

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of December 2017

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PPP at 50

FIFTY years appear to be a very long period in the case of the Pakistan Peoples Party that was born on Nov 30, 1967. Think of an upheaval and the PPP has experienced it.

Jail, execution, splits, forced exit, triumphant return, compromises, intrigue, conspiracy, assassination, feuds, relentless persecution, betrayal — the PPP has been through it all. No other political entity in Pakistan draws reactions as extreme as this party has done over the decades.

The 1970 election which saw the party as the biggest force in the then western wing of Pakistan had been a momentous occasion in the country's history; the people had finally spoken out. This was the foundation of the country's democratic edifice which has been under constant threat.

Back in the 1970s, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his PPP were a part of the emerging setup which couldn't prevent the breakup of Pakistan. Later, the central authority in Bhutto's truncated Pakistan faced a series of hostile situations before he was overthrown by an opportunistic general in 1977.

The PPP founder's judicial murder two years later heralded a grave chapter in the party's history. The shaheeds have been synonymous with the PPP since then. So have accidental leaders and the altogether new organisations they have had to create to suit their command — Benazir Bhutto's PPP, Asif Ali Zardari's PPP, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's would-be PPP.

The PPP as a popular party has been consistently in the thick of things, in Sindh, in Islamabad, and elsewhere in Pakistan. Its role in the opposition at the federal level easily eclipses its two stints in power in Islamabad under Benazir Bhutto.

The latest chapter in the PPP's history has been defined as by far the most disappointing. It began with the killing of Benazir Bhutto 10 years ago, just when so many believed that Bhutto's mature daughter was now best equipped to lead the party and country towards a solid democratic order.

The current leader's unabashed courting of the establishment indicates just how far the PPP enterprise has moved away from its ideals in its search for relevance.

But this doesn't mean that Mr Zardari is the first person to tamper with the PPP ideology, or whatever remains of it, to stay in the run. The 'anticipatory' steps taken by his predecessors were no less traumatic.

However, the diehard jiyalas feel that they are not to be written off as yet — many continue to dwell on the days of glory and speak of the time when the new party had eliminated a degenerate system and its selfish protagonists in the 1970 election.

A national-level revival of the PPP to counter the burgeoning centre-right camp is still widely considered to be one of the most viable options, if not the only one. While it may not be the most flattering option to have been considered, it is still a compliment the PPP is badly in need of.

Power surplus

IT is heartening to hear the prime minister inform the country that Pakistan is now surplus in power-generation capacity. The only task left to carry out now, it would appear, is to find a way to end the load-shedding that persists despite this surplus of power. It is worth remembering that when the power crisis was first seen in its full dimensions, roughly in the years after 2006 when the first accumulation of the circular debt made its appearance on the balance sheets of listed independent power producers, there was also a surplus in power-generation capacity. In the years that followed, as load-shedding spread across the country prompting power riots in many cities, much of the generation capacity was sitting idle for want of payments. Even back then, the crisis was not caused by a lack of power supply as much as by the inability to pay for the generation capacity in the system due to a paucity of fiscal resources. Those years are now behind us partially due to a reduction in oil prices and a rollback of the subsidies that had been hampering government finances. Having passed the higher costs on to the consumer, the government managed to lighten its load somewhat. A marginal improvement in billing and recoveries was seen from 2014 onward, but

much of this also owed itself to the new policy of recovery-based load-shedding, not so much to the reform of the billing and recovery machinery of the distribution companies.

Today, one more time we can claim that we are in surplus, yet load-shedding in some parts persists. The question remains the same: can we afford to run the system at full capacity? The enhanced megawatts added to the system are real, but we will know whether they will solve our power crisis once they are activated in earnest and the full costs of the generation start to come in. This will happen as the summer months approach, or perhaps the winter months will present their own challenge since hydel generation usually plummets at this time of the year and the entire power needs of the country are met through thermal generation. The government has indeed executed its projects with vigour and succeeded in diversifying the fuel mix away from expensive furnace oil. But whether this is enough to overcome the persistent power crisis that began in 2006 remains to be seen.

Musharraf's balderdash

IS it shocking or the new normal? Former military dictator and army chief Gen Pervez Musharraf has expressed his admiration and support for Hafiz Saeed and the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Unprovoked, seemingly for no reason other than his need to make headlines with increasingly outrageous statements and with no regard for Pakistan's delicate international position, Mr Musharraf has once spewed out fantastical nonsense.

What is more than puzzling is that when Mr Musharraf was army chief and had installed himself as a military dictator, it was his regime that took significant steps to restrain militancy. Indeed, it was on the former dictator's orders that many militants groups were outlawed and at least nominal clampdowns enforced.

Quite why Mr Musharraf has felt the need to traverse the ground between an advocate of a moderate Pakistan to now saying virtually anything that appears to pop in his mind or interviewers goad him into saying is not clear.

What is clear is that his former institution or whoever is able to counsel restraint needs to urgently speak to Mr Musharraf and put an end to his unpredictable outbursts.

Perhaps Mr Musharraf also needs to be reminded of the destructiveness of his regime. After nearly a decade in charge, militants were rampant, the economy had tanked and society was under the influence of growing extremism.

If there is a singular justification for why modern Pakistan needs democracy not dictatorship, Mr Musharraf is it. Unable to deal with his ouster after a revolt by Pakistani society, Mr Musharraf has tried to establish himself as a legitimate political alternative to no avail.

Now, he has chosen self-exile rather than facing a treason trial. But even by the standards of a frustrated former strongman, Mr Musharraf appears to have little regard for the damage his comments can cause to the country.

If a long-term army chief and military dictator cannot exercise restraint, perhaps it is time for him to be ignored all together by the nation.

The extremism challenge

IT is a pattern that helps militants and terrorists stay ahead of a state in pursuit. Reports that the Peshawar attackers may have been tricked by their handlers into believing they were attacking an intelligence office instead of a civilian vocational training institute demonstrates the craftiness of the enemy. Brainwashing young men into becoming suicide bombers or fidayeen attackers has a significant history now, but perhaps that task is made easier by the utter lack of a counter-narrative and the absence of any meaningful counter-extremism strategy in the country. The National Action Plan, drawn up in the wake of the devastating Army Public School attack in December 2014, at least recognised the importance of a counter-extremism strategy in the overall fight against militancy and terrorism, but little has been done to implement it. Indeed, recent events in the country suggest that NAP has effectively been buried and forgotten.

The fear is that the scale of the extremism challenge may be set to grow significantly. In the past, rivalries between extremist groups of different sects have sharpened when one group is perceived to have gained an advantage with the public over the others. Now, with an election on the horizon and uncertainty prevailing across the political landscape, extremist elements may be further emboldened to grab space from mainstream political parties and drag the national discourse into very troubling directions. A weak government and a state in which it appears that the various institutions are neither working cohesively nor reading from the script complicates the task of keeping extremism in check. Perhaps institutions such as parliament or the Election Commission can step up and suggest a revised code of conduct for the elections that explicitly bars extremist rhetoric and speech that can fan hate, spread discord and open sectarian fault lines. It should be clear that doing nothing is not an option.

If it is agreed that Pakistan must remain a constitutional, democratic, people-oriented state, there needs to be clarity on the extremist challenge. The spectrum from suicide bombers to eager participants in the politics of hate is wide and each part of that spectrum requires a specialised approach to countering it. But the starting point to countering all parts of the militancy and extremist challenge is arguably the same: a determination to return the country and its people to a moderate, inclusive and tolerant centre. Early on in the fight against the banned TTP, it had appeared that the state had been overwhelmed by the challenge to its authority and clawing back space would be tremendously difficult. It was a hard slog, but determination and strategy helped pull the country back from the edge of the abyss. That same commitment needs to manifest itself if the extremist challenge is to be first contained and eventually rolled back. A part of the reason why militants sometimes appear to be one step ahead of the state is their tenacity and craftiness. The state must fight back with vigour and assemble all the tools it needs to win what is a battle for the soul of the country.

Freed from blame?

SIX and a half years after the lethal raid on Abbottabad, former US president Barack Obama has come up with a statement that vindicates the position maintained by Pakistan: the latter did not know the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden until he was killed by American SEALs in action on May 2, 2011. Mr Obama made this remark during an interview in India, saying his government had no evidence that proved Islamabad was aware of Bin Laden living in a location where the Pakistan Army has a huge presence. The former president's words are by far the biggest snub to experts who were convinced that Pakistan had a hand in hiding Washington's most high-profile target in the US-led 'war on terror'. But while it is a real setback to these analysts, it will surely not be the end of the refrain that aims to paint the Saudi militant spending long years in this country as a guest. In fact, there could be increasing focus on the incompetency of the Pakistani administration in allowing an extremely dangerous suspect to stay in the country and operate undisturbed from here for many years. Hence, there is no room for complacency.

There are many more challenges that will require Islamabad to be on its toes. The follow-up questions during the very interview in which Mr Obama admitted to there being no proof of Pakistan's involvement in the Bin Laden affair did provide new angles. With yet another round of questions about the May 2011 raid and the events surrounding it in the offing, what is required by the authorities and the diplomats representing this country is some deft and cool handling, now that they appear to have a clean chit from the former US president. Most crucially, the country should be able to assert strongly that, just as it didn't hide the prime 'war on terror' suspect then, it has nothing to hide now. This is where the unveiling of an earnest discussion on the report compiled by the Abbottabad Commission could come in useful. It is unfortunate that in the tradition of earlier inquiry reports on some of the most significant events in this country's history, the Abbottabad Commission probe has officially not seen the light of day. It can greatly help in taking Pakistan's case forward. Let no fear come in the way of a natural desire to know the truth.

Power-sector transparency

THE government has made the right decision in agreeing to the demand from the provincial governments to share more data on the power sector, but far more room for greater transparency remains. The power sector is notoriously opaque, and few other areas of government operation are in more dire need of the light of day than this one. A more comprehensive template to regularly disclose key data such as units sent out in each distribution company, units billed, fuel stock position, daily flue gas emissions reports from each power plant should be disclosed publicly as per a regular cycle. In addition to this, financial data relating to recoveries and cash flows also needs to be disclosed regularly along the lines of what listed companies are required to do.

Transparency will help identify and curtail the play of rackets in the power sector, whether in fuel pilferage and adulteration or in billing and recoveries. It will also impose a certain operational discipline on the staff that would be made to focus on the numbers rather than the rackets. Moreover, it will give discerning eyes amongst the public a valuable glimpse into the operational and financial efficiency of the power sector, and help curb the overly centralised nature of decision-making within it. The latter is one of the core reasons why the sector has been unable to respond to strategic directives from the top — because there is a strong disconnect between the base of the pyramid and the top tier of the decision-makers. This situation has created a symbiosis of sorts, where each tolerates the other without seeking to disrupt the status quo in any significant way. It is this symbiosis that has thwarted efforts at reform, and transparency along the lines of a regularly updated disclosure template can go a long way in disrupting it. The provincial governments are entitled to their share of data from the energy ministry, but so is the larger public.

Role of institutions

INSTITUTIONAL rivalries and confusion are undermining the performance of the state. So perhaps it is time for the apex body, parliament, from which all other institutions draw their authority to debate and clarify the roles of all institutions. A book launch in Islamabad on Sunday was an opportunity for leaders across the political spectrum to express their concern about the state of democracy in the country and the encroachment of institutions into the political domain. Certainly, a part of the problem is a fractured political landscape, with fierce rivalries among parties and politicians contributing to undermining the democratic project. But it is also apparent that the weaknesses of the democratic order in the country are being exploited for parochial and institutional interests, putting at risk hard-won political continuity that is closing in on delivering a third consecutive on-time general election.

With Senate elections expected to be held early next year and a constitutional amendment likely to pave the way for the general election, there will be renewed focus on parliament. Parliament should use the opportunity to assert its primacy and remind all institutions, including the federal government, of their responsibilities under the Constitution and to the people of Pakistan. The Faizabad debacle was a shocking illustration of the damage that a weak, directionless government and undesirable interference from institutions can combine to inflict on the country. Had parliament been activated during the crisis, there was enough leadership in the two houses to have helped steered the country away from a debacle, notwithstanding a government that appeared weak and indecisive and an opposition that seemed intent on drawing political blood. And if deep divisions had persisted, at least they would have manifested themselves inside parliament, drawing a necessary contrast with anti-democratic street protests.

Ultimately, however, it is across institutions that the separation of powers needs to be clarified. The judicialisation of politics and the military establishment's increasing forays into the political realm are not only contributing to instability in the political realm, but also drawing the other institutions away from their core responsibilities. A broken justice system in the country and the fight against militancy, terrorism and extremism are areas that need sustained focus — something unnecessary and undesirable interference in the political domain by

other institutions detract from. The constitutional separation of powers and the apex role of parliament exist not to perpetuate an undemocratic, elitist control of the country, but to create institutions that reflect the legitimate priorities and interests of the people. Unsatisfactory as the performance of civilian governments and political parties in some areas may be, artificial crises and contrived circumstances have too frequently undermined the political order. No country can progress, let alone achieve stability, if the locus of power is amorphous. Pakistan is a democracy and parliament must step up to remind why Pakistan must remain one.

Fiscal stress

IT may have taken another meeting with the IMF, this time for post-programme monitoring, but the government has been pushed into releasing some essential data that it has been sitting on for almost a year now. Specifically, the debt management report, which was due in March but was only uploaded to the ministry website over the weekend.

Moreover, the fiscal deficit figure for the first quarter has been revised up, from 0.9pc originally given by former finance minister Ishaq Dar back in October to 1.2pc released recently. The upward revision was couched inside revenue collection data which was headlined by the fact that tax revenue collection jumped by 20pc in the same quarter. This ought to sound like a triumph of sorts for the lethargic tax authorities, but seen in the context of the upwardly revised deficit figure, it loses some of its shine.

In fact, signs are mounting that the government will live up to the fears expressed prior to the budget — that election-related priorities would eat away all the gains on the fiscal front since 2013. The upward revision comes at a bad time, when the government is gearing up to sterilise the inflows from the bond auction last week, the funds from which are scheduled to land in a few days. Domestic borrowing will need to be constrained by a corresponding amount if the resultant inflows are not to upset the monetary indicators and lead to an unplanned expansion of the money supply.

Now that the hand of government has been forced, even if ever so slightly, to present a truer picture of the fiscal state of affairs, it is a good time to recall that the budget announced this June has wholly unrealistic targets in it, particularly for the revenue side. Current expenditures are actually budgeted to fall by Rs141bn from last year, an expectation that strains the imagination considering every other year current expenditures have always blown past the budgetary allocation.

The inordinately heavy emphasis on development spending, particularly on pet projects, is likely to feel the strain as this revenue picture carries forward. And that strain is likely to land up in growing public debt. So the fiscal framework is already coming under stress, something that is currently being addressed through window dressing. But this cannot continue for much longer.

The country needs a strong finance minister, and the decision to appoint one should be made soon.

Killing of teenaged driver

GIVEN our pervasive gun culture, it is no surprise that society has suffered fatalities, trauma and injuries caused by shootings including everyday firearm-related violence. This unchecked gun culture is the reason behind the fatal shooting of a teenaged driver on Sunday morning in the aftermath of a hit-and-run accident near Karachi's Clifton beach.

According to reports, when an 18-year-old student driving a Mercedes hit a motorcyclist and failed to stop, he was chased by armed men in an SUV. Although the biker survived, his friends fired several rounds of bullets killing the young driver on the spot and injuring another passenger.

Though there is no justification for not stopping after hitting a vehicle, it is the fear of frenzied mobs known to assault those behind the wheel, whether or not they are at fault, that keeps many drivers from halting.

In this incident, while the police have apprehended the culprits who have confessed to their crime, the question of gun-control measures, and the non-

implementation of stringent controls for the use, licensing, display and possession of guns has come to the fore.

This utterly senseless shooting and incidents of similar gun violence (the Shahzeb Khan murder in 2012), where perpetrators are young men easily provoked into violence, raises several points.

First, in certain incidents lax parental control is partly to blame when young people have access to guns — especially disturbing is when adults protect young perpetrators of violent acts.

Secondly, with an ill-equipped and overstretched security apparatus, the government is clearly hesitant to implement existing rules curbing unnecessary gun use. Consider here the thuggish, private armed ‘militias’ accompanying politicians, state ministers, feudal families and such, displaying their weapons and harassing ordinary citizens.

Meanwhile, clamping down on fake gun licences and conducting stringent background checks, including mental and drug testing for gun permits, is imperative. Eliminating gun culture when gun laws are openly flouted is a complex but necessary task if society is to be protected from violent and illegal ‘retribution’.

A ‘do more’ visit?

A LOW-KEY visit that produced no immediately known breakthrough nor fresh rancour is perhaps the best that could have been expected. The daylong visit by US Secretary of Defence (retired) Gen James Mattis to Pakistan included the usual high-level meetings with the civil and military leaderships and formulaic statements issued afterwards. Pakistan emphasised its position, particularly the problem of TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan; the US pressed Pakistan to ‘do more’ in the regional fight against terrorism and dangled the benefits of greater cooperation; and the two sides parted amicably enough to allow them to continue the slow, hard work of better aligning their interests to achieve peace and stability in the region. Given a mercurial president in the White House and his preference for military force over diplomacy, there ought to be no illusions that the months

and years ahead will be easily navigated. However, as the US and Pakistan both appear to have recognised, there is no plausible alternative to continued dialogue and cooperation.

The attack on the Agricultural Training Institute in Peshawar ought to have been a warning, if any was needed, that Pakistan is still at risk of a major terrorist strike. Sheer bravery and some good fortune prevented a greater tragedy in Peshawar, but there are recurring elements in terrorist strikes inside Pakistan. The problem of TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan is the biggest of those elements and perhaps the only one that Pakistan does not have the ability to directly address. The Afghan government has made it clear that it expects reciprocal actions taken by Pakistan — a crackdown on Afghan Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, which the ISPR has denied exist, but acknowledged “the possibility of miscreants exploiting Pakistan’s hospitality” following the meeting between army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and Secretary Mattis. Whatever the language used to accommodate the sensitivities of whichever country, the issue of cross-border sanctuaries needs to be addressed meaningfully. No amount of border fencing and coordination or expeditious return of Afghan refugees will fully resolve the threat that emanates from Afghanistan.

From a domestic, democratic perspective, there is a worrying, relatively new aspect to the Pakistan-US relationship. Trapped in a leadership crisis of its own making, the PML-N government appears to have virtually no idea about what the civilian side of the state can negotiate with the US as the security issues are wrangled over. Certainly, the reality of Afghanistan dominating the Pakistan-US relationship has long meant that civilians have had a lesser role, but it is discouraging to witness an almost total surrender. Be it on trade with Afghanistan or greater access to US markets that Pakistani exporters have long sought, the ideas appear to have dried up on the civilian side of the state. If meaningful peace and stability are to be achieved in the region, civilian governments will need to press ahead with their views and priorities.

CPEC's difficulties

THERE are growing indications that things are not going as well with CPEC as we are being told. Since the government did not release any meaningful details following the recent, seventh round of the Joint Cooperation Council — the crucial forum where the details of the various projects that come under the CPEC umbrella are being negotiated between the Pakistani and Chinese sides — news has managed to trickle out that many of the projects considered central by Pakistan have suffered setbacks.

The first news related to the Diamer-Bhasha dam project that was the most recent addition to the bouquet of projects being considered under the plan. That information emerged during a parliamentary committee hearing in which a former Wapda chairman said that the Chinese were asking for terms that Pakistan was unwilling to give in order to finance the mega dam.

The next bit of news came after the meeting itself, when reports trickled out that the framework agreements for the Peshawar-Karachi railway project, known as the Main Line 1 project, as well as the Karachi circular railway, could not be signed during the meeting.

For the circular rail, there appeared to be good reasons for the delay, but for the ML1 project, it was merely stated that cost estimates will take another two to three months to be finalised.

Now comes a report that three important road projects, brought into the CPEC framework in the sixth JCC meeting held last December, have also suffered setbacks.

According to the report, the Chinese have developed new rules for approving financing for CPEC projects, and each of the latter will have to be resubmitted through the new procedures before financing can be arranged.

All of these might prove to be temporary difficulties, and the projects mentioned (except for the Diamer-Bhasha dam which appears to have been scrapped), could be back on track within months. Or this could be the moment when CPEC is changing gears, entering a new phase of its construction beyond the 'early

harvest' power projects, and the enterprise is growing beyond the ability of the government to effectively manage.

As CPEC grows, its implementation becomes more complex and unwieldy given the small number of people involved in drafting the Pakistani position in the talks. The only antidote to the growing difficulties the government appears to be running into is greater transparency, which is becoming more urgent with the passage of time.

Lack of drinking water

OUR government would do well to remember that social deprivation stokes disillusionment and conflict in communities without basic rights. Poor sanitation services and unsafe and unsustainable water supplies condemn millions to live with disease and poverty. On Tuesday, the Supreme Court intervened in this regard, reminding the Sindh government to provide access to clean drinking water and reliable sanitation. After concluding that measures recommended by an earlier judicial commission had not been given sufficient attention, Chief Justice Saqib Nisar summoned Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah to the next hearing. Mr Shah may need to explain why, for instance, 88pc of the population in Larkana — his party, the PPP's traditional political base — are consuming filthy water; also why 80pc of Karachi's population is devoid of clean water. Overall, the commission report found 78.1pc of water samples tested in the province unsafe for human consumption. And, with rising water demand — especially as urbanisation, poverty, drought and pollution put pressure on existing sources — it is imperative that the government improve and sustain safe water sources. Tackling the challenge of intermittent water supplies and the spread of water-borne diseases requires more investment in expertise, time and resources, and cohesion among ministries.

Meanwhile, although we have policies for clean water and sanitation, 21m people do not have access to potable water; 79m do not have a decent toilet; and nearly 19,500 children under five die annually from diarrhoea. Failure to meet water-related obligations can be attributed to incompetent government functionaries, organisational deficiencies and corruption at all tiers. If the government's national priority is bringing clean water and sanitation facilities to all Pakistanis, then,

funding for the water and sanitation sectors should be increased alongside formulating transparency mechanisms.

Our largest minority

DELAYED, then rushed, the 2017 census was bound to betray some statistical anomalies, but perhaps the most glaring discrepancy is that of the disabled population at 0.48pc of the total population. The figure beggars belief considering that WHO estimates 10-15pc of the global population has some form of disability – and that this number skews higher in developing countries marred by disease, poverty and conflict. In fact, according to a recent report in this paper, a survey conducted along international standards in Attock district in 2015 found that 15.5pc of the population had a disability. That the census exercise was an opportunity missed is a huge understatement. The truth is, people with disabilities are likely our largest and most inclusive social group — all ages, genders, ethnicities, religions and socioeconomic levels are represented; and anyone can join this group at any time; at birth, or through injury, illness or old age. It stands to reason then that any government that claims to be people-centric must factor in disability as a major development priority.

Yet, Balochistan is so far the only province to have passed comprehensive legislation based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Pakistan ratified in 2011. And although the other provinces have passed legislation based on the antiquated Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981, since the 18th Amendment, virtually no progress has been made in practice. The latter legislation mandates an employment quota for people with disabilities in both public and private sectors; companies with more than 99 employees which fail to do so must pay into a rehabilitation fund. Yet, the report reveals that public officials seem apathetic, and it appears there's no implementation by the provinces to generate revenue through this mechanism for much-needed disability-specific programming. Nor has there ever been effective implementation of the Accessibility Code of Pakistan, 2006, to ensure that infrastructure can be accessed by every Pakistani. Despite introducing a Special CNIC (ostensibly to avail specialised social services) in 2009, only a few hundred thousand PWDs have registered; most Nadra offices remain inaccessible, and the process is lengthy and prohibitive.

The right to a life of dignity and equal opportunity ought to be unconditional, but if that is not enough to awaken our policymakers, they should consider this startling fact: the cost of excluding PWDs from Pakistan's workforce could reach as high as \$21.4bn by 2018.

Voter disillusionment

ELECTIONS are not only about choosing which political party is best for the country but also which party can endorse a national vision for change for the next five years. Yet, Pakistanis are cautious when it comes to promises of change because elected officials often fail to find solutions to pressing issues. Today, as we mark National Voters' Day, political parties should remember that they will have to rebuild voters' trust before the 2018 election. On its part, the ECP aims to increase registration of women voters to bridge the electoral gender gap. Because identifying and registering 12.17m women is an enormous challenge, the ECP must muster support from local governments and political parties. This requires eliminating institutional and traditional barriers that hinder electoral equity.

Another voter base of significance is young people, comprising 44pc of registered voters between 18 and 35 years. Therefore, it makes sense that parties delve into what younger voters see as key issues. With many young people unemployed, ignoring their concerns is detrimental. Festering disillusionment causes young people to lean towards right-wing groups, away from parties espousing democratic values. This does not bode well for the latter category of parties; a shift to the right in middle- to low-income communities could take place if mainstream parties do not draw the youth to the ballot box. In fact, the kind of politicking going on between the PTI and PML-N, both hurling allegations of corruption and bad governance at each other, would only have left more young people suspicious of politicians. Recall it was the PTI that actively sought to bring young voters to the fore but the attention given to their issues was short-lived once the political campaigning ended. Where young citizens and women vote, ideally the end result is the dissemination of democratic ideas, accessible politics and better laws. Ignoring them comes at the cost of risking the survival of democratic politics.

Mishandling protests

THERE was no justification to keep the judicial inquiry report hidden from the public, other than the reason that it is a vast and devastating indictment of the Punjab government and police. Under court order, and having recognised that the report could no longer be kept secret, the Punjab government on Tuesday released the report of Lahore High Court Justice Baqar Najafi on the Model Town killings in June 2014. At the very outset, indeed in the midst of the horrifying violence that was broadcast live on television on June 17, 2014, it was obvious that unacceptable actions were perpetrated by the police on the relatively defenceless supporters of Tahirul Qadri. There are no legitimate circumstances in which 14 citizens can be killed and scores others injured by the police in an operation that was unnecessary and appeared to be politically motivated. Almost certainly crimes were committed by officials that June day three years ago and there must be justice and accountability.

The recent debacle at Faizabad has underlined another worrying aspect of the Model Town incident: the politics of protest is growing in the country and with it the risk of violence in the streets is increasing. That creates a new, twin challenge for law-enforcement and authorities: creating clear rules and chains of command for the use of force by the police and giving the police the resources and legal cover necessary to enforce order. The Model Town report suggests that ambiguous chains of command and unofficial orders allow responsibility for mistakes and errors to be evaded. At its core, that is the problem of the politicisation of the police. No government, federal or provincial, current or past, has ever allowed the police to function independently. In Lahore, a specialised anti-riot police force has been created, but as long as its deployment is politically decided, there will always be the possibility of misuse of the anti-riot force. An anti-riot force with clear rules of deployment and legally binding lines of authority is what is needed — something all governments have resisted, but that must eventually be implemented.

Of course, in dealing with violent protesters and other threats to law and order, the legitimate needs of the police must also be addressed. From adequate training and resources to legal indemnity for actions lawfully undertaken against violent protesters and other threats to law and order, the police force needs serious and sustained investments. In Punjab, the Anti-Riot Police Force Bill,

2017, has been proposed and it may have many sensible protections for the police. A bill properly vetted by the Punjab Assembly, the police and representatives of civil society could go some way in addressing the current confusion and may become a template for other provinces to emulate. The shocking events from Model Town to Faizabad have made clear that business as usual is no longer an option.

Jerusalem lost

DONALD Trump is not a man known for his visionary foreign policy or global statesmanship.

The US president has, in the short period he has occupied the White House, made some incendiary decisions and statements that have threatened to upend the international order. These include his intention to torpedo the widely acclaimed Iran nuclear deal, as well as threatening to “totally destroy” North Korea from the floor of the UN General Assembly.

On Wednesday, Mr Trump added another dubious feather to his cap by issuing a fiat on one of the most divisive, and sensitive, global issues of the modern age: the status of Jerusalem.

Overturning decades of American policy regarding the holy, and contested, city, Mr Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. He also said preparations were under way to shift the American embassy from Tel Aviv to what the Arabs refer to as Al Quds.

With this decision, not only has the US president disregarded global opinion on the matter — the UN secretary general has led the criticism — and brushed aside the advice of some of America’s closest allies, in one fell swoop, Mr Trump has also legitimised five decades of Israeli occupation.

The US leader has played to a very narrow gallery here — the Israelis, the American religious right as well as the pro-Israel lobby in Washington, that powerful group whose ‘blessings’ every politician in the US desirous of high office seeks.

The rest of the world, meanwhile, has been highly critical of the move, led by the Palestinians. Both leading Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, have slammed the decision, with protests breaking out in the occupied territories. The reaction from Arab and Muslim capitals, as well as other states, has also been highly critical.

While Palestinians have rued the day Israel was created in 1948 and they were doomed to a seemingly permanent exile from their native land, Jerusalem's status as an occupied city has been accepted by almost the entire global community ever since Israel grabbed it in 1967. Al Quds lies at the heart of Palestinian identity and for the US to 'gift' the contested city to Israel is almost certain to doom the two-state solution.

As per the 1993 peace accords, the final status of Jerusalem was to be resolved mutually. That agreement, it seems, no longer holds.

So what now? While Israeli leaders have been gloating over the move, the occupied territories are brimming with discontent. There have been many predictions of a 'third intifada' being launched; this reckless move by the US leader may well be the spark that gives birth to this uprising. Humiliated by Israel for decades and treated in a subhuman manner, now the Palestinians are seeing a city central to their culture and identity being snatched away from them.

While there is not much room for optimism, perhaps the global community can pressure the US to revisit this highly unwise and dangerous move.

Regional possibilities

WE have one more reminder that Pakistan's regional policies carry a heavy price tag. This time, the Asian Development Bank has emphasised that "a unique opportunity for Pakistan to emerge as a centre of trade and commerce" exists, provided borders can be opened. The statement, given by Xiaohong Yang, the ADB country director, at the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Strategy, underlined the importance of better relations with neighbours and the large "peace dividend" that Pakistan can unlock. The vision for deeper regional economic cooperation is an old one, with CAREC alone emphasising it for almost a decade now, with up to \$30bn in resources behind it, and \$1.5bn of that coming to Pakistan. But the main stumbling block remains the bitter relations with neighbours such as Afghanistan and India.

Pakistan cannot unlock its regional trade potential on the back of CPEC alone. Without a route through Afghanistan, the distant markets of Russia and the Central Asian republics remain too far to be economically competitive. And by ruling out any talks with India on trade and economic cooperation, Pakistan locks itself away from the growing markets of an important neighbour. Both Afghanistan and India are keen for overland connectivity through Pakistan, something that can provide an effective bargaining tool provided Pakistan is willing to entertain the idea. The regional trade and connectivity potential that Pakistan has due to its location cannot be unlocked fully only on a north-to-south axis. ADB is right to emphasise the idea, and present the possibility of a peace dividend. There might be good reasons for the strain in relations with both neighbours, but it must never be forgotten that these tensions come at a steep price for everyone concerned. The wages of peace far outweigh whatever benefits hostilities bring. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor is undoubtedly a positive programme to advance the benefits of regional connectivity, but it is not the only one. Projects that predate CPEC, such as the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, or the CASA transmission line or the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, all deserve to be energetically followed up on, as well as the projects under CAREC, which dovetail with CPEC. Pakistan's continued dependence on external powers to finance its weakness on the external account can only be broken when the normalisation of ties with its neighbours is accompanied with domestic reform.

Polio eradication

AS the clock ticks ever closer to the passage of another year, it is a time of reckoning all round: what gains have been made, what losses incurred, in the country's various endeavours? One topic that has cropped up with distressing regularity is that of polio. Despite the decades-long battle against the crippling disease — the national eradication programme was initiated in 1994 — and frenetic efforts to vaccinate every child, Pakistan has not yet been able to eliminate the virus completely. Along with Nigeria, which is well on its way to eradication, and Afghanistan, we are one of the world's last three countries where anti-polio drives have yet to achieve complete success. Still, the gains have been considerable despite formidable odds (such as the campaign by some quarters to brand the polio vaccine as harmful, leading to parents' refusal to allow the drops to be administered to their children, and the numerous attacks by terrorists on vaccination teams). The number of new cases has declined fairly steadily over the years, from an estimated 350,000 cases in 1988, to 54 in 2015, to 19 last year. It was in this context that on Wednesday, speaking at a conference in Islamabad, National Health Services Minister Saira Tarar said that Pakistan is fighting its final battle against the virus and has achieved major success.

It is unfortunate, though, that Ms Tarrar's reassurance coincided with news of another polio case in Karachi — its second in three months. In terms of the whole country, these cases bring the tally so far this year to six. Even so, it cannot be denied that the goal of polio eradication hangs tantalisingly within reach. There is an urgent need for redoubled efforts on the part of all those involved in the vaccination campaigns, whether it is the vaccinators themselves, those that have taken up the task of advocacy and spreading awareness, or the national and international bodies providing the vaccine and critical funding. A final push could prove pivotal.

Madressah reform

IT was true before and is clearer than ever today. The country's fight against extremism cannot succeed, arguably cannot begin, until the issue of madressah reform and regulation is meaningfully addressed. Army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa is right: too many madressahs in Pakistan are providing their students with an education that leaves the students ill equipped to find employment or adjust to the modern world. Indeed, it is refreshing that a senior military leader has chosen to speak plainly about a problem, which in many ways is linked to national security, that the country's leadership, military and civilian, has avoided dealing with. Modernising madressah education is essential but has been made controversial by vested interests that are opposed to state regulation and do not believe in a tolerant, democratic and progressive Pakistan. In the name of religious education, a great disservice is being done to Pakistan's children by closing their minds before they can learn to make decisions for themselves.

Certainly, the issue of reforming and regulating vast madressah networks that operate in every part of the country is not easy or straightforward. The halting, uneven curriculum reform efforts in the mainstream education systems of the country have demonstrated that consensus is difficult to forge and reforms hard to implement. For example, mandating that madressahs teach basic maths, science or language skills at par with what students learn in public school systems would create a massive demand for qualified new teachers in the country. Furthermore, with the standards of education in the public school system often poor, how will state oversight of the madressah sector improve standards there? Such problems are, of course, not insurmountable and the magnitude of the challenge itself is a reason to push ahead with thoughtful reform and reorganisation of the madressah sector. Generations cannot continue to be lost to misguided and inadequate education.

If the state is serious about reforms, there are two obvious principles that ought to be adhered to: the elimination of hate and the promotion of basic skills. With extremism apparently on the rise in the mainstream education system, especially in colleges and universities, it has become clear that the propagation of hateful ideas can affect even otherwise highly educated minds. Within the madressah sector, the formal and informal imparting of intolerance and dislike for other groups and sects is a much bigger problem. That must first be halted. To

promote basic literacy, the management of madressahs and governing boards may have to be changed to include mainstream educationists who can advise and help implement curriculum changes. Such moves are likely to be met with fierce resistance, but as has been suggested it is not for the madressah networks to decide the future of many of Pakistan's children. The state has a responsibility to promote an education suitable to the modern world for all of Pakistan's children.

Food security

PAKISTAN is an arid and water-stressed country and, at the time of its birth, had hardly enough arable land and surface water resources to achieve food security. As a net importer of food, the spectre of famine hung over the country for almost a quarter century following independence. Cropping cycles were doubled only after tube wells were installed through multiple salinity control and reclamation programmes, the Mangla Dam and other associated water infrastructure were constructed, and a massive land-clearing and reclamation effort was undertaken. The area under cultivation saw an increase as did the yields through large-scale utilisation of modern inputs like urea fertiliser to lift the agrarian potential of the country and achieve food security by the early 1970s. That was no mean feat, and was quite possibly the single-largest accomplishment the young country had ever seen. The work put in during those days has stood the country in good stead every since, insulating us from commodity price shocks, and banishing the spectre of large-scale famine that would frequently afflict the region.

But all that is now changing, and faster than anyone can see. First we began to see widespread incidence of malnutrition, which had until now largely impacted the youngest children. Now the Food and Agriculture Organisation is telling us that the area under cultivation has stagnated at just around 25pc of the total land area of the country, and food output is not going to be able to keep pace with the rapid population increases we are registering. This means a return to the growing reliance on imports to meet domestic food needs, thereby rolling back the hard-fought gains of the quarter century following independence. Moreover, with dwindling water resources, further expansion is not possible. To top it off, as soil fertility is worsening, increasing yields is also becoming a growing challenge. This broad-based stagnation combined with growing pressure on land in peri-

urban areas as agricultural land is cleared to meet the housing needs of expanding cities is aggravating the problem. The pressure to grow more nutritious food per unit of land is growing at an accelerating rate, putting unprecedented stress on future food security. Careful curation of our soil fertility, along with preservation and the ultimate expansion of our agricultural land, will require what the FAO calls a 'comprehensive approach'. Given the urgency of the stakes involved, the time to start work on this is now.

Maritime tragedy

FAR from the chaos of the urban areas, we tend to forget that accidents can take place anywhere, and involve any manner of transport. The tragedy that took place off the coast of Thatta in Sindh on Thursday comes as a grim reminder of this reality. A boat carrying devotees to the shrine of Meenh Pathai — which is located on an island — for an annual festival and pilgrimage capsized near Mirpur Sakro. The boat was some 10 nautical miles away from the coast, and the accident is said to have been caused by the strong winds blowing across the open seas. The vessel capsized as the crew lost control of it. By Friday morning, when rescue teams called off their operations, over 20 bodies had been pulled out from the sea. Almost 50 people were rescued of the approximately 70 who are believed to have been on the boat when it capsized — this is the usual capacity of the sort of boats that are used by the local communities here, although there have been conflicting reports in the media regarding the exact number of people who were on board.

Those that died were among the poorest of the poor, mostly hailing from settlements along the coastal belt. And the most unfortunate part of this tragedy — one that makes the loss of life even more unbearable — is the fact that with just a little more organisation and state oversight, it may well have been preventable. For one thing, those sailing were headed for an annual pilgrimage and the authorities should have had this event on their radar, especially when it is no secret that the seaworthiness of the boats available to these communities is always questionable, as is the level of training of the crews. Then, the tendency to overload, especially on a festive occasion, is rampant. Where there is much talk about accidents on urban thoroughfares, it should not be forgotten that other modes of transport, too, deserve oversight.

Reinvigorating Pak-Iran ties

ALTHOUGH there are reasons why Pakistan's ties with neighbouring Iran have hardly been robust, it is time to remove the irritants and rebuild the relationship. In a wide-ranging interview with this paper over the weekend, the Iranian ambassador to Pakistan indicated as much as he talked of both the obstacles in the relationship and the scope for improvement. A turbulent border, infested with criminal gangs and small-time insurgent groups, and alleged cross-border links of individuals such as Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav and the late Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mansour are among these obstacles. Besides, there is the matter of unfinished projects, the most obvious example being the joint gas pipeline initiative. International sanctions on Iran have been used as an excuse for Pakistan's foot-dragging on work on its territory, although some in policy circles have felt that the Gas Purchase Agreement was signed prior to the sanctions, and thus lay outside their ambit. Given the size of the other projects in the federally funded PSDP, it can't even be argued that resources to finance construction on Pakistan's side are not available domestically. Pakistan, too, has had its list of concerns, among them the role of Iran in sectarian tensions inside this country and Tehran's tilt towards New Delhi in recent years.

But then, as the ambassador pointed out, engagement on other fronts is vital. Trade in commodities and cooperation in sectors like aviation, ports and shipping, and science and technology can help boost ties; and, unlike in the case of Afghanistan and India, where long-standing grievances have been a stumbling block in relations with Pakistan, there is no discernible reason why Iran should seek to destabilise Pakistan. With no substantial historical baggage to weigh them down, working together to remove impediments in the way of enhancing cooperation should be a priority.

In his recent visit to Tehran, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa assured President Rouhani that Pakistan desired an enhancement in bilateral ties. This deserves to be followed up energetically. Iran has repeatedly called for increasing cooperation between the two ports of Gwadar and Chabahar, as well as participating in CPEC. The remnants of the sanctions, that informally linger with global banks reluctant to engage with those doing business with Iran, needs to be navigated skilfully. While Pakistan's deepening engagement with the Saudi-led military alliance that has shunned Iran complicates the picture, the leadership

here can still take an independent stance by not allowing foreign powers to dictate our foreign policy agenda. Indeed, Pakistan and Iran have much to gain through the expansion of ties, and an earnest effort in that direction is possible, provided the will is there.

China's security alert

THE threat has not been taken lightly nor should it be. An extraordinary warning by the embassy of China in Pakistan to Chinese nationals in the country is an unwelcome reminder that the militancy threat has not abated and continues to be a serious problem for foreign nationals.

Threat alerts such as that issued by the China embassy need to be addressed immediately and meaningfully. Even if it were not for CPEC and the massive investments being made in Pakistan by Chinese companies, it is imperative that Pakistan be able to protect foreign nationals who travel to or work in this country.

It is not a question of politics or troublesome relationships with other countries. The interconnectedness of the Pakistani state with the outside world has suffered a great deal over the past decade, with many foreign delegations, private and public, unwilling to travel to this country because of the perception that great danger awaits them here.

For a country that is now looking to attract global investments, it is vital that foreign nationals be able to not just visit Pakistan, but feel safe and secure in doing so.

Presumably, foreign governments such as China, which are friendly towards Pakistan and looking to significantly expand their investments in this country, would not issue such a warning unless the threat were significant.

Ultimately, while Pakistan has made important strides towards securing investment zones and sites with significant foreign nationals present, there has to be a recognition of underlying perils. While China is evasive about militant threats to its territory and people, Pakistan need not be so. Pakistan's long fight against

militancy will ebb and flow, and the closer the strategic relationship with China becomes, the more likely there will be threats to both China and Pakistan.

But the Pakistani response cannot and should not be country specific. For many years, the state has been unnecessarily and undesirably suspicious of foreign nationals in this country. What is needed, instead, is an openness and a determination to protect all foreign nationals who wish to visit, travel to or live in Pakistan.

Until CPEC materialised, there were many other countries that either had or were interested in significant investments in Pakistan. There appears to be the possibility of fresh investments by a range of countries in Pakistan today.

Protect everyone, so that all may be safe and all may look to Pakistan as an investment destination.

Violence against women

HISTORIES of oppression are always followed by histories of subversion. In societies that have silenced women for decades and subjected them to exclusion, there have still been instances of resistance by strong-willed women. Not only does this give reason to hope, it also reminds us that the recent outpouring of women's stories from across the world is an alternative to ceding to the dark undertow of patriarchy. In effect, the 16-day global movement against gender-based violence couldn't have come at a more opportune moment when igniting more conversation and action on women's rights in Pakistan is essential. Starting Nov 25 (the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) and ending yesterday (Human Rights Day), this annual campaign conceived by the Centre for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University puts the spotlight on women's empowerment. For Pakistani women, the gender equality challenge constitutes a lifetime of struggle requiring sustained intervention. Wavering political commitment to women has proven problematic especially when parties fail to confront regressive forces for reasons of survival.

Tolerating a litany of excuses to keep women backward is no longer an option. Closing legal loopholes and implementing laws stringently so that victims of

'honour' crimes, rape and sexual harassment are not deprived of justice is imperative, especially as the poison of misogyny remains pervasive. Ours is a country where statistics on crimes against women defy belief — every second woman has suffered some kind of domestic violence; 93pc have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime; and 2,300 women were killed in the name of 'honour' in 2016. Yet again, we ask this question of the state: when women continue to battle patriarchy with their lives, why are perpetrators of heinous acts allowed to maim and murder with impunity? Refusing to change the status quo denies the nation of women's full participation. Our policymakers must know that the price for no change in women's lives gets much higher by the day and this is unacceptable to all.

Is the party over?

THE 'resignation' of five PML-N lawmakers has once again spurred speculation about an imminent breakup of the ruling party.

These five members have entrusted their resignation letters to their spiritual leader, or pir, who has been in the forefront of the campaign demanding that Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah be sacked over his comments about a minority community.

These resignations were handed over in a grand show in Faisalabad on Sunday, which highlighted the growing threat to the existence of the PML-N government and how the religious element could take the conflict to an altogether new level. This fresh assault on the government could quickly discredit it to the point where its ouster would become inevitable.

Having said that, the kind of momentum that some were expecting this campaign, which is based on a religious issue, to gain is as yet absent. Maybe the opposition groups have too many potential alliance partners to consider, even though the sole objective is to destabilise, en route to dislodging, the PML-N government.

This has been a truly remarkable chapter. The way in which the PML-N has survived as a party ever since its disqualified leader had to step down as prime minister, is unique.

In the past, parties pitted against similar odds have wilted or split at the slightest pretext. Hence it was no surprise that many observers declared that the staying powers of a PML-N under so much pressure was a sign of the maturing of Pakistani democracy, notwithstanding the sops the leadership was alleged to have offered to keep the party intact.

But if felicitations for its resistance to the old disintegration formula are well earned, the PML-N is still facing a challenge. There has been an upsurge in the activity to create a united front against the party and whereas the opposition is so far divided in many camps, we know from history that it doesn't take too long for the most disparate of politicians here to connect the dots and come together for a common cause.

The PML-N realises this. It has assigned some of its most vociferous members the job of blasting opposition alliances in the making. The firebrand Leaguers are revelling in the space in which they are able to roar. And for a true measure of just how sensitive the situation is, the rather low-profile prime minister was the other day found offering a terse riposte to those striving to cobble together a common front against his party.

The aggression shown by the PML-N against those opposing it on political rather than religious issues may also be part of an attempt to divert attention from its troubles vis-à-vis the very dangerous religious elements. In the long run, however, the party would be well advised to prepare for a front, or fronts, which comprise a variety of opponents.

Nuclear concerns

IT is a sobering, necessary warning. Accepting the Nobel Peace Prize on Sunday, the executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (Ican) warned that “the deaths of millions may be one tiny tantrum away”. Beatrice Fihn did not mention US President Donald Trump and North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un by name, but it is apparent that the very public wrangling between two mercurial leaders with nuclear arsenals under their command is a threat to global peace and stability. It is possible that some of the public sparring and trading of insults between Mr Trump and Mr Kim is boastful bravado. A weekend New York Times profile of Mr Trump in the White House noted that aides believe Mr Trump has “a deeper concern about the North Korea situation than his blithe, confrontational tweets suggest”. At the very least, however, Mr Trump and Mr Kim have introduced a flippancy and casualness in global nuclear discourse — a worrying change. Ms Fihn’s warning that the “destruction of cities and the deaths of millions of civilians” in a “moment of panic” is especially relevant given the personalities of the leaders of North Korea and the US.

In South Asia, Pakistan and India have managed to limit aggressive nuclear rhetoric — at least until now. But a militarisation drive in India and Pakistan’s determination to react to every Indian threat, whether real or perceived, has spawned a nuclear competition that can take on frightening dimensions if the nuclear conversation suddenly shifts. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s reckless accusations about Pakistani interference in the Gujarat state elections are an indication of how quickly domestic politics can have regional repercussions. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s vulnerability to a major terrorist attack by the banned TTP or other anti-Pakistan militant groups and the state’s insistence that the threat is often directed by India have the potential to unleash jingoism and war-mongering. The reality is that the security situation in South Asia means nuclear weapons will not be abolished for the foreseeable future. But Ican’s mission is the right one: a world without nuclear weapons is both morally right and practically necessary. Ms Fihn correctly stated, “We have a choice, the end of nuclear weapons or the end of us.” In wildly uncertain times, it is more important than ever to return to fundamental principles. Nuclear weapons are a manifestation of the world’s collective failures, not its successes. That must change one day.

Outlawing torture

AN investigative report in this newspaper's Sunday edition, pegged on Punjab, revealed the horrifying details of a practice that is widely believed to be endemic: the torture of convicts and undertrial prisoners in jails. The ordeal begins pretty much from the inmates' first day in prison in a ritual known colloquially as the mulahiza, or inspection, which involves the first of many beatings. The report details one harrowing account after another by former inmates: from being forced into physical stress-inducing positions for hours on end, to beatings with an array of instruments, to being strung up, and much worse. Taken together, the prisoners' accounts point to a wilful 'institutionalised' project to break the men down and perpetuate a jail culture of abuse, bribery, corruption and blackmail. Indeed, there is even compelling evidence that some jails have formalised torture cells or even whole blocks.

Torture in jails lurks behind high walls. Yet it is well known that at police stations and other detention centres across the country, torture is a routine weapon for extracting information and confessions. A good part of the guilt must be shouldered by the state, which has never formally outlawed torture through legal coda. The Senate passed the proposed Torture, Custodial Death and Custodial Rape Bill (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 2015, in March that year, but it was never passed by the National Assembly. In February this year, the Senate passed a resolution referring the legislation to a joint sitting of parliament, but nothing more was heard. And this sorry state of affairs persists even though Pakistan ratified the UN Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in 2010. To start addressing these heinous issues, Pakistan urgently needs to formulate a law directly condemning torture and its perpetrators. Otherwise, the circle of abuse will never end: as one interviewee in the Dawn report pointed out, after a few years of being tormented, the prisoner himself becomes the tormentor.

Delaying Fata reforms

IT is a case of a promise made and not kept, at least so far.

Soon after becoming prime minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi pledged to implement Fata reforms that the federal cabinet had approved in March. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif had stalled his own government's recommendations on Fata because of the political opposition of allies, notably Fazlur Rehman of JUI-F and Mahmood Achakzai of PkMAP.

It now appears that the resistance to Fata reforms has outlasted Mr Sharif's period in office and continued into Mr Abbasi's tenure, further undermining the current prime minister's standing.

The bill that was to be presented in the National Assembly is a historic landmark and perhaps the least controversial aspect of Fata reforms: extending the jurisdiction of the Peshawar High Court and the Supreme Court to Fata. How is it that a judicial milestone, one that every right-thinking and sensible person ought to embrace, has been thwarted by dismal political opportunism?

The PML-N parliamentary management was particularly shambolic. First included in the National Assembly's official agenda for Monday and then mysteriously crossed out overnight, PML-N leaders in the house made no effort to explain why the bill had been withdrawn and made yet more dubious promises that it would be included in the agenda within days.

The opposition in the National Assembly was rightly aggrieved, creating the rather strange spectacle of opposition parties vociferously supporting a government bill that the government itself is reluctant to support.

Indeed, the remarks by several opposition leaders that the PML-N has unfailingly disappointed and undermined parliament with its almost undemocratic attitude towards the people's house have an uncomfortable ring of truth. Democratic institution building is based on respecting rules and promoting good norms. Parliament's real strength is drawn not from its power to elect a prime minister, pass a budget or amend the Constitution; it is drawn from the perception that the people's representatives are promoting the people's interests.

What could be in the greater interest of the people of Fata than extending the jurisdiction of the Peshawar High Court and Supreme Court to a region where colonial-era rules still prevail?

The danger is that with a general election looming, the PML-N may sacrifice Fata reforms altogether to appease political allies in what is expected to be a fiercely competitive poll climate.

There is no credible alternative that those opposing Fata reforms have presented. Indeed, the opposition is mostly behind closed doors with few politicians willing to speak publicly and frankly about their reservations.

The Fata reforms package has already been somewhat diluted by the decision to promote a so-called mainstreaming of the region before considering the issue of a merger with KP. Narrow political interests and myopia should not be allowed to derail Fata reforms.

Reporting restrictions

IN the interest of justice, there are times when restraint is prudent and desirable. The Supreme Court bench hearing the Hudaibya Paper Mills reference has quite reasonably barred TV talk shows from discussing the case and ordered Pemra to ensure that its directives are implemented. Pemra in turn has issued instructions to television channels to refrain from airing live shows on the Hudaibya case, warning them that any violations will be dealt with under the Pemra Ordinance 2002. It has, however, said that factual reporting of court proceedings, as opposed to analysis or discussion, is allowed. While the apex court has on earlier occasions alluded to the unbridled media coverage of high-profile cases being adjudicated upon, most recently during the hearings into the Panama Papers case, this is perhaps the first time it has taken such a firm stance on the issue.

One wishes the court had acted much earlier: it would have prevented many hours of unrestrained speculation presented as expert opinion — even from those with little or no legal knowledge — in sub judice cases. For instance, a circus-like atmosphere prevailed in the Panama Papers case, with court

reporters having barely finished recounting the session's proceedings before analysts would be invited to weigh in on television channels with their views. Evening talk shows featured wall-to-wall discussions on the case, anticipating the course of the trial or predicting the ultimate outcome, their opinions often based solely on the judges' observations during the hearings. Reporting restrictions in sub judice cases are based on sound logic: what is published or aired during a trial can create judicial bias or influence a witness and thereby impede the course of justice. Flouting these restrictions can also amount to a trial by media of the accused, in which emotion and prejudice drive the premature assumption of innocence or guilt. Pakistan, with its ratings-obsessed electronic media that provides a platform for unfettered political discourse — particularly uncouth in the run-up to an election — is no stranger to this phenomenon. Freedom of speech is not an unqualified right, something that is already implicitly recognised by the provisions against hate speech and the incitement of violence in the codes of conduct that the electronic and print media have formulated for themselves. Media organisations should also independently issue guidelines for their journalists to follow while covering ongoing legal proceedings. Fact should take precedence over opinion until the verdict is in.

Party of the people?

It is a pity that instead of looking into the grievances of the sugarcane growers protesting near Bilawal House in Karachi on Monday, Sindh's agriculture minister called the ugly violence that broke out a conspiracy. It is on such occasions that the title 'Pakistan Peoples Party' appears to be a contradiction in terms. There is nothing more appalling than a political party which claims to have the people, especially the poor, at the centre of its existence going after those pressing for a fair price for sugarcane. The protesters, who were brutally dispersed by police, said they had only wanted to take their demand to PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. They were met with force and the only explanation the police could come up with was that, it being located in the red zone, the administration couldn't quite risk allowing the demonstrators to approach Bilawal House. The administrative action built on this premise was a disaster and threatens to fuel more protests.

Perhaps a better attempt at clarification was made by the chief minister who argued that the blame for the problem facing the growers actually lay with the

federal government. He said that the provincial government was trying to remove the hurdles so that the sugarcane growers would get a fair price. It is baffling as to why the PPP couldn't find a way for one of its senior members, if not Mr Bhutto Zardari himself, to convey the same message to the protesters. In the event, by using force, the PPP earned itself some negative points — even when, according to its own account, it was the federal government the growers needed to protest against. The truth is that the Sindh government mishandled the situation and is now faced with the prospect of more demonstrations in the days to come. This is the worst kind of publicity a party which is trying to assert its credentials to retain its hold on power in Sindh and stage a comeback on the national stage can afford at this moment.

Delayed election concerns

DO parliamentary parties want a general election next August or are they willing to contemplate an electoral delay that potentially undermines the democratic process? The mysterious wrangling over a delimitation bill in parliament — necessary to reflect the results of the latest census and a precondition for the ECP to begin the months-long task of preparing up-to-date electoral rolls — is still threatening to prevent an on-time general election taking place next August and the politics of it is increasingly confounding. The PML-N government has repeatedly stressed that it intends to complete its term, indicating its preference for a general election next August. There could be a constitutional possibility of an election next September if the PML-N dissolved the National Assembly even a day before it completes its term, though that may not be the right precedent to set. But an August election is perilously close to becoming administratively impossible or democratically undesirable, if it means continuing with constituency delimitations according to the 1998 census.

The dispute ostensibly is inter-provincial and intra-province. Representatives of Sindh have argued that the census results deliberately suppressed the overall population figures for the province, while the perennial urban-rural divide in the province has been exacerbated by population growth numbers for Karachi that appear to fly in the face of visible reality. While some of the concerns expressed may be legitimate and the Council of Common Interests has tried to address the problem, it appears the parliamentary delay is tied to other matters of politics in

the country. With the PML-N government under pressure on a number of fronts, a delay in elections may harm the party the most. Perhaps, then, there is cynical political bargaining at work. But the PML-N government has not acquitted itself well thus far either. Poor parliamentary management and sloppy negotiations by the government appear to have brought the country to the brink of a fresh crisis.

The political parties involved in the extreme brinkmanship ought to consider that if the delimitation issue is not addressed immediately, other institutions of state may step in and take control of matters. After all, the latest census only became a reality because the Supreme Court passed an order and energetically followed up on it. If the delimitation issue and the timing of the general election are also decided in forums other than parliament and by institutions that are designed to be apolitical, the democratic process may suffer a further blow. The tardiness of the PML-N government and the willingness of other parties to delay parliamentary approval are sending the wrong signal at a time when the democratic process needs a boost and clear leadership by the political class. Parliament has handled more complicated legislation and political deal-making than what a delimitation bill should require. There is no justification for the inordinate delay. Parliament must pass the delimitation bill quickly.

Lawbreaking police

IT is difficult to know quite what to make of the Sindh authorities' reported action against some 12,000 police officials at various levels of service for allegedly misusing their power, contravening the law, or simply sleeping on the job. Punitive measures have apparently been taken against the law enforcers for misdemeanours ranging from illegal recruitment of police personnel, to holding citizens in unlawful confinement, to even in one case being nominated in an 'honour' killing case. If the rot within the provincial police department runs so deep, why has it become the cause for action only now? And if it is a case of better late than never, then we can only appreciate the fact that the Supreme Court has pursued the matter relentlessly, until the Sindh authorities had no choice but to furnish the answers. And thus it was that on Tuesday, the provincial home department placed on record a fresh report concerning the issue before the two-judge bench at the Supreme Court's Karachi Registry that was hearing a case pertaining to the involvement of policemen in crime.

The Sindh government has over the years proved itself intolerably blithe over matters of governance, including those that most closely concern the citizenry — law enforcement and policing are the subject at hand here, but a host of other examples are available, from water and sanitation to the provision of basic amenities. Perhaps the greatest tragedy this has brought about — and the police force is a case in point — is that the government's actions have impeded even those committed individuals who strive to decently discharge their duties. Where the Sindh police department is popularly characterised as inefficient and corrupt, it is also a reality that it is shockingly under-resourced, undertrained, and shackled to short-term political interests. The interference of the political elites in the functioning of the department is almost a given at every level and even includes the jockeying over appointments to the highest positions of authority. At the other end of the spectrum is the fact that an unreasonably large number of personnel — as high as 30pc of the Karachi force, at one point — are diverted towards VIP duty, starving the ranks of both men and morale. It is perhaps no less than tragic that it has taken the prodding of as high a forum as the Supreme Court to nudge the slumbering provincial government into action.

Building schools in KP

PAKISTAN'S public schooling system has continuously fallen short of expectations as our children remain bereft of quality education and a nurturing learning environment. While the overall education crisis has much to do with inadequate planning and poorly spent budgets, it has been exacerbated further by what appear to be political motivations. According to recent media reports, the PTI-led KP government has shut down 1,000 primary schools, built previously, because of low student enrolment. The justification is that school buildings that have barely more than 50 students had bled the provincial exchequer dry. The criteria for constructing new schools are that they are built in districts where at least 1,000 people reside; and where there are no primary schools within a 1.5km radius of a proposed site. Reversing the stark statistic of 1.5m out-of-school children in KP indeed requires increased enrolment and quality education. Moreover, if enrolling girls is part of the mission, more schools close to villages and towns are essential for success.

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Pervez Khattak is tasked with identifying districts requiring additional schools, sanctioning construction plans and upgrading schools for higher education. Under the 2015 annual development plan, for instance, it was the chief minister who decided the location for 160 new primary schools — rather than district education officers who are ideally equipped to research gaps at various tiers of education. This is why the chief minister's role has proven contentious as there are concerns that many schools are being built not on the basis of need but for reasons of political patronage. Given the PTI's visible commitment to education, its party stalwarts must remember that accruing political mileage by opening schools in areas where they are not be required, so depriving other districts, is a disservice to the cause of education. The need for a revolution in the way schools are built, run and staffed calls for sustainable interventions, not ill-executed projects and misuse of resources.

NA speaker's puzzling words

IS the PML-N at war with itself, with state institutions or simply in disarray?

Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has contradicted speaker of the National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq and insisted that elections will be held on time in August. On Wednesday, Mr Sadiq ominously suggested in interviews that the National Assembly is unlikely to complete its term, though the speaker only alluded to the reasons why that may be the case.

Prime Minister Abbasi's rebuttal, however, is far from convincing. Travelling yet again to London to meet PML-N supremo and ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif, Mr Abbasi's words may have been more persuasive if uttered from the floor of parliament.

The very fact that Mr Abbasi needs to consult his party boss in a foreign land so frequently suggests a fluidity in national politics that is the opposite of what the prime minister has been claiming.

One of the more puzzling aspects of the latest contradictory statements by the PML-N leaders is that both Mr Abbasi and Mr Sadiq have been loyal supporters of Mr Sharif. While it is possible that the prime minister and the speaker have

different views on the events unfolding, could it be a case of Mr Sharif deploying different party leaders to spread different messages?

A great deal of the uncertainty in national politics today flows from Mr Sharif's ambiguousness about his own future in politics. Is the ousted prime minister willing to give up front-line politics if his legal troubles become insurmountable? Or is he determined to try and force his way back into electoral politics come what may?

Currently, Mr Sharif is unable even to guarantee his physical presence in Pakistan for longer than fleeting court appearances. The illness of his wife and MNA-elect, Kulsum Nawaz, is a legitimate factor, but there is a sense that Mr Sharif simply prefers to be outside Pakistan for longer than is strictly necessary. That itself is a disservice to the people and politics of Pakistan.

Certainly, the PML-N is being subjected to pressure on a number of fronts that mature democracies do not have to contend with. Yet, while the details may differ, there is nothing fundamentally different about the final year of a government being mired in political speculation and confusion. The fifth year of the last PPP-led government was similarly turbulent.

Some of the confusion can be dispelled by decisive leadership. Resolving the deadlock over the census and subsequent delimitation of constituencies; announcing a schedule for Senate elections well in advance; placing on the record a parliamentary agenda for the last six months that focuses on institution building and democracy strengthening — the government has several options to nudge the political discourse away from destabilising speculation and towards substantive governance. Prime Minister Abbasi and Speaker Sadiq can surely do better than stir controversy and sow confusion.

OIC on Jerusalem

THE OIC is not an organisation known for tackling the great questions of the day that confront Muslim states with any vision or alacrity. However, during its emergency summit in Istanbul on Wednesday, there were some signs of life as the body raised its voice in reaction to Donald Trump's ill-advised decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The OIC statement declared East Jerusalem "the capital of the State of Palestine" and called upon all countries to recognise this state.

Turkish President Erdogan minced no words while critiquing Mr Trump's decision, terming it "the product of an evangelist and Zionist mentality".

There were various leaders of Muslim states in attendance, including this country's prime minister, as well as the leaders of Iran, Jordan, Indonesia etc. However, conspicuous by his absence was the Saudi king; Riyadh, instead, sent a minister.

The Saudi 'snub' did not go unnoticed, as Iranian President Rouhani quipped that "some countries in our region are in cooperation with the United States and the Zionist regime". As for the Palestinians themselves, President Mahmoud Abbas used blunt language for the US, saying he saw "no role" for the Americans in the peace process.

While the show of unity is commendable, it must be seen how far this rhetoric can go in actually addressing the Palestine question in tangible terms. It is quite obvious that there is a divide in the Muslim world, with certain states — Turkey, Iran — openly expressing sympathies with the Palestinians.

Other more pro-American regimes in the Middle East, while declaring support for Palestine, are wary of upsetting Washington. It is also a fact that many of the Arab autocracies have been quietly expanding ties with Israel in the shadows.

Will Muslim states be able to bridge these geopolitical divides and speak with one voice to secure the rights of Palestine? There also needs to be greater clarity on whether the OIC has accepted that the Palestinians only have a claim on East

Jerusalem; after all, 1993's Declaration of Principles indicates that the status of the holy city had yet to be finalised.

The occupied territories are in ferment, especially in the aftermath of the US announcement.

The question is: will the Muslim world take practical steps to help secure a viable Palestinian state, or will the Palestinians be left alone to face the Israeli war machine as it tramples them underfoot?

Axing renewable power

IT was almost inevitable, and now we have it from the horse's mouth. When the government announced that it was contracting surplus power-generation capacity so that it could close down inefficient, more expensive power plants currently supplying the grid, it was up for debate what fate would befall renewable power contracts that are either in the pipeline or aspiring to be. Now the energy minister, Mr Awais Leghari, has confirmed that the government feels no obligation to consider any more expressions of interest for renewable power since "load-shedding has ended" and the goal presumably achieved. This is precisely the kind of thinking that the nascent revolution in renewable energy needed to be protected from, and it is precisely what has come to pass.

This is nothing short of tragic. The short-sightedness involved in this assessment — to see renewable energy as a short-term solution to load-shedding — is disastrous and will cut us out of a global revolution as prices of solar and wind power drop with almost every passing month. More importantly, the renewable energy revolution renders the whole concept of 'load-shedding' obsolete. Pakistan needs to urgently accelerate its adoption of what is called 'point-of-consumption generation', where small wind and solar turbines installed on rooftops and vacant plots near factories supplement the power provided by the grid. This model works best when there is concerted attention by the state to enable net metering, where surplus power generated through point-of-consumption renewable sources is sold back to the grid when it is not needed. The idea is not so crude as 'ending load-shedding'. The idea is to put in place a model that enables the rapid spread of renewable energy technology, to the point

where it eventually begins to replace grid-supplied electricity as the primary source. If our government, and its ministers, could see this far, they would not talk of axing renewable energy because “load-shedding has ended”.

Blow to PTI

Imran Khan’s political career has survived, Jahangir Tareen’s has not and the PTI politics of change has taken a hit.

The Supreme Court verdict yesterday was in a case rooted in politics. The petitioner seeking the disqualification of Mr Khan and Mr Tareen is a PML-N leader, Hanif Abbasi, who approached the court immediately after the first hearing in the Panama Papers case was held.

While the allegations against Mr Khan and Mr Tareen were plainly justiciable and within the powers of the court to decide, they pertained to declarations made by the PTI leaders in their nomination papers for the 2013 general election.

Politics was clearly a motive in the petitions, but just as clearly Mr Khan and Mr Tareen were vulnerable to legal sanction because of complicated financial dealings that wealthy Pakistanis have long considered to be the norm, whatever the letter of the law may state.

Now, if wealthy Pakistanis begin to consider declaring their wealth and assets more accurately and politicians start taking declarations in nomination papers more seriously, a small step in the right direction for the country as a whole may have been taken.

For the PTI, the survival of Imran Khan is not vindication enough. The disqualification of Mr Tareen, the secretary general of the PTI and a figure nearly always seen at the side of Mr Khan, is a significant blow to a party that has relentlessly attacked political opponents for alleged corruption and preached that Pakistan’s progress lies in an unwavering adherence to the rule of law.

Mr Tareen’s disqualification is also uncomfortably close in judicial reasoning to the ouster of the former prime minister and PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif.

Effectively, a top PTI leader has been stripped of public office for almost the same reason the PTI used to argue Mr Sharif had no right to hold public office.

In recent years, the PTI's brand of insurrectionist, outsider politics has existed uneasily alongside the party's embrace of so-called electables. While all politics is a form of compromise and the gap between what politicians pledge and what they do is often large, the PTI's legitimate quest for power is being undermined by a whatever-it-takes attitude to politics. The rot within the PTI extends significantly further than just Mr Tareen.

For the political class as a whole, the Supreme Court decision ought to be another warning against the growing judicialisation of politics. The invocation of Article 62(1)f and a lifetime ban from politics for misdeclaration without underlying crimes having been proven in a court of law are arguably signs of democracy headed in the wrong direction.

No one, especially elected representatives, is above the law, but the law has to be fair, just and reasonable. A reassessment of the disqualification law is needed; is the political class willing to do so fairly and transparently?

APS: three years on

IT is an attack that shook Pakistan to the core; a date that will live in infamy. Three years ago today, the Army Public School terrorist attack in Peshawar claimed 141 lives, including 132 schoolchildren. There have been attacks before and since the APS attack that have been shocking and vile: the Benazir Bhutto assassination, church bombings, market bombings, mosque bombings, hotel bombings, attacks on airport, police and security agencies, massacre of Hazaras — all wreaking terrible havoc and leaving deep scars across the country. The monstrosity of the APS attack, however, almost defies understanding. A very large number of children killed in a school is a country on the verge of failure that nobody can deny. The attack unleashed a wave of revulsion and galvanised public opinion against terrorists and militants. Operation Zarb-i-Azb, launched six months earlier, was intensified. In an unfortunate spirit of vengeance, the moratorium on the death penalty was lifted. A constitutional amendment to give military courts the power to try civilian terrorism suspects was forced through

parliament. Perhaps most significantly in the long term, the National Action Plan was drawn up and unanimously approved by the country's political leadership. A page was supposed to have been turned.

Three years later, did APS truly mark a decisive turn against extremism, militancy and terrorism? Sadly, the spirit of the victims of APS has not been honoured. While Pakistan is generally more stable and secure than it has been in a number of years, the fight against extremism envisaged in NAP has gone nowhere. Drawn up hastily after the APS attack, NAP was more a statement of intent than a detailed guide to fighting and defeating extremism in the country. But it is important because it reflects a national consensus and was the first time an attempt was made to define and systematically confront the threat of extremism in the country. Today, while some forms of militancy and terrorism have been diminished, the extremist threat is arguably greater than it has ever been. The failure is total and collective — civil and military, provincial and federal. Whether out of fear, incompetence, complicity or a combination of all three, the state has allowed extremism in society to fester. There will be no final victory against terrorism in Pakistan unless extremism is also defeated. Honour the memory of the children of Army Public School; confront and defeat extremism.

Lawyers at it — again

ON Wednesday, angry lawyers once more turned to ransacking and rioting in Multan. Some 50 of them have been booked for resorting to violence. The reason? The shifting of the lower courts to new premises. The lawyers felt that the new place didn't quite have facilities worth their while. Resultantly, they got angry, smashed things, and shouted, vowed and warned. Then they posed for the camera. It is really no use analysing such behaviour anymore — there have been far too many instances that have recorded similar reactions by lawyers when they felt they were being denied relief, privileges and favours. Everyone knows what is wrong with such an attitude. Everyone understands the background — the lawyers' movement et al. It is common knowledge what this kind of disservice and repeated acts of violence are doing to the grand edifice that is essentially meant to deliver justice via an unwavering adherence to the rule of law. It is evident that we are helpless in the face of a hydra-headed entity that is ready to trample on good sense and principles at the slightest pretext.

It is the lawyers who have been in the forefront of the movement for ensuring the rights of the people. It can be expected that society in general would never hesitate to support the advocates' fight for the best possible deal. Unfortunately, many lawyers have been acting as if this support were surplus to their requirements. Even if it is conceded that the lawyers as a union are free to push for their 'exclusive' causes on their own, there have been concerns enough for some among them to stand up and call for tough introspection. It seems that such recent calls have not brought about a resolve aimed at reformation. There has to be a growing realisation among the lawyers that violent practices that put them in the same category as vandals have to stop. Or eventually, there will be nothing worth saving in this country.

Politicisation of courts

IT is an extraordinary riposte to perceived critics by the chief justice of Pakistan and it deserves to be analysed carefully.

A day after declining to derail PTI supremo Imran Khan's political career but knocking out PTI secretary general, Jahangir Tareen — who has since resigned from the post — from electoral politics, Chief Justice Saqib Nisar has lamented the politicisation of the superior judiciary by sections of the media and the political class.

According to him, while his court is working hard to provide justice according to the letter of the law, some judgements are being viewed unnecessarily through a political prism. In today's fiercely divided polity and media, that perception is damaging the court's stature and position as a neutral arbiter.

His bluntness is clearly rooted in a great deal of truth. The febrile political atmosphere in the country and no-holds-barred commentary in some sections of the media have reduced complicated legal questions to perceptions of which political party benefits or loses from a particular decision.

The judicialisation of politics here is an emerging reality, however, that all sides and institutions need to consider carefully. Once the judiciary is approached in a

matter that is clearly justiciable and within the jurisdiction of a court, the latter cannot simply turn away petitioners because of possible political ramifications.

But the superior judiciary may want to consider being more mindful of public perception and issue judgements that are well argued, firmly rooted in the law and establish good precedents.

Where there is a coincidence such as on Friday when verdicts concerning Shahbaz Sharif and Imran Khan, seen as potential prime ministerial candidates, were announced, political speculation is inevitable, though not necessarily worrying as it quickly dissipates. But in the Panama Papers case, for example, there was far too much controversy and inconsistency.

No legal purist could have been fully satisfied with the court's reasoning and some of the obiter remarks by the bench were unnecessary.

A newfound enthusiasm for invoking constitutional disqualification clauses against the elected representatives ought to be reevaluated by the judiciary that cannot be expected to disregard constitutional clauses simply because they may stir political controversy. However, it is possible to make a case for reading disqualification clauses narrowly.

In a previous era, the superior judiciary itself noted that were some of the disqualification clauses to be interpreted broadly, virtually no one would be eligible to be the people's representative.

The Supreme Court is large and diverse. All the justices do not necessarily have to agree on every point; intra-court dissent can be helpful in building a stronger judicial institution.

Perhaps, however, the court can consider why seemingly similar cases are yielding opposite decisions. The Supreme Court is integral to a healthy, functioning democracy. There is no harm in a bit of introspection.

Crackdown on INGOs

REPORTS this week that the government has ordered anywhere between 10 to 30 INGOs to cease operations in the country is further evidence of the state's escalating paranoia. Viewed in tandem with attempts to crack down on the media, social media and local activism, this suspicion of all foreigners and Pakistanis working with international aid threatens to plunge us deeper into darkness, isolated from the world and even each other. True, many foreign states do attempt to influence policy agendas through the disbursement of grant funding, particularly when it comes to national security. But when these policies align with what our government ought to be pursuing anyway, and when the ultimate beneficiaries of such activities are our own neglected people, the government must explain why it is preventing necessary humanitarian, development, research and advocacy work from taking place within the country. It is a legitimate demand that the development sector comply with stringent rules. But transparency and accountability are also required from our elected representatives.

None of the INGOs that have spoken to the media have been given a reason for why their registration applications were not approved by the interior ministry. Confirming its arbitrariness, at least one local NGO was also included in this wholesale culling, even though its application is currently under review with the SECP. The government must provide grounds for its denials and ensure an independent review process for appeals. It must provide an answer to the no less vital question of whether it has the funds, capacity and will to fill the vacuum left behind by INGOs and, concomitantly, local NGOs. International groups contribute billions of rupees, supply technical assistance and employ thousands of Pakistanis to strengthen access to education, healthcare, disaster relief, food security and human rights. Human Rights Watch estimates that INGOs along with local partners reach about 20m Pakistanis annually. They do this because successive democratic governments and military regimes have failed to discharge their duties to the people, despite donor agencies' attempts to work with the public sector. If the state is committed to the people's uplift, it must see a way past its myopic distrust of the progressive values of the development sector and work with it to provide sustainable human security. Anything less is a disservice to our underprivileged, marginalised, disaster- and conflict-affected citizens.

Street crime & terrorism

THE DG Sindh Rangers, Maj Gen Muhammad Saeed, has executed an almost perfect illustration of the saying 'to crack a nut with a sledgehammer'. Addressing a news conference in Karachi on Wednesday, the head of the paramilitary force said that robbers and street criminals should be tried as terrorists under the Anti Terrorism Act and suggested that the home department was considering such a step. He went on to dilate upon the success of the Rangers-led operation in the city that he said had resulted in a steep decline in crimes such as targeted killing, kidnapping for ransom and extortion. Street crime, however, remained a concern, one that neither the Rangers nor the police had been able to curb.

When a law-enforcement agency drafted in ostensibly to tackle the most serious crimes is tacitly given licence to use unbridled force — including torture and extra judicial killings — to achieve its objectives, it leaves both the law-enforcement apparatus and society brutalised. All nuance is lost: the ends justify the means. The DG Rangers' statement is certain to have struck a chord with many people, especially those who have fallen prey to street crime. However, it is for good reason that vigilante 'justice' lies outside the pale of the law; crime must be prosecuted according to a dispassionate rationale. Every act of criminality does not rise to the level of terrorism, which does not mean that certain types of crime should be condoned, but that perspective is important. Equating someone who, for instance, steals mobile phones, with a target killer is overstating matters, particularly when there are several privileged individuals in our society who get away with actions that seem to constitute the legal definition of terrorism. Conflating street crime with terrorism also trivialises the crimes that attract the application of the ATA. Moreover, the DG Rangers is surely aware of how the ATCs are already clogged with cases. Adding to the bottleneck is hardly the answer.

Church tragedy in Quetta

THE capital of the most militarised province in the country has been attacked yet again by terrorists. The Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta was attacked yesterday by suicide bombers; at least nine people were killed and many more injured. An attack almost certainly meant to spread fear countrywide among a beleaguered Christian community preparing to celebrate Christmas, the state has responded in a disturbingly reflexive manner by praising security personnel at the scene of the attack for preventing a greater attack. While heroic and alert security personnel may have prevented a greater tragedy, the attackers were undeniably successful. Indeed, the recurring question of how secure zones in Quetta are entered with seeming ease by militants remains unanswered. Quetta is neither a border town nor a provincial city with a scarcity of security resources. Perhaps state officials are concerned about maintaining morale among the general public and in the lower tiers of the security apparatus, but the denial of reality can have its own debilitating effects.

While the roots of terrorism in Balochistan are undeniably complex, there has been a tendency to try and separate it from militant violence elsewhere in the country. Certainly, a low-level nationalist insurgency and an unstable border with two neighbouring countries put Balochistan's security challenges in a different perspective, but terrorist attacks such as against a church in Quetta cannot be separated from the national militant threat. From Fata to Karachi, Peshawar to Quetta and Rawalpindi to Lahore, there may be different militant networks active, but they are often part of the same spectrum. The interconnected fight against militancy and extremism also plays its part, with militant networks acquiring the knowledge to attack in new parts of the country by tapping into local extremist networks. The ad hoc, piecemeal strategy of the state to combat militancy, terrorism and extremism has not worked. Arguably, an ad hoc, piecemeal approach by the state allows militant groups to regenerate or evolve.

While state officials will pledge to step up security at churches and Christian sites across the country in the run-up to Christmas, the reality is that the terrorists will always have a greater range of targets. The Easter Sunday bombing in Lahore in 2016 targeted a public park frequented by local communities celebrating. It ought to be obvious that attacks must be stopped at the stage of conception and organisation if ever true stability and normality are to return to Pakistan.

Unhappily, the state appears to be caught in a defensive crouch, lashing out at real and perceived external enemies but unable to bring greater coherence and organisation to the fight against militancy. With an election on the horizon, the political class fiercely divided, and the civil and military facets of the state seemingly in conflict with each other, the months ahead could hold great danger.

Rising external debt

THE latest data on external debt that the State Bank released on Thursday paints a worrisome picture of the direction in which the economy is headed. External debt of the country increased by \$10bn in the first quarter of this fiscal year compared to the first quarter last year. And this does not include the \$2.5bn in the bonds floated recently. The bulk of this increase has come since March this year, and given the recent flotation of bonds in the global markets, the figure is set to accelerate in the coming months. As part of this story of increasing external debts, there is an accompanying growth of external debt-service payments. For example, two years ago, the country paid \$5.3bn in debt-service costs, including principal and interest. The next year, this figure rose to almost \$8.2bn, with both components, principal and interest, registering an increase. Thus far in the first quarter of the fiscal year, the debt-service figure has come in at \$2.1bn, which if extrapolated forward, indicates no change from last year in the best of scenarios. Even that is worrisome, given that we are shoring up our reserves with borrowed money.

The rising external debt is the other side of the growth story that the government constantly reminds us of. Pakistan's GDP growth rates have indeed begun to tick upward since 2013, but the pace of accumulation of external debt implies that in substantial measure, these upticks have been earned through borrowed money. The fresh borrowing undertaken recently by floating bonds in international capital markets should not impact the total debt of the state since the government claims that it will be retiring an equal amount of domestic debt this week. If it does this without raising additional revenues so that the fiscal deficit target is not impacted then the net effect will be to transfer domestic debt to the external account. But even without a net increase in total public debt, the rising external liabilities are a problem because of the depreciation of the rupee, which increases debt-service obligations accordingly. Those who use this fact to argue against the

depreciation of the exchange rate demonstrate a lack of familiarity with how debt markets work. There is no way that a strategy built on borrowing and paying for growth can be sustained without the bill eventually becoming due.

Rohingya massacre

IF the international community wishes to preserve its humanitarian credentials, then it must seriously examine the bone-chilling testimonies of Myanmar's Rohingya survivors. Released recently, a report by Doctors Without Borders found that at least 9,000 Rohingya died in Myanmar's Rakhine state between August and September. Of those, at least 6,700 were killed after being beaten, shot, burnt or sexually assaulted. At least 730 were children below the age of five — 60pc of them died after being shot. Even as conservative estimates, these figures far exceed Myanmar's official death toll of 400. They also render the repatriation deal between Myanmar and Bangladesh even more disconcerting. Repatriating Rohingya people back to villages burnt to ashes and where entire communities were subjected to a campaign of ethnic cleansing is shockingly inhumane — especially as the current refugee exodus shows no signs of abating. Then, the disappearance of young Rohingya citizen journalists, especially those secretly documenting violence since 2012, has resulted in a complete information blackout — two Reuters journalists were detained recently by the military. On their part, the Myanmar authorities deny involvement in the violence. But failure to allow UN investigators access to Rakhine to assess the state of Rohingya communities clearly points to the government's complicity. Access for fact-finding missions to check ground realities should serve as a UN precondition for future voluntary repatriation.

With more than 647,000 refugees having fled Myanmar, survivors in Bangladesh's camps recount being driven out of their villages by bullets, rape and arson. Testimonies of mass gang rape and killings have emerged with survivors describing dead bodies stacked high after villages experienced mass slaughter. These accounts are reminiscent of the suffering of the Yazidi community, many of whose members were killed by the militant Islamic State group, and should prod the international community into taking immediate action. Given the UN's mandate to protect human life, it must push for investigations into these unforgivable crimes to hold those responsible to account.

America's warning

A SEMI-ANNUAL Pentagon report to the US Congress on the security situation in Afghanistan has included a troubling assertion about Pakistan-US ties. The report has warned that the US is prepared to take “unilateral steps” in areas where Pakistan differs with the US in how to address the regional militancy threat.

While the report has also stressed the need for dialogue and cooperation with Pakistan, the mere suggestion of unilateral military action inside Pakistan by the US against militant targets is likely to be met with hostility.

The presidency of Donald Trump has already upended many diplomatic norms, while a more militarised approach against militant threats that America perceives globally suggests a willingness to redefine red lines in ties with other countries. Pakistan must respond carefully to any invasive tactics that the US might attempt.

The triangular relationship between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US has had both legitimate and less legitimate complaints on all sides.

With Pakistan continuing to suffer terrorist attacks, and credible intelligence suggesting that many of these originate in sanctuaries that anti-Pakistan militants have found in Afghanistan, it is clear that Pakistan itself faces a serious threat.

Meanwhile, the repeated attempts to pin blame on Pakistan for failures of the US and Kabul overlook a fundamental reality: eventually, there will have to be a political settlement in Afghanistan. Threatening Pakistan with unilateral action against militant networks that Pakistan is also expected to help bring to the negotiating table makes little sense.

Where intelligence is shared with Pakistan of the genesis of certain attacks inside Afghanistan being traced back to its soil, Pakistan has for some years expressed a willingness to act. It has never been clear why that offer has not been taken up earnestly by Afghanistan or the US.

In Afghanistan, the Trump administration seems destined to allow the US military greater leeway for at least the next two years, perhaps for the entire term of the current presidency.

There will likely be some gains. The military surge authorised by former US president Barack Obama was significantly larger, but the looser rules that this administration has set could allow the much smaller US military presence today to return the war in Afghanistan to a stalemate.

That may trigger an eventual reassessment by the Afghan Taliban, Kabul and the US about the need to restart a dialogue process. It is towards that end that Pakistan must keep its focus.

The Salala incident in 2011 and an incursion by US helicopters into South Waziristan in 2008 have already demonstrated how reckless action can have severe implications and consequences for all sides.

Hepatitis C in Punjab

THE extent of the damage caused by the hepatitis C virus is beginning to be revealed as a public health disaster that is impossible to reverse but that can be halted. Given that Pakistan has the world's second-highest prevalence rate for hepatitis C after Egypt, it is clear that the national health services ministry has yet to demonstrate solid commitment to tackling this crisis. On Monday, a news report revealed 50,000 patients had been diagnosed with hepatitis C in Punjab over six months. Dubbed the slow, silent killer, hepatitis C can cause chronic liver disease that proceeds insidiously and can go unnoticed for decades. Because there is a cure for the virus, abandoning thousands to potential death due to poor diagnosis by untrained medical practitioners is not an option. If prices for drugs prevent large-scale provision of treatment, the government should approach global health donors — though a fairer pricing framework for drugs must be encouraged. The paucity of resources has meant that other national disease-prevention programmes are buttressed with donor funding. Similarly, public-private partnerships are needed for hepatitis. Meanwhile, because poverty fuels economic vulnerability, regulating healthcare providers will curb malpractice. And though the Punjab Hepatitis Ordinance, 2017, stipulates the enforcement of

preventive measures (safe blood transfusions and dialysis etc), the overall lack of quality medical services is at the core of the crisis.

Investing resources and expertise for prevention and treatment is critical for hepatitis C. Eliminating risk factors implies ensuring implementation of health and safety mechanisms — including curtailing the use of dirty syringes, enforcing safe blood transfusions and improving the hospital-waste disposal infrastructure. Moreover, the health ministry must note that its long-standing failure to consolidate preventive strategies has left the exchequer with a hefty burden. However, certain projects spearheaded by Punjab's health ministry are worth emulating. First, Punjab has reportedly replaced 50pc of syringes in hospitals with single-use syringes. Improving waste-control projects in Punjab, including by building 39 incinerators in health facilities, is also on the checklist. So, with the Supreme Court's alarm at Sindh's lax attitude towards social-service provision, including waste-disposal mechanisms, it makes good sense for the province to follow Punjab. Only when countries like ours, with few resources and high prevalence of disease, demonstrate strong political and financial commitment, can governments eliminate life-threatening illnesses. Otherwise, a potential death sentence awaits swathes of poor communities.

Imprisoned abroad

EXPERIENCES with the criminal justice system may vary from country to country, but in states like Pakistan, where the system is not known for its speedy delivery of justice, individuals often have to languish in detention beyond the duration of their sentences. There have been cases here where people have spent over a decade in jail as their trials have dragged on. Yet there are systems which are more opaque and byzantine than Pakistan's; for example, in the Gulf nations even flimsy charges can get one hauled away, with the legal process proceeding at a snail's pace. Therefore, it is of great concern that thousands of Pakistanis are languishing in foreign jails, while the state has no coherent policy to provide them with legal assistance. As reported recently, the foreign affairs ministry told the Lahore High Court that 9,476 Pakistani nationals are imprisoned in 100 countries. The court was hearing a petition by families of prisoners incarcerated in the Gulf states — the majority of Pakistani prisoners abroad are reportedly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In states where the rule of law is enforced and the judicial process is transparent, Pakistanis accused of committing a crime are either exonerated if found innocent, or let off on completion of their sentence. However, as indicated above, in states where official processes are less transparent, the guilty and the accused can spend an inordinate amount of time in jail in miserable conditions. That is why the Lahore High Court's order to the government to place the consular protection policy before it in two months must be welcomed. Under such a policy, Pakistani missions abroad would be tasked with providing consular access to Pakistani citizens in foreign jails. Such access, whether in the shape of hiring local counsel, or translating court proceedings, can be instrumental in helping Pakistanis aboard secure justice. The government must not delay the formulation of such a policy and should present it before the court within the stipulated period.

CPEC plan lost in frivolous chatter?

The government has released a summary of the Long Term Plan of CPEC, and although many of the details are not contained in the document, some disclosure is still better than none.

The thing to note in the document is the breadth and scope of the corridor enterprise, which, it is now clear, goes far beyond roads, power plants and transit trade.

The document provides pointers which say that Pakistan's investment landscape is going to be reshaped to "encourage Chinese enterprises, private sectors and private sector funds of other economic entities to make various forms of direct investment".

Aside from investment, the document points towards the creation of large tourist resorts along the Makran coast, implying a growing number of Chinese personnel living in Pakistan in the years to come, as well as elaborate financial interlinkages between China and Pakistan to facilitate investment flow and expand the role of the yuan in Pakistan's external trade — for starters.

The sheer scope of what the document points towards is breathtaking, and even if a small portion of what is mentioned actually materialises, the project will indeed be a 'game changer' as the government repeatedly says.

Considering all this, it is imperative that the document be given a close read by all parties concerned, particularly in business and politics.

It is dismaying to the extreme that as an engagement of this magnitude gets under way, the entire national conversation is dominated by squabbling amongst politicians and the heads of various institutions. This is no way to begin a journey down a 'game changer' of a road.

It is also worth noting that the objections of Ahsan Iqbal, in his previous post as planning minister, to the Dawn story on the LTP published in May, stand nullified. The document released on Monday is only a summarised version of the same, more detailed document that the Dawn story was based on.

Given the magnitude of what is about to begin, the pressures that Pakistani rulers will face over the years until 2030 — the period that is covered by the plan — will be enormous, as the presence of Chinese capital and personnel increases.

For the benefits of the enterprise to truly be unlocked for Pakistan, political sobriety and stability will be essential. If our traditional slash-and-burn style of politics remains the norm in the years ahead, with political and institutional rivalry dominating the national discourse as well as the policy environment, it will put Pakistan at a catastrophic disadvantage throughout the process.

It is unclear how strongly Pakistan's interests are represented on the CPEC negotiating table, but our current way of doing politics needs to end if we wish to extract maximum benefit from this enterprise for our country.

Farmers in peril

FOR small-time farmers, the massive gated communities coming up in Karachi's peripheries are an ominous development that threatens to upend their very existence. Their quality of life, the prospects of their future generations, even their place within the extended community, is inextricably linked with the land. On Monday, an investigative report in this paper exposed the travails of indigenous people in Karachi's district Malir who are under pressure of eviction from the land to which their claim often goes back generations. The district, which is part of the city's rural belt, has in recent years been the focus of Bahria Town and DHA, Karachi, mega private developers who belong to or have connections within the highest echelons of power in this country. The tens of thousands of acres that have been acquired for the purpose in this area, at times by blatantly illegal means, add up to around 10pc of the entire district. The construction of housing projects here also entails enormous environmental costs, whose extent will unfold over the years to come. The farmers unfortunately have no voice; those quarters whose duty it is to safeguard their rights have instead bartered them away in return for political favours and pecuniary benefits.

The state is constitutionally bound to protect its citizens' property rights. Instead, the PPP government is colluding with powerful lobbies by surrendering government land at throwaway prices and depriving those with a legal claim over portions of it in order to benefit from the proceeds. It is also the state's duty to provide housing, but no viable scheme for low-cost housing has been developed in Sindh for several decades. The government's neglect on this score is in stark contrast with its alacrity in its transactions with private developers to build homes for the upper- and middle-income social strata. By going down this path, it is also encouraging runaway speculation in projects unlikely to see the light of day for decades. Even the fact that this area constitutes a PPP vote bloc has not deterred the Sindh government; the avarice of its head honchos has blinded it to the party's very *raison d'être* and the legacy of its founders. Senator Farhatullah Babar on Monday called for the military's commercial activities to be confined to defence production and allied matters. He may want to question his own party's role in expanding the security establishment's commercial interests in Sindh.

Fighting malnutrition

EARLIER this year, a UN study showed how the number of hungry people in the world had increased for the first time since the turn of the century, fuelling concern that climate change and conflict could set back years of progress in fighting malnutrition. In Pakistan, 44pc of all children under five years are reported to be stunted. On Monday, the Global Nutrition Report 2017 couldn't have been launched at a more opportune time as its authors issued yet another important call for governments to make critical nutrition investments ensuring that our children thrive. Pakistan's nutrition challenge is exacerbated by poverty and inequality. The country spends only 3.7pc of its GDP on nutrition — the lowest in Asia — it has failed to combat malnutrition. Further, it noted that a significant number of Pakistani children were obese due to unhealthy eating habits. The report also found that 88pc of all countries face varied forms of malnutrition — besides childhood stunting, there are many anaemic women of childbearing age. Improving nutrition as a national priority means greater investment and judicious allocations to ensure that budgets are spent in areas such as health, food, social protection and sanitation. Nutrition-specific interventions utilising the expertise of LHWs in preventive healthcare and family planning are imperative. Another tested method to curb malnourishment is to add specific nutritious foods to existing health interventions in the primary healthcare system.

Because so many children die annually from lack of food or suffer from stunting, the fight against malnutrition must be a priority for all governments. This means adopting a comprehensive national strategy to combat hunger and poverty — perhaps emulating the successes of Peru that scaled up national and nutrition-specific policies and interventions across food, health and social protection systems to reduce malnutrition rates. In Pakistan, the best plan would involve overcoming obstacles to implementation barriers and achieving high coverage rates in food programmes.

Gen Bajwa's briefing

AMIDST myriad internal and external challenges and the country teetering on the brink of crises, attempts to bridge the civil-military divide and foster dialogue between institutions are particularly welcome.

Army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's decision to visit parliament at the invitation of the Senate and deliver a multi-hour, wide-ranging briefing alongside the DG ISI, DG MI and DGMO suggests that the military is aware that the constitutional order and national security need to be strengthened by inter-institutional cooperation.

The interconnectedness between a strong democratic order in the country and Pakistan's strength internally and regionally has often been obscured by bitter partisan wrangling.

However, if the military leadership is willing to engage the political class in frank dialogue, there is a possibility of aligning institutional interests so that the country itself benefits. It is hoped that Gen Bajwa's maiden briefing to parliament has set a precedent that will be regularly followed.

Yet, for dialogue to be successful, it must be genuine. Gen Bajwa is reported to have told the Senate that the military welcomes parliament's setting the national security strategy and that better relations with India are also a prerogative for parliament to pursue.

That, however, is far from the reality that is known to most parliamentarians and the public. Successive governments in this era of a transition to democracy have tried to influence Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan and India, but those attempts have led to severe civil-military tensions.

When the previous PPP-led coalition negotiated a historic civilian assistance programme with the US, the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009, it was nearly derailed by military objections. While parliament has passed a resolution calling for neutrality in the Yemen conflict, retired army chief Gen Raheel Sharif has become the first commander of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, a grouping with a distinct anti-Iran bias.

If the security establishment does want parliament to have a greater role in the formulation of national security policy and strategy, it has to demonstrate that it is willing to listen and implement ideas it may not necessarily agree with.

Perhaps one of the gestures that the military could consider is to have civilian representatives present in the meetings that the army chief routinely has with foreign leaders.

While uniformed representatives are often invited by the civilian government to high-level meetings with foreign governments, the opposite is not the case. The defence minister or the foreign secretary, for example, are hardly ever present in meetings at GHQ with political representatives of foreign states. Learning to work alongside each other is a necessary first step to learning to accept non-coercive input from one another.

Certainly, the civilian leadership must also learn to analyse and speak about national security matters in a more sophisticated manner. Fundamental change in the national security domain is difficult, but it is also necessary.

Delimitation gains

THE squabbling politicians have finally cooperated. On Tuesday, the Senate managed to pass a bill that clears the way for delimitation of constituencies based on the results of the latest census. The move means that a big hurdle in the holding of elections on schedule has been removed. Though the ECP had earlier set a Nov 10 deadline for the passage of this bill, it is still expected that the commission will expedite work to ensure the completion of this very sensitive task before next summer in order to meet an important prerequisite for holding the general elections. Here's hoping that in this assignment the ECP will enjoy complete support at both the federal and provincial level and that there will be no further hiccups along the way. It is important that the country is ready to go to the polls on time, especially when this is seen as a crucial step towards ending the present state of uncertainty.

Indeed, the bill did require commitment and resolve from various parties. To begin with, Punjab is set to lose nine National Assembly seats because of the

delimitation exercise. All stakeholders have agreed that the total number of National Assembly seats will be unchanged. The province that will gain the most is KP whose quota of seats will rise by four, while Islamabad and Balochistan are going to be the other beneficiaries. The strongest opposition to the bill came from parties with a large presence in Sindh where the seat quota will remain the same. It was an inevitable reaction given the reservations of the PPP and the MQM regarding the census numbers. The approval of the bill by the parties is both a sign of maturity and a credit to the ruling party: despite its large presence in Punjab where the number of seats will decrease, the PML-N was sensible enough to grant certain demands. Among these is the audit of the census that the PPP had been insisting on in return for its nod to the delimitation bill. It may have taken more time than it should have, but the eventual passage does offer an answer to those who had been claiming that the quarrelsome politicians were actively pursuing a delay in the holding of polls, or some other sinister purpose, by opposing the bill. The current unity is welcome and should ideally be in evidence later on as well.

Karachi's water woes

THE problem of water supply in Karachi is two-fold: firstly, there is not enough water — for various reasons — flowing through everyone's taps; secondly, the quality of water that citizens receive across Sindh is highly questionable. A Supreme Court-appointed commission has dilated on the latter issue in great detail over the past year. In fact, were it not for the apex court's constant perusal of the matter, the provincial authorities would have continued to ignore it. As the chief justice of Pakistan remarked in Lahore on Tuesday, "we have taken notice of the poor ... amenities in Karachi and now it is Punjab's turn". However, the administration in Sindh, rather than admitting it has failed to provide potable water to Karachi in sufficient quantities, has shifted the blame to the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board. During a meeting on Tuesday Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah said that the water board had been "misguiding" successive governments on Karachi's water needs, adding that the real problem was not the lack of sufficient quantity, but a decrepit water distribution system.

Shah sahib is only partially right. While the KWSB is indeed an overstaffed and inefficient organisation and water pipelines in the metropolis need replacement,

there is a water shortage, part of it due to theft and wastage. The chief minister said Karachi's requirements were around 800 MGD, yet some independent experts have argued the megacity needs over a billion MGD. The fact is, passing the buck will not solve the problem, especially since the water board functions under the provincial government. What is required is a thorough study and action plan — backed by independent experts — that can pinpoint Karachi's water needs and suggest ways to plug the holes, including the thriving water rackets in the metropolis. Either the provincial government should overhaul the water board and ensure steps are taken to scientifically address Karachi's water problem, or it should hand over the KWSB to the municipal administration.

India's visa politics

THE faux magnanimity that Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj exudes on Twitter in responses to requests from Pakistanis for visas suggests that there is more to the picture than meets the eye.

In reply to a parliamentary question, Indian Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijju has confirmed what many Pakistani applicants for Indian visas have claimed in recent times: India has dramatically cut back on visas issued to Pakistanis. In 2017, India has issued 18,000 fewer visas to Pakistani applicants than it issued in 2016.

Already little more than a trickle, the official flow of people across the Pakistan-India border has been further choked by India: 52,525 visas to Pakistanis in 2016 had until November this year been reduced to 34,445.

Read more: India planning to 'slow down' visa process for Pakistani applicants — report

The reverse flow, Indians travelling to Pakistan, has seen an uptick: 6,000 more visas issued in 2017 until November, for a total of 45,519, according to Pakistan High Commission officials in India.

Even so, the numbers in both directions are unacceptably small and are an indication of the deep freeze in ties between the two countries.

Unhappily, there does not appear to be a readily identifiable path back towards normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan. Both domestic and regional dynamics suggest that the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will continue to try and heap pressure on Pakistan for myopic gains.

The recent furore in India in the midst of state elections in Gujarat underlined the luridness of the anti-Pakistan sentiment that is being deliberately fanned by the Modi government. That the current prime minister accused his immediate predecessor, Manmohan Singh of the Congress party, of conspiring with Pakistan to defeat the BJP in a state election was truly astonishing.

Also telling was the response of Mr Singh, an Indian leader thought to have long yearned for peace between South Asia's biggest rivals: Mr Singh suggested that it is Mr Modi who is soft on Pakistan, not the Congress party. That is the state of the discourse in India on Pakistan: national leaders competing with each other to take a more strident tone against this country.

Caught in the middle are the average citizens of India and Pakistan. With more than 1.5bn people in the two countries and tens of millions with family or historical ties in India and Pakistan, it ought to have been inconceivable that only about 80,000 visas were granted in the first 11 months of 2017 by India and Pakistan.

People-to-people contacts are vital to maintaining constituencies of peace in both countries and ought to be separate from the very real problems that the two states are grappling with.

If India is determined to play politics with the issuance of visas for Pakistanis, Pakistan should demonstrate a greater understanding by inviting more Indians to visit this country and experience first-hand the generosity and welcoming spirit of the people here.

Media under pressure

THE nature of the peril may have undergone a change, even if temporary, but journalists around the world continue to work in hostile environments. A number of organisations that fight for the rights of journalists to report without fear of violence or repression have documented a steep drop in fatalities compared to previous years. According to the International News Safety Institute, compared with 112 last year and 101 the year before, 68 journalists and media workers were killed in 2017, with the most fatalities occurring in Afghanistan, Mexico, Iraq, Syria and the Philippines. The number of women journalists who were killed, however, whether in the line of duty or deliberately targeted, was markedly higher. Nine, which constitutes 13pc of the total, were women, proportionately higher than in 2016 and 2015, when women made up 3pc and 10pc respectively of the total. However, fatalities alone give an incomplete picture of the state of the media. Attempts to gag the press have escalated alarmingly with Turkey heading the list of countries with the most journalists behind bars — 73 out of 262 — according to a recent report by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Similarly, Pakistan remains a minefield for media professionals despite a second consecutive year having nearly gone by during which no journalist died in retaliation for their work. The World Press Freedom Index still places it among the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. That appears a fair assessment for a number of reasons. As long as the murders of scores of journalists over the years go uninvestigated, let alone prosecuted, the threat of violence from various quarters — extremist groups, elements of the security establishment, insurgents, criminal gangs, etc — remains ever present. Only in three instances have the murderers of journalists been called to account. Such impunity means that media persons continue to look over their shoulder; some drop out of the profession altogether; others exercise self-censorship. Threats from militants still prevent media persons who had to move out of Fata during the military operations from returning home. Journalists have been forcibly disappeared and physically assaulted during this year. In Balochistan, practising journalism has become ever more hazardous after insurgent groups vowed retaliation against newspapers for the 'blackout' on news about their activities. The government, meanwhile, mouths platitudes about its respect for the freedom of the press, even as it takes no substantive measures to protect the fourth estate.

Foreign Office on Yemen

THE Yemeni conflict is one of the most brutal and complex wars currently raging in the Middle East. While on one level it is a tribal tussle pitting various Yemeni factions against each other with sectarian undertones, on a larger plane it reflects the wider battle for regional influence between Saudi Arabia, which backs the government of President Hadi, and the Houthi rebels, supported by Iran. Hence, Pakistan must approach the issue very carefully and avoid taking sides. However, on Wednesday, the Foreign Office condemned a recent Houthi missile strike on the Saudi capital Riyadh — apparently targeting a royal palace — in strong terms. It said the “increasing frequency and ferocity of the missile strikes, targeted at innocent civilians by Houthi rebels, pose a threat to regional peace and security”, adding that Pakistan stands “shoulder to shoulder” with Saudi Arabia. This was the second Houthi strike on Riyadh, as the militia had also fired upon the capital’s airport last month; the rebel leadership says the latest strike was to mark the 1,000th day of the Saudi intervention in Yemen.

The Houthi strikes targeting Saudi Arabia should be condemned, even if reports say that there has been no major damage. However, it is also very clear that Saudi strikes in Yemen have been brutal and in many cases indiscriminate. Thousands of Yemeni civilians have perished, as the Saudi-led coalition has bombed markets, funerals and other public places. The UN has censured Riyadh for its campaign, particularly for the fact that hundreds of children have died in coalition attacks. Moreover, the blockade of Yemen is suffocating the country and threatening to unleash a catastrophe of horrific proportions. Even Donald Trump — a man otherwise not known for his humanitarian concerns — has called upon his Saudi allies to ease the blockade. The Pakistan government must maintain its neutrality in the Yemen conflict and not appear to take sides, especially when a former Pakistani general heads the Saudi-led military force cobbled together to ‘fight terrorism’.

America's arrogance at the UN

A CLEAR majority of the global community — in fact, over half of the UN's members — voted overwhelmingly on Thursday to reject the unilateral US move to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

A General Assembly resolution, spearheaded by Egypt and co-sponsored by Pakistan, termed any attempts to alter the status of Jerusalem as “null and void” while calling on all states “to refrain from the establishment of diplomatic missions in the Holy City. ...”

A breakdown of the voting reflects some interesting facts. The 128 countries who favoured the resolution include Muslim states as well as the wider community of the Global South, along with most EU member states. Amongst the nine who voted against it, apart from the US and Israel, are tiny island nations and a couple of Central American states. Many other states abstained.

The tone of the US — both of its president and UN ambassador — before and after the vote was antagonistic and intimidating. The US threatened to cut off funding to the UN, while before the vote Mr Trump told the global community that he would be “watching those votes”, adding that any country that resisted US diktat would see aid money dry up.

True, there have been many rabble-rousers on the world stage, but rarely in recent history has the leader of one of the world's major powers issued such naked threats publicly.

While the US has a right to fashion its own foreign policy — even if in the case of Jerusalem such policies fly in the face of international law and globally acknowledged facts — there are ways to make one's point, especially at a forum as august as the UN. Such blatant threats do not behove states that swear to respect democracy and the global order.

US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley's comments were equally appalling and combative, as she said after the vote that the US “will remember this day in which it was singled out for attack in the UN General Assembly. ...” Ms Haley

appears to believe that the world community should either toe the American line, or suffer the consequences.

Regardless of Mr Trump and Ms Haley's grandstanding and verbal attacks, Thursday's vote was a powerful moral victory for Palestine. It showed that the plight of the Palestinians is not just a 'Muslim' issue, but one of universal human rights and dignity.

Those in the world community that receive millions in US aid — such as Egypt and this country — must also be commended for voting as per their conscience and not succumbing to threats.

The Palestine problem cannot be solved through bullying or intimidation; unless the rights of the Palestinians are recognised and secured, a long-lasting solution to the matter will not be found. On Thursday, in the hallowed halls of the UNGA, this sentiment echoed loud and clear.

Nuclear deterrence

THE National Command Authority has reaffirmed Pakistan's embrace of so-called full-spectrum deterrence in view of the challenges India's conventional and nuclear arms build-up have created. While neither state will admit it, a low-level nuclear arms race is already under way and it is not clear how it can be stopped. India's global aspirations and rivalry with China have triggered massive investments in the Indian military generally, but also in its nuclear arsenal specifically. A chain effect on Pakistan, requiring strategic responses to India's military build-up, was inevitable. Moreover, by mooted Pakistan-specific military plans such as the Cold Start doctrine and making fantastical claims about so-called surgical strikes across the Line of Control, India has attempted to undermine Pakistan's confidence in its defensive military strategies. That has further reinforced the need for Pakistan to seek and acquire more military defences, including a predictably greater reliance on this country's nuclear deterrence. The growing nuclearisation of South Asia is thoroughly undesirable and ought to be of concern to all right-thinking and sensible people in the region. However, the growing danger cannot be adequately addressed without an

understanding of the factors driving a shifting nuclear deterrence between the two countries.

The language of the NCA press release issued by the ISPR ought to be noted. While there was specific mention of the threats Pakistan perceives to strategic stability in the region — a “massive arms build-up in the conventional domain, nuclearisation of the Indian Ocean Region and plans for the development/ deployment of BMD” — and the potential for increasing civilian and commercial spin-offs of the nuclear programme was noted, there was no reference to dialogue to help reduce the regional nuclear threat. Therein lies a growing problem on both sides of the border: the language of peace and normalisation, however tenuous, is rapidly being replaced with the language of military action and defence. In practice, the language of peace and normalisation has failed to prevent the nuclearisation of South Asia, but it could help reduce the rate at which the nuclear deterrent in the region grows. Pakistan will not unilaterally freeze its nuclear deterrent while India’s military strength rapidly increases. But Pakistan has long advocated a policy of mutual nuclear restraint. If New Delhi is sceptical of Pakistan’s offers of restraint, the latter country has reason to question if India is interested in negotiating long-term peace. Rational but peaceful decision-making and planning in South Asia need an urgent boost.

Juvenile courts

IT is well established that children who commit crimes are less culpable than adults who are found guilty, as they do not possess the intellect or the moral capacity to comprehend the impact of their actions. For that reason, juvenile courts are necessary because child offenders should not be held to the same standards of accountability and justice as adults. Recognising this imperative, the Lahore High Court chief justice opened the first-ever juvenile court in Lahore this week. Here, it is worth reiterating that protecting children from overly harsh sentences means offering them opportunities to become productive citizens later in life. Though underage offenders must be held accountable for their actions, juvenile courts should focus more on rehabilitation than punishment. Their history of wrongdoing and the seriousness of the crime are important considerations while offering offenders a second chance to turn their lives around. Saving them from the dangers attributed to incarceration with adult offenders and ensuring

access to education in detention should be part of the effort. Studies note that those released from juvenile prisons are far less likely to again commit a crime than someone coming out of an adult facility. Thus, there is a need for increasing juvenile detention facilities in the country.

Despite the watertight provisions of the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, 2000, underage offenders often face the same punishments meted out to adults because of the fundamental weaknesses of our juvenile justice system. Alarming, lax implementation of the law has resulted in the state sanctioning the execution of at least six juveniles over the years. This was barbaric on the part of the state that, apparently, did not take into account the limited capacity of a young individual to reason or to judge or to fully comprehend the horror or consequences of his crime. Prison sentences and penalties that leave underage criminals without a chance to reform themselves and, as adults, become productive members of society, are themselves a travesty of justice.

MML rebuffed

IT is the right decision for the right reasons and it must be supported by all institutions of the state. The Milli Muslim League's attempts to register itself with the Election Commission as a bona fide political party with the right to contest elections have correctly been rebuffed by the interior ministry.

In its reply to a petition in the Islamabad High Court by the MML, the interior ministry has not only cited relevant local law, but also Pakistan's international commitments to deny that the MML can be registered with the ECP. Whatever the MML may claim, it is patently clear that the aspiring political party has deep and fundamental links to Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamaatud Dawa.

To allow the MML to participate in electoral politics would be akin to allowing the LeT and JuD to participate in electoral politics — an incomprehensible idea given the sanctions against the two outfits and the legal watch lists on which they are placed.

In theory, any group that renounces violence, pledges adherence to the Constitution and accepts the principles of democracy should be allowed to participate in the electoral process.

The appearance of a fledgling mainstreaming agenda for militant groups could also be interpreted somewhat positively: the very idea of mainstreaming is built on the notion that vast militant and extremist networks in the country need to be deactivated and their cadres turned away from violence and extremist ideas.

But in practice, a mainstreaming agenda will need to be debated across institutions, implemented with great care and continuously monitored to ensure that groups are not simply using political cover to continue with banned activities.

Thus far, no clear plan for mainstreaming has been mooted and parliament, electoral institutions and the public are unaware of any contours of one. Indeed, it has appeared at times that the MML is attempting to make up its own rules and impose them on the democratic system rather than the other way round.

As elections approach and the ECP draws up its code of conduct, attention must also be given to the wider question of the rules that all candidates and registered political parties must follow.

The TLYRA and other groups may seek to organise their politics on explicitly violent grounds; they should not be allowed to do so. Episodes such as the Faizabad protest cannot be repeated.

Eulogising terrorists executed by the state and campaigning along lines that can be considered hate speech should not be permitted.

The law and electoral codes already bar many such possibilities, but enforcement will be the key. Pakistan is approaching a third consecutive on-time election and a historic transfer of power.

The focus should be on ensuring that the voters have legitimate choices and that the election should be free and fair as never before. Now is not the time for ill-thought-out experiments and spoilers.

False accusations

GIVEN the nature of some crimes, exoneration means little except for a vindication of the suspects' stance and that of their family and friends. So it is in the case of the five bloggers who had vanished into thin air within a short span of time in January and were subsequently accused of having committed blasphemy.

The FIA on Friday informed the Islamabad High Court that investigators have found no evidence that they had indeed committed the crime.

Meanwhile, however, their reputations have been dragged through the mud while their families have had to deal with both their disappearance and the death threats hurled against their loved ones. Four of the bloggers who finally surfaced have fled the country in fear of their lives.

The men had been critical of the security establishment's policies on social media, and their abduction, never claimed by any organisation, sparked fears that state elements were using enforced disappearance to intimidate civil society activists into silence.

Matters took an even more ominous turn when a scurrilous campaign on social media accused the five of posting sacrilegious material online. That effectively ensured that any public sympathy for them would evaporate, and their supporters would have to back off lest they were accused of the same crime.

Blasphemy is perhaps the most emotive issue in this country; even hearsay is capable of provoking murder and mayhem. Not surprisingly therefore, the law can be abused to settle scores, or terrorise an entire community.

At the same time, even false allegations can usually be traced to a source; this time, however, the identity of the source remains as mysterious as the kidnappers of the five men. What can be said for certain is that the allegations have exacted a terrible cost, as they do always.

Moreover, the stigma of being accused of blasphemy endures; the question of innocence or guilt is of little consequence. Blasphemy accused have been murdered by vigilantes even following their acquittal, sometimes after they have

served their sentence. That makes it all the more imperative that the state itself not add to the hysteria; a responsible approach would be to order that an investigation be swiftly carried out to determine the veracity of the allegations.

Moreover, as mentioned during the latest hearing of a petition against the bloggers, false allegations of blasphemy must attract punitive measures. Blasphemy is not a charge to be levelled lightly.

Strides in cricket

PAKISTAN cricket has made significant strides at the ICC executive committee meeting held in Singapore earlier this month by lapping up more than 120 international matches under the new Future Tours Programme which is being proposed for the five-year period 2019-2023. In a rare show of wisdom and professional competence, PCB officials made a strong presentation at the ICC meeting, reaping handsome dividends. Initially, Pakistan was scheduled to play around 104 matches across three formats — Tests, ODIs and T20s. However, in a revised schedule, the number has risen to 121, with 80pc of the games against stronger teams. This has enabled Pakistan to leapfrog into a league that comprises Australia (123 matches), South Africa (122) and New Zealand (119). Besides these matches, Pakistan could end up playing many bilateral games in the next few years. The ICC does not have a direct say in bilateral series scheduled among full-member countries and only acts as a facilitator.

While Pakistan has had little international cricket at home for almost eight years since the March 2009 attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore, the current year saw the country staging a PSL final in a high-profile visit by a star-studded World XI that included players from seven Test-playing nations, and a short tour by the Sri Lankan team to Lahore for a T-20 contest. The West Indies cricket team is all set to tour Pakistan for a bilateral series in March, and, according to PCB sources, negotiations with a number of cricketing nations are in their final stages. The approval of a six-week window for the Pakistan Super League is also a testament to the latter's tremendous popularity achieved within a span of just two years. However, the picture is not so positive regarding Pakistan-India matches, the fate of which rests on an ICC dispute-resolution

process. The pending matter has deprived fans of some thrilling cricket, mainly due to India's absurd tendency of mixing sports with politics.

Family first, not democracy

A SUCCESSION struggle in the PML-N appears to be nearing resolution. But consider that whoever is to lead the party in the next general election, that person's last name will be Sharif. The largest political party in the country and a party that will be seeking a fourth term in government is still a fiefdom of the Sharifs.

If Nawaz Sharif does not nominate his brother, Shahbaz, to be the party's candidate for prime minister and is unable to find a way back into electoral politics himself, assuming the party again wins power next year, the PML-N prime minister will be little more than a proxy for the elder Sharif.

If Mr Sharif does nominate his brother, Shahbaz, the PML-N will formally become a family affair. Matters could become worse if Shahbaz Sharif nominates his son Hamza to lead the party in Punjab.

Certainly, it is the right of a party to choose its own leaders and it is the right of the voters to choose their representatives. But democracy will not take a qualitative leap forward if parties are simply transferred from one family member to another.

The PPP has demonstrated both the good and bad sides of family control. Benazir Bhutto was a worthy heir to her father and a historic political figure in her own right. But few would argue that her widower, Asif Zardari, has on the whole served the party well. Indeed, the fact that the next leader of the party will be either Bilawal Bhutto or one of his siblings has likely prevented a leadership challenge to Mr Zardari emerging.

In the PML-N's case, Shahbaz Sharif would arguably be one of the most qualified candidates for prime minister in the country's history, given his long experience as the executive head of a province with more than 50pc of the country's population.

But that would not be the reason for Mr Sharif becoming the prime ministerial candidate. The sole reason would be that he is the brother of Nawaz Sharif.

Another dispiriting aspect of the PML-N' politics is that it has not sought to cultivate a broad range of next-generation leaders. There is a team of somewhat younger faces around Maryam Sharif, but it is clear they owe their position to loyalty to Ms Sharif's ambitions. Nawaz Sharif has relied almost exclusively on a small coterie that was with him in the 1990s. In Shahbaz Sharif's stints as chief minister there is no one he has recognisably groomed for future leadership other than his sons.

If the present is discouraging, the future appears to be even gloomier.

Outlook for minorities

AS the nation observes two significant events on this day — Christmas and the birthday of the father of the nation — it would be worthwhile to reflect on the state of Pakistan's minority citizens. While Christmas is a time of joy, this year, the mood is sombre as the bombing of the Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta earlier this month is still a fresh wound. Unfortunately, Christians and other followers of minority faiths in Pakistan remain under threat, especially in their places of worship, targeted as they are by terrorist outfits such as the militant Islamic State group and others. As for the Quaid's birthday, it would be in order to mention that the founder of Pakistan stated in no uncertain terms that followers of all religions, along with Muslims, would be free to practise their faiths in Pakistan. How far we have come from Jinnah's vision, sadly, is clear for everyone to see.

The foremost threat to minorities in Pakistan, which Pakistanis of the majority community also have to contend with, is the ogre of militant violence. While terrorists struck Quetta in the run-up to Christmas this year, last year tragedy was witnessed in Lahore as families celebrating Easter Sunday were massacred mercilessly. Minority communities and their places of worship, especially, are 'soft' targets for militants. Other than such attacks, the misuse of the blasphemy laws is also rampant in our society. Ahmadis often have to face the wrath of

vigilantes, while there have been a disturbing number of cases reported from Sindh of apparently forced conversions of Hindu girls. Indeed, the world over there has been a rise in anti-minority sentiment. For example in India, Muslims have had to face a strident, fascist Hindutva brigade patronised by powerful elements at the top of India's power structure. Even in Europe and North America, the far right is on the march. As far as Pakistan is concerned, there are two major steps that can be taken by the state to protect the life and property of non-Muslim citizens. First, those who have indulged in violence against and victimisation of minorities must be brought to justice. Secondly, in the longer term, a pluralist message must be given to the masses through the curriculum and the attitude of the state towards non-Muslims. While there has been much negativity through the decades, there is still time to build the tolerant and progressive Pakistan this country's founding fathers envisioned.

Internet censorship

FOR most democracies, the benefits and challenges of social media are increasingly apparent. However, when governments arbitrarily clamp down on internet freedoms, not only is that blatant censorship it is also an infringement of fundamental liberties. In its new report Internet Landscape of Pakistan 2017, Bytes for All Pakistan notes that the real risk to freedom of expression for online activists and journalists, especially those with outspoken, secular and anti-establishment views, emanates from the repressive mindset of the state and non-state actors. Allegedly both groups threaten online users with real-life repercussions, including abductions, enforced disappearances, and blasphemy charges. Monitoring the state of freedom of expression and the restrictions posed by legislative and executive measures in online and offline spaces, the report found an uptick in threats, including rising cybercrimes, increased use of cyber armies (by rival political parties and state actors), enforced disappearances and the misuse of legislation. Amending the draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, to clearly define cybercrimes is imperative given the growing incidence of arbitrary censorship and offline interrogations and harassment.

It is condemnable that the government turns to Peca to silence progressive voices citing 'national security' as justification. With the FIA having a new mandate to fight cybercrime, this move has endorsed online censorship with

authoritarian undertones. It is because of this kind of intervention in internet policy that social media activists and journalists were summoned by the investigation agencies for their online expression this year. Safeguarding digital spaces should mean regulating and removing hate content and militant social media handles rather than silencing dissenting views using social and legal vigilantism. Our state must understand the great power of online spaces with potential to institute change of all kinds; even impact the fate of nation states. Committing to upholding free expression is a hallmark of a nation's democratic credentials — and especially important when access to online spaces is rising to increase the velocity of political expression and activism.

Segregation on campus

THE role of education should be to prepare students for the world beyond university — an adult world where men and women are required to interact at work, at home and in everyday life.

However, instead of promoting progressive values within academia, our universities shockingly succumb to pressure from the religious right by banning gender interaction on campuses.

Against such an unkind social backdrop, this weekend's news reports revealed that Bacha Khan University in Charsadda has imposed a gender segregation policy — an unnecessary move to supposedly insulate students from 'immoral' behaviour.

Justifying the need for gender segregation, the university's chief proctor's explanation that this measure would deter students from wasting their time by socialising with one another is as illogical as it is ridiculous.

More fundamentally, interaction among students, and between students and faculty, is necessary for understanding and learning.

The increasing reports of moral policing on campuses in this country are alarming. Students and faculty must denounce such an approach. It is the

education authorities' duty to oppose moral policing which undermines a progressive academic culture.

Moreover, because Bacha Khan University was the target of a militant attack last year, in which many students lost their lives, the administration must take extra care to foster tolerance and pluralism as a way to protect its youth from militant ideologies.

The trend of gender stereotyping must be reversed, especially when misogyny is already entrenched in society.

This entails supporting collaborative learning to counter campus segregation. Unfortunately, it has become the norm over the years for right-wing student groups like the IJT — linked to the Jamaat-i-Islami — to aggressively and consistently issue 'behaviour' guidelines at Punjab University.

Though conservative student lobbies are notorious for putting pressure on administrative officials, the latter usually have a regressive mindset themselves.

Given the changing culture of society, educational institutions must promote a holistic and conducive learning environment. The absence of this will ensure the manifestation of intolerance and gender inequality.

A new policy to boost SME lending

PRIME MINISTER Shahid Khaqan Abbasi chose the occasion of his most recent visit to Karachi to announce a new policy to encourage bank lending to small and medium enterprises. The latest policy comes after a long line of similar engagements by the State Bank to urge banks to diversify out of lending to government or to a handful of blue-chip corporates alone, whether towards SME lending or agriculture, the two areas where there are growing deficiencies. There might be some reasons for the banks' reluctance to lend to SMEs, such as the difficulties involved in assessing creditworthiness. Following the last SME policy in 2004, SME lending reached 17pc of total private-sector credit disbursement in a few years, but this came crashing down following the financial crisis of 2008 when loans to SMEs went readily into default. By 2013, the percentage of SME

lending dropped to 9pc of total private-sector lending, and in absolute numbers has still not surpassed where it was in 2006. Reversing this tide might take more than urgings from the regulator, and perhaps more than the inducements offered in the new policy. But a start has to be made somewhere because the entire purpose of having a privately run financial sector is to intermediate between savers and borrowers, and most of Pakistan's economy is run by SMEs and agriculture. When private-sector banks refuse to diversify their lending, their entire purpose in existing is undermined.

The last policy attempt to give a boost to SME lending came in May 2016 in the form of a State Bank circular that tweaked some of the definitions at play in the sector in order to encourage the flow of credit in its direction. A spike in lending to SMEs followed by the third quarter of 2016, but a year later that move had run its course when lending again showed a quarterly decline. Clearly, something fundamental in the policy and regulatory landscape is going to have to change to break the growing dependence of the banks on sovereign and blue-chip lending.

The new policy has some novel ingredients that will make for an interesting follow-up. Its move to link SME lending, remittances and branchless banking is perhaps the sort of innovation that the financial sector has needed. Branchless banking is showing impressive growth by most metrics except one: utilisation of its services tends to drop a few months after every new account is opened up. Furthering its links to other areas, such as remittances or maybe even SME lending, may not be the silver bullet to change this, but expanding the landscape that is covered by branchless banking, to include other services like remittances and SME lending, could prove crucial to the eventual success of all three areas.

Yemen's mass misery

OVERSHADOWED by its geopolitical dimensions, the conflict in Yemen has created a humanitarian catastrophe the world seems not to have taken notice of. Millions in the Arab world's poorest country are unable to get relief from international agencies because of the Saudi blockade and widespread fighting. Since Riyadh has partially lifted the blockade, some aid does indeed enter Yemen, but it is a trickle. By a rough estimate, close to three-fourths of Yemenis are in need of help, with 8.4m people on the verge of starvation. Overall, by UN

estimates, 22m people are desperately in need of some kind of help. Even worse is the condition of the sick, especially children, since all Yemeni ports are not open to commercial ships or even to UN aid organisations, thus denying food, medical supplies and fuel to the distressed. The non-availability of medicines has led to an outbreak of cholera, considered the worst in modern times, with over 2,000 dead since it broke out in April this year. Diphtheria, too, has been detected in 18 of Yemen's 22 administrative districts, and doctors fear a rapid rise in fatalities if lifesaving drugs remain out of the reach of the medical community. Unicef has airlifted 6m vaccines for children, but this is peanuts compared to the enormity of the challenge.

An end to the Yemeni people's misery doesn't seem to be in sight because the peace dialogue remains deadlocked. Seven agreements on ceasefire have failed, and there is no indication yet that either side is willing to show flexibility. All that UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres did at a recent news conference in Riyadh was to express cynicism and called for the talks to be "resurrected". Last month, three UN relief organisations declared that the partial lifting of the blockade was not enough and that unless Riyadh ended it completely, 150,000 malnourished children could face death. Oman, which is not part of the Saudi-led coalition, is trying to make the Saudis and Houthis agree on demilitarising the port of Hodeida, but there is no word yet on when the negotiators will meet. Riyadh suspects that ending the blockade will enable the Iran-backed Houthis to import arms. Unless Riyadh and Tehran subordinate their geopolitical aims to the interests of the Yemeni people there is little possibility of peace in the region.

Missing Benazir

TEN years ago today, Pakistan suffered a devastating loss. Arguably, the democratic order and the country itself have yet to fully recover from the demoralising setback. Benazir Bhutto was a much-loved and admired political figure, a Pakistani leader recognised and respected on the world stage. Her killing remains a profoundly shocking event, even for a country with a history of assassinations, executions and war. Undoubtedly, there are complicated aspects to Benazir's legacy. The PPP's two stints in power under her leadership were marred by financial scandal and a relatively poor governance record. But where there can be no doubt is her ironclad commitment to defending and advancing the democratic order in Pakistan. It was a mission of a lifetime and it is likely she would have been alive today had she not returned to Pakistan to force another dictator to transfer power to a civilian elected government. After her father's democratic awakening of the masses, Benazir ranks at the very top of democratic leaders in modern Pakistani political history.

But Pakistan is struggling to match her democratic legacy. The transition to democracy, which Benazir, arguably, was the catalyst for, is nearly a decade old. Yet, the transition appears to be weaker today than it has been at nearly every stage over the past decade. A competitive and free and fair election next year could go some way to helping put the democratic transition back on track, but institutional imbalances and infighting among the political class may mire the democratic order in further difficulties. Indeed, the inability and perhaps unwillingness of the political class to protect democratic institutions against encroachment by other institutions remains a profound challenge. Enlightened self-interest and a collective recognition that durable political legitimacy can only be bestowed by the electorate could strengthen the democratic order, but interference by anti-democratic elements and the dominance of raw power politics is preventing a better outcome. Perhaps the 10th anniversary of her assassination could be a moment for political reflection.

If the wider political class has disappointed, the PPP has virtually betrayed Benazir's democratic legacy. The electoral collapse of the PPP outside its base in Sindh, where there is little organised political opposition to the party, has been historic and is perhaps irreversible. As a result, there is no political party today that can credibly claim to have a significant presence across the provinces and

regions and in both urban and rural Pakistan — a situation that has itself undermined the democratic order here. More dispiritingly, many of the PPP's mistakes have been self-inflicted and the taunt sometimes aimed at the party that the current leadership has caused more harm than the military establishment rings uncomfortably true. Can the PPP regroup and reorganise? While it surely must, it is not clear it can. Benazir Bhutto remains much missed.

Women disenfranchised

HISTORICALLY, those opposed to female enfranchisement have adopted the ludicrous argument that women should keep to their sphere at home, because engaging in politics as voters and candidates is a masculine pursuit. In fact, barring women voters is an exclusionary practice and one that must be stopped. Take the example of KP, where religious-right and ostensibly progressive political parties often collude to bar women from participating in the polls. Recent reports that women did not vote during by-elections for two districts in Upper and Lower Dir are a stark reminder of this deplorable fact. The ECP might have ambitious plans to register 1.2m missing women voters before the 2018 election, but it should first nullify poll results in constituencies that bar women from casting their ballot; indeed, it is legally mandated to do so in places where women have cast less than 10pc of the vote. So, it is imperative for the electoral watchdog to conduct a re-poll in the two districts where not a single woman cast her vote — even though thousands have been registered in Upper and Lower Dir. Unfortunately, local representatives of political parties that prevent women from polling in conservative swathes of KP, Fata and Punjab are hardly penalised. Hence they continue with their regressive ways, either failing to facilitate women voters or outright curtailing their vote.

Such disenfranchisement is a routine discriminatory practice in societies where men exercise complete control over women's lives. In the run-up to the 2013 election, for instance, again in Upper Dir, the PTI signed an agreement with other parties barring women from voting and stipulating large fines for parties breaking the agreement. Resultantly, one woman's vote was recorded though 38,910 women voters were registered. Sadly, political parties have failed to challenge social pressures as they fear that doing so would increase their risk of losing traditional seats. Only when the ECP pursues the issue of such deliberate

disenfranchisement and organises a re-poll in constituencies where irregularities have been established can there be drastic change. Moreover, with a 36pc increase in women voters in the tribal areas, it would be beneficial for political parties to be educated before the 2018 election on the importance of women's participation in the electoral process and on how best to mobilise their vote. Duty-bound to protect this constitutional right of women, the electoral watchdog must not tolerate any illegal manoeuvres by political parties.

Urdu conference

THOSE who lament that Urdu — at least in its literary manifestations — is on a slow and steady decline, would have taken heart from the recently concluded International Urdu Conference at the Arts Council in Karachi. Despite the five-day duration, the longest in its decade-long history, the event was extremely well-attended. Moreover, coinciding as it did with 70 years of Pakistan's independence, it was a fitting occasion to reflect upon this country's journey through the decades. From literature to music, film and theatre, the conference's various components spanned the entire gamut of cultural expression in Urdu with several stars of its literary pantheon among the participants. Inevitably, some sessions were more relevant than others; some trod a well-worn path while others were more stimulating. For instance, as expected, there was a particularly animated discussion about how Pakistan today compares with the country that Jinnah had envisioned, with various speakers presenting diverse points of view.

'Conference' is a term that conjures up a purely academic and cerebral ambience. However, so wide was the canvas of the event that it could quite aptly be described as more akin to a festival. But that is all very well, for such an approach, especially the showbiz element, lent variety to the occasion and in the process attracted younger people as well. That is an important consideration. This is the demographic for whom literary pursuits in the national language are taking a back seat, partly because higher educational institutes in Pakistan place disproportionate emphasis on 'career-oriented' disciplines such as IT, and business and finance at the cost of the arts. Also, in an age of media overload and its culture of instant gratification, such events are a reaffirmation of Urdu as a significant repository of our cultural memory and political consciousness. At a time when regressive currents are threatening to overwhelm debate, sideline

critical thinking and impose a one-dimensional worldview, every effort to retrieve the space ceded to the right wing is vital for a pluralistic, democratic polity.

Deterring corruption

THE Panama Papers were a watershed moment in international politics. Having claimed several political scalps across the globe, it also enmeshed a Pakistani prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, in a financial scandal that ultimately cost him his job. It was right and correct that Mr Sharif was the first to be investigated in the Panama Papers scandal. As the incumbent prime minister at the time, there was a greater burden on Mr Sharif to prove that his family's business empire and assets were legitimately acquired. While the suo motu action against Mr Sharif ended in controversy, there remained the not insubstantial issue of the other Pakistani nationals ensnared in the Panama Papers revelations. They too needed to be investigated, if Pakistan was ever to become a country where the rule of law was anything more than selective application against politicians and others who had fallen out of favour with the permanent establishment. Now, the new chairman of the National Accountability Bureau, Javed Iqbal, a retired justice of the Supreme Court, appears to have finally taken action. An inquiry has reportedly been ordered into the offshore companies held by some 435 Pakistanis whose identities were revealed in the Panama Papers.

A NAB inquiry does not necessarily mean that wrongdoing will be ultimately identified and penalties or sentences imposed. Indeed, the mere registration or ownership of an offshore company is not a crime; what matters is the assets that are routed through such companies — were the relevant local and international laws applicable at the time adhered to? While the legal issues may be complex, the politics surrounding the Panama Papers have become simplistic. What is undeniable, however, is that NAB is a deeply flawed institution that has been poorly served by its leadership over the years. The consensus in the political class has long been that NAB ought to be replaced by a new institution with fair and just rules and an autonomous leadership. But parliament has failed to act on that consensus and NAB remains the only organisation capable of imposing a modicum of accountability in the country. Its resources need to be applied evenly but fiercely across the country. A thorough inquiry into the assets of other

Pakistanis citizens identified in the Panama Papers could open a strong new chapter on accountability in the country.

Yet, the wait for renewed vigour in the bureau should not become a reason to delay necessary structural reforms. NAB may be able to deliver some results, but it often only swings into action under pressure from other institutions. What is truly needed is an independent institution, adequately resourced, competently staffed and empowered enough to investigate and prosecute financial malfeasance in all institutions. At stake is nothing less than the public's trust in the institutions of democracy. Without accountability, there can no meaningful democracy. NAB needs to deliver.

New finance team

IT took some prolonged uncertainty, but finally the government has appointed a full court team to the finance ministry and the wheels at Q Block are ready to start turning again. At the outset this is positive news since finance is a crucial division and must not be allowed to remain headless for very long. Mr Ishaq Dar's entanglements with the law, whether fair or not, had become a real hindrance to the smooth discharge of his duties at a time when Pakistan badly needed a firm hand on the tiller, and a clear-minded captain in charge of the economy. The mixed trends prevailing in the economy are increasingly presenting us with a high-stakes bet to place. The real sector is showing dynamism as investment grows and demand for bank credit from the private sector remains strong; in fact, forecasts show that growth could cross 6pc in the next couple of years. But the external sector is crumbling, and it is precisely this that has been the undoing of rapid growth rates in the past.

Unfortunately, though, with only a handful of months to go, there is limited room for manoeuvre. Exports have been showing strength for a number of months now, and these might experience some boost from the recent correction in the exchange rate. But imports are powering on faster still, and only some of this can be attributed to machinery imports, which would be an investment in future growth. The recent regulatory duties have had only a limited impact in curbing the growth of imports, and further measures will be necessary, something the new team will have to turn its mind towards in its brief stint in power. Miftah

Ismael, the man at the helm as a financial adviser with ministerial powers, is right to have pointed out the fiscal constraints as an important priority, but his real challenge actually lies in managing the growing current account deficit. On the fiscal side as well, he has mentioned the broadening of the tax base as a key priority, though time will be against him since this is better pursued as a medium-term goal. The biggest priority for the new team should be to ensure it does not leave an unpleasantly urgent set of choices for the interim government. If the team can manage simply that much, it could consider its brief stint to have been vindicated.

DNA testing in rape cases

WHEN sexual violence is perceived to be almost the norm, the world becomes a dangerous place to be female.

This observation rings true for Pakistan too. Although the average of 3,000 rape cases reported annually, and a low conviction rate, may appear to diminish the extent of the problem, it must be remembered that crimes of a sexual nature are massively underreported in this country because of the strong social stigma attached to them.

Observing that perpetrators will be punished if there is incriminatory evidence, the Peshawar High Court noted this week that it is mandatory for investigating authorities to conduct DNA tests in rape cases.

The court, which was ruling on a petition filed by a man accused of sexually assaulting a woman, highlighted the value of medical forensic examinations, including methods used for evidence collection and preservation.

Pakistan's anti-rape law makes DNA evidence admissible in court and calls for in-camera trials so victims are protected in court from humiliating questioning. It stipulates DNA samples be taken from suspects and perpetrators for DNA profiling to prevent future attacks.

Ideally, such DNA samples should be maintained in a national database in case of repeated violations by offenders. Investigators should ensure DNA samples are collected within 72 hours from the time of the incident.

The realisation that DNA verification can make or break case outcomes is enough of a reason for them and for prosecutors to collect this medico-legal form of evidence.

Also, notorious for furnishing fudged medical reports, medical officers found colluding with the accused or deciding that a claim of rape is not reliable on a moral whim must be penalised.

At the heart of failed rape prosecutions lie the inadequacies of investigators and prosecutors who have been unable to provide the evidence required for a fair trial. If the government is committed to pushing back against this culture of hiding violent sexual crimes, then it must institute stringent policies for prevention, legal response and support with immediate effect.

Blame game over Benazir

A WAR of words has erupted between Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and retired Gen Pervez Musharraf.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari used the occasion of the 10th anniversary of his mother's assassination to accuse Mr Musharraf of involvement in Benazir Bhutto's death.

As has become his habit, Mr Musharraf quickly lashed out against the accusation and delivered a crude response to Mr Bhutto-Zardari. Neither appears to be aware of what his words and accusations imply.

If, as the PPP has often alleged, the party is aware of who is responsible for the assassination of its iconic leader, it had five years in government immediately after Benazir's killing to try and bring to justice her killers. It made no such attempts.

And if Mr Bhutto-Zardari truly believes that Mr Musharraf was responsible for his mother's murder, it implies that the PPP considered being in government more important than bringing to justice, or at least putting on trial, Benazir's alleged killers.

Or is the PPP leader now just indulging in political posturing with his attacks against Mr Musharraf? That is an unsettling possibility for a politician so young though otherwise clearheaded in his understanding of the militant and extremist threats to Pakistan.

Mr Musharraf's comments have been wholly more astounding. In an interview with the BBC, the former military dictator suggested that so-called rogue elements within the military could have played a role in Benazir's assassination. A female political leader with liberal, secular leanings would be a logical target for militants, Mr Musharraf has asserted.

But that implies that the former army chief had also lost control of the forces he commanded for a decade. The very possibility of the existence of rogue elements suggests a breakdown in the chain of command.

When asked about Mr Musharraf's astonishing claim, DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor denied the existence of rogue elements in the military and emphasised the sanctity of the chain of command.

It appears that Mr Musharraf has caused some discomfort in his parent institution. Perhaps in the days ahead, Mr Musharraf will retract or clarify his comments.

There appears to be a pattern of outlandish and provocative statements by the former dictator in recent times. But Mr Musharraf ought to be pressed to explain his latest comments and justify them if he stands by them. His outburst directed at Mr Bhutto-Zardari is also shameful and ought to be retracted.

Ultimately, what should not be lost sight of is that there remains little clarity about the events surrounding Benazir's assassination. The collapse of trials of several individuals accused of facilitating the suicide bombers has underlined how shoddy the investigations and prosecutions have been.

The uncertainty has fuelled conspiracy theories and threatens to reduce a convulsing event in Pakistani history to political theatre.

The memory of Benazir Bhutto deserves better and Pakistan deserves better.

New voters

THE Election Commission of Pakistan is set to undertake a task that will boost confidence in the run-up to the 2018 general elections; the ECP will be adding the names of 7.3m Pakistanis to the electoral rolls. These individuals possess CNICs but have yet to find a place on the voters' list. The number of potential voters is very large and could have a significant bearing on election results nationwide. Political parties must actively persuade them that the first step towards strengthening democracy is their registration. In fact, enrolling new voters is an exercise worthy of the same level of enthusiasm as is on display at the time of voting — candidates and their parties put in a huge effort to try and ferry all the voters to the polling booth. Registering citizens as voters is where it all begins. It means that they now have a voice that matters, and that they have a say in how their affairs should be run by the government. It is here — in the context of giving people a voice in managing the affairs of the country — that the breakdown of the numbers of those who are to be enrolled makes for sorry reading. Once again, the men outnumber the women by huge margins, everywhere in the country, showing how women are forced to live low-profile and concealed lives.

The 7.3m Pakistanis are the last batch who will enter the list of voters following a door-to-door verification drive by the ECP. They received their CNICs before the Elections Act, 2017, came into effect. The act provides that Nadra shall transmit the relevant data for every new national identity card issued by it to the ECP “for registration of the card-holder as a voter in the electoral roll of the electoral area in which his permanent or temporary address is located, in accordance with the option indicated by him in the application for issuance of the [CNIC]”. This will solve so many problems and could minimise cases of votes getting registered under wrong addresses, etc. Diligence here is due from the aspiring voter who cannot afford to stay unaware of his or her rights in this era. Greater

responsibility, however, rests on the shoulders of the ECP which is up against the official Pakistani tradition of missing targets and missing so many who qualify to be counted in the enrolment exercise.

Gilgit-Baltistan protests

FOR two months now, the areas of Gilgit-Baltistan have been convulsed with large protests against a bevy of new taxes that the government has been trying to impose on the residents. The most recent of the protests has seen a 10-day shutter-down strike in all districts of the region. Considering that GB has been left dangling in terms of its constitutional status — it is not recognised as a province, and was only belatedly given ‘provincial status’ by the last PPP government at the centre — the measures amount to taxation without representation. The revenue hunger of the government is palpable, and the argument that the federation is funding large-scale development projects in the area under the CPEC umbrella cuts little ice with the residents, since there is little local input in the design of the projects or recruitment. It is sad to see such a wide cross section of civil society from the region having to come out on the roads in such large numbers, for a prolonged period of time, to make a very simple point.

The government should make every effort to live up to the terms of the agreement under which the last of these rallies was broken up. The local administration agreed to withdraw the GB Adaptation Act of 2012, under which the taxes in question had been imposed, and the federal government must ensure this agreement is not violated. Before considering the imposition of any taxes in the region, including those that have an incidental effect on the residents of GB such as the withholding tax on bank transactions by non-filers (GB residents are not in the jurisdiction of the FBR and cannot file returns with the federal tax authority), the federal government must first resolve the constitutional status of the region. Until that is done, no attempts should be made to make the residents of the area share any part of the burden of federal expenditure in the region.

Response to US

A SERIES of sharply worded comments about Pakistan by officials in US President Donald Trump's administration has elicited a sharp reaction from this country.

On Thursday, DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor delivered a tough message to the US, effectively warning that any so-called unilateral actions inside Pakistan by the US would be met with an emphatic response.

The rhetorical escalation between the US and Pakistan is undesirable and unnecessary — and both sides ought to consider reassessing their approach at the moment.

The Trump administration's hardening stance against Pakistan is particularly egregious. In power for less than a year, the administration's so-called South Asia strategy was only revealed last summer.

The core of the strategy is a renewed emphasis on military power inside Afghanistan to try and roll back the gains the Afghan Taliban have made in recent years.

The notion that alleged Pakistani sanctuaries or support for the Afghan Taliban is the principal reason for the latter's relative strength inside Afghanistan has always been preposterous.

It is even more preposterous when failures of the Afghan state, both political and military, are taken into account.

Clearly, sanctuaries are a problem. Pakistan's insistence that sanctuaries for anti-Pakistan militants in Afghanistan is preventing the country from fully defeating the banned TTP and affiliated groups suggests that the opposite too could be true.

But in the vexed triangular relationship between the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan, common sense and the common good have mostly proved to be elusive.

With China, Russia and Iran seeking to expand their role in the Afghan security situation, balancing competing interests is likely to become more difficult. Arguably, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US have the most to gain from a relatively stable and peaceful Afghanistan and should find ways to address their common security challenges.

The Kabul bombing on Thursday was yet another bloody reminder of the complexity of the militant threat in the region.

The militant Islamic State group is an undeniable actor in the region and a threat to all states. Dismantling its infrastructure and eliminating its network is an urgent priority.

Arguably, the more Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US find ways to disagree, the more IS benefits.

If there has been any lesson regarding stability and cooperation in the region, it has been that public pressure often has the opposite effect to what is intended. The mercurial Trump presidency combined with Afghanistan's political uncertainty is surely contributing negatively to the pursuit of peace in the region.

The strong response of the Pakistani state to the recent threatening comments of senior US officials should not be interpreted as mere verbal sparring.

All sides need to return to diplomacy to find cooperative solutions or ways to disagree without roiling the region.

Schools gone wrong

THERE are thousands of children who are not enrolled in schools in the federal capital. In fact, there is a school in the interior minister's constituency which has been turned into a sewage pond. Meanwhile, the condition of schools in Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif's constituency is a true measure of just how bad the situation is. Unfortunately, these negative reports have not stirred the rulers into action; they do not even appear to be mildly offended by pressing reminders from the media regarding the official apathy that prevails. Proof of this was recently provided by an NGO that also compiled data on the condition of schools in Mr Sharif's Lahore constituency. The schools were found lacking even in basics such as boundary walls and security guards — though these would have been a waste for schools without classrooms and without teachers. Other amenities, such as labs, would have been far too great a luxury for the students. Instead, the official attention is fixed on big, attractive projects in the vicinity such as the metro bus or the bridge on Ferozepur Road that allowed Mr Sharif to inaugurate a loop of the Lahore Ring Road a few days ago. In contrast, a school in nearby Youhanabad remains shut long after its building was completed.

This is the subject — obsession with brick-and-mortar development — that echoed during a meeting of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Government Assurances on Thursday. It was a government MNA who finally asked the question: what are the children being taught in government schools in Islamabad? It led to a revelation by the state minister for the Capital Administration and Development Division that, of the 450,000 children in the federal capital, only 215,000 or so studied in government schools and over 250,000 in private schools. This is a little shocking for a relatively small area which had been narrowly focused on by not only the same minister, but also by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz Sharif. The father-daughter duo had been shown going around schools in Islamabad as an expression of their commitment to improving education. The schools may have been poorer without these high-profile visits. But as the treasury MNA behind the question, Shahezadi Umerzadi Tiwana, so succinctly pointed out: "We want to see a difference in our children rather than a difference in school buildings." This sums up the problem.

Assistive technology

HELD in Karachi this week, one session at the International Conference on Computing and Related Technologies highlighted an oft-ignored area where our nascent but booming IT sector can be a game changer in uplifting millions of lives: assistive technology. AT encompasses all forms of assistive, adaptive and rehabilitative devices — prosthetic limbs for physical impairments, hearing aids for auditory impairments, screen-reading software for visual impairments, etc — to improve people with disabilities' daily functional capabilities and participation as active members of society. Given the likely high prevalence of disability in Pakistan — exacerbated by disease, consanguineous marriages, poor health and safety standards, violence and terrorism — it is imperative that we enable PWDs to lead independent lives to the greatest extent possible and strive to remove barriers in accessing the same opportunities as the able-bodied population, particularly in education and employment.

The operating systems of our everyday devices increasingly feature AT, and parents of children with special needs can now find a wide range of devices and apps (some developed by local coders) to support learning. With the cost of 3D printing falling, at least one local start-up is working on customised, low-cost prosthetics. And both multinational and local firms have begun to recruit, train and provide reasonable accommodations to PWDs as part of diversity initiatives. This wouldn't have been possible even a decade ago were it not for tech innovations — but for most PWDs even simple devices still remain out of reach. For this to change, we need a multi-sectoral approach to implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, with the IT ministry spearheading an initiative for developing home-grown AT interventions. We have the main ingredients to do so: creative and talented IT professionals, success stories from other developing countries, international donors for whom disability is a priority and an altruistic public. "I have created opportunities for myself and will create opportunities for others," said one disabled speaker at the conference. This is the spirit we must adopt going forward.