that has not been fully addressed while, at the same time, there is no one who is prepared to pronounce it untreatable.

It is symbolic of much that exists in limbo in this country — including the health sector which is a bundle of the confused priorities of those who make policies and the ones who implement them.

Take a look: [Young doctors take to streets](#)

The Young Doctors in Punjab have taken to the streets again, a familiar sight since 2012 and even before. When their movement was at its peak in 2012, some kind of a compromise was reached between the protesters and the provincial government.

An agreement exists. Some kind of progress is also said to have been made towards addressing these demands. But just as expectations are raised, the doctors say there is some hiccup that stalls the process and they are left with no choice but to come out protesting once again.

There are many layers to the demand. The demonstrating doctors are often eager to include points such as the free flow

of medicines to patients on their list, which gives a more wholesome, popular look to their movement.

Primarily, however, it is about promotions and other such details that determine perks and privileges in service for the doctors working in public-sector hospitals.

The main hurdle is lack of finances, to which the response of the doctors as well as other independent observers is standard: the government must get its priorities right.

The Young Doctors' situation is after all only one aspect of it, even if it is agreed that, as in all such cases, not all their demands are reasonable or not all of them can be readily met.

There are many other instances justifying the criticism of the official penchant for fancy schemes at the cost of basics such as education and health. Even the courts have in recent times noted this, in the latest instance during the hearing of a petition against the construction of a new road in Lahore.

Having said that, the doctors' protest has been allowed to continue for far too long. It is so replete with allegations of apathy and indeed betrayal that it must rank among the worst advertisements for the 'efficient' Shahbaz Sharif set-up.

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Removal of barricades

THE presence of VIPs perhaps never rankles the average Joe quite as much as it does when those VIPs gobble up chunks of real estate — that should by right be accessible to the general public — in an avowed quest for security around their spacious and already fortified abodes.

Where Karachi is concerned, that includes numerous diplomatic missions as well as former presidents' residences. Increasingly, many ordinary citizens of Karachi have also resorted to barricading the streets and even entire localities where they reside, in the name of security.

Take a look: [Inside Karachi: Over 125 street barriers removed](#)

Some schools and even commercial enterprises have erected such barriers. Several days ago, the Rangers, citing the need for access to all thoroughfares as part of their operation to restore law and order in the city, issued a three-day ultimatum whereby everyone who had taken recourse to blocking off roads with barricades was to ensure their removal; otherwise the Rangers would undertake the task themselves.

After initial resistance, it seems even Bilawal House — which over the years has swallowed up a service lane and a green belt plus a two-way thoroughfare (one side was reopened in late 2013) by erecting concrete walls — has agreed to comply. Let us hope this is not a temporary concession.

There is no legal provision whereby a public thoroughfare can be closed permanently or on a long-term basis. Those engaging

in this practice are thus not only creating a public nuisance but also violating the rights of their fellow citizens who, by virtue of being equal under the law, are entitled to unfettered use of public land.

Security concerns of course cannot be discounted, and here is where the state must do its duty by all citizens.

As things stand, the law-enforcement apparatus is geared towards providing security in the so-called elite areas where residents are already in a better position to safeguard themselves while localities lower down the income scale have little else but flimsy barricades to stave off threats to their lives and property.

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Little progress on Afghanistan

THE criticism levelled by the Afghan High Peace Council — tasked for many years now to engage the Afghan Taliban in talks — against its government’s decision to allow American forces to delay the final drawdown of troops from Afghanistan is yet another indication that neither Kabul nor the US appears to have anything resembling a plan to deal with the Taliban.

Half the US troops in Afghanistan were scheduled to depart at year’s end with the other half likely to have gone by the time US President Barack Obama leaves the White House in January 2017.

Know more: [Afghan peace council assails decision to slow down US pullout](#)

To the extent that the US forces are staying on in higher numbers for a longer period than originally planned, it will officially be cast by the Afghan and American sides as a decision aimed squarely at not allowing Afghanistan to become a sanctuary for global terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda.

In truth, however, the decision is about shoring up the Ashraf Ghani-led Afghan government in the face of the Taliban threat.

But to what end? As suggested in the US-Afghanistan joint statement at the end of President Ashraf Ghani’s visit to the US late last month, “reconciliation and a political settlement

remain the surest way to achieve the full retrograde of US and foreign troops from Afghanistan”.

Without reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban, there will be no real stability or relative peace in Afghanistan. But the Afghan government seems unable to interest the Afghan Taliban in talks at the moment while the US seems too preoccupied with strife in other parts of the world. Who then is to lead the multidimensional and multiplayer push for talks with the Taliban?

It is little wonder that the HPC appears to be frustrated. Then again, in the murky world of Afghan politics, the HPC could simply be trying to distance itself from an Afghan government decision that could complicate its task of engaging the Taliban.

As ever, and as also underlined in the joint US-Afghan statement (“need for an Afghan-led peace process, enjoying regional support, in particular from Pakistan”), the key remains Pakistan.

Despite the increased cooperation in terms of taking on anti-Pakistan militants on both sides of the Durand Line, there seems to have been little attempt by Pakistan to even create the conditions for dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban leadership.

The fear, and it is hardly an unfounded one, remains that the massive push against anti-Pakistan militants has not changed the strategic perspective within the military leadership on what needs to be done in Afghanistan.

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If that is in fact the case, it would be a significant, possibly insurmountable, hurdle in achieving regional peace. A settlement in Afghanistan is as urgent for Pakistan as is the dismantling of militant groups inside the country. Will the military accept this?

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MQM-PTI code of conduct

FINALLY some sanity appears to have prevailed in the fraught relations between the MQM and PTI in Karachi.

A day after some supporters of the two parties were involved in a clash in Azizabad's Jinnah Ground, which was more a spontaneous fracas than a planned encounter, the Sindh governor Ishratul Ibad moved with alacrity to bring representatives from both sides to the negotiating table.

A code of conduct for the April 23 by-election in NA-246 was agreed upon during the meeting whose participants included Imran Ismail, PTI's candidate for the constituency and Kanwar Naveed Jameel, MQM's candidate for the same.

Also read: [Governor Sindh welcomes PTI decision for Karachi rally](#)

According to Dr Ibad's statement following thereafter, the parties have agreed to desist from provocation and the use of derogatory language against each other.

The demonstration of such civility can only be welcomed, notwithstanding the 'hidden hands' — with their equally obscure agendas — that may be at work behind it. For it is crystal clear to anyone with any stake in maintaining peace in this city of 20 million that the circumstances demand a rational and mature response.

Events in recent weeks have thrown the situation in Karachi into a state of flux, and when the chips fall, they may not do so without considerable violence.

As a result, the coming by-election, that too in no less a constituency than the MQM bastion of Azizabad, has acquired far greater significance than it would have earlier.

As we have said before, the campaign for this poll will be a test case for both parties to rise above petty invective and slander, and demonstrate they have the political chops to address the myriad problems that plague this city.

They can take their cue from the manner in which the brawl in Jinnah Ground on Tuesday was swiftly handled through political efforts rather than being allowed to vitiate the atmosphere.

Every party has a right to campaign freely in Karachi and then approach the court of public opinion for its verdict, voluntarily given and unreservedly respected.

Banks and madressahs

MADRESSAHS have complained to the government that banks are reluctant to open accounts for them for fear of becoming entangled in a possible illicit activity investigation.

The complaints were shared with the secretary, religious affairs, who conveyed them at a PAC meeting, in the context of an ongoing effort by the government to get all seminaries to register themselves and make disclosures about their source of funding.

The effort includes getting the seminaries to fill out a form requiring them to disclose their assets, number of vehicles and bank account information as well as the sources from where funds will arrive into the account.

There are five Wafaq boards, and at least two of them have reportedly refused to comply with the instructions to fill out the forms. They argue in return that the procedures being demanded of them are cumbersome, and that banks routinely refuse to open accounts for madressahs.

The government has not specified what penalties will apply to those seminaries that do not comply with the new registration procedures, and the issue seems to have reached an impasse.

At this point, it is not clear whether or not the complaints of the seminaries against the banks are valid, but given that Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan has himself stated on record that 10pc of all madressahs could be involved in terror-related activities,

without specifying which ones, the banks have grounds to be cautious in dealing with all of them.

How are they supposed to know whether or not a particular applicant belongs to the 10pc that is allegedly involved in terror-related activity? In the absence of proper bank accounts, seminaries here are likely to continue with the existing practice of using individual accounts of people working for them to transact their finances, or to deal entirely in cash.

This complicates the task of tracking and monitoring their funds. It is bad enough that the government has had such a complicated time figuring out how to go about the rudimentary job of registering all seminaries, and acquiring some knowledge of how many are operating around the country.

How are we to expect that the government will be able to conduct higher levels of regulation, such as curricular reform and tracking sources of funding? Clearly, more vigorous efforts are required from the government.

Leaving the entire exercise to be carried out by the religious affairs ministry alone is not going to be enough.

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Joint session on Yemen

IN a sensible and timely move, the PML-N government has, at the urging of the opposition, decided to convene a joint session of parliament to discuss the conflict in Yemen.

The focus will also be on what role, if any, Pakistan may play in what is essentially a civil war inside Yemen — but one that has been turbocharged by Saudi fears of potential Iranian influence growing in a country that the kingdom shares a border with.

Take a look: [PM seeks joint session of Parliament on April 6 to debate Yemen conflict](#)

While a joint session of parliament cannot issue a binding resolution directing the government on how to proceed in a matter of foreign policy, it should help clarify at least two things: one, the government's position, thus far at odds with Saudi claims; and two, what is at stake for Pakistan, both internally and externally, when it comes to intervening — diplomatically or militarily — in a region where Pakistan has to necessarily balance competing interests.

To begin with, there has been some consistency in the official claims made by the PML-N government: seeking a diplomatic and peaceful solution to the crisis in Yemen; declaring that the government's red line is a violation of the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia (effectively, if the Houthis were to cross the border into the kingdom); and leaving the door open to sending troops at least for defensive purposes inside Saudi Arabia.

What has been particularly troubling, however, is that Saudi officials and the media there have repeatedly contradicted the Pakistani government claims and bluntly stated that Pakistan has already committed to making a military contribution to the Saudi-led coalition presently bombing the Houthis in Yemen that may be followed by a land invasion.

There being a long history of the state here being parsimonious with the truth and making private commitments to outside powers, the fear is that the PML-N government may be saying one thing to its own public and preparing to do something quite different.

In the joint session of parliament to be convened on Monday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself needs to speak, explain his government's policy and address the conflicting claims made by his government and the Saudi regime.

There is also a significant role for the opposition to play in the joint session: laying out the internal implications of a military involvement in Yemen when the fight against militancy at home is at its peak; expanding on the regional implications for participating in a Saudi-led coalition that is aimed at reducing perceived Iranian influence; and dilating on the proper diplomatic and political role for Pakistan in the Muslim world, which is riven by conflict, both state and non-state.

In particular, refuting the dangerous and destabilising claims in some quarters here that the Yemen conflict is sectarian or that the Pakistan state has a sectarian leaning of its own is something that all of parliament could do together — and forcefully.

Kenyan campus attack

THE list of depredations carried out by religious extremists grew ever longer on Thursday.

This time in Kenya, where gunmen belonging to the Somalia-based terrorist group Al Shabaab massacred at least 147 people, mainly students, at the Garissa University campus during a 15 hour-long siege, the worst ever attack on Kenyan soil since the 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi.

The town of Garissa lies almost 200km from the border with Somalia, and the attack is the latest act of retaliation carried out by the Al Shabaab against a joint Somali-Kenyan military operation to destroy the Al Qaeda-linked group.

Know more: [Shebab militants massacre 147 students at university in Kenya](#)

For Pakistanis, the atrocity bore a chilling resemblance to the APS Peshawar attack less than four months ago.

Around the same number of students and teachers were murdered that day by militants of the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan who went from classroom to classroom hunting down unarmed children, leaving behind a trail of blood on scattered schoolbooks, devastated families and a nation in mourning.

Earlier, even among the most violent of ideologically driven groups there were some red lines. Now, however, the distinction between combatants and innocents is increasingly blurred.

Nothing is sacred, not even children or young people studying in schools and colleges. In fact, students and/or educational infrastructure — not to mention other soft targets — are increasingly being targeted by terrorists, whether by Boko Haram in Nigeria or the TTP in Pakistan.

A worldview more twisted and nihilistic can scarcely be imagined. There was another sinister element to the attack in Garissa, one that is common to several recent acts of terrorism by Al Shabaab in Kenya.

The campus attackers singled out Christians for murder, a move calculated to drive a wedge between the country's vast Christian majority and its sizeable Muslim minority.

It would be doubly unfortunate were such intentions to bear fruit, for nothing would suit religious extremists more than a world riven along the lines of faith and engaged in a never-ending, apocalyptic battle.

Published in Dawn, April 4th, 2015

Iran N-deal in sight

IN the midst of numerous crises raging across the Middle East, the news that emerged from Switzerland on Thursday was exceptionally positive.

After over a decade of mutual mistrust and suspicion, the framework for a potential deal between Iran and the P5+1 to resolve the Islamic Republic's nuclear question has been agreed to.

While scepticism has been expressed by some quarters, the principal stakeholders appear satisfied with the results of the marathon negotiations.

Know more: [Framework for final deal reached at Iran nuclear talks](#)

The potential deal — which is to be finalised by June 30 — calls for greater IAEA access to Iranian nuclear facilities and a more transparent atomic programme, though there will be no rollback. Most critically, Tehran will have the debilitating UN, EU and US sanctions, which have primarily hit its finance and petrochemical sectors, lifted as part of the deal. Credit goes to both sides for choosing the route of dialogue over bellicosity and confrontation.

Yet to assume that years of mistrust will magically be transformed into bonhomie would be naive. Progress on the deal will be incremental and the P5+1 and Iran will need to show flexibility and avoid taking hard-line positions.

Many of the tricky details remain to be ironed out; for example, what will be the timeline for sanctions' relief? Also, on a number of other geopolitical fronts, such as Syria and Yemen, the West and Iran are clearly not on the same page. And it can be expected that Israel and the Republicans in the US will try and sabotage a final deal.

The deal should not be held hostage to the whims of Tel Aviv or domestic American politics. For this, Barack Obama, in the time he has left in the White House, as well as European leaders will need to show statesmanship and diplomatic tact to ensure the agreement goes through smoothly.

But what is important is that progress has been made in a dispute that, until very recently, seemed intractable, with neither side willing to budge and often demonising the other.

The developments show that other difficult situations in the world, such as the India-Pakistan relationship, or the battles currently being fought in the Middle East, can be resolved through diplomacy and negotiations — if there is a desire to move forward by all parties.

And where Pakistan is concerned, the lifting of sanctions against Iran may well pave the way for projects such as the gas pipeline, should Islamabad play its cards right.

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Military ‘justice’

HAD there been any hesitation in recognising that the constitutionally empowered military courts system hastily set up in the wake of December’s Peshawar school massacre is one that is abhorrent and in violation of the most basic principles of justice, then the revelation that six accused have been sentenced to death and a seventh sentenced to life imprisonment should extinguish even that vestige of doubt.

Consider first the form as announced over the DG ISPR’s Twitter account — “#Mil Courts: Army Chief confirms death sentence of 6 hard core terrorists tried by the recently established mil courts.”

Know more: [Military courts announce death sentences of six convicts](#)

There is surely something terribly wrong with a judicial system in which the first time the public learns about death sentences for six individuals is via a press officer of a non-judicial head of a military institution. Are judges no longer allowed to speak via their judgements in even the most solemn of cases?

There are then the substantive issues. Who are these men? What crimes have they been accused of and now convicted for? What evidence was presented? What kind of legal representation was available to the accused? And what is the appeals process that is available to the convicted men?

All that is known, via an ISPR press release, is that “In view of the nature and gravity of offences preferred against each, 6

terrorists have been awarded death sentences and one life imprisonment by the military courts”.

Even that vague offering has a serious flaw. How were six of the accused deemed deserving of death, but one given life imprisonment for the same category of crimes?

From a sceptical point of view, could it be that one of the first batch of convicts was ‘only’ sentenced to life imprisonment to try and dispel the notion that the new military courts are little more than execution chambers?

This week’s announcement also grimly underlines the basic problem with the new military courts — they are run by the military to try individuals accused by the military, with verdicts confirmed by the military.

Even allowing for all the problems of collecting evidence in war zones and on battlefields and the messy nature of counter-insurgencies, what has been done is nothing short of obliterating the very idea of justice, due process and a fair trial.

Who though should bear the ultimate responsibility? The military for seeking these sweeping powers, or the elected political leadership of this country for giving those powers to the military?

What is incontrovertible is that there would be no new military courts if the politicians had not agreed to pass the 21st Amendment to the Constitution.

What is also true is that nothing — nothing at all — has been done to try and reform the broken criminal justice system in the

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country. If the politicians don't lead, will other institutions not try and grab more power?

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Mahesh Bhatt's views

IT was once Lahore's Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop's international festival that earned the country a place on the map of world theatre. Sadly enough, that emblematic event had to be wrapped up several years ago, primarily because of the country's deteriorating law and order situation. That loss has cost Pakistan dearly, but thankfully there is some saving grace: for some years, now, the role of hosting an international theatre festival has been taken on by Karachi's National Academy of the Performing Arts. The fourth Napa International Theatre Festival is now nearing its conclusion, having put on several worthy productions. The potential for greater cultural ties, be it in terms of theatre or other forms of the performing arts, between Pakistan and other parts of the world has been obvious.

It would be possible, here, to make an argument about improving the country's image internationally through such methods of soft diplomacy. And indeed, that is valid. But the fact is that such affairs also go to the heart of the country's welfare, particularly in economic terms. This was highlighted by Indian film-maker Mahesh Bhatt, who was at Napa with the theatre play Daddy. In a session with the media on Tuesday, he

commented that "it was a matter of sorrow" that Indian directors could not shoot in Lahore or Karachi due to the law and order situation. Were that to alter, he added, both countries would benefit economically. Of course, India's film industry is amongst the biggest in the world, with millions upon millions being invested in and earned by the sector. That of Pakistan, meanwhile, continues to at best limp along, a few notable recent successes notwithstanding. As in many other sectors, were Pakistan able to offer an investor-friendly climate, there is much to be mined that can benefit its own economy and people. At the moment, however, the country's inability to resolve its law-enforcement issues and provide stability is extracting a huge cost.

Published in Dawn, April 5th, 2015

Role of the CII

IT speaks volumes for our regressive social fabric that humane points of view that come naturally to so many other countries, and are too obvious to be uttered, must here be held up for appreciation. Into this category falls, for instance, the few voices that speak up in favour of vaccination against polio, and girls' education. Another example of this was provided by the director general of the Council of Islamic Ideology on Thursday when, in an interaction with the media in Islamabad, he voiced the opinion that children should not be married until they reach "mental maturity". On an earlier occasion, this public servant surprised many by presenting relatively reasonable views on topics that the CII in general tends to see

in a very conservative light. Let it not be forgotten, after all, that in 2013, the CII left many astonished when it said that DNA testing could not be used as primary evidence to establish rape. That pronouncement led many to challenge the very raison d'être of the CII. It was pointed out that the social and political fabric of the country has changed in fundamental ways since the body was first formed in the 1960s. It then went through a change of nomenclature in the 1973 Constitution where it was tasked with advising legislatures on whether or not a law runs contrary to Islamic ideals.

This argument deserves to be highlighted again. The CII has only an advisory role, but the nature of its constitution, as well as its input in earlier decades, means that its pronouncements attain a degree of moral authority that really should not be required in a country where hundreds of elected lawmakers are available in the federal and provincial legislatures. The latter are perfectly capable of deciding on any issue. In terms of the marriage of minors, for instance, the Sindh Assembly passed the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Bill, 2013, which makes it illegal for anyone under 18 to marry, and also provides for the penalising of parents and facilitators of such unions. Earlier this month, the Punjab Assembly approved a bill proposing amendments to the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, which provides stricter penalties for parents and clerics facilitating underage marriages. Such are the legislative successes that need to be built upon, and for which strict implementing mechanisms need to be devised. The views of the CII should not be required at all.

Published in Dawn, April 5th, 2015

Dormant security plan

IT has been just over a hundred days since the announcement of the National Action Plan. Unfortunately, going by the report produced by Nacta on the status of its implementation, we may have to wait a long time before we see decisive action. NAP contains 20 points. Some are as bland as “militant outfits and armed gangs will not be allowed to operate in the country” and “no room will be left for extremism in any part of the country”. But other action points are a little more specific, such as freezing “all funding sources of terrorists and terrorist outfits” and “registration and regulation of religious seminaries. Yet the implementation report produced by the counterterrorism authority shows that the government has been more busy pushing paper around the bureaucracy than getting results on the ground. In the intervening days since the plan was announced, three imambargahs have been attacked and two churches targeted by suicide bombers while religious seminaries are no closer to being registered and regulated by the government than they were before NAP was announced. In fact, the implementation report shows that the plan appears to be suffering from the fate of all other bombastic announcements of massive and immediate change in decades past.

A list of banned organisations had to be removed from Nacta's website because it contained the name of a group that is on the UN's Al Qaeda sanctions list, but domestically has been allowed to operate by the state. A committee “has been notified” for madressah reforms and regulation, but thus far at least two wafaq boards are refusing to entertain the government's request for all seminaries to fill out a form

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detailing their assets and sources of funding. The creation of a joint intelligence directorate remains a proposal, which “has been prepared”. A counterterrorism narrative is “being developed”. More than 292,000 people have been “picked up”, but only 140 of them had “terrorist links”. And so on.

In fact, the entire report reads more like a laundry list drawn up to satisfy a bureaucratic requirement rather than reflect ground realities. The lack of progress on the implementation of NAP is entirely consistent with our approach to other national plans and projects. We have seen governments in the past declare solemnly that there will be a massive bill recovery drive, or a national effort to locate stolen assets, or a documentation drive to register informal enterprises. In each case, the declared intention was whittled down as it met the headwinds of reality. And it seems that the resolve to finally tackle terrorism head-on as was announced last December by the prime minister after Peshawar’s school tragedy is also floundering. This is what happens when the wheels of the state touch the ground in Pakistan — it is all spin. Barely any forward movement is discernible.

Published in Dawn, April 5th, 2015

No money for hockey

THE abrupt wrap-up of the national hockey team camp, set up in Islamabad to prepare for the 2016 Olympics qualifiers, due to paucity of funds is seen as a new low for the game in Pakistan.

While the slump in Pakistan hockey has been in evidence for almost a decade now, with no major titles, except that of the Asian Games, coming our way, the extraordinary development this week has plunged the game into a deeper predicament, with the Pakistan Hockey Federation top brass admitting its failure to collect enough funds to manage the daily allowances of the players.

It is no secret that the cash-strapped PHF, for long, has been striving to keep the game afloat amid countless appeals of financial assistance made to the government. Its efforts to meet Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to apprise him of the debilitating state of the game, however, have not met with success. Hence, the embarrassing fold-up of the month-long camp at the Naseer Bunda Stadium, some 10 days ahead of the scheduled closure.

Take a look: [Save hockey from collapse, Akhtar appeals to PM](#)

Having said that, the government alone cannot be blamed for the shambolic state of Pakistan hockey today.

It was a year ago that Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif dished out a hundred million rupees for the PHF to put its house in order. Whatever happened to that grant and who benefited from it is anybody’s guess.

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In fact, the haphazard manner in which Pakistan hockey has been run over the past decade has been largely responsible for its current state of collapse.

The PHF officials have not only allowed the game to become hugely politicised during this time, they have remained too engaged in ego battles and joyrides to concentrate on the game's development.

Unlike cricket, where players and officials are equally held responsible for a debacle — as witnessed in the recent ICC World Cup — the blame for hockey's decline lies largely at the door of the PHF bigwigs who led the game into a blind alley owing to their absurd, short-sighted decisions.

Published in Dawn, April 6th, 2015

Illegal constructions

THE Karachi Metropolitan Corporation's demolition squads moved in on Friday to raze a number of illegally constructed wedding lawns in the city.

In a metropolis which has been disfigured beyond recognition by encroachments and land-grabbers, this is positive news. But we must also question why the civic authorities are generally so complacent; illegal commercial enterprises, built on amenity plots, have been in business for decades. Why are they allowed to be set up in the first place?

The simple answer is that such illegal constructions cannot occur without the connivance of the authorities; whether it is the occupation of footpaths or the devouring of whole parks and other public spaces, criminals — often backed by political and religious groups — bribe or pressure their way to legalising what are clearly unlawful constructions or occupations of somebody else's property.

Also read: [MQM leader's 'illegal' wedding lawn razed in North Nazimabad](#)

In Karachi especially, the land mafia is so powerful that many activists have paid with their lives for raising their voice against such criminality. Yet while land-grabbing may be particularly acute in the Sindh capital, nearly all urban areas of Pakistan suffer from this malady.

In the past, anti-encroachment drives in Lahore have been halted reportedly due to political pressure, while even

Islamabad, which is supposed to be better planned than other urban areas in the country, is not immune to the depredations of the land mafia.

Encroachments cause numerous problems in cities, including adding to traffic congestion and taking away footpaths from pedestrians.

Moreover, public spaces meant for the health and recreation of citizens at large are gobbled up and commercialised for the profit of a few.

Encroachments also fuel criminality and violence, as land-grabbers are always on the lookout for available spaces. The key to resolving this issue is to put in place proper land use and management mechanisms, and to take action the moment encroachers and land-grabbers move in.

A lack of coordination has been witnessed among the multiple land-controlling authorities in urban areas, particularly Karachi. This needs to be corrected so that there is a single source for addressing the status of land and taking action when illegalities occur.

Elected local governments, which will soon hopefully be in place nationwide, are ideally placed to monitor land use and management.

With our cities expanding and considerable rural-urban migration, land will become even more sought after, which is why the state must manage it judiciously and protect it from the clutches of criminals.

Pipeline moment

WITH a framework for a nuclear deal in place and with signs of rapprochement between Iran and the international community, now is the time to re-energise the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project.

Last December, the government made a half-hearted foray into the global financial markets to determine investor interest in the plan. It returned with the gloomy report that the sanctions on Iran were making investors wary of getting involved in the project.

That may be about to change as the world begins to eye the business opportunities that are about to open up. Pakistan should also start by at least verbally intimating its interest in pursuing the pipeline project energetically.

Take a look: [Iran-Pakistan gas project to be completed in two phases](#)

Much has been made of the LNG imports. The fact that the first consignment of LNG has already landed, and there has been much bragging about this feat, is an indicator of the high level of ownership that was given to this project by the government.

The high return on equity allowed to power producers who will use LNG is another signal that the government is moving fast to incentivise imports and create a constituency within the country for LNG.

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Similar high-level ownership now needs to be given to the Iran-Pakistan pipeline, beginning with the government affirming its commitment to the project, followed by the homework necessary to start construction, creation of the relevant tariffs and policy software to manage injections of the gas into the national transmission system, and proper agreements to govern allocations.

Diversifying our fuel mix is an important priority of the government, and the pipeline project is the most promising avenue through which to pursue this goal.

Pipeline gas is much cheaper than LNG and more reliable as well. There is no longer any reason for the government to continue to drag its feet. Whatever decision is made regarding Saudi Arabia's request for troops for the Yemen campaign, it is important to ensure that it does not adversely impact the Iranian pipeline project.

Our domestic energy security must take precedence. Thus far, the project has been held up by one specific sanctions law that prevents dealings with Iran's central bank.

That law is amongst the sanctions that are about to be lifted. Beyond that, there is little in the sanctions regime that prevents Pakistan from moving ahead on the plan.

It might still take time to arrange an investor, but much of the homework on the ground, which was not done in the enthusiastic haste to complete the LNG project, can begin now and perhaps some PSDP allocations can be made in the forthcoming budget to add credibility to the government's resolve. It is imperative that the government seize the moment

and involve itself with determination in a scheme that can bring the people considerable relief at time of a serious energy crisis in the country.

Published in Dawn, April 6th, 2015

Back in parliament

THE PTI and its leader, Imran Khan, may not have treated parliament with the respect it deserves, but parliament did the right thing in allowing Mr Khan and his fellow PTI MNAs to once again take their rightful seats in the National Assembly yesterday.

On Monday, the PTI may not have been made to feel especially welcome — the MQM and JUI-F predictably claimed the PTI MNAs stood resigned while sections of the PML-N jeered the party for reversing course — but that appeared to be largely about grandstanding and political theatrics.

Few, if any, parties in parliament can genuinely prefer that the PTI remain outside the National Assembly.

Know more: [Much ado about PTI at joint session to debate Yemen dilemma](#)

For one, that would reflect poorly on the completeness, and hence, legitimacy of the National Assembly given that the PTI

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won the second-largest number of votes nationally in the May 2013 election.

For another, the PTI's purpose in boycotting, and at some stage trying to quit, the National Assembly was to bring down parliament — an inherently destabilising situation for any legislature.

Truly, the return of the PTI is a case of better late than never — and credit for this move must go to two sides. First, from the Speaker of the National Assembly to the principal parties in government and opposition, there was an early consensus that the PTI should not be allowed to quit parliament in an attempt to boost its anti-government street protests.

Had the PML-N reacted petulantly or the PPP, for example, sought to create mischief, Speaker Ayaz Sadiq could have come under a great deal of pressure to accept the PTI resignations.

That would have triggered a spate of by-elections while the PTI was in the midst of its street agitation — a scenario that surely was best avoided. Second, credit must, belatedly, go to the PTI.

Critics may contend that the PTI has only returned to the National Assembly after it had become apparent that the government was not going to fall and the party was unable to trigger mid-term elections.

That may well be the case, but the PTI has also had to swallow a great deal of ego — no small thing given much of what has been on display over the past years. It appears to have

internalised some of the principles of democracy that it seemingly failed to grasp earlier.

Anytime a mainstream political party embraces the democratic system and sets aside its ego, it should be welcomed as self-enhancing.

There remains though a problem: the seeming lack of interest in electoral reforms on all sides.

The PTI's quest to expose what it claimed were widespread instances of electoral fraud in May 2013 was, from a non-partisan, democratic perspective, as much about improving the electoral system as it was about establishing the legitimacy or otherwise of the PML-N's win. Worryingly, with the possibility of mid-term polls having receded, no party seems focused on electoral reforms any longer.

Published in Dawn, April 7th, 2015

Mullah Omar's biography

STATESMEN, public figures and politicians the world over pen biographies that are quickly snapped up by people who would like to get a deeper insight into their lives. Now, it seems that even the leaders of militant outfits have caught on to this trend.

On Sunday, the Afghan Taliban published online the biography of their supreme leader Mullah Omar to mark his 19th year as the head of the militia that once governed Afghanistan.

The Taliban supremo is indeed an enigma; only grainy photographs exist of him and exact details about the man are difficult to verify.

Know more: [Taliban publish biography of 'RPG-loving' Mullah Omar](#)

So apart from hard-core followers, many ordinary people may also want to find out more about the reclusive militant commander. Reports indicate the publication contains interesting details about Mullah Omar's tastes in weaponry, as well as the observation that he is not without a sense of humour.

The biography may well have been published to stem the tide of defections to the self-styled Islamic State.

While the world of Islamist militancy is indeed a murky one, we have seen radical movements make increasing use of the internet and social media for propaganda purposes.

Before he was killed, Osama bin Laden's fiery exhortations to 'jihad' were often uploaded by Al Qaeda as a propaganda tool.

The IS, meanwhile, has a considerable web presence. While Mullah Omar's online biography may be limited to reassuring his Afghan acolytes, the IS is an expansionist concern and uses the internet to recruit followers and brag about its battlefield 'exploits'.

Hence, the use of cyberspace by hard-core Islamists cannot be ignored. That is why the state must keep an eye on cyber-jihadis to ensure they are not abusing the internet to forward the aims of extremist groups.

Seeing blood-soaked battlefield videos or listening to fiery sermons can radicalise young minds.

Keeping the implications of this in mind, the misuse of cyberspace by dangerous extremist groups should be checked, without the exercise affecting the right of freedom of speech of those who do not promote violence.

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GM seeds

AN amendment to the Seed Act of 1976, working its way through the legislative process, could have far-reaching consequences for Pakistan's agriculture.

The amendment will essentially open the door to genetically modified seeds, particularly in cotton which is the country's largest crop.

It does this by providing legal cover for intellectual property rights in seeds. It is important that the legislation be enacted because Pakistan's per acre yield in cotton has been stagnant for many years now, while India and other countries that have embraced BT cotton, have doubled their yields over a decade.

Take a look: [Farmers most affected by new law on seeds](#)

Pakistan's cotton crop still enjoys higher yields per acre than India, but lags far behind countries like Egypt and Mexico. Stagnant yields in food and cotton will strain the country's food self-sufficiency as well as industrial growth.

Further improvements in yields can only come from opening the door to genetically modified varieties, which is a technological innovation akin to the green revolution.

But prospects for the passage of the amendment have been dimmed by a loud chorus of protests. Successive governments have struggled with this amendment, which has been in the works since 2007, and was last brought before the National Assembly in 2010.

Know more: [Reinventing seed business](#)

Of the arguments that the protesting farmer associations are advancing, there is one that is very potent and should receive high-level consideration. That argument points towards the disruptive impact that the new legislation, particularly its stress on intellectual property rights, will have on the farmers' right to conserve, sell and exchange seeds amongst themselves.

Many of our small farmers rely on informal exchanges of seeds at sowing time, and opening the door to large private-sector seed companies must not be allowed to shut down these local markets or inhibit their operation.

Pakistan needs to avail itself of the benefits of new seed technologies to keep pace with domestic growing requirements as well as the output of its main competitors.

But it is also important that the new markets that need to be created to make use of these benefits do not shut down existing ones on which the small farmers have become very dependent.

Any disruptive impact that the amendment to the Seed Act can have on livelihoods of small farmers needs to be debated in the Senate as well, and institutional reforms should accompany the new legislation to ensure customary practices are not harmed in the course of ushering in the new technology.

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Carjacking remedies

EFFECTIVELY fighting crime is a matter of constantly evolving strategies and techniques, as well as staying in conversation with every possible effort to buttress law enforcement.

Unfortunately, these are areas where the police in Pakistan often find themselves lacking, particularly in Karachi, where the statistics on street crime — armed muggings, the snatching or lifting of vehicles, etc — outstrip those in any other city in the country.

Data available with the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee and the Sindh police, for example, put the figure of four-wheelers and two-wheelers snatched or stolen as running into the thousands every year. According to some estimates, on an average, more than a dozen vehicles are taken away from their owners every single day.

Know more: [Flaws in security system of locally assembled cars render carjacking child's play](#)

Given this situation, and especially in a country where stolen vehicles are all too often used for terrorist and criminal purposes, it would have been rational to expect that time and effort were constantly being invested in plugging the loopholes wherever they exist.

That, unfortunately, does not seem to be the case: on Monday, Karachi's Anti Car-Lifting Unit drew the attention of the authorities to the fact that a number of security features whose

availability could reduce the incidence of auto theft were not being incorporated in cars that are assembled locally.

The ACLU letter pointed out that in the UK, for example, the steering column lock has been a standard feature since 1970, and that measures such as sandblasting engine and chassis numbers on windscreens and major metal parts, or embedding electronic, code-carrying chips into the plastic body of ignition keys, could help lower the statistics on carjacking.

Indeed, there is really no reason why measures such as these should not be made mandatory at the assembly stage, or even at the sale/transfer point where possible.

While the cost of buying a car might rise nominally, decreasing the vehicles' vulnerability would help bring down insurance premiums. For both the law-enforcement agencies and citizens, this could be developed into a win-win situation.

Published in Dawn, April 8th, 2015

LHWs' unpaid dues

GIVEN that Lady Health Workers are a vital cog in the wheel of our sputtering health machine, the shabby treatment meted out to them beggars belief.

First it was the regularisation of their services which they managed to achieve only after extensive agitation — not to mention being tear-gassed and baton-charged by police — despite a Supreme Court ruling in their favour.

Now it's their arrears that the government is dragging its feet on. According to a report in this paper, the centre owes the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government Rs2bn in arrears due to the 13,000 plus LHWs in the province.

Take a look: [Lady health workers not paid salary for two months](#)

Following devolution in 2010, the centre had pledged to continue financing the LHW programme until 2017, after which the provinces would assume the responsibility, a decision reiterated by the Council of Common Interests.

However, a recent meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council decided to suspend funding from June 2015, leaving the provinces with the daunting task of finding space within their own budgets for the outlay.

Even though the programme could be much improved, the 106,000 LHWs in Pakistan play an important role in providing

essential primary health services on a community level, especially in rural areas.

Reports by public health experts say that households visited by LHWs are 15pc more likely to have children under three years fully immunised, an important consideration in a country where outbreaks of childhood diseases such as measles are fairly common.

Moreover, with 85pc of LHWs involved in the anti-polio campaign, they are also on the frontline — in a very real sense — of Pakistan's war against the crippling disease, one we stand perilously close to losing primarily because of the risk to the lives of polio vaccinators.

Over 60 vaccinators and security personnel assigned to safeguard them during campaigns have lost their lives in attacks by militants during the last two years, with the highest number of casualties taking place in KP.

It is outrageous to expect them to continue with what has become life-threatening work without the compensation owed to them.

They are not the only health workers seeking their due: vaccinators from the Expanded Programme on Immunisation in KP threatened on Monday to boycott the upcoming anti-polio campaign if their salaries — pending for the last several months — were not paid to them.

Let no one think that the government isn't doing its bit to turn a crisis into a full-blown emergency.

Debate on Yemen

THE ongoing extraordinary joint session of parliament has produced at least one consensus so far: there is no enthusiasm anywhere along the political spectrum for sending Pakistani troops to Yemen.

In fact, other than the PML-N, the leadership of every party, be it from the religious right or secular left, has rejected the option of sending troops to Yemen.

Even Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif could only bring himself to refer to the Saudi requests to Pakistan made public by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif on Monday, suggesting that the PML-N itself remains unconvinced of the merits of militarily interfering inside Yemen on the side of the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis.

Know more: [Nawaz says 'no hurry' to decide on joining Saudi offensive in Yemen](#)

So far at least the sensible approach appears to be carrying the day inside parliament, reflecting the consensus in rational quarters outside the house that Pakistan should not be drawn into a conflict in which it has no discernible interests to protect and where the risks are many.

What though is to be made of Prime Minister Sharif's reluctance to elucidate on his government's policy on Yemen?

Instead of leading the debate, laying out a policy for parliament to focus on, the prime minister yesterday appealed to the house to guide the government.

In the political arena, such deference is usually meant more in spirit than in substance — surely, the prime minister has no intention of allowing parliament to make a choice for the government that he does not agree with.

More likely the government is juggling two other concerns: an inability to flatly reject the Saudi demands of military assistance in the Yemen campaign; and the need to give diplomatic consultations an opportunity to find a peaceful solution — at least before an expected land invasion led by the Saudis into Yemen begins.

The prime minister clearly hinted at the latter when he referred to the shuttle diplomacy being conducted by himself and the Turkish president possibly producing a breakthrough later this week.

Whatever the strategy of the government, it needs to heed the message of parliament: a military entanglement in the Middle East is not in Pakistan's interest.

Not at this time when there is a war against militancy to be fought inside Pakistan first. Not in Yemen, where old, tribal enmities are being given a sectarian edge by outside powers. Not in the decades-old proxy wars of Saudi Arabia and Iran. And not when the Middle East itself appears to be teetering on the brink of catastrophe.

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Pakistan does have interests in the Middle East and the relationship with Saudi Arabia is vital, both for security and religious reasons. But protecting one important relationship should not come at the cost of destabilising other ties.

Most of all, as underscored in parliament yesterday, Yemen is a potential quagmire that could rival Afghanistan. The public appears to understand this as does much of parliament. Will the PML-N too let better sense prevail?

Published in Dawn, April 8th, 2015

Good neighbours

IT'S not often when a navy warship, decisively primed for conflict, shows its country's 'soft' side, that too to its 'enemy'.

But that's what happened when the Pakistan Navy frigate Aslat, which is equipped with missile launchers and anti-submarine rockets, hosted 11 Indians among the 36 foreigners and 146 Pakistanis on their three-day journey out of strife-torn Yemen to Pakistan.

The remaining foreign nationals were from China, the Philippines, Syria, United Kingdom, Indonesia, Egypt, Jordan and Canada.

Take a look: [India accepts Pakistan's offer of special aircraft to bring back citizens](#)

The navy clearly pulled out all the stops in an effort to play the hospitable host. It seems in fact that they did it so well that by the time the passengers disembarked at Karachi port on Tuesday to an enthusiastic welcome, they — including even the Indians — were cheerfully waving the Pakistan flag.

Not quite the sight that warmongers on either side would relish but a triumph for track-3 diplomacy nonetheless. The bonhomie was evident in the remarks of the passengers about their trip, which the UK nationals described as having been akin to a luxury cruise.

They also mentioned the fact that the ship's crew had very thoughtfully prepared a special Easter Sunday dinner for them.

The arrival of the Indians to Pakistan's shores was followed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's offer to send them home on a special flight, which was accepted by the Indian government.

In this brewing conflict, Pakistan and India have been good neighbours, with the latter also evacuating some Pakistani nationals from Hodeida a few days ago.

The cooperation we have just witnessed is a relief from the hostile posturing by the two countries from time to time.

Some years ago, there was similar cause for celebration when several Indians kidnapped by Somali pirates were released through the efforts of the Pakistani government.

Just as strategic interests can bring together strange bedfellows in a war, humanitarian impulses can engineer a counter-

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intuitive situation. Where India and Pakistan are concerned, such an opportunity is no less than PR gold.

Published in Dawn, April 9th, 2015

Better border vigilance

IT is a considerable challenge for the government to clamp down on militant groups that terrorise the Pakistani people and attack symbols of the state.

But when such non-state actors, reportedly based in this country, cross borders and commit acts of terrorism in neighbouring states, Pakistan is put in an even more difficult situation.

On Tuesday, a day before the visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to Pakistan, militants belonging to the Jaishul Adl outfit reportedly crossed the border from Balochistan and attacked security personnel inside Iran, killing at least eight border guards.

Take a look: [Eight Iranian guards killed in 'Jaish-ul-Adl' attack](#)

While we cannot definitively say the ambush was planned to coincide with Mr Zarif's visit, the timing was ironic — and embarrassing — for Pakistan.

Iranian officials claim the militants crossed back into Pakistan and the seriousness of the incident can be gauged by the Iranian foreign ministry's statement that border security would also be on Mr Zarif's agenda in Islamabad.

The Iranian government also lodged a protest with Pakistani diplomats in Tehran on Wednesday.

Such cross-border incidents are among the major irritants that stand in the way of improved relations between Islamabad and Tehran.

This is not the first attack of its kind, as militants carried out a similarly deadly raid in 2013, while Iranian guards have also been kidnapped in the past by militants reportedly based in Pakistan.

Along with creating a rift between both countries through such activities, militants belonging to groups such as Jundallah and Jaishul Adl are also believed to be involved in sectarian violence inside Pakistan.

Therefore, to maintain its obligations to its neighbour and for its own security, it is imperative for Pakistan to seriously tackle the issue of cross-border militancy.

While there have been several militant attacks that have affected bilateral relations negatively, there have also been occasions where Pakistani authorities have played a major role in tracking down anti-Iran militants.

Among these was the capture of Abdul Salam Reki of Jundallah earlier this year, who was apprehended by local

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security forces from a bus near Quetta. His capture proved that concerted, intelligence-based efforts can neutralise such violent elements.

Some security experts have also called for the reformation of the 'A' and 'B' policing areas in the districts bordering Iran.

Pakistan will need to work with Tehran and improve security in sensitive border regions to ensure its soil is not used by terrorist groups to cause trouble across the border.

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State Bank autonomy

IT is encouraging that the government has signalled its renewed resolve to the IMF to pass legislation updating the State Bank's autonomy.

The IMF has been given a commitment that this will be done by June, and the new legislation will include language to bring it in line with international standards.

The issue has been the most important sticking point in all reviews of the current programme, and the government has been showing considerable reluctance in undertaking this reform.

Legislation was drawn up in April last year, and the Fund found that it did not meet international standards. Another attempt was made in August, but was drowned out by the protests, outside parliament, that began that month.

This time the government appears to have signalled seriousness of purpose in seeing the passage of legislation that does more to protect the State Bank from political interference — and there is limited room for failure.

The first step in the grant of such autonomy should be the removal of the secretary finance from any decision-making role on the State Bank board.

Governments have historically resisted an autonomous State Bank for various reasons, principal amongst them being the difficulties they face in getting other organs and pillars of state to respect their mandate.

Elected governments have routinely had to face headwinds from the military and bureaucracy, both of whom have sought to circumscribe the powers of the elected rulers.

They have also been wary of autonomous actors going rogue and engaging in a game of political point-scoring rather than focusing on the discharge of their obligations in a fair and professional manner.

Given the powers that the State Bank exercises, such as management of the exchange rate, the conduct of monetary policy, auctions of government debt and regulatory oversight of banks, there is a feeling that in the wrong hands these could

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do some damage to the sitting government if used for political point-scoring.

But such fears are misplaced. Regulators, particularly as important as the State Bank, need to be insulated from political interference because the duties they perform have long-term effects and should not be allowed to become entangled in the short-term thinking that is typical of politics.

And for autonomy to really matter, it must be coupled with proper appointments at the top in order to ensure that the person has no political ambition and brings considerable credibility and expertise to the spheres of banking and economics.

Having said that, it is also important that those heading the State Bank show more regard for the hard-fought autonomy that the bank currently enjoys.

Those at the top must demonstrate an interest in expanding their areas of autonomous action.

There is little sense in passing legislation to enhance the powers of the State Bank if those heading the institution are themselves not interested in exercising them.

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Early closure of shops

WHENEVER a government runs out of ideas to deal with the power crisis, it resorts to the same gimmicks. Today, we're hearing the government talk about early closure of shops, for instance.

Admittedly, this is only in the capital for now, but it must be remembered that the previous government tried this measure on more than one occasion and failed to implement it for very long.

Along with this, there were proposals such as distributing millions of energy-saver light bulbs with electricity bills, turning off air conditioners in government offices during designated hours, awareness campaigns to urge people to set their air conditioner to 26°C, and even an attempt to introduce daylight savings time.

Take a look: [Shops to shut down by 8pm in Islamabad, Punjab: CCE](#)

None of these measures worked. Today they have become contents of a bag of failed tricks and gimmicks tried on numerous occasions in the past with few results.

If the measure is to be restricted to the capital only, then its impact is going to be minimal. Commercial consumers account for 7.5pc of IESCO's total units billed, and are amongst the smallest category of consumer in the distribution company, except for tube wells and 'other'.

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Their growth rate is also very small. Moreover, this category includes offices and shops, so the amount of electricity saved by closing shops early is going to be even smaller.

As a power conservation measure, this step makes little sense, unless it is part of a larger plan to unroll over the entire country eventually.

But that step is going to be harder for the government to implement, especially since much of the power to do so lies with the provincial governments; and shopkeepers, who are a key PML-N constituency, have put up strident resistance to it in the past.

It appears the government is trying out various ideas in anticipation of the coming summer months when load-shedding is again set to return as a serious challenge. One can only hope that they have plans beyond publicity stunts of this sort once the temperatures begin to soar.

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Organ donation

IN a society where conservative beliefs often impede progress on crucial issues, the endorsement of organ transplantation, including cadaver donation, by a number of well-known religious scholars was very reassuring.

On Wednesday, ulema attending a programme at the Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre at Karachi University not only supported the life-lengthening medical procedure but praised the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation for its efforts in this regard.

The consensus was not unanimous, and true to form Maulana Mohammad Khan Sherani, who heads the Council of Islamic Ideology, raised concerns about afterlife and interfaith issues that bordered on the absurd.

Take a look: [Ulema support organ transplant as CII chief prevaricates](#)

Fortunately, scholars rivalling him in stature had different views, with Mufti Munibur Rehman saying that there was nothing wrong in transplanting organs, regardless of the faith of the donor and recipient. And why should they not take this enlightened view?

Even ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia is carrying out transplantations, after these were cleared by the ulema there, while the procedure is also routine in Iran. Indeed, instead of allowing organ transplantation to be obfuscated by extraneous

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considerations, it should be promoted as a praiseworthy intervention — governed by medical ethics — that saves lives.

Although the procedure of cadaveric organ donation is commonplace in much of the world, including Muslim countries, it has had a long, hard climb in Pakistan.

Legislation on the matter went back and forth between the two houses of parliament for years, and the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act was finally signed into law in 2010. Next came the formidable task of altering societal confusions and prejudices.

Given the situation in Pakistan, getting the religious lobby on board has been important, and SIUT must be given the credit for leading the effort to change mindsets against the procedure as well as investing in the necessary infrastructure, including the training of doctors.

Such training can hopefully be extended to hospitals across the country. However, the bigger challenge is instilling awareness and removing inhibitions in society — the ulema's endorsement was a step in that direction — so that more and more people agree to become donors after death.

There are long lists of patients who need transplant; and unless there is a concerted effort to dispel myths and promote donations such lists will only grow.

A good beginning could be made at schools where biology books could spell out the different ways of giving a new lease of life to seriously ill patients.

The search for peace

WHILE there were initial concerns that the PML-N-led government would jump into the Yemeni quagmire to please Saudi Arabia without thinking through the consequences of such an action, it now appears that Pakistan is trying to play peacemaker in the conflict.

These were the vibes that we got from Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's two-day visit to Islamabad, during which the Yemen conflict dominated the discussion. That both Pakistan and Iran agree that hostilities need to cease is positive; it is the mechanics of how such a ceasefire can be reached which need to be worked out.

Clearly, the bombardment of Yemen must stop as it has taken a heavy toll on the population. In nearly three weeks of fighting, WHO has said there have been over 640 fatalities while more than 2,200 people have been injured in the impoverished state. In fact, the situation has been described as "critical" by the global health body.

Know more: [45 killed in air raid on refugee camp in Yemen](#)

While the need for a ceasefire is essential, it will require diplomatic tact and finesse to pull one off that is acceptable to all sides — particularly the Saudis, who are leading the coalition that is bombing Yemen, and their Yemeni allies, such as the exiled president, as well as the Houthi rebels who are said to be supported by Iran.

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The Arab states, by intervening militarily, have clearly taken sides in what was originally an internal power struggle, while Iran, by reportedly backing the Houthis, has also become a party.

Hence, the considerable burden of forging a consensus for a ceasefire may fall upon Pakistan and Turkey, two major non-Arab Muslim states with no obvious stakes in the Yemeni fight.

While Pakistan has said it will not accept threats to Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity, it has also supported a negotiated settlement to the Yemeni imbroglio.

The Turkish president was recently in Tehran and stressed the need, along with his Iranian counterpart, for a political solution. Hence Ankara and Islamabad may be well placed to bridge the gulf between Riyadh and Tehran on Yemen.

And while Iran has called for a ceasefire by all sides, there is logic to the position that any pause in fighting must not be used by the Houthis to regroup and rearm. If this is allowed, it will only start the cycle of violence anew in Yemen.

Throughout the crisis, the UN has remained quiet, while the OIC, seen as close to Riyadh, has hardly pressed for peace. Russia has submitted a resolution in the Security Council calling for a ceasefire, but there has been no momentum on the issue.

The world body, aided by regional states, needs to have a more prominent role to end the bloodshed in Yemen and bring the

parties together to achieve a settlement — one that will hopefully not collapse into violence soon after it is finalised.

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Yemen conflict: Parliament's welcome resolution

ON the fifth day of the extraordinary joint session of parliament, a resolution that the legislators can be proud of — and the country satisfied with — was passed unanimously yesterday.

Pakistan will not be a participant in the Saudi-led campaign inside Yemen. Instead, the government will continue with its pursuit of a diplomatic solution to the war in Yemen.

While language in support of Saudi Arabia is included, there is an unmistakable line drawn: in the present instance, there will be no military deployments from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia unless there is a direct threat to Saudi territory — and then sending the Pakistani military in a combat role is not automatic or guaranteed.

Know more: [Parliament calls for neutrality in Yemen conflict](#)

All of that is quite extraordinary. Not just because the PML-N government, and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself, are

perceived to be especially close to Saudi Arabia but also because the Saudi regime has had close ties with the Pakistani military and security establishment for decades.

Moreover, with a new king, the first next-generation deputy heir to the throne and a youthful defence minister all dealing with their first major foreign policy crisis and opting for a military response, the pressure on the Pakistani state to join the Saudi-led coalition must have been intense.

The brazen assertions by Saudi officials and media that Pakistan had already committed to participating in the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen were surely only the tip of the iceberg. It is unimaginable that such public assertions were not backed by insistent demands behind closed doors.

So it goes doubly to the credit of this government, parliament and the military that the sensible choice — the choice that was in Pakistan's own national interest — prevailed.

There is, however, still much work left to be done, particularly with Pakistan taking an unfamiliar lead in trying to broker a peace in the Middle East on effectively two fronts: the intra-Yemen conflict and the soaring Saudi-Iran tensions.

The strident comments emanating from Iran on Thursday are surely unhelpful and the threat of a land invasion remains. Adding to the complications, the US appears to be siding with Saudi Arabia — possibly in a bid to try and balance Saudi, Israeli and domestic US opposition to the US-Iran nuclear deal that may be sealed later this summer.

Shuttle diplomacy by Pakistan and Turkey may not yet have yielded any concessions by the sides warring and grandstanding, but it has provided the contours of a possible diplomatic end to hostilities.

There is also, as reiterated in the joint resolution of parliament yesterday, the need for the OIC and the UN to play a greater role here.

The more diplomatic forums on the regional and international level get involved, the more likely it is that better sense may prevail and a peaceful solution to Yemen's long-running woes is found.

Published in Dawn, April 11th, 2015

LUMS under pressure

AN event scheduled at LUMS had to be cancelled at the last minute “on order from the government”, according to the university’s official statement.

The event was a panel discussion on Balochistan and one of the speakers was Mama Qadeer, who came to prominence when he led a march from Quetta to Islamabad to protest the brutal disappearances of Baloch youth that is the hallmark of the counterinsurgency the security forces are waging in the province.

Mama Qadeer’s own son is amongst the disappeared. The “order from the government” was personally delivered by an officer of the security services to the acting dean of the programme that hosted the talk, and had been preceded by attempts from officers at the interior ministry to reach the LUMS management.

Know more: [Lums students protest ‘academic censorship’](#)

It is totally unacceptable for the government, and more specifically the security agencies, to pressure an academic institution to cancel an event. Universities are curators of the educational process whose sanctity must be defended against all attempts to place curbs on it.

But it is also important to note that the decision to cancel the event was made by LUMS. While such pressure being exerted on institutions by the security establishment is not unknown, there is no obligation to act “on order from the government” —

perhaps even less so if such orders come from the security services. In fact, LUMS would have been well within its rights to have insisted that such orders be routed through the proper channels, whatever they may be.

The subject of the planned discussion was no doubt an important one, but the organisers ought to have known that the event they were planning could spark such a reaction from the security agencies.

It is unfortunate that in this case, LUMS was unable to demonstrate the independence that should ideally be a feature of every centre of learning.

The question remains whether such sensitive events should be planned at all if a university is not capable of dealing with their fallout. In fact, buckling under pressure might have done more damage than good to the cause of justice for Balochistan’s disappeared.

Published in Dawn, April 11th, 2015

Success against polio?

IT is a statement difficult to substantiate, let alone defend. On Wednesday, Minister of State for National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, Saira Afzal Tarar, told a gathering in New Delhi that Pakistan has taken an aggressive anti-polio stance, and that the incidence of the disease went down in 2014.

Take, first, the earlier part of the comment. In the last month alone, Pakistan's battle against the disease made headlines when once more polio workers were killed.

In the same month, it was discovered that a large consignment of the pentavalent vaccine — worth some \$1.3m and of a quantity that could have vaccinated 400,000 infants — had spoiled whilst in storage at the National Health Services Ministry because the required temperature had not been maintained.

Take a look: [Tarar reports anti-polio success to Saarc](#)

It was also reported that the problem of parents refusing to allow the vaccine to be administered to their children has grown to such proportions that the state has resorted to the extreme step of arresting such persons.

Next, consider the figures. As the sun set on 2014, Pakistan's polio tally crossed 300, and the country broke its own shameful record of more than a decade of the highest number of cases reported in a single year — the previous high of 199 had been recorded in 2000.

True, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative has acknowledged that “strong, functional emergency operations centres are now operational both at the federal and provincial levels” in the country, and that strategising is under way. In view of this, Ms Tarar's statement was, at best, an attempt to save face.

Meanwhile, it is ironic that the forum Ms Tarar was addressing consisted of health ministers from the Saarc countries. India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka were all certified polio-free last year by WHO.

The only other Saarc country not on this praiseworthy list is Afghanistan, which joins Pakistan as one of the world's last three (the third being Nigeria) polio-endemic countries.

Even there, only one case has been reported so far this year, as opposed to 21 from this country. If Pakistan faces significant challenges vis-à-vis polio, was the same not true of all the other countries mentioned above, but which have succeeded in their endeavour?

Instead of trying to gloss over a bad situation, Pakistan would be better served carefully studying the polio eradication strategies developed by its neighbours, and trying to follow suit.

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On Bilawal's behalf

IT is good to know that at least someone from the Bhutto Zardari household wants to and is allowed to pursue business and agriculture rather than politics as a career. But even as we learn, on the authority of a person no less than her father, that young Bakhtawar Bhutto Zardari has chosen to stay away from politics, the focus remains on the future plans of her brother Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. Former president Asif Zardari says his son will be gradually eased into a political career. From a few reports of the news conference given by the ex-president it appears as if an acknowledgement has been made that the young scion, already the saviour to look forward to for his party, is not mature enough for the mantle of leadership. Alternately, it has been reported that security concerns kept him away from Pakistan and its politics. Whatever the case, a 'gradual' induction could prove a little too late for the PPP, if projections about the party's falling popularity are true. There will be grumblings and calls for measures focused on the PPP's classical appeal and its current profile.

There remains the pending case where Pakistanis must debate the demerits of politics by inheritance. Also, there is the issue of a section of Pakistanis wanting to revive the old PPP, something many of them believe can only happen with a reversal of roles currently played by Asif Zardari, who is in control, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who stands at a distance and is sidelined. The young heir was showing sure signs of rebelling against the situation when he was packed off to London last year. It is not improbable for some in PPP circles to be found urging him to skip the 'training' and take up the reins. Whether or not he does so is his choice — so long as it is

his choice. Whatever decision he makes, given his earlier posture of siding with the people, the latter would like to hear it from Bilawal Bhutto Zardari himself.

Published in Dawn, April 12th, 2015

Massacre in Turbat

IT is unfortunate that whenever Balochistan surfaces on the national radar, it is usually for all the wrong reasons. Whether it is the separatist insurgency or sectarian bloodshed, violence and insecurity are what have come to define the province in recent times. Saturday's atrocity in Turbat also falls in line with this unenviable trend. As per reports, at least 20 labourers were killed when militants opened fire on the men as they slept. The victims were reportedly all non-Baloch, with most of them hailing from Punjab, while a few of the men were from Sindh. This is not the first incident in Balochistan where people have been targeted because of their ethnic identity; last year, several workers were killed after their ethnic backgrounds were determined by gunmen in an incident near Hub. Turbat happens to be the hometown of the current chief minister of Balochistan; however, such brazen attacks show that even the native area of the province's highest elected official is not insulated from the effects of the militant insurgency.

Balochistan remains far from pacified; on Saturday there were reports of the security forces carrying out search operations in Dera Murad Jamali and Panjgur, while a suspect wanted in the

2013 attack on the Quaid-i-Azam Residency in Ziarat was killed by security men in Bolan. Moreover, the missing persons' question remains unresolved. While many of the issues raised by political activists pertaining to the security establishment's heavy hand used in Balochistan are genuine, these legitimate grievances are relegated to the back-burner whenever militants carry out atrocities similar to what was just witnessed in Turbat. It is unfortunate that nationalist forces claiming to speak for the rights of Balochistan are either silent or offer muted criticism whenever such gory incidents take place. Nationalists must speak up and condemn such horrendous murders just as strongly as they slam the security forces' alleged excesses in Balochistan. As it is, for most of the rest of Pakistan — apart from human rights activists and a few concerned groups and citizens — within the general population there is much apathy where Balochistan and its plight are concerned, with the province generally considered a distant entity. The callous murder of non-Baloch workers and 'settlers' will do little to attract the sympathy of the people towards Balochistan's legitimate grievances, which is why those who believe in fighting for the province's rights peacefully must raise their voices against such unacceptable violence.

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IN the case of Pak-India relations, it seemingly is always a case of either going round in circles or, worse, one step forward, two steps back. Earlier this week, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered his most positive comments on the bilateral relationship since becoming prime minister, in a newspaper interview, by referring to his government's willingness to engage in dialogue and then specifically mentioning the Shimla accord and the Lahore declaration as the frameworks within which India could conduct dialogue. The Shimla accord has long been hostage to differences between Pakistan and India on a key interpretation — does it allow for international, third-party mediation or does it strictly require bilateral negotiations only? But the Lahore declaration, tellingly, signed by the last BJP government in power, offers much more common ground and one that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself remains wedded to. Then, came the release on bail here of the alleged architect of the 2008 Mumbai attack, Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi of the Jamaatud Dawa/Lashkar-e-Taiba, throwing a fresh hurdle in the possibility of dialogue between Pakistan and India resuming anytime soon.

The release of Lakhvi has sparked the usual round of accusations and recriminations between the foreign policy establishment of both countries. With the Indian Ministry of External Affairs taking a tough line, the Pakistan Foreign Office responded by suggesting that the case against Lakhvi would have been stronger had India cooperated with Pakistan and offered it greater access to the evidence India claims to have gathered on the attacks. A predictable back-and-forth in a scenario where perhaps no one, not even within the Pakistani government, would suggest that the release of Lakhvi at this time is a step in the right direction. More importantly, however,

Prime Minister Modi himself declined the opportunity to directly assail Pakistan in a news conference with French President François Hollande, referring instead to the need for global action against terrorism when the issue of the Mumbai suspect was raised. At the very least, then, the Indian government does not appear immediately ready to return to the bellicose route it has taken with Pakistan for the most part of Mr Modi's tenure so far. Perhaps, as a recent internal BJP declaration on foreign policy suggests, the BJP government is coming around to the long-understood logic of the need to engage Pakistan rather than hold it at arm's length.

Within Pakistan though there remains quite a bit of reckoning to be done. The release of Lakhvi suggests a total breakdown of all aspects of the state doing their job: the political government, the security establishment and the superior judiciary. The evidence against Lakhvi was, for the most part, locally gathered and his prosecution depended on the Pakistani state demonstrating some resolve. If such a high-profile case is so poorly handled, what does that say about Pakistan's overall ability to fight militancy?

Waste management

Too often in Pakistan, issues that merit being addressed immediately are allowed to slip off the radar. One such example was presented by the federal secretary for climate change, Arif Ahmed Khan, in Islamabad on Friday.

Chairing a meeting on the subject, he said that hazardous waste requires proper management as it has become a major source of environmental degradation in the country. The truth of his observation is readily apparent.

Read: ['Hazardous waste requires proper management'](#)

Across the country, waste that requires special handling and treatment, from industrial effluent to hospital refuse, is often seen disposed of unsuitably, thus presenting a significant risk to public and environmental health. Shockingly, as revealed by the director-general of the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency, some 300 medical facilities in Islamabad do not incinerate their waste properly.

If that is the case in the capital, there can be little doubt that the situation in urban sprawls such as Lahore or Karachi, or in smaller towns, would be similar if not worse.

Pakistan ignores this issue at its peril. Hospital waste is in particular very problematic as it can be contaminated and infectious. Further, the improper disposal of items such as syringes facilitates their re-use, which in turn accelerates the spread of diseases such as HIV/Aids and hepatitis C.

Also read: [Solid waste body signs accord with TIP](#)

Industrial effluent and factory by-products, meanwhile, stand to contaminate reservoirs of water and even poison the land itself. Yet, Pakistan's waste disposal problem is not restricted to what is labelled 'hazardous': even trash in general is improperly handled because of issues ranging from poor garbage collection facilities, to landfill locations that are not commensurate with city requirements, to the insufficiency of waste treatment plants.

The problem is made worse by a scattered sewage network; from Karachi alone, for example, millions of gallons of raw sewage make their way into the sea every day.

The picture painted bodes ill for the future. Is it not time for the city administrations and the environmental authorities, to say nothing of the people themselves, to take up the matter urgently?

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New tax directory

It might seem like a rather mundane affair, but the annual publication of the tax directory, which gives details of every taxpayer and how much he or she paid in the outgoing year, is a welcome development in the government's effort to encourage a culture of filing tax returns.

Broadening the base of direct taxes is a crucial part of the revenue effort, and naming and shaming those who are making false declarations of their income is important.

Read: [1,040 lawmakers out of 1,169 filed taxes for 2014: Tax Directory](#)

The tax directory has come under some criticism from people who believe that it is revealing sensitive and private information. Such concerns are valid in an environment of insecurity, where kidnapping for ransom is a widespread practice. But these reservations need to be balanced against the requirements of the revenue effort required to pay for the maintenance of law and order in the first place.

The directory lists many individuals, including politicians, known to be leading lifestyles that entail heavy expenses such as big cars and frequent foreign trips, but declaring very small incomes.

However, it is also important to realise that thus far the exercise of the annual publication of the tax directory, the second of which was published on Friday, is restricted to naming alone. The simple fact of publishing the directory is not

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enough. It is left to the media to pore through the long list of names contained in the directory, and conduct what amounts to media trials of those who are perceived to be mis-declaring their income.

Also read: [About 200 top taxpayers awarded 'privilege, honour cards'](#)

The authorities putting out the report, particularly the Federal Board of Revenue, should go a step further and issue a small comment on the overall exercise. They should especially furnish one on how far they are satisfied with the results contained therein, and what measures are going to be taken to rectify the sources of dissatisfaction.

The directory brings to the fore two categories of persons liable for follow-up action: those who are not filing, and those who are doing so but not giving the correct figure for their income. Of these, the latter group clearly merits punitive action. Those in the former category, on the other hand, must be urged to start filing, particularly in the case of salaried persons who are paying taxes through deductions from their monthly income but failing to file their returns. Publication of the directory is a welcome exercise, but it now needs to be taken a step further.

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Arab frustration with Pakistan

After the resolution, the recriminations. It may have been a stirring riposte to unreasonable demands, but the consensus parliamentary resolution last week was always going to draw criticism from the Arab states that had wanted Pakistan firmly on the side of the Saudi-led coalition attacking the Houthis inside Yemen.

Perhaps the only surprise is that the first broadside has come from the UAE, with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Mohammad Gargash using decidedly undiplomatic language to vent his, and possibly his state's, apparent frustration with the Pakistani decision to not participate in hostilities inside Yemen.

Explore: [Parliament calls for neutrality in Yemen conflict](#)

There are at least two things that need to be considered here. First, Mr Gargash's comments have underscored precisely what was argued in parliament last week: the conflict in Yemen is not about Yemen itself but seen by Saudi Arabia and its allies as part of a much wider struggle to push back against perceived Iranian influence in the region.

That in and of itself is reason enough for Pakistan to abide by the parliamentary resolution — Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries cannot and should not come at the expense of a third country with which Pakistan shares a significant border.

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Read: [UAE minister warns Pakistan of 'heavy price for ambiguous stand' on Yemen](#)

What Mr Gargash, and surely his counterparts in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf and Arab countries, may be perceived as seeking to do is to use the Yemen conflict to effectively declare war on Iran. But Pakistan has no reason whatsoever to engage Iran in a conflict, directly or via proxies.

In fact, it is in Pakistan's interests to broaden ties with Iran, especially in terms of energy cooperation, and to position itself to take advantage of the rollback of sanctions that the US-Iran nuclear deal may allow.

Also read: [Resolution on Yemen is Pakistan's internal matter: Saudi minister](#)

If there is any role for Pakistan in the Yemen conflict, it must lie in the diplomatic route that the government has stressed in recent days. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is already coordinating closely with the Turkish government and has tried to encourage the OIC and the UN to play a more proactive role — that remains the responsible thing to do.

Second, Mr Gargash's comments have made it imperative to launch a parallel and urgent diplomatic outreach to Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Yemen conflict.

Their anger and resentment directed at Pakistan may be unjustified, but it should not be ignored. Pakistan has many political, economic and diplomatic stakes in the GCC countries and Saudi Arabia, not least the estimated several million Pakistani expatriates.

Also read: [Turkey, Pakistan back peaceful resolution to Yemen conflict](#)

Ensuring the safety and security of Pakistanis abroad and the continuation of an economic lifeline ought to be a priority of the government here. Surely, the Pakistani emphasis should be on the much broader spectrum of ties that exist with the GCC countries and Saudi Arabia and the self-defeating economic rationale of curtailing financial and employment ties with Pakistan. Ultimately, it is no one's interest to escalate a policy difference over Yemen into wholesale damage to long-standing and close ties.

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Handover of Gwadar port

After years of languishing, Gwadar port is finally set to be handed over to a credible operator who has signalled a willingness to also invest in the associated infrastructure to bring the facility into operation. This is a good development and deserves to be received with optimism.

Thus far the port is handling less than 3pc of the cargo that Karachi does between its two harbours.

Also read: [Gwadar Port to become operational in May, senate committee told](#)

The main reason for this has been its relative isolation from the country's transport infrastructure such as roads and railways as well as its inability to serve as a home for a large number of skilled workers, which are required to operate a port.

The city of Gwadar lacks the water resources, as well as housing and other services such as educational and health facilities to provide for a large workforce.

It is connected to the rest of the country via a single road that leads to Karachi, which makes shipping goods there more expensive than Karachi since the cost of overland transport is far greater. Without these investments, as well as warehousing and other storage infrastructure, the port would be destined to languish.

Also read: [Call to resolve issues hindering Gwadar Port's completion as full-fledged facility](#)

But all that is about to change, we are told. In February, the port was handed over to the China Overseas Port Holding company as part of a larger transition towards making it operational. Issues surrounding the acquisition of land from the navy and coastguard were also resolved, and over 2,000 acres are set to be transferred to the port authorities for building an industrial park. Additionally, the Chinese have agreed to build the road infrastructure connecting the harbour with Sukkur and an international airport, along with a Gwadar Economic Free Zone, although details of these commitments are not yet known. The agreements required to initiate this work are reportedly going to be signed during the visit of China's President Xi Jinping soon.

There is little doubt that the move to make Gwadar port fully operational will have a transformative impact on Pakistan. Still, there are good reasons to keep the optimism controlled, and to be mindful of the challenges ahead. For one, much of the engagement with China is being seen in Pakistan through an emotional lens, as friendly assistance by a brotherly neighbour. In fact, much of this assistance is coming on commercial terms, and the Chinese have been known to walk away from large projects in Pakistan when they believe that the authorities here have failed to live up to their end of the bargain. There is much that needs to be done by Pakistan to make the Chinese opportunity a reality, and there are question marks hanging over the government's ability to do so. Instead of undue optimism, it would be better if more energy were invested in doing the homework that is necessary to successfully see this project through.

Published in Dawn, April 14th, 2015

HBL share sales

The government is to be congratulated on the success of the sale of its stake in HBL, but some questions remain. The government sold its entire holding of 41.5pc shares in HBL, the country's largest commercial bank.

It appears that most of the buyers were foreign institutional investors.

Read: [Govt to sell off its HBL stake for \\$1.02bn](#)

The base deal, which was the first offering of 250m shares, or 17pc of government holdings, drew such a large response from the market that the government decided to exercise its option to put the remaining 359.3m shares up for sale as well.

Together, the two offerings will add to the reserves, although in an amount less than the total sale because some of the shares were picked up by domestic investors.

The sale opened up much-needed fiscal space, amounting to 0.3pc of GDP by some estimates, for the government at a time when revenues are lagging behind projections.

The strong investor interest reflects well on HBL management, and will have some reputational impact on Pakistani assets as well.

Also read: [Floor price for HBL divestment set at Rs166 per share](#)

All of this is good news, but only for the day, and the moment of jubilation will pass sooner than most realise. Something similar happened with the Eurobond flotation of 2004, which was also billed as an exercise in reputation building.

The fiscal and reserves impact will not last long, although the loss of dividend income on an asset that paid its highest-ever cash dividend last year will last forever.

The reputational impact is to be acknowledged, but is also likely to remain confined to a few blue chip shares only. Questions remain as to why this deal was necessary to begin with, aside from the inflows it creates for the moment. The government was not saddled with management responsibilities at the bank, nor did the asset require large amounts of government subsidies on an annual basis, like PIA and Pakistan Steel do.

Explore more: [HBL in the spotlight](#)

The reputational impact of such transactions, history teaches us, is limited. Aside from the fact that a commitment was given to the IMF that these shares will be sold, what other compulsions were there to undertake this exercise?

The Fund is only interested in raising Pakistan's reserves to improve the country's debt service capacity, and its endorsement means little in this case. The government should accept the kudos rightly coming its way, but should also use the opportunity to explain why it feels offloading these shares was necessary in the first place.

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Impure bottled water

The perils of contaminated water are well known. So is the unfortunate fact that unscrupulous vendors will try to capitalise on high demand for a product to make a quick buck.

It is, therefore, reassuring that the Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources undertakes regular testing of mineral and bottled water brands available in the country.

Its report for the period of January to March 2015, based on the results of testing 71 brands of mineral and bottled water collected from across the country, declares eight as being “completely unsafe” for human consumption on various grounds.

[Read: 8 bottled water brands found to be ‘unsafe for consumption’](#)

Several of them contain levels of arsenic, sodium and potassium either moderately or far higher than the permissible limits set by the Pakistan Standards and Quality Control Authority. These chemicals can cause various ailments, including diabetes, kidney problems, hypertension and even cancer.

Three brands were found to be unsafe due to “microbiological contamination which may cause cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, hepatitis and typhoid etc”.

The quarterly exercise by the PCRWR is certainly helpful for consumers and may even be having a deterrent effect. In the

first quarter of last year for instance, 21 brands of mineral and bottled water were found to be contaminated compared to eight this time.

In November 2014, the PSQCA in a press release went further and declared it was illegal to buy or sell eight brands of water found unfit for human consumption during that monitoring cycle. Violating the ban, it said, would attract a fine of at least Rs50,000 and one year behind bars.

However, without stringent implementation of the law, repeat offenders — as well as new, fly-by-night concerns — may resume the lucrative business of selling contaminated water masquerading as ‘pure’ and ‘safe’ to lure consumers.

Under its mandate to check deceptive marketing and oversee consumer protection issues, the Competition Commission of Pakistan can also play a role here. Consumers themselves cannot be expected to stay abreast of periodic reports that inform them which brands of bottled water are safe.

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Power sector adrift

One by one reports coming out of the power sector are chipping away at the story the government sought to tell: that it will move vigorously to increase generation and streamline distribution to eventually end load-shedding in the country. That goal seems like a mirage today.

Now we have news that at least four separate power plants are experiencing forced outages, taking more than 2000MW off the grid just as the summer months set in and the dams lie empty.

These are days when thermal power generation is needed the most because temperatures increase and hydel generation is not available since river flows have not begun to rise.

Outages are usually scheduled outside this period, but the lack of maintenance seems to have forced the power managers' hands.

This should be considered together with the fact that the circular debt now stands at Rs540bn, or 2pc of GDP according to the IMF's latest review, only slightly below the level it was at when the present government took charge, promising to eliminate it.

Consider also that our rulers have already begun rolling out failed ideas such as the early closure of shops, something they haven't been able to implement in the past.

Read: [Power managers 'ignore' PM's order](#)

Meanwhile, the pricing regime announced for the new generation using LNG is probably more expensive than furnace oil, the fuel they have been trying to replace because of its cost. This means that bridging the gap between cost of generation and cost of sale will be harder with LNG. One by one, all the points on which the government had staked its reputation are coming under stress: the present rulers were going to be superior managers to see through large projects and solve big problems in one go, and have a handle on pricing, etc. It is fair to say that by now the government has lost the initiative in tackling the power crisis, and appears to be muddling through like all previous administrations. We can only hope that this perception proves wrong.

Published in Dawn, April 15th, 2015

PM's sensible response

If Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council want to engage Pakistan in a war of words, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has presented the correct response: reaffirm Pakistan's commitment to the territorial security of its allies while stressing for a peaceful and diplomatic solution to the Yemen conflict.

The Saudi-led coalition that has been bombing the Houthis in Yemen since March 26 is, for Pakistan, the wrong war at the wrong time for the wrong reasons.

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Participating militarily in Yemen would not just distract from the overriding objective of fighting militancy at home, as Mr Sharif alluded to in his comments on Monday, but it would risk drawing Pakistan into an open-ended regional and, potentially, sectarian conflict with horrific consequences.

Read: [PM makes damage control move](#)

Doing nothing, however, is not an option for Pakistan either, as the crude pressure that senior officials and the media in several of the GCC countries and Saudi Arabia have piled on Pakistan has made clear.

Originally, when the bombing by the Saudi-led coalition began in late March, the pressure on Pakistan had come in the form of on-the-record claims by Saudi officials that the Pakistani state had already committed itself to joining the coalition.

Now, following the parliamentary resolution that rejected the possibility of Pakistan engaging in military action inside Yemen, the pressure has come in the form of veiled threats that Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia and the GCC will suffer for the stance parliament has taken and which the government is abiding by.

Also read: [Parliament calls for neutrality in Yemen conflict](#)

Unpleasant as the mood may be towards Pakistan in countries long considered rock-solid allies of the state, it has to be contended with.

And the government here is on the right track by vowing to intensify an already hectic diplomatic campaign.

That campaign will need to be conducted simultaneously on several fronts.

One, conditions for a ceasefire inside Yemen need to be determined and implemented as quickly as possible.

Two, the explosive Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry in the Middle East needs to be reined in.

Three, Pakistan needs to reaffirm its long-standing ties to and convergence of interests with Saudi Arabia and the GCC.

Four, the expatriate Pakistani population in the region needs to be reached out to and reassurances given to what are surely millions of people.

On the first and second of these issues Pakistan will not be able to achieve much on its own.

The international community will have to act in a concerted and urgent manner and yesterday's decision by the UN Security Council to impose an arms embargo on the Houthis may, if combined with other interventions by other countries and forums, pave the way for an early ceasefire.

On the third and fourth issues, Pakistan's foreign policy establishment will have to go into overdrive, using the full array of tools at its disposal to restore calm as quickly as possible. This crisis need not become a permanent rupture.

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Arrest of suspect

Tuesday saw a flurry of activity where the MQM and its interactions with the British and Pakistani legal systems are concerned.

Perhaps the most closely followed story of the day was Muttahida chief Altaf Hussain's appearance before London's Metropolitan Police in connection with a money-laundering case.

After interviewing him for several hours, the British authorities extended the MQM supremo's bail till July.

Meanwhile, in Karachi, Moazzam Ali, one of the key suspects wanted in MQM leader Dr Imran Farooq's 2010 murder case, was produced before an anti-terrorism court and placed under preventive detention.

Read: [Money laundering case: Altaf Hussain's bail extended till July](#)

On Monday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan had announced that the suspect had been arrested in the Sindh capital.

This individual is believed to have sponsored the British visas and provided the tickets for two men suspected of murdering Dr Farooq in London, as well as making other arrangements for the men's travel and stay.

The suspect has been linked to the case for some time now, with his name emerging in media reports earlier on; the

London police are believed to have been aware of his involvement and alerted the Pakistani authorities. While it is hoped that his arrest will help solve this brutal murder case, one key question remains unanswered: where are the two individuals who are believed to have actually murdered Imran Farooq?

The names of the suspected killers — Mohsin Ali Syed and Kashif Khan Kamran — have also been cited in numerous media reports for some time now.

Also read: [Prime suspect in Imran Farooq murder arrested in Karachi: Nisar](#)

These men are believed to be in the custody of Pakistani intelligence and were reportedly picked up from the tarmac at Karachi airport upon their arrival from the UK, via Sri Lanka, in 2010.

The security establishment has maintained an ambiguous position on their status and whereabouts, though it has also been reported that British authorities have been given access to the men.

The state needs to disclose the facts about these individuals — where are they being held, what exactly are the charges against them, what evidence exists against them etc — so that the murder case is thoroughly investigated and solved without further delay.

With the arrest of the alleged facilitator of the suspected killers from Karachi, we hope the investigation is expedited and that the authorities both in the UK and Pakistan are able to bring the

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murder case of the senior Muttahida leader to a conclusion and punish those involved in the planning and execution of this crime.

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Cybercrime bill controversy

On the surface, all seems well: there is no doubt that laws referring to cybercrime require being formulated. The issue has been with us for several years, the 2007 Pakistan Electronic Crime Ordinance having lapsed in 2009.

Attempts to revive that led to representatives of the IT industry and its activists, such as the Internet Service Providers' Association and the Pakistan Software Houses Association as well as some NGOs that work in this area, becoming involved in the process of giving shape to the proposed new legislation.

Read: [Digital censorship](#)

The draft of the new Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill 2015 was sent to the National Assembly's Standing Committee on IT and Telecom earlier this month.

And on Tuesday, speaking to the media at a conference in Islamabad, Minister of State for Information Technology Anusha Rahman said that the government has finalised the cybercrime bill. She added that this was in line with the

implementation of the National Action Plan to counter terrorism, with severe penalties proposed for offenders.

Also read: [New cybercrime bill tough on individuals' rights, soft on crime](#)

Scratch through this surface of gloss though, and there is much that is controversial.

Critics say that a government-led sub-committee put in time to modify the draft that had originally been chiselled by the IT ministry and industry stakeholders and activists — the latter now holding that they were excluded from the process of finalising the draft.

What now stands to be tabled in the National Assembly, they say, is a loosely worded piece of legal drafting that not just betrays a poor grasp of the technical aspects of digital communications and the internet, but also contains several deeply problematic clauses that are open to misinterpretation and may be used as crutches for censorship and the suppression of views a government finds unpalatable.

Consider, for instance, Section 31, the most jarring of several examples.

Under this section, the government could block access to any website “in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality....” Who is to decide what undermines the integrity of Pakistan, or its relations with other states?

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Who exactly are the “friendly foreign states”, and where would countries with which Pakistan has fluctuating ties such as the US be placed? Critics also refer to several other technically flawed and vague definitions that pose threats to ordinary citizens.

The bill is yet to be tabled before the National Assembly.

When that happens, it is to be hoped that the lawmakers tune in and examine each and every clause very carefully, with a view to protecting the hard-won freedoms and rights of Pakistani citizens.

The issue is of much greater importance than the government has chosen to project. Pakistan has suffered much because of laws that are open to abuse and misinterpretation. It does not need more such laws.

Published in Dawn, April 16th, 2015

Afghan refugees

There may be millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan — a million and a half officially registered and perhaps twice as many unregistered — for decades now, but the state here has been unable to resolve humanitarian considerations on one side and political and emotive aspects on the other.

Now, with the Proof of Registration cards given to Afghan refugees over a decade ago set to expire on Dec 31, the question of what to do next once again confronts the state.

Read: [Most Afghan refugees return home due to fear of arrest, harassment](#)

With a meeting of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-UNHCR tripartite scheduled for August, the three long-term solutions will once again be on the table: voluntary repatriation (returning to Afghanistan), resettlement (settling permanently in a third country), and local integration (remaining in Pakistan).

In the past, all hard decisions have been avoided by simply extending the expiration date of the PoR cards — done thrice now. This time, there may be an attempt to try and speed up voluntary repatriation, but conditions in Afghanistan suggest a large-scale voluntary return over the next year is highly unlikely.

Also read: [UNHCR in a dilemma over Afghans' repatriation](#)

That leaves the option of simply extending validity of the PoR cards once again or, as a UNHCR official in Peshawar mooted

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at a news conference on Tuesday, looking towards some kind of integration of a limited number of Afghan refugees.

The idea behind integration is not to grant citizenship to Afghan refugees with PoR cards, but to accept the reality that being resident in Pakistan with only the barest of legal status leaves them vulnerable to all manner of exploitation here.

From corrupt officials in the state apparatus to having to resort to bribery when interacting with even the private sector in search of basic services, Afghan refugees' hardships are compounded at every turn.

However, the very suggestion that they be granted more rights here is likely to trigger a political firestorm in the country, given that the long-prevailing national sentiment is for the Afghan refugees to leave Pakistan at the earliest.

Anything that creates a further incentive for the refugees to stay in Pakistan is not just likely to be rejected, it may exacerbate tensions between the Afghan refugees and the communities amidst which they live.

The best idea, then, as ever remains to create the conditions for the refugees themselves to choose to return to Afghanistan.

Barring that, the default option of extending the validity of the PoR will only further defer resolution of a decades-old issue.

Published in Dawn, April 16th, 2015

Guns and children

To say that Pakistan is a gun-friendly country would be stating the obvious. The number of firearms owned by civilians here, both legal and otherwise, is estimated to be at least 18,000,000, which works out to a rate of 11.6 guns per 100 people.

Compare that with India, where it is 3.36 per 100 people. No self-respecting 'VIP' — or an aspiring one — in Pakistan would deign to be seen without a posse of armed guards.

Applications for arms licences have registered a steady increase with tens of thousands of them being issued within the span of a few years as the security situation has deteriorated. Shooting ranges are witnessing higher numbers of visitors.

Read/ [Footprints : Dangerous child's play](#)

A small arms shooting competition in Karachi, the first ever international one, is scheduled for May. While such competitions are no doubt a healthy sporting activity — shooting is even an Olympic sport — it is rather disturbing that the forthcoming event includes a category for children.

According to the organisers, children as young as 10 will be handling pistols and rifles on the occasion.

After the APS Peshawar attack, Pakistan in some respects seems to have discarded clear thinking for knee-jerk reactionary responses.

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Also read/ [Teaching our students to fire weapons is madness itself](#)

Students in several educational institutions in the country have been given weapons training by police and even taught to defuse bombs.

To believe that such an approach can enhance students' defence capabilities is surely deluded, and it could well have tragic consequences.

It is for good reason that arms licences are not issued to those below the age of majority: with the right to handle lethal weapons comes the concomitant responsibility of due care that the law assumes is beyond the capacity of a minor.

Even within the controlled environment of a shooting range, allowing children access to firearms conveys subliminal messaging that glorifies violence and renders the use of deadly force acceptable.

Protecting children in a heavily militarised environment does not mean co-opting them into the dangerous pursuits that should be the domain of adults alone.

Published in Dawn, April 16th, 2015

The Afghan challenge

The so-called annual spring fighting season in Afghanistan was always going to be a challenge for the President Ashraf Ghani-led national unity government.

But already a difficult spring appears to be morphing into a torrid summer. Not only is there a sense that violence is spreading to new areas, it also seems to be intensifying in old trouble spots.

Meanwhile, discouraging are the prospects for Mr Ghani's urgent outreach to the Afghan Taliban achieving anything tangible.

Read: [Comment: Afghan president strives to put house in order](#)

Attempts at dialogue appear to have gone nowhere, and the Afghan president has found himself under pressure at home for his allegedly pro-Pakistan stance.

Now, with a visit to India scheduled for later this month, the Afghan leader may find that the tightrope he has been treading since assuming office last September is about to get even narrower.

But security is only one side of the puzzle.

Governance and the economy complete the trio of issues that the national unity government must contend with even as it becomes obvious that the half-year old new dispensation is only able to deliver patchy results at best on those fronts.

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Part of the problem is that even as Mr Ghani tries to impose discipline and accountability on the decade-old Afghan state structure, he is emulating his predecessor by zealously centralising decision-making.

Political disputes aside — famously, despite two rounds of proposed nominees, parliament is yet to confirm more than a handful of ministers — the suggestion in Kabul is that there is really just a two-man team: Mr Ghani and the head of the national security council, Hanif Atmar.

Mr Atmar has been given a much larger role in engaging the Afghan Taliban in talks than his predecessors, displacing the High Peace Council to a great extent.

Surely, Afghanistan's problems, least of all its economic and governance woes, cannot be addressed by trying to micromanage affairs from Kabul.

At the same time, there is also a sense that Mr Ghani looks too much to outside powers to help with the security side of Afghanistan's problems.

Be it looking to the Americans to continue to buttress the Afghan security forces' capabilities, to looking to Pakistan to nudge the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table, to hoping that China — a diplomatic and political novice in Afghan issues — will somehow achieve breakthroughs where others failed, Mr Ghani seems to look more outside than within Afghanistan's borders.

That is hardly the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process long touted as the only realistic solution.

Army chief's visit to Balochistan

Heedless of the lessons that should have been learnt from history, the old playbook on how to tackle Balochistan has not been revised.

The army chief's high-profile visit to the Frontier Corps headquarters in Quetta on Wednesday, where he met the Balochistan chief minister and governor as well as the head of the FC Southern Command — who oversees security-related operations in the part of the province where the insurgency is at its height — makes that very clear.

During his trip Gen Raheel Sharif warned "foreign governments and intelligence agencies" against meddling in Balochistan and thereby sustaining the insurgency that he vowed would be defeated "comprehensively".

Read: [COAS vows to crush insurgency in Balochistan](#)

The timing of the army chief's visit and his bellicose statements are significant, and seem to indicate an imminent intensifying of the already heavy military footprint in the province.

The reprehensible murder by separatists last week of 20 non-Baloch labourers in Turbat who were working on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, appears to have been the catalyst for this renewed focus on the province, despite the military's

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ongoing operations against extremists in the country's tribal areas.

The imminent visit of the Chinese president and his plans to inaugurate several mega projects in Gwadar in all likelihood also factored into the robust response to the murders by the military.

Also read: [20 labourers gunned down in Turbat](#)

It claimed to have killed 13 militants in a clash, although reports suggest that at least some of the dead were earlier victims of enforced disappearance.

The involvement of third parties in fomenting trouble in Balochistan has long been alleged.

Given its strategic location, there may well be truth in that contention, and evidence to the effect should be brought into the public domain.

Critically though, the establishment continues to ignore its own role in creating conditions in the province that are ripe for exploitation by regional forces.

By stifling alternate narratives, allowing free rein to its proxies to run amok and commit horrific human rights abuses, and refusing to suspend its inhumane kill-and-dump policy, the state has allowed deep-seated grievances to develop among the Baloch and fanned the flames of separatist sentiment.

Moreover, despite the much-touted benefits of devolution, Balochistan is still deprived of agency over its vast natural resources that are its primary asset.

Even though the COAS during his visit advocated an integrated civilian-military approach to address the Balochistan problem, the optics left no doubt that the province continues to be viewed primarily through a security lens.

It is the civilian government in Balochistan, which after all has an elected set-up and assembly, that should take the lead in finding a durable political resolution to the impasse — including attempts to engage the insurgents, and any security operations should be announced by the prime minister, not the army chief. Instead, the military's highly visible role simply adds fuel to the fire and makes Dr Abdul Malik's government appear powerless.

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Climate change concerns

A new study released by WWF-Pakistan has found that agriculture here could face a loss of up to 10pc of its output by 2040 due to climate change.

This is a huge percentage, but fortunately the authors of the study also have some suggestions on what can be done to mitigate this impact. Specifically, they point to improved farm management practices such as better utilisation of water in irrigation, tillage and agro-chemical input use.

They also suggest a public policy response, involving the creation of a large number of field schools where knowledge can be disseminated to farmers to enable them to adapt to the challenges coming their way.

Adaptive strategies of the sort mentioned by the study are very important for an agrarian country like Pakistan when facing the multiple threats that climate change presents.

But one problem is that much of agricultural policy, and the power to create the dissemination networks for adaptive knowhow, lies with the provincial governments. It is crucial that the leadership at the provincial level start to awaken to their responsibilities in preparing farmers for the challenges of climate change.

Resignation need not be the only response when facing such a huge challenge.

There are many steps that can be taken to improve crop yields and resilience to temperature changes, and disseminating these techniques must begin soon since farmers are slow to adopt new practices.

This is not a daunting task by any means, and there is still a window of opportunity to get the ball rolling.

Other facets of climate change, such as irregular rains and flooding, present their own challenges and require a greater role for the state to upgrade forecasting capabilities and hydraulic infrastructure.

But those adaptive strategies that require farmers to adopt new practices to make their crops resilient to temperature changes and increase yields will be slow in coming and therefore require a much longer lead time.

The time to start undertaking that effort is now.

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Unhealthy economic trends

THE latest report by the State Bank on the banking sector provides a glimpse of some very unhealthy trends that continue to hang over the economy. The report undoubtedly tries to downplay the negatives, but the numbers and in some places the language as well, reveal a troubled picture. For one, profitability of the banking sector “surged by 52pc [from same period last year] to reach Rs247bn in 2014; highest ever for the banking industry”.

A closer look at where these profits came from shows that the banks’ unabated appetite for government securities coupled with a rising stock market contributed the largest share of this growth. Profitable banks may be a healthy phenomenon, but if those profits are derived from risk-averse lending behaviour and inflated values of speculative assets, then they actually speak to a growing dysfunction in our banking system, which is becoming more and more a sovereign lender and less and less an intermediary between savers and borrowers.

A banking system that posts record profits while stubbornly refusing to engage in private-sector lending is not a healthy development. The performance review notes how lending to government continues to increase, while the private sector is crowded out and deposit growth is slowing down. The banks are becoming increasingly reliant on liquidity injections from the State Bank, whose daily average outstanding amounts rose by almost 400pc between the third and fourth quarters.

This means the banks are taking money from the State Bank and lending it to government, and ploughing growing amounts

into public-sector commodity operations or NSS schemes, where returns are also largely risk free. It notes a growing concentration of bank advances to the power sector, most to finance the operation of the circular debt, and calls for “early liquidation measures” to contain the risks from such concentration. It notes the pressure on the fiscal framework by pointing towards an “expected shortfall in FBR revenue” even as “security-related measures may push the expenditure [sic] up”, meaning that these unhealthy developments are likely to continue, and even aggravate, before the end of the fiscal year.

The way forward is clear but not easy. Liquidity pressures at the banks need more “deposit mobilisation” effort by the banks, but the root cause of the malaise is fiscal. The growing inability to meet expenditures from revenue means the government is becoming entrenched as the banks’ single largest customer, and left to its own devices, the situation will not change since the banks have no incentive to shift away from lending to government. Couple this with the surging stock market and inflating property prices, and we have a rather dysfunctional economy, where fiscal weaknesses and the search for speculative rents are the main driving force. More needs to be done to acknowledge and remedy this state of affairs.

Published in Dawn, April 18th, 2015

SC's courageous decision

THE decision by the full bench of the Supreme Court to suspend the death sentences awarded by military courts to six convicted terrorists is the right and courageous one and ought to have been taken earlier. Far too many individuals in far too many quarters have cheered on the death sentences as just and deserved — with only the vaguest details of who has been convicted, under what circumstances and for what specific crimes having being revealed in the most shameful of circumstances.

Perversely, the Supreme Court itself is now being criticised for belatedly doing its job by supporters of military courts. In the desperation to wreak vengeance on militants for the ghastly atrocity that was Peshawar, the cheerleaders for military courts appear willing to sacrifice the structure and principles of the state itself. There must, at all times, be a basic separation of powers: parliament legislates, judiciary interprets. And at all times, all institutions of the state must hold the rights of the people paramount. Violate those principles and neither will militancy be eradicated nor will the society and state emerging from this war be recognisable as anything close to the foundational values of this country.

To critics of the Supreme Court's temporary decision and proponents of the new, post-December regime of military courts, there is also a straightforward response. Yes, there is a desperate need to draw up a coherent and cohesive policy to fight militancy here, but military courts can be no part of such a strategy, in principle or in practice. Consider what is now known about the six men who were, before the Supreme

Court's intervention, sentenced to be executed in the name of the power that the people have invested in the state.

They were effectively sentenced to death (the appeals process under the new legislation will surely be even more abbreviated and limited than the trial itself) because the military has accused them of being terrorists. If the military is convinced of the militancy connections of these six men, and knows the specific crimes they have committed, why is it so difficult for the same evidence to be produced in a reasonable manner before reasonable individuals? The notion that the judiciary is an incurable ally of militancy is preposterous. By the same token that the military has convinced itself of the guilt of certain individuals, why can it not convince others of the same? The Supreme Court has done the right thing.

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Minister's strange logic

FOR the London Metropolitan Police, the obstacles in the way of solving this whodunnit must be baffling. The victim, MQM leader Dr Imran Farooq, sought political asylum in the United Kingdom as a Pakistani citizen. The two men suspected of having killed him in London are also Pakistani citizens and who, media reports said, arrived in Karachi via Colombo soon after the murder on Sept 16, 2010 and were whisked away from the airport by intelligence personnel in whose custody they have been languishing since.

Yet the Pakistani government, which has only recently and somewhat tacitly acknowledged that the men are indeed in its custody, appears to be in no hurry to cooperate. Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan has stated unequivocally that in the absence of an extradition treaty between Pakistan and the United Kingdom, they will not be handed over “unilaterally” to the British authorities and that Pakistan would extend “additional cooperation” only if the UK agreed that this case would become a precedent for it to follow when Pakistan sought extradition of a wanted person in the future.

Although according to the principle of sovereignty Pakistan has jurisdiction over people within its borders, and there is indeed no extradition treaty with the UK at present, the interior minister's stance does not stand to reason. The government should be keen to see that a crime against a former political leader from Pakistan allegedly carried out by Pakistanis is successfully prosecuted instead of withholding possible evidence as a bargaining chip.

There is already enough evidence to suspect that the revelations about Dr Imran Farooq's murder have been timed with a view to political expediency rather than driven by the desire for justice to be served. There is nothing to stop the government from pursuing an extradition treaty with the UK to put in place a legal framework for exchange of individuals suspected of committing crimes in each other's countries; just as there is nothing to prevent it from rising above institutional interests and responding appropriately in the Imran Farooq murder case.

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Insensitive media

THE deadly attack on the station house officer of Karachi's Preedy police station on Thursday morning has left yet another Pakistani family torn apart by grief. An investigation is under way, yet there are other dimensions to this tragedy that deserve being highlighted — such as the electronic reportage of the incident.

According to doctors at the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre, where the body of SHO Ejaz Ali Khawaja was received, the victim's widow arrived saying that she had come to know about the attack from the ticker running on the news channel she had happened to be watching. It is impossible to imagine the level of apprehension this woman must have experienced as she, with her toddler, made her way to the

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hospital — only to learn that her worst fear had come true. The strength of that emotion can only be matched by opprobrium for the news media that deemed it fit to release a name for the consumption of the general public without confirming that — as is standard journalistic practice across the world — the victim's family had been informed first.

Yet why should we be surprised when time and again, unhappily, a large section of Pakistan's electronic news media has failed to show the sensitivity that would have been fair to expect as the country plummeted down the vortex of violence. From television crews giving away the movement of law-enforcement agencies during the 2009 Manawan Police Academy assault, to the broadcast of blood, gore and pain in the aftermath of bombings or other violent incidents, to the privacy of victims' families being violated by cameras and indelicate questions, the country's news media seems bent on committing serious errors of judgement. The issue has been raised often, with media houses even agreeing on a self-imposed code of conduct a few years ago. That lapses should still be taking place is shocking. Can the plea be made, once again, that the thirst for ratings not be allowed to trump the values of humanity?

Published in Dawn, April 19th, 2015

Karachi operation

GIVEN the menu of items discussed at the last apex committee meeting in Karachi, it would appear that the Rangers' operation in the city is approaching an important turning point. They appear to be moving beyond simply apprehending violent elements, to actively draining the swamp that breeds them, — with a particular focus on the sources of funding which come from “extortion, illegal hydrants, kidnapping for ransom” and other such activity.

Additionally, a computerised record of all seminaries in the province will need to be compiled with details on size as well as sources of funding. Other measures include the creation of a land record to identify land grabbing. Many of the rackets that are identified in this list find patronage from powerful groups, including political parties. Yet only these parties can execute the actions, while remaining committed to bringing in a more just and formally bounded system of local government that would carry on the exercise in the future.

And therein lies the problem. The operation is now at a very sensitive point, where the will of the political parties must be harnessed to reform the tools and system of governance in a way that chokes off the spaces where rackets have developed. But if the list of rackets to be shut down does not expand to include the foreign sources of funding that lie behind the banned militant outfits that also operate in the city, many of the actions outlined at the apex committee could come to be seen as a political move.

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They would be viewed as an attempt to choke important resource lifelines of the parties while leaving those of militant organisations largely untouched. The operation has been carried out with some skill thus far, but it is important that it is not perceived as one against the rackets of political parties alone. Banned militant groups that operate in the city don't have access to many of the rackets outlined, such as illegal water hydrants, but they are able to operate quite freely out of this city nonetheless. Some groups that are either banned or on a 'watch list' have been able to hold rallies in the city while the operation has been under way. Such disparities in the treatment of different groups runs the risk of giving the operation a political colour, which must be avoided since, at the end of the day, the operation's success depends crucially on the cooperation of the political parties.

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Long road to China

CHINA'S President Xi Jinping is scheduled to arrive in Pakistan in the next few days and announce a set of projects in power and communications infrastructure totalling almost \$50bn. Details of the projects were provided by the Planning Commission to a number of assembled delegates from the media and assorted think tanks at an open event, and they make for an impressive list.

If all of what is described indeed materialises, we can say that the Chinese are offering an intervention in our infrastructure development to rival what the Americans did in return for our accession to the Indus Waters Treaty. Recall that as part of surrendering our rights to the waters in three eastern rivers, the Americans had offered to build a vast hydrological infrastructure including storages such as Mangla and Tarbela, as well as canals and associated power generation and transmission systems. The investments made under that programme not only gave us stupendous increases in power generation and transmission, but vastly improved agricultural yields allowing Pakistan to become self-sufficient in food by the end of the 1960s.

Those investments ended by the mid-1970s, and the improvements they heralded for our economy have largely carried us through the decades. But today Pakistan is in dire need of another major round of infrastructure investments, in water, power and communications, to build durable grounds for future growth. What China is offering may well come up to the requirements of our economy, and the opportunity must not be missed.

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However, one point needs to be amplified at the very outset. That point was made by the Minister for Planning and Development Ahsan Iqbal during his presentation at the open event. Pakistan will need to do a lot of work at its own end in order to avail itself of the benefits of what the Chinese are offering, and this work will need to “keep pace” with that conducted by the other side. The Chinese are not offering to do all the work for us, nor is all this coming for free. In the past, on at least two occasions, the Chinese have walked away from major commitments in infrastructure because the Pakistanis were too embroiled in bickering amongst themselves, or had not done their homework to live up to their end of the bargain. Investments in roads will require improved security.

Investments in power will need vastly improved fuel supply arrangements, especially for coal, in whose handling and supply we have no experience whatsoever. Across the board, for these benefits to flow and become the basis on which our future growth is built, much work will be required, resources will need to be committed, differences must be buried and competent coordination executed. Mr Iqbal was correct to flag all this in advance. Let us hope that we can rise to the promise of the moment.

Published in Dawn, April 19th, 2015

Human rights report card

For the most part, the HRCP’s State of Human Rights in 2014 does not make for very optimistic reading. The report highlights the fact that where human rights and fundamental freedoms in Pakistan are concerned, 2014 saw much of the same violence and exploitation that this country has known for far too long.

As the document notes, the last year began with “...faith-based assaults on religious minorities. ...” and came to a harrowing end with the APS Peshawar massacre.

And as the statistics show, vulnerable groups such as religious and sectarian minorities, women, children and the poor had to struggle to survive in a stifling atmosphere dominated by violence and intimidation, with the state largely failing to protect the citizens’ fundamental rights.

Read: [HRCP presents dismal rights picture](#)

Terrorism remained Pakistan’s foremost security concern in 2014, taking a bloody toll, with over 1,700 deaths in terrorist attacks. Violence against women also remained high, with hundreds of girls and women raped and subjected to ‘honour’ killings.

Far too many cases of custodial killings were reported, as were incidents of torture in custody, while sectarian and targeted killings continued to bedevil the country.

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Yet in such an atmosphere of gloom there were a few bright spots. These included the fact that the provinces were active in the lawmaking sphere while the number of missing persons in Balochistan was down, but only slightly. Also welcome was the broad national consensus to tackle militancy that developed in the aftermath of the Peshawar tragedy.

But the shape this consensus took — the formation of military courts, the resumption of capital punishment — points to a preference for short-term, populist solutions rather than a desire to address the systemic, societal problems that feed militancy and terrorism.

Moreover, such solutions have given the state, especially the security establishment, sweeping powers that stray perilously close to trampling on basic rights.

Perhaps the root cause of Pakistan's dismal human rights situation is the state's lack of ability to implement existing laws, as well as the failure of the criminal justice system.

The report says that by the end of 2014, there were nearly two million cases pending in the country's courts. This lack of accountability and justice delivery says much about the state's desire to protect the people's rights and bring the usurpers of those rights to justice.

The HRCP document rightly says that the "gap between laws and implementation" is a key reason behind the growth of crime, especially targeting minorities and vulnerable segments of society.

There seems to be complacency prevalent in all sections of the state and society. Yet the protection of fundamental rights is not the job of civil society or activists alone; it should be a matter of concern for every Pakistani.

Unless the state delivers on its responsibilities and the citizens actively remind the rulers of their duties, the weak and the vulnerable will continue to be exploited in Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, April 20th, 2015

Anti-India protest

Stubborn opposition to a sensible idea can often have dangerous consequences and so once again India-held Jammu and Kashmir is suffering because of the actions of India's leaders.

A weekend of violence in Kashmir was presaged by the arrest of Muslim League chairman Masarat Alam Bhat on Friday, an arrest that itself was predictable as Mr Bhat appeared with supporters waving Pakistani flags earlier in the week to welcome the return to the region of another key All Parties Hurriyat Conference leader, Syed Ali Shah Gilani, from New Delhi.

Read: [Kashmiri leader waves Pakistani flag at rally in Srinagar](#)

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However, few doubt the real reason for Mr Bhat's arrest: the BJP government in the Indian capital is unhappy with its partner in government in Kashmir, Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's PDP, because Mr Sayeed has moved to release separatist leaders such as Mr Bhat from detention and taken a softer line than the BJP would like with pro-independence and pro-Pakistan Kashmiri leaders.

First things first however: the detention of Mr Bhat is a brazen violation of the rights of the Kashmiri people.

The rally at which the Pakistani flag was visible was peaceful and Mr Bhat has a right to speak his mind.

Other than the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi feeling embarrassed by the gesture of Mr Bhat's supporters, there was no real cause to rearrest the recently released leader.

Also read: [Indian police arrest Kashmiri leader over protest, raising pro-Pakistan slogans](#)

Beyond that, there is a fundamental problem with Mr Modi's approach to Kashmir. Having won an unprecedented number of seats, though from the Hindu-majority areas of the region, in the recent elections there, Mr Modi and the BJP appear to believe that there are neither any long-standing nor any legitimate and deep grievances in the region.

With the Indian government seemingly convinced that it can contend with armed militancy in the region and with a power-sharing arrangement with the PDP, Mr Modi seems to believe there is no need to reach out to the other strands of the Kashmiri leadership or indeed to Pakistan.

That is as wrong-headed as it is arrogant and ignorant. Kashmir's problems will not go away simply because the Indian government has acquired the draconian tools the government thinks can prevent another armed uprising in the region.

Only engagement will provide a long-term solution, something that the BJP's partner in government in the disputed region appears to understand. Chief Minister Sayeed is on the right track; Prime Minister Modi may find it useful to reconsider his stubborn rejection of dialogue.

Published in Dawn, April 20th, 2015

Tough war against polio

It is unfortunate that the constant two-way traffic between Afghanistan and Pakistan often impedes the efforts of vaccinators in either country just as they embark on a drive to administer anti-polio drops.

This can lead to the further spread of the dangerous virus and has caused serious concern among those who have been tasked with the very difficult and sensitive task of getting the essential polio antidote to the people in the face of a vicious militant propaganda.

Read: [Joint anti-polio campaigns to be proposed to Kabul](#)

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The militants are mindful of the necessity of a simultaneous across-the-border anti-polio drive. They know how great an impact their attempts at denying the vaccine to as many children as possible has been having in promoting their image as the opposite of those responsible for governance.

These militants have frequently used violence to convey their message, and last week they once again succeeded in promoting their oppressive agenda by causing the postponement of a Pak-Afghan meeting on polio.

The militants are eager to perpetuate the impression that if they cannot control an area, they still have the power to scuttle all efforts aimed at improving people's lives.

Also read: [Pak-Afghan polio meeting cancelled over security threats](#)

The postponement of the meeting inevitably leads to the usual summing up of the factors that bind and those which divide the two countries.

Pakistan and Afghanistan are inseparable, and the campaign against the poliovirus has to be jointly carried out in territories under the jurisdiction of either country for it to have an effect.

The anti-polio drive has been an unfortunate victim of militant tactics that involve the crass use of fear. The response on the side of the anti-polio drive has been brave, just as there have been calls for accelerating the search for finding innovative solutions to the issue.

Also read: [Aseefa invites Maryam, Reham to join anti-polio efforts](#)

There have been suggestions of how experts from Pakistan and Afghanistan can come together by video link.

This is a good idea and can be extended beyond holding conferences to maintain permanent connection. Sometimes working quietly, but with a sense of purpose, is the right option.

Published in Dawn, April 20th, 2015

Bangladesh's win

Bangladesh's historic ODI series win over Pakistan on Sunday is a testament to the fact that the former, dubbed as minnows of international cricket until a few years ago, have finally come of age, especially in limited-overs cricket.

Riding on the back of a sensational World Cup campaign last month where they stormed into the quarter-finals by taming England and other competitive outfits, the hosts completely outplayed Pakistan in the two matches played thus far of the three-match contest.

Their performance speaks volumes for their newfound maturity and resilience.

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Read: [Misery for Pakistan as Bangladesh seal historic series win](#)

A closer look at the recent success that Bangladesh has enjoyed in international cricket shows they owe it largely to a revamped coaching staff which now boasts impressive names including two former Sri Lankans Chandika Hathurusinghe and Ruwan Kalpage besides ex-Zimbabwe skipper Heath Streak.

Between the three, they have worked diligently on the techniques and psyche of the Bangladesh players to get the team on an upward curve in the past eight months which is no mean feat at all.

In stark contrast, Pakistan cricket seems to be on a declining curve. The Greenshirts, who struggled to make the World Cup quarter-finals, appeared disjointed and without any steam against a side positioned much below them in the ICC world rankings.

The much-trumpeted appointments of young guns Azhar Ali and Sarfraz Ahmed as captain and vice captain of the team, besides the induction of half a dozen new faces, has not altered the equation much for Pakistan as a one-day side that has lost all its four previous series on the trot.

A team must be very good in at least two of the four areas which count in performance — batting, bowling, fielding and temperament.

Unfortunately, Pakistan has none of the four going for it at the moment and that is a sad reflection on our domestic cricket structure which has failed to produce quality back-ups to

players like Misbah-ul-Haq, Shahid Afridi, Younis Khan and Saeed Ajmal.

Published in Dawn, April 21st, 2015

Karachi's by-election

Rarely has a by-election turned into such a national issue. The contest for NA-246, [the seat vacated by Nabeel Gabol](#), is taking on the contours of a referendum on the dominance that the MQM has traditionally enjoyed in this constituency.

Since 2002 at least, the margins by which the MQM candidate has won in this area had been so large, fluctuating between 30,000 and 100,000 votes, that the party's hold on the seat seemed unchallengeable.

But now, two large parties have portrayed the dominant position of the MQM as some sort of stranglehold that the latter has on the populace, from which the contenders claim they will 'liberate' the people.

Read: [Karachi's NA-246 by-poll: A three-way contest](#)

Not only the strength of the challenge, but the large role that the Rangers will play in making the election happen — smoothly, it is hoped — is adding more fuel to the rhetorical fires.

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With polling agents from multiple parties present in every booth, and Rangers patrolling outside and cameras installed in at least some of the polling booths, the carpet of surveillance and control being laid to monitor this election is beginning to look quite unique.

Through all this, it is crucial that the role of the Rangers remains limited to the maintenance of law and order, to prevent the intimidation of individual voters as well as safeguard the rights of the polling agents and to keep disputes amongst them from taking an untoward turn.

Their role should not grow beyond this and the conduct of the electoral process as well as the monitoring of the behaviour of polling staff must remain within the hands of the Election Commission of Pakistan and the polling agents fielded by all parties in the contest.

Also read: [MQM, PTI & JI get allies in Karachi by-poll at 11th hour](#)

This is particularly crucial since the losing party, whoever it turns out to be, is more likely to cry foul in this contest than in any other by-election since 2013.

The role played by the paramilitary force will need to be seen as completely neutral by all parties to prevent such allegations from taking root, and that will only be possible if the Rangers remain out of the actual voting process altogether.

It is no exaggeration to say that the conduct of this poll could impact all elections that come after it. If the voting goes smoothly, and no party is left with an excuse to hurl

accusations, then the arrangements used to effect such a neutral and unimpeachable outcome could turn into a model for subsequent polls too.

But if allegations of foul play mar this electoral exercise like they have previously in Karachi, then the credibility of the ECP and that of the Rangers will suffer, and that could turn out to be tremendously damaging to the conduct of future polls.

Let us keep it clean please. And may the best man win.

Published in Dawn, April 21st, 2015

Tragedy at sea

To appreciate the gravity of the problem, consider this; the reported deaths of migrants at sea so far this year are 30 times higher than in 2014, itself a record year.

On Sunday, in the worst disaster of its kind, around 700 — some estimates say 900 — such individuals are believed to have drowned when the fishing vessel they were travelling in capsized off the Libyan coast.

Less than 30 survived the tragedy which occurred when a ship arrived on the scene to provide assistance, as instructed by the Italian coastguard which had picked up a distress signal from the migrants' boat.

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Read: [700 feared dead as migrants' boat capsizes off Libya](#)

In their haste to escape the stricken vessel, the passengers reportedly rushed to one side, which caused it to keel over. Last week, a dinghy carrying migrants sank; 41 drowned. On April 12, 400 people perished when their vessel capsized.

Only extreme desperation can drive individuals to take the dire risks inherent in a perilous sea crossing in overloaded boats ill-equipped for such a journey.

The latest exodus of migrants fleeing across the Mediterranean has largely been triggered by the turmoil in Libya, but also includes people from Syria and sub-Saharan countries.

What is desperation for many, however, is for others an opportunity to make a profit. Driven purely by avarice, human smuggling networks treat the individuals who have entrusted themselves to their care — often at the cost of their life savings — as no more than mere cargo.

Read: [Survivors say 400 migrants drowned off Libya](#)

In September 2014, an estimated 500 migrants drowned after traffickers deliberately rammed the boat they were travelling in, in an attempt to force them onto a smaller vessel.

Such callousness has unfortunately been matched — if unwittingly so — by the European Union's new approach in which the Italian-run search-and-rescue operation Mare Nostrum, that reportedly saved 100,000 lives in 2014, was suspended on the grounds that it was encouraging people to undertake the journey.

That logic is flawed, as proved by the sequence of shipwrecks this year.

The West's exploitative policies have contributed much to the mayhem wrought by despots and extremists of various kinds, and which has compelled so many to seek European shores for refuge.

Given this reality, these vulnerable individuals should be not be viewed simply as economic migrants — and thereby at risk of deportation — but as refugees so that the relevant international laws can protect them until they are able to return home in safety. The world cannot turn its back on their plight.

Published in Dawn, April 21st, 2015

China raises the stakes

Now that President Xi Jinping has concluded his visit to Pakistan, leaving behind him much optimism, it is time to reflect on the meaning of the event.

For a country that has been the favourite punching bag of the international community for almost a decade now, a visit from the head of an emerging great power who shared words of warmth and friendship has been a breath of fresh air.

In the days to come, many will hype up the importance of the visit, while others will try to puncture the optimism with their

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cynicism. At this early point, there are two things to note regarding the visit, and the message that President Xi brought with him to Pakistan.

Read: [Pakistan was with us when China stood isolated: Xi Jinping](#)

First, the view that China takes of South Asia was revealed in his speech to parliament. He urged Pakistan to play a more proactive role in bringing about reconciliation between the government and the warring factions in Afghanistan. He also pledged cooperation in the fight against “non-traditional actors”.

And he avoided any mention of Pakistan’s territorial disputes with India, preferring to speak of the latter only as an addition to the economic corridor that he is proposing, which could extend eastward through India to Myanmar and beyond.

In China’s view, peace and stability in South Asia are more important than rivalry and conflict, and President Xi’s speech to parliament made it clear he believes Pakistan holds the key to this.

This is a hopeful sign. In the past, other countries, most notably the United States, have said the same thing, urging Pakistan to renounce support for “non-traditional actors” as an instrument of foreign policy, and to find peaceful ways to address its territorial disputes to the east, as well as its fears of encirclement from the west.

But the US was hobbled by the baggage of the past, having played its part in nurturing these very same “non-traditional

actors” during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, then walking away from the conflict once its own objectives were achieved. It also served as an erratic and somewhat hapless broker in its attempts to nudge India and Pakistan along the path of dialogue.

But China has no such baggage. It commands credibility amongst the leadership as well as the populations of all countries in the region; and now that they are willing to own the same message of peace and stability in South Asia, there is hope that the message might actually find receptive ears.

Needless to say, much depends on whether or not this happens.

The second thing to note is the theme that ran through the speech. Pakistan has been an enduring friend to China, he said.

And in return, China now wishes to include Pakistan in its larger regional plans titled ‘One Belt, One Road’, where Pakistan can serve as a bridge between the New Silk Road for Eurasian connectivity, and a Maritime Silk Road between the ASEAN countries.

If properly executed, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor could prove a transformative vision that can be the driver of Pakistan’s growth rates for decades to come. Again, much depends on whether the opportunity is properly understood.

The invocations of enduring friendship are music to the ears of a country accustomed to being vilified globally for so many years now.

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But it is important to note that President Xi opens almost every speech in every country with similar invocations.

His style of diplomacy is to make everyone he addresses believe they are special. It would be a mistake to understand this to mean that there is no obligation on our part. The 'One Belt, One Road' vision has more than 60 countries participating.

But nothing is assured, nor is Pakistan the only country that can serve as a bridge. To successfully become part of this initiative, Pakistan will have to live up to its side of the bargain, which includes doing its bit to promote stability in the region and creating the right economic environment for the promised investment to operate in.

The words President Xi had for us were heartening but will only be meaningful if we can match them with deeds on our side. That is where the question marks now linger.

Published in Dawn, April 22nd, 2015

Vaccination debacle

After a heated debate in the Balochistan provincial assembly on Saturday over the cause of death in Quetta of five children from Killa Saifullah, an inquiry committee has been constituted.

It can only be hoped that definitive answers are found — and soon — because they will hold crucial implications for the success (or otherwise) of the province (and country) in vaccinating children against the nine preventable childhood diseases that are covered under the government-run Expanded Programme on Immunisation.

The circumstances surrounding the tragedy that befell these five unfortunate children on Friday are as yet murky.

Read: [Anti-measles injections claim lives of five children in Balochistan: parents](#)

The parents of the deceased — all of whom belonged to the same extended family — say that their offspring died as a result of being administered the measles vaccine; the suspicion is that the doses were either of substandard quality or had spoiled as a result of a possible interruption in the cold-chain storage process.

On their part, the health authorities maintain that the children had been weak and dehydrated when they were brought to the Civil Hospital Quetta. They point out that with an anti-measles drive under way in the province, tens of thousands of other youngsters have been administered the same injection

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(including several at the same time as the ones who lost their lives).

The tragedy raises once again the issue of the many serious problems being faced by Pakistan in its efforts to vaccinate its child population. The challenges faced on the polio front are, as is being widely discussed, formidable.

In fact, the escalating gravity of this one disease jeopardising Pakistani children's health has tended to overshadow all the other ills that beset the vaccination sector. From mismanagement to problems of outreach to out-and-out negligence, the charge-sheet is one that is long and troubling.

Consider, for example, a survey jointly carried out over 2013 and 2014 by the World Health Organisation and Unicef of 151 vaccination sites across the country, the results of which were widely publicised earlier this year.

It concluded that major improvements are required in most areas of the vaccine and supply management system, and that the country meets the required standards in just one component: the vaccine/commodity arrival procedures.

Yet even this ray of light tends to dim a bit once it is recalled that Pakistan relies heavily on the support of international forums and organisations to obtain the vaccines that are required.

A similar indictment can be read into the discovery last month that a large consignment of the pentavalent vaccine was discovered to have spoiled because the required temperature

had not been maintained while it was under storage at the National Health Services Ministry.

That consignment had been worth some \$1.3m and could have vaccinated 400,000 infants. When this dismal list is juxtaposed with the slowdown in the rates of routine immunisation at various tiers of society, the picture that emerges is nothing less than forbidding.

It cannot be more obvious that Pakistan needs to urgently reinvent and reorient its child vaccination strategy. But even if the alarm bells have gone off in the relevant administrative quarters, there are few signs that anything other than firefighting is being attempted to combat the challenge.

Published in Dawn, April 22nd, 2015

Yemen: false hope?

There appeared to be a window of opportunity opening up for peaceful resolution of the Yemeni crisis when the Saudi-led coalition announced on Tuesday that it was suspending air strikes on Houthi rebel positions inside Yemen.

Yet just how complicated finding a negotiated path out of this quagmire is going to be was proved when reports surfaced on Wednesday that the Saudis had resumed bombing raids targeting the city of Taiz.

Riyadh's campaign has been ongoing now for close to a month, but as yet it is unclear if anything positive has been achieved to bring Yemen's warring factions — principally forces loyal to the self-exiled president Hadi and the Houthi militia that opposes him — to the negotiating table. If anything, it appears as if all sides have dug in for a long, open-ended battle.

Read: [Saudi-led coalition ends military operation in Yemen](#)

What is clear, though, is that a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Yemen: as per the UN's figures, over 900 people have been killed since the air strikes were launched, while the global body's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says there are currently around 12 million food-insecure people in Yemen, while 150,000 have been internally displaced in the impoverished state.

If the coalition's aim was to cripple the Houthis and pave the way for Mr Hadi's return, that mission has obviously not been accomplished.

In fact, it is highly doubtful if external intervention — whether it is the coalition's support for Mr Hadi or Iran's reported backing of the Houthis — will pacify Yemen. Recent examples abound — Libya, Iraq, Syria — where foreign interventionism has only further destabilised local matters.

Riyadh had done the right thing to call off the strikes, hence the coalition should hold its fire and give diplomacy a chance to succeed.

Things in the region are heating up, with US warships moving into waters off Yemen to reportedly prevent Iranian vessels from reaching the country. In such a scenario, brinkmanship from any quarter could spark an ugly confrontation. Therefore, the factions inside Yemen, as well as their external backers, must eschew further violence and provide the space for a negotiated settlement.

The UN and the OIC — who have been conspicuous by their absence — must do much more to bring the warring sides to the table and help work out a peaceful solution. The Yemeni people must be the ones to decide who should rule them, free from external pressures and an atmosphere of violence and intimidation.

Published in Dawn, April 23rd, 2015

Distressing report card

In the aftermath of the visit by the Chinese president and the optimism generated by the announcement of multiple transport and energy projects getting under way soon, comes a reality check that shows we still are not able to get some basics right. In this context, the Pakistan Education Statistics 2013-2014 report unveils several unsettling facts.

According to the report, the primary school enrolment rate in the country has not seen a significant improvement over the last four years.

Even more alarming, enrolment at high schools has actually declined slightly since 2012-2013, falling from 2,835,326 to 2,318,840 students in 2013-2014.

Read: [New report reveals one-tenth of all children enrolled in madressahs](#)

At the same time, the report found that around 1.8 million children, or one-tenth the number of students enrolled in primary school, are studying at madressahs.

There is much that can be extrapolated from these statistics, although the report itself indicates partly where the problem lies.

For instance, it finds that approximately 35pc of schools do not have facilities for clean drinking water, 31pc are devoid of toilets and 41pc have no electricity.

Such shabby infrastructure/missing facilities at many schools, especially in the government sector, coupled with teacher absenteeism and higher than optimal student-teacher ratios is neither conducive to ensuring a productive pedagogical experience nor to retaining students in the education system.

Pakistan's school dropout rate, often cited as the highest in South Asia, has long been of concern. It is related in large part to poverty; many parents see greater immediate advantage in having their offspring contribute towards the family income rather than persevere with education. Cultural factors also drive girls' dropout rates upwards.

These can be countered by some practical measures; for example, by having smaller catchment areas for girls' high schools as their mobility tends to be more restricted compared to male students.

Nevertheless, most people desire that their children should receive at least some education, but with a large chunk of government schools suffering from the shortcomings outlined above, and many parents being unable to foot the cost of private schools — at least for all the children in a family — the madressah system steps in to fill the gap.

A number of studies indicate that enrolment in madressahs has increased over the years; the provision of free board and lodging offered by large numbers of these institutions enhances their appeal for low-income families.

Although there is many a question mark over the quality of education offered in Pakistan's public-sector schools, a

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seminary education is, by definition, conservative and in many cases, fosters undesirable ideological divisions.

The lack of headway so far in madressah reform makes the issue all the more problematic.

The federal and provincial governments must summon the requisite enthusiasm to address the intensifying education emergency.

Necessary as infrastructural development is, improving school enrolment will have a far more long-term, transformational impact on Pakistan's fortunes.

Published in Dawn, April 23rd, 2015

'Driver-friendly' licences

The hassle of getting the government bureaucracy, in whichever province of the country, to process paperwork has for decades been so great that jokes have grown up around it.

Years ago, citizens breathed a sigh of relief with the setting up of the centralised National Database and Registration Authority, which has over the years established a comprehensive and cross-referenced database against which the records of citizens are readily available.

Computerisation meant that, for example, citizens could henceforth apply for the renewal of the National Identity Card from the area in which they happened to currently live — as opposed to having to return to their area of permanent residence as recorded in government registers.

Read: [Punjab govt to offer 'driver-friendly' licences](#)

Now, the Punjab government has approved a step that will remove one more niggling, though inevitable for many, headache: under the second phase of the Driving Licence Issuance Management System, which has now been given the nod by the finance department, applicants will be able to get all kinds of driving licences (which apply to different categories of vehicles) from any driving licensing authority in the province.

This is significant because, under the old system, there was no provision for people to acquire their driving licence from any place other than their district of permanent residence; and there are a great many Pakistanis who have shifted away from their

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native areas of residence, and who would need to return to have their licences issued or renewed.

This is a praiseworthy step, and deserves to be replicated all over the country.

Other archaic document-issuing systems, particularly those pertaining to passports — which falls under the purview of the Directorate General of Immigration and Passports, Ministry of Interior — need to be similarly brought up to date with current realities, particularly when the technology is there and there are examples to emulate.

Rapid urbanisation, migration and internal displacement are realities in Pakistan; a great number of people move away from their native areas. Issuance of the necessary documents should reflect that.

Published in Dawn, April 23rd, 2015

LNG muddle persists

Importing liquefied natural gas is not rocket science. The technology is very old now and the market for LNG highly developed. India began importing LNG in 2003.

Today, it is the world's fourth largest LNG importer, after Japan, South Korea and China. Japan entered the LNG market as a large player following the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in 2011, and became one of the world's largest importers in a matter of months.

India is moving to diversify its supply contracts away from Qatar towards Australia, Russia and the United States, and has even acquired stakes in a Mozambique LNG project.

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

It is also eyeing new offshore gas discoveries in Africa. Meanwhile, here in Pakistan, the government is still struggling to import subsequent consignments of LNG following the arrival of the [first vessel in late March](#). And the matter is snagging on issues so basic that it is surprising that it was left to the last minute to be sorted out.

The technology to import LNG may be simple, but the policy framework required to manage and transport the fuel to upcountry customers requires a little bit of work.

Third-party access rules need to be worked out for utilisation of the government-owned pipeline infrastructure.

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Read: [Private company blocked from importing 20pc cheaper LNG](#)

Clear terms on how a molecule swap arrangement will function need to be worked out, authorisation from provincial governments to draw pipeline gas out of the system against a swap at the terminal has to be acquired, and most importantly, clarity is urgently wanted on whose responsibility it will be to pay for the imported consignments, or what the mechanism will be for private parties to place contracts in the spot markets.

In short, a large policy framework is necessary to enable the smooth import and transmission of LNG.

It is becoming apparent that none of this work was done in the run-up to the start of commercial operations of the LNG terminal. Disputes continue to swirl around each issue, with the Port Qasim Authority claiming that the channel width and depth is not sufficient to manage the kinds of cargoes that parties are looking to bring into its channels.

Then there are disputes between PSO, SSGC and SNGPL about who will pay for the imports.

Considering the enormous fanfare that the government created around the project, the fact that these disputes show no signs of being resolved even after the terminal has begun commercial operations reflects very poorly on the petroleum ministry and its capacity to execute this scheme.

The disputes are now at risk of growing beyond the control of the government to be able to manage, and if not dealt with expeditiously, could escalate to legal battles.

The policy framework should be finalised at the earliest, and smooth imports should commence on a priority basis to avoid further damage to the government's credibility.

Published in Dawn, April 24th, 2015

Kidnapping at airport

No doubt, many would be justified in describing the situation inside Pakistan as a security nightmare. However, such epithets appear inconsequential to officialdom as demonstrated by the serious security lapse witnessed on Wednesday at the Benazir Bhutto International Airport in Rawalpindi.

As reported, the employee of a money-changing business arrived here from Karachi, carrying with him an amount totalling some Rs70m.

As he exited the arrival lounge, he was set upon by several men, beaten and dragged off to a waiting vehicle, robbed and then abandoned a few kilometres away from the airport.

Read: [Passenger kidnapped at airport, robbed of millions](#)

Colleagues who had been waiting to greet him were left watching helplessly as, in full view of the public and the security apparatus at the airport that also serves the capital city, the man was kidnapped.

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Key installations in the country, including airports, must now constantly maintain readiness to defend against any sort of attack — as the one on [Karachi's Jinnah International Airport last year](#).

Indeed, such a state of preparedness is often proclaimed by those in positions of authority — until they have reason to be embarrassed.

If this is the sort of response — ie none — that can be expected from those guarding the capital's airport, citizens can legitimately raise questions about the performance of all others.

The jeep that was used in the kidnapping had been parked in the drop-lane for over an hour; if it was accosted by security personnel, clearly, the robbers told a convincing tale.

A clue can be found in the fact that two of the kidnappers were dressed in police uniform, while a third posed as being from one of the intelligence agencies. With the airport guarded by personnel from many circles of law-enforcement bodies, from the police to the Airport Security Force to the army, it is almost incredible that a crime as audacious as this could be carried out.

But then, again and again, we are given reason to recognise the lesson: security arrangements are pointless unless they are well-coordinated, well-equipped and response-ready. Will this ever be internalised?

Published in Dawn, April 24th, 2015

Corridor of politics

The government is right to prioritise the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and push ahead with its implementation, but it would be a mistake to minimise the political controversies that are growing around it.

The assemblies of two provinces, KP and Balochistan, have lodged protests about the change in the route as well as the lack of transparency in the projects connected with the corridor project. In response, the prime minister ordered the removal of what the Minister for Planning and Development described as “irritants” in the implementation of the project.

Read: [PM orders removal of irritants from corridor projects](#)

It is not clear what the prime minister meant by ‘remove’, but describing the concerns of the provincial governments as “irritants” is a poor choice of words.

One hopes that it is nothing more than that, because if the government is genuinely dismissive about the politics swirling around the CPEC project, then it would be a mistake.

Also read: [Economic corridor in focus as Pakistan, China sign 51 MoUs](#)

How does the government intend to remove these irritants? Would it be by meeting the aggrieved parties, listening to their views, and engaging with them with a view to ultimately dispelling their suspicions? Would it be by bringing more transparency to the implementation of the CPEC projects, so

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that it becomes clearer what is being implemented where and on what terms?

Or would it be simply by first ignoring these aggrieved voices, followed by vilifying them and terming them Indian agents? Much depends on the approach the government intends to take in response to concerns such as the change of route of the CPEC corridor, or the lack of transparency in the award of contracts and the terms offered to investors.

The tone adopted by Mr Iqbal in his talk with the media on Wednesday did not inspire confidence that the government intends to adopt an attitude befitting a democratic leadership.

Also read: [KP warns of protests if Pak-China corridor route changed](#)

Saying that the country needs to show unity for the successful implementation of the project is one thing, but referring to those protesting the inequitable sharing of the benefits of the project as “Indian agents”, and saying that those raising “provincial concerns” need to be “singled out” has a menacing ring to it that the project could do without.

It is true that the CPEC project will benefit from a show of national unity, as would any other project, but the government should also realise that such unity needs to be earned with political skill, not through remarks bordering on intimidation.

Published in Dawn, April 24th, 2015

Absent lawmakers

The title of chief whip may sound impressive. The term conjures up the image of someone in control, sternly directing a group of charges through an assignment that has to be completed within a stipulated time.

Unlike, of course, Sheikh Aftab Ahmed, the gentleman unfortunately in charge of ensuring attendance by the PML-N members in the National Assembly.

Having been held accountable repeatedly by so many over his party’s ever-playing-truant MNAs, the PML-N’s chief whip surrendered before the deputy last Monday.

Read: [Minister ‘helpless’ to ensure NA attendance](#)

He said he was helpless when it came to bringing the treasury benchers to the house in reasonable numbers and he proposed to the deputy speaker — without his sentiments being reciprocated — that the matter should be taken up with the prime minister.

The latter is another honourable member not particularly known for wasting time in and on parliament.

Let’s be fair to our lawmakers. They need days off and away just as does everyone else. There would be issues close to their heart which they would want to debate passionately in parliament and then there would be matters that they won’t quite fancy.

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But in Pakistan's case, as has been pointed out by repeated calls for attendance by the legislators, it is far more serious than just a matter of a few of them having wandered away at the same time by coincidence.

There seems to be almost an institutionalised effort to set a tradition that encourages members to stay away from the proceedings of the house. The most important issues are settled by the most important people outside parliament. Even in the presence of all kinds of watchdogs who point out which legislator did what and when, the message that comes across is that parliament is a good place in which to while away one's time, so long as no better option is available. That better option could mean anything from a personal engagement to an official meeting which will not be, cannot be, put off simply on the request of a mere chief whip. As always, the top leadership must intervene.

Published in Dawn, April 25th, 2015

PM's Saudi visit

It may have been an exercise in damage limitation, but it will take some time before the success — or failure — of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's trip to Saudi Arabia becomes apparent.

The Saudi regime is notoriously secretive and opaque while the Pakistani leadership often only offers anodyne statements in matters of foreign policy, so it is hardly a surprise that little insight into Thursday's meetings in Riyadh with the apex of the Saudi leadership has been offered by either.

Yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did put out a statement that for the most part reiterated and rehashed the Pakistani position since the parliamentary resolution on the Yemen conflict. There was though one clue offered: "Pakistan and Saudi Arabia agreed to further expand the existing defence, security and intelligence cooperation," the statement read in part. Therein may lie either the seeds of recovery for the bilateral relationship or a crisis further down the road.

Read: [PM Nawaz expresses 'solidarity' with Saudi Arabia over Yemen](#)

As became apparent since the Saudi-led coalition began to attack the Houthis in Yemen in late March, much of the Arab expectations of Pakistan in the Yemen conflict appear to be based on a difference in understanding between what the Saudi leadership comprehended or expected and what the Pakistani leadership asserted.

Clearly delineated, however, deepening the existing defence cooperation — in general terms and not with specific reference to Yemen — with Saudi Arabia could help repair at least some of the damage caused by the Pakistani rejection of Riyadh's demands to participate militarily in the conflict. Saudi Arabia has invested billions of dollars in upgrading its military resources in recent years, but there is a sense that it is still learning about the human aspect of building a formidable war machine.

Pakistani assistance in intelligence, training and military strategy could prove valuable to the Saudi regime in the defence of its own territory against potential enemies, without putting Pakistan's soldiers and military resources in harm's way.

That aside, it is to be hoped that the Pakistani leadership pressed home its own concerns regarding the Saudi Arabian and GCC criticism against Pakistan in recent weeks.

Also read: [UAE minister warns Pakistan of 'heavy price for ambiguous stand' on Yemen](#)

Millions of Pakistanis employed in those countries are uncertain about their economic and employment future because of the unprecedented barrage of criticism directed at Pakistan, and it is incumbent on the leadership here to work to assuage their concerns. While it is necessary to reach out to the foreign leaderships, it is also important to assuage the legitimate concerns of Pakistanis living abroad.

Published in Dawn, April 25th, 2015

A resounding victory for MQM

The voters in NA-246 have spoken, and spoken decisively. As the unofficial numbers began to pour in from the 213 polling stations in the constituency, it soon became clear that the MQM's Kunwar Naveed Jamil would win hands down in what is considered to be his party's bastion. While his victory was expected, the huge margin by which he outpolled his main rivals was not.

According to official results, there were 95,644 votes cast in his favour compared to 24,821 for the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's Imran Ismail and 9,056 for Rashid Naseem, the Jamaat-i-Islami candidate.

Significantly, in this by-election, perceived as perhaps the most free and fair that Karachi has seen in a long time, the MQM's share of valid votes, 74pc, was around the same in NA-246 during the last elections, a figure that was then allegedly boosted by ballot stuffing.

Read: [NA-246: Official results announced, MQM regains seat by huge margin](#)

The PTI's share of the votes polled went up from 17pc in the general election to 19pc this time. The JI's share remained more or less the same.

It was however the turnout — nearly 37pc — that made the biggest statement. By-elections are notorious for low turnouts;

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even in the last by-poll in NA-246 in 2004, less than 25pc of registered voters bothered to stamp the ballot papers.

But that was before the establishment's recent excesses against the MQM — the public humiliation of its cadres, the tell-all eleventh hour 'confessional' by Saulat Mirza, etc — which appear to have only succeeded in polarising the electorate along parochial lines and engendering a siege mentality among MQM supporters. In response, they turned up in droves, on a weekday in hot weather, and voted for the party they perceive is best-placed to protect their interests.

Even in this democratic exercise, the establishment's heavy footprint was discernible everywhere, from the multiple checking of identity cards to even counting the votes at some polling stations. While the enhanced security did ensure a more peaceful and transparent election, it was the duty of the provincial election commission and its appointees to act as referees — the Rangers' overt involvement in the electoral process could set an unwelcome precedent.

Given its travails of late, this is for the MQM a sweet victory indeed — one that, for a change, is not marred by allegations of unfair means.

The party obviously has a substantial vote bank, but it should not see this vindication at the hustings as an excuse to go back to its politics of protest and questionable tactics to either 'control' the city or manipulate political developments on a wider scale.

Meanwhile, it is to the PTI's credit that the issue of poll transparency is getting the attention it merits. The PTI should

now devote its efforts to an issue-based politics rooted in local dynamics rather than one galvanised by negative criticism, street agitation and the 'saviour' rhetoric.

Published in Dawn, April 25th, 2015

America's drone accident

"The death of Mr Weinstein and Mr Lo Porto in a drone strike demonstrates the risk and unintended consequences of the use of this technology that Pakistan has been highlighting for a long time," said the Foreign Office in Islamabad on Friday.

Those less constrained by convention have been more direct in pointing out just how long it has taken the United States to see a simple fact.

Aid workers Warren Weinstein of the United States and Italian national Giovanni Lo Potro were killed accidentally in January while they were being held captive by militants.

Read: [Obama apologises for hostage deaths in Pak-Afghan border strike](#)

This led to an admission by President Barack Obama on Thursday that discretion had not been exercised by those who oversaw the drone attack. Quite unavoidably, the revelation was followed by protesting voices seeking to remind the US of the innocent victims of its drone-driven war strategy, and

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blaming the Americans for maintaining double standards: in a nutshell, the US may have come clean on the deaths of the two aid workers, but it has maintained a deafening silence on the euphemistically put ‘collateral damage’ that has included people belonging to ‘lesser’ countries.

Also read: [Hostages’ death in drone attack shocking: FO](#)

Pakistan’s own offensive against the drone strikes could have been more persistent and stronger. Apart from the state, on the popular level, thanks to the dearth of information regarding casualties from the tribal areas where drone strikes were carried out, many in Pakistan did appear to look upon drones as an efficient deterrent against militancy.

If this was an extension of the American silence over the issue, Pakistan is now offering a contrasting response to the American regret over the accidental killing of the two Westerners. It is not at all an inappropriate or inadequate response.

As it expressed solidarity with the families of Weinstein and Lo Potro, Islamabad acted like someone who knew how it felt to lose precious citizens because of a ‘technical fault’ and because of a world power’s disregard for life and for the general rules of combat. It is a terrible feeling.

Published in Dawn, April 26th, 2015

Another voice silenced

The assassination of Sabeen Mahmud, director of T2F, a self-described community space for open dialogue in Karachi, is a desperate, tragic confirmation that Pakistan’s long slide towards intolerance and violence is continuing, and even quickening.

Profoundly troubling too are the circumstances surrounding Ms Mahmud’s murder.

Read: [T2F hosts the Balochistan discussion that others shy away from](#)

On Friday, T2F hosted the Baloch missing-persons activist Mama Qadeer, after the Lahore University of Management Sciences cancelled an event with Mr Qadeer earlier this month under pressure from the intelligence agencies.

Mr Qadeer’s activism has been consistently opposed by the security establishment, to the point where few in the media or the activist community choose to interact with him now. Those who do engage with him often report threats.

Also read: [Outcry on social media as LUMS cancels talk featuring Mama Qadeer](#)

But clearly, in the tumultuous city of Karachi and given the variety of causes Ms Mahmud championed, the security agencies are not the only ones perceived as suspects in her assassination. Ms Mahmud’s work had attracted criticism and threats in the past, particularly from sections of the religious

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right, which viewed her promotion of the arts, music and culture with great hostility.

While only a thorough investigation can get to the root of the matter, what is clear is that there is not so much a war between ideas in Pakistan as a war on ideas. Free speech, robust debate, academic inquiry, the promotion of individual rights — anything that promotes a healthy, inclusive and vibrant society is seemingly under attack.

Also read: [Director T2F Sabeen Mahmud shot dead in Karachi](#)

Before Sabeen Mahmud there was Rashid Rehman, the lawyer and rights activist who was murdered for defending a college lecturer accused of blasphemy.

Before Rashid Rehman there was Perween Rahman, director of the Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute, murdered in Karachi apparently for her work on behalf of poor people against the city's land mafia.

Before Perween Rehman there was Malala Yousafzai, shot in the head as a young teenager by the Taliban for championing the cause of female education. Before Malala, there were Shahbaz Bhatti and Salmaan Taseer, murdered for daring to question the misuse of the blasphemy laws.

Each one of those victims may have been attacked for different reasons and by different groups, but all of them have one thing in common: they were fighting for a better, kinder, gentler Pakistan. And all of them used words and ideas, never weapons, to champion their causes.

Pakistan is a poorer place for being without them — and in Malala's case, for her being unable to return home.

Tragically, the state seems to have all but surrendered to the forces of darkness — that is when sections of the state themselves are not seen as complicit.

Dialogue, ideas, debate, nothing practised and promoted peacefully is safe anymore. Instead, it is those with weapons and hateful ideologies who seem to be the safest now. Sabeen Mahmud is dead because she chose the right side in the wrong times.

Published in Dawn, April 26th, 2015

Shafqat Hussain's case

In the aftermath of the APS Peshawar carnage, concern has rightly been raised about the state's all too eager use of the death penalty.

Since December 2014, around 100 executions have taken place in this country. While the lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty was originally justified to tackle cases of terrorism, now convicts are being executed for all capital offences.

And perhaps one of the most controversial cases in which the death sentence has been passed is that of Shafqat Hussain.

Read: [Shafqat Hussain to be executed on May 6](#)

On Friday, an antiterrorism court in Karachi issued a black warrant for Hussain's execution on May 6 for the killing of a minor boy in 2004. His execution had earlier been stayed to determine the convict's age at the time the crime was committed.

There are clearly far too many doubts in this case that make us question the use of capital punishment — while this newspaper opposes the death penalty under all circumstances. For one thing, human rights groups say the convict was a minor when he allegedly committed the crime. Secondly, Shafqat Hussain has said his confession — apparently the only 'evidence' in the case — was obtained through torture.

There are also procedural questions about the case; in light of all these lingering concerns, the argument that the convict should be given the benefit of the doubt and should not be hanged is strengthened.

Also read: [FIA inquiry concludes Shafqat 'wasn't a minor'](#)

As we cross the grim 100-executions mark, we must ask the state: is Pakistan a safer place now that capital punishment has been resumed? The answer would hardly be in the affirmative. Along with the death penalty's questionable efficacy in deterring crime and terrorism, we must realise that our criminal justice system is broken, which means there are far too many gaping holes in it to allow the state to take an individual's life. In such a system, which can be easily manipulated and where justice is both delayed and denied, can executions ever be justified? And while the investigation and prosecution of cases

in the civilian justice system is poor, the military courts are opaque and not open for scrutiny. With reportedly the largest death-row population in the world, Pakistan must rethink its approach to criminal justice. While criminals and terrorists must by all means be punished and justice must be served, executions are hardly the ideal method of dispensing it, especially in a system as flawed as ours.

Published in Dawn, April 26th, 2015

Cantonment elections

AFTER a lengthy gap of 17 years, local government elections were held in 42 of the country's 43 cantonment areas on Saturday.

Countrywide the process was mostly smooth, though there were reports of low turnout in some areas. While official results are due on Tuesday, as per unofficial tallies candidates allied to the PML-N prevailed in Punjab, whereas those backed by the PTI appeared to lead in KP constituencies. In Sindh, the MQM looked to be in the lead and in Balochistan, independent candidates reportedly bagged the majority of seats.

These results seem to mirror the outcome of the 2013 general elections.

Take a look: [Local govt polls conclude in cantonments, PML-N in the lead](#)]

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Let us hope this becomes a standard exercise and residents of cantonment areas don't have to wait another 17 years to elect their representatives.

There are a number of civilians who reside in cantonments across Pakistan, and like their counterparts in civilian-run areas they also face a variety of civic issues.

Hence, it is important that civilians living in military-administered areas have a voice so that they can raise these issues.

As far as the composition of the cantonment boards is concerned, half of the members are elected civilians, while the other half consists of nominated members, who can be either civilians or military men.

The station commander is president of the body and enjoys veto power. We hope that the elected civilians have an actual say in the way cantonment boards are run and are not treated as mere token members.

As we have said before, the nature of garrison areas has changed and many of them are now very much part of the urban environment, with large civilian populations, hence the input of civilians in their administration is as important as of those in uniform.

With the holding of the cantonment polls, all eyes will now naturally be on the provinces and Islamabad to see if they can follow through on promises to hold local government elections.

The provincial governments — apart from Balochistan, which has already held the polls — have dithered considerably on conducting this exercise, and were it not for the Supreme Court's constant pressure in this matter, there would perhaps be no momentum whatsoever where holding of the polls is concerned.

The apex court has given Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa till September to hold the polls. The negative consequences of not holding regular LG polls have been enumerated countless times.

Hence it is hoped that the elections are held smoothly in the remaining three provinces and Islamabad on a party basis without delay and that this essential democratic exercise becomes a routine matter and is no longer considered a novelty.

Published in Dawn, April 27th, 2015

Next NFC award

AFTER some delays, the ninth NFC commission has finally been constituted to decide the eighth NFC award, and will be holding its first meeting within days.

At the outset, it is important to underline that the process of devolving federal resources, as well as responsibilities, down to the provinces ought to be continued.

The last NFC award made history by devolving the majority of resources from the federal divisible pool to the provinces, whose share increased from 47.5pc to 57.5pc of the total divisible pool resources. In return, the provinces were required to increase their own revenue generation effort, as well as accept greater responsibilities of governance under the 18th Amendment.

This was a historic step which sought to correct an imbalance in our federation that had been there since the very beginning. But right from the outset, the new finance minister began blaming the award for the large fiscal deficit that the federal government began to run, and which grew to more than 8pc of GDP by the end of the last government's term in 2013.

Take a look: [Sound bytes: 'Centre is incapable of looking beyond Punjab'](#)

Meanwhile, the provinces were criticised for not living up to their commitment to ramp up their own revenue effort.

None of these developments should be used as an excuse to roll back the allocations made to the provinces. A strong federation stands on strong provincial governments. Rather, the commission should revisit the weights assigned to the various criteria used to calculate provincial shares with a view to incentivising the provinces towards ramping up their revenue generation effort, while at the same time doing more to urge the federal government to cut expenses by devolving those ministries it has no business to hold on to any longer following the 18th Amendment.

Therefore, the weight assigned to the provincial revenue effort in the seventh award can be increased, which would incentivise provinces to raise more funds themselves to increase their shares from the federal divisible pool.

Likewise, the weight assigned to population should be reduced further still, especially since the population data is now woefully outdated in the absence of a new census.

The commission also has an opportunity to address other issues, such as duplication of taxes on services, and this opportunity ought to be taken advantage of.

The negotiations under the new NFC commission present the government with an excellent opportunity to address concerns that Punjab is being favoured in policymaking at the federal level, and that opportunity too should not be wasted.

Published in Dawn, April 27th, 2015

Uncontrolled piracy

IT is commendable that as a way of marking World Intellectual Property Day on Friday, Karachi's National Academy of the Performing Arts arranged for industry professionals to come together in a panel discussion on music piracy in Pakistan.

The issue has been raised many times by musicians, vocalists and all others who work in the industry. As the moderator of the discussion pointed out, the piracy levels of music are as high as 90pc in Pakistan, with hardly a legal impediment placed in the path of the pirates.

To those that produce the music, this means that once their work is in the public domain, they can expect to earn hardly anything at all in royalties — which in other countries usually constitutes the bread and butter of those producing the creative content.

Also read: [‘Get up, stand up... for music’](#)

In addition, as a representative of the recording label EMI pointed out at Friday's event, radio stations and television channels tend not to pay for the music they use; here, too, it seems that those that produce the creative content are not shown the courtesy of being paid for their efforts.

The result is that music-makers are increasingly turning to markets in other countries for release, where the laws are better and enforcement stricter. Pakistan's inefficiency is costing it an industry — and the revenue that would bring — that could be flourishing.

While this is an area that the country needs to work upon, it should be noted that the problems of piracy and the reluctance to pay artists royalties by even media houses is not restricted to the field of music. Private television production houses, for example, have for years suffered in the same way, at the cost of their own and their employees' economic interests.

Media houses, for their part, complain legitimately about the unauthorised recording and pirating of their broadcasts. With all these industries capable of growing further and accumulating more cultural capital, it is time the laws and their enforcement were tightened considerably.

Published in Dawn, April 27th, 2015

PPP: a jaded appearance

AT least for some time to come, the media will, out of habit if nothing else, continue to look for the PPP angle in every political activity in the country.

Such has been the presence of the party that many are still hesitant to write it off even in parts of Pakistan where it has done little of notice over the last few years.

The angle is very much there in the reporting of the recent cantonment board elections across the country — and the verdict is out: the PPP has failed to show any signs of revival. Indeed, these local-level polls underline, yet again, its

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transformation from the role of a main contender to one that is mentioned as that of an also-ran. So much so that a PPP politician in Lahore reportedly said the party didn't have candidates to field on every seat to the two local cantonment boards and some had to be paid to avoid a more conspicuous party no-show.

Also read: [Lyari was and remains a PPP stronghold, says Zardari](#)

Needless to say, those who financed these 'candidates' would have been much better off using the money for grass-roots reorganisation as part of an effort to reclaim traditional PPP territory that has been usurped by the PTI to oppose the PML-N.

The PTI's claim that it has emerged as a party challenging the PML-N in large areas of the country, especially in Punjab, is supported by figures as seen in the cantonment poll results. This has been at the cost of a fading PPP that can no longer boast a nationwide presence and appears too constrained to do anything about raising the profile of its government in Sindh.

PPP insiders asked to comment on the dismal trends of the party in the cantonment polls are slaves to their own habits. They will, for any length of time, continue to argue about their leaderless existence.

The more optimistic among them — a breed which is becoming rarer with time — promise a turnaround with Bilawal Bhutto Zardari at the helm.

Asif Ali Zardari, the self-appointed caretaker of the PPP, until the time the young heirs are there to take the reins, talked of the need for a leadership as he addressed a revive-PPP public meeting in Lyari.

However, those who still think that the PPP may have a role in the country's right-inclined politics may find reason to criticise Mr Zardari's single-line formula for a change in his party's fortunes.

He wants youth in the party and experience in the government — the latter in the person of Mr Zardari himself and Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah. It could actually be the other way round.

There has to be an element of freshness, of youth and well-meaning adventurism displayed in the running of the government in Sindh to rejuvenate the party cadres. Sindh is all the PPP has to create a party on.

Published in Dawn, April 28th, 2015

Weather chaos in KP

IT was nature's fury compounded by long-standing human apathy. The trail of destruction wreaked by a mini-cyclone, described by the Met office as the third worst in Pakistan's history, killed over 40 people and left more than 200 injured across Peshawar, Mardan and Nowshera districts on Sunday.

Most of the death and injuries were caused by mud brick homes collapsing, their fragile infrastructure unable to bear the brunt of the high-velocity winds and torrential rain.

In scenes of utter chaos exacerbated by a power blackout, with downed billboards, and uprooted electricity poles and trees blocking the roads, rescue operations were hampered and medical assistance to victims delayed.

Standing wheat crop ready for harvesting in the affected districts has reportedly been destroyed. With more rains forecast, the people's miseries may not yet be over.

No one can argue that 'freak' weather phenomena are a challenge to manage. However, for a country that has suffered through five floods in five consecutive years, we are no longer strangers to extreme weather and there have been more than enough such calamities for relevant bodies to get their act together.

Why then is there still no early warning system in place that should have given people in the path of the cyclone adequate time to take precautionary measures, and for the state to extend its assistance to them in doing so?

While it is important to repair infrastructure and pay compensation post-disaster, it is extremely short-sighted not to invest in technologically advanced systems that could mitigate the loss of life and property.

Moreover, in what has become a depressingly familiar pattern, lack of coordination by the provincial disaster management authority, district administrations and municipal bodies — in the immediate aftermath of the storm and the following day — managed to propel what was an emergency into a full-blown catastrophe.

Even the day after the storm, mayhem reigned on the flooded streets with traffic policemen making feeble attempts in some locations to open blocked drains while the municipal authorities were nowhere to be seen.

In that respect, Peshawar's Lady Reading Hospital has at least absorbed some of the lessons afforded by virtue of it being the principal medical facility in an area that unfortunately has repeatedly been the target of large-scale terrorist attacks.

While the overall quality of care could be better, the initial response procedures are much improved, and were adequate this time as well.

Published in Dawn, April 28th, 2015

Increase in pension

MUCH to the relief of pensioners, the government has announced an increase of 46pc in their monthly payments through the Employees Old-Age Benefit Institute. The increase will take effect immediately.

The last time pensions for retirees of private-sector organisations were raised was in 2012 — by a nominal 24pc. Since then, subsequent governments have promised a raise in their budget announcements but failed to deliver.

Even this time, the increase was announced in the last budget but it took the government almost 10 months to deliver.

Take a look: [EOBI raises minimum pension to Rs5,250](#)

Delays notwithstanding, the step is good news for a segment of the population whose lifelong contribution to the country tends to be largely forgotten by policymakers. It should be followed up by another pledge of further increase in the forthcoming budget.

The announcement was accompanied by a promise to make public a study on how the EOBI can be strengthened. This is also good news considering that the organisation has just emerged from the shadow of a damaging scandal.

There are a few other steps that also need to be taken for the benefit of retirees. One is to find a way to limit the participation of large institutional investors in national savings schemes, a preferred destination for the life savings of senior

citizens who are desperate for a healthy and stable return to be able to meet their expenses in their twilight years.

Large investors bring some benefit to the NSS, but they also make the returns subject to market volatility.

Currently, senior citizens do enjoy some immunity from the declining interest rates in the country, but new arrivals into the scheme are finding it hard to avail themselves of this stability.

Second, there should be the option of transferring payouts under NSS and the EOBI electronically into people's bank accounts, rather than making pensioners collect their cheques from the nearest office.

With all the pressing priorities that weigh down our policymakers, it is important that senior citizens and retirees are not forgotten.

Published in Dawn, April 28th, 2015

Concrete evidence?

IT is a peculiar situation the judicial commission led by the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan has found itself in.

Faced with political parties who have alleged systematic fraud in the May 2013 general election but have been unable to provide the evidence to back up their claims, the inquiry commission headed by Chief Justice Nasirul Mulk has drawn up a list of three questions for those alleging fraud in May 2013 to answer.

Taken together, the three questions — effectively trying to find out answers to how, who and where — amount to attempting to get the political parties alleging fraud to focus their claims in front of the tribunal. Surprisingly — or perhaps not surprisingly to some — the PTI has been the arch culprit in supplying a confused and confusing set of documents to the commission that do little other than rehash generic claims and allegations made at media conferences and political rallies.

Take a look: [Judicial commission posits three questions to political parties](#)

But it is not just the PTI at fault. Nearly every mainstream political party, including the PPP, ANP, JI, JUI-F and PML-Q, have in various degrees argued since May 2013 that seats were stolen from them in May 2013.

Now that the time has come to present the facts to back up their claims, the parties seem unable or unwilling to provide the evidence to the inquiry commission.

Perhaps now that the commission itself has tried to provide focus to what the political parties are to present, the parties before the commission will comply.

Even the strongest defenders of the May 2013 election have never claimed that it was entirely free of manipulation and fraud.

At best, it was a progressively more credible and acceptable election that reflected the overall will of the electorate. That though should not be where the bar remains for the next general election — it must be raised if the legitimacy and strength of the democratic system is to be improved.

The work of the judicial inquiry commission, if aided by the political parties, could go a significant way towards improving the electoral system. Surely, the PTI's goal must extend beyond simply knocking out the PML-N government in Islamabad.

A cleaner, more transparent and fair electoral process is in the PTI's interests, especially since the party is yet to construct the extensive electoral and patronage machine of other parties. If the PTI presents to the commission the evidence that the party has long claimed it possesses, the commission will surely act on it.

Published in Dawn, April 29th, 2015

Devastation in Nepal

SATURDAY'S massive earthquake has left the Himalayan nation of Nepal in total disarray. While the quake has claimed a large number of lives, the situation is grim for those who survived.

According to the UN, around eight million people have been affected. At the time of writing, the death toll had crossed 5,000, though the Nepalese prime minister was quoted as saying it could climb to 10,000.

Many thousands have been injured in the disaster while Unicef says up to a million children need urgent help. Many survivors have been camping under the open skies while there is fear of an outbreak of disease.

Take a look: [People flee Kathmandu as toll passes 4,300](#)

The government has appealed for supplies of food and clean water. Several aftershocks have further complicated relief and rescue efforts in what has been described as Nepal's worst earthquake in eight decades.

While the Nepalese government has been clearly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the disaster, help has been arriving from the mountainous nation's neighbours, as well as from across the world.

India and China, which share borders with Nepal, have led the effort, flying in personnel and supplies to help the quake-stricken nation. Pakistan has also sent help, including an army-

run mobile hospital, search and rescue teams as well as essential supplies.

Among the problems hampering the rescue effort is congestion at Kathmandu's only airport; due to this some flights carrying aid have had to be turned away.

We hope Pakistan will continue to help Nepal and its people with relief and rescue efforts, as the armed forces here have particular experience in managing relief operations in the aftermath of natural disasters.

The memories of the 2005 earthquake that mainly affected the Kashmir region killing thousands are still fresh. In that situation also, remote communities in mountainous, hard-to-access localities had been affected by the temblor.

Therefore perhaps Pakistani experts can help advise the Nepalese authorities on how best to move forward with the rescue effort.

On the whole, it is hoped that the world community is able to better coordinate efforts to reduce the sufferings of the quake survivors and get help to those who need it urgently.

The earthquake also highlights the need for Saarc countries to improve coordination on disaster management efforts. Many Saarc states share boundaries and have suffered from similar natural disasters in the past — earthquakes, floods etc.

After so many years as a regional association it is a pity that these countries have yet to combine their experiences and knowledge on disaster management. By sharing best practices

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in this 'soft' policy area, many lives can be saved in the region and the effects of disasters mitigated to a considerable degree.

The leaderships of Saarc states must seriously consider how they can combine forces to help create a regional humanitarian response mechanism in the event of natural disasters.

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Brokerage house defaults

AT least one brokerage house is at the centre of a growing storm of controversy because its owners have reportedly decamped with their investors' funds after making a few bad bets.

ACE Securities owners, according to news reports, have fled the country with Rs350m of the clients' funds which were entrusted to them for investing purposes, but were diverted to the owners' bank accounts instead.

A crowd of nervous investors gathered outside the head office of the brokerage in Karachi, and for a number of days some of them have been making contact with the media to draw attention to the issue. Then on Monday, the regulator finally moved and suspended operations of all trading terminals belonging to the brokerage.

Take a look: [Investors' run on ACE Securities](#)

It is wholly regrettable that the regulator took this long to take action. Reports of problems at the brokerage were doing the rounds since last week.

Now that the owners of the brokerage are reportedly no longer in the country, and not responding to the regulator's notices, it might seem a little late in the day to be taking action. The matter has dented the regulators' credibility and can cause a significant dip in confidence amongst small investors.

The Karachi Stock Exchange management, as well as the Securities and Exchange Commission, should now clarify urgently whose responsibility it will be to ensure that the small investors get their money back.

Additionally, both the frontline and apex regulator should release a timeline detailing exactly when they became aware of problems at ACE Securities, and what course of action was taken subsequently.

The investing public needs to be reassured that their funds will be safe in the hands of registered brokers, and that regulators will exercise vigilance with due care. At this point, there is no assurance that either of these conditions prevail in our stock market.

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A time for answers

THERE is of course no doubt that activist Sabeen Mahmud's murder last week in Karachi dealt a grievous blow to the already shrinking space for debate, discussion and progressive ideas in this country.

But from the impassioned response to her death, even from those who didn't know her personally, it is also clear that the values she espoused meant a great deal to a great many people.

Take a look: [Silencing dissent in Pakistan](#)

With the demand to see her killers caught and punished becoming a rallying cry, the finger of blame is increasingly being pointed towards the security agencies.

However, in the interest of rational discourse — unpopular at a time of heightened emotion — it bears reiteration that Ms Mahmud's work encompassed many diverse areas, and frequently ran afoul of some of the many groups with dubious hyper-nationalist, extremist agendas that operate in Karachi.

Some of them are known to have levelled serious, unambiguous threats against her in the past. Moreover, this chaotic city, with its untrammelled growth, lies at the confluence of many competing regional interests, all of which makes her murder far from a cut and dried case.

At the same time, the suspicions being voiced about the involvement of the security agencies hardly spring from a vacuum.

They lie on a continuum of events over the years which illustrate the establishment's apparent conviction that it is above the law and owes no answers to the public, however egregious the crimes attributed to it.

Whether it is cases of enforced disappearances in KP and Balochistan or the murder of individuals like Saleem Shahzad, no satisfactory responses have so far been forthcoming.

Judicial commissions looking into crimes where the establishment's hand is alleged, peter out inconclusively, making them appear — understandably — an exercise in futility undertaken only for the sake of form.

If this time around the security agencies are indeed, as they claim, not complicit, the only logical response would be for them to assist the police to the fullest extent of their resources to unmask the killers, and their handlers.

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An opportunity for South Asia

THE geopolitics of western South Asia — Afghanistan, Pakistan, India — is mostly a case of politics undermining geography.

The staggering potential trade and economic linkages among one and a half billion people in the three countries is seemingly forever thwarted by the inability of the political and security establishments of the three countries to come together and find mutually beneficial solutions.

This week those contradictions and complications have once again been apparent. With Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in India on a three-day visit in search of boosting trade and Indian investments in Afghanistan, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif offered his most downbeat assessment of the state of India-Pakistan relations yet.

Also read: [No sign of India resuming dialogue with Pakistan: PM Nawaz Sharif](#)

In an interview with the Saudi Gazette, Mr Sharif not only suggested that the Indian government has not reciprocated his desire for improving relations, but that there is “no sign of India desiring resumption of dialogue with us”.

The Pakistani prime minister is correct: the Indian government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has baulked at every opportunity to engage Pakistan, preferring instead to pander to

domestic politics, whether it be in India-held Jammu and Kashmir or about using even legitimate concerns vis-à-vis terrorism as a cover to appear tough on Pakistan.

Surely, the one lesson that has been evident in decades of on-again, off-again India-Pakistan relations is: dialogue is the only option.

Both sides have legitimate concerns about and demands of the other and not talking will not make those issues go away.

In fact, not having a dialogue only strengthens the hand of the hawks in both countries, increasing the risk of conflict.

Yet, for all of India’s reluctance to engage Pakistan, it is also true that Mr Sharif has done little to try and break the impasse.

Hesitation at home, perhaps because of the army-led security establishment’s unwillingness to engage India at the moment, translates into weakness abroad. Where once the prime minister envisaged the Lahore Declaration, it now appears that pro-activeness and determination are missing.

Perhaps the key for now is to prevent a fresh scramble for influence in Afghanistan by Pakistan and India from breaking out.

Afghanistan needs economic assistance, trade and investment and what strengthens Afghanistan in those areas should be welcomed by Pakistan, rather than stoking old fears of encirclement by the India-Iran-Afghanistan nexus.

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President Ghani has rightly reached out to Pakistan and has every right to further his country's interests by boosting trade and investment ties with India.

Security and the economy are not just interlinked inside Afghanistan, but in the latter's relations with India and Pakistan too. Pakistan can help on the security front in return for its own security interests vis-à-vis India not being compromised, while Indian investments in Afghanistan can bring the kind of economic stability inside the latter that could help improve internal security.

It could be a win-win-win scenario — if the leaderships of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India choose to do the right things.

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Saudi reshuffle

AS the developments coming out of Riyadh on Wednesday illustrated, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is experiencing a period of great political change.

While the reshuffle in government posts can be considered merely an internal Saudi matter, in truth the changes have far greater implications, with long-term consequences, for the way Riyadh conducts its foreign policy and domestic affairs. It reflects a mix of internal politics within the House of Saud, as well as the realisation that shifting regional and global realities require the kingdom to adjust its course accordingly.

Also read: [Saudi king names new heir to throne in govt shakeup](#)

King Salman — months after taking over following the previous monarch Abdullah's death in January — has named his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef as crown prince, replacing his half-brother Muqrin.

The king has also named his son Mohammed as second in line to the throne.

Moreover, Prince Saud, son of assassinated monarch Faisal, has been replaced as foreign minister by the current Saudi ambassador to Washington. Prince Saud had occupied the post since 1975, while this will be the first time a non-royal will head the sensitive foreign ministry.

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As in any system, the moves can be interpreted as a new ruler's attempts to consolidate power and place 'his men' in all key positions.

Yet beyond mere consolidation of power, King Salman's moves illustrate the first concrete example of the much talked-about generational shift within the House of Saud.

The king is nearly 80 and by naming his nephew as crown prince, the way has been cleared for the grandsons of Abdul Aziz bin Saud — the kingdom's founder — to one day occupy the Saudi throne.

Up till now only the sons of Abdul Aziz have ruled the kingdom. Secondly, the move shows that the architects of the Yemeni campaign — the new heir as well as the deputy crown prince — have been made critical players in Saudi politics. The kingdom's campaign targeting Yemen's Houthis has displayed an uncharacteristically muscular Saudi foreign policy, perhaps serving as a harbinger of the way Riyadh will conduct its external affairs from now on. These are turbulent times for Saudi Arabia and the entire Middle East, with the region made increasingly unstable by wars and the rise of Islamist militant movements, especially the self-styled Islamic State. Hence navigating these currents for Saudi Arabia will be a considerable challenge, one that the new generation of princes that has just been empowered will have to deal with head-on.

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