

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of March, 2015

Note: This is a compiled work by the Team The CSS Point. The DAWN.COM is the owner of the content available in the document. This document is compiled to support css aspirants and This document is **NOT FOR SALE.**

Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)



www.thecsspoint.com



DOWNLOAD

CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines



THE CSS POINT
Yes We Can Do It!

WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM

- **Download CSS Notes**
- **Download CSS Books**
- **Download CSS Magazines**
- **Download CSS MCQs**
- **Download CSS Past Papers**

*The CSS Point, Pakistan's The Best
Online FREE Web source for All CSS
Aspirants.*

Email: info@thecsspoint.com

Contents

Saving Radio Pakistan	3	Way to the grass roots	24
Another jailbreak	3	PM's visit to Saudi Arabia.....	25
Kashmir: the way ahead.....	4	Music to the ears	26
Defence anxieties.....	5	Ludicrous suggestion.....	27
Tensions with Dhaka	6	Return of IDPs	28
IS's war on heritage.....	7	Diplomatic rigmarole	29
Time to go back to parliament.....	8	Farmers' protest.....	30
Minorities' dilemma.....	9	Government's confusion.....	31
Graffiti menace	10	Unusual IMF visit.....	32
Senate's welcome move	11	Solar takes off	33
PSO results	12	A debatable judgment	34
Polio narrative.....	13	Reviving executions.....	35
A provocative address.....	14	Nine Zero raid.....	36
Strange disappearance	15	Investment climate	37
More of the same	16	Senate challenge	38
Utter chaos.....	17	Unequal taxation.....	39
Madressah financing.....	18	More war powers?	40
Misuse of ECL.....	19	Vaccines' wastage	41
Fond memories revived	20	Mystery of weapons.....	41
Float the rupee.....	21	Release of Mumbai suspect?	42
Repair work for Senate	22	Shafqat Husain case	44
A thrilling win	23	Militants' pact	44
		Roads and railway	45
		Shifting of prisoners	46

March 2015

Where is the CCI?	47	Blocking channels?	71
Intelligence cooperation	48	China bank.....	72
Pakistan in quarter-finals	49	Aug 11 speech in textbooks	73
Margallas in danger	50	Misbah hits out	74
Way ahead for MQM	51	LNG muddle	75
Reading Lahore’s lynch mob	52	Replacing NAB.....	76
Obama’s realisation	53	Ayyan’s assets	77
Unabated polio killings.....	54	Yemeni conflict expands	78
An unequal justice.....	55	Karachi operation.....	79
Netanyahu’s victory	56	Minimum wage	80
FDI decrease.....	57	Circular debt again	81
Saulat Mirza’s ‘confession’	58	Forgotten war	82
Goodbye to World Cup	59	Moon-sighting consensus	83
Crime and punishment	60	LNG confusion persists.....	84
Torture in custody.....	61	Murky waters	85
Progress on poll inquiry	62	Yemen conundrum.....	86
Water warnings.....	63	Applause for economy	87
Sana’a bloodbath	64	Deserving winners.....	88
Pakistan Day.....	65	A job well done	89
Juvenile justice system.....	66	Power sector infighting.....	89
Currency correction	67	Karachi bye-election campaign.....	90
The madressah problem	68		
Gesture of defiance.....	69		
State Bank’s optimism	70		

Saving Radio Pakistan

PERHAPS the best way to describe Radio Pakistan is to say that it is a giant in decline. Once the indispensable companion of most people through the day, it has for years now been more or less irrelevant to large sections of the population and a drain on the state's coffers.

The subsidy runs into the billions — though it generated Rs344m in 2013-14, the scale of expenses was such that the government had to provide a subsidy of Rs3.7bn. An effort was made some time ago to find a solution to this state of perma-crisis, with the Public Accounts Committee advising in 2012-13 that the entity chalk out a new business plan. In line with this, on Wednesday, the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation proposed that an electronic cess be levied on the purchase of high-end mobile phones and on the registration of vehicles that could go towards covering the Rs4bn deficit Radio Pakistan runs into each year.

Such a move may help, but it seems that those at the helm of affairs have not really understood what underpins the problems of Radio Pakistan — or the latter's huge untapped potential. In terms of entertainment and other non-news programming, the task for a public-sector media enterprise such as this is to carry programming that is in the public interest, such as infotainment and educational content, and that which is being sidelined because it does not draw advertising revenue — for example, it could provide a platform to classical and folk musicians. Such media platforms are the world over subsidised by taxpayers' money, because this is where media content that is delinked from commercial concerns can be broadcast. On the news side,

Radio Pakistan and Pakistan Television have since their inception been used as propaganda-disseminating government mouthpieces. This needs to end, with news programming being given parliamentary oversight instead so that more independent editorial policies can be adopted. Between them, these two entities have tremendous reach across the country — and the state needs to make them count.

Published in Dawn March 1st, 2015

Another jailbreak

THE successful escape on Friday of a militant involved in the Nanga Parbat massacre and another accused of killing one of the investigators in the case is only the latest in a growing list of jailbreaks by militants charged with heinous crimes. And once again the manner in which the jailbreak was executed suggests the possible involvement of elements among the prison authorities although details about how the escape was effected are still sketchy.

Reportedly, four prisoners somehow managed to convince the prison guards that they were armed and made their escape. In the ensuing shootout, one prisoner was killed and another critically injured. The jail was guarded by three separate law-enforcement and paramilitary bodies, and if and when an inquiry into the event is undertaken, it must look into why security was not foolproof. The prisoners' escape shows that holding hardened militants in jails meant for ordinary criminals is fraught with risk, even though, unlike two other jailbreaks — at Bannu and D.I. Khan — this incident did not involve a large force attacking the prison from outside.

The episode highlights the need for special detention facilities for hardened militants. Holding them in facilities meant for ordinary criminals only raises the likelihood of attacks launched by militants from outside, or an escape of the sort just witnessed. The fact that even after two large jailbreaks, and one incident in which an escape tunnel was discovered near a prison in Karachi, militants continue to be held in ordinary facilities and guarded by forces with poor training shows the authorities' half-hearted approach to law-enforcement functions necessary in the fight against militancy. It is vital that the task of apprehending and detaining militants be taken far more seriously than it is at present. Rather than let the problem of weaknesses in the detention apparatus fester, only to be 'handled' through emotive and sudden calls for handing it over to the military — as was done with the courts — the challenge of holding militants in secure facilities needs to be addressed through effective, long-term measures. It is perplexing that hardened militants involved in the Nanga Parbat massacre should be held in a district jail in Gilgit. By now it ought to have been obvious that holding militants is serious business. Unfortunately, as the jailbreak makes clear, authorities here insist on learning their lessons the hard way. We can only hope that this pattern will change in the future.

Published in Dawn March 1st , 2015

Kashmir: the way ahead

IN the cauldron of Kashmiri politics, the union between the Narendra Modi-led BJP and Mufti Mohammed Sayeed-led People's Democratic Party is more startling than it is necessarily cause for hope. After all, the election campaign run by the BJP in particular in India-held Jammu and Kashmir was nakedly communal and polarising.

That the electorate responded by effectively voting along communal lines — the PDP and BJP have near equal representation in the Srinagar assembly, but BJP's representation is from the Hindu-majority Jammu region and the PDP's largely from the Muslim-dominated Kashmir valley — points to both the effectiveness of the campaign and the deep divisions that characterise politics and daily life in the region. The coalition government that has emerged after two months of fierce negotiations has been hailed outside the region, but inside India-held Jammu and Kashmir the sentiment is decidedly more mixed, and perhaps even dark. How the PDP and BJP will be able to sell their alliance to their constituents will depend largely on their ability to deliver on the so-called common minimum programme — to be released soon, according to both sides — and the government's ability to deliver inclusive economic growth and clamp down on the corrupt ways of governance in the region.

Kashmir though is not just a local issue — a reality underlined by the intense interest far outside the borders of India-held Jammu & Kashmir in the birth of the unprecedented alliance. And, in this hour of unexpected hope, now may just be the time for India and Pakistan to revisit the fundamentals of their

Kashmir policies. For Pakistan, that means recognising that the core policy — right to self-determination for Kashmiris and a Kashmir solution that is acceptable to the Kashmir population — has been distorted for too long and in too many ways by the armed jihad that was unleashed in the region with — no matter what the officially stated position is — the active collaboration and sponsorship of the Pakistani state. The rights of all Kashmiris were never going to be won through violence and a policy of militants and proxies has caused incalculable damage to Pakistan's position on Kashmir, the Kashmir region itself and surely Pakistan too. For India, with the BJP now allied with a party that has explicitly demanded the retention of India-held Kashmir's special status and urged the expansion of ties and resumption of dialogue with Pakistan, the Modi-led government may be forced to recognise the deep, open wounds that the politics of communalism and exclusivity engendered by Delhi have created.

From here, if the Indian and Pakistani states really do finally internalise the lessons from Kashmir, there is an obvious path: a quest for resolution of the Kashmir dispute along the lines of the formula that was pursued by the regime of Pervez Musharraf — and that did not go unappreciated by the Manmohan Singh government. Resolution is possible, peace achievable — if the political governments lead and the respective security establishments cede. A cautious hope, but surely not a forlorn one.

Published in Dawn March 1st, 2015

Defence anxieties

First, the bad news. The Indian defence budget is set to hit a record high of \$40bn. That compares with a basic and Pakistani military budget of roughly \$7bn.

Moreover, a good chunk of the Indian military budget has been set aside for capital acquisitions, ostensibly to try and keep up with rapid Chinese military expansion — though the security establishment here believes many of the items on the Indian military wish list are there with an intention of increasing its war capabilities against Pakistan.

Now, to the somewhat better news. In percentage terms, the increase in the defence budget is lower than the current Indian fiscal year (April-March).

Take a look: [‘Pakistan’s defence spending lowest in region’](#)

Military expenditure as a percentage of GDP is below two per cent and dropped further this year. And the latest budget suggests, according to Indian defence analysts, that the Narendra Modi-led government has decided to move more slowly than expected in meeting the demands of the Indian security establishment.

There are two aspects here that are particularly worth bearing in mind, one for Pakistan, the other for India.

For Pakistan, the thought of the Indian military pulling out of sight in conventional terms can be an uncomfortable —

March 2015

possibly, unacceptable – one. However, not everything the hawks here perceive is necessarily true.

Consider that while the Indian defence budget is set to cross \$40bn, the Chinese defence budget is roughly four times larger.

India also has to compete for control in the Indian Ocean, a formidably expensive proposition.

Moreover, the Indian military's modernisation project has come after years of under-investment – so the punch it can pack may not be as big as the \$40bn figure suggests.

The Pakistani security establishment is right to closely track Indian defence spending because India remains, in terms of its military capabilities, the principal threat to Pakistan's security. But a rational, logical perspective is really what is needed rather than the wild conjecturing in some hawkish quarters.

For India, there should be a realisation that goes beyond the plain numbers: the further away it pulls from Pakistan in the conventional field, the more it will create pressure on Pakistan to perhaps lower the nuclear threshold to stave off the threat of conflict.

Simply, much as some in India would like to separate the question of competing with China from the need to manage risk with Pakistan, the overall Indian military capability will send a message in both directions. Stability will only come from advancing dialogue with Pakistan.

Published in Dawn March 2nd, 2015

Tensions with Dhaka

THE government of Prime Minister Hasina Wajed in Bangladesh appears to be on a mission to disrupt, even harm, ties with Pakistan.

Last week, PIA flight operations to Bangladesh were suspended after the Bangladeshi authorities conducted raids in search of a PIA official stationed in that country on what appears to be the flimsiest of grounds.

Earlier this month, a Pakistani diplomat in Dhaka was declared persona non grata and had to leave the country. In recent months, it has become increasingly difficult for Pakistanis to acquire visas for Bangladesh amidst allegations by Ms Wajed's government that Pakistan is stoking unrest in Bangladesh and sponsoring militancy.

Officials here have strenuously denied all allegations though they have sensibly steered clear of adding to the drama and handing Bangladeshi authorities an opportunity to push matters from the merely unpleasant into the potentially dangerous.

While Ms Wajed appears to be the driving force behind this new phase of a downturn in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, it is still not entirely clear what is animating the Bangladeshi prime minister's antipathy towards Pakistan at this particular moment.

Part of the explanation must surely be domestic — as it almost always is in politics. The Awami League government is locked in a bitter struggle with the Khaleda Zia-led Bangladesh

March 2015

Nationalist Party yet again, with the year-old government of Ms Wajed struggling to contain a street challenge by Ms Zia's party that is clearly meant to overthrow the Awami League government.

Invariably, jingoism, nationalism and the secular-vs-Islamist cards are trotted out in Bangladesh's internecine political warfare — with Pakistan often being dragged into the mix because of the tragic, terrible events of the late 1960s and very early 1970s.

But it does appear that the prime minister has either miscalculated or is simply being reckless in her bid to make Pakistan a political and diplomatic issue at this point in time.

To be sure, if the Bangladesh state does have some legitimate concerns about Pakistani interference in that country, there are other ways to handle such problems. But such concerns are a two-way street.

Consider that over the years, it has been the near-constant refrain of nearly all Bangladeshi politicians that the Pakistani security establishment interferes in Bangladesh's politics.

Meanwhile, over here in Pakistan, there are long-running suspicions about India's role in undermining good regional relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh. Legitimate concerns on both sides do need to be addressed, but surely not in the present hostile climate being created by Bangladesh.

Published in Dawn March 2nd, 2015

IS's war on heritage

CONSIDERING that the zealots of the self-styled Islamic State feel no compunction about putting men, women and children to the sword, it would be naive to assume that the militants would have second thoughts about pulverising historical artefacts.

In fact, as recent events illustrate, the IS hordes are actually celebrating their vandalism targeting Iraq's cultural and historical treasures and its houses of learning.

In one video that surfaced recently, bearing the outfit's insignia, men can be seen rampaging through what appears to be a museum; reports indicate the facility is located in Mosul, the Iraqi city that was overrun by IS in June 2014.

The modern-day vandals are seen toppling statues and smashing artefacts to dust. In a related incident, IS is believed to have torched Mosul's main library resulting in thousands of books and manuscripts going up in flames.

Iraq's ancient treasures have been under assault from looters ever since the 2003 US invasion. But with the rise of IS the war on culture and history has gained alarming pace.

This is not the first time that IS militants have ransacked libraries or houses of learning. One report indicates classrooms in Mosul colleges have been transformed into dormitories for fighters.

The obscurantists have also demolished or desecrated revered mosques, shrines and tombs in both Iraq and Syria.

March 2015

Fuelling such actions is a mixture of religious fanaticism, ignorance and a desire to show the world what the militants are capable of.

The Unesco chief has described these incidents as “cultural cleansing” and called for an emergency meeting to discuss Iraq’s heritage.

The threat is indeed considerable as hundreds of archaeological sites in Iraq now lie within IS-controlled territory. But whether it is protecting the people of Iraq and Syria or saving the heritage of these ancient civilisations, the key lies in permanently neutralising IS.

And for that to happen, regional states and the international community need to support and coordinate efforts with the governments in Baghdad and Damascus against the extremists.

Published in Dawn March 2nd , 2015

Time to go back to parliament

IN his trademark belligerent style, PTI chief Imran Khan reacted yesterday to his party’s failure to secure a deal with the PPP on the Senate elections to be held in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly on March 5 by accusing the PPP and JUI-F — and the PML-N for good measure — of corruption and indulging in horse-trading.

This, a day after the PTI chief and PPP boss Asif Zardari held unprecedented talks over the telephone — that were implicitly hailed by the PTI itself — for sealing an unspecified deal with the PPP.

Unhappily, the sharp shift between the mood and language on Sunday and that on Monday indicate that the PTI, while sometimes seemingly willing to do the sensible thing, is yet to learn how to deal with setbacks to its own plans and ambitions.

Also read: [PTI facing internal pressure to return to parliament](#)

While Mr Khan is all too willing to lash out at others, the simple fact of the matter is that much of the problem in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly lies within the PTI camp. Were the PTI’s own MPAs not willing to consider voting for Senate candidates of other parties against the direction of the PTI leadership, there would be no need for the frantic, eleventh-hour negotiations between the PTI and other political parties.

March 2015

Also dashed — hopefully only very temporarily — by Mr Khan’s outburst yesterday was the immediate hope that the PTI would end its boycott of the National Assembly and return to its rightful and legitimately earned place there.

It had appeared that the sensible voices within the PTI were on the verge of convincing Mr Khan that the time for ousting the government through street agitation had passed.

They believed the party was better off building on its position inside parliament to mount a robust opposition to government policies the PTI is opposed to and also to press for the much-needed and long-promised electoral reforms.

In boycotting the National Assembly for seven long months, the PTI has not only turned its back on the very voters who sent PTI representatives to parliament in May 2013 but has also done a disservice to the democratic project and the quest to build a stronger and more stable parliamentary system.

Both the PTI and democracy itself have been hurt by the boycott and it is time that the party which has done so much to revitalise and reinvigorate the electorate go on to demonstrate that legitimate demands can be achieved inside parliament too and not just on the street.

There is also the possibility that a return to the National Assembly will bring to bear some pressure on the PML-N to deliver on its promise to debate and enact meaningful electoral reforms.

For all the PTI’s missteps and faults, it has at least shown an inclination to do the right thing eventually. Surely, the PML-N — in power for the third time — can do the same.

Published in Dawn March 3rd , 2015

Minorities’ dilemma

AMONGST the predicament of minorities in Pakistan is the fact that youngsters belonging to faiths other than Islam either have to study the religion of the majority, or learn about Islamic themes that are included in the textbooks of unrelated subjects.

As some scholars have pointed out, forcibly teaching non-Muslim students Islam — either because of the lack of alternatives or through inducement — violates their constitutional rights.

In this regard, it is welcome that the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Textbook Board has begun developing ethics books for the province’s minority students.

Know more: [KP begins developing Ethics textbooks for non-Muslim students](#)

While ethics is being taught in other provinces, it is shocking that it took KP so long to offer an alternative to non-Muslim students.

March 2015

Even the ANP, which ruled the province before the PTI's rise to power, did not rectify this anomaly. As reported in this paper, many non-Muslim students in KP are forced to study Islamiat due to the lack of ethics textbooks and instructors who could teach them the subject.

This brings us to another major problem: while the province has done well to formulate an ethics textbook, who will teach the subject? As our report indicates there is a shortage of qualified ethics teachers in KP. This problem also exists in other provinces.

In order to create a more tolerant and inclusive society, it is essential that non-Muslim students are not forced to study the religion of the majority. With the addition of KP, ethics will now be taught nationwide, hence there needs to be a trained cadre of instructors in all provinces that can teach the subject to non-Muslim pupils.

Moreover, minorities must be consulted so that their respective religious beliefs are taught to youngsters instead of ethics should they so choose. Then there is the issue of including Islamic topics in subjects as varied as general knowledge, social studies and English.

Of course, this infusion of religious material across the academic spectrum is mostly the work of Ziaul Haq's 'Islamisation' project. It must be realised that Islamiat is a compulsory subject in Pakistan, hence there is little reason to include religious teachings in other subjects.

Doing so poses two major problems: it forces non-Muslim students to study Islam and where Muslim pupils are

concerned, this approach can result in diluting the focus of the lesson. Both the issues of non-Muslim students and the inclusion of religious topics in unrelated subjects must be considered in future curriculum reform efforts.

Published in Dawn March 3rd, 2015

Graffiti menace

POLICE in the capital city recently removed graffiti glorifying the self-styled Islamic State from the walls of buildings in an area where schools are located.

Patrols will now be enhanced to ensure that the wall-chalking does not reappear in the vicinity. In fact, the menace of graffiti is very widespread and a big problem in Pakistani cities and a more energetic approach is required to tackle it.

Take a look: [Karachi's walls have become a canvas for spreading political, social and religious messages.](#)

Political graffiti appears on the walls of historical buildings, while posters of electoral candidates are pasted on national monuments too. More insidiously, hate messages are scribbled on walls in large localities in Karachi, and towns across Punjab.

March 2015

The seeming impunity with which these messages are scribbled on the walls shows that they are not considered a big enough menace by law-enforcement or the local administration.

Quite apart from desecrating national monuments and historic sites, hate messages along sectarian lines or glorifying groups involved in large-scale atrocities should be a special target for erasure.

Yet thus far we have not witnessed any systematic effort to discourage those who insist on scribbling these messages in public places.

The police in Sector H-9 of Islamabad have done the right thing in promptly painting over the graffiti and enhancing patrols in the area to ensure that it does not recur. But much more needs to be done in towns across Punjab — and in Karachi where last year the Sindh Assembly passed a law against the defacement of public and private property, stipulating punishment for the offenders.

The local authorities, including the police and city administration, must play a more vigilant role to erase graffiti promptly, and apprehend those responsible for putting up these messages.

The political parties can lead the way by mounting a strong campaign internally to dissuade electoral hopefuls and other political players from using public walls and national monuments as display areas for their messages and slogans. Meanwhile, keeping hate off our walls will help keep it out of our minds.

Published in Dawn March 3rd , 2015

Senate's welcome move

JUST days before some 50-odd senators are to bow out at the completion of their terms the upper house on Monday passed a bill seeking to change laws about 'honour' killings and another about improvement in the legal clauses on custodial torture and custodial rape.

The bills were moved by members belonging to the PPP, which is striving to stay relevant in the fast-changing political landscape by occasionally, even if sporadically, striking a forward-looking chord.

Know more: [Senate passes bills against rape, honour killing](#)

The Senate unanimously passed the proposed changes, which have to be debated in the National Assembly before being sent for a presidential nod.

If the bills are a sign of a common cause pursued above partisanship, it could have been even more uplifting if the initiative had come from the treasury.

Clear commitment shown by the government members at this stage could have inspired greater hope about a smooth passage through the lower house where the PML-N has a majority.

March 2015

Even more importantly, it could have provided a bigger assurance that the new laws will be smoothly implemented.

Nevertheless, this is some kind of an achievement, given how divided the legislators have remained over these clauses, especially the most controversial Qanoon-i-Shahadat or the law of evidence introduced by the martial law regime of Gen Ziaul Haq in 1984.

This can be taken as a sign that the country's process towards political maturity continues despite the routine maligning of Pakistani politicians. Only these politicians have to frequently intervene and assert themselves in other areas in favour of progress and a just society.

The Senate, with its continued multiparty composition, needs to build upon this momentum. Rather than these bills being remembered as the upper house's farewell gift to some of its parting members this must mark the beginning of a new era of rigorous, dispassionate and fair review of laws.

There is, there will always be, much that needs to be corrected. The case of Pakistan requires even greater urgency given that revisions have been delayed and denied here for so long under one pretext or another.

Published in Dawn March 4th , 2015

PSO results

ALMOST two months after it happened, we are finally beginning to get a credible picture of what really led to the petrol crisis in early January.

The financial results just announced by PSO include data from the crucial second quarter ending Dec 31, 2014, when the crisis germinated before emerging in its full-blown form early this year.

Know more: [PSO profit plunges 73pc to Rs4.3bn in July-Dec](#)

The data paints a startling picture. Profit after tax plunged by 73pc in the six months from June to December, compared to the 150pc growth that was recorded in the same period last year.

The company says inventory losses of Rs2.7bn, compared to a gain of Rs6.4bn in the same period last year, explain some of this drop.

The rest of the drop is explained by lower receipts of late payment surcharges from the power sector — Rs3bn in the first half compared to Rs11bn last year.

The results appear to vindicate the line taken widely by the media and financial analysts during the crisis that the liquidity problems of PSO lay behind the problem.

The line taken by the government, and at least two inquiry commissions constituted by it, was that mismanagement led to

March 2015

the crisis. It is true that the oil supply chain suffered from crucial weaknesses, such as a weak stock position, but those issues are as structural as the circular debt.

It is hard to discount the impact of the sharp deterioration in the financial position of the company as revealed in financial results, which hampered its ability to arrange fuel shipments.

Further, many of the deteriorating financials are connected with the power sector, from margins on furnace oil to late payment surcharges from the power sector, and strengthen the argument that ultimately it was the circular debt and its impact on the company's finances that led to the petrol crisis.

It is sad that this picture is emerging after two separate inquiry reports produced by government-appointed commissions, neither of which gave sufficient prominence to the financial issues of the company and the circular debt, a few words to the effect notwithstanding.

The full results are to be released later, and they will help build a more detailed picture of what went wrong in early January. There might be a temptation for the new management of PSO to use the interval to package their results in a way to not contradict the government's story, but this temptation should be resisted.

Published in Dawn March 4th , 2015

Polio narrative

THE challenges Pakistan is facing in its struggle to ensure that all children in the country are vaccinated against polio are well known, as is its lack of success in the endeavour.

The single fact that Pakistan stands poised to compromise the herd immunity of the world population ought to have sparked a frenzy of effort. And yet, the number of cases continues to rise, with last year's figures being the highest in nearly a decade and a half, and the violence against polio workers and the security teams with which they must travel showing no signs of abating.

Know more: [KP police arrest 471 parents for refusing polio vaccine](#)

Meanwhile, mischief that ought to have been nipped in the bud has been allowed to grow so that now it has attained formidable proportions, ie the extremist right-wing propaganda initiated by Mullah Fazlullah in the north-eastern parts of the country, and then adopted by the Taliban, that the drops are harmful.

With the passage of so many years, this narrative has taken hold among communities, in particular in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and some parts of Karachi, and spun out of the control of the centre and the provincial governments.

Parents or guardians of children refusing to let the OPV drops be administered has become a seemingly intractable problem.

March 2015

It is against this backdrop that the KP administration's decision to arrest people who refuse to allow the drops to be administered must be seen. As the first day of the second round of the KP government's Sehat Ka Insaaf programme got under way on Monday, some 470 people were arrested for this reason in Peshawar.

Though the threat seems to be having some effect — people similarly arrested in Nowshera and Kohat last week were freed after they gave in — it is appalling that matters have been allowed to reach such a pass.

The need for the state to retake control of the polio narrative could not be more urgent, and other avenues of inducement, such as linking the issuance or renewal of essential documents including national identity cards to proof of vaccination, need to be explored.

However, the most obvious avenue of all is for political and religious leaders across the country, but particularly KP, to become involved beyond what they have so far done — using the polio vaccination campaign as a cynical photo-op and making empty promises of continued involvement.

Consider the case of Imran Khan, who leads the party in power in KP, and Maulana Samiul Haq, head of the Darul Uloom Haqqania. Both promised personal involvement in the campaign but then faded away to attend to matters that they considered had higher priority.

The participation of leaders such as these, though, could make a pivotal difference. What needs to be recognised is that polio is no longer solely a health issue; it has been, unfortunately,

politicised and as such, needs a sustained political campaign for its resolution.

Published in Dawn March 4th , 2015

A provocative address

BENJAMIN Netanyahu's speech to a joint session of the US Congress on Tuesday is a prime example of how international diplomacy should not be conducted. It was a strange situation: the leader of a foreign nation was challenging the policies of the US president in America's national legislature.

This bizarre event clearly shows the power Israel yields over a large section of the US political establishment. Mr Netanyahu had a largely one-dimensional message: there should be no nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1.

Not only was this political stunt — legislative elections are due shortly in Israel — a clumsy attempt to sabotage the nuclear negotiations, it was also blatant interference in America's domestic affairs.

Also read: [Israeli PM warns US against Iran nuclear deal](#)

Barack Obama's dislike of the episode was illustrated by his total snub of the Israeli leader, while House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi described the speech as an "insult" to American intelligence.

March 2015

Tehran, understandably, termed the address “Iranophobic”. The speech was little more than scare-mongering, using such a distinguished platform to make sweeping statements about a “nuclear nightmare” should Iran develop the bomb.

Moreover, Mr Netanyahu has made misleading statements about the alleged Iranian bomb earlier, most notably before the UN. The address also illustrated a clear division within the US political establishment as over 50 Democrats boycotted the speech; this is a rare departure from the usual bipartisan support Tel Aviv gets in Washington.

Yet despite the dissent Mr Netanyahu received several ovations from the representatives of the American people.

While Benjamin Netanyahu’s compulsions may have been to show Israeli voters and Tel Aviv’s friends in Washington that he wants to appear tough on Iran, such theatrics must not affect the nuclear negotiations.

Tehran has a right to pursue peaceful nuclear power while the prospect of more nuclear weapons in the Middle East would be an unwelcome addition to a volatile region.

Hence diplomacy should be the only channel pursued to ensure Iran gets a fair deal and that the concerns of its neighbours and the West are sufficiently addressed.

Published in Dawn March 5th , 2015

Strange disappearance

THE prime accused in multiple murder cases as well as a key suspect in the Baldia Town factory fire case has disappeared under circumstances described as ‘mysterious’ by the Rangers.

Rizwan Qureshi was arrested on five counts of murder and one count of possession of illicit weapons in June 2013, and interrogated by a Joint Interrogation Team a week later.

Know more: [MOM disowns ‘worker’ who blamed it for factory fire](#)

He was indicted by a sessions court — where the trial was being conducted — in all six cases based on the recorded testimony of eyewitnesses as well as a confession he gave to the police, which has no weight before a court.

By October 2014, he was granted bail in all cases due to delays in recording the testimony of key eyewitnesses before the court. Then in early February the JIT report was made public when it was placed before the Sindh High Court in a case totally unconnected with the six counts on which Qureshi was being tried in the sessions court.

The report’s contents regarding the Baldia Town factory fire sparked a fierce political controversy, even though they were based entirely on hearsay. When the sessions court hearing the original six cases summoned Qureshi for a hearing on Feb 25, 2015, he failed to appear and has since been missing.

March 2015

How could somebody accused of five counts of murder be granted bail? The clear answer is that the investigating authorities did a poor job of building a case for the court.

For one, his confession was never recorded before a judicial magistrate, which would make it legally admissible as evidence in court and might have been enough to secure his conviction.

Trying to convict someone accused of crimes as dangerous as the ones Qureshi was accused of on the basis of eyewitness testimony alone is very poor prosecution because eyewitnesses are easily intimidated.

Additionally, why was the JIT report not shared with police investigators or the prosecution in the trial under way in the sessions court, especially considering its recommendation that Qureshi “may be Challan [sic] in the cases in which he has disclosed his involvement” was signed by the SSP South, Karachi Police?

It almost seems as if trying Qureshi was a lesser priority to using his disclosures before the JIT for creating a political firestorm. Given these weaknesses in our prosecution and investigative capacities, perhaps it is not all that ‘mysterious’ that the prime accused in such heinous crimes has ‘disappeared’.

Published in Dawn March 5th , 2015

More of the same

IT is perhaps a testament to the hopes and dreams of many in the region that an overnight stopover in Pakistan, squeezed between visits to Dhaka and Kabul, by a senior Indian bureaucrat can still generate so much interest.

Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar’s visit to Islamabad may have been billed by the Indian government as part of a so-called Saarc yatra, but it was always going to be bilateral issues that dominated the agenda in Islamabad.

The real question — given that few anticipated any kind of breakthrough on Tuesday — was what kind of tone the foreign secretaries would set in their interaction. Now, the answer is known: a cautious, bureaucratic tone meant to avoid controversies and which gave neither cause for much hope nor great sorrow.

In the jargon of the times, Mr Jaishankar and his Pakistani counterpart, Aizaz Chaudhry, played up modest convergences and downplayed significant divergences.

On display, then, was an old, gentle game: India mentioned Mumbai, Pakistan referred to the Samjhota Express; Pakistan mentioned alleged Indian involvement in Balochistan and Fata, India pointed to alleged Pakistan-based anti-India militancy. Both sides brought up violence along the LoC and Working Boundary.

As host, Pakistan mooted the softest of CBMs (people-to-people contact, religious tourism, media and sporting ties, etc)

March 2015

while, as the guest, India graciously promised to dwell on the suggestions. As is the norm, the more meaningful communications — getting down to brass tacks, as it were — would have taken place behind closed doors and in confidence.

Know more: [Samjhota Express, LoC violations discussed: Aizaz Chaudhry](#)

For the Pakistani side, the main interest was likely to try and determine how the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is planning to address the bilateral relationship in the immediate future.

Is the approach to remain wrapped up in the broader Saarc context, a sign that Mr Modi is content to let ties remain frozen, or is the Saarc emphasis really to provide domestic political cover while Mr Modi engages Pakistan and seeks some genuine progress on the major issues?

For New Delhi, the main interest was likely to determine whether the military-dominated, but civilian-fronted Pakistani policy on India is willing to address its concerns about regional terrorism and India-centric militants tolerated by Pakistan.

What is discussed behind closed doors though will eventually be reflected in the public positions. If the resumption of full-spectrum talks is the goal, then this hesitant dance dubbed as ‘talks for talks’ is well worth the effort.

In truth, on some issues there is really little of substance left to negotiate — Sir Creek and Siachen in particular. And much depends on political will. So how the talks are structured may in fact determine what the outcomes are.

Mr Modi has already shown his petulant side by cancelling foreign secretary-level talks last year and the state here has shown its intransigence over the Mumbai attacks-related trials. Political leadership is what’s needed, but will it materialise?

Published in Dawn March 5th , 2015

Utter chaos

THERE are many examples of abject mismanagement and unexpected crises in the political history of this country. But few such episodes have been as thoroughly unnecessary and self-inflicted as the fiasco that was polling day for the Senate elections yesterday.

It is less the number of seats that became the subject of controversy — certainly, only a minority of the 48 seats contested on Thursday. It was the entire voting process that was tainted by the actions of a few.

As with every fiasco, there are culprits and this time it is the PML-N and, to a lesser extent, the PTI. Start with the PML-N. As the governing party, the PML-N is the chief custodian of the democratic project.

In addition to being in the electoral fray, it was the responsibility of the PML-N to keep the process itself as transparent, efficient and free from controversy as possible. In that regard, the PML-N has been a stunning failure — adding

March 2015

to its growing list of ineptitudes and difficult-to-understand mistakes.

In strictly procedural terms, ahead of the unruliness in Punjab and ugliness in KP, the failure to elect Fata senators is a wretched tale of an eleventh-hour intervention failing to address a problem that had been apparent from the very outset of this election process.

Presidential ordinances are an undesirable form of legislation to begin with, but can there even be a justification for a democratic government promulgating an ordinance in the middle of the night that changed the rules of an election to be held the following morning?

Whatever the problem that the ordinance sought to address — legitimate or not — surely the late-night change to the rules was always going to stoke controversy. If that were not enough of a scandal, there was a broader PML-N failure in three provinces: the inability to anticipate some thoroughly obvious problems and the unwillingness to offer pre-emptory solutions.

Nothing that happened in Balochistan, KP or Punjab was new or particularly challenging — but none of those problems could be dealt with without calm, organised and thoughtful political leadership.

Surely, in politically divided provinces such as Balochistan and KP and neglected houses such as the Punjab Assembly, MPAs were going to create trouble if left to their own, parochial devices.

Disastrous as the PML-N leadership was — a last-ditch effort to pass a constitutional amendment actually underlined the political and managerial failures of the government — the PTI in KP played its role in compounding the problems.

With a provincial leadership that appears to defy the central leadership more often than not and with PTI chief Imran Khan being his usual mercurial self, the PTI in KP appears to have become everything Mr Khan excoriates in status quo politics. Where are the principles, where is the discipline and where is the public interest in the PTI set-up in the province?

Published in Dawn, March 6th, 2015

Madressah financing

WHAT does one make of a situation where a different answer is given to the same question, depending on who is asked and when?

In a rolling series of responses given to the Senate since at least January, the Punjab police have been giving conflicting answers to a simple question: how many madressahs in the province are known to be receiving foreign funding?

In late January, where other provinces presented a combined figure of 23 madressahs that received foreign funding, Punjab had said there were no such seminaries on its territory.

March 2015

This claim was met with scepticism, and the Senate committee summoned the Punjab IGP and asked him the same question. The IGP sent a representative in his place who reportedly told the committee that foreign funding was indeed being received, but came via informal channels, and details were therefore not known.

He sought the assistance of the FIA and the State Bank in tracing it. The committee tasked the Punjab police with preparing a detailed report and scheduled another hearing.

That hearing was held on Wednesday, and this time the Punjab IGP appeared in person, along with an official from Nacta, the counterterrorism authority.

This time they told the committee that 147 seminaries in Punjab were receiving funds from abroad, but that “no actionable intelligence” existed on the matter, and therefore the police could do little more than keep the entities under watch.

Nacta made the startling observation that it was unaware of the exact number of madressahs operating in the country since the figures provided by different agencies and provincial governments did not tally. He had no concrete information on foreign funding. Given some follow-up, the provincial government has gone from “nil”, to “some” to 147 in just over a month.

The fact that legislators have to follow up aggressively in order to get straight answers to such an important question shows the provincial government’s lack of interest in pursuing the matter.

Funding of madressahs, especially those suspected of involvement in terrorist activities and those whose curriculum includes preaching hate against members of other sects and denominations, is a crucial part of fighting the menace of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan.

If the law-enforcement agencies are evasive in generating straightforward answers to simple questions, and continuously plead their helplessness and ask for assistance from other government departments, it reveals a manifest lack of vigour in going to the roots of terrorism.

Published in Dawn, March 6th, 2015

Misuse of ECL

OFFICIALDOM in Pakistan seems to have a penchant for mishandling sensitive issues. Take the treatment meted out to Baloch rights activist ‘Mama’ Abdul Qadeer at the Karachi airport on Wednesday.

Before the activist, accompanied by two colleagues, could board a flight to the US to attend a seminar, the group was stopped by the Federal Investigation Agency and told their names were on the Exit Control List.

Know more: [Baloch rights activists barred from going to US](#)

Mama Qadeer says officials told him he was involved in “anti-Pakistan” activities, which is why he could not travel abroad. The campaigner was supposed to participate in a seminar in New York on rights violations in Sindh and Balochistan.

The move clearly smacks of political victimisation. What is particularly disturbing is why the individuals had not been informed when their names had been placed on the ECL; this would have allowed them to challenge the move legally.

This incident indicates the state is continuing to misuse the ECL. Instead of employing it as a tool to prevent the flight of violent and dangerous suspects or criminals, it seems the government is using the list as a way to punish critics and opponents by restricting their freedom to travel.

It should be recalled that Mama Qadeer had led a nearly 2,000km march that ended in Islamabad in 2014 to highlight the plight of missing persons in Balochistan.

Accompanied by a small group of women and children, Mama Qadeer’s march was a poignant, painful reminder that in this country, it is taken for granted that the security apparatus detain people extra-judicially.

His own son was found shot dead after going missing. The state should realise that instead of silencing critics or preventing them from raising their voice internationally, it must address the core issues that push people to speak up against injustice in the first place.

This unsavoury incident also highlights the need to reform the process of placing names on the ECL. The procedure must be made more transparent and less prone to abuse.

Fond memories revived

THE horse and cattle show of Lahore is back. The occasion rekindles fond memories and, as is customary these days, spurs readymade theories about the value of cultural spectacles as a means of painting a positive image of this nation in the eyes of the wider world.

Reminiscences and international reputation aside, this is one mela like all others that the people here should be allowed to have regularly and without hindrance.

The fair was discontinued about a decade ago because of the tense security situation. It had evolved from a modest livestock exhibition to a show that now needed to diversify further.

Take a look: [Horse and Cattle Show stages comeback](#)

This is not to say that some of the old features had lost their charm. The livestock competition did create plenty of excitement as did the light show in the evenings and various other offerings such as tent-pegging, dog shows and daredevil stunts.

March 2015

It was all there yet somehow the grandness of the old that had encouraged Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to rechristen it the Awami Mela in the 1970s, in sync with popular projections of himself, had worn off with time.

The foreign dignitaries who had once graced the show went missing as did some of the enthusiasm that had seen people, both from the upcoming industry and agriculture, to contribute to its expansion.

To put it candidly, just as those after Bhutto found reason to distance themselves from the ‘awami’ description that the original horse and cattle event was given, the people, too, found other attractions to occupy themselves with.

It will now take a few editions to re-establish the old link but this is a good beginning. The fair has to be fully revived. In fact, it has to be expanded upon. It is a cultural expression tied to tradition and evolution right at the grass roots.

At the same time, it is, of course, a reminder of the true Pakistan in the face of all those prone to using violent methods to establish an alien order.

Published in Dawn March 7th , 2015

Float the rupee

HOW is the rupee continuing to hold its strength against the dollar at a time when currencies around the world are not?

The dollar has risen to the highest level in a decade compared to its principal trade partners, and many other countries around the world are eagerly letting their currencies fall in comparison to avail themselves of the cheaper export prices this makes possible.

Know more: [SBP intervention keeps dollar below Rs102](#)

The dollar’s recent strength does not come from any underlying economic dynamism. It comes from the prospect of rising interest rates. In response, central banks around the world are cutting rates, from India to Russia to the European Central Bank to many other emerging markets as well, in an effort to further drive down their own currencies and make their products competitive in world markets.

This trend has accelerated throughout 2014, and has only been gaining momentum in the early months of 2015. Yet the Pakistani rupee clings stubbornly to its value of 102 to a dollar.

Some might see this as a sign of economic strength. But all it shows is that the monetary authorities in Pakistan are using their precious foreign exchange reserves, mostly consisting of borrowed money, to shore up the value of the rupee.

March 2015

Recent reports from the currency markets suggest that the authorities may be resorting to increasingly aggressive moves to keep the rupee steady around 102. Why would they do this?

One simple answer is ego. For many decades now, the assumption has reigned in our policy thinking that a strong rupee is desirable because it makes imports cheaper.

That may be so, if the consumption of imported goods was the only objective that our economic policy was supposed to serve. But in reality, it is worth asking what costs come with this stubborn insistence to support the rupee at higher levels.

Exports suffer, as seen in our trade balance, and more sustainable sources of earning foreign exchange dwindle, making the economy more dependent on borrowed resources. Thus, the sale of automobiles and retail fuels are shooting up but exports are declining month after month.

Is this really a desirable state of affairs? It is worth reminding the monetary authorities in Pakistan, and there is some debate about who they really are these days, that the benefits of a strong rupee may not necessarily outweigh the costs.

As the dollar continues its unnatural climb, perhaps it would be better to let the rupee find its own moorings.

Published in Dawn March 7th , 2015

Repair work for Senate

SURVEYING the wreckage that has become the 2015 Senate elections, this much is already clear: the upper house of parliament has a serious repair job ahead of it in terms of recovering its reputation and reinstating itself in the public imagination as a forum where serious, sober and informed debate is possible.

To be sure, few — if any — candidates have been elected to the Senate solely on the basis of vote-buying and without the support of a political party with representation in one of the assemblies.

Also read: [Senate election and its set of controversies](#)

But the perception of these elections has been fundamentally shaped by several other factors: the mismanagement of their parties and the electoral process by the PML-N and PTI; wild speculation in sections of the media; and a welter of allegations on election day itself, leading to unprecedented disruptions of the polling process.

That is a stain no house should have and surely not the Senate, which in its composition and design is meant to be above bare-knuckled, winner-takes-all politics.

Before the Senate can begin to recover its reputation though, there is the business of avoiding yet more damage. When the new members of the Senate will be sworn in next week and the house will convene to elect a chairman and deputy chairman,

there is an obvious problem: the PPP and PML-N will have near-equal representation in the Senate.

So which party will get its senator elected as chairman? For the PPP, retaining the Senate chairmanship will act as a useful riposte to the growing criticism that it has been reduced to a regional party from interior Sindh.

For the PML-N, control of the Senate will aid its legislative agenda in parliament and rebut the allegation that it is essentially a Punjab-only party. But with roughly one-fourth of the votes in the Senate each, if the PML-N and PPP do decide to contest the Senate chairmanship, then both sides will need to reach out to the other parties in the Senate — triggering another potentially damaging round of speculation and allegations of vote-buying and arm-twisting.

There is also the issue of the PTI. It has yet to allow its members to return to the National Assembly and if its six senators also stay away from Senate proceedings, it will add to the perception of parliament being an incomplete forum.

Beyond that perhaps what the Senate should look to focus on is ramping up its legislative and oversight agenda. The wealth of talent and professional expertise — and not plain wealth in monetary terms — in the Senate remains high with this new set of legislators.

There is no other legislative body in the country with specially reserved seats for technocrats and ulema and many of the parties send some of their most experienced and competent members to the upper house. Surely, the best response to scandal is to get down to business quickly.

A thrilling win

PAKISTAN'S resounding 29-run victory over the mighty South Africans on Saturday have brought them very close to qualification for the World Cup quarterfinals, a situation that looked well beyond their grasp barely a week ago. Given their horrendous start to the World Cup last month, where they lost back to back games against India and the West Indies and limped to victory over the lowly ranked Zimbabwe, Misbah-ul-Haq's embattled men had all but been written off by the experts.

But the unpredictability tag has long been attached to the Pakistan team, and this was very much evident in its emphatic victory against the Proteas in Auckland. Needless to say, the victory has come as a major boost for the Greenshirts and millions of their supporters around the world who now believe in their team's chances as a certain title contender. More importantly, the win has restored the players' confidence in themselves to a large extent besides enabling the team to establish a winning combination which had eluded them in the earlier games.

The resilience of Sarfraz Ahmed, who was adjudged player of the match in his World Cup debut, and the lethal impact of the four-pronged pace attack have brought welcome relief to the erstwhile struggling national outfit and the perpetually under-fire team management. Sarfraz, unencumbered by any notion of restraint despite his unjust omission in previous games, stamped his class yet again as a wicketkeeper-batsman of exceptional talent and should now be made a permanent feature of the team. With three wins in the last three games, Pakistan is

March 2015

clearly on a roll. However, the competition is set to become more gruelling in the later stages and in order to maintain its winning act, the team must guard against any complacency. Hosts Australia and New Zealand, with their inordinate appetite for success, pose a real threat to the competing teams, and with Pakistan peaking at the right time, the World Cup looks destined for a thrilling finish.

Published in Dawn March 8th , 2015

Way to the grass roots

NOT for the first time has the Supreme Court said that it will have none of it. The dillydallying governments, the half-prepared Election Commission, the politicians not wanting to share power at the grass roots, have all been censured. The apex court on Friday ordered that all parts of the country must have local governments by September this year. This raises hope. Maybe the so-called democrats, as well as others who have contributed to the delay, have now run out of excuses.

All kinds of reasons have been given for the denial of this basic right to the people, an essential follow-up to the much celebrated devolution of power blueprint provided by the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. Much criticism has come the way of the PPP and PML-N, the main forces behind the amendment. They have now been blocking the local governments as the ruling parties in Sindh and Punjab. In circumstances where politicians are as much under pressure

and as willing to outsource jobs they should ideally be performing they could well be grilled over their inability to level the route on their own for a smooth and swift holding of the local government vote. That they have been disciplined by the judge's hammer to tread the right path, albeit behind the clock, will, and perhaps should, expose the political leadership to some more flak.

The time lost cannot be regained. But under duress and lacking in grace as they might be, the set-ups will be doing their own reputations a favour if they were to now earnestly employ their resources and create an enabling environment for the polls. The ruling says that the cantonments must hold local elections on April 25 — the refusal to allow even a week's postponement conveying the mood the court is in at the moment. As Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is asked to organise the election in May, the province and the cantonments can set an example for the two bigger units in the federation to follow. Maybe there are no other ways that Punjab and Sindh, the two most reluctant provinces, can delay the delivery of the local governments to the people beyond the Sept 20 deadline. But just in case there are more excuses, the pressure needs to be kept up to ensure that the court decision and people's aspirations are acted upon in the name of the democracy that everyone these days is so keen to swear by.

Published in Dawn March 8th , 2015

PM's visit to Saudi Arabia

THE prime minister's visit to Saudi Arabia has sparked a mini-firestorm of speculation about the 'real' motives for the trip. Yet Nawaz Sharif is just one of many regional and international leaders invited to Riyadh over the past few days.

The Turkish and Egyptian presidents were recently in the kingdom, while John Kerry also made a quick dash to Riyadh. It seems two main issues were commonly discussed during these visits: Iran and the self-styled Islamic State. There has been talk of forming a 'Sunni bloc' as Tehran has started to exercise greater influence across the region and a possible nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 emerges on the horizon, which would pave the way for the Islamic Republic's re-entry into the global financial system. Indeed in both Syria and Iraq, Iran is helping these governments push back against IS. This puts the Arab sheikhdoms in a tough spot: should they still try and contain Iran, or should they focus on defeating IS?

IS, on the other hand, is projecting itself as a champion of the 'Sunni' cause, putting up a fight against an expansionist, Shia Iran. Here, the difficulty of the Gulf sheikhdoms becomes apparent: if they take a position against IS they'll be on the same side as Iran. If they support the Islamic State — overtly or covertly — it will effectively be suicidal. For while IS may come in handy to encircle Iran, it is quite clear the self-styled caliphate seeks to dismantle the current political architecture of the Middle East and remake the region, and indeed the entire Muslim world, in its image. That is why it is important for Sunni-majority states, especially the Gulf sheikhdoms, to firmly oppose IS, and despite their doctrinal and ideological

differences with Iran, bury the hatchet and work with Tehran against IS. Moreover, if the Sunni states remain ambiguous about their anti-IS policy, Islamists the world over will gravitate towards the extremist group as it continues to play up its anti-Iran and anti-Shia credentials.

And where does Pakistan fit into this equation? It is indeed a difficult challenge for Islamabad to balance its ties with Riyadh and Tehran. But within this difficulty may be an opportunity. Firstly, Pakistan should not become a party in the Arab-Iran tussle. Iran is a neighbour and should not be estranged while decades of ties with Saudi Arabia must also not be severed. If anything, Pakistan is ideally placed to act as a bridge between the two — should it play its cards right. Coming back to IS, the Iranian action against the group must not be viewed through a sectarian lens, especially when Saudi Arabia and other countries have declared it a terrorist organisation. Ideally, collective action against IS is the best option; for this Iran and Saudi Arabia will need to set aside their differences and focus on the common enemy.

Published in Dawn March 8th , 2015

Music to the ears

AS the two-day annual All Pakistan Music Conference filled the night sky with music from the lawns of the National Academy of the Performing Arts in Karachi recently, many had reason to reflect on the great classical musicians and vocalists Pakistan has produced over the decades.

That these musical traditions have continued to be passed down through the generations testifies exemplary commitment, especially in the face of scant support by the state.

At Friday's event, as bansuri-playing brothers Abid Ali and Sajid Ali were introduced, it was pointed out that while the former had played with the likes of Mehdi Hasan and Noorjehan, his sibling is contributing to Coke Studio collaborations.

Take a look: [Brass band sets tone for 12th music conference](#)

Hidden in this compliment — Coke Studio has not only produced music to critical acclaim but has also proved commercially successful — is a reality that has seemingly escaped the attention of policymakers.

Since the audience for classical music is small (and this is true for many parts of the world), artists receive state support; failing that, and driven by the need to earn, they perform turn to other work. As a result, the true classical traditions become neglected and eventually die out.

This unfortunate process has been under way in Pakistan as well. And yet at no administrative level has much concern been evident. That it was once on the radar is manifest, given that institutions such as the Pakistan National Council of the Arts and the Arts Councils in various cities were set up with mandates that included supporting (financially and through the provision of performance platforms) artists whose work would attract low commercial attention, such as classical music.

In practice, though, efforts made by these organisations have come across as piecemeal and sporadic. Avenues such as Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan, too, are no longer as hospitable to classical musicians as they once were.

Surely, Pakistan's classical music traditions ought not to be allowed to die out simply because of inattention. Is it too much to ask policymakers to intervene?

Published in Dawn, March 9th, 2015

Ludicrous suggestion

THE water regulator, Irsa, has suggested to the federal government that all development programmes being carried out in the country be “frozen for at least five years and funds may be diverted” for building mega dams.

This is an absurd proposal, and has been floated in the past as well to little avail. The secretary water and power would be well advised to ignore it.

Know more: [Irsa warns of water crisis, seeks PSDP freeze](#)

Nobody doubts that Pakistan needs more water storage, especially in response to the challenges posed by climate change. But suggesting that these should be built by diverting the entire PSDP funds for five years to the water bureaucracy shows a lack of seriousness on the part of Irsa.

First of all, before making such an enormous request, which if agreed to would have deep ramifications for the economy, it is worth asking what other steps the regulator has recommended to meet the challenges of climate change.

What suggestions do they have regarding flood-control measures and the improvement of flood-forecasting techniques? What work have they done to promote more efficient utilisation of water on farms?

Instead of advancing silly proposals of this sort, Irsa’s time would be better spent doing some actual work on the

challenges that climate change presents to Pakistan, and on what sort of strategies can be adopted to meet them.

Demanding money for giant construction schemes is something a lot of government departments excel at, but the water bureaucracy has left everybody behind in asking for the entirety of the development funds in the country to be placed at their disposable.

The proposal is not even a new one. Officials from the water bureaucracy have been making suggestions of this sort for many years now.

It reflects an extreme version of the thinking that infects much of our approach to water issues: that more physical infrastructure and more money are the answer to Pakistan’s water issues.

More than physical infrastructure, the water bureaucracy needs to do a better job of managing the resources at its disposal first, and doing more to advance policy reforms to raise efficiency and awareness of best practices and the reduction of water theft.

The poor track record of the water bureaucracy in building large hydro projects, as evidenced by the repeated delays and poor management of the Neelum Jhelum hydropower project, do not inspire confidence that they can be trusted anymore with large construction projects.

Published in Dawn, March 9th, 2015

Return of IDPs

THE pledge by the Pakistan Army to begin the return, in a phased manner, of an estimated 150,000 families displaced by the military operations in the North Waziristan and Khyber agencies is a welcome sign that the leadership has some understanding of the need to fight a people-centric counter-insurgency.

To avoid a familiar cycle of violence peaking and subsiding over a period of time in most insurgency-hit areas, the local population needs to be on the side of the state.

That is possible, but only through the careful management of the needs of the local population.

Take a look: [IDPs' return likely to begin next week](#)

To begin with, the affected population needs to be equipped with enough resources to make resettlement as painless a process as possible.

The military and the Fata administration have accumulated a fair amount of experience in this regard and it appears that a reasonable amount of resources have been allocated to the task. But setting aside a quantum of resources and aid is one thing; ensuring that the families that it is intended for receive it in a manner that is dignified and as trouble-free as possible in the circumstances is another.

Far too often, the good intentions and the well-designed plans fail at the point of contact with the affected population: the

lowest tiers of the military are not trained to deal with population and those of the administrative set-up rarely think of themselves as public servants.

What is then designed thoughtfully and with care in Peshawar, Rawalpindi and Islamabad tends to not work as well on the ground in Fata.

This has been a recurring theme over the years with IDP management and returning them to their homes in Fata. Then, there is the sense that after the IDPs have been returned and several months have passed, they are essentially left to their own devices, with the military dominant in the area but focused on protecting territory and the civil administration all but displaced and non-functional.

That turn of events over the medium term is a failing on the part of the military. If Fata is ever to be normalised – and not simply returned to the pre-insurgency state of affairs – it has to have a sustainable, responsive system of government running the gamut of civil administration to the administration of justice to law and order. Worryingly, the military leadership appears unwilling or unready to permit meaningful Fata reforms.

Finally, there is the long term: what is the military's exit strategy from Fata? One hundred and seventy five thousand troops cannot remain there forever, but militancy in Fata is intrinsically connected to the situation across the Durand Line, management of the border and broader foreign and national-security policies.

March 2015

The military leadership pledges to wipe out terrorism, but a militarised anti-terror strategy combined with a shield still seemingly provided to old militant favourites does not seem to be the right way ahead.

Published in Dawn, March 9th, 2015

Diplomatic rigmarole

COUNTLESS Chinese VIPs, including the liberation icon Zhou En-lai, have visited Pakistan, but never before has a Chinese leader's trip to this country fallen victim to such gaucherie as the one now surrounding President Xi Jinping's.

On Sunday, Islamabad for the first time officially denied that President Xi would be in Pakistan on March 23.

The denial came from foreign policy adviser Sartaj Aziz. Without a fulltime foreign minister, the nation is spectacle to a bizarre phenomenon — it almost seems as if Pakistan has no leader or institution that knows how to conduct diplomacy.

Know more: [Sartaj Aziz admits no breakthrough in talks with India](#)

Originally scheduled for August last, the visit was postponed because of the sit-ins by Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri close to security-sensitive buildings.

The end of the sit-ins could have paved the way for President Xi's visit, but two developments clouded the authorities' vision: first, President Barack Obama was invited to be the guest at India's Republic Day celebrations; second, the army announced that March 23 would be celebrated with the traditional armed forces' parade after a break of several years.

Then somebody leaked a most childish feeler — that the Chinese president would be the state's guest at the Pakistan Day parade.

What message did those who leaked this bit of 'information' wish to give to the public? That we have a readymade formula to counter the perceived Indo-US axis?

Surely Pakistan should not concern itself with which world leader India invites to its celebrations.

Meanwhile, the Chinese, not wishing to embarrass Pakistan, did not deny categorically that their president would not visit on March 23. Instead, they gently indicated that Mr Xi intended to visit the country this year but gave no specific dates.

No doubt, there should have been an emphatic denial, but this should have come from Pakistan's Foreign Office right after the unverified report was circulated by the media.

Unfortunately, by not issuing one then, our foreign policy managers merely added to the confusion. This does not bode well for our conduct of diplomacy.

Published in Dawn March 10th , 2015

Farmers' protest

THE rumblings from the countryside have reached the city. Have the seeds of confrontation been sown? The local officials, with their act of blocking the way of protesting farmers, might have given the latter an additional excuse and maybe the impetus to build up an effective campaign.

The farmers, who complain of having been hit hard by an 'anti-agriculture' government, had been threatening to set off from various districts of Punjab for a rally in Islamabad.

That was something the government was not ready to allow and the district administrations were asked to stop the protests early.

Also read: [Farmers stopped from going to Islamabad rally](#)

There was violence in Vehari in southern Punjab as well as in Pakpattan, nearer to the power centre of Lahore. Batons were wielded and the protesters were tear-gassed for their crime of pressing for their basic right to hold a rally in the capital — a luxury which it seems cannot be allowed to 'just anyone'.

Police arrested many protesters and registered cases against them. By Monday afternoon, the local officials in Sahiwal were still holding talks with the representatives of the Pakistan Kissan Ittehad.

Whereas the reluctance of the administration to allow the farmers' passage had been made abundantly clear, by now apparently there was little relief that the local-level government

functionaries could offer to them. The demands related to policies which required intervention from higher levels, both in the province and at the centre.

The protesting farmers oppose the import of agricultural produce from India. They are asking for a revision in the official wheat price, and want a minimum price for potato as well as subsidy for rice growers.

Add to this the call for the removal of GST on farm inputs and we have a clearer idea of just how deep and varied the grievances of the farmers are. This is not just about one issue or a few issues.

This is a complaint against the general indifference towards, even wilful neglect of, a Pakistan that exists away from the limelight, and which is sought to be kept at a distance from Islamabad.

Just as political parties — even those in the opposition — and the media fail to lend a sympathetic enough ear to the farmers, the government, too, is bent on smothering the voices of protesters.

But unfortunately for the government, as it applies force and erects hurdles, the protesting chants only get louder.

Published in Dawn March 10th , 2015

Government's confusion

THE struggle over producing a list of banned outfits shows that the government is not clear about who should be on the list and who shouldn't.

Clarity on religious extremist groups means more than going on about 'zero tolerance' policies and promising an end to the distinction between the 'good' and 'bad' Taliban.

Clarity means being able to, at the very least, name all known religiously-motivated militant organisations operating in the country, telling the public why many of them have been banned, and what action is being taken to shut down their operations and apprehend their activists and leaders.

Take a look: [Govt to ensure ban on proscribed organisations within few days, affirms Nisar](#)

None of this appears to be happening. Putting up one list on a government website, only to take it down a few days later, clearly indicates confusion about the enemy to be pursued.

The failure to create actionable guidelines for the identification of assets and funding lines connected with these organisations shows lack of, or worse still fear of, resolute action.

The Senate has been struggling to get a simple list from the Punjab police of madressahs known to have militant links; yet three hearings later it is no closer to obtaining one than it was at the start.

Yet we are told that 19,000 suspected militants have already been apprehended. This claim strains credulity. If it were true, we would be hearing far more noise than we are at the moment.

The religious parties, after protesting vigorously that their seminaries should not be caught up in the dragnet, have gone quiet and those with a presence in politics have returned to business as usual, a clear enough sign that their apprehensions have been assuaged.

How has this silence come about? Have they been given an assurance that their networks will not be touched in the course of fighting terror? And if so, will this assurance weaken the fight or strengthen it?

Without clarity of mind, the ongoing operation will amount to little more than the myriad operations that have come before it. What exactly is stopping the government and the security agencies from defining a terrorist?

What stops them from naming madressahs that are known to be linked to militant organisations? What prevents them from pursuing the assets and funding lines that are known to function within the country's formal financial system?

The fact that answers are needed almost three months after the awful tragedy in Peshawar and 40 days after the blast in Shikarpur, begs an even more fundamental question: what will it take to realise that wars cannot be won without clarity of mind?

If we have resolved to uproot terrorism in the country, surely the first step in this direction is to be clear on who is a terrorist

March 2015

and who isn't. How can we claim to be fighting an enemy that we are afraid to even name?

Published in Dawn March 10th , 2015

Unusual IMF visit

IN a slightly unusual move, a three-member IMF team led by the mission chief for Pakistan has visited the country just days before the documents from the sixth review are to be circulated to the Fund's executive board for approval.

Once approved, it will pave the way for release of the seventh tranche of the \$6.7bn loan that Pakistan took in 2013. The visit is unusual because normally there is no reason for the mission chief to visit the country after the review is completed, and the wide range of meetings that he is holding show that this is not a simple courtesy call.

Know more: [7,000MW to be added to national grid by 2017, IMF assured](#)

What is not unusual though is the list of its 'achievements' drawn up by the finance ministry, presented to the Fund team and detailed in a press release issued after the visit.

Foreign exchange reserves have crossed \$16bn, the press release says, without mentioning that most of this is borrowed money. All structural benchmarks have been met, it adds,

without casting further light on the fate of legislation to grant increased autonomy to the State Bank. New power projects will add 4,000MW to the national grid, it boasts, without saying anything about the circular debt.

The press release may do its best to put a happy spin on the visit, but the metrics of success being used by the finance minister are problematic and almost each one could easily be deflated by a couple of astute questions. Were any of these questions asked by the Fund? We can only conjecture, but a good guess would be 'yes'.

In all likelihood, Pakistan's request for the seventh tranche will be approved by the board when it meets at the end of the month, although much depends on when the documents are circulated to the board. But it would be better if the finance minister could give an indication or two once in a while that he does not entirely believe the public relations line taken by his ministry.

Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2015

Solar takes off

A SOLAR-POWERED aircraft took off from Abu Dhabi on Tuesday for a voyage around the world that will take five months to complete.

About a year ago, that goal seemed very distant. The speed with which developments in solar energy are progressing is truly breathtaking, and we should take heed of the enormity of the promise that is gradually opening up before us. We are living on the cusp of a revolution that promises to transform our lives much like the spread of cellular communications did.

Prices of solar panels are dropping steeply, by almost 70pc since 2011, and the cost of a unit of solar energy has fallen from 21 cents in that year to 11 cents today. At six cents, the technology becomes viable for large-scale commercial adoption because its costs will be competitive with those of coal. That goal is less than five years away.

Know more: [Solar-powered plane enters Pakistani airspace](#)

In many ways, the move towards alternative sources of energy is already under way in Pakistan. Across the mountainous north, for instance, micro-hydel turbines that generate electricity from streams are being adopted at an accelerating pace, and many inaccessible villages are already lit up at night with free electricity in the summers.

A few enterprising entrepreneurs around the country are already setting up solar operations, selling residential equipment that can charge a UPS capable of running an entire

house. The International Finance Corporation is already offering enterprise loans for manufacturing outfits in Pakistan that wish to run their operations entirely on solar energy.

In villages across the country, solar panels are becoming an increasingly common sight. There may still be a long way to go, but the distance can close fast once the right price point is crossed. All the government needs to do is to get out of the way.

An upfront tariff for solar energy is a good beginning, but the real potential for this innovation will be in household use, what is called point-of-consumption use within the industry. For that, incentives for import and local manufacture of solar panels will play a big role, as well as net metering, a technology that enables households to sell surplus electricity generated in their homes back into the national grid.

The heroic flight of Solar Impulse demonstrates that no heights are too high and no distance too far when imagination is coupled with the power of technology.

Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2015

A debatable judgment

SALMAAN TASEER was murdered by an unrepentant Mumtaz Qadri in a deliberate, premeditated and ruthless manner for the vilest and most distorted of reasons. That makes Qadri a murderer who must be punished.

The Islamabad High Court hearing Qadri's appeal did both the legally and morally correct thing in upholding Qadri's conviction on Monday. Where the court appears to have unnecessarily created confusion and caused uncertainty about his ultimate fate is in its decision to set aside his parallel conviction under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997.

Know more: [‘The court delivered half justice to my client’](#)

In a single paragraph dealing with the anti-terrorism conviction — one paragraph among 47 that constitute the overall judgment — the court found that none of the prosecution witnesses (barring one), and neither the investigating officer nor the prosecution evidence, suggested that Qadri's act amounted to an attempt to create panic, intimidate and terrorise the public, or to create a sense of fear and insecurity among the public. With due respect to the court, that is a very surprising and quite unsustainable finding.

Qadri's killing of then governor of Punjab Salmaan Taseer is the very definition of terrorism. It was an undisguised political act meant to send an unambiguous message of fear and intimidation to the public.

As the judgment itself notes, Qadri claimed that the murder of Taseer “is a lesson for all the apostates as finally they have to meet the same fate”.

In assassinating the Punjab governor, Mumtaz Qadri was not simply killing an individual, he was sending a message to state and society that only the particular version of religion and Pakistan that he and his supporters are in favour of ought to be the one implemented here — and anyone who deviates from that distorted, horrifying vision is deserving of death.

If that is not religiously inspired terrorism, then what is? Surely, the scores of individuals who have been celebrating Qadri's act and are now welcoming the decision to strike down the terrorism conviction because it will allow them to openly and publicly venerate him and the hateful ideas he stands for only emphasise that the act of murder was not just against an individual, but was meant to distort society itself.

There is a further problem here. If Qadri's murderous act in the name of religion is not terrorism, then what about killings on sectarian grounds and violence targeting non-Muslims?

The court appears to have unnecessarily embarked on a slippery slope with all manner of unpredictable consequences. Has, for example, the court unwittingly provided a ‘Qadri defence’ to religiously inspired terrorists who have so blighted this country in recent decades?

Finally, in unnecessarily tampering with the original judgment in such a high-profile case, has the court not reinforced the perception that the criminal justice system favours the accused

March 2015

over the victims? The original conviction should have been allowed to stand in its entirety.

Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2015

Reviving executions

THE federal government's decision to reactivate the death penalty in all cases where it is applicable, going beyond the terrorism exception invoked two months ago, is a grave setback to the cause of justice and rights in the country.

In practice and in theory, the death penalty is a punishment that does not belong in modern times — the state's right to take the life of an individual who is already behind bars and no threat to society in the name of the collective good is one that no state ought to have.

Know more: [Death penalty moratorium lifted completely in Pakistan: Officials](#)

Consider first the practical implications. In a criminal justice system that is broken for all intents and purposes, the death penalty disproportionately applies to individuals who are unable to have adequate counsel and who, in some instances, simply do not have the resources or clout to purchase their freedom.

Far too often human rights advocates have pointed out to both procedural and evidential flaws in the trial and appeals process where the state has sought the death penalty.

Surely, it is not enough to say, as the federal government is claiming, that the penalty will only be applied after exhaustively failing the letter of the law when both the very spirit and letter of the law are routinely flouted here.

There is also the reality that the death penalty does not act as a deterrent to crime in any meaningful manner. If it did there would not be more than 8,000 individuals on death row in Pakistan, the vast majority convicted before the moratorium was put in place by the previous government.

In terrorism cases, where the individual seeks to embrace death whether by suicide bombing or a fedayeen attack, the death penalty can never be a deterrent.

Even beyond that, given the wide range of crimes in which the death penalty is applicable in Pakistan, it is impossible to claim that violent and major crimes would be curbed by its presence.

Global experience shows that crime is curbed by addressing its social, economic and political roots rather than simply seeking to apply the maximum punishment.

Consider just the experience of two ideologically very different countries — the US and Saudi Arabia where the death penalty is enthusiastically implemented.

March 2015

In both places, there appears to be a steady supply of individuals willing to commit offences attracting capital punishment. Pakistan does not need more blood on its hands.

Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2015

Nine Zero raid

RELATIONS between the Rangers and the MQM had been strained even before yesterday's raid by the paramilitary force on Nine Zero, the Muttahida headquarters in Karachi.

The MQM had been complaining that it was being victimised by the Rangers during the course of the ongoing law-enforcement and counterterrorism operation in the city; the party said its workers were being picked up by security forces and would later turn up dead.

Then last month, the stinging allegation came from the Rangers that the Baldia factory was deliberately set on fire by elements linked to the MQM in 2012.

In such a tense atmosphere came the Nine Zero raid; the Rangers claimed they had recovered heavy weapons from the party's complex, while convicted criminals were also reportedly picked up. A member of the Rabita Committee was also taken into custody, and the MQM claimed a worker was killed in the raid.

This is not for the first time that the MQM has faced the wrath of the security apparatus. The 'operations' of the 1990s are still fresh in the memory, when the state unleashed its force against the party.

Rightly or wrongly, the Muttahida has attracted a reputation for using strong-arm tactics when the need arises, while its street power in Karachi is widely considered second to none.

It needs to explain about the weapons the Rangers say were recovered from Nine Zero, and give its point of view regarding the recovery of 'hardened criminals' from within the complex. As its reputation unfortunately precedes it, the MQM will need to work hard to clear its name, while refraining from shutting down the city each time it feels it has been wronged.

Having said that, it must not appear as if the Muttahida is being singled out for persecution by the state, specifically the security establishment.

If there is credible evidence that party members have been involved in illegal activities, this must be presented by the Rangers in court where the MQM can defend itself. While the law-enforcement agencies claim the Karachi operation is non-discriminatory and that suspects linked to other political parties and extremist groups have also been picked up, the optics of the current situation say a lot.

For example, it was on the same day as the raid that the black warrant for Saulat Mirza, a convicted murderer said to be an MQM activist, was issued. To be effective and above board, counterterrorism and law-enforcement actions in Karachi must be seen as being impartial.

March 2015

For while politically linked suspects are being rounded up, are the LEAs going after religious and sectarian militants with equal zeal? The fact that jihadi militants have firmly ensconced themselves in pockets of the city would suggest otherwise.

Hence action has to be across the board and most importantly, within the ambit of the law and fundamental rights.

Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2015

Investment climate

THE Pakistan-United States Business Opportunities Conference that just concluded in the capital may not create much business between the two countries, but at least it has furnished an opportunity to revisit some long-standing concerns of investors in Pakistan.

The head of the US delegation at the conference, Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker, described some of the challenges that foreign investors face when it comes to this country, and the list turned out to be a bit long.

Some of the items that were mentioned are fairly standard concerns that foreign investors have when doing business in developing countries — but then there are others that merit serious attention.

Take a look: [‘Pakistan-US Economic Partnership Week’ opens](#)

The delays in processing sales tax refunds, for instance, have long been an irritant for businesses, whether foreign or domestic, and strengthening the fiscal machinery to do away with this practice of withholding refunds to help jack up the revenue numbers deserves to be addressed on a priority basis.

For its part, the government is likely to be disappointed if it expects large American investment in the areas that have been identified by the commerce minister as a priority. Those areas include energy, infrastructure and the agriculture sector.

Energy investments are hampered by the circular debt and the poor state of governance in the area whereas infrastructure investments are highly politicised. Meanwhile, agriculture is mostly informal in our country, and, subject to the policy framework, is designed largely to benefit large landowners who have links to political parties.

The government would be well advised to devote its energies to addressing the challenges and creating a more stable and predictable environment for investors before it asks for preferential trade treatment, or large-scale investment in areas with long gestation periods.

Nevertheless, it has been encouraging to see such a large delegation from the US at the conference. Perhaps a few investment opportunities can be fruitfully discovered in similar sessions, although two such conferences in the past have not yielded anything to brag about.

Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2015

Senate challenge

AVOIDING the unseemly bargaining and bartering that characterised the Senate polls in some provincial assemblies, the election of the chairman and deputy chairman of the Senate was a relatively smooth affair.

Given the events of the previous week, it was only right that the Senate's image not be further tarnished. Happily, the country's political leadership also saw the need to avoid controversy and elect a stalwart of the house, Raza Rabbani of the PPP, to the chairmanship unopposed.

That the deputy Senate chairman, the JUI-F's Ghafoor Haideri, is from Balochistan and the PTI also decided to throw its hat into that electoral ring is a further boost for the democratic process. As ever in politics, the big question is, what next?

Know more: [JUI-F's Ghafoor Haideri takes oath as Senate Deputy Chairman](#)

After the political and, later, security turmoil of the last year and a sense that the PML-N government did not from the very outset have a legislative agenda nor is it particularly interested in developing the parliamentary process, the new Senate has taken its place in an arena fraught with challenges and few obvious opportunities.

The Senate remains, however, an assembly with a great deal of legislative and political experience, so perhaps it can nudge the government into taking parliament more seriously.

Early in its tenure, the PML-N government occasionally pointed to the fact that it had a small presence in the upper house (owing to its being elected by the previous assemblies) as a reason why it had to go slow on the legislative front. The reality though was otherwise as the PPP, then with a near-majority in the upper house, did not try to obstruct the government in a significant way and it was clear that the party was willing to cooperate on legislative matters at least with the government.

Where the Senate was a disruptive force — as with the PPP-led boycott of the house — it was only to emphasise the government's neglect of it and to demand the prime minister and his cabinet participate more often and meaningfully.

Nearly two years on from the general election and after December's National Action Plan, there are now new and immediate things the Senate can lead on — not least a thorough review and overhaul of the decrepit criminal justice system. Will it though?

The other aspect of the Senate's neglected core duties is oversight: how effective have the various committees and individual senators been in holding governmental actions to account? The opportunities here are plenty.

Consider just the electricity sector, with the government's oft-tweaked promises never really coming close to reflecting the realities in this area. Would not the country benefit from a thorough, open and non-partisan study of why the electricity sector is confounding successive governments and proposals of how to move ahead?

March 2015

Surely, if the Senate leads in a constructive, helpful manner on many issues, the government would have to try and follow.

Published in Dawn, March 13th, 2015

Unequal taxation

FOR decades now our tax system has been riddled with holes opened up arbitrarily through the use of discretionary powers given to the tax bureaucracy to grant exemptions to select parties.

Over time, the number of exemptions granted and the amount of tax revenue lost as a result has grown to such enormous proportions that it rivals some of the largest expenditure heads in the budget.

It stands to reason that only those with the right connections can avail themselves of the benefits of selective exemption, meaning that the poor, who pay their share of taxes through the GST levied on all items of daily consumption, are left at a disadvantage.

Know more: [Government moves to widen tax net, but big fish yet to be caught](#)

The chairman of the Federal Board of Revenue recently found an occasion to dilate upon the government's efforts to roll back these exemptions in a meeting with officials from the office of

the Auditor General of Pakistan. He reminded the AGP officers that his government has rolled back close to Rs100bn worth of exemptions, and intends to roll back another Rs250bn worth in the coming years.

This is not a new issue. It has been the subject of donor advice since at least the early 1980s. Most recently, the commerce minister touched on it again when talking at the launch of a new report that shows very high levels of inequality in the country, where the top 10pc has a 31pc share in total spending, while the bottom 40pc spend only 20pc.

In response to the state of inequality in the country, the minister reminded his audience that vast sectors of the economy remain undocumented, notably in retail and wholesale trade, and therefore inaccessible for tax purposes.

The fiscal machinery has a role to play in helping close the growing inequalities in the country, most importantly by helping to document large sectors, but also by making revenue available for directed social welfare programmes, areas highlighted by the report as important dimensions of inequality.

But documentation measures are far more long term than tackling exemptions, and whereas the government's efforts to roll back exemptions should be acknowledged, it should also be emphasised that far more ground needs to be covered.

Eliminating exemptions and rolling back the whole culture of discretionary powers in the FBR can play a central role in redressing some of the problems raised by the authors of the

March 2015

report on inequality, and that step begins with mustering political will.

Published in Dawn, March 13th, 2015

More war powers?

WITH less than two years left for President Barack Obama to complete his second term, it is unclear whether Congress would be willing to give him special powers to prosecute the war against the self-styled Islamic State.

On Wednesday, US Secretary of State John Kerry asked the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to give a unanimous vote for a new authorisation of military force (AUMF) to strike the IS at what he called “a pivotal hour”.

Aware that the war against the IS is likely to outlive the Obama administration, the White House has asked for a three-year authorisation so that the change of government should not impede the prosecution of the war.

Take a look: [War against IS may outlive Obama administration: Defence Secretary](#)

Defence Secretary Ashton Carter also told the Senate committee that an “unmistakable message” should be given to the IS leaders that they could not divide and defeat “us”. This ‘us’ obviously includes America’s regional allies which have

been fighting the IS hordes without having made any gains that could be called very significant.

Having begun their offensive from Iraq’s Anbar province, the IS militia has made stunning gains, capturing Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, and then going over to the offensive in Syria to reach Kobane on the Turkish border.

Since then there has been a sort of stalemate — in spite of the benefit of American airpower the anti-IS coalition has yet to break the militant organisation’s image of invincibility.

While the region’s strongest military power, Turkey, has decided to keep itself neutral, the members of the coalition seem to lack both firepower and the will to take on the IS. America’s greater involvement militarily runs the risk of proving counterproductive and perhaps could help the IS propaganda war.

Without the AUMF the US already has a massive military presence in the region; what the situation demands is not more war powers for the president but greater diplomatic efforts on America’s part to goad its regional allies into taking decisive military action, breaking the IS’s image of invincibility and reversing the tide of the battle.

Published in Dawn, March 13th, 2015

Vaccines' wastage

THE difficulties faced by the country in vaccinating every single child against polio are widely known and place a formidable question mark over the health of new generations.

Less talked about, though, is the fact that the deficiencies of the health sector in terms of protecting children against preventable diseases are myriad, and so deeply entrenched as to make a change of course appear difficult.

If at one end of the spectrum there is the problem of the slowdown in the rates of routine immunisation, at the other are the glaring gaps in supply, storage and oversight, which may cumulatively negate what little success the country does manage to achieve in this area.

The latter point was underscored by the news that came to light a few days ago that a large consignment of the pentavalent vaccine, worth some \$1.3m, that was being stored on the premises of the National Health Services Ministry had spoiled because the required temperature had not been maintained.

Take a look: [Pakistan wastes \\$3.7 million worth of donated vaccine](#)

To put this into perspective, the vaccine, which protects against five potentially deadly diseases in a single shot, was of a quantity that could have been administered to 400,000 infants.

The story has only come to light because of the actions of a whistleblower, and the health authorities have on their part

instituted an inquiry and promised suspensions when those responsible for this lapse are identified.

That is all very well, but hardly goes far enough. That such an eventuality occurred at all provides further evidence of what a survey undertaken by WHO and Unicef last year concluded: urgent improvements are needed in most areas of vaccine and supply management systems, while the country is meeting the required standards only in the area of vaccine and commodity arrival procedures.

As it is, Pakistan's vaccination efforts are aided in no small part by international organisations; it is shameful that even so, the country cannot get things right at its own end, even when its own future is at stake.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2015

Mystery of weapons

THE US State Department has categorically said that lethal supplies, including weapons and ammunition meant for Isaf, the Nato-led force in Afghanistan, are not transported from the Karachi port, indicating that the facility is used only to bring in non-lethal supplies.

The same clarification had been issued in September 2013 by the US embassy, when the case regarding stolen containers carrying lethal supplies meant for Nato forces was being heard

March 2015

by the Supreme Court and there was much comment in the media.

Given two clear statements to the effect that lethal supplies like guns and ammunition are not transported from the port, what do we make of the Rangers' claims, following Wednesday's raid on the MQM headquarters in Karachi, that a large cache of weaponry and ammunition was discovered on the premises, and must have come from stolen containers carrying Nato supplies?

Also read: [Karachi port never used for transporting arms: US](#)

Footage of the weapons and the ammunition was released to the media. Some of the arms appeared to have been stored in cardboard boxes sealed with masking tape. The footage seems to confirm that these weapons and ammunition were indeed present, but questions still linger as to how they got there in the first place.

If Nato supplies that arrive in Karachi port do not contain weapons, as the US government has indicated, then where did this cache come from?

The MQM claims that it was planted, although as yet there is not much to suggest that this was the case.

Meanwhile, the Rangers' version too appears debatable in light of the State Department's consistent claim. What we are left with is a mystery that has persisted for a long time now.

Both the Rangers and the MQM need to provide answers to the natural questions that arise about the presence of these weapons in the party's headquarters.

The Rangers must back up their allegation with facts and figures and make clear how they arrived at this conclusion, while the MQM, that is often accused of employing strong-arm tactics in urban Sindh, also has a lot of explaining to do.

The case should be thoroughly investigated to get to the root of the matter and to prosecute those suspected of having committed crimes.

But attempts to sensationalise the issue and make allegations without evidence will only create confusion and detract from the effort to nab suspected militants, whether they belong to a religiously motivated, political or ethnic group.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2015

Release of Mumbai suspect?

ZAKIUR Rehman Lakhvi's crawl towards judicially permitted freedom appears to be near an end.

The federal government may yet try to impede the release of the Lashkar-e-Taiba leader and alleged architect of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, but it is unlikely to be

anything more than a shoddy ad hoc measure to cover up gross failure over the past six years.

Lakhvi should not be a free man. That he may soon be free is entirely the fault of the state, and especially the security establishment, whose only real intention appears to have been to take the LeT leader out of the global spotlight when the international pressure on Pakistan was intense and then do little of note.

Be it an energetic pursuit of evidence against Lakhvi and his co-accused, appointing prosecutors with vigorous intent, providing the necessary protection to the court or ensuring that the defence team's manoeuvring is swiftly and adequately countered, the state has failed in nearly every area.

How, for example, as long rumoured and recently confirmed by media reports, has it been possible for Lakhvi to spend his time in prison in relative luxury and with access to his network of supporters — unless the state itself is complicit?

Surely though the judiciary must shoulder some responsibility for this unhappy state of affairs. While the judiciary cannot be expected to simply allow the state to indefinitely hold an individual, there do appear to be strong reasons not to allow Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi to walk free.

There are several examples where the courts themselves have urged the prosecution, the police and the government to do more than they are at the moment. Were it not for judicial intervention there would be little movement on local government elections.

Were it not for judicial intervention several high-profile crimes, like the lynching of a Christian couple in Kot Radha Kishan, would probably have been quietly dropped by the authorities.

There are other instances as well, such as the case of the missing persons where the judiciary's interest and activism have been positive and welcomed. A similar approach is needed in the case of Lakhvi.

The Islamabad High Court's decision to nullify the conviction of Mumtaz Qadri on terrorism charges has already resulted in uncertainty. And further controversy could follow its latest orders. In such cases, surely the Supreme Court ought to take notice, seek answers and suggest the necessary changes.

There is a further problem: if Lakhvi is set free, will he be allowed a hero's welcome and made available for LeT/Jamaatud Dawa/Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation propaganda events?

It is well known that the state has many tools available to it to keep militant groups from emerging from the shadows and taking centre stage.

Already there appear to be attempts to hijack March 23 as it was last year by radical groups. A repeat should not be allowed.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2015

Shafqat Husain case

THE course adopted by the country in executing prisoners on death row is deeply problematic, to say the least. While ending the moratorium on the death penalty in cases involving terrorism caused much consternation among rights groups, lifting the bar in its entirety has opened the floodgates of the miscarriage of justice, particularly given that the flaws in and faults of the justice system are all too evident. This is vividly illustrated in the case of Shafqat Husain, currently incarcerated at the Karachi Central Prison; the warrants for the execution of the 23-year-old have been issued for March 19. However, this may be a travesty of justice; human rights organisations are pointing out that he was around 14 years old at the time of the commission of the crime. Pakistan's obligation under the international Convention of the Rights of the Child means that the death sentence cannot be handed down to those who were underage at the time the crime was committed. Further, there are grounds to believe that his confession was extracted under torture. On Friday, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan raised these points in calling upon the prime minister and the interior minister to intervene to save Husain's life. The letter points out that in January, the interior minister "had announced that an inquiry would be conducted by the ministry ... No such inquiry has taken place and Shafqat is now headed for the gallows...."

This case can prove a litmus test for the government's commitment to the ideals of justice. Husain's case deserves being considered through a humane lens but the fact is that the matter goes far beyond that. Was the stay on executions a considered move, as a result of which real chances were

calculated of bringing militancy under control — even though statistics show that capital punishment is no deterrent to murder? Or was it a knee-jerk reaction to assuage the anger of a nation that has suffered too much? It is the fate of cases such as that of Husain that will decide.

Published in Dawn, March 15th, 2015

Militants' pact

CLAIMS that a breakaway faction of the banned TTP, the Jamaatul Ahrar, led by Omar Khalid Khorasani, has rejoined the original umbrella organisation, the TTP led by Mullah Fazlullah, and that a third militant outfit, Mangal Bagh's Lashkar-i-Islam, has also joined forces have come as no surprise. The new pact formalises what had been an informal working arrangement in place for a while, including the sharing of suicide bombers for each others' operations. Neither is the timing of the announcement particularly surprising. All three groups have come under pressure in their hideouts on the Afghan side of the Pak-Afghan border and attempted to reassemble in the Tirah region of Khyber Agency — the very region in which the Pakistan military has launched the next phase of the Khyber-I operation. This week, the military has claimed dozens of militant casualties in air strikes in the region and that is expected to be only the start of intense action against militants there, following on from the push in the flatter terrain of the Bara region late last year.

As ever, in the opaque world that is the frontline fight against militancy, there are several big questions. To begin with, how much cooperation from the Afghan government and security forces — to stop militants from fleeing across the border again — will the Pakistani state be able to expect? The recent improvement in ties between the Pakistani government and the security establishment on one side and the Afghan government and intelligence and security forces on the other is the key to obtaining and sustaining Afghan cooperation. It almost certainly includes the quid pro quo of urging the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table with the Afghan government. It remains to be seen how durable that new, untested compact is. The other question: is Khyber-I going according to plan? The military had always suggested there would a second phase starting this month, but the general experience in military operations here is that the ability to clear and hold is relatively easy as compared to being able to return an area to normality and keep the militants out after the main phase of the operation is over. Finally, the militants themselves have proved to be far more resilient and adaptable than is often assumed. Once again, in the face of intense pressure, they have banded together and may seek to survive in enough form to be able to bounce back at a later point. Is there a strategy to prevent that?

Published in Dawn, March 15th, 2015

Roads and railway

THERE is much cheer in the thought that a state-of-the-art highway is about to be built that will connect Karachi with Hyderabad, with plans to stretch it all the way to Lahore eventually. Connecting Pakistan's cities with a high-quality road network will undoubtedly yield many benefits. But it is worth asking: is this the best investment in our transport infrastructure? Consider just some of the plans that are being talked about these days: large coal-fired power plants in southern Punjab as well as an overland road link from Gwadar to the western provinces of China. Will a revamped road network really suffice to serve the incremental volumes of freight that will need to move as a result of these plans?

Of course, building roads is essential, but perhaps even more important for our future requirements is to build up the railway, and it is striking to see the level of neglect that this vital infrastructure is suffering from. In the last budget speech, for example, the allocation for roads and highways was Rs113bn, including urban and intercity roads, for a total of 74 projects. The railway, on the other hand, was allocated Rs77bn for 45 projects. Moreover, many of those projects were going to be funded by China, according to budget documents, and a number of them consisted of routine maintenance and some track upgradation in a few locations. The additional purchase of 500 locomotives was promised, from China again, against about 421 today, a claim that strains credulity absent details. Even now, the majority of visible work, which enjoys strong ownership from the top levels of government, is about roads with hardly anything being said about the railway.

Compare this with our neighbour, India, whose railway budget was just announced in February. The government there has made upgradation of the railway one of its top priorities, and announced an investment plan of \$137bn over five years for the purpose. Of course, there are problems over there as well. Much of this money is expected to be raised by the railway from market lenders, and there is scepticism over whether they will be able to do it considering their revenue streams do not look like they can support such a massive debt burden. Also, many of the new projects announced sound a little bizarre — Wi-Fi in train stations for instance — and passenger fares have been left untouched, putting the financing burden on freight traffic instead. The proportion of cargo moved by the railway has, therefore, been declining over the years, but it still stands at 31pc of the total, compared with 4pc in our country. Roads need improvement in Pakistan, but the real requirement is in the railway, for passenger and freight movement. The overarching emphasis on roads is a clear case of misplaced priorities.

Published in Dawn, March 15th, 2015

Shifting of prisoners

IN Pakistan, ensuring that dangerous suspects and convicts are kept in detention is a major task, especially considering the several high-profile jailbreaks that have occurred in this country in the recent past.

The last such incident was the jailbreak in Gilgit-Baltistan, in which some inmates suspected of involvement in 2013's Nanga Parbat massacre managed to escape. With this bitter experience in mind, the GB authorities have sought to transfer 20 high-profile inmates to detention facilities in Punjab. What is troubling is that officials told this paper they feared a fresh jailbreak was possible.

Considering the remoteness of the region and its limited resources and infrastructure, it appears to be a good idea to shift dangerous prisoners to Punjab, which has relatively better facilities.

Also read: [20 high-profile prisoners being shifted from Gilgit to Punjab](#)

Some officials have raised concerns about how trials will be conducted, considering GB's physical distance from the rest of Pakistan; this problem can be largely overcome through the use of technology, for example by conducting the trials through video link.

The move by the administration highlights the need for better prison facilities in Gilgit-Baltistan. While shifting dangerous inmates to Punjab or elsewhere in the country may be one

solution, it is only a temporary fix; in the long run, improvements need to be made to GB's criminal justice infrastructure to minimise the chance of future jailbreaks.

Also, while Punjab may indeed have better facilities, these are by no means foolproof. For example, even some key prisons in the province, such as Adiala in Rawalpindi, are said to be vulnerable to terrorist attacks. What is needed countrywide is a series of maximum-security prison facilities to detain terrorism convicts and suspects.

Punjab is due to bring such a facility online in Sahiwal shortly, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the past has talked of building a similar high-security jail. But such facilities are needed in all provinces and regions considering the enormity of the threat militancy poses to the country.

Along with more secure detention facilities, what is required is a thorough exercise to conduct background checks of jail staff members whose duties demand interaction with terrorism convicts or suspects.

In the GB jailbreak case, the inmates were said to have 'brainwashed' jail officials while prison staffers are believed to have been complicit in their escape. Measures need to be taken so that extremist inmates don't mingle with ordinary prisoners, and jail staffers guarding them don't turn out to be sympathetic to the militants' cause.

Published in Dawn March 16th, 2015

Where is the CCI?

THE attempt by several PPP MNAs to bring to parliamentary attention the federal government's extended delay in convening the Council of Common Interests is a welcome move that may just cause the government to take at least one of its constitutional responsibilities more seriously.

Despite a constitutional provision stipulating that the CCI must meet at least once every 90 days, the group has not met since last May.

The CCI is an arcane platform, but its powers and potential impact are anything but. As set out in Article 154(1) of the Constitution, "The Council shall formulate and regulate policies in relation to matters in Part II of the Federal Legislative List and shall exercise supervision and control over related institutions."

Know more: [PPP asks govt to convene CCI meeting](#)

Part II of the Federal Legislative List covers everything from the census to supervision and management of public debt and from the railways, ports and electricity to national planning and national economic coordination.

The government itself appears to be aware of the practical need to convene the CCI, with meetings scheduled at least twice in recent months but then not held for reasons not explained by either the Ministry for Inter Provincial Coordination or the Prime Minister's Office, the prime minister being the chairman of the CCI.

March 2015

Now, there is a fresh meeting reportedly scheduled for this week and perhaps, with the matter being taken up in parliament, it will finally be held.

Just a sample of the more than one dozen items on this week's agenda further underlines the CCI's relevance and importance. The population and housing census is to be discussed, as is the permanent absorption by the provincial governments of federal government employees transferred under the 18th Amendment.

In addition, amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code; the Indus River System Act, 1992 (which deals with water distribution between the provinces); and the federal petroleum policy are to be discussed.

Each one of those agenda items could consume an entire meeting by itself. Now, owing to the tardiness and neglect of the federal government, they are all on the agenda of the same meeting.

The neglect of the CCI also underlines a wider problem: the PML-N government's almost total lack of interest in institution building and preference for ad hoc, extra-parliamentary and extra-institutional decision-making.

Contrast the number of committees (under NAP to discuss constitutional amendments, or to consider talks with the Taliban once upon a time) the government has either created or kept active with the institutional mechanisms it has relied on.

The lack of interest in the proceedings of the National Assembly, the virtual shunning of the Senate, the sidelining of parliamentary committees — it is all of a piece in a system

where the federal government prefers to take decisions in small, informal forums and then gets the formal institutions to rubber-stamp those decisions.

Published in Dawn March 17th , 2015

Intelligence cooperation

IT is widely believed that intelligence agencies in Pakistan, both of the civilian and military variety, guard their 'turf' jealously. Yet considering the challenges militancy and violent crime pose to the country, such territorial attitudes must be abandoned in favour of greater intelligence convergence.

Fortunately, attitudes do seem to be changing as a few recent incidents have illustrated. As reported, security officials say information from the civilian-led Intelligence Bureau was instrumental in the recent raid on Nine Zero, the MQM's Karachi headquarters.

Sophisticated arms and suspects wanted in major crimes were recovered in the Rangers-led action.

Know more: [Information collected by IB played vital role in raid on Nine Zero](#)

The IB had been maintaining a database on suspected criminals within religious and political parties in Karachi.

March 2015

Meanwhile last month, the interior minister told the National Assembly that a network planning to target Balochistan's Hazara community had been busted thanks to collaboration between the IB and Inter-Services Intelligence.

While these are indeed intelligence successes, gaps still remain, as the bombing of two churches in Lahore on Sunday shows. As per the Punjab home minister, there was no previous information about the possibility of such attacks.

It would be correct to say that the Army Public School tragedy was what motivated the country's various intelligence agencies to drop their territorial attitudes and combine forces for the sake of national security.

However, this collaboration must be a continuous exercise and not a temporary arrangement. The intelligence landscape in Pakistan has long been dominated by the military's agencies, with the civilian outfits not given as much attention.

Whenever military regimes were in power the IB was neglected while during democratic set-ups the bureau was politicised.

Now, even though the military's agencies may be leading the effort, perhaps the IB's value in intelligence gathering is beginning to dawn on the security establishment. But more work is needed in the area of intelligence sharing; it needs to be a formalised affair instead of working on a case-to-case basis.

Cooperation among agencies must be the norm, not the exception. For this the National Counter-Terrorism Authority can play a major role. Unfortunately, Nacta is still largely

inactive, thanks to reported manpower and financial problems, coupled with the state's apparent lack of interest in making it an active concern.

For effective counterterrorism measures and long-lasting efforts against violent crime, the civilian and military agencies must continue their cooperation under Nacta, which should work as an independent and empowered entity focused on actionable intelligence gathering and sharing.\

Published in Dawn March 17th , 2015

Pakistan in quarter-finals

PAKISTAN'S comprehensive seven-wicket victory over Ireland in a do-or-die game on Sunday has assured them of a quarter-final berth in the ICC World Cup.

The qualification, which saw the country jubilant, has been astounding to say the least, keeping in view the team's dismal start to the Cup last month. It was barely three weeks ago when back-to-back defeats against India and the West Indies had all but derailed Pakistan's chances of making the grade.

The insipid manner in which the Greenshirts were subdued by the rival teams had the critics predicting an early ouster for them.

March 2015

Also read: [Views from Ireland: Pakistan game 'the biggest in Irish history'](#)

But hats off to skipper Misbah-ul-Haq and his men for regrouping in style and bouncing back strongly to make the quarter-finals against all odds.

To their credit, they have successfully managed to put behind them the ignominy of the early losses, the selection snags, the scores of injuries as well as poor form to win four games on the trot, including a famous one over favourites South Africa, which is no mean feat.

Here, one must point out that more than the diligent workouts on the field, some clear thinking and rational decision-making on the part of skipper Misbah and the team management in the latter phase of the Cup has paid off for Pakistan that was regretfully missing earlier on.

The imbalances in the playing eleven have thankfully been dispensed with and the results are there for everyone to see. The belligerence of Sarfraz Ahmed, who was inexplicably ignored in the earlier games, as well as the bold step to go in with five specialist bowlers have been key factors in the recent turnaround.

With the inception of the knockout round, however, there's hardly any room for error now. Misbah and his team will be up against the formidable Aussies this week in what is seen as the toughest quarter-final of all.

But with Pakistan playing to their strengths at the moment, there is nothing that should be seen as beyond them in this World Cup.

Published in Dawn March 17th , 2015

Margallas in danger

EFFORTS to stop commercial stone-crushing and quarrying activities in the Margalla Hills in and around Islamabad are not new.

Conscientious citizens and officials have for long tried to put an end to such activities in the Margalla Hills National Park, where quarrying and crushing were outlawed by a 1979 ordinance. But despite even the Supreme Court's intervention, these activities have continued unabated in the hills.

At a hearing on Monday, the apex court came down hard on the Capital Development Authority for failing to protect the national park; it described the Margallas as a "national asset" and a "public trust".

Also read: [Besides pollution, stone crushing plant owners violate labour rights](#)

The CDA in the past had said — also under court pressure — that it would demolish stone-crushing units within the park area. Unfortunately, this has not happened.

March 2015

But the threat such operations pose to the ecological diversity of the Margallas, as well as to the health of the workers employed by the units, and of those living near the plants, calls for concerted action before the lush green hills are forever denuded.

Firstly, it must be asked why units have been allowed to operate in protected parkland, in clear violation of court orders and the law.

Numerous animal and plant species are at risk due to the commercial activities. Environmental experts also point out that quarrying activities affect the health of the population by adding to air pollution.

Particulate matter found in the air in areas where crushing takes place has been found to be much higher than acceptable standards. Labourers employed at the units, apart from working in a dangerous environment, often end up suffering from pulmonary and respiratory diseases.

All these factors illustrate the seriousness of the matter. Efforts must be made to immediately stop commercial activities in the protected parkland and to shift these to areas located far from population centres. And wherever quarrying and crushing activities are taking place, dust-suppression methods must be employed to minimise workers' exposure to particles and control the level of air pollution.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2015

Way ahead for MQM

THE ripples from the raid last week on Nine Zero, the MQM's headquarter in Karachi, continue to course through the city and wider afield.

Considering it is the fourth largest political party in Pakistan and one that has reigned virtually unchallenged in the country's financial jugular — some would say had a chokehold on the city of 20 million — this is scarcely surprising.

Let alone the citizens of Karachi, the party itself appears to have been caught completely off guard by the no-holds-barred, [Rangers-led raid](#) on its formidable redoubt.

The party's response to the offensive, perhaps the harshest action against it since the army-backed operations of the 1990s, has ranged from plaintive claims of victimisation to belligerent denials of culpability.

Know more: [Rangers file case against MQM Chief Altaf Hussain](#)

On Monday, party supremo Altaf Hussain refuted allegations of a militant wing within the party, maintaining that any misdeeds committed by its activists comprise "personal conduct" of individuals rather than actions sanctioned on an organisational level. That would, at the very least, mean that the MQM is shockingly poor at screening its cadres.

March 2015

The MQM is an anomaly, a party that has survived in the rough and tumble of Pakistani politics despite a central leadership remotely controlling it from thousands of miles away.

Usually, fear has been the not-so-secret weapon it has wielded to that end, both when it wanted to bring Karachi to a standstill at a moment's notice — thereby demonstrating its relevance in the national political landscape — and also when it wanted to chastise its own leaders for perceived crimes of omission or commission.

Those who could have comprised the second tier of the MQM leadership and taken politically sound decisions are instead perpetually engaged in a struggle to keep their heads above water.

Some of them have mysteriously either met a nasty fate or voluntarily removed themselves from the political arena. As a result, there is a crisis of leadership in the party, with a yawning vacuum below the man in London.

After the recent turn of events, there is only one possible way ahead for Mr Hussain. And that is to purge the MQM of the militant elements within — whether they have taken “shelter” within it, or been actively cultivated by it.

For a party that has been sending its representatives to the assemblies since 1984, electoral politics is not a strange country. It is high time this is the only kind of politics it engages in.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2015

Reading Lahore's lynch mob

SPEAKING in the National Assembly on Tuesday, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan stated that the lynching of two men at the hands of an enraged mob in the aftermath of the church bombings in Lahore on Sunday was “the worst form of terrorism”.

The tragedy does indeed compound the original horror, particularly since the assailants — even though they are yet to be identified — were in a sense victims themselves: their fury was kindled by the assault on their community. Does this take society's behaviour in the aftermath of a terrorist attack in a twisted new direction?

Could the future be one where members of various communities turn against each other, thus achieving the goal the terrorists have so far unsuccessfully been striving for? An answer of sorts can be found in the minister's speech.

Know more: [Mob lynching is 'worst kind of terrorism', says Nisar](#)

Chaudhry Nisar invoked the example of earlier attacks on imambargahs and mosques, saying that a violent mob reaction such as that in Lahore had not been witnessed in those incidents.

He went to the extent of citing the example of the Charlie Hebdo killings, pointing out that the minority Jewish community of Paris did not erupt in violence.

March 2015

This is true. But there is a distinction to be made between the anger in Paris — or that experienced by terror-drenched Pakistanis in general — and what fuelled the lynching in Lahore: religious minorities in Pakistan have been targeted in a sustained fashion by militant and terrorist groups for at least a decade and a half.

These communities have had their backs to the wall for a very long time and, further, have for generations borne the brunt of discriminatory practices and laws — the worst being the blasphemy law.

While Pakistan has seen lynching incidents in the past, often over a blasphemy accusation, these have been premeditated murder in the sense that clerics and others have knowingly incited a mob to violence.

In Lahore's case, to delineate, the crowd's actions — though horrific— appeared spontaneous. This provides a window into the pain and frustration of the country's religious minorities, left unprotected by a callous state that simultaneously refuses to offer any meaningful redress.

Now that this eventuality has occurred, the state must realise the need to pursue this incident with much more seriousness than it has tended to show in the past.

There are avenues of identifying the perpetrators of the lynching, and of ascertaining whether any incitement to violence occurred; those responsible must face the penalty of law. But in the larger picture, the state and government need to improve security across the board, improve police performance

and urgently take ownership of religious minorities and vulnerable groupings.

Without the reversal of the growing sense of victimhood at the level of the community, the future bodes dark.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2015

Obama's realisation

FOREIGN interventions, regime change and implanting democracy from the outside have all been failed strategies that have only served to destabilise the global scenario.

Yet it is rare — especially for superpowers — to admit to the failure of such follies. In this context, Barack Obama's recent comments regarding the rise of the self-styled Islamic State are a welcome realisation.

The US president said the IS phenomenon “grew out of our invasion” of Iraq in 2003, while adding that the so-called caliphate was an ‘outgrowth’ of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Know more: [Invasion of Iraq led to rise of IS, says Obama](#)

Indeed the US — and others — have often shown a propensity to play the role of global policeman. However, the results of interventionism have rarely led to any positive outcome. Whether it was Soviet forces marching into Afghanistan in

March 2015

1979, the US invasion of Iraq, or the Nato-led air war in 2011 targeting Muammar Qadhafi's regime in Libya, such interventions have left the targeted countries in worse shape than before.

Indeed, problems in most of the world's trouble spots existed before the interventions, and foreign interference has only exacerbated these to the point of virtually destroying once-functional states.

But Mr Obama's realisation must go beyond words and be reflected in policy. Replacing 'unfriendly' regimes (as some in the West are still trying to do in Syria) through guile and aggression is and always will be a bad idea.

Moreover, it has often been witnessed that those professing democratic values have either helped dictators quash popular aspirations, or looked the other way for strategic reasons.

All major players in the international arena must realise that democratisation is an organic process and that people must be left to chart their own destiny.

Coming back to IS, Mr Obama has talked of the "60-nation coalition" to counter the extremist movement. But if such efforts are to succeed in the long term, they must be coordinated with the governments in Baghdad and Damascus, while regional states (particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia) should play a central role in battling the extremists.

Published in Dawn March 19th , 2015

Unabated polio killings

IT is tragic that while polio workers continue to be cut down in the country, few outraged voices are heard condemning their murder or demanding justice.

On Tuesday, two Lady Health Workers and their guard were shot dead in the Danna area of Mansehra district. And yesterday, one vaccinator died and another was injured in an attack for which responsibility was claimed by the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban in Bajaur Agency.

Take a look: [Polio worker killed in attack on team in Bajaur](#)

Will the deaths of these brave individuals serve to shake up state and society and prod the country into finding the wherewithal to push back against the threat? This is unlikely, since the latest victims are far from the first polio vaccinators to have met a brutal end in a hail of bullets.

In such cases, the response from the state, which has hardly gone beyond providing a guard or two to protect the vaccinators, has been demoralising to say the least. The killing of polio workers — and their protectors — is an issue which has now taken its place among the myriad other challenges that have faded into the background to become just another unfortunate reality in this country.

At just about every level — from the administrative and health authorities to the families of the children potentially at risk — there appears to be little realisation that polio, which is easily

March 2015

transmissible, is fast proving to be a national calamity that has alarmed even the international community.

The warnings could not be clearer: rising incidence of the disease, growing violence against the teams administering the vaccination, the fear factor faced by parents who are intimidated into refusal by retrogressive elements.

The presence of the virus is being confirmed at more and more locations across the country, with interior Sindh (Karachi has had a polio problem for a considerable period of time) being the latest to find the alarm being raised.

It is difficult to predict how and when this situation can be reversed. Those against the polio vaccination effort appear focused and implacable in their intentions to deter health workers from vaccinating children.

Perhaps a new strategy is needed to combat the threat. One solution could be to take the disease itself out of the domain of child health and repackage it as a national security emergency — for it is nothing short of that.

But first the state has to show that it recognises the threat and is ready to take action against it.

Published in Dawn March 19th , 2015

An unequal justice

THE grisly sequence of death-row executions continues apace in the state of Pakistan.

On Monday, [12 death-row inmates](#) across the country were sent to the gallows, the highest number of executions in a single day since the government lifted the six-year moratorium on capital punishment last December, a day after the APS Peshawar attack.

Yesterday, [another nine](#) condemned prisoners were hanged, bringing the total of such state-sanctioned killings to 39 in the intervening period.

The government had initially maintained that the lifting of the moratorium would apply only to those sentenced to death under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

Earlier this month however, that exception was revoked and the interior ministry directed provincial governments to reactivate capital punishment wherever applicable against all those prisoners who had exhausted every avenue of appeal and clemency.

No one with a modicum of awareness can deny that the criminal justice system in Pakistan is deeply flawed and hence profoundly weighted against the poor and marginalised segments of society.

From the filing of an FIR, the investigation of a crime, the trial and appeals process, to the conditions of incarceration — the

March 2015

outcome of every step is often directly co-related to the financial and/or political clout of the parties involved. While one result of this broken justice machinery is that some crimes go unpunished, the other side of the coin is that many accused do not get a fair trial.

Their defence is often in the hands of state-appointed counsel, who are overburdened, underpaid and usually not the brightest stars in the legal fraternity.

Cases such as that of Shafqat Husain are instructive: although he was a minor at the time of committing the crime for which he was convicted, his state-appointed lawyer did not bring up the issue of his age during trial.

One of those hanged on Monday also included Mohammed Afzal who, according to Amnesty International, was only 16 when convicted. It is scarcely surprising that the vast majority of those in prison, whether under sentence of death or not, are from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, as long as the state stays its hand against carrying out the one punishment that is irrevocable in its finality, there remains the chance of redressal.

By rescinding the moratorium in its entirety despite the realities outlined above, the state has implicitly set aside its commitment and its duty to uphold the cause of justice. Instead, in the interest of appearing to reassert its writ, it is pandering to populist demands based on emotion and fear.

The exultation with which each batch of executions is greeted by a large chunk of the public is disturbing for its apparent

willingness to dehumanise the individuals sent to their deaths. Finally, it seems, the bloodlust of the terrorist has met its match in the bloodlust of a wounded nation.

Published in Dawn March 19th , 2015

Netanyahu's victory

IN a Middle East already unstable due to multiple crises, the victory of Benjamin Netanyahu's rightist Likud party in the Israeli elections bodes ill for chances of a just peace deal for the Palestinians.

Due to the Likud triumph, Mr Netanyahu will most likely be asked to form a government in Tel Aviv. Yet if his past record is anything to go by peace for the Palestinians and stability in the wider region will remain elusive.

In 2014, Mr Netanyahu presided over the Israeli rampage in Gaza, ostensibly carried out in reaction to rocket attacks from the impoverished strip. As per independent figures, over 2,000 people were killed due to Israeli aggression, the majority of them civilians.

Know more: [Netanyahu hopes to form new Israel govt 'in 2-3 weeks'](#)

Also, under Mr Netanyahu's watch the expansion of illegal settlements on Palestinian land has continued unabated; over

March 2015

350,000 Israelis are said to be living in these controversial communities in the West Bank, while a similarly large number are to be found in occupied parts of Jerusalem.

The Israeli leader has also been clear in his opposition to the two-state solution: while the Palestinian leadership has stated it would work with any Israeli government that supported Palestinian statehood, Benjamin Netanyahu has said this is not a possibility.

Hence the peace process — already in tatters — is likely to stay that way. Mr Netanyahu's jarring words and actions have managed to alienate many of Israel's usual supporters in the US and Europe, with the White House terming his election rhetoric as 'divisive'.

The Likud victory has indeed reflected the mood of the Israeli electorate. However, those world powers that have influence in Tel Aviv must counsel restraint to Benjamin Netanyahu.

By no means should diplomatic efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear question be torpedoed by Israel. It should also be assured that atrocities such as the Gaza episode are not repeated.

Above all, the world must press Israel to honour the two-state solution that would allow the Palestinians to live in peace and with dignity in their own land.

Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2015

FDI decrease

DIRECT foreign investment inflows into the country have slowed by a large amount in the latest State Bank report, raising concerns regarding the country's balance of payments, as well as the larger investment environment at a time when declining oil prices were supposed to help in providing some support to a weak external position.

This is a worrying development and the State Bank should address it in the monetary policy announcement scheduled for tomorrow. In the last announcement, the bank had specifically pointed out the low level of foreign investment (1.8pc of GDP at that time), and said that "lack of private inflows could pose risks in achieving a sustainable BoP position".

Take a look: [SBP's erroneous data published](#)

Since then, the situation regarding foreign inflows has deteriorated further, with FDI actually dropping by 3.8pc in the first eight months of the fiscal year.

Foreign portfolio investment has, however, jumped in the same time period, but this is itself a source of concern given the volatile nature of the funds, especially in light of the steep declines in the stock market this week, reportedly on account of sharp withdrawals of foreign funds.

The sustainability of balance of payments is of further concern because the steep declines in oil prices appear to be bottoming out, with some evidence that a renewed period of oil price increases is approaching.

March 2015

Coupled with the less than favourable outlook on privatisation and mounting external debt service obligations, the bank, in its announcement tomorrow, ought to tell us clearly how they see the external sector's health.

There is no reason for alarm since reserves remain high, but concerns are growing about the exchange rate and the balance of payments, and we are owed some clarity on these from the central bank.

Clarity is also needed on the fiscal situation, especially since the government has been trying in vain to raise Rs150bn for payments connected to military operations and IDP repatriation, and this amount is not budgeted.

The government has raised the matter with the IMF, to little avail, and most recently the finance minister was reported to have raised it with a visiting diplomatic delegation as well.

With the revenue target already revised downward, and the deficit target untouched, the State Bank's announcement should include a pointer or two on how they are seeing the fiscal situation shaping up as budget season looms before us again.

Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2015

Saulat Mirza's 'confession'

TWO death-row prisoners got a last-minute reprieve in the early hours of Thursday. But whereas in Shafqat Husain's case it was civil society's vocal campaign that earned him a brief stay of execution, far more covert forces are clearly at work behind Saulat Mirza's eleventh hour respite.

Many individuals on the verge of being sent to the gallows – a punishment that Dawn does not support under any circumstances — would conceivably have the desire to unburden themselves.

Not many, however, have been provided the opportunity to indulge in such a cathartic exercise on national television as did the MQM worker, convicted in 1999 for multiple murders, on late Wednesday night.

Mirza's sensational revelations, which have sent convulsions through Pakistan's fourth largest political party, were followed by the announcement that his execution had been stayed for 72 hours.

Know more: [Killed KESC chief on Altaf Hussain's orders, Saulat Mirza claims](#)

Saulat Mirza had already articulated the substance of his 'confession' in a statement before a Joint Investigation Team some years ago, the video of which is in the public domain.

This time around, there are explicit details that have brought not only Altaf Hussain but some of MQM's most prominent

March 2015

names into the dragnet. It is the latest salvo in the concerted push to tighten the noose around the party that controls much of the country's largest city and its financial hub.

Last week's raid on Nine Zero and recent allegations by the Rangers of MQM's culpability in the deadly Baldia fire have unfolded against rising tensions between the law-enforcement agency and the party, which maintains it is being unfairly singled out in the ongoing counterterrorism operations in Karachi.

However, the latest development raises several questions: how did a camera find its way into the death cell? Why this modus operandi, especially when there are other ways of going after militants taking refuge? Why now? What is the long-term objective?

There is no legal value in a 'confession' not made in a magistrate's presence. Moreover, the situation — a condemned prisoner looking for any way to delay the inevitable — was conducive to manipulation. But in the eyes of the establishment, no stranger to Machiavellian tactics, there is perhaps considerable political mileage to be gained.

What that is, is open to speculation, but the wholesale discrediting of the party is surely only part of it. However, while it is an open secret that the MQM employs heavy-handed tactics to maintain its grip on a city where politics and criminal networks often overlap, such an approach to bring it to account is in the long run likely to exacerbate the ethnic divide in Karachi, deepen the sense of persecution, and augur ill for peace in the metropolis.

Meanwhile, even as the deep state orchestrates the MQM's 'remaking' to its current requirements, both the central and the Sindh governments appear to be taking a back seat. By doing so, they do themselves and the democratic project no favours.

Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2015

Goodbye to World Cup

Pakistan's stunted World Cup campaign finally came to an end on Friday when they were overwhelmed by a rampaging Australia in the quarter-final at Adelaide.

Misbah-ul-Haq's men were clearly the underdogs in the do-or-die clash and, barring a momentary fight-back at the start of the Australian innings, never appeared to take charge of the game after setting a rather modest target of 214 for their formidable opponents.

Though Pakistan needs to be commended for making it to the quarter-final stage after its horrendous start to the World Cup, the fact remains that barring a famous victory over South Africa in the league round, they failed to hold their own against the leading sides such as India and the West Indies.

Yesterday too, the many chinks in Pakistan's armour were exposed by a professional Australian team which will now meet India in the semi-final at Sydney in a week's time.

March 2015

Also read: [Australia dump sloppy Pakistan out of World Cup](#)

Inconsistent batting, poor fielding and a management that did not plan intelligently afflicted Pakistan throughout. It wouldn't be fair to argue that Pakistani players lack talent. But if other attributes such as skill and application are not present in decent measure, the outcome can still be disastrous as we witnessed.

It was also evident that Misbah, despite his prolific form with the bat, is not the ideal leader for the limited-over format although he enjoys an enviable record as skipper in Test matches. His cautious approach and inability to pick the right combinations and build confidence are factors that have affected the team in the ODIs.

However, with both Misbah and Shahid Afridi deciding to bid adieu to the ODIs now, there's room for a young, dynamic leader to lead the one-day team with an eye on the next World Cup which is scheduled to be held in England in 2019.

Needless to say, a professional set-up at the Pakistan Cricket Board can also boost Pakistan's chances of regaining their status as a major cricketing nation.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2015

Crime and punishment

NECESSARY and welcome as it is for the state to take its law-and-order and judicial responsibilities more seriously, there is an unmistakable sense that politics is driving the many stunning revelations in Karachi at the moment.

From a bizarre, late-night televised confessional of a death-row convict to the interior minister dilating on the murder of Imran Farooq in London, there are important, disturbing facts coming to light — but few of those seem to be purely about the logic of law and order.

Consider just one fact: the interior minister, Nisar Ali Khan, has spoken about the murder of Imran Farooq, as though there have been sudden revelations.

In fact, for a while now, for years in fact, there has been speculation on the Imran Farooq front. Does the security establishment have in custody two men who may be connected to the murder in London?

If it does, why have they not been brought forward for so long to admit the crimes they may have committed? Surely, it belies the state's attempt to bring to justice criminals as and when they are discovered, as opposed to prosecuting when it is politically convenient.

Beyond the Karachi episode, beyond the convenient timing of state intervention, there remains a troubling question. When will the powerful recesses of the state ever be brought to a position where they are made to act when evidence is

March 2015

unearthed, as opposed to when it is politically convenient or relevant to do so?

Surely, be it Karachi or Fata or Balochistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this country needs to evolve in a way where politics is fundamentally separate from institutional interests.

It is quite remarkable that a city of an estimated 20m individuals has been held hostage for so long, in so naked and ugly a fashion, as Karachi has — and to what end?

The myth of the dominance of one or more political parties, and possibly militant elements within, dominating Karachi has been shattered. But the denizens of Karachi — nationally, in fact — ought to ask why it has taken so long for the state to do its job.

In the midst of the overtly politicised actions on Karachi, and, now, possibly including the PPP, owing to sensational headlines created by a known criminal element, there is also a question that needs to be asked of the political parties that dominate urban and rural Sindh.

Why have those parties, be it the PPP, ANP, or sundry regional parties, not sought to rescue the erstwhile city of lights by the Arabian Sea from the ugly, parochial and violent politics that have dominated it for decades?

Surely, for all the misdeeds and unwise ideas that may emanate from certain, non-political quarters, the political leadership of Sindh needs to accept that it has failed the people of Sindh.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2015

Torture in custody

WHETHER Shafqat Husain was a minor at the time he committed the offence for which he has been sentenced to death may be a matter of debate, at least for now; the fact that his confession was obtained after he was tortured for nine days in police custody is scarcely in dispute.

On Thursday, the lawyer for the main suspect in the Zahra Shahid murder case claimed his client had been subjected to torture by the police as a result of which he was passing blood in his urine.

Also read: [SC assails 'thana culture'](#)

Dumped bodies of 'missing' people routinely display signs of sadistic treatment. Tellingly, an inordinate number of detainees — even young men — seem to suffer cardiac arrests during the criminal investigation stage.

Earlier this week, the Supreme Court was informed that two individuals at military-run internment centres up north had died of that very cause.

Sometimes the use of third-degree methods need not only be inferred. Who can forget the sight of the seven men — part of the so-called Adiala 11 — presented in court two years ago, their broken, tormented bodies testament to the torture they had suffered apparently at the hands of the intelligence agencies?

By engaging in such coercive methods to extract information/confessions or to intimidate individuals in custody,

March 2015

Pakistan violates not only the fundamental rights of its citizens as spelt out in the Constitution, but also its international commitments.

The country ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture in 2010, which makes it binding upon Pakistan to pass relevant legislation that brings its law-enforcement apparatus in conformity.

However, both the country's penal and criminal procedure codes remain conspicuously silent on the subject. While the Police Order 2002 does spell out sanctions for inflicting "torture or violence" on individuals in custody, in practice even those provincial police ostensibly operating under it — Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — follow the archaic Police Act 1861.

A survey carried out in 2013 in Punjab found that nearly 55pc accused complained of torture in police custody. Meanwhile, intelligence agencies appear to operate according to rules of their own making.

It is worth recalling that according to a recent US Senate report, the "enhanced interrogation techniques" employed by the CIA against terrorism suspects in shadowy internment centres around the world yielded virtually no actionable intelligence.

Moreover, not only is the information extracted under conditions of torture unreliable, it exacerbates the brutalisation of society and fuels further disenchantment with the state.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2015

Progress on poll inquiry

THE much-debated, long-delayed judicial commission to investigate allegations of fraud and misconduct during the 2013 election appears finally to be near creation, with the PML-N and PTI unveiling a preliminary agreement on Friday. If the committee is in fact formed and begins its work — between the stalling tactics of the PML and the mercurial demands of the PTI, nothing should be assumed — it would represent the politics of cooperation reasserting itself after a dangerous spell of brinksmanship that had threatened to destabilise the democratic system itself. That the PTI and PML-N have also agreed to take the so-called terms of reference agreed between them to the political parties for their input is also a welcome move: while it has often shaped up as a private battle between the PTI and PML-N, the tussle over the 2013 election results affects all parties — and, far too often forgotten, the voters themselves.

What is especially promising about the preliminary agreement is that it appears to strike the right balance between concerns about electoral malpractices at the constituency level and the need to respect the broader, democratic system. The 2013 election clearly did not establish some kind of ideal to aspire to — but it was almost universally hailed as an improvement on previous elections. The goal was and remains to ultimately have free and fair elections, though that does not mean anything short of that is not credible or acceptable. For too long, the PTI seemed to focus on the smallest details — perhaps because its real goal was to topple the government. Similarly, for too long, the PML-N seemed focused on the big picture — perhaps because its sole goal was survival. Neither

of those approaches was an improvement on the democratic process because it put power and survival ahead of everything else. Now, the PML-N appears to finally be recognising its wider, systemic responsibilities as does the PTI, offering some hope that electoral malpractices will not only officially be identified, but also curbed ahead of the next elections.

It is that latter part — electoral reforms — that may ultimately prove to be more difficult. Much as the PTI has done a service to democracy by demanding reforms and the PML-N seems willing to countenance them, political parties deciding among themselves the rules of the electoral system is unlikely to ultimately produce a corruption-free, untainted electoral process. For that, the process of debating and proposing reforms needs to be open to the public too. Hold public hearings, ensure that parliamentary meetings are open and solicit as wide a spectrum of expert opinion, locally and internationally, as possible. That alone will nudge the country towards a transparent and fair electoral system — lowering the barriers to entry in politics and ensuring only legitimate votes are cast and counted. But will it happen?

Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2015

Water warnings

CALLS are mounting that the world is steadily drifting towards a major water crisis. Today, on World Water Day, we have a new report by the United Nations warning that “[t]he global water crisis is one of governance, much more than of resource availability”. It adds that there is enough water to meet the world’s growing needs “but not without dramatically changing the way water is used, managed and shared”. This is important for Pakistan for two reasons. First, we are fast becoming a water-starved country as per capita availability is falling at an alarming rate. Second, in order to remedy this potentially catastrophic slide, we need to shift our thinking away from building mega dams to increase water availability towards a more judicious utilisation of the resource that is currently available in our system. Everybody understands that Pakistan is a hydrological society, underpinned by agriculture and sustained by water. What needs to be repeated, however, is that we are wasting a precious and dwindling resource by failing to adopt more efficient farm practices, technologies of water conservation, efficiencies in watercourse management, and pricing incentives to encourage its more thoughtful utilisation.

In its annual report on world water development, released on Friday, the UN emphasised this shift in focus when talking about investment in water projects as well. “There is a need, however, to increasingly shift the focus of such investments towards changing the way in which water, and the environment more generally, are valued, managed and used.” This theme runs through the report, and it needs to be made part of our thoughts on water as well — more particularly, of the thinking coming out of the myriad government agencies built for the

purposes of water management. In fact, this emphasis on how water is “valued, managed and used” should be internalised by Irsa, the main regulator for the water sector, which recently made headlines by advancing an impractical proposal that the entire development budget of the country be diverted towards the construction of water storage infrastructure. Nobody denies that water is central to life and livelihood in Pakistan, or that our current storage capacity is inadequate to meet present and future requirements. But before demanding increased funds for greater water storage, Irsa should give us some idea of what more needs to be done to encourage the judicious use of the water that we already have in our system.

Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2015

Sana’a bloodbath

FRIDAY’S carnage in Sana’a, in which suicide bombers struck a number of mosques in the Yemeni capital, marks a dangerous new low for the impoverished, strife-torn state. Over 140 fatalities have been reported; the mosques targeted were frequented by supporters of the Houthi movement, while the self-styled Islamic State has claimed credit for the atrocities. While Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has a strong presence in Yemen, this is possibly the first time the so-called caliphate has claimed an attack in the country. The bombings are significant for two reasons: firstly, they threaten to plunge Yemen into a communal quagmire. The Houthis are Zaidi Shias, and the online statement claiming the attacks was full of

virulently sectarian invective. Given Yemen’s delicate confessional balance — Zaidis and Sunnis are found in roughly equal numbers in the country — such acts of terrorism can widen sectarian divisions. Secondly, if IS were to gain a perch in Yemen and create a fledgling statelet, it could create a new security nightmare for the Gulf monarchies.

While the IS presence in Yemen should not be overblown, especially considering the lack of major evidence linking local militants to the larger concern in Syria and Iraq, the ferocity of the attacks means the possibility of such linkages should not be taken lightly. IS is an expansionist concern, and when it cannot establish direct control it will look for affiliates. And as the recent terrorist attack in Tunisia, as well as the pledges of allegiance given to the ‘caliphate’ by militants in Nigeria, Egypt and elsewhere, show, there is no shortage of takers of the IS brand. Yemen’s internal situation is precarious: the Houthis swept into Sana’a in September and in January forced the president to flee after surrounding the presidential palace. The Houthi-government stand-off may well be giving AQAP and IS the space to expand. That is why the Houthis must work with the elected government and resolve all differences at the negotiating table in order to confront a common threat.

Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2015

Pakistan Day

AS the country commemorates today the resolution that 75 years ago laid the foundation for what was to become the independent state of Pakistan, there is much to reflect on in terms of how far the country has drifted from the ideals upon which it was founded.

First though, for all the difficulties on the security front, there is something to be said about the resilience and tenacity of the country for the state to be able to put on a Pakistan Day parade in Islamabad after a break of seven years.

Also read: [After 7 year gap, Pakistan Day to see military parade in full glory](#)

Parades, especially those dominated by shows of military strength, may seem, and in some ways are, anachronistic.

Celebrations of nationalism and patriotism engineered by the state usually hew a narrow and exclusive idea of what it means to be Pakistani.

But given the massive blows the country has suffered in recent years, it may be a good idea to demonstrate to the people that it is possible to envisage a future that in some, positive ways harkens back to a more internally secure and peaceful past.

Small steps that contribute towards rebuilding the public's faith in state and society here can surely be welcomed – with the caveat that the state should not try and promote a distorted view of the past or false identities.

More concretely, as the country commemorates March 23, the military will be waging one of the fiercest battles it has fought to regain territory ceded to militant control.

The battle for Tirah, now dubbed Operation Khyber-II by the military, is arguably a pivotal moment in the counter-insurgency that has been waged across Fata.

From the congregation of many militant groups in Tirah to the impact the area has on stability on both sides of the Durand Line, if the military strategy – a vital part of which is coordination and coordination with security forces across the border – succeeds in Tirah, the short- to medium-term security outlook for the country could improve dramatically.

As ever, however, the gains made on the battlefield will only really be consolidated in the long term if the state moves away from a militarised strategy against militancy.

The assumption that after the guns have fallen silent, economic aid will somehow revive the area and militancy will forever be shut out is entirely unrealistic.

Militancy, terrorism and extremism will only be irreversibly rolled back if the state reverses its own decline and manages to provide the full spectrum of services that the public needs, from law and order to a reasonably efficient civil administration and from basic health and educational services to policies that encourage inclusivity and growth.

Surely, whether it is Fata or Karachi, Sindh or Punjab, Balochistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan will only

March 2015

become a stable and secure place if the state rediscovers how to help the population it represents.

Published in Dawn March 23rd, 2015

Juvenile justice system

THE lifting of the moratorium on capital punishment in Pakistan has thrown a light on the dark corners of its criminal justice system.

None perhaps can be darker than those condemned prisoners who were juveniles when they committed the crimes for which they were sentenced to death.

A recent report by Justice Project Pakistan and Reprieve indicates that such inmates could well number around 800, in other words 10pc of the 8,000-plus individuals on death row across the land.

Also read: [Would we hang a 14-year-old 'terrorist'?](#)

That statistic in itself, if true — even without the ongoing furore over the case of Shafqat Husain — offers a shocking insight into the lack of safeguards for juveniles in Pakistan's criminal justice system.

This, 25 years after signing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child according to which “every child deprived of liberty shall be treated with humanity and respect”.

There also exists domestic legislation to specifically deal with young offenders. However, in practice many of the provisions of the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance 2000 remain unimplemented, thereby jeopardising the rights of minors to due process and fair trial.

In the first place, for the JSSO to be applicable, an individual's age needs to be determined but most of those netted by the criminal justice system belong to disadvantaged homes that do not possess documentation such as birth certificates, school records etc.

Moreover, in the chaotic rough-and-tumble of our legal system where indigent accused are usually dependent on overburdened and barely competent state-appointed counsel, the question of their age can fall by the wayside.

Provisions in the JSSO that remain unmet include the establishment of juvenile courts in the manner prescribed along with related procedural requirements. The legislation also calls for more borstals to be set up for detention of minors.

However, juvenile-specific detention centres remain inadequate, resulting in a number of young offenders being housed in close proximity with adults in regular prisons. Lack of resources compounded by youth makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse of all kinds behind bars as well as torture by police during the course of investigation.

March 2015

Although according to a 2012 report, the number of juveniles in the prison system has declined significantly over the last few years, concerns about minors being on death row must be urgently addressed.

The spirit of juvenile justice is essentially reformatory rather than retributive. There can be no greater retribution than the taking of a life.

Published in Dawn March 23rd , 2015

Currency correction

THE State Bank says in its latest monetary policy announcement that the foreign exchange markets are stable and attributes this stability to rising reserves.

Yet currency dealers are increasingly talking of a slide in the value of the rupee driven against the perceived wishes of the central bank.

There is little doubt that the rupee ought to be allowed to float, and equally that if it were, it would find a value somewhat below what it is currently at.

Know more: [Interest rate cut to 8pc](#)

But some of the shortages appearing in the currency markets, where dealers are reluctant to sell the dollar at stipulated prices

in anticipation of an increase in its value in days to come, suggest there might be a mismatch between how the State Bank is reading the situation and how the markets are seeing it.

Before closing for the weekend, the dollar crossed Rs103 in the open market, before obediently coming down to below Rs102 again.

Perhaps there is a realisation settling in amongst the monetary authorities that an overvalued currency can do more harm than good, and they are describing the growing pressures on the currency as a stable situation.

Perhaps the pressures are a passing phenomenon, driven by uncertainties coming from the strong volatility in the stock market and the long weekend ahead on account of the national holiday on March 23.

We have no way of knowing. What is certain though is that the rupee will have to adjust at some point to a more realistic level as the dollar is expected to climb further in view of the approaching end of an accommodative monetary policy by the Federal Reserve.

Whether that happens gradually and permissively, or whether it is sudden will depend on the kind of stewardship the currency receives from the central bank.

We can only hope that the central bank will be able to be fully autonomous in its actions in that situation. But describing such a situation as stable raises more questions than it answers.

Published in Dawn March 23rd , 2015

The madressah problem

IT was always going to be a difficult task — reforming the madressah sector and purging elements within who promote extremism, militancy and terrorism. But as a report in this newspaper yesterday indicates, the government appears to have all but given up already.

Three months on from the articulation of the National Action Plan, the federal government does not appear to have even decided which ministry should take the lead in dealing with the various madressah networks in the country.

Take a look: [The madressah factor](#)

Should it be the Ministry of Interior, with its basic responsibilities for law and order and hence identifying extremist- and militancy-supporting madressahs? Or should it be the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which coordinates with the madressah networks and in theory ought to have responsibility for determining the curricula taught?

Or should it be the Ministry of Finance, a unit of which is meant to supervise financial transactions in the country, that must be aware of the money flowing to the madressah networks?

Yet, unless all three are done, unless curricula reform, capturing militants and monitoring financial flows are pursued by the relevant ministries, a certain sub-section of the national madressah network will continue to pose a threat to the country's security.

Also read: [Campaign against 'radical' seminaries going nowhere](#)

The problem, as ever, appears to be less about the difficulties in drafting a meaningful plan and implementing it with purpose, and more about the state — both the political and military arms — not really considering it a priority.

Perhaps the PML-N finds it easier to do nothing: taking on the religious right with its street power and other means to put pressure on the state is hardly something any elected government would relish doing.

Perhaps the army-led military establishment is preoccupied with fighting militants and extremists, or maybe it does not consider dealing with extremism its responsibility.

Whatever the reasons for the state sinking back into inaction against the nurseries of hate, intolerance and extremism in the country, the effect is predictable: the gains in the short term, via military operations, against militancy and terrorism will likely be squandered in the long term.

For there is little possibility of the state winning the fight against militancy if it does not also seek to address the root causes. Why are so many Pakistanis taught distorted religious ideas in centres funded by foreigners?

It must also not be forgotten that the madressahs are only one part of a much bigger mosque-madressah-social welfare network that is collectively used to spread distorted beliefs and, sometimes, preach violence and hate.

March 2015

Just yesterday, the Jamaatud Dawa, perhaps the most well known of the so-called welfare networks, held a public event in Karachi to commemorate March 23 — this just a month after intense speculation about whether the group is to be banned or not. How serious, then, is the state in its promise to end militancy and terrorism of every stripe?

Published in Dawn March 24th , 2015

Gesture of defiance

WOMEN clad in black, their faces sombre and resolute, bear a rose-petal strewn coffin through a street. Men flank the periphery and bring up the rear in a protective cordon. It is an image that sears itself into the mind.

For such a break with tradition is all the more unusual, defiant even, because it happened in Kabul. Afghan society is more uncompromisingly patriarchal than most, where the rights of women and girls are routinely violated on the pretext of religion and culture. But there's another significant element in this grim tableau.

The body, or what was left of it, that lay in that coffin was that of a woman who had been beaten to death and her corpse set on fire by a mob on an allegation of blasphemy.

Also read: [Afghan woman lynched over Quran-burning was innocent: minister](#)

Described by her family as “deeply religious”, the 27-year-old had also reportedly suffered from mental illness for much of her life.

From accounts that have emerged since then, it appears that her accusers' pecuniary interests sparked the confrontation that led to the vicious murder.

In Pakistan, we are all too aware of how mobs can be incited to frenzy by accusations of blasphemy. The savage lynching of Shama and Shahzad and the attack on Ahmadis' homes last year, and the ransacking of Joseph Colony in 2013, are only among the more recent examples.

Worldly considerations lie at the heart of many blasphemy accusations, and the arrow of the blasphemy law is a handy weapon to achieve the objective.

Perhaps even more unfortunate are those incidents in which the trigger is an individual's mental illness and his concomitant lack of control over his actions.

In 2012, a mentally unstable man accused of desecrating religious text was lynched by a crowd in Bahawalpur.

An elderly man diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia was sentenced to death under the blasphemy law last year. In such cases — far too many for comfort in anything resembling civilised society — the confluence of ‘faith’ and ignorance can be deadly.

Published in Dawn March 24th , 2015

State Bank's optimism

THE latest monetary policy announcement by the State Bank of Pakistan provides an optimistic assessment of the economy, bordering on the unrealistic.

It begins by telling us that every economic variable is moving in a "favourable" direction, and goes on to say that those which aren't, such as growth in the large-scale manufacturing sector, will also be doing so soon.

Further on, most of the statement dwells on falling inflation and attributes movement in many other variables to it. At best, this analysis is too optimistic, and at worst, it is disingenuous.

Also read: [Currency correction](#)

It is true that inflation has fallen faster than anybody forecast in this fiscal year, but it is also possible to read too much into that development.

It strains the imagination a little, for instance, when the State Bank tells us that a decrease in private-sector credit offtake is due to falling inflation. If this is true, how do we explain rising government borrowing?

In fact, the bank has gone a little overboard in its optimism, a fact likely to be read by independent commentators as bowing before its political masters.

The drop in the current account deficit is attributable in some measure to higher CSF payments and other "multilateral

inflows", hardly a sustainable basis on which to build external sector health.

Fiscal affairs are only touched on in passing to say that the deficit appears to be "on track" despite major revisions in revenue targets and large expenditures looming in the third quarter.

The State Bank appears to be going to some lengths to avoid giving critical comments on the state of the economy, a trend that has been visible for some time now, but the latest monetary policy goes much more out of its way than most others have.

Given the powers vested in the bank to exercise autonomous decision-making, there is no reason for it to be so shy of pointing out the areas in the economy that need improvement. The assessments given by the bank are meant to provide the National Assembly with an objective and realistic view of the economy.

By giving out assessments of the sort contained in the monetary policy statement, the State Bank lets down the National Assembly, and those who look to it for a grounded, independent analysis of the economy.

It would be better if future pronouncements by the bank did not read like a press release from the finance ministry.

Published in Dawn March 24th , 2015

Blocking channels?

CENSORSHIP in the name of regulating the media is the oldest of political tricks and it appears that the present government is not about to give up on its quest for a docile, easy-to-manipulate media in the country.

As revealed in this newspaper yesterday, the federal government is considering an amendment to the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Act, 2007, that would allow the electronic media regulator to interfere with or block the satellite signal of a particular TV news channel.

Effectively, that would mean no cable operator would be able to broadcast the particular news channel that Pemra wants to block at any given moment and that no direct-to-home customer (those with what are colloquially known as dish antennae) would be able to access the channel either.

Know more: [TV channels broadcasting 'unwanted' content may be blocked](#)

If that were not disturbing enough, the government plans to enlist the help of Suparco to ensure the instantaneous blackout of a news channel.

All of that to what end? According to Pemra officials, the aim, in addition to the usual complaints about glorification of terrorists and TV channels showing terrorism-related scenes that the state believes are unfit for public consumption, is to keep other so-called objectionable and unwanted content off air.

This includes, rather astonishingly, blanking out the speeches of political leaders if necessary — presumably a thinly veiled reference to the MQM's relationship with the media in Karachi, where a number of TV news channels are headquartered.

That is truly dangerous territory, whatever the need to ensure a healthier relationship between the media and the political party that dominates Karachi.

If regulating political speeches is deemed so necessary, then why doesn't the government start with its own state-run news channels, which routinely broadcast lengthy speeches and everyday news conferences of the PML-N hierarchy?

But even if the government were to free state-run media from the yoke of state control that still would not make even a borderline case for making news channels unavailable to viewers on the basis of what the state determines they ought to hear and see.

Surely, in 2015, given all that the state has inflicted on society over the years, especially in the dark days of a state monopoly over the dissemination of news and information, there ought to be an immediate and total rejection of anything done in the name of censoring so-called unwanted and objectionable content.

Where there is a need for regulation — and the freewheeling nature of TV news in particular here does call for some sensible and principled regulation of the industry — it should be done in a manner that never gives the state the ability to pull

March 2015

the plug on the media and cause a TV news blackout nationally in seconds.

Consider what that power would mean during, say, demonstrations such as the anti-government protests last year in Islamabad or during another military intervention. Such power would be antithetical to the public interest.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2015

China bank

THE Obama administration might have made a mistake in opposing China's venture into multilateral lending, and is now standing more isolated than the country they sought to isolate.

One by one, countries have lined up to become part of the endeavour called the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, while the United States is alone in cautioning that the China-led initiative threatens to undermine the World Bank.

It is not clear why the US would want to believe that the World Bank ought to be the only multilateral lending agency dealing in infrastructure and social sector schemes, or that the Asian Development Bank is not being mentioned.

Also read: [Britain to join China-led Asian bank](#)

The world is a big place and there is plenty of room for other multilateral agencies to complement each others' work. The head of the IMF and the government of Australia are the latest to add their voices of support to the venture. Clearly, they saw that there was little sense in opposing the AAIB.

There is even less sense in regarding the prospect of a Chinese move in multilateral infrastructure lending as some sort of a boon for Pakistan. It remains to be seen how the Chinese will deal with the problem of chronic users of their resources, and how they will approach the question of internal reform and conditionality-based lending.

Multilateral lending is a tricky game. Nobody wants to underwrite the economic dysfunctions of another forever, but urging the borrower to introduce reform brings the lender into the internal affairs of another country, something that the Chinese had been averse to until now.

As evidence of the deliberate and measured pace of movement, the Chinese have agreed to forego a veto in the bank, a move that was critical to win the support of the European countries.

The painstaking attention being given to governance issues these days is another indication that the bank is likely to be a more serious multilateral enterprise, and not an arm of Beijing's foreign policy as the US has implied.

They are looking to not exercise the kind of power within the institution that the US has exercised at the IMF since its founding. It would be a mistake to underestimate the depth of the commitment that the Chinese are bringing to this enterprise.

March 2015

It would also be a mistake to try and isolate them in the process. But equally it would be a mistake to regard the venture as some sort of big opportunity opening up for Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2015

Aug 11 speech in textbooks

THEY are among the most well-known words spoken by Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Uttered on Aug 11, 1947, they are often quoted by those seeking to reiterate that the founder of this nation envisaged it as a country where religion and state would be entirely separate from each other.

“You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the State....” he said in that address.

Know more: [Quaid’s Aug 11 speech to be included in school curriculum](#)

The decision by the Sindh government to include the speech in its entirety in the school curriculum is a laudable one, for the Pakistani state through the years has made religion very much its business — often with distressing results.

Official patronage of right-wing elements has led to a situation where religious extremism has become an ever-present spectre, fracturing society along the fault lines of faith. Its impact is even being felt in Sindh, the cradle of a benign and inclusive Sufi tradition.

While Sindh has taken the lead in reclaiming its pluralistic heritage through the classroom — much of its primary school curriculum has been purged of divisive, prejudiced material — the other provinces would do well to emulate its example.

However, political considerations and/or lack of courage in the face of regressive pressure groups have so far either stymied curriculum reforms or resulted in an ideological slant being reintroduced in certain textbooks.

Curriculum reform is vital to a long-term directional change in mindset and thereby to the promotion of a consolidated anti-extremism narrative in the country. Inculcating tolerance and appreciation of religious diversity is part and parcel of the latter.

To that end, school curricula should also consider including chapters on eminent personalities from minority communities. Broadening their minds will work to ensure that young Pakistanis of today will be the standard-bearers of a more moderate Pakistan tomorrow.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2015

Misbah hits out

THE outgoing Pakistan skipper is in the mood. At a media briefing in Lahore on Tuesday upon his return from the World Cup campaign, Misbah-ul-Haq picked up from where he had left off in the quarter-final game against the Australians.

Just as uncharacteristically as he had broken the calm by stepping out to try and heave Glenn Maxwell out of the stadium in his last one-day international innings, Captain Cool decided that it was time he furnished some crisp answers to his critics.

Take a look: [I am not the devil: Misbah](#)

Without being too loud and without naming names, he was aggressive and quite a lot of what he said made sense. It doesn't take too deep an inquiry to establish that much of what was said against — and not so much about — him or his team in the media reeked, if not of personal vendetta, then of a propensity to be sensational.

His target was undoubtedly some ex-cricketers looking to build careers as critics in a competitive market sustained by the Pakistani passion for the game.

Misbah has been pulled up for being ungrateful to the media, by and large. Whereas he has been brutally reminded of the huge role the media does play in advertising the game and the players, indeed there has been some debate about how it is a two-way avenue now: under the new rules, the one who is

under attack has a more recognised right of response today than was the case in the past.

The trend is reflected in how strongly 'accused' cricketers elsewhere have asserted their right to reply in recent times. The Pakistan team had gone about their World Cup expedition like a group put on trial.

Pakistanis must now show generosity even if some are a little perturbed by some of the reactions by the outgoing ODI captain. The criticism must always continue — about what Misbah lacked as player and captain — just as his rebuttal should in no way prevent recognition of his contribution to national cricket.

Published in Dawn March 26th, 2015

LNG muddle

THE first shipment of imported LNG should be landing in a few days, yet the negotiations with the Qataris still seem to be continuing.

The recent visit by the emir of Qatar was expected to clear up the issues that are holding up the agreement, but going by the statements coming from the authorities in the wake of the visit, it hasn't. It appears, going by the reluctance on the part of the government to discuss the matter, that the price remains to be set.

This is a serious issue, and is already showing early signs of becoming politicised. What is even more serious, though, is the evident lack of planning and preparation for the project.

Take a look: [Confusion over price of LNG from Qatar](#)

This is especially difficult to fathom considering the great fanfare with which the government announced the project, and the great hopes it seemed to pin on it.

The project has been struck by delays for almost a decade now, from court challenges to the inability of the previous government to implement a tendering process.

But today the delays look like they will be on account of something so basic as an inability to plan and meet deadlines. Not only that, delays this time will mean capacity charges, which are substantial.

So why has an agreement on long-term supplies eluded the government thus far? There is little to no word from the ministry of petroleum about the crucial questions hanging over the project at a crucial moment, in contrast to the celebratory rhetoric in which they wrapped the project in its early days.

In all likelihood, the long-term arrangement will materialise soon — although it must be added that there is no firm basis for believing so. But the delay, the last-minute nature of the whole effort to finalise the deal before the capacity charges kick in, is another reminder of how the government is largely muddling through most of its initiatives.

This was true of the Gadani power park, which has been shelved, and it is true of the coal conversion in power generation. Once LNG imports get under way, whenever that is, it's very likely that there will be continuing loose ends being tied up on a last-minute basis in matters such as transmission pricing and allocations. The project which ought to have been an emblem of this government's success appears instead to be turning into an emblem of its lack of competence.

Published in Dawn March 26th , 2015

Replacing NAB

IN an unexpected but welcome move, the federal government has taken to parliament once again the issue of replacing the National Accountability Bureau with a new statutory body to combat corruption among holders of public office.

While the NAB still limps on — on Tuesday, its executive board has announced investigations into, among other issues, allegations of corruption by the chairman of the Pakistan Agriculture Research Council, a former chairman of the Competition Commission of Pakistan and officials of the sales tax department — it is a body that for all intents and purposes no longer has either the moral mandate or necessary financial and legal resources to combat corruption and promote accountability at the national level.

Know more: [New move in NA for consensus accountability law](#)

That the PML-N has announced it wants a consensus inside parliament on the new accountability law will further boost hopes for a fair, transparent and powerful new accountability commission, especially if parties such as the PTI are also brought on board.

There remains, though, a gap between what the government, and the PPP, says it wants to do and what it may end up doing. In the last parliament, where the PPP and PML-N's roles were reversed, there were at least two attempts to replace the moribund NAB with a new statutory accountability organisation but, after most of the details had been extensively

negotiated on, neither the PPP nor the PML-N seemed quite able to get the job done.

While both sides will contend that it was less a disagreement over fundamentals and more about how the new organisation should be structured that thwarted a final agreement, the suspicion remains that the two parties were unable to resolve their differences because ultimately it was not in their interest to do so, and clearly was never a priority.

Will this time be any different? The PTI, if it does return to the National Assembly as seems likely, could be another complicating factor, now. While the PTI's input could lead to a more muscular and independent accountability commission, the party has a tendency to undermine negotiations with its abrasive approach.

It remains to be seen whether the cooperative PTI or the populist, politician-baiting PTI will appear at the negotiating table — if the government does move ahead with the new bill presented in the National Assembly on Tuesday.

Finally, there is a broader issue here: much as an accountability commission is needed, that very need suggests the system itself requires overhaul.

Be it the judicial system, checks and balances within government departments or the regulatory framework for how government and the private sector interact, little works as it should — which is why accountability is such an overarching issue.

March 2015

How much would corruption be reduced and accountability promoted if the normal systems of oversight were also to be strengthened? Parliament would do well by looking beyond just creating a new accountability commission.

Published in Dawn March 26th , 2015

Ayyan's assets

THIS is one story we could all have done without. With no facts, other than a supermodel languishing in a jail, the imagination is reduced to speculating about the source of the cash she was arrested for trying to smuggle out of the country, or to dwelling on the conditions she must be living under.

While the press is busy trying to satiate a hungry public's appetite for meaningless details, the rumor mill is running in overdrive about whose money it was that Ayyan Ali had concealed in special compartments in her luggage.

Meanwhile, the authorities have a free ride to take their time in pursuing the facts of the case, thereby allowing rumors to gather steam that there might be a political connection.

Take a look: [Supermodel Ayyan held for attempting to fly out with \\$500,000](#)

Some basic facts should be released as soon as possible to put to rest the rumors that the story is being allowed to simmer for

its potential to score some political points. It should be easy enough to establish the source of the funds, and the intended recipient — especially since on Wednesday, Ms Ali's lawyer submitted to customs investigators records of the sale of plots claimed to have been formerly held by the model.

A brief look at her bank accounts should be enough to establish if there is a pattern of dabbling in funds of dubious origin. It strains the imagination a little to think that large political players would use this method to move their funds out of the country, but if there is indeed a link, it should not be hard to establish.

Perhaps customs intelligence should ask for some assistance from the FIA, which has more experience and expertise in dealing with money laundering cases.

Capital flight is a highly developed industry in this country, and if methods of this sort are being used to smuggle ill gotten gains out, then at least it tells us that such sums cannot be as large as they are generally supposed to be. This mystery should be put to rest, now.

Published in Dawn, March 27th, 2015

Yemeni conflict expands

THE situation in Yemen is, by any description, incendiary and Pakistan, as matters stand, appears to be getting ready to jump into the fray.

On Thursday evening, after a meeting chaired by the prime minister, the government announced that a high-level delegation, including the defence minister and representatives from the military, would be heading to Saudi Arabia today to “assess the situation”.

This comes swiftly on the heels of Saudi airstrikes inside Yemen targeting the Houthi rebel movement, which is locked in a struggle with the Yemeni government.

Getting involved in what is essentially an internal conflict is unwise, but the prime minister seemed quite concerned with protecting Saudi Arabia’s territorial integrity, any violation of which, he said, would evoke a “strong response” from Islamabad.

Know more: [Threat to S Arabia will evoke strong reaction from Pakistan: Nawaz](#)

Earlier, there had been some talk of the Saudis wanting Pakistani troops involved in this conflict. Yet the government had maintained a largely ambiguous stance, until yesterday’s developments. The pressure on Pakistan was indeed immense to tag along in the anti-Houthi coalition.

Yet despite the heat from Riyadh and others, considering the regional situation and Pakistan’s own predicament, neutrality would have been the wisest option.

Intervention in others’ internal affairs is always a tricky proposition. For example, how are we to justify coming to the aid of the Yemeni government while opposing, say, Bashar Al-Assad’s regime in Syria?

Also, considering the regional dynamics in play in Yemen, Pakistan needs to tread carefully. Saudi Arabia backs Yemen’s beleaguered President, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who also has American support, while the Houthi movement is said to enjoy the confidence of Iran.

It is clear that Yemen has become the latest regional theatre of the Riyadh-Tehran proxy conflict. Egypt and Turkey have supported the Saudi intervention while the US is also involved.

The Houthis, on the other hand, have warned of a “wider war” in response to the Saudi action, while the Iranian government has dubbed the airstrikes a “dangerous step.”

It is difficult for Pakistan to play favourites with either Saudi Arabia or Iran — considering Pakistan’s strategic relationship with the former and geographical proximity with the latter. This is something both capitals need to understand.

Also, Pakistan is fighting its own internal war against militants. Can we realistically afford to despatch troops overseas when the military is currently engaged in Fata and elsewhere?

March 2015

If anything Pakistan should use its good offices to help achieve a diplomatic solution, rather than become a party in this conflict.

Published in Dawn, March 27th, 2015

Karachi operation

A YEAR and a half since the so-called Karachi operation against militant and criminal elements in the provincial capital was first approved by the federal government, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif once again huddled with the senior-most military commanders in the city on Wednesday.

The outcome: a new, wider and, possibly, even more intense, crackdown on militant and criminal elements is to begin.

To the extent that the political and military leadership has reiterated a collective resolve to go after militant elements, it is surely a welcome sign that the Karachi operation and the National Action Plan are in fact dovetailing.

Know more: [Rangers raid MQM HQ in Karachi, detain member of Rabita Committee](#)

Karachi in particular has long been known as a transit spot, a fundraising centre and a sanctuary for militants of every stripe, from the TTP to Al Qaeda and from Lashkar-i-Jhangvi to sundry sectarian outfits. Peace will not come to the city until

militants groups and their members are systematically moved against.

More problematic, though, is the other side of this federal government- and military-led push to restore peace in Karachi: the focus on the MQM.

As the dominant actor in the city for several decades, the MQM has clearly played a role, directly and indirectly, in the city's slide into lawlessness.

Furthermore, to the extent that the MQM — indeed, any political party or state institution — is harbouring and protecting criminal elements, those criminal elements need to be identified and prosecuted, in full view of the public, with due process and with the maximum punishment allowed under the law sought.

Using the cover of a mainstream political party to perpetrate crimes ranging from murder to extortion deserves the strongest possible lawful response that the state can muster.

Whether it is the MQM or any other political party, whether it an institution of the state or a rogue sub-section of it, any time crimes against the public are unearthed, they ought to be fully but fairly prosecuted.

However, there is a growing sense that what is happening in Karachi at the moment is effectively treating the MQM as a whole as a terrorist or militant organisation.

This is truly a dangerous and destabilising precedent, both in terms of principle and practice. For all its sins, and there are

March 2015

many, the MQM is also one of the largest political parties in the country with the genuine and popular support of the voting public.

Treating the party itself as an enemy of the peace — the latest manifestation was the snubbing of the provincial governor, Ishratul Ibad — will only lend credence to the claim that the Karachi operation is essentially political in nature and not fundamentally about law and order.

More practically, many of these tactics have been attempted before — with disastrous consequences for the city and politics in general. Karachi cannot afford for a genuine law-and-order problem to once again become overtly political in nature.

Published in Dawn, March 27th, 2015

Minimum wage

THE long-delayed process to raise the minimum wage in Sindh as promised in the last budget provides a window into the careless way the concerns of the poor are handled by the state.

First of all, it was not necessary to allow the process of issuing a notification to take so long. Two separate notifications have been sent, by two departments, creating confusion about the status of the announcement.

The first notification went out in December, and the second in March. The lack of coordination between various departments of the Sindh government that this shows is startling, and industrialists now have an opportunity to take advantage of the confusion and refuse to pay the higher minimum wage till the matter is clarified.

But bureaucratic incompetence aside, the minimum wage — upon which the majority of workers in the country depend for their livelihood — also raises important issues for other provinces.

Know more: [Sindh delays notification on minimum wages](#)

How exactly is it determined what the minimum wage ought to be? Setting benchmarks of this sort, like the poverty line or the minimum wage, is a very complex exercise and touches on important philosophical issues, such as what is the minimum nutritional intake or educational level that a citizen should consider entitled to as a right.

March 2015

The poverty line in Pakistan is set by assistance from the World Bank, where much of the debate and measurement required for the exercise is carried out. But how exactly is a minimum wage decided?

Without proper data, for instance the labour force participation survey, how can the state even decide what the minimum wage ought to be? The last labour force survey was conducted two years ago, and the process has become irregular.

No major effort is made to gather real-time data about the labour force, making it very difficult to believe that the yardstick being used to determine the minimum wage is anything other than arbitrary. This seems to be just another sad reminder of how the poor are treated as an afterthought by the state.

Published in Dawn, March 28th, 2015

Circular debt again

ONCE again, the government has tripped up on the circular debt. In a written statement in response to a question asked in the National Assembly on Thursday, the water and power minister confirmed that the total amount under circular debt is at Rs258bn as of end February, whereas the receivables of the Discos are Rs552bn.

The reasons he gave for the return of the issue were familiar: problems in recoveries, failure to pass through markup costs on outstanding payables to consumers and delays in tariff determination and notification. Of these, the attempt to have consumers pay the markup on payables deserves to be resisted strenuously.

The least-convincing part of the minister's answer was on the steps being taken to tackle the problem. We're promised a concerted recovery effort, and the imposition of a Debt Recovery Surcharge "to ensure repayment of loans" taken out to pay Discos' liabilities to private power producers.

Also read: [Power sector circular debt exaggerated to make case for tariff increase](#)

Additionally, we're promised some amount of technical upgrades to reduce line losses. In other reports, there are signs that NAB is going to be made party to power sector recoveries once again, as it was a number of years ago, but with little idea on how the process will be made effective this time.

March 2015

Last time, NAB was unable to recover any more than Rs5bn or so, out of the total recoverables more than 10 times that amount. The problem was not in the lack of capacity to force payment. The problem was in faulty billing, and rectifying that appears to be beyond the capacity of the power bureaucracy.

A Debt Recovery Surcharge is just another way of passing the cost of interest on outstanding payables to consumers, except that by calling it a surcharge the approval of the regulator is no longer required.

It can be implemented by executive order, like an SRO, instead. Upgrading the technical apparatus of transmission and distribution is a good measure, but it will prove highly unequal to the task of increasing the number of billed units and recoveries.

All of the steps mentioned by the minister, except for the surcharge, should be implemented, but it also needs to be acknowledged that the power bureaucracy will never be able to solve this problem.

For a lasting fix to the problem of power-sector mismanagement, which is in large measure the cause behind the circular debt, the role of the bureaucracy needs to be reduced dramatically.

Published in Dawn, March 28th, 2015

Forgotten war

REPORTS that the military has presented to a tribal jirga of elders from North Waziristan an eight-page document setting out the terms under which IDPs can return to their homes in some parts of the agency has brought some welcome coverage, even if tangential, to what is rapidly becoming a forgotten war.

As Operation Khyber-II and the operation in Karachi dominate, it seems a lifetime ago that Operation Zarb-i-Azb was initiated amidst claims and rumours that it was to be the biggest, most decisive of all counter-insurgency operations attempted by the military.

In fact, that lifetime was just nine months ago. It is also not the first time that a military operation has been launched amidst a torrent of official propaganda before quietly slipping off the public agenda. Consider that before North Waziristan, there was South Waziristan.

Know more: [Elders express inability to maintain peace in North Waziristan](#)

And before South Waziristan, there was Swat. What's common to all these places is that relevant, verifiable information dries up, the military's presence is extended indefinitely and the local populations struggle to return to their normal, pre-insurgency lives.

In the latest case of the military requiring some North Waziristan tribes to pledge, among other things, to keep out militants from their areas before IDPs are allowed to return

home, what is particularly disturbing is that the military, via the Fata administrative apparatus, is effectively seeking to return to the pre-insurgency status quo of the FCR, collective punishment and the jirga system.

Not only does that suggest that the very idea of Fata reforms has indefinitely been put on hold, it also suggests a fundamental misreading of what led to the unprecedented insurgency in Fata over the last decade and a half.

Specifically, while the war in Afghanistan, the state reliance on proxies and the growing radical Islamist discourse in the country were all contributing factors, Fata has been on fire because it has been for all intents and purposes kept as a buffer zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a no-man's land meant to extend Pakistan's influence into Afghanistan and prevent Afghan influence from radiating into Pakistan proper.

While the immediate priority in Fata has to be to tamp down militancy and recover all territory under control of militants, no strategy to achieve that will succeed if it does not factor in long-term considerations. Fata needs to be reformed and, administratively and legally, made like much of the rest of Pakistan — not returned to the anachronism it has always been.

As for the rest, with independent, verifiable information from North Waziristan all but impossible and the state, both civilian and military wings of it, seemingly preoccupied with new issues, there needs to be some political pressure — from parliament, through the media or perhaps even civil society — to prise more information from the state about what is happening in North Waziristan.

An information blackout is contrary to the public interest.

Published in Dawn, March 28th, 2015

Moon-sighting consensus

IN Pakistan, even occasions of joy can end up being marred by controversy. Take the celebration of Eidul Fitr, for example. Almost every year, there is disagreement over the start of the month of Ramazan, as well as the sighting of the Shawwal crescent, which marks the beginning of Eid. Without fail, some clerics in different parts of the country end up disagreeing with the decision of the central Ruet-i-Hilal Committee, which results in the celebration of Eid on two different days. There have even been occasions in the past when the nation has witnessed Eid celebrated on three different days. To try and prevent the recurrence of this strange phenomenon, the Supreme Court on Friday summoned the Ruet-i-Hilal Committee's rules and notifications regarding the appearance of the moon. A petition concerning the moon-sighting controversy had been filed with the apex court a number of years ago.

While the SC's concerns about the matter are valid, resolving this controversy is essentially the job of the ulema. After all, many Pakistanis take decisions about when to celebrate Eid as per the views of the clergy. Unfortunately, as in many other matters, our divines have failed to reach a consensus where moon-sighting is concerned, despite the fact that all major Muslim schools of thought are represented in the central Ruet

body. To ensure Eid is celebrated on a single day countrywide — as is the norm in most Muslim countries, where the official Eid announcement is rarely contested — the ulema must work towards building consensus on the issue. Tradition and science must both be employed to arrive at a dependable method of moon-sighting. There might always be mavericks that choose to go their own way, but if religious scholars of repute of all confessions work towards celebrating Eid on the same day and communicate the message to their flocks, it will do much to promote national harmony. Perhaps when this goal is achieved the ulema can work to address other divisive issues.

Published in Dawn, March 29th, 2015

LNG confusion persists

THE first-ever consignment of LNG arrived in the country to far less than the fanfare that one would have expected. There has been a rush to claim credit for the development, threats of a court challenge from one provincial government, confusion in the media about who really imported the consignment, and continuing mystery over the negotiations for a long-term supply contract from Qatar. Not only that, it appears that very little of the homework required to effectively manage the injection of the imported gas into the system has been done. It turns out that the government had decided to swap the molecules injected into the system at the port with those produced from fields in upper Sindh as a mechanism to transfer the gas to its consumers in Punjab. But the provincial

government of Sindh is upset that it was not consulted when this mechanism was finalised, especially since it involves the diversion of its own gas. The private sector parties, which imported the first consignment, discover that there is no pricing mechanism in place to draw the gas out from their respective points of consumption upcountry. Additionally, they are being told that losses through Unaccounted for Gases (UFG) will be applied to their imported consignment, and there is much to debate about how these will be calculated.

In fact, the first consignment of LNG appears to have sparked a bit of a wrangle between the myriad stakeholders in the gas supply chain. In due course, pricing issues between the various publicsector entities will also surface. Most of the issues coming up are nothing more than glorified teething problems and should not be blown out of proportion. But it is still astonishing that all this work was not done prior to the arrival of the first consignment. The government had months in which to get these issues sorted out, and none of them constitutes rocket science. Now that the first consignment has landed, the confusion has created the space for frivolous controversy mongers to have a field day. The petroleum ministry must bear some of the responsibility for the growing chorus of confusion that is engulfing the project, because it was its job principally to ensure that the policy framework to absorb the imported gas into the national system was in place. Now the work has to be done in amateur haste, for which there will doubtless be a cost to pay.

Published in Dawn, March 29th, 2015

Murky waters

WHEN a secretly recorded conversation between a national politician and one of his advisers is leaked to the media and public, the temptation is to examine the substance of the conversation and explore the gap between public positions and private exultations. But that temptation must be resisted. There is one and only one issue that ought to matter in this rather unfortunate instance of an alleged conversation between PTI chief Imran Khan and PTI MNA Arif Alvi being leaked to the media: who did it, why did they do it, and did they have any legal authority to do so? Unhappily, the PML-N government appears neither to comprehend nor be particularly interested in the fundamental issue here, preferring instead to gloat over the embarrassment caused to the PTI and seeking to add to it in any way can.

The PML-N reaction has raised suspicions that the federal government itself may have authorised the secret recording and leaked it now to put the PTI on the defensive. Certainly, the Intelligence Bureau, which reports directly to the prime minister and whose director general is serving on an extension in duty at the prime minister's personal intervention, has the capabilities to tap local mobile phones. As for motive, the PML-N's continuing struggles with the PTI, with Imran Khan again warning of taking to street agitation if the judicial commission to investigate allegations of rigging in the May 2013 election is not convened by the government as promised, give it a surfeit of motives. However, the PML-N, via the IB, is by no means the only possible culprit. It is entirely possible that the most usual of suspects and the oldest of culprits in such

matters are once again involved: the intelligence wings of the military establishment.

That there is no parliamentary oversight of intelligence agencies, that there are no clear statutory limits on what intelligence agencies can do, and that military-run intelligence agencies report only to the army leadership and regard the civilian side of the state with historical mistrust is well known. What is not known at all is the scope of the intelligence agencies' snooping on civilian politicians, and to what end. In the Khan-Alvi recording, there can be discerned only political purposes, with the PTI being made to look duplicitous and untruthful. Consider that in recent days the MQM, PPP and now the PTI have all been undermined by sudden revelations amidst a media frenzy. There is no clear or obvious reason why the military-run intelligence wings, pre-occupied as they must be with the fight against militancy, would try to muddy the waters for the PTI too at this moment. But there is enough happening on several fronts now for both the federal government and the military to determine who is behind the PTI leak and put an end to these dangerous shenanigans immediately.

Published in Dawn, March 29th, 2015

Yemen conundrum

It has long been an unhappy feature of Pakistani foreign and national security policy that many of the more sensational revelations are left to foreigners to make. So it has been with this sudden and frenzied will-we/won't-we speculation that Pakistan will send troops and other military resources to the Middle East — either to intervene inside Yemen on the side of the Saudi-led coalition or help defend the Saudi border from a possible invasion by the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Read: [Nawaz assures Saudi King Salman of Pakistan Army support](#)

Bizarrely, it has been the Saudi news media — hardly known for their independence, especially in matters of regional policy — that has led with loud, insistent claims that Pakistan has agreed to make a military contribution to the Saudi-assembled coalition that has been aurally pounding the Houthis since last week and which may soon become a fully fledged land invasion.

Here in Pakistan, the government has seemingly tried to downplay the issue, without giving any clear indication of what is being discussed and why. Why the gap between the thinly veiled official Saudi claims and the watered-down government statements here?

Also read/ [Pakistan will not participate in conflict that divides Muslim Ummah: Khawaja Asif](#)

Part of the reason could well be that the Saudi government, keen to have as broad a coalition as it can assemble in Yemen, is using public statements and media leaks to put pressure on Pakistan.

In times of crisis — and the Saudi monarchy appears to be either grimly determined or in a state of panic already — it is to be expected that every bit of leverage, public and private, will be used to achieve the ends that the Saudis are looking for in Yemen.

It could well be that private and very cautious Pakistani resistance to the idea of getting involved in Yemen, or even on Saudi soil, is being very publicly countered by the Saudi media campaign.

However — and this can never be discounted given the Pakistani leadership's penchant for secrecy — it could also be that the Saudi cajoling is aimed at making Pakistan deliver on the far more extensive private reassurances it has already given to Riyadh in contrast to what the Pakistani leadership has publicly claimed.

Also read: [PIA flight from Yemen lands in Karachi](#)

Whatever the truth, it is time for the Pakistani government to publicly and clearly set out what it is and is not willing to do in Yemen or on behalf of Saudi Arabia and on what terms and for which reasons.

In doing so, the government may also help dispel an unfortunate impression that has been created inside the country that the conflict in Yemen is essentially sectarian in nature. It is

March 2015

not. Allowing the misinformed notion of a sectarian conflict abroad to go unchallenged can be dangerous for stability here. As for troops: none for offensive purposes anywhere should be considered. Defensively, for clearly articulated and rational reasons, deployment could be considered — as a last resort, which the situation is nowhere near at the moment.

Published in Dawn, March 30th, 2015

Applause for economy

The economy has been receiving quite an ovation in the last few days. First the State Bank applauded how more indicators are moving “in a favourable direction” in its last Monetary Policy Statement. Then Moody’s upgraded the outlook on Pakistan’s credit rating, from positive to stable, pointing towards a strengthened external position, efforts towards fiscal consolidation and steady performance under the IMF programme.

The latest to join the applause is the IMF itself, where the Executive Board issued an upbeat assessment of the government’s “strong performance”. Three major institutional voices, representing diverse sets of interests, have each pointed out that the economy is on the mend through fiscal consolidation and the strengthening of external accounts.

Read: [Prudent policies help improve Pakistan’s economy: IMF](#)

The government deserves its share of credit for this.

But it’s also important to remember that each of these voices has its own priorities to safeguard.

For instance, Moody’s has one overriding interest: to determine whether Pakistan can meet its debt service obligations to foreign creditors in the forthcoming year. If that is fine, then all is good.

Also read: [Moody’s upgrades Pakistan bond rating](#)

The IMF is similarly mostly interested in strengthening the debt service capacity of the country, with a little bit of focus on structural reforms as a garnish.

The State Bank has lost its voice of late, and a question mark hangs over its own credibility. One voice that is unfortunately absent from the choir is that of the common citizenry of the country. Are people seeing this improvement in the economy through job creation, income growth, stabilising household finances, falling poverty, and so on? Thus far, the naked eye can see the following: investment and business activity is in a slump, but consumption and speculation are charging ahead.

Factories are sputtering but the malls are packed. Investment is down, but the property market is booming. If one listens to the institutional voices mentioned above with a trained ear, one can hear powerful caveats tucked away in their language, for instance, when Moody’s points out – two-thirds of the way down in their statement – that “most of the build-up in official reserves has come from external borrowings”. The government is justified in taking a bow at the end of this round of applause

March 2015

coming from those entrusted with safeguarding the interests of external creditors. But the rest of us are still waiting for our turn to join in. Let's hope we find reason to do so soon.

Published in Dawn, March 30th, 2015

Deserving winners

For all the hype leading up to Melbourne on Sunday, it can be said the contest for the world cricket crown lasted but only five deliveries. Brendon McCullum, the man behind New Zealand's dream campaign during the 11th edition of the cricket World Cup with his aggression, was out without scoring to Mitchell Starc.

The die was cast. The spirited challengers to the Australian dominance of the game over the last two decades were jolted into adopting a defensive strategy in their batting. That sealed the fate of the Kiwis, with Michael Clarke and Steve Smith providing the finishing touches to the successful Australian chase for the title.

Read: [Captain Clarke bows out with Australia's fifth World Cup title](#)

Clarke, the master in a more traditional mould, played his last ODI innings, and Smith, the likely successor, used the grand stage to display his flair for innovation. This was some spectacle to be inspired by.

As always, this World Cup also has its own stories of near misses, of potential winners and botched attempts, of underdogs and chokers. There would be memories of artists with bat and ball and of workmen determined to get the job done.

All these accounts add to the romance of the game and none should detract anything from the Australian feat.

To have won the cup five times in the span of 28 years is an achievement any country would be proud of. Additionally, as the co-hosts along with New Zealand, Australia would be pleased by the element of speed and mobility this latest edition has highlighted.

Also read/ [Comment: When the Australians took World Cup for granted](#)

This was a tournament remarkable for its pace — reflected in the bowling analyses as well as in the rate at which the runs were amassed. But as the old cautious approach built upon conservation and consolidation fades out, there were indications the thinkers were willing to consider corrections to restore a more equal competition between the bat and the ball. The conclusion of a World Cup tournament is a good time for initiating these much-needed changes to make the contest as even as possible.

Published in Dawn, March 30th, 2015

A job well done

From time to time, there is an episode or an event that makes us proud to belong to this country. The successful evacuation of more than 500 Pakistanis from Yemen over the weekend is one such example.

Both the Foreign Office and PIA deserve credit and a round of applause for a tough task executed well. More specifically, the Pakistani ambassador in Sanaa, and the entire embassy team there, did a heroic job arranging a large bus convoy to transport all the Pakistanis there to safety, overcoming great dangers along the way.

The convoy was stopped and the documentation of each traveller checked along the way, putting their lives in danger as the conflict raged around them. But they made the journey to safety under the leadership provided by the embassy team, and as they landed here in Pakistan, the whole country heaved a sigh of relief.

PIA did its part too in rapidly arranging an aircraft, along with a back-up plane ready to be dispatched if the need arose. Additionally, a corridor had to be opened up for the plane to fly through treacherous skies, which was complicated by the fact that Yemen's airspace has been shut down by the Saudis while the air strikes are under way.

The fact that the plane made it there, and successfully lifted all Pakistani citizens out of danger and brought them safely back to their country, was an enormous job. It's been gratifying to see our institutions, PIA, the Foreign Office, the CAA and the

Ministry of Defence, all working together and coordinating to ensure that this vitally important mission succeed.

The smooth execution of the operation has brought credit to these institutions and Pakistani citizens can take a moment of pride to absorb the fact their government pulled together to come through for its citizens in their hour of need. This was a job well done indeed, and those who were part of it deserve our gratitude.

Published in Dawn, March 31st, 2015

Power sector infighting

A tussle under way in the power bureaucracy perfectly illustrates the myriad dysfunctions that afflict our power sector.

A number of officers at Fesco, the power utility serving the industrial city of Faisalabad, have challenged their transfer orders before the Lahore High Court, arguing that these were issued on political grounds after the utility conducted a raid on the factory premises of an MPA from the ruling party.

The managing director of the utility has referred some of these transfer orders back to his counterpart at Pepco, from where they originally came.

In their court petition, the officers argue that they are being targeted on political grounds, and the Pepco managing director

does not have the authority to order anybody's transfer since that power has been handed to the independent Board of Directors under which the utility has been operating for a number of years now.

What sounds like a simple case of government functionaries challenging their transfer orders is actually illustrative of the weaknesses that mire the power sector. First of all, the raid is an example of the difficulties involved in raising recoveries, which is an essential part of the strategy to reduce the circular debt.

The consequences visited upon the functionaries are a typical example of political interference, if they do indeed relate to the raid.

The Fesco managing director's refusal to entertain the transfer orders is a good example of the governance failures within the power bureaucracy, where arbitrary decisions are made, and challenged on a daily basis.

Has the MD done a fair job of taking his instructions from the BoD, whose authority is being invoked to refuse the transfer orders? The resort to judicial authority is also typical, not only in the case of power sector governance, but billing matters too frequently land up in court if pushed too hard.

The confusion created by this state of affairs is very typical of the confusion that has gripped the power sector for almost a quarter of a century now, ever since a mix of private- and public-sector interests began operating within it.

And it is precisely this sort of confusion that has hampered the ability of the power bureaucracy to adapt to the changing challenges of its time, or to accept the kinds of reforms it needs urgently. It's time to reform this system and remove these governance weaknesses if the power crisis is ever to be resolved.

Published in Dawn, March 31st, 2015

Karachi bye-election campaign

In the old days, a bye-election in Azizabad — the heart, as it were, of the MQM's power in Karachi — would have barely registered as a blip on the political landscape.

But much has changed since then; and the increasingly charged rhetoric around the bye-poll in NA-246 on April 23, occasioned by the intriguing resignation of Nabil Gabol from the seat he won in the 2013 elections, is indicative of that.

For one, the last general election saw the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf arrive as the new player in town challenging the MQM's virtually uncontested writ in Pakistan's financial jugular since several decades, aside from the two army-led operations against it in the '90s.

March 2015

Meanwhile the changing demographics of Karachi were already a source of concern to the party, which essentially draws its strength from the politics of ethnicity.

Then, a slew of multi-pronged, MQM-specific actions of late under the rubric of restoring law and order in the city, including the raid on Nine Zero — the party headquarters in Azizabad — and Saulat Mirza’s death row confession accusing some of its top leaders of complicity in murder, has made the last few weeks particularly torrid for the party.

From a virtually unassailable position in Karachi that by extension gave it a significant role on the national stage, the MQM is currently on the defensive.

Recent developments have brought its siege mentality to the fore, one that it has assiduously cultivated in tandem with its strong-arm approach. If not carefully managed with maturity and foresight by the political parties concerned, the situation can easily strain the fragile equilibrium in the city to breaking point.

The campaign for the upcoming bye-election can well be seen as a test case in this respect. It is an opportunity for the MQM, which has been sending representatives to the assemblies since 1988 and has its finger on the pulse of Karachi, to demonstrate it is also capable of issue-based politics and that its support in the city is based on more than coercive tactics as alleged.

For its part, the PTI can use the campaign to illustrate its understanding of the dynamics that underlie this complex city. Judging by the rhetoric on display, however, it appears that both Imran Khan and Altaf Hussain are loath to rise above the

same old histrionics and personal attacks that have marked their style of politics thus far.

There is undoubtedly a crisis of governance in Pakistan’s largest metropolis. And that is what the PTI must build its campaign for the bye-election upon, rather than Imran Khan assuming a patronising ‘saviour’ mantle.

Such a stance could even backfire; there are enough questions hanging over the chastening of the MQM — its timing as well as the ill-conceived, highly questionable tactics employed — to give pause to the public whose vote Imran is courting.

Published in Dawn, March 31st, 2015