

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of March 2017

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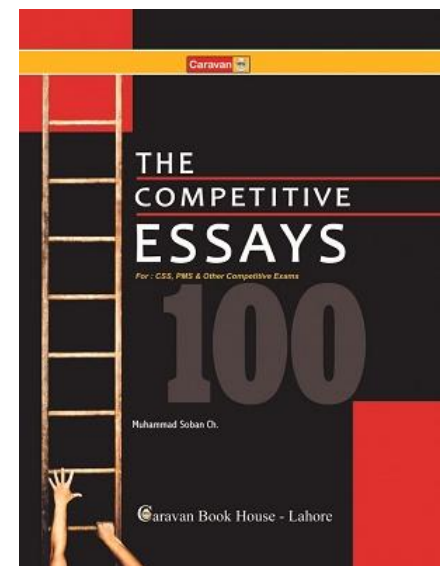
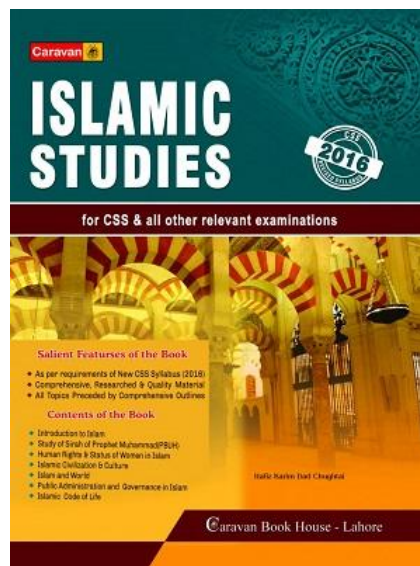
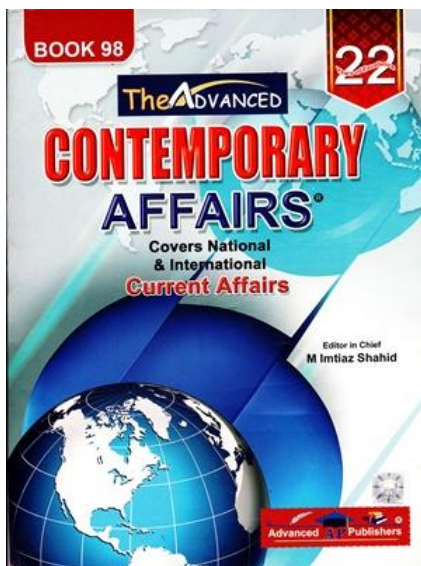
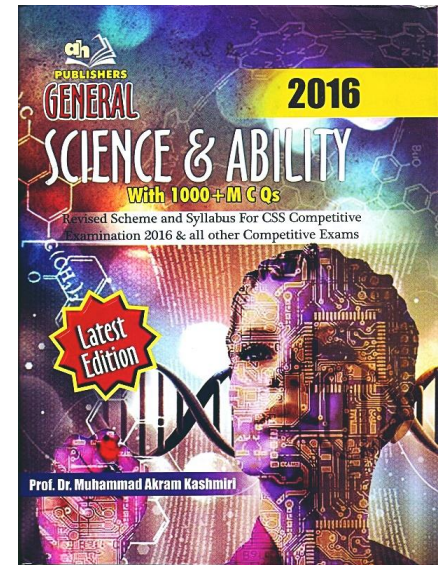
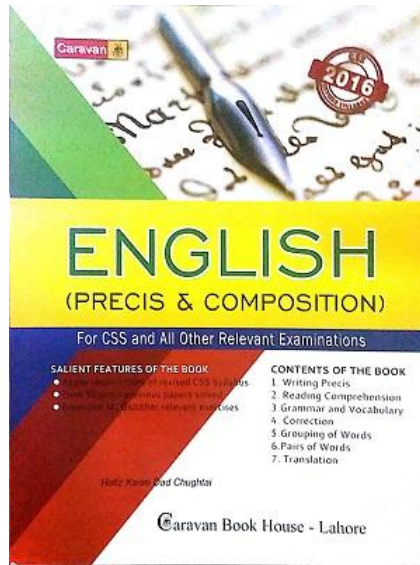
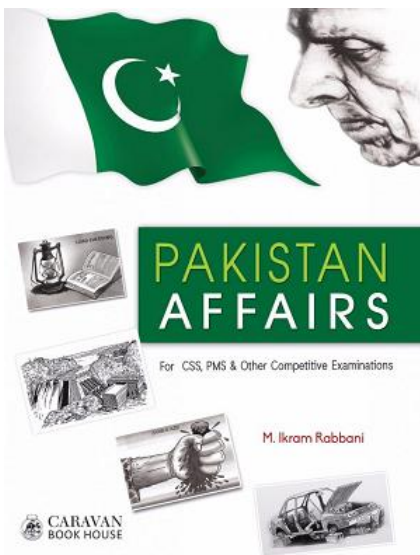
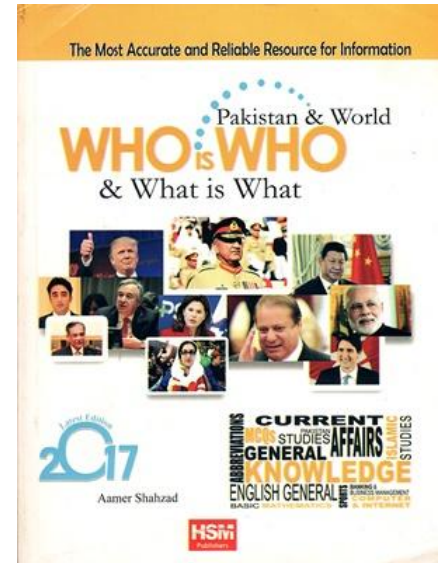
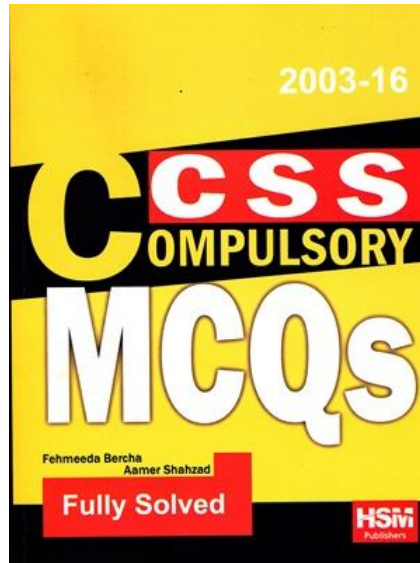
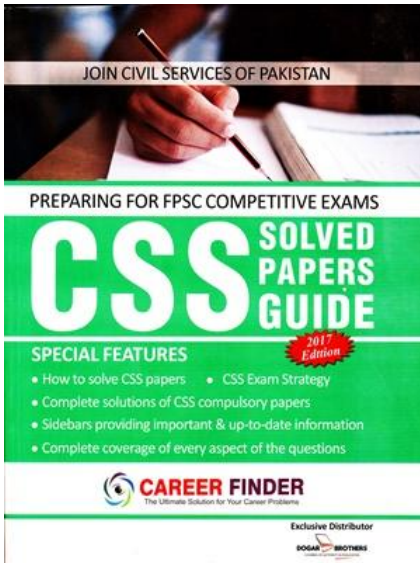


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PSL decision.....	8
Ethnic profiling.....	9
Bilawal’s puzzling stance.....	10
CPEC claims and doubts.....	11
CSS in Urdu.....	12
Award for Dr Rizvi.....	13
ECO summit.....	14
SECP vs brokers.....	15
Radio Muzaffarabad.....	16
Fata’s merger.....	17
Security in Lahore.....	18
Door-to-door enrolment.....	19
Security meeting.....	20
Family planning.....	21
A sensible step by India.....	22
Beyond PSL.....	23
Money laundering.....	24
Bill to ban dowry.....	25
Border closure.....	25
Promoting music.....	26
‘Turnaround’ in the power sector.....	27
Let-down by the PPP.....	28
Imran Khan’s new target.....	29
Women’s Day.....	30
Debating K-Electric.....	31
Lawmakers’ inertia.....	32
‘On’ money for new cars.....	33
Kabul attack.....	33
Swiss tax treaty.....	35
Sindh Food Authority.....	36
NAP implementation.....	37
Combative lawmakers.....	38
Cadaveric donations.....	39

Role of regulators..... 40

Rejecting hate 41

‘Sindh Bachao’ march 42

An opportunity for Pak-India ties..... 42

Disabled persons..... 44

Savings by lottery..... 45

The census, finally..... 45

Trade deficit grows 47

Municipal tussle 48

Money laundering concerns 48

The ‘encounter’ 49

Muzzling political speech 50

PM’s Holi message 51

Abbottabad report..... 52

Jailed abroad..... 53

Politicising promotions 54

Circular debt again..... 55

Culture of opacity..... 56

Military courts..... 57

Blocked CNICs 58

Response to stent scandal 59

The growth seesaw 60

Madressahs galore 61

PSL spot-fixing case..... 62

Pak-India dialogue..... 62

Doubting the census 63

Child abuse..... 64

Accountability and the PPP..... 65

Linguistic diversity..... 66

Syrian imbroglio 67

Afghan peace 68

Extremists in politics 69

CPEC security cost..... 70

Transition to democracy 71

University clash 72

Counterterrorism efforts 73

Indus water talks 74

Medical emergency..... 75

Attack in London 76

Stop-start Afghan peace process 77

Mid-course changes 78

Sindh’s education woes 79

The Reko Diq disaster 80

Unending ordeal 82

New lease of life for old suspicions..... 83

Monetary policy 84

Scourge of domestic abuse 85

Smuggled cars 86

Raheel Sharif’s reticence..... 86

PPP’s tired formula 88

Regulators and transparency 89

Full disclosure 90

Mosul ‘collateral damage’ 91

Populism and platitudes on display 91

Moving too fast? 92

In memory of Edhi..... 93

Power sector tussle..... 94

The boys’ clubs..... 95

Unsafe mode of travel 96

PSL decision

Lahore has suffered, Sehwan has suffered, indeed, all of Pakistan has been affected. The recent spate of terrorism in the country has triggered a wave of concern and anxiety that is genuine and legitimate; the state has stumbled in its responsibility to protect the public.

A better coordinated, more effective response by the state is needed against terrorism — and perhaps a clear signal too that state and society will not succumb to the threat of militancy. Controversial, then, as it may be, the decision to hold the final of the Pakistan Super League on March 5 is the right message at the right moment.

Certainly, the government and Pakistan Cricket Board's attempt to politically cash in on the event is not to be welcomed. The secrecy in which, and seemingly political reason for, the decision to hold the final in Lahore are a textbook case of bad decision-making. But poor optics should not detract from the underlying soundness of the reasons to hold the PSL final in Pakistan.

First, eight years since international cricket abandoned this country, there have been undeniable gains in the fight against militancy and the state's ability to secure events and arenas has improved. From Karachi to Islamabad, the country has hosted international leaders, summits and guests without incident over the past couple of years.

A cricket final would undoubtedly pose an elevated risk; but at the same time, the collective might of the state is focused on providing an incident-free sporting spectacle. Moreover, a successfully concluded PSL final could open up the space for other cultural and sporting events to resume.

That Pakistan is a nation at war should not be forgotten. Equally, the incremental gains in that war should not be ignored. It is time to repose a degree of trust in the state's organisational capacity.

Second, and equally crucially, the government must not regard the imminent return of cricket to Pakistan as its own victory. Every effort must be made to make the occasion as apolitical and all-encompassing as possible.

That PTI supremo Imran Khan has already spoken out against a final in Lahore should be regarded as his legitimate right to political dissent. The PCB/PSL management may have their political differences with Mr Khan, as may the PML-N governments in Punjab

and at the centre, but if there has ever been an occasion to transcend politics and, however briefly, come together as a nation, this is it.

Political leaders, cultural ambassadors, ordinary citizens and peaceable and prosperity-seeking segments of society should make the PSL final a festival of all that is inclusive and progressive in Pakistan. A foreign contingent of players would be an added endorsement of Pakistan striving to be normal.

There is no room for complacency, but cricket must be welcomed home again.

Ethnic profiling

HISTORY is witness to this nation's failure in maintaining harmony between the various ethnic groups that inhabit its boundaries. The cataclysmic events of 1971 and the repeated insurgencies in Balochistan offer ample evidence of that. However, the last few weeks have illustrated how our leadership remains appallingly short-sighted on this score. In the aftermath of the recent bombings in Lahore and Sehwan, the Punjab government instructed law-enforcement agencies to focus on areas with a majority of Pakhtuns and Fata-origin people while carrying out raids to apprehend terrorists and their facilitators. Despite the resulting uproar from several political parties, they pressed blithely ahead. Informal orders from administrations in some districts told citizens to keep an eye on individuals belonging to the aforementioned areas. Rawalpindi police began conducting surveillance of people from the tribal areas living within the Pindi division. Even more disturbingly, a proposal to contain them within a certain place and issue them chip-based identity cards is reportedly under consideration. Legislators in the KP Assembly on Monday gave vent to their anger. Yesterday, in the face of gathering fury, Law Minister Rana Sanaullah said that Pakhtuns "had every right to live in Punjab" and that allegations of their victimisation were attempts to "spread hatred".

The Punjab government's move to counter the criticism is belated. Its attempt to twist the facts is execrable, for it alone is responsible for sowing division and hatred based on ethnicity. A number of accounts have begun to emerge of the hardship that such profiling is causing ordinary, innocent Pakhtuns in earning their livelihoods and going about their daily lives, already full of hardship for many due to internal migration and militancy in their native areas. Moreover, the smaller provinces have long chafed against what they see as Punjab's sense of entitlement, and the 'anti-Pakhtun' rhetoric only reinforces such damaging perceptions. At the same time, reactions like that of ANP leader Asfandyar Wali Khan, who has threatened forcible eviction of Punjabis from KP, only serve to fuel the fire and are unbecoming of a leader of his stature. Pakistanis must

keep in mind that fear and mistrust of each other based on ethnicity or faith can only result in discord and conflict. After all, they are quick to condemn such profiling when they are at the receiving end in other, particularly non-Muslim, countries. What holds good in that situation also holds true in the present one.

Bilawal's puzzling stance

THE last thing that PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari would want is the reputation of a politician who first announces his intentions and then does not carry them out. Unfortunately, that is just the sort of image he is acquiring. Not too long ago, he presented a four-point agenda which was meant to lead to serious consequences for the government if it did not address the PPP's concerns. Where are those four points now? Mr Bhutto Zardari has moved on to expressing other vows — and forgetting about them too. He joined his father Asif Ali Zardari in making a 'most important' announcement on the occasion of his mother's death anniversary last December. Father and son declared themselves as would-be candidates in by-elections for two National Assembly seats in Sindh which their party members were, of course, ready to vacate for them. But if it appeared then that the election was only a matter of time, this is not how it turned out to be. Mr Bhutto Zardari now explains he is actually waiting for the court ruling on the Panama case to decide if and when he wants to become a parliamentarian.

Is he serious? Tying it up with Panama now does not make sense — the Panama case was still going on when the original announcement about the intentions of the two gentlemen to enter parliament via by-polls was made two months ago. Had they not thought of the 'linkage' then? Moreover, the PPP chairman's remarks regarding the Panama decision highlight another significant point: party leaders may be guilty of thinking too much about what others should be doing instead of doing something on their own. And to top it all, Mr Bhutto Zardari has recalled that there have never been any court verdicts against the Sharifs — this was a reference to a case in which he was not only not a complainant but from which his party chose to maintain a safe distance. All this is just a little difficult to fathom now.

CPEC claims and doubts

On Tuesday, Islamabad heard a series of perspectives on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that could be viewed as a case study on the gap between the claims and apprehensions about the project.

At the Council of Ministers' meeting before the formal opening of the 13th summit of the Economic Cooperation Organisation, foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz claimed that CPEC could "galvanise trade opportunities with the ECO region" by acting as a catalyst to boost intra-region trade through greater connectivity. He claimed that CPEC could help the entire ECO region emerge as a "formidable economic bloc" in the world as greater connectivity promoted greater trade and investment flows amongst its member countries.

This is how the tale of CPEC has grown with the telling. What was originally presented as a 'game changer' for Pakistan is now being touted as a 'game changer' for a region consisting of 10 countries.

In the official version, it appears there is no limit to how much change and benefit CPEC promises, while the costs and pitfalls in such a large undertaking are dismissed as the musings of sceptics and pessimists.

But on the same day, across town in Islamabad, two other discussions were under way on the promise and perils of CPEC that had decidedly less ambitious undertones.

In the Senate, during a hearing of the Planning and Development Committee, the chairman voiced apprehension that CPEC may or may not bring the promised benefits, saying "China is our brother, but business is business".

Amongst the many things his committee was told, by staff from the Planning Commission that is tasked with overseeing the details of all CPEC projects, was that only Chinese investors would be allowed to invest in the proposed special economic zones being created under the corridor umbrella. No assurances could be given that Pakistani labour would be recruited to work in the Chinese projects, or that the country would see a revenue windfall.

At another event, organised by a think tank, a Chinese speaker highlighted the "enormous challenges" both China and Pakistan should expect to face, while adding that China would "never like it [CPEC] to fail". Another speaker underlined the disproportionately expensive financing conditions that come with CPEC projects, adding

that these are higher than the conditions at which China has lent to other countries such as Myanmar.

This is where our CPEC conversation stands today. The official claims are almost always met with deep apprehensions about the costs of CPEC financing as well as purported benefits for Pakistan's economy.

Thus far, official quarters have not been able to put these apprehensions to rest. The government has surmounted much of the route-related controversy that erupted in the early days of the CPEC initiative, but these concerns regarding financial costs and economic benefits continue to bedevil the project.

CSS in Urdu

IN mid-February, the Lahore High Court said that from next year, the CSS examinations will be conducted in Urdu. The court had been petitioned to order that the CSS exams for this year have Urdu as their medium. It responded that there was not enough time to make the switch from the English language this year but ruled that the change must be ensured from 2018. It was explained that the shift from English to Urdu in the case of the CSS exams was consistent with a 2015 Supreme Court judgement, which called for the use of Urdu in the running of the affairs of government. That ruling had generated plenty of debate but not much of it related to the principle of employing native languages to run state affairs. Rather, the debate centred on popular perceptions of quality and the practical difficulties of replacing English with Urdu. Some pointed out that Urdu was not developed enough to serve the purpose. Whereas this argument was countered with logic that predicted the accelerated enrichment of Urdu once it was declared the sole language of official use in the country, some other very valid objections were more difficult to answer. One viewpoint maintained that large sections of the population had as their mother tongue languages other than Urdu and that they communicated best in these languages.

All of these age-old arguments and some more have resurfaced after the Lahore High Court's deadline for the change from English to Urdu. On the other hand, Urdu's high-spirited supporters cast it as an ambitious agent of effective communication. According to one dominant strain, those taking the exam for the prestigious service, barring rare exceptions, are ill equipped and overburdened by the compulsion of having to express themselves in English. They may be good enough without being proficient in English, is

the oft-quoted line with which Urdu's supporters aspire to clinch the issue, without feeling the need to provide proof of the candidates' abilities to put across their views convincingly or at least coherently in Urdu. Clearly, this is a real twist of the tongue, and an easy solution is not likely to surface soon. Perhaps the best answer that can be offered right now is the introduction of a system where each candidate is able to choose the language he or she wants to communicate in. Ideally, candidates should be free to opt for English, Urdu or any other native language they are comfortable with.

Award for Dr Rizvi

NOT many people become legends in their lifetime, particularly if they are not in the public sphere, and especially so if they do not seek the limelight. Usually, it is posterity that in retrospect recognises the enormity of their achievements. Not Dr Adib Rizvi however. Pakistanis have long held him to be one of the foremost humanitarians that this country has produced. And so it was entirely appropriate that the country's cultural community recognised him with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Lahore Literary Festival last week. This is one of a slew of awards that the good doctor has received over the many years he has been the driving force behind the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation in Karachi and head of its transplantation team. For instance, he received the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award 20 years ago; the government of Pakistan too has bestowed upon him some of its highest civilian honours including the Sitara-i-Imtiaz, the Hilal-i-Imtiaz and a Lifetime Achievement Award.

At 79 years, the celebrated urologist has spent well over four decades in the service of his fellow citizens, without consideration of caste, creed or class. That is a rarity in a country where these distinctions often determine access to facilities that are, or at least should be, welcoming of all. Dr Rizvi's belief that every person has a right to access free public healthcare with dignity informs his work and the ethos of his beloved institution, one that he began as an eight-bed facility back in 1972 in Civil Hospital. Today, SIUT, despite depending on charitable donations for a large part of its funding, has grown into a state-of-the-art centre offering free medical care to all, and involved in specialised medical education and research. Moreover, under Dr Rizvi's leadership, the institute is recognised globally as being at the forefront of ethical transplantation and promotion of deceased organ donation in Pakistan. For all that he has done with grace, humility and compassion, a grateful nation is forever indebted.

ECO summit

THE Economic Cooperation Organisation is a bloc of countries with great trading potential, but far too many hurdles in the way of realising that promise. At least on one count, a positive signal has been sent. Islamabad hosted, smoothly and without incident, a reasonably high-profile regional summit attended by heads of state and government. The security situation in the country has clearly deteriorated to the point that a military-led, national operation has been necessitated, but in the long war against terrorism, the state is demonstrating that it can establish pockets of relative normality and periods of calm. An incident-free PSL cricket final in Lahore may add to the sense that Pakistan is turning a corner and able to deliver on its regional and international hosting responsibilities.

Where a great deal of work still remains to be done is on the core agenda of the ECO itself — trade. The decision by Afghanistan to downgrade its participation and send only its ambassador to Pakistan to both the Council of Ministers meeting and the final summit is a regrettable decision. The grievances of Kabul regarding Pakistan are well known, but the ECO is a regional gathering and Pakistan was only the host. Indeed, on a day that Kabul was once again attacked by the Afghan Taliban, the absence of President Ashraf Ghani, even his foreign minister, from the Islamabad summit sent a signal that the Afghan government is in a mood to play spoiler rather than seek cooperative solutions. As with the decision by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to skip, and thereby scuttle, a Saarc summit in Islamabad last year, the elevation of bilateral complaints and disputes over and above regional forums of cooperation only serve to signal displeasure and achieve little else. Indeed, the very presence of an array of international leaders in Islamabad suggests that some neighbouring countries' hopes to isolate Pakistan will not go very far. The Afghan leadership should have been more courageous and forwarding-thinking in its approach to the ECO.

For Pakistan, too, the ECO summit was a missed opportunity. Hosting a regional trade summit for an organisation in which Afghanistan and Pakistan sit near the very centre only days after Pakistan slammed shut its borders with Afghanistan is entirely the wrong message to send. Pakistan has legitimate security concerns and Pak-Afghan border management is a vexing problem that will require years of trust-building to resolve. But the road to dispute resolution does not pass through closed borders and the targeting of refugee and migrant populations. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has been consistent in his message of regional peaceful coexistence, connectivity and trade. The ECO summit may eventually become a small step towards the realisation of an overarching regional vision. But fair and just solutions are reciprocal; meaningful action must back up the talk of trade and peace.

SECP vs brokers

THE Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan is right to start cracking down on the broker community, but it needs to go much further down that road. At least six brokers have defaulted on their clients' money so far and the fact that this has happened in the midst of a massive bull run in the stock exchange makes the matter even more difficult to digest. Clearly, these parties lacked the ethics and the intelligence to be trusted with other people's money. The problem is that the SECP chairman, in his latest news conference, mentioned that at least some of these brokers had been on his radar long before the default. At least three separate reports have been compiled, in which the names of some of these brokers are mentioned, yet action came after the damage had been done. In addition, three of the defaulting brokers had been issued repeated warnings for purchases beyond their capital capacity. The fact that the commission is acting is good news, but for the future, we are entitled to expect a faster response if brokers are found to be overleveraged, engaging in illegal badla financing, or participating in manipulative trades.

The managing director of the Pakistan Stock Exchange may be right to point out that the current bull run in the stock market is not built on illegal leverage like previous episodes, such as in 2005, and there should be no panic that it is a bubble. But the clear fact here is that the bull run is largely irrelevant to the actions being taken against errant brokers. Illegal trades of any sort need to be dealt with by a strong response, including stiff penalties and criminal charges if they end in default, whether or not the market is performing well, and the impact that such actions may have on the bull run should be disregarded. If the fundamentals are strong, the market should have no problems continuing with its climb regardless of regulatory action against certain brokers. In due course, the SECP should ramp up its activities to strengthen oversight of IPOs and build up its capacity to act before matters end in default. The disorderly winding up of defaulting positions that results after a broker is unable to meet his liabilities hurts the market far more than any regulatory actions do, and protecting the trust of the retail investor should be the first priority of the regulator.

Radio Muzaffarabad

A REPORT in this newspaper a few days ago brought to light a story that is heartbreaking for all those who believe in institutions and the power of communication. The venerable institution of Azad Kashmir Radio Muzaffarabad, once the recipient of near-unanimous praise for the quality of its programming and with a listenership that extended well beyond Azad Jammu & Kashmir, has been allowed to fall into a sad state. The station once represented the voice of Kashmiris struggling for freedom and constituted a challenge in terms of narrative dominance for radio stations in Srinagar and Jammu in India-held Kashmir. But for years now, the AKRM has been lurching from crisis to crises. Damage to infrastructure during the devastating Oct 8, 2005 earthquake meant that from 2005 to 2014, a skeleton staff ran transmissions from tents and shelters; even now, the administrative and news sections operate from similar makeshift workspaces. The transmitters — those that still work — are rundown FM machines that get very little reception. So dire are the circumstances that the daily transmission is suspended during load-shedding hours, since the generator is not powerful enough to sustain it.

If this is a giant brought down low, the overall picture is even more depressing. Radio Pakistan, once an institution of beauty for its contribution to literature, poetry and music, is in many ways in similar straits and has become more or less irrelevant. In an age of digital media, FM stations and burgeoning electronic media, it has been unable to carve out an identity or role for itself. This is a sad waste of resources, given that the station and its vast network of medium-wave transmitters have impressive — indeed enviable — reach into the hinterland beyond the urban areas. It can be employed to the people's great benefit through concentrating on public service programming, given that it is a public entity with no need to compete with more commercial operations. Revival ought to start with the AKRM, but extend to revamping Radio Pakistan as a whole.

Fata's merger

It has been the longest of roads, spanning centuries and traversing war, insurrection and an irrepressible quest for peace. With its endorsement of historic reforms for Fata, the federal cabinet has entered the pantheon of historic change-makers in this country. Fata, a territory maintained as an anachronism and denied the rights and recognition of the provinces of Pakistan, is to finally enter the political mainstream of the country. This is a moment of celebration — crucial as the implementation phase may be, an undeniable success has now been achieved. The people of Fata, the very territory of Fata, will henceforth be regarded as an integral part of Pakistan. If carried to completion, the Fata reforms will represent the very liberation of the people of the region. No more second-class or virtually unrecognised citizens of this country — it is a moment of celebration when political and legal rights are extended to a populace long regarded as little more than a buffer against external aggression.

Sensible as the five-year plan for integration with KP may be, the challenges should not be underestimated. Three immediate challenges can be identified. First, Fata is set to become the frontier of the Pakistani state — no more buffer regions or zones of strategic depth can be contemplated. The eventual extension of the provincial boundaries to the border with Afghanistan means a fundamental reimagining of strategic choices by the state will become necessary. Better to make them sooner than later. Second, the implementation of the reforms will be critical. Be it the absorption of parts of Balochistan decades ago or the reforms in Swat, the formal merger into Pakistan of territories has had an uneven record. Fata will be a challenge like no other — a region that has been ravaged by war and abuts Afghanistan where there is continuing conflict. Constitutional, legal and administrative reforms will only succeed in an environment of relative security stability. Third, the success of Fata reforms will depend on the willingness by the other federating units and the centre to make difficult choices. The 3pc share of the National Finance Commission award to Fata will be critical to the rehabilitation and transition programme in the region, but it will require compromise by other provinces and the centre. Fundamental change will not come easily to the country.

Finally, there is the issue of expectations — and effort. The endorsement of the package of reforms by the federal cabinet is a starting point, but it has only come after a long effort. From foreign adviser Sartaj Aziz to Safron secretary Arbab Shehbaz, from prominent politicians to unsung bureaucrats, there has been a significant investment of time and expertise and the belief that the constitutional structure of the state will expand to provide greater rights to all citizens of the country. Fata will only be mainstreamed if the rest of Pakistan wants it to be.

Security in Lahore

WHILE there is no denying that an incident-free PSL final in Lahore will boost the chances of a return of international cricket to the country, it is evident that security fears, after the recent attacks in the metropolis, are very much there. It is because of these concerns that Lahore is trying to make an important statement about its own security and that of Pakistan. Thousands upon thousands of law enforcers, consisting of police and the Rangers, have been mobilised for the contest to be played at the Gaddafi Stadium on Sunday evening. Lahorites are paying the price for this. Schools in the city have been closed and the authorities have asked businesses near the match venue to suspend their dealings for a few days. Roads, too, are going to be blocked. The assurances offered by the officials that there will be no 'curfew-like' situation in the Punjab capital have not convinced those who believe this to be an unnecessary show fuelled more by ego than logic. Indeed, the least the Punjab government can do is to lessen inconvenience to citizens by clearly communicating which areas will be out of bounds and what alternative routes are available, and ensure that roads to emergency venues such as hospitals remain open on the day.

Having said that, a good number of people seem to have responded to the government's calls for a positive projection of the PSL final. Long queues of enthusiasts have stood outside banks selling entry tickets for the game that promises to bring back the exciting, competitive element that once characterised top-level cricket in Pakistan. Fans obtaining the coveted, often expensive tickets, will submit themselves to elaborate security checks at the stadium, which will require them to be present at the venue many hours before the match. Their willingness to comply is a measure of their frustration at having been denied high-level cricket contests. No doubt, such security measures are crucial to protect against attacks and assuage fears. However, surely what is also clear is that it is by providing security to one's own citizens first — even when there is no gala event on the horizon — that the country will be able to woo foreigners and sell its image abroad. In the case of Pakistan, which is desperately out to prove that the negative perceptions about it are false, that golden formula has not been applied. It must be if perceptions are to change.

Door-to-door enrolment

WHEN false promises, dashed hopes and rampant corruption become the order of the day, it is difficult to summon optimism at officialdom's purported plans — especially when they fly in the face of reality. Consider Balochistan Education Minister Abdul Rahim Ziaratwal's assertion that a door-to-door campaign to enrol every child of school-going age is to soon be launched in his province. The minister announced this campaign at a news conference on Wednesday that was attended by the department's senior officials. To encourage enrolment and student retention, he stated that schoolbooks — often difficult for students' families to purchase — had been sent to institutions of learning through district education officers and local administrations. Another encouraging step, according to the minister, is that teachers appointed on a temporary basis earlier were now permanently employed. At the same time, he conceded that government servants themselves preferred to send their own children to private schools and colleges.

Education indicators in most parts of Pakistan are dire, mainly because of low budgetary allocation, poorly planned utilisation of existing budgets and lack of accountability. The outcome is but natural: according to a UN report last year, Pakistan is 50-plus years behind in its primary and 60-plus years behind in its secondary education targets. According to the report, 5.6m children all over the country are out of school. In Balochistan, despite recent increase in budgetary allocation for education, enrolment rates have not increased appreciably. Nevertheless, during Dr Abdul Malik's tenure as chief minister the provincial government to its credit did at least make an effort at accountability by initiating a verification exercise to unearth ghost schools and absentee teachers. As a result, funds to over 900 such schools were stopped and the services of 400 absentee teachers terminated. However, the perilous security situation in large parts of the province has also contributed in no small measure to Balochistan's dismal education figures. That makes the avowed 'door-to-door' exercise little more than mere rhetoric.

Security meeting

A FAMILIAR setting with a familiar message: the high-level security meeting chaired by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, a first since the military announced Operation Raddul Fasaad, has produced a joint statement of resolve by the military and civilian leaderships to eradicate all forms of militancy from the country. Specifically, the statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office claimed that the state will continue with "full might" the "offensive against terrorism and extremism in all its forms and manifestations". At least two points need to be reiterated. First, "full might", while necessary and important, must also be applied in a lawful, harmonious manner. The aggressive and expansive counterterrorism measures envisaged under Raddul Fasaad will take the military and civilian security apparatus deep into communities across this country's cities and towns. Already, there has been an outcry over alleged ethnic profiling in Punjab by the security apparatus. In fighting terrorism and militancy, the state must employ legitimate and lawful strategies. There is no question that the long war against militancy must be fought vigorously. But it must be fought in a manner that will leave state and society in a more lawful, democratic place. In defeating terrorism and militancy, the values and principles that the state is built on and the rights of law-abiding and peaceful citizens will have to be protected.

Second, where is the counter-extremism component of the plan? From the creation of Nacta to the drawing up of the National Action Plan to the language in which Operation Raddul Fasaad is being rolled out, the need to fight extremism has been recognised but virtually nothing has been done. Indeed, there appears to be little understanding of how extremism is injected into society. The official plans to combat extremism that do exist are often backward-looking and focused on madressah reforms and old modes of disseminating hate speech. But in the age of the militant Islamic State group and increasingly technologically savvy Taliban networks, the fight against extremism will have to be fought both online and in the physical world. A genuine, believable counter message will have to be crafted too. Militant propaganda is relatively clear; much less so is the message of inclusivity, tolerance and regional peace that must be spread in Pakistani communities. An unequivocal rejection of armed 'jihad' and the need for a Pakistan at peace with itself and its neighbours is the message that must be embraced by the state and spread in society.

The civilian and military leaderships are doing the right thing in attempting to show a unified front. But true civil-military cooperation will only manifest itself when the priorities and policy choices of both sides are included in the decisions taken. The civilian legislative apparatus has been pushed into overdrive to once again grant the military

extraordinarily judicial powers. Is the military willing to listen to policy inputs on Afghanistan and India?

Family planning

THERE is little argument that women and children, in this part of the world at least, are generally the first to suffer in any crisis. Take the case of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the provincial government has reportedly dropped its scheme to hire the services of religious scholars for a campaign to create awareness about the importance of birth spacing which is of benefit to mother and child health. The plan had been reasonable: a three-year effort in which the Population Welfare Department would remunerate clerics and prayer leaders in all areas of the province for advocating on the topic and including it in sermons. The campaign, which was designed to cost the department Rs100m over three years, was reflected in the Annual Development Programme 2016-17, with Rs17m for the current year. However, it has now been shelved as a result of 'financial constraints' being suffered by the provincial government.

This is a great pity, especially given that at a family planning summit in 2012 that was attended by 69 countries, Pakistan had pledged to increase the contraceptive prevalence rate to 50pc from the current 32pc. In KP alone, there is a population of 29.17m, which will double in the next 35 years at the current growth rate. Overall, while some gains have been made in slowing down the growth rate, it is still at untenable levels, leading to multiple and severe socioeconomic problems not least of which are the overstretched resources at the level of both state and family unit. Meanwhile, employing clerics to discuss the subject — which is still considered taboo by many sections of the population — would have brought the issue to the attention of men who continue to exert control over women's bodies in what remains a regrettably patriarchal society. Pakistan's truth is that decision-making on birth spacing and family planning is hardly left to the women — who often don't even have a say in the matter. There is an urgent need to engage with men, especially in areas that are deeply conservative. The efficacy of involving religious figures to emphasise that such interventions are by no means repugnant to religion was established before in the context of the resistance to polio vaccinations. In terms of birth spacing and contraceptive use, such interventions may well prove to be a turning point. The KP government needs to revisit its decision.

A sensible step by India

INDIA'S decision to attend the Indus Waters Commission meeting, scheduled to be held in this country later this month, is a wise step. The nearly six-decade-old Indus Waters Treaty has proved to be a remarkably durable document, having survived fully fledged wars, bilateral exchanges of verbal vitriol and periods of uneasy peace between Pakistan and India. While both sides — more recently the Indians — have played politics with water, with hawks in Delhi threatening to block the waters flowing into Pakistan, on the ground it has thankfully been the measured approach of the IWT that has governed the way the rivers of this region are to be shared. Though Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has threatened to unilaterally scrap the treaty, especially in light of recent tensions over India-held Kashmir, the fact that the Indians have decided to attend parleys in Pakistan related to the water accord prove that beyond the public sabre-rattling, a more sensible approach is being applied.

It would be premature to hail this move as a return to 'business as usual' in the subcontinent; it should be seen within its limited context. The atmosphere in South Asia is still very much one of suspicion and distrust, and many of the outstanding bilateral issues between Pakistan and India remain frozen. Having said that, the upcoming meeting does at least prove that even in these difficult times, Pakistan and India do recognise the need to discuss their issues in a civil, frank and practical manner. The water issue is an incredibly sensitive one, both within nations and in the bilateral context. Hence, it cannot be left to the demagogues to use as a plank to forward their antagonistic agendas. The upcoming talks must focus on protecting this country's legitimate water rights, while India's concerns must also be addressed within the framework of the IWT. The treaty is one of the few bright spots in the mostly morbid Pakistan-India relationship; it must, therefore, be built on and taken forward.

Beyond PSL

CONTROVERSY, politics and high-stakes decisions aside, the cricket final in Lahore yesterday has put a number of issues in the spotlight once again. First, the unprecedented security measures taken to protect the final and the spectators may have a great many critics, but it demonstrated an important evolution in the approach to security: civilian and military officials worked together to draw up a comprehensive plan and then implemented it in close cooperation. With the final played against the backdrop of the recently launched Operation Raddul Fasaad and the Rangers' deployment in Punjab, security cooperation between the civilian and military arms of the state is essential. If the experience in the build-up to the Lahore final can be replicated elsewhere, the fight against militancy will be advanced a great deal.

Second, the lessons learned in Lahore must be extended to other provinces and regions of the country. Clearly, some parts of the country are still insurgency-hit and terrorism threats are more pronounced in these areas. For example, Karachi has witnessed a significant operation in recent years and Balochistan needs steps towards eventual normalisation and the input of civilians in security matters. The PML-N benefits from its twin governments in Lahore and Islamabad, but the centre has a responsibility to work with all the provinces and advance their security too. If Raddul Fasaad is to deliver meaningful, lasting results, the provincial security mechanisms such as the provincial apex committees will need to be re-energised. At the very least, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif should hold a summit with the provincial chief ministers to discuss how cooperation between the centre and provinces can be deepened in the security domain.

Third, the civil and military leadership will need to address other policy areas beyond the narrow security domain. A summit held in Islamabad last week called for greater regional connectivity, while the border with Afghanistan remains closed. A cricket match in Lahore is meant to symbolise the reintegration of Pakistan with the global sporting community, but how friendly are visa policies towards foreign nationals? In truth, the image of Pakistan will improve once the underlying security and economic environment improves. True, symbolism matters and incremental steps will have to be taken, but real change will come when security goes hand in hand with humaneness and an openness to the outside world. Even if immediate steps are difficult to take, the civil and military leadership should consider opening up Pakistan to guests other than VIP foreigners.

Money laundering

THE latest International Narcotics Control Strategy Report released by the US Department of State goes much further than previous reports in pointing out the deficiencies in Pakistan's anti-money laundering and counter-financing of terrorism, or AML/CFT, environment. This might be one indication of the kind of relationship Pakistan can expect to have with the new American administration. For example, this year's report notes that "UN-designated groups continue to be able to solicit donations openly without apparent government reaction". In another place, it notes that "Pakistan does not fully implement UN sanctions obligations uniformly against all designated parties". These observations were absent in strategy reports for the previous two years, and may point towards a diminished willingness on the part of the new administration to turn a blind eye towards this problem.

Another striking deficiency pointed out in the report is the near-total failure of the law-enforcement and judicial apparatus to proceed against money laundering and terror financing, despite the fact that the system for flagging and reporting suspicious transactions has improved. In 2011, for example, 560 suspicious transaction reports were filed, and for nine months from July 2014 till March 2015 that figure rose to 1,919. This rise in the number of STRs suggests greater vigilance on the part of financial institutions and authorities, possibly as part of a tightening AML/CFT regime. But the number of prosecutions in the latter year was two, and the number of convictions zero, suggesting severe weakness on the part of law-enforcement and judicial authorities. Combating terror financing and money laundering are crucial priorities for Pakistan's security and development, and the persistent weakness in this area is puzzling. To some extent, this weakness is structural. Pakistan has one of the world's highest cash-to-bank deposit ratios in the world, meaning there is a massive informal sector where rackets thrive, and where channels for illicit financial flows are readily available. Law-enforcement and judicial authorities are new to the task of combating illicit financial flows, and it will take them time to develop the capacities required to carry out effective investigations and prosecution. But these weaknesses are not the full story. The use of illicit financial flows by powerful entities and individuals means there is ample protection available to those who operate these rackets. Ultimately, our security and development needs will require ending this relationship between power and black money altogether.

Bill to ban dowry

TRADITION is often used as a pretext to justify some regressive practices that perpetuate the low status of women in society. If the KP Assembly goes the distance, one of these customs, dowry, may soon be banned in the province. For on Wednesday, the Jamaat-i-Islami MPA Rashida Riffat tabled a bill to ban the giving or taking of dowry. Those violating the law will be punished with up to three months' imprisonment and a Rs200,000 fine. Anyone pressuring the bride's family into giving dowry will also be liable for legal action. Some of the other provisions of the law are that any gift to the bride by her parents or other family members should not exceed Rs10,000; only beverages are to be served at the nikah; expenditure on any wedding ceremony should not exceed Rs75,000; and marriage functions must wrap up by 10pm.

Weddings in South Asian cultures are often an occasion to showcase one's wealth; this spawns such an unhealthy competition at all levels of society that to host a daughter's wedding within one's means can mean a loss of 'face' for the parents. That is one reason why families see daughters as a burden, for whose marriage they will have to one day beg, borrow or steal. Meanwhile, for the families of young men, a bride can be a passport to acquiring cash and material goods. The lack of a 'sufficient' dowry can thus become a catalyst for violence against women, if not physical then at least a recurrent cause for mental torture. While there have been restrictions brought in from time to time to control unreasonable extravagance at weddings, only lip service has thus far been paid to the pernicious effects of the dowry system. However, in Pakhtun society, 'bride price' or walwar, an amount paid by the groom to the bride's family in return for her hand, is a common custom. This too, perpetuates the commodification of women by putting a 'price' on her and must be addressed.

Border closure

IT is undeniably a humanitarian crisis and an indication of a profound security challenge. The decision, therefore, to allow a temporary and partial reopening of two border crossings with Afghanistan for two days is only a small step in the right direction. Clearly, the problem of anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries along the Afghan side of the border is an urgent problem that needs sustained attention by both the Pakistani and Afghan states. Pakistan cannot simply allow itself to be attacked from across a porous border and Afghanistan cannot allow the perception that it, at the very least, turns a blind eye to the problem emanating from its soil. Yet, a border closure is a punitive measure that does not do much to address the problem. Militants, as evidenced by the

death of five soldiers in an attack in Mohmand Agency yesterday, find alternative ways to penetrate Pakistan when they cannot blend in with legal border crossers. Indeed, the near impossibility of sealing the border with Afghanistan as it exists means the burden will fall on ordinary Afghans, and Pakistanis too. As Afghan officials and media reports have indicated, trade with Afghanistan is declining overall and the recent closure has hurt seasonal Pakistani exports to Afghanistan.

Underlying the effective border closure is an important, unanswered question: what are the objectives and for how long can the closure be maintained? Set aside the bizarre disconnect between a government that is flogging its regional connectivity and trade agenda and a security establishment that is closing borders. Even from a narrow security perspective, the calculation must always be that an action should produce the desired results. Pakistan wants Afghanistan to urgently address the militant sanctuary issue and in the longer term needs cooperation from Afghanistan on border management. But does a border closure make Afghan cooperation more or less likely? Worse, doesn't it, in fact, complicate the task of interdicting and keeping out Afghan-based militants seeking to re-enter Pakistan? While business as usual is no longer an option, any approach must be rooted in a sensible strategy. Militancy may be defeated eventually, but the war must be fought in a humane, people-centric manner. A border closure amounts to punishing ordinary, law-abiding, peaceful citizens with no sense that the pressure will yield to cooperation by Kabul. Indeed, it may be deepening mutual suspicions and mistrust, making Pak-Afghan ties that much harder to navigate.

Promoting music

IT must have felt like a gamble. Given that the final day of this year's iteration of the All Pakistan Music Conference in Karachi coincided with the final of the Pakistan Super League in Lahore, there must have been considerable concern that people in this cricket-mad nation might choose sport over culture. But, in a testament to both the diversity of audiences in the country and the confidence of the organisers of the event, this proved not to be the case. The third and last day of the annual APMC event, held on the premises of the National Academy of the Performing Arts on Sunday, deserves praise on several counts — from the commendable mix of performers and musicians to the number of music lovers it drew. Now in its 14th year, the APMC-Karachi's mandate to encourage young performers was reflected in the recent set, where senior and junior artists of classical music performed together. This is how musical traditions are sustained and empowered.

Efforts to keep musical traditions alive continue; the APMC-Lahore, which for seven long years remained suspended as a result of security concerns, returned to Bagh-i-Jinnah in 2015. What is largely absent, though, is further work on this by state institutions, even those that were set up to promote culture such as the Pakistan National Council of the Arts and most of the arts councils that exist in the major cities. Apart from the efforts of hardly any state-funded organisations, what is being done overall to promote music and culture is not enough. Even PTV and Radio Pakistan, which in earlier years played a significant role in supporting classical and folk musicians, and providing opportunities to emerging talent, no longer appear that interested. This is symptomatic of what ails Pakistan in general: the good often comes through because of the effort made by individuals, but the institutions mandated with carrying out certain responsibilities are hardly concerned. Were this equation to somehow be re-engineered, the possibilities would be endless.

‘Turnaround’ in the power sector

FOR a number of years now, we have been hearing a story from the government about how it has turned the country around from the position it was in back in 2013. The economy has started to grow, we are told, and foreign investors around the world are taking note. The stock market has climbed to record highs, as have foreign exchange reserves. The currency is stable, shopping malls are full, auto sales are soaring, the import of consumer items is rising, a house-building boom is sweeping the country and the return of prosperity is visible to the naked eye. Besides the larger economy, another turnaround story has been circulating regarding the power sector. Compared to the situation in 2013, the naked eye can see that load-shedding is down and follows a schedule. Bills are not spiralling out of control, even if the consumers have yet to witness the benefits of the rapid fall in oil prices in the power bills.\

But the naked eye is often deceived. Evidence is mounting that the stories of a turnaround being told in both areas — the economy and the power sector — may not be built on durable foundations. For the power sector, the latest report by a German bank, KfW, points out that the increase in the supply of electricity since 2013 owes itself more to additional capacity than generation efficiency. In fact, some evidence suggests a decline in generation efficiency of the major public-sector power plants. The circular debt is back in the news, with the independent power producers once again taking out advertisements threatening to invoke their sovereign guarantees if the accumulated amount of Rs414bn in payments due to them is not released soon.

The visible improvement in the power sector may well owe itself to contingent factors. The price of oil has plummeted since this government assumed office, which has helped the liquidity position of the power sector. Recoveries, too, have improved. But how much of this is due to the highly controversial loss-based recovery plan implemented across the country since late 2013? New capacity is being added in large quantity and the power sector is probably seeing one of its largest spurts of investment ever, but will the power produced by the new investments be affordable, or will it lock us into a high-cost growth path once again like the IPPs of the late 1990s did? The findings of the report by KfW perhaps scratch the surface of what all needs to be known before we can buy into the claims of a turnaround in the power sector. It would, indeed, help if the government brought greater transparency to the sector's governance by regularly releasing operational and financial data so that an informed decision on the future prospects of the sector can be made.

Let-down by the PPP

THERE is only a difference of degree, not principle. With the PPP chipping in with its suggestions for the reinstatement of military courts, there is not a single mainstream political party in the country that has had the courage to condemn military courts for what they are: a profoundly anti-democratic, constitution-distorting, rights-destroying institution. While the PPP has made known its reluctance to endorse military courts and its proposals do seek to confine their jurisdiction and regulate their working, the recommendations amount to a stark climbdown for a party that for near two generations has opposed military courts and the death penalty. What makes the PPP's capitulation more striking is that as one of the final holdouts and despite its significant presence in the Senate, the PML-N government would not strictly require the PPP votes to achieve the two-thirds majority needed in the upper house of parliament. In the end, the party appears to have been unwilling to remain on the wrong side of a parliamentary consensus, even if it meant being on the right side of history. Perhaps the PPP leadership is concerned about being politically isolated at a time when the party continues to face uncertainty in Sindh because of the ongoing Karachi operation.

Whatever the case, the failure of the political leadership of the country to either resist or offer an alternative to military courts is nothing less than a challenge to the continued democratic order. A transition to democracy that is nearly a decade old and is inching towards delivering a historic success of two consecutive full-term governments ought to be strengthening democratic institutions instead of destabilising and vitiating something as foundational as the rule of law and the justice system. Unhappily, there is little indication that any political party, in government or in opposition, is concerned with

legislative reforms and strengthening of the justice system. A one-year extension of military courts, as the PPP has proposed, will carry this parliament towards the end of its term, at which point electioneering will dominate. A two-year extension to military courts, as other parties have recommended, would sail right past the election and the initial period of the next parliament, allowing other legislative priorities to encroach on criminal justice reforms. The fight against militancy will necessarily be a long one. A year or two from now, there will likely still be so-called jet-black terrorists active. How long will Pakistan distort itself to fight them?

Imran Khan's new target

PRIME MINISTER Nawaz Sharif has not quite declared himself unavailable for a match with Imran Khan for the top slot, or has he? If he has, it would be easier to understand why PTI chairman Imran Khan is depicting the rather low-profile Election Commission of Pakistan as his new opponent in chief. According to some estimates, and his own tentative itinerary, Mr Khan is on his way to yet another outing on the streets — this time pitting himself against the ECP. He wants the ECP to reinvent itself by framing new laws and to ensure its impartiality — a task, it is assumed, the commission can easily undertake in light of the advice that Mr Khan has been offering for the last few years. He revealed his latest plans just after he chose to stand against the holding of the PSL final in Lahore, an approach that many thought would cost him some vital popular points. In that context, Mr Khan may soon discover that the ECP is not the target which will quickly bring back some of the supporters that he might have lost after he failed to make the PSL sufficiently controversial for political gains. The ECP as an opponent does not generate as much excitement as does Mr Sharif. So what is stopping the PTI chief from aiming at Mr Sharif who has his own grand projects and electoral year 2018 in mind?

All signs say that Mr Khan wants to conclude this stretch as the only opposition leader worth the title. He wants to seize the momentum for the PTI in the months leading up to the general election next year. He wants the moral high ground and a cause that keeps him prominently in the news in this crucial interim, but the proposed move may just be seen by many to be lacking in imagination. Perhaps this gives the PTI chief another reason to reflect a moment longer and rephrase in clear slogans what he actually wants to achieve.

Women's Day

FOR all the machismo on display in Pakistani society, indeed because of it, it is this country's women that are its real heroes. Some of them have become synonymous with the struggle of women for their fundamental rights — Mukhtar Mai, Malala Yousafzai, etc. There are countless others in the warp and weft of life in Pakistan who stand up to prejudice, discrimination and misogyny every single day — the embodiment of that well-known rallying cry, 'The personal is political'. March 8, International Women's Day, is an apt occasion to celebrate these women, these often anonymous and courageous warriors who swim against the tide when it would be so much easier, and infinitely safer, to conform.

For most women in Pakistan, life — at least in broad strokes — is mapped out for them from the moment they are born. That is not to say that social attitudes have remained static: an increasing number of families send their daughters to school, even in more conservative areas, and support for girls' higher education is also on the rise. At the same time, antediluvian notions of 'honour' continue to prevail and suppress women. Even with an education, their career aspirations are often thwarted, and they are expected to acquiesce to the wishes of their families in most matters. Deviation from that template can result in severe consequences. Consider Hina Shahnawaz, accomplished, highly educated and the sole breadwinner in her family, who was allegedly murdered by a cousin for working outside the home. There are many like her in this country, women who are considered renegades for defying an age-old social order, simply because they earn a living by dint of their own abilities without riding on a husband's or brother's coattails. In this rigidly enforced patriarchy, to marry or to refuse a particularly persistent suitor can be perilous. Muqaddas Bibi, Zeenat Rafiq and Maria Sadaqat were among the thousand or so last year alone who paid the ultimate price for exercising their freedom of choice. There's also Badam Zari, who was the first woman candidate from Fata in the 2013 election, and fortunately lived to tell the tale. By competing for public office, she confronted the hidebound culture in the most conservative parts of Pakistan that, in connivance with local chapters of mainstream political parties, prefers its women voiceless and disenfranchised.

By their acts of defiance, these women, and others like them, are forcing an inexorable — if gradual — change in society. They have to some extent in recent years been supported by the legislature that has enacted a number of pro-women laws to address issues such as sexual harassment, honour killing, forced marriage and domestic violence. Regressive elements, both in the assemblies and outside, have pushed back and constantly sought to dilute these gains. It is not a battle that will be won easily, but fight it we must.

Debating K-Electric

THE Sindh Assembly has just lashed out at K-Electric while discussing a serious resolution that calls on the power utility to accelerate the installation of time-of-use meters in Karachi. The resolution makes a good point, but the discussion surrounding it careened into absurd territory more than once. Calling on the regulator to be more proactive in monitoring overbilling complaints is a valid concern for a legislator. But calling on the federal government to nationalise the utility is not. Whatever complaints that people may have against K-Electric, it must be kept in mind that the power utility is in far better shape today than it was prior to 2004 when it was a state-owned entity.

The point that the resolution, introduced by Khurram Sherzaman of the PTI, makes on time-of-use meters should be the focus here, and the Sindh government can play a helpful role in the matter. In June 2016, the government notified what it calls a 'time-of-use tariff', meaning power tariffs would change between peak and off-peak hours for all categories of consumers. Other distribution companies have had time-of-use tariffs for many years now. But for it to work, distribution companies have to issue time-of-use meters to all consumers who ask for them, so that their consumption can be recorded along with the time when the units were used, and the bill calculated accordingly. Some consumers who managed to obtain this facility have said that their bills went down by almost one-third as a result.

Distribution companies, including K-Electric, have been slow to issue these meters though, and many of those asking for them now report that they end up being given the bureaucratic runaround. This is part of a widespread failure to advance new billing methodologies that would benefit the consumers and rationalise the allocation of power between shifting bases of demand. Clearly, pressure needs to be exerted on the distribution companies to move forward on the matter. The distribution companies have a built-in incentive to resist moves such as time-of-use metering and net metering for rooftop solar installations since these steps could reduce their revenues. But far more than their revenues is at play here. Time-of-use metering is essential to more effectively allocate power where and when it is needed, and net metering is important to kick-start the adoption of home-based solar generation. The Sindh government now needs to build on the resolution and find a way to pressure the federal government on this; at the same time, it must keep the issue alive in the public discourse. Using the moment to simply lash out at the power utility does little other than adding more noise to the system and drowning out the very legitimate grievances that were brought to the floor of the Sindh Assembly.

Lawmakers' inertia

IN the political lull since the end of the Panama Papers hearings in the Supreme Court, the focus is shifting to where it rightly belongs: parliament and its legislative and executive oversight responsibilities. Yet, in the misguided quest to reinstate military courts and the seemingly endless series of committee meetings on electoral reforms, there is a sense that even when attention does turn to parliament, however briefly, it is mainly for the wrong reasons or to give the impression of getting core parliamentary work done without actually achieving much. Consider that for all the national attention the Panama hearings have garnered, there has been virtually no movement in parliament to overhaul the country's anti-corruption systems. Indeed, the more severe the political climate, the more it becomes an excuse to delay legislative reforms. Both government and opposition seem content to trade accusations rather than move towards strengthening institutions. Contrast the urgent and relentless energy the entire political class has expended on reviving the military's powers to try civilian terrorism suspects versus virtually any other legislative agenda. It appears likely that military courts may be revived before parliament can get around to amending the Constitution for the much-heralded and long-sought Fata reforms.

Patchy as the legislative record may be of this parliament, the worse failure is in oversight of the executive. The parliamentary committees are virtually moribund, the very forums in which specific ministries and departments are supposed to be held to account. Ministers continue to routinely skip parliamentary sessions, while the prime minister makes waves if he ever does decide to make an appearance. That renders most parliamentary sessions dreary events where the government struggles to keep quorum and issues of substance are rarely discussed. Perhaps most damningly, the Public Accounts Committee has been reduced to virtual irrelevance, the tall claims of its members notwithstanding. While a handful of parliamentarians, particularly senators, do try and infuse the work of parliament with some energy and purpose, the overall picture is an undeniably dismal one. The path towards relevance, however, is a relatively clear one. The recent spurt of interest in legislative matters should be sustained, and the imminent Supreme Court judgement on the Panama Papers matter should quickly lead to measures inside parliament that both improve the transparency of the political process and impose punishments on violators of the law. In truth, there is no substitute for the hard, patient work of effective parliaments.

‘On’ money for new cars

DESPITE numerous attempts to eliminate the menace of ‘on’ money, those buying a new car still have to wait for many months for delivery or pay an ad hoc fee to get spot delivery. In some cases, the waiting time can extend up to six months, and the ‘on’ money demanded can be as high as Rs130,000. For an industry that enjoys extensive protections, this menace of late delivery is the industry’s failure to ensure the consumer’s interest. To a certain extent, the problem grows out of a massive cash economy where speculators buy up new cars only to sell against ‘on’ money, turning new cars into a speculative enterprise. The government has tried to stamp out this practice by introducing a tax on the transfer of vehicle registration, requiring the ID of all buyers to be recorded, and punishing non-tax filers with an additional withholding tax. These measures would certainly hit the speculators, but clearly they have proven to be insufficient since the practice continues in full swing. One consequence of these steps may have been to raise the amount demanded as ‘on’ money, thereby passing the cost of the disincentives onto the genuine buyer.

Auto assemblers need to do more to ensure timely delivery. That would be the best way to eliminate the practice of amassing new cars by holders of large cash hoards. Part of this could be through ramping up production, but perhaps tighter policing of their own dealerships, which are often engaged in the practice of buying up large numbers of new cars through benami accounts, will be necessary. It is up to them to work together and develop a tighter coordinated plan to discourage the practice, while ensuring the availability of vehicles to meet demand. The protections that they enjoy come with the understanding that the consumers’ interest is being curtailed to a point in order to aid domestic investment. But compromising on the consumers’ interest must have its limits too.

Kabul attack

A GROTESQUE attack on a military hospital in the centre of Kabul is a sickening reminder of what is at stake as Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to fight militancy. The attack claimed by the militant Islamic State group demonstrated a sophisticated ability to penetrate weaknesses in Kabul’s security and then mercilessly inflict casualties. It is impossible to categorise one kind of militant violence as worse than another, but the brutality that IS appears to revel in is particularly unsettling. In a region long blighted by war and violence, IS appears to not just be reviving the extreme cruelty of some jihadist

groups in decades, but deliberately seeking to exceed in wickedness and monstrosity the crimes of the past. From Sehwan to Kabul, a new menace stalks the region and it will test the resolve of both states and societies to defeat it. The long war against militancy has taken a grim new twist.

The Pakistani Foreign Office has rightly condemned the Kabul attack and emphasised that militancy is a common threat to the region. The need, however, is for Pakistan and Afghanistan to urgently overcome the most recent tensions plaguing the bilateral relationship and to take concrete actions to fight the rising common threat of IS while addressing the separate concerns that the two countries have about cross-border militancy. As the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Gen John Nicholson, recently stated in a testimony to the US Senate, IS in the region is an evolution of TTP militants from Orakzai Agency who relocated to eastern Afghanistan under pressure from anti-militancy operations in Fata. By now, IS has likely drawn further support inside Afghanistan, while several attacks in Pakistan have demonstrated that sectarian militant groups are aligning themselves with IS. For all their mutual suspicions, the Afghan and Pakistani intelligence apparatuses should be able to coordinate in the clear case where IS threatens both countries.

Undeniably, meaningful and long-term cooperation will depend on both states recognising the specific, national concerns that the other has. Afghanistan cannot ignore the issue of anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries on its soil. The perception that the Afghan government may be tolerating or turning a blind eye to such sanctuaries in a bid to gain leverage over Pakistan is only likely to achieve the reverse; the Pakistani state is unlikely to succumb to what it perceives as blackmail by the Afghan state. On Pakistan's part, however, the single biggest gesture that could have a positive impact on the bilateral relationship is if the state here used its influence over the Afghan Taliban to nudge them into negotiations with the Afghan government. Recent reports that the Taliban are signalling a willingness to engage in dialogue and that China may be stepping up its regional diplomacy are encouraging. What is needed is an unequivocal and public commitment by Pakistan to restart an intra-Afghan dialogue process.

Swiss tax treaty

IT has been a long road but finally the end is in sight. The Swiss authorities are now ready to sign a convention with Pakistan that will facilitate the sharing of information to prevent tax avoidance and evasion. The convention goes a step further than many other bilateral treaties that Pakistan has with other countries in that compliance is not voluntary, except in cases where the authorities have reason to believe that the information being sought is for purposes other than pursuing tax evasion, such as political victimisation. The convention, once activated, will significantly enhance the powers of the FBR to locate details of tax-evaded wealth stashed away in Swiss accounts.

But here the good news ends. A number of important caveats now hang over the moment. One is that there is no shortage of tax havens in today's world, and people can find other places to safely stash their black money. It is not clear if the convention grants access to past information on accounts that have been closed. If so, it can continue to be helpful even after the party in question decides to relocate the money to some other jurisdiction. But the biggest caveat is that of political will. Pakistan has a poor track record of apprehending people for tax evasion, even in cases where there is a treaty in place for exchange of information for tax purposes. Part of the reason owes itself to the manner in which such powers are sometimes used, either for political victimisation which makes the authorities receiving the request wary of honouring it, and part of it because the tax authorities here can use them for fishing expeditions by submitting broad-based and open-ended requests for vast troves of information. For the treaty to be effective, the authorities will have to demonstrate seriousness of purpose when submitting requests, and often will have to muster the political will to go after those parties that enjoy high-level support. This is not a toothless convention that is about to be signed, but the teeth will only be effective when they are used properly. Tax evasion and avoidance have been perennial issues in our economy, dominated as it is by black money and illicit flows. The signing of the tax convention is a hopeful step, but how far it helps to actually apprehend holders of black money still remains questionable.

Sindh Food Authority

EATING out can indeed be considered a national pastime, with eateries of all varieties packed with gastronomes across Pakistan. However, there are very real concerns about the quality of foodstuffs served in even some of the supposedly big-name restaurants. Sometime ago, a former head of the Punjab Food Authority oversaw a blitzkrieg campaign in that province to bring adulterators and other violators of food safety laws to book. While there was some criticism of the overzealousness of that campaign, there is no denying the fact that it had eateries on their toes; many sought to clean up their act and ensure the food and drink they were serving was of acceptable quality. Now, Sindh also seems to have woken up to the need for a proactive food authority. During Wednesday's Sindh Assembly session, the house passed the Sindh Food Authority Bill, 2016. Once this bill receives the governor's assent, it will pave the way for the creation of the Sindh Food Authority. Details of the law state that bureaucrats, lawmakers, food technologists and members from the food industry will be part of the authority.

It is welcome that lawmakers, technocrats and people from the food industry itself will have representation in the new body to ensure that there is no misuse of power. The new authority in Sindh must keep two goals in mind: firstly, it must concentrate on enforcing the law across the province, so that only quality food and drink are served in restaurants and eateries in Sindh. The enforcement regime should cover the big names as well as more humble establishments where the common man eats. Secondly, the process of inspection of food establishments must be transparent and unbiased, so that there are no accusations of harassment. Adulteration of food and serving edibles of questionable quality are major problems in our society. It is hoped that the establishment of this authority will help keep a check on these harmful practices that take a huge toll on human health.

NAP implementation

Once again the military leadership has called for a quickening of the pace of implementation of the National Action Plan, but will the demand, even if the sentiment is shared by the civilian leadership, finally lead to the desired results?

The problems are several and exist on both sides of the civil-military divide. Consider the public demand by the military, a week after a closed-door, high-level summit with the civilian leadership presided over by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

While that meeting resulted in a bland statement by the Prime Minister's Office claiming that the fight against militancy and extremism would be pursued aggressively, the ISPR press release after the corps' commanders' conference on Thursday made clear that one side believes it is doing more than the other.

The military view is not new, nor entirely inaccurate, but it does raise the question whether such public interventions, interpreted by many as a rebuke, are efficacious. If the war against militancy is to be waged together, as it must, by all elements of the state, there must be an emphasis on trust-building and cooperation.

There is also the problem of specifying and narrowing the actions envisaged under NAP. Instead of championing specific actions, the tendency is to broaden them when they face predictable resistance from quarters opposed to the full implementation of NAP.

The demand by the military for the government to pursue "madressah/education" reforms is a case in point. Overall curricula reform, a matter largely in the domain of the provinces, is important, but the public schooling system is not generally considered an incubator for extremists and militants. The problem is more prevalent in the madressah system and some madressah networks in particular. Tackling extremism while wary of being attacked by the very elements propagating it is a non-starter.

Finally, there is the issue of whether the military leadership inadvertently gives the political leadership further reason for inaction.

The revival of military courts, clearly at the urging of the military leadership, will once again postpone the regular criminal justice reforms that are so desperately needed. Admittedly, the political leadership had demonstrated no keenness on criminal justice reforms, but the dismantling of military courts after the 21st Amendment could

eventually have created the kind of pressure necessary for a strengthening of the regular anti-terrorism judicial system.

Instead, the political class is once again against being shepherded towards populist measures that will surely erode belief in the supremacy and irreversibility of the democratic process itself.

To be sure, the civilian leadership suffers from indecision and uncertainty of its own making. Few statements by the senior civilian leadership at the centre or in the provinces suggest a real willingness to take ownership of the fight against militancy. But there ought to be no alternative to slowly but progressively helping the civilians take charge.

Combative lawmakers

IT is the people's house and home to the elected representatives from where the people's business is meant to be conducted. But two backbenchers of the PML-N and the PTI contrived to turn the premises of parliament into a gaudy circus, with attempted physical violence and misogynistic comments thrown into the mix. Belatedly, senior party leaders on both sides tried to clean up the shambolic mess created by their junior colleagues, though not without the usual equivocations and attacks on the politics and alleged uncouthness of the other side. At least two points need to be reiterated. First, sexist behaviour by parliamentarians against fellow parliamentarians and families of male colleagues needs to be pushed back against urgently and emphatically. Most parties have examples in their ranks of legislators and political leaders who have indulged in unacceptable behaviour against women, though some appear to have a worse record than others. Whatever the case, an overall gender sensitisation and public decorum course appears to be in order for all parliamentarians and all assemblies. Whether it is new rules or new sanctions that are eventually introduced, the norms of parliament and provincial assemblies need to be re-established. Parliament and the assemblies are also the workplaces of women — the environment for all persons must be respectful at all times.

Second, the PTI and PML-N need to develop a code of conduct for their party members. The truth is that, regardless of which side starts the quarrel, both are guilty of attacking each other in unrestrained ways that undermine democracy. To be sure, a strong democracy needs robust competition and a fierce contest of ideas that give the public a genuine choice of policies. The PML-N and PTI are also legitimate political contenders

for power with wide public support. But there is a sense that the two parties are locked in a downward spiral that threatens to drag the country into the politics of the 1990s, when internecine and unending political warfare led to a revolving door of power and ultimately the overthrow of the democratic system itself. While the imminent Supreme Court judgement in the Panama Papers matter may have heightened the rivalry between the PML-N and PTI at the moment, it is also apparent the political landscape will time and again produce new issues to contest. A collapse into disorder must be averted at all costs by the senior leadership of the two parties.

Cadaveric donations

AS World Kidney Day passed on Thursday, it is sobering to reflect on Pakistan's situation. According to Dr Waqar Ahmed, head of the nephrology department at Shaikh Zayed Hospital in Lahore, an initial estimate has shown that around 20,000 new patients of end-stage renal disease emerge every year. This is quite apart from the kidney disease or malfunction sufferers, thought to number some 20 million, who have not yet reached this final stage of chronic kidney disease. At the end of this painful path lies a stark choice: regular dialysis, which can cost up to Rs40,000 a month, or kidney transplant — a hope for which most renal patients in Pakistan wait in vain.

The most frustrating part of this picture is that the framework within which organs can legally be donated and transplanted already exists, and has done so for years. The Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act was passed in 2010. The ethical and religious implications of the procedure have already been well discussed, with consensus being reached across the board that, far from being problematic, the donation of an organ is an act of nobility. The misery of tens of thousands of patients in need of donated organs, be it a kidney or an eye, could easily be alleviated were the practice of cadaveric donations to become prevalent. The fact that it has not points to deep-rooted prejudices in the societal mindset and, indeed, outright misinformation. There is a lack of understanding about brain death, for instance. Similarly, there is the erroneous perception that the removal of organs disfigures the body. Some 50,000 lives could be saved annually were cadaveric donations to become common. Urgently needed, then, is a campaign to alter mindsets, led from the top by persons of influence such as clerics, politicians and stars of the sports and entertainment world. An example was set by the then president, Asif Ali Zardari, who became a donor when the transplantation law went into effect. More high-profile figures need to step forward.

Role of regulators

FOR far too long now, Pakistan's economy has operated in an environment in which there is very weak enforcement of the rules, allowing large vested interests to have virtually unimpeded sway in crucial decisions that can have far-reaching consequences for the economy, and the larger public interest. As an example, unscrupulous property developers have been able to announce housing colonies on land they don't own, sell files for plots that will never likely materialise, and dupe unsuspecting investors in a large number of cases. A few independent power producers were caught billing the government for dubiously calculated capacity charges, but how many others were never caught is not known. The stock market saw a historic crash in 2008 because of illegal modes of leverage. The oil and gas sector has seen unscrupulous practices in the matter of LPG pricing as well as dealers margins in CNG. The banking sector is one area where the regulator's hand has been comparatively stronger, though even here much room for improvement remains. There are innumerable examples where, due to their political clout and relative impunity against regulatory action, large capitalist interests have routinely been able to skirt or defy the regulatory framework within which they are supposed to operate.

Something in this environment appears to be changing today, although how far this movement will go remains to be seen. In the past few days, we have seen Ogra standing up to the LPG distributor lobby, the SECP standing up to the brokers, and Nepra standing up to IPPs and government dictation. Granted, these look like baby steps compared to the enormity of the task before them, but the newfound willingness on the part of these regulators to assert their prerogative is something new after years of acquiescence. Hopefully this willingness will be able to grow with time, and remain wedded to advancing the public interest rather than getting caught up in the stormy winds of our political culture.

If this assertiveness is to continue, and eventually rise above the massive vested interests it is supposed to regulate, it will need to venture beyond the confines of the regulator's own powers. In the case of the SECP, for example, beyond asserting its prerogative over the community of brokers and registered corporate entities, it needs to straighten out the community of auditors and credit rating agencies as well since their work is crucial to the discharge of regulatory obligations. Likewise, in sectors like oil and gas and power, the regulators' efforts need to be informed by reliable financial statements amongst much else. It might sound like a tall order, but if the regulators can work together to fix the architecture of the business environment they are supposed to monitor, it can go a long way towards unlocking the potential of Pakistan's economy.

Rejecting hate

DAYS after the military leadership publicly urged the government to accelerate the implementation of the National Action Plan, and more than a week since the combined military and civilian leadership pledged to take up the fight against extremism, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has made a frank and timely appeal to religious scholars and leaders. In a speech in Jamia Naeemia in Lahore, Mr Sharif called on religious leaders to reject preaching hate and sowing divisions among Pakistanis and to instead promote tolerance and inclusivity. The prime minister is right and he must carry his message, personally and through his government, to all corners of the land. A frank assessment of what ails the religious right and its powerful networks across the country is the right starting point and is made all the more effective when it is done directly, without proxies and in simple but powerful language. Indeed, Mr Sharif should encourage other mainstream political leaders to carry the same message across the provinces and territories of Pakistan. If the long war against militancy and extremism is to be won, the mainstream political forces in the country must patiently though determinedly confront the forces of darkness in the country.

Fighting extremism, promoting the message of democracy, tolerance and inclusivity, and healing the wounds that have cut so deep in recent decades will necessarily have to go beyond speeches. While Mr Sharif and all likeminded political leaders who want to embrace the same social message should be applauded and encouraged, the difficulties of the fight ahead should not be ignored. With the PML-N, there is also a concern that Mr Sharif uses such speeches to either soften the party's image or counter some unpalatable aspects of its politics as practised by other N-League leaders — there being no evidence yet that the party intends to translate Mr Sharif's occasional words into a viable policy, legislative or governance agenda. Consider that for all of Mr Sharif's welcome words yesterday, there was no road map laid out for how the government intends to promote religious tolerance or what steps it is willing to take against religious elements peddling extremism. What the government either fails to understand or refuses to acknowledge is that extremism is not a static force; it is spreading and, in some cases, accelerating. The longer the government fails to draw up and implement a viable plan to combat extremism, the harder that eventual and necessary fight will be.

‘Sindh Bachao’ march

RATHER than continue to be lost in the vast stretches of Thar, a cry for the most basic right, the right to be heard, had to make its way to Karachi. The ‘Sindh Bachao’ ‘long march’ set off from Islamkot on Feb 7 and arrived in the provincial capital on Tuesday night; the participants took to the streets the next day to air their grievances against what they claimed were anti-Sindh projects, particularly the construction of the Gorano reservoir in Tharparkar. Their protest centres around fears that the reservoir, besides displacing some 15,000 residents of 12 villages in the area, portends an environmental disaster for the water courses that sustain their livelihoods, which are based on farming and rearing livestock. The protests have been ongoing for the last few months although that would be news to most people in the country.

It is a measure of officialdom’s callous indifference to citizens’ problems that people have to take such steps to make their voices heard. The more marginalised a populace and the more distant from the main power centres, the more easily their rights can be trampled without a second thought. Granted, there are sometimes groups that seek to politicise every issue for their own ends and create unnecessary roadblocks. However, those who use ‘development’ as a mantra for riding roughshod over local concerns are far more powerful and backed by interest groups that have shown no inclination to address their problems of poverty, food insecurity, non-existing health facilities, etc. Sadly, residents of interior Sindh, even those living in goths around the provincial capital of Karachi, have little reason to trust ‘development’ projects. The authorities, instead of protecting their rights to secure housing and livelihood, either collude with the developers or turn a blind eye to their plight. The narrative of the ‘common man’ finds no place in the corridors of power. Notwithstanding the claims of those justifying the construction of the Gorano reservoir, the government must address the apprehensions of the protesters.

An opportunity for Pak-India ties

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led the BJP to an unexpected sweep of state elections in Uttar Pradesh, a vast, bellwether electoral battleground.

Having defeated regional rivals and now set up the party for consolidation in the upper house of the Indian parliament, Mr Modi has reaffirmed his general election victory of 2014 and established the BJP as India’s pre-eminent political party. What does this mean for Pakistan?

First, Mr Modi and his ultranationalist party resorted to familiar Pakistan-bashing in the run-up to the election. That must stop. Time and again, when faced with tough electoral battles, Mr Modi and his allies have sought an edge by deploying harsh rhetoric against Pakistan.

In the UP campaign, Mr Modi went so far as to suggest that Pakistan was responsible for a deadly train crash in the state last November that killed 148 people. It may just be a domestic campaign tactic, but it causes ripples across the border and further complicates the bilateral relationship.

Second, with a resounding electoral victory, Mr Modi now has an opportunity to pivot and put behind him the recent anti-Pakistan acrimony. Indeed, the leaderships in both India and Pakistan have an opportunity in the months ahead that may not appear again for several years.

In Pakistan, the civilian and military leadership has renewed their commitment to combating terrorism and extremism in all their manifestations, and the extension of Operation Raddul Fasaad to Punjab takes the country one step closer to fulfilling that pledge. Moreover, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his government have consistently offered talks without preconditions to India. Most recently, during his visit to Turkey last month, Mr Sharif once again emphasised that Pakistan wants good neighbourly relations with India.

Last year, bookended by the Pathankot and Uri attacks, Mr Modi turned his back on his own recognition that dialogue with Pakistan is the only way ahead. It is time Mr Modi and his government returned to the path of dialogue that had so publicly been embraced in late 2015.

Finally, there is an age-old reality that both countries must confront: political will is needed if a meaningful breakthrough is to be achieved. Neither side has demonstrated the necessary will.

When Mr Modi re-engaged Pakistan, the possibility of spoilers attempting to prevent or disrupt bilateral dialogue was real. But political will crumpled in India after the Pathankot attack. And while Mr Sharif has manoeuvred a crackdown against the LeT/JuD leadership, he has been unable to deliver any meaningful progress on the Mumbai attacks-related trials or the Pathankot investigation.

Pakistan and India have a shared past and a common destiny. But to realise that destiny, the leaderships in both countries will need to demonstrate sustained statesmanship.

Disabled persons

It is unfortunate that so far, instead of working towards inclusivity in all areas of life, our approach as a nation has been to spurn those seen as different. Take the case of people with disabilities. There is much prejudice against them and many barriers to their advancement. Few people are able to go beyond the obvious and recognise the potential within. Given this context, it was a relief to note that on Friday, two different sources sent out a strong message that discriminatory practices against persons with disabilities was not only against their fundamental rights and morally repugnant, but that this segment of the population was capable of making positive contributions to society and earning a good name for the country. On Friday, the Lahore High Court directed the federal government to frame new rules before the CSS exams are held so that persons with disabilities could be ensured the same opportunities as the other candidates. The case concerned two men who secured high positions in the 2014 CSS exams. This gave them the right to choose their area of service. Both chose the Foreign Office, but were allotted posts in the Information Group because they are blind. Issuing the detailed judgement, Chief Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah reminded the government that Pakistan had ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2011, adding that “the state and its institutions are under a constitutional obligation to go the extra mile” to facilitate persons with disabilities.

Meanwhile, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif launched the ‘No Athlete Left Behind’ initiative to increase disabled persons’ access to sporting facilities and events. This is being done in collaboration with Special Olympics Pakistan. Mr Sharif also hosted three differently abled athletes who will be representing Pakistan at the Special Olympics World Winter Games 2017 in Austria. These are encouraging outcomes, yet much more needs to be done to ensure that people with disabilities are not denied their rights. Consider, for example, that overwhelmingly, places of work do not have wheelchair access — which can become the very reason the disabled are not considered for employment. The state could lead the way in ensuring that all public buildings and installations can be accessed by persons with disabilities, and making it mandatory for privately owned spaces to follow suit. Pakistan has only laurels to gain by seriously taking up the cause of disabled citizens.

Savings by lottery

THE new premium prize bonds are a creative idea, and the fact that they will be registered means they will be less likely to be used for money laundering and cash hoarding. As such, they could be an interesting experiment. If interest in the prize bonds is low, we will be able to conclude that much of it comes from the holders of black money. But if demand for the new bonds is high, it will be grounds to perhaps phase out the unregistered bonds altogether and replace them with the premium bonds so as to close off one more avenue for the whitening of black money. The bonds will be useful towards this end, but if the government wants us to understand that these are instruments for documenting the economy, or getting the savings rate up, it should be prepared for some scepticism.

Getting the savings rate up to 30pc is a laudable aim, but it will take more than a glorified lottery scheme to realise this goal. As it stands, the bonds seek to get people's attention by offering a 'profit', which we are supposed to believe is not the same as 'interest', as well as the chance of winning Rs80m as the first prize. But their requirement is that the 'profit' as well as the prize money will be paid into a bank account. It is not clear whether or not they will be transferable. If yes, then their documentation impact is likely to be limited, and if not then interest in the bond could be low. In any case, they will certainly play some role in mobilising white money towards savings, but the big challenge of raising the savings rate can only be met by offering large avenues, such as bank deposits or national savings schemes. At its best, the premium bond will be little more than a gimmick towards such a lofty goal, the pursuit of which will require far greater effort.

The census, finally

The start of a new census exercise is a welcome development, and now more than ever before the authorities must do everything to ensure that the results are credible and not marred by allegations of being manipulated.

Critically, the requirement to present a CNIC needs to be reconsidered because it will result in a large number of people either not being counted at all, or being counted as foreigners. Trying to count foreigners is itself a tricky task if it relies on self-designation as the criterion.

Even though internal migration is not being targeted for data collection, an assessment of migration patterns will still be possible using the reported figures for mother tongues. In previous census exercises in the country, this had been a particularly strong sticking point since both Sindh and Punjab have difficulty in acknowledging the number of migrants settled in their respective areas of jurisdiction.

This time it is crucial that the census reflect a realistic picture of how the demographic balance has changed in each province since the last count was held in 1998.

The data gathered by the enumerators will be used for a wide variety of purposes that go far beyond seat shares in parliament and the NFC award. This is our chance to get a clearer picture of the demographic balance, as well as of urbanisation trends in the country. The data can be used by law enforcement as well as local governments — for example when deciding shares in district finance commission awards.

For so many reasons that have little to do with politics, the quality of the data must stand above reproach and suspicion, and with the start of the exercise, the burden of ensuring that rests more than ever on the shoulders of those tasked with overseeing the operation.

Transparency is the biggest support they will have in ensuring a credible outcome. In the past, suspicions have been raised as a result of the quality of analyses done on the census information, so it would be an idea for the authorities to release the data quickly and make it accessible to multiple research communities simultaneously.

The speed of the turnaround will go a long way towards dispelling any suspicions of possible tinkering. Hopefully, the process to collate the data into a spreadsheet format is well thought through since simply making the entries in a useful format will be an enormously time-consuming exercise and should not be required to be performed more than once.

The results are eagerly awaited because this is the first time we will be getting data on a number of fronts, such as the transgender community or the number of households with a functioning toilet.

Part of the burden of ensuring credibility also rests with provincial governments now that they have a voice at the table, and spurious allegations of wrongdoing must be avoided.

Trade deficit grows

THE yawning deficits in the external account are now threatening to eat up the government's economic track record altogether. The latest data reveals that the trade deficit for the first eight months of the fiscal year has jumped by 34pc compared to the same period last year, showing no let up in the deterioration of the economy's external sector. Not only that, there is an acceleration since last month, when the gap jumped by 29pc. Coupled with the continuing deterioration in remittances, the signs are increasingly pointing towards growing foreign borrowing as the only way to keep the reserves under control. There may be an argument to make here that the deterioration is temporary due to the expected uptick in exports when investments related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor begin commercial operations, but that point of view is beginning to sound less and less convincing. Machinery for CPEC does appear to account for the bulk of the increase in imports, but the declines on the export front are equally stark. The recent moves by the State Bank to impose 100pc cash margin on all non-oil imports inspires little confidence in the government's ability to control the growing deficit, since it suggests that no policy options are available with the government in Islamabad and it has to rely on regulatory injunctions of this sort from Karachi in order to tackle the challenge.

What is more worrying is that this is happening when large outflows connected with CPEC and other debt-service obligations are set to begin. For a while, the government was able to buy time by arguing that the difficulties on the trade front were global in nature and that there was little that could be done to stem the tide. For that period at least, remittances were able to plug the gap. But now, remittances have also begun to reduce, and other countries such as India and Bangladesh have reversed their deteriorating export performance, meaning the global nature of the problem has been surmounted by them. What are the ideas in Islamabad for arresting this growing deficit? Are they even taking it seriously as a policy challenge? Thus far we have heard nothing to convince us of that. It is imperative that the government start showing more seriousness by first acknowledging this problem, and then developing a policy path forward. The external sector is the economy's Achilles heel that has been allowed to fester.

Municipal tussle

OVER the past few days, what had been for long a simmering though low-key feud between the PPP-led Sindh government and the MQM-piloted municipal administration of Karachi has turned into an ugly, very public exchange, with both parties throwing muck at each other. On Sunday, PPP Senator Saeed Ghani unleashed a barrage of criticism targeted at the MQM, accusing it of land grabbing and hiring ghost employees. The same day, the Muttahida's provincial lawmaker Faisal Sabzwari replied to the PPP in the same coin, terming the Sindh Secretariat as the "office of a commission agent" and accusing the party of encroaching on municipal powers. Earlier, Karachi Mayor Wasim Akhtar had written a number of public letters calling for the return of powers to the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation, while also threatening to move the Supreme Court to secure these powers. Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah on Saturday dismissed the mayor's criticism and told him to 'do his job'.

At the heart of the matter is the question of who should be doing what in Sindh's urban areas. While both the PPP and MQM have earned criticism for bad governance and corruption — much of it well deserved — in this case, the mayor's stance has some weight as key municipal functions and utility bodies such as solid waste management, the Karachi water board, the building control authority etc are currently under provincial control. The result of this control is there for all to see in the shape of mounds of stinking garbage and broken roads in the metropolis. Even Sindh's secondary cities — Larkana, Sukkur etc — are in decrepit shape where civic services are concerned. The point here is not to defend any party and criticise the other. The key point is that municipal functions in any democracy are the responsibility of the third tier, with state or provincial authorities exercising supervisory powers. Instead of hurling abuses at each other, the PPP and MQM should agree on a modus vivendi that allows elected local representatives to do their job.

Money laundering concerns

THE governor of the State Bank is right to be concerned about money laundering to the point where he is willing to call a meeting of the heads of all major banks to urge them to build more robust systems for detecting when their institutions are being misused for illicit purposes. After all, Pakistan has one of the world's highest cash to bank deposit ratios in the world, meaning there is a vast so-called informal economy where all manner of tax evaded wealth circulates endlessly. Alongside this, Pakistan's strained relations with three of its four neighbours mean that much regional trade must also

utilise illicit channels to transact and settle payments. On top of that, the meagre avenues for investment that Pakistan's economy offers means much of the capital that accumulates in private hands must be kept out of the country and pathways must exist for it to come and go from the country without triggering alarms. In short, the structure of our economy calls for large-scale money laundering pathways so all manner of wealth that dare not speak its name can ply its craft without disturbing the official radars.

But one of the chief reasons why money laundering exists on a large scale, and why not a single meaningful prosecution of it has been mounted in our history, is that those on the top of our social hierarchy are the very ones who use these channels as if it were routine. For a country where a confessed money launderer can become finance minister, and where a former president has been convicted of accumulating black money in Swiss accounts, what chance do the authorities, whether in the financial system or the legal and judicial arms, have of ever building a proper system to clamp down on the practice?

Money laundering has become such an ingrained part of doing business in Pakistan that it is not possible any longer for any one institution to build a system to put a stop to it. The State Bank and the financial system will need to have their efforts supplemented by Customs, the Federal Bureau of Revenue, the Federal Investigation Agency, the attorney general and the courts if this practice is to be choked off in a credible manner. That will take political will at the top, the very place where some of the biggest clients for the services of cash mules and benami accounts are usually found. But ignoring the menace is no longer an option, since the global anti-money laundering regime is tightening year after year. Very soon Pakistan's authorities will have a choice to make: continue with business as usual, or make deep adjustments to their own behaviour. That moment is approaching, and it will take more than a meeting with bank chiefs to sort it out.

The 'encounter'

FOR some law enforcers in Pakistan, rather than depending on the proper investigation of cases and waiting for the results to emerge from this country's unhurried judicial system, there seems to be an easy way out: the 'encounter'. In certain instances therefore, it is perceived that police and paramilitary forces get rid of troublesome suspects by claiming they were gunned down in encounters whereas these are, in reality, extrajudicial killings. What often makes such claims by LEAs doubtful is that while the suspects are nearly always eliminated or captured in a wounded condition, the

law enforcers usually miraculously escape without a scratch. In this connection, the administrative judge of the antiterrorism courts in Sindh on Feb 10 had ordered the provincial IGP to conduct an internal inquiry into 65 cases in which over 80 suspects were caught injured after questionable shoot-outs. On Monday, the Sindh police authorities submitted the report in court, observing that proper SOPs needed to be in place to instruct officers to employ “proportionate use of force” and make minimal use of lethal weapons. The police high command also said that the cases of the alleged shoot-outs should be decided by trial courts, while judicial enquiries should be conducted in the most serious cases where high-handedness was suspected.

The judiciary’s actions should be welcomed as police and paramilitary forces cannot be allowed to play judge, jury and executioner. Indeed our LEAs work in a challenging environment, where they are often targeted by well-armed and ruthless criminals and militants. However, this cannot justify them taking the law into their own hands. In a system where the rule of law is supreme, such impunity should not be tolerated. Unfortunately, from the brutality that personifies the ‘thana culture’ to the freewheeling use of encounters, law enforcers in Sindh — as well as Punjab — thrive in a culture of impunity. Those who may defend encounters as the ‘only way’ to neutralise dangerous suspects, should consider that not only are such shoot-outs thoroughly illegal, there is also no way to verify the LEAs’ claims about the suspects once they are mowed down in encounters. Rather than depend on such maverick methods of law enforcement, there is only one solution to Pakistan’s law and order and militancy problems: police forces must use modern, scientific methods to investigate crimes, and the prosecution and criminal justice system must deliver justice in a transparent, timely and fair manner.

Muzzling political speech

IT was startling and unacceptable. Perhaps having grown accustomed to the near daily duelling press conferences during the Panama Papers hearings in the Supreme Court, Minister of State for Information Marriyum Aurangzeb and PML-N MNA Daniyal Aziz held what amounted to an entirely unnecessary press conference on Monday. Taking the war of words with the PTI to a new low, Ms Aurangzeb menacingly threatened to use the country’s controversial cybercrime law against Imran Khan for allegedly defaming the information minister’s boss, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Even the mere suggestion of using the powers of the state to clamp down against political speech is alarming. That it came from a minister of state and a government media team that is known to take its directions from the inner circle of the Sharifs is doubly offensive. Ms Aurangzeb ought to immediately clarify her comments in parliament and make it clear

that her government will not take any steps whatsoever to try and muzzle political opponents of the PML-N.

The country's cybercrime laws exist for one reason alone: combating a surge in criminal activity on the internet. Political speech is not a crime and must never be regarded as so. Rights activists have consistently held that the country's evolving cybercrime laws' framework is riddled with loopholes and open to abuse. Until now, there had been no suggestion that the government considered political attacks against it to be a prosecutable offence. In democracies the world over, freedom of speech is given a wider berth when it comes to public representatives. What may be considered inappropriate or even a prosecutable offence when said against private individuals, is necessarily considered permissible when it concerns an elected official. When it comes to a prime minister, the bar should be even higher — after all, as the face of his party and the government, a prime minister must submit himself to extraordinary scrutiny. Perhaps the prime minister himself can set the record straight after Ms Aurangzeb's dangerous faux pas.

PM's Holi message

THEY were fine words, and delivered with conviction, even panache. Faith is indeed a personal matter, as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif assured minority communities in his speech on Tuesday at an event to mark the Hindu festival of Holi. No one can compel others to adopt a particular religion, he said, and termed forced conversions “a criminal practice”. Stressing the fact that all religions teach respect for humanity, he added that all Pakistanis, regardless of religious affiliation, must have “equal access to progress and development”. This is not the first time the prime minister has delivered a progressive and inclusive message, and it must be acknowledged that by doing so, he is following through on his exhortation to the ulema a few days ago that they should disseminate a message of peace, tolerance and sectarian harmony. Freedom of religion is, after all, among the foundational elements of a civilised society, and also enshrined in the Constitution as a fundamental right.

However, when the articulation of such obvious truths seems like a welcome breath of fresh air it denotes how far society has strayed from these principles. That gulf cannot be bridged with words alone, and it is presumptuous to assume that non-Muslims in Pakistan will be assuaged by them. The reality is that in these times, religious sentiment can be whipped up into murderous frenzy against minority communities on the basis of rumour alone. Consider Shantinagar, Godhra, Joseph Colony, to name but a few — entire neighbourhoods ransacked and individuals lynched by mobs. Or take the

example of Sawan Masih, sentenced to death for committing the blasphemy that led to the Joseph Colony riot while the 115 people charged with setting fire to over 100 houses belonging to Christians in that locality were acquitted. One exception to this catalogue of shameful impunity is the Kot Radha Kishan case in which perpetrators of faith-based violence were actually convicted.

Some efforts have indeed been made to address the minorities' fears, but they have not been unequivocal enough. In November last year, for instance, Sindh passed a bill to criminalise forced conversions. But that laudable move has faltered in the face of protests by some right-wing groups. The governor has yet to sign it into law and there has been talk of the government reviewing the bill. When the issues that minorities face are of such magnitude, gestures such as declaring a holiday on Diwali or Holi, while welcome, are scarcely enough to make 'inclusivity' much more than a buzzword. Nevertheless, as the prime minister's words clearly suggest, there is a realisation that protection of minority rights is not only important for its own sake but is vital to the pushback against extremism. It provides the starting point for the larger and very necessary conversation about respecting the religious freedoms of all Pakistanis, Muslim and otherwise.

Abbottabad report

THE Washington Post opinion pages have, perhaps inadvertently, shone a spotlight on an unanswered but important question in Pakistan: what has become of the Abbottabad Commission report? Former ambassador to the US Husain Haqqani's assertions in and reasons for writing his latest controversial newspaper article aside, the veil of secrecy that has quite predictably been thrown over everything surrounding the Abbottabad debacle needs to be lifted. From a Pakistani perspective, the questions are several and of enduring importance. How did Osama bin Laden arrive in Abbottabad and how did he live there for many years without being detected? How were American troops able to penetrate Pakistani airspace, conduct a ground operation deep inside Pakistani territory and then exit several hours later seemingly without most parts of the vast and heavily resourced security apparatus knowing of the incursion? And perhaps most importantly, what steps need to be taken to ensure there is never another incident where one of the world's most wanted terrorists can live a relatively comfortable life in a bustling Pakistani town? The deliberate suppression of the facts established by the Abbottabad Commission and the obvious non-implementation of its recommendations — what is not known cannot be implemented — is a continuing injustice to state and society that must be corrected.

The report will surely not be a panacea, but its publication would be an important turning point for several reasons. There is a long, virtually unbroken history of the results of important inquiries being shielded from public view. From the assassination of the country's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, to the break-up of Pakistan in the 1971 war, to the killing of Akbar Bugti, which turbo-charged yet another Baloch insurgency, there have been convulsive events whose origins and histories have been investigated but the results of those inquiries kept secret. In turn, the national security of the state has suffered as the truth and accountability have been suppressed in favour of institutional interests. Making public the Abbottabad report would demonstrate that national security is being returned to the public domain, where it belongs and where it can be debated without fear or intimidation. Moreover, publication would help cleanse the dominant narrative that has had toxic effects. From the fate of Shakil Afridi to the stoking of anti-Americanism, the Abbottabad episode has been turned into a weapon rather than what it should have been: an opportunity to correct course.

Jailed abroad

IT is cause for grave concern when Pakistanis jailed abroad languish in prisons because our government finds itself unable to protect their rights. The fact that such apathy is typical when it comes to addressing human rights violations was underscored this week when the Lahore High Court heard a petition filed by families of Pakistani citizens jailed in Saudi Arabia. During the hearing, Chief Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah observed that the government had “adopted a policy of ‘no policy’ on overseas Pakistanis in Arab countries.... ” His ire is justified. The government had conveniently ignored the court's earlier directive suggesting that it devise a coherent consular protection policy. Such lack of concern is deplorable on the part of the state that is duty-bound to protect vulnerable and impoverished Pakistani citizens. Data collected by the foreign affairs ministry shows that thousands of Pakistani prisoners are suffering abroad. The Senate was informed last year that some 2,400 were jailed in Saudi prisons alone. Since then, it is believed these figures have increased. Further, lawyers have noted that Pakistani migrant workers are vulnerable prey for local agents who use them as drug mules, forcing them to travel with ingested narcotics to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. When caught, they face execution for narcotics offences. Given Saudi Arabia's record of executing prisoners, it is imperative that the government minimise these risks for those seeking employment abroad by prosecuting criminal local agents.

With reported wrongful convictions and executions of Pakistanis in violation of international and domestic legal standards, the government must intervene when

citizens require diplomatic and legal assistance. Consular access is not simply about collating prisoner information; it also means ensuring the prisoners receive a fair trial. It is inhumane to leave Pakistani prisoners all over the world to die in prisons and their families at home to suffer in silence. Pakistani citizens deserve to benefit from the presumption of innocence and due process when jailed abroad, rather than be assumed guilty and abandoned by our government.

Politicising promotions

A FAMILIAR controversy rooted in an obscure decision requiring the intervention of the highest court in the land, the promotion of senior bureaucrats has yet again been ensnared in politics and litigation. The details are complex, but the crux is straightforward: claiming that a final round of promotions in the previous government's tenure were heavily politicised, the current PML-N set-up changed the rules to effectively give the prime minister discretion in the appointments. Predictably, the discretionary evaluation based on reports of the alleged reputation and so-called integrity of individual bureaucrats resulted in claims of favouritism and discrimination. Equally predictably, the affected bureaucrats turned to the courts for relief and a short order issued by a Supreme Court bench led by Chief Justice Saqib Nisar has returned the matter to square one. As per the court's instructions, the Central Selection Board will have to re-evaluate the cases of several hundred bureaucrats denied promotions — and possibly revisit the cases of those granted promotions under the new rules and now eligible for elevation to the highest slot, Grade 22.

Defenders of the government's decision to amend the rules governing promotions suggest that it has helped weed out corrupt officers. But that only sidesteps the problem. If there are reports of corruption, why are the officers not prosecuted and only denied promotion? Moreover, with integrity and reputation evaluated presumably on the basis of intelligence reports and anonymous sources, there is widespread potential for abuse. Finally, by granting the power to make an overriding adverse judgement against a bureaucrat to the Prime Minister's Office, the automatic possibility of politicisation of decision-making arises. The fearsome power of a small coterie of prime ministerial aides and bureaucrats to derail the careers of rivals and advance the careers of favourites appears to have been wielded with gusto. That practice must stop.

Ultimately, the problem is of a political set-up that is unwilling to relinquish its control of the bureaucracy. While politicians do have some legitimate grievances against the bureaucracy, especially when it comes to the bureaucracy's ability to thwart legitimate policy aims and reforms of any government, it is the political class that ensures no real

change for the better takes place. From the police service to public administration, ministers and elected representatives regard the bureaucracy as a tool of patronage and political leverage. By controlling promotions and politicising advancement, governments ensure an obedient bureaucracy — but also a thoroughly inefficient one, with officers forced to curry favour with their political bosses instead of having the job security to focus on running the executive and implementing legitimate government policies. Quite how to resolve the conundrum of having the political class promote reforms that reduce the power of the political class is not clear. What is clear is that it will take courage and statesmanship.

Circular debt again

After three years of flattening out, the circular debt is back in our lives.

For a number of days, we witnessed the spectacle of independent power producers taking out ads in major newspapers saying their outstanding receivables had jumped to Rs414bn again, and threatening to call in their sovereign guarantees to ensure payment. Now we hear of massive furnace oil stocks piling up at the refineries and ports and other storage depots while offtake plunges.

According to a report in this paper, furnace oil stocks are now enough to cover 40 days of consumption, while offtake is half of what it is supposed to be. Part of the reason may be due to the greater availability of gas, part of it certainly because of the finances. An equal part is the result of an unexpected plunge in demand for electricity due to a cold spell in the month of March.

Since the finance ministry is either unable or unwilling to release its share of the power sector subsidy, and the FBR has stuck up refunds equal to just under a third of the total circular debt, liquidity for the power sector is being strained once again, just as it happened in the run-up to the petrol crisis of January 2015.

In the past, this has presented a problem in the form of the sudden constriction of supplies. This time it is the opposite. The inability of the power sector to lift stocks means the supply line is choked with supplies, leading to congestion at the ports and tankers filled with oil waiting in long lines outside the power plants.

This time it is the members of the oil supply chain who are up in arms, with the

refineries and petroleum ministry complaining of excess fuel stocks, while the ministry either lacks the funds to lift the supplies or has let them accumulate while demand returns.

If the situation concerning furnace oil is not checked, other fuel categories will be affected, and the availability of motor gasoline, diesel or jet fuel impaired — it will be the second time that we see the power sector liquidity issues create a wider fuel supply crisis in the country.

This is more than just bad planning, as some quarters are trying to suggest. It is evidence that the underlying weaknesses in the fuel supply chain, and how they interact with the power sector, can create a wider crisis.

Culture of opacity

THE active history of right to information laws in Pakistan starts from 2002, when we became the first country in South Asia to pass an ordinance in this context — even though the legislation was rightly criticised for being weak and leaving too much wiggle room. In the decade and a half that has passed since then, progress has been slow but does provide grounds for hope. The right to information was recognised as a fundamental right in 2010, through the insertion of Article 19-A in the Constitution as part of the 18th Amendment. Then came the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Right to Information Act, 2013, followed by the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013. A federal law in this regard was finalised by a Senate committee on information in 2014, but on that count matters remain stalled despite the assurances given out from time to time by those in the echelons power. Earlier this week, on Monday, Sindh's provincial assembly passed the Sindh Transparency and Right to Information Bill, 2016, thus drawing tighter the network of legislation covering this aspect of citizens' constitutional rights. This can be interpreted as a sign that there is growing recognition of the fact that this is a fundamental building block from which all other freedoms flow, since it is the ability to curb access that allows dark doings to be indulged in.

However, it will take more than just laws to build transparency into the very roots of systems in Pakistan. There is in the country, at all levels of federal and provincial governments, a culture of opacity that is the fundamental problem to be addressed. Going by the experience of both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, it is evident that while the citizenry has been allowed the right to put in a request for the disclosure of information, such an application nevertheless tends to be stonewalled by an implacable and hidebound bureaucracy. Unless it is ensured that there is no room for the state and

bureaucracy to prevaricate or obfuscate matters, little will change despite a legal framework being in place.

Military courts

Nine years since the latest transition to democracy began, the elected representatives of the people of Pakistan are set to take the country another step backwards.

The reinstatement of military courts for civilians accused of terrorism is a democratic tragedy presented as a negotiated success — what the PPP and its allies have negotiated with the government amounts to the most feeble of excuses for what will become a continuing, deadly miscarriage of justice.

Simply because the collective institutional wisdom of the country has decided that, at this juncture in the country's history, the responsibility of sustaining an effective criminal justice system must be outsourced partly to the military does not make it a moral or principled decision.

Indeed, politician after politician has argued for the necessity of military courts rather than address the inevitable damage they have caused and will continue to cause to the democratic project. Like the 21st Amendment before it, the soon-to-be-enacted 23rd Amendment will forever be a testament to the failure of this country's elected leadership to stand true to the principles and democratic spirit of the Constitution.

From here, once military courts are revived, the path ahead is uncertain, at least for criminal justice reforms and the salvaging of a broken civilian judicial system that made recourse to military courts justifiable to many.

In the first stage, there will likely be legal challenges to the constitutionality of the amendment, but relief will be very difficult to win. While the Supreme Court does have a number of new justices who had not yet been elevated to the highest court when the 21st Amendment was contested, overturning a full court judgement will be extremely difficult.

Barring an unexpected change of opinion in the Supreme Court, then, military courts for civilians accused of terrorism will be the law of the land until at least the summer of 2019.

The second stage is where even greater uncertainty lies. Perhaps the collective political

leadership will take seriously its responsibilities — and renewed pledge — to reform the criminal justice system over the next two years.

It is possible that the stipulation for the formation of a parliamentary oversight committee in the agreement between the government and opposition parties will lead to a raft of sensible and much-needed judicial reforms. From the 18th Amendment to the continuing quest for electoral reforms, parliament can deliver — if the leaderships of the various parties are interested in delivering change or feel the pressure to do so.

The other possibility is that the very formation of yet another parliamentary committee is a signal of the lack of seriousness of parliamentarians. After all, other than vague promises to rehabilitate a broken justice system, there were no solid suggestions.

The question remains: will 2017-2019 be a repeat of the lack of progress on judicial reforms witnessed over the last two years, or will the right kind of changes be effected?

Blocked CNICs

OVER the last few months there has been a steady drip-drip of stories about the CNICs of a large number of people, mainly Pakhtuns, having been blocked by Nadra. After running from pillar to post to try and resolve the issue, even obtaining an order from the Peshawar High Court in their favour, those affected are now going public. On Thursday, several tribesmen from Mohmand Agency addressed a news conference at the Peshawar Press Club about the long delays in the verification of their blocked CNICs. They also alleged that while bona fide Pakistanis are suffering on this score, Afghans with fake Pakistani identity cards are going about their business by bribing local officials. Indeed, former Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour's fake Pakistani CNIC only came to light upon his death. The issue of blocked CNICs is no minor hiccup. Even if the number is not in the millions, as earlier perceived, the Senate was recently told that well over 300,000 CNICs have been blocked: of these, 175,000 are awaiting verification by the intelligence agencies and another 52,000 are still to be cleared by Nadra.

This problem has been brewing for some time, but it has now snowballed into a chorus of complaints. And well it might, because the lack of a CNIC in Pakistan presages all manner of difficulties in day-to-day life, from opening or operating a bank account, obtaining a passport, even travelling within the country, conducting land transactions or closing formal business deals, the list is long and varied. The issue is particularly emotive at present because it has become conflated with the perception, not entirely

inaccurate, that Pakhtuns are being subjected to ethnic profiling in ongoing security-related operations. One must of course acknowledge that the state has legitimate concerns about foreigners in possession of false documentation, fraudulently obtained, showing them to be Pakistanis — after all, in the same Senate session mentioned above, it was also revealed that nearly 120,000 CNICs have been seized from foreign nationals. Confounding the problem further is that for many tribes, the Durand Line is a border in name only. On Monday, a tribesman from Waziristan told the Senate Standing Committee his father's CNIC was blocked since 2012 because he belonged to one of the 18 tribes that live on both sides of the border. Nevertheless, Nadra must resolve the matter on a priority basis. Nothing generates 'anti-state' feeling more than being disowned by one's country.

Response to stent scandal

THE discovery earlier this year that cardiac patients were being hoodwinked into paying a high price for illegal — unregistered — stents has led to some 'protective' reactions. For example, the Ministry of Capital Administration and Development Division in Islamabad has decided to not reimburse bills for any illegal devices. Also, CADD now wants evidence that a stent has actually been implanted in a heart patient — in the form of the 'original sticker' that comes with the device. Meanwhile, a report says that, in an effort to guard against medical malpractice, the federal government has asked for the filming of cardiac procedures. A new government advisory issued on March 15 further calls for the printing of retail prices on cardiac stents.

It is difficult as yet to hail as a remedy the sense of awareness that has been on display since the stent scandal hit the country some time ago. The general vigilance as reflected in the CADD instance and the specific measures advised by the federal government for all public- and private-sector hospitals are welcome in that they light up a course that now needs to be pursued diligently. The placing of the price tag is aimed at ensuring greater responsibility on the part of the manufacturers and sellers of such sensitive medical devices and, as such, must fuel a drive for the regularisation of the supply of these devices. The video shooting of the 'stenting' and other cardiac treatment that has been asked for is apparently on the pattern of how angiography and similar procedures are recorded. It will require expert reading later on to decode and determine the exact details of how the procedure went, something which will one more time put the onus on the doctors. There has to be some kind of a renewal of commitment by these worthy practitioners to whom patients entrust their lives in critical moments. It is for the doctors to lead the search for more ways to improve the system.

The growth seesaw

THE most recent data on large-scale manufacturing shows that the growth spurt of the last couple of years may be on the cusp of a plateau. After registering some increases, growth in the period July to January 2017 was 3.48pc, below its target of 5.9pc. More interestingly, sharp falls in the growth rate of automobiles and fertiliser dragged the overall rate down. The only bright spot in the data came from food, particularly soft drinks and sugar, and iron and steel products. This was most likely the outcome of the accelerating pace of construction involving projects related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

One aspect the figure draws our attention to is the absence of any linkages between the CPEC-related projects that are gathering steam across the country and the rest of the economy. Much is riding on the assumption that investment related to CPEC will spur growth inside the country. It is important because we are now relying on this investment to create jobs, spur exports and generate revenues. If the investment fails to establish substantial backward and forward linkages, there is a risk that we will be left with little more than the bill that comes with this enterprise. Thus far, when perusing the data on large-scale manufacturing, we see an impact in the construction sector and nowhere else, which is troubling because this trend could be the earliest sign that hopes of a wider economic revival owing to CPEC could be misplaced.

The absence of growth in textiles is crucial here. This is the sector that generates the most jobs and export proceeds. Its growth has been the most anaemic thus far, less than 1pc last year and falling to 0.29pc in the same period this year. If any revival in the overall growth rate leaves out textiles, we can be quite certain that it will be unsustainable because the rising bill from the import of industrial raw materials will swamp the economy in the absence of proceeds from exports. The government needs to revisit its CPEC story while focusing due attention on the impact on domestic industry. This impact should be evaluated from two perspectives. First, there are the backward and forward linkages necessary to ensure that CPEC does not end up creating an island of growth in the midst of a largely stagnant economy. Second, the competitive pressures unleashed by CPEC investment could act as a spur to innovation, or lead to the wholesale destruction of domestic industry as raw materials and energy are swivelled as 'incentives' to relocate to Pakistan. The fact that the government enjoys pointing out an increase in the growth rate since it assumed power while large-scale manufacturing continues to register mixed trends is one reason to believe that the anxiety around these questions might be well grounded after all.

Madressahs galore

OVER the years, one of the state's many sins of omission that have had a direct bearing on where Pakistan finds itself today is its neglect of the education sector. A recent survey by Islamabad's capital administration illustrates the extent to which other actors have filled this vacuum. According to its findings, educational institutions in the city number 348 — not counting higher secondary schools, which are generally considered inter-colleges — a figure exceeded by the number of madressahs which currently stands at 374. And that is not all. Of the seminaries, more than half — 205 — are unregistered. That in itself offers an indication of the enormous latitude given to religious organisations to set up these institutions and the lack of oversight by the government. Add to this the information that the federal government has opened not a single new school in the city during the past four years, during which time a number of madressahs have come up in Islamabad, and one can see the entire dismal picture in a nutshell. This shocking dereliction of duty in the education sector is not localised but extends to the rest of Pakistan as well.

Religious leaders, Maulana Fazlur Rehman being the most vocal among them of late, bristle at the suggestion that madressahs are to blame for faith-based violence. It is undoubtedly true that all madressahs do not promote extremism per se, let alone violent extremism, but it is equally a fact that by their very definition, they offer a conservative education that often fosters undesirable ideological divisions. The abysmal budgetary allocation to the education sector, growing income inequality and the government's indifference to how it impacts access to institutes of learning by the poor, are a boon for the madressahs. For low-income households, the option is either to send their children to free but substandard government schools or to better quality private schools — even the most modest of which charge fees that are beyond the means of a large family. Madressahs offer the perfect formula; free board and lodging, coupled with education of at least an acceptable quality. The geo-tagging of madressahs on a provincial level has revealed an alarming growth of these institutions, many of them unregistered. The government has for too long outsourced the critical task of educating the population to religious organisations. Now that the disastrous results are before us, the state must pick up the gauntlet without further delay.

PSL spot-fixing case

PAKISTAN cricket has yet again come under a cloud. The PSL spot-fixing scandal that has unfolded over the past two weeks has seen five players being charge-sheeted or suspended over their alleged links to bookies and this figure is likely to swell. Following the initial crackdown of the PCB's anti-corruption unit against openers Sharjeel Khan, Khalid Latief and Nasir Jamshed in the UAE in February, the suspension of giant pacer Mohammad Irfan and opener Shazaib Hasan this week have prompted fears that the scam could well be just the tip of the iceberg. And with the FIA now in the picture and the interior minister calling it a national disgrace, the PSL scandal has snowballed into a major crisis. However, despite the anti-corruption unit's claims of catching the players red-handed, no substantial proof of their actually throwing the games in the league have been brought forward. Both Sharjeel and Khalid, despite confessing to meeting bookies in the UAE, have denied allegations of indulging in any foul play during the league matches. Lengthy interrogations of the two players by the authorities have also proved futile. A three-man tribunal to further investigate the charges has been set up.

In view of the PCB's poor track record in dealing with cases of fixing, critics and ex-players are reluctant to take the latest accusations at face value. They have rightly been asking the board to either produce concrete evidence against the suspected players and impose life bans, or let them go with warnings and fines. There has also been talk of jailing the culprits if found guilty — something that largely depends on the degree of a player's involvement and the circumstances. And, it is necessary to have indisputable evidence before the authorities embark on such a strict course of action. Meanwhile, this menace needs to be nipped in the bud by keeping a strict watch over domestic games and weeding out the corrupt elements besides, of course, ensuring proper grooming of the players.

Pak-India dialogue

PAKISTAN High Commissioner to India Abdul Basit has made a sensible and timely observation: important as the terrorism issue is to bilateral ties, there are other matters of equal importance that deserve to be focused on and therefore dialogue needs to be revived at the earliest. The high commissioner's remarks came on a day that the BJP shocked India with its nomination of a controversial, hard-line Hindu priest to the post of chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state. The reaffirmation of a message of constructive dialogue on Pakistan's part at a time when India may be lurching further to the political right is necessary; the stakes are simply too high for India

and Pakistan to drift into a new era of turbulent relations. The high commissioner's remarks, then, are a welcome reminder that right-thinking individuals in both countries are continuing to dwell on the need for dialogue and not jettisoning the shared experience of the past seven decades, which has proved that while dialogue is difficult to initiate and even harder to sustain, it is the only realistic option.

Consider the so-called low-hanging fruit that Mr Basit referred to: Sir Creek and Siachen. Sir Creek in particular was once regarded as an agreement within reach — a border and maritime dispute that can be resolved by technical teams, if the political will to do so exists. Similarly, the mindless stand-off in Siachen, more than three decades old and a growing environmental concern, could be resolved in a manner that satisfies both the military and political leaderships in both countries. But the freezing of dialogue has stalled all progress, in disputes small and large. And in the case of Siachen, there is a sense that the intransigence of the Indian military and its growing influence in the national security and foreign policy domains have effectively cancelled the low-hanging-fruit status of the Siachen dispute. Unhappily, the absence of dialogue is allowing other factors to intervene and make historical and already complicated disputes even more complex.

The revival of political will to engage in dialogue is the obvious starting point. Having established his party as the dominant political force in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has an opportunity to pivot and return to the path of dialogue with Pakistan. Mr Modi also now has the benefit of greater experience — the unexpected return to dialogue and the unveiling of the so-called comprehensive dialogue process with additional baskets in late 2015 was a commendable effort, but was not adequately militancy-proofed. The subsequent Pathankot attack caused a rupture where more experienced and committed dialogue partners may have found a way to sustain the process. Almost a year and a half later, with Pakistan having taken a few steps against India-centric militant groups and large-scale counterterrorism operations under way across the country, the dialogue process can be restarted in a more conducive environment.

Doubting the census

NOW that the census has begun in earnest, it is important for observers to bear in mind that it is too late to start asking for additional items to be included in the list of data that is being gathered. There has been an entire process for preparing the form, and for weeks leading up to the exercise there was an open debate focusing on what is and what is not to be included, with representatives from the provincial governments

participating in the conversation. Many in the media, including this newspaper, argued that removing Form 2A from the exercise was a mistake, but none in government or opposition bothered to look into the matter. Now that 55m forms have been printed, and a system has been agreed upon through which to gather the data, a number of politicians have suddenly started issuing proclamations about what is and is not being counted in the census. Functionaries of the state are not errand boys to be tasked at whim, and the census exercise is certainly not a shopping list.

It is true that the credibility of the data is essential for the exercise to be meaningful. But now that the process has been launched, the only way to ensure it is credible is for the provincial governments to set up complaint centres where people can report malpractices. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics says people should report any malpractice, but there is little information on where these ought to be reported. Second, the credibility of the data will become obvious when it is placed next to data from the previous census and glaring discrepancies are seen, such as how the population shares change between the provinces, and how the ethnic composition of certain provinces alters. While the process is under way, there is little point to issuing statements that evince dissatisfaction at the absence of certain preferred data points, or that ask for the duplication of forms ('carbon copies') for verification after the exercise. There was ample time for making those preferences known in the weeks leading up to the exercise, and simply politicising the process at this point will prove counterproductive. An imperfect census is still better than no census at all, and it has taken a lot of prodding to get to even this point. Greater care should now be exercised when issuing statements that cast a pall of uncertainty over the results.

Child abuse

THE passage of the draft National Commission on the Rights of the Child Bill, 2015, during the current session of the National Assembly is an important step in the right direction. It is neither designed to be a panacea nor is it likely to eliminate the scourge of child employment and abuse. But if the NCRC functions even to a fraction of the expectations of it, countless young lives may be saved. Consider the two new cases of alleged child abuse of illegally employed domestic workers that have surfaced over the weekend, one each in Islamabad and Multan. The grotesque allegations of torture and domestic servitude made by the families are heartbreaking. In the Islamabad episode, a 12-year-old girl was allegedly burned with hot knives, beaten with leather belts and prevented from visiting her family for four years. The monstrousness of such crimes may defy comprehension, but the law must not shirk from punishing such crimes. There

are too many such instances that come to the public's attention to suggest that urgent interventions are not needed.

While commissions are often toothless or ineffective in practice, the NCRC may be in a position to make critical interventions. The parliamentary bill, among other things, empowers the NCRC to help strengthen the legislative framework for the rights of children, inquire into incidents of rights' violations and recommend that criminal proceedings be undertaken. Perhaps most visibly, the NCRC, once operational, will be able to house children who have been removed from abusive environments and, hopefully, will be able to give the physical care and psychological attention that such children need. The unregulated domestic workers' sector and a prevalent social mindset that family matters must remain private no matter what the cost surely means that many children continue to be abused in the country. But rescuing those children and saving others from prospective harm is possible. No state or society, no matter what the challenges they face, can allow crimes against children to continue unabated.

Accountability and the PPP

IT was dramatic and confusion-ridden in a way that harkened back to a previous era of tumultuous politics. The return of Sharjeel Memon, former Sindh information minister and close ally of Asif Zardari, from self-imposed exile and his brief detention by the National Accountability Bureau have sparked a war of words between the Sindh government and the federal accountability regime of the PML-N government at the centre. That the accountability process needs an overhaul is patently obvious and accepted by all sides, including the political class. NAB's operations are neither transparent nor entirely plausible. Indeed, on many an occasion, including in the incident with Mr Memon, there is a sense that NAB is more interested in burnishing its public-relations credentials than strictly following the law. To be sure, the sudden return of Mr Memon smacks of backroom manoeuvring and deal-making by the PPP. Indeed, a link between the PPP's eventual willingness to help revive military courts and the hectic efforts to rehabilitate the inner circle of former president Zardari cannot be ruled out.

Whatever the flaws with the NAB regime and the mysterious circumstances in which Mr Memon was detained and released, there is an undeniable lack of interest on the part of both the PPP and the PML-N to address the accountability challenge. Since the latest furore centres on, and has been accentuated by, the PPP, consider the party leadership's role in fostering a culture of impunity. In the nine years since a return to democracy, there has not been a single PPP leader who has been disciplined by the

party itself. This despite being the ruling party for five years, the largest opposition party in parliament for nearly four, and with an unbroken spell leading the government in Sindh. The record in Sindh is particularly damning. While Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah attacks the centre for its interference in Sindh, what steps has his government taken to tackle corruption and graft? It was Mr Shah, after all, who came to power mid-term vowing to clean up governance and address the dismal public perception of the party when it comes to corruption.

As for the PML-N, with the Sharif family caught up in an anti-corruption probe by no less than the Supreme Court itself, the party appears unwilling to address clean governance as anything other than a matter of politics. Consider the amount of time and energy the PML-N has expended in countering the PTI over the past year. Had even a fraction of that time and effort been channelled into legislative reforms and strengthening of administrative oversight and accountability, the government could have by now overhauled the system to the extent of the first big names being caught and punished. What the PML-N and PPP seem to forget is that democracy is about more than winning the elections.

Linguistic diversity

LANGUAGE is identity, and it is especially important to acknowledge that in a multi-ethnic society such as Pakistan: a failure to do so can have far-reaching consequences. So while it may have taken five years in coming, the KP government's decision to at last implement the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Promotion of Regional Languages Authority Act, 2012, is a case of better late than never. Starting with the next academic year which commences in April, government primary and secondary schools will begin teaching regional languages as a compulsory subject in the areas where they are spoken. These languages include Pashto, Hindko, Seraiki and Khowar, while Kohistani, which is also among the five officially designated regional languages of the province, will not be part of the curriculum because of a dispute among its speakers over differences in dialect.

The history of this country illustrates how language is seen as a vehicle of political power, or the lack of it. The protests soon after Partition in what was then East Pakistan over the central government's decision to declare Urdu the national language arguably sowed the seeds for the Bengali nationalist movement. In the early 1970s, Sindh saw language riots between Sindhi and Urdu speakers. In Balochistan today, neither Balochi nor Brahui are taught in government schools — even as an optional subject. It is telling, therefore, that at Turbat University, located in an area where the insurgency is the

strongest, far more students opt for Balochi as their major than any other subject. Even aside from the obvious political connotations, to give regional languages — especially those spoken by smaller, less empowered groups — their due is to celebrate and preserve diversity in its most fundamental form. Language is after all the repository of a people's collective memory, the heritage that makes each ethnic group so unique. The authorities at the federal and provincial levels have been apathetic in their duty on this score. A 2014 parliamentary paper on the subject pointed out that of 72 languages spoken in this country, 10 are either "in trouble" or "nearing extinction". Meanwhile, as a conference in Peshawar earlier this year pointed out, the speakers of dozens of other languages are also dwindling rapidly. Among these is Hindko, which makes the KP government's recent move very timely. For the federal government to declare the major regional languages as national languages would be even more appropriate, not to mention far-sighted.

Syrian imbroglio

THE reports emerging from Syria over the past couple of days are worrying, and the faint hope of a negotiated end to this brutal war is fading fast. On Monday, government forces pounded rebel-held parts of Damascus, a day after militants had launched a surprise attack on the Syrian capital. Moreover, the Israeli defence minister made a reckless announcement on Sunday promising to "destroy Syrian air defence systems" after reports had emerged that Israeli jets had struck targets inside Syria. The Syrian government had claimed that it had shot down the Israeli intruder. Last week, nearly 50 people were killed — most of them reportedly civilians — after American warplanes hit a mosque in Aleppo province; the US denied it had hit a mosque and claimed it had targeted Al Qaeda militants instead. All this makes for a grim build-up to the Syrian peace talks, sponsored by the UN, that are due soon in Geneva.

The key problem is that in Syria, there are far too many parties creating problems. The civil war, which has now completed its sixth year, was internationalised when the West, Turkey and the Gulf states saw an opportunity to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime. On the other hand, Mr Assad's allies — Iran, Russia and Hezbollah — were not ready to see the government in Damascus fall. In the middle of all this, sectarian extremists gained ground and now threaten the security of the region. Israel — long a force of instability in the Middle East — has also not helped matters with its arrogant rhetoric and irresponsible forays into Syria. Already, hundreds of thousands have been killed in the Syrian war, while millions have been displaced. A once functioning country has been turned into a hollow shell of its former self. It is hard to be optimistic about Syria's

future in such circumstances, but it must be said that regional states — Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia particularly — need to go the extra mile and make greater efforts to resolve the conflict to avoid further destruction and suffering.

Afghan peace

THE reopening of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is a welcome and sensible move. The closure for over a month, after Pakistan accused Afghanistan of not doing enough to act against anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan, had serious socioeconomic implications for the populations on either side and caused bilateral ties to plunge to yet another low. The retaliatory, knee-jerk response by Pakistan did not make sense then, nor does it appear to have achieved much. Predictable third-party intervention, this time by the UK, which for a while has stepped up its diplomacy in the wake of desultory US policy, has likely wrested compromises from both the Afghan and Pakistani sides, but it remains to be seen if private commitments are realised in public actions. The pattern of terror attacks causing a rupture in ties and then papered over until the next downturn has become distressingly familiar.

Clearly, cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan can help radically reduce terrorism and militancy in the region. Particularly when it comes to fighting the militant Islamic State group in the two countries, the possibility of security cooperation is obvious and real — neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan have any tolerance for an IS that has upended the political and security dynamics of the Middle East. Yet, lingering suspicions and mutual mistrust, particularly when it comes to strategic and long-term interests, on both sides has thwarted meaningful cooperation. But past failures and recent strains should not be reasons for diplomatic surrender. Just as Kabul cannot expect Pakistan to resolve the old problems — Afghan Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan and perceived foot-dragging over an eventual dialogue process — without addressing the new — anti-Pakistan sanctuaries in Afghanistan — Islamabad cannot expect the opposite. The security establishment here may want its demands addressed urgently, but Afghanistan either has limited capacity or lacks the will to address Pakistan's immediate concerns.

Indeed, the common sense path is to ramp up security cooperation, using the full force of diplomacy to nudge the Taliban into a regional peace framework. An Afghan government that is pursuing peace with the Taliban may find itself in a better position to address Pakistan's security concerns and strengthen border management and cooperation. Following the US and China, a third major power, Russia, is now

attempting to broker a peace process — yet another opportunity for durable talks to be launched. Where previous efforts have been a failure there has been a perception on the part of Kabul or the Taliban that the dialogue is tilted against them. To assuage the doubts of the Afghan government, Russia has sent the right signal by extending an invitation for a regional dialogue, engaging Kabul and reiterating a path to peace for the Taliban. A negotiated peace is the only sustainable solution for all parties involved.

Extremists in politics

FOR many years now, electoral politics have been a vehicle for extremist elements in Pakistan to insinuate themselves into the democratic framework, even as they work to corrode the principles upon which it is based. With general elections due sometime next year, it is prudent to give some thought to how this process can be disrupted. Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan's statement in the Senate on Monday that a law is on the anvil to prevent leaders of banned organisations from taking part in elections must therefore be welcomed. However, the interior minister continues to display a troubling lack of clarity on the modus operandi of dealing with such individuals. For instance, he once again defended his meeting last October with Maulana Ahmed Ludhianvi on the grounds that the head of the banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat had arrived to see him as part of a delegation. He was nevertheless correct in pointing out that the cleric was allowed by the election commission to contest the polls in May 2013. And that is precisely why a specific law of the kind that Chaudhry Nisar has proposed is so necessary.

Pakistan has been fairly prolific in outlawing extremist organisations, particularly after a slew of them were banned in the aftermath of 9/11. But it has been a self-defeating exercise. With the leaders of these groups under no ban themselves, they continued to peddle their noxious rhetoric, while their organisations re-emerged with new names. This was particularly dangerous given that Gen Zia's 'party-less' elections of 1985 had already driven political candidates into making alliances with sectarian groups who had recourse to mosques across the country from where they could rally supporters. In subsequent years, the expediency displayed by every government, civilian or otherwise, created even more space for such groups in electoral politics. Their leaders manoeuvred themselves into positions from where they could wield a preposterous amount of influence behind the scenes or even directly. In 2002, for instance, Azam Tariq, chief of the banned Sipah-i-Sahaba — a predecessor of the ASWJ — contested, and won, a seat in the National Assembly from prison as an independent candidate. He was released by Gen Musharraf in exchange for his vote in favour of Mir Zafarullah Jamali as prime minister. Aside from enacting legislation to prevent such leaders of

banned groups from standing in elections, the restrictions applicable to individuals under the Fourth Schedule should also be strictly enforced.

CPEC security cost

It was always a bad idea to bundle the cost of security for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor enterprise into the power tariff and pass it on to the consumers.

Now that the federal cabinet appears to have approved the decision, it falls on the tariff-setting power regulator, Nepra, to ensure that the rights of the consumers are protected against spurious items being added to their bills.

Nepra has taken suo motu notice of the matter and called a public hearing on April 4 to which all members of the public and other stakeholders are invited. This is a good opportunity for all civil society groups to register themselves as participants, as per the details available on the Nepra website, and submit comments and feedback on the proposal.

It is tempting for the government to add all manner of power-sector expenses, for which there is no room in the budget, to utility bills, but this temptation must be strenuously resisted.

Power bills are not surrogate revenue machinery. In this case, the total cost added to the bills will amount to 1pc of the capital cost of all projects per annum, which comes to roughly \$155m going by the figures given by Nepra. The amount may not sound much at the moment, but it should be borne in mind that this figure will inevitably rise over time as the number of power projects increases.

With the passage of time, it is entirely reasonable to expect that the percentage being asked for will also increase, and other unanticipated costs will similarly be added to the bills. CPEC security is undoubtedly an important matter, but costs should be kept within the budget, and not billed to power consumers

The proposal is yet another example of how the government has failed to properly forecast the costs it is to bear under the CPEC umbrella, and one can only wonder what other unanticipated expenses are going to arise as the projects move towards commercial operations.

Transition to democracy

THE backdrop was ironic, the claim sensational. The rare meeting of the PML-N parliamentary committee appears to have been held primarily to ensure the presence in Islamabad of enough party legislators to smooth the passage of the 23rd Amendment — democracy working to undermine democratic principles. As if to confirm Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's continuing fixation with a former political nemesis, the only headline to emerge from the meeting was his dramatic claim that then-president Gen Pervez Musharraf had in 2007 offered Mr Sharif a deal to form a coalition government after elections — eventually held in 2008. Perhaps Mr Musharraf, known for speaking his mind, will himself confirm or deny the prime minister's claim, but it does provide an opportunity to reflect on the state of the transition to democracy, now nearing a decade and on the verge of delivering two full-term parliaments.

Certainly, democratic gains have been considerable. That a decade ago the country was ruled by a military dictator and the democratic façade was fragile enough for a single individual to determine who would form the government itself demonstrates the distance travelled. Today, robust political competition exists, different parties govern in the four provinces, and the next election ought to produce a fairer and more transparent verdict than before. Pakistanis have genuine electoral choices; it is they who will decide who will govern the country. Moreover, with three tiers of government across the country and democratic reforms having been extended to first Gilgit-Baltistan and now Fata, the structure of democracy is deeper and wider than it has ever been. Gone, and seemingly with a growing irreversibility, are the days that power can simply be grabbed by strong men and legitimacy bestowed upon illegitimate governments by unelected judges. Seventy years since Independence, Pakistan is closer than it has ever been to fulfilling its destiny as a durable democracy.

However, challenges remain. For all the electoral competition and promise of regular elections, the institutions of democracy have not been strengthened in a comparable manner. The country's elected representatives, in their unwillingness to address issues of corruption and the high barriers to entry in politics, are presiding over a system that is tarnished and viewed sceptically by far too many people. Absent is the vital democratic corollary: a belief in and commitment to a system of checks and balances. From dynastic politics to the murky nexus between politics and business, and from dysfunctional systems of accountability to the refusal to embrace regulatory reform, the toll on democratic institutions continues to grow. Democracy, ultimately, is only as strong as the people's belief in it. A dearth of institutions that promote fairness and justice erodes public confidence and allows anti-democratic forces to survive. Mr

Musharraf is no longer in power, but the mindset he embodied lives on in some quarters.

University clash

TUESDAY'S clash at the Punjab University, which left at least 10 students injured, had been many months in the making. The cadres of the Islami Jamiat Talaba and the Pakhtun and Baloch students lodged in the PU hostels had exchanged blows many times over the last couple of years. The collision took place since these students from Balochistan and KP did not appear beholden to the strict code of the IJT, the PU being one of its main laboratories from the Gen Zia days or even earlier. In what must have been most offensive to the long-dominant force on campus, these 'outsiders' — who feel safer staying close to each other — showed little inclination for learning the ways of life at an average public-sector college in Lahore. However, it was soon realised, that they, like so many others, were the product of circumstances; these Pakhtun and Baloch students came to be looked upon as a combating force — a nemesis — for the IJT boys to grapple with at a time when their old patrons had started to consider the Jamiat a liability.

Past vice chancellors were crucial promoters of the IJT. But this was no longer the case when the students from KP and Balochistan had made it abundantly clear that they had their own ways and were not going to be intimidated by the diktat of the IJT that had been playing the role of the oversensitive big brother. Not just that, the IJT as well as its parent body, the Jamaat-i-Islami, had lost the clout they had enjoyed for long courtesy of their close ties with the PML-N, the ruling party of Punjab. The Jamiat could still hope to wield some influence when JI's window of reconciliation with the PML-N was open. But its public image was severely weakened once it was evident that the Sharifs, who were out to convince the outside world of their commitment to fight fundamentalism in Pakistan, saw merit in keeping their distance from the JI. It was also feared that a drastic reduction in influence could lead to desperate measures being taken by the old campus kings. And a musical event by a new rival was just too big an opportunity for some of the elements to ignore. In a changed situation, the signs are that the objective of ruling the campus through fear may be too tough to achieve now. The old tactics might not work.

Counterterrorism efforts

IN the aftermath of last month's deadly blast at the dargah of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, the Sindh government's counterterrorism efforts have been stepped up. A number of suspects reportedly belonging to militant outfits have been rounded up, while suspected extremists have also been eliminated in 'encounters' with law enforcers. These activities are being complemented with longer-term efforts. These include attempts at better monitoring of places of worship belonging to all religious groups. As published in this paper on Wednesday, the Sindh administration plans to launch a video surveillance project of places of worship belonging to non-Muslim faith groups. Earlier, the Sindh chief minister had ordered "foolproof" security of various dargahs and shrines in the province. These efforts are welcome, for it can be argued that it was security lacunae that allowed militants to carry out the dastardly bombing at the Qalandar's shrine. However, video surveillance, for example, can come in handy after an act of terrorism, to trace down culprits or their handlers. What the Sindh and federal authorities must concentrate on is neutralising the extremist cells believed to be active in the province.

While many talk of the 'Sufi' and 'pluralist' character of Sindh, there has been a steady stream of evidence emerging over the past few years that points to the existence of militant and sectarian groups in the province, particularly its northern districts. Lashkar-i-Jhangvi is believed to be particularly active in this region. Before the Sehwan blast there was a massive bombing at a Shikarpur imambargah in 2015, while last year militants tried to storm an imambargah in Khanpur, also located in Shikarpur district. Last week, the police's counterterrorism department claimed to have arrested the Shikarpur chief of LJ. Unfortunately, no part of the country is immune from the sectarian and militant menace. Therefore, it is reassuring that the Sindh government has realised that a problem exists. Now the challenge before it is to root out such violent networks before they can cause more devastation.

Indus water talks

A brief moment of expectation appears to be vanishing.

Earlier this week, water officials from India and Pakistan met under banner headlines for two-day talks about the three controversial hydropower projects India is building upstream on the Jhelum and Chenab rivers.

Pakistan is seeking international arbitration under World Bank auspices, whereas India is pushing for a lower level forum to seek a resolution arguing for the appointment of a neutral expert, as was done for the Baglihar Dam dispute. Following the talks, it appeared that India may have consented to go for arbitration by the World Bank, but latest pronouncements by the Indian side indicate that that may not be so.

If a way forward was not found in the talks held between the water officials this week, then it can only be said that those talks ended in failure.

Both countries have valid concerns in the matter, and only technical experts with a neutral disposition can arbitrate this matter. One mistake to avoid, however, is to view this dispute through the larger lens of the India Pakistan rivalry, or the Kashmir dispute. This is worth emphasising because matters unconnected with the Indus Waters Treaty have a way of inserting themselves into the water dialogue.

At a press conference after the recent round of talks, Khawaja Asif was asked whether there was a possibility that the discussions might lead towards a resumption of the composite dialogue, and he rightly swatted away the expectation. Talks held under the Indus Waters Treaty framework should remain focused on water issues.

Of course part of the reason why it is so difficult to achieve this focus in the present environment is because of Prime Minister Modi's recent threat to walk out of the Indus Waters Treaty altogether.

Even though subsequent moves by the Indian government suggest the threat was more bluster than policy, it nevertheless did its damage, by dragging the treaty and water issues between the two countries under the clouds of suspicion that mar their larger relationship.

And from Pakistan's side, its readiness to invoke the arbitration clauses of the treaty appears somewhat trigger happy, and that harms its case. Demanding a neutral expert in the Baglihar Dam dispute did not go down very well for Pakistan since the judgement

came out in India's favour. In the case of the Kishanganga and Ratle hydropower plants, arbitration could similarly go in either direction, based in large measure on how well Pakistan is able to build its case.

If the recent decision by the World Bank tribunal looking at the Reko Diq project is anything to go by, Pakistan is likely to feel challenged when the minutiae of its case are brought under intense scrutiny.

Both countries need to realise that their water issues stand above other disputes; and they must find a way forward accordingly.

Medical emergency

It would appear that the urgency to probe the sale and manufacture of drugs and medical devices has reached an altogether new level. A forum has asked the National Accountability Bureau to investigate the workings of the fancied and once very promising Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan. The complaint raises familiar issues about regulating medicines and medical devices such as cardiac stents. Although Drap may already be working to address the problems, an organisation with a mandate like NAB to ensure transparency and corruption-free proceedings obviously could not afford to ignore the frequent concerns voiced about the country's drug sector. There have been just too many scandals in the area of health in Pakistan — if anything their frequency has increased with time — calling for close scrutiny at various levels. The latest complaint refers to alleged irregularities in maintaining records of medicines, increase in drug prices and that most infamous case where a large number of coronary patients were said to have been provided low-quality stents. This could well be the tip of the iceberg. An inquiry aimed at setting reforms in motion could 'reveal' a lot more.

At the same time, the call for a NAB investigation is yet another reminder about the state of affairs we all are very aware of. The recent scandals only add to the feeling of helplessness the people of this country have been long living with. The bureau may help to assign blame for these irregularities. Some of those responsible may even be asked to pay for their misadventures that have caused such grievous hurt to people. In the long run, however, what could truly benefit everyone here would be a sustained campaign led by the most knowledgeable in the field, including doctors, other public health experts and planners with technical capability. The health authorities have tried to explain how they are trying to address various issues and they may have their reasons for expecting public applause for whatever they are doing to clear the pile

gathered over decades. But they cannot effectively deal with all that needs their intervention without launching some kind of emergency — declared or otherwise. More than these fleeting shows of empathy for people and their well-being, these probes upon probes, what is needed most urgently are expert endeavours aimed at rooting out a style of governance that has left such an indelible mark on the lives of Pakistanis.

Attack in London

TERROR returned to the streets of London on Wednesday, injecting further tension into an already fraught series of debates playing out across the international stage. For countries such as the US, UK and many others in Western Europe, the balance between freedom and security may be tilting towards the latter. As counterterrorism measures have grown more sophisticated in those countries, the terrorists are turning to more rudimentary techniques. Unable to breach airport security or build large bombs without being detected, the terrorist has turned everyday items such as cars and knives into weapons of attack. That in turn is driving up suspicions in western communities against perceived foreigners and migrants, as so-called native populations react in fear to the threat the terrorist is spreading. So within those countries and between western countries and the Muslim world, there is a growing tension that can have enormously damaging consequences if left unaddressed. The starting point must be to not give in to fear and improve counterterrorism intelligence and resources in a way that can help prevent attacks without alienating entire communities.

Fundamental as the duty of every state to protect the public is, there is a sensible way to wage and win the fight against terrorism and there are more reckless ways. The new US administration appears to be more interested in the latter. Consider the decision to ban laptop computers and tablets from the carry-on luggage of passengers originating from several Muslim-majority countries. American airlines operating on the same routes have been exempted and it appears more than likely that the ban is part of a covert trade war that the US has launched against what are believed to be heavily subsidised Gulf and Middle Eastern carriers. The sheer absurdity of using terrorism as an excuse to help domestic airlines suggests that the Trump administration does not comprehend the interdependent, rules-based world the US has helped create. Better understanding between global communities and closer cooperation is the only way to defeat terrorism.

Stop-start Afghan peace process

Amidst a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, there are incipient signs that another attempt at an Afghan peace process is under way.

While denied by the Afghan Taliban, a report claiming that Pakistan has hosted a Taliban delegation in Islamabad ahead of a multilateral summit in Russia next month suggests that behind-the-scenes manoeuvring is increasing. As ever, the signals are mixed and hopes for a quick breakthrough are necessarily low.

Another media report, quoting an unnamed US State Department official, has suggested that the US will not participate in the Moscow summit, ostensibly because the US was not consulted before the summit was scheduled.

With the US administration seemingly in disarray and the new Secretary of State Rex Tillerson scheduled to travel to Russia next month, there is a possibility the US will reverse itself and participate in the summit, but the confusion only underscores the great difficulty in aligning the interests of outside powers on Afghanistan.

Certainly, while the US is a pre-eminent actor in the Afghan impasse because of its military and economic commitments to the Afghan state and its diplomatic heft on the global stage, the regional dimension of the problem means that Pakistan can and should take the lead in finding a negotiated solution.

In the failed dialogue process of 2015 and a second attempt pre-empted by the US killing the Taliban leader Mullah Mansour in a drone attack in 2016, Pakistan has over the last several years at least demonstrated its preference for a negotiated settlement and a willingness to help achieve that.

Now, following a China-led peace attempt having fizzled out because of vicious militant attacks in Kabul, the Moscow summit presents an opportunity to reignite a stalled Afghan peace process and counter the violent and growing cross-currents of the regional militancy. Peace may be elusive, but the alternative is unthinkable.

Perhaps even if a peace process cannot immediately be started — the past month has seen a new low in Pak-Afghan ties that is only now beginning to be repaired, and bilateral tensions have an obvious potential to scuttle a possible dialogue — a fresh series of consultations amongst regional and international countries can help develop a framework in which the Afghan government and the Taliban can eventually achieve reconciliation.

The Taliban have been remarkably consistent in their demands over the years. From the release of prisoners to removal from UN black lists and the eventual total withdrawal of foreign forces, there is a phased negotiation process that can be conceived before arriving at the hard negotiations over the constitution, the eventual political set-up and, possibly, power-sharing.

No such clarity is apparent on the other side. Besides the end of violence and, before that, possibly a cessation of Taliban attacks in Kabul, there is little trace of even a possible roadmap to peace. Perhaps the imminent Moscow process can focus on that.

Mid-course changes

FAR too many of the mega projects being implemented by the government face mid-course changes that profoundly affect the cost structures and timelines. From the Nandipur power project to the coal-fired power plants in Thar, to name only a few, midway changes have seen technology that is different from the one stipulated in project documents, or alterations made to the proposed waste disposal sites. It has become almost routine now to get a project approved on the basis of a hastily done calculation, then make revisions during implementation, causing costs to spike or delivering unbudgeted savings to the sponsor because the tariff had been approved at higher cost. Now we are seeing the same trend repeat itself with the LNG terminal in Gwadar.

The original approvals that were given to the project involved purchasing a regasification unit, but now the government wants to lease it instead. Some aspects of the project's structure have also been modified, necessitating a return to the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council for approvals. Pointed questions should be asked about the reason behind the changes. If the original project design was flawed, then why was it presented for approval in the first place? In projects of this scope, involving hundreds of millions of dollars in expenditure, mid-course changes imply a lack of professionalism. If a leased arrangement was better than purchasing a regasification unit, why did the original proposal seek to purchase one? If the project is better off being implemented in integrated form all the way to its terminus in Nawabshah, then why was the pipeline originally presented as separate from the terminal? Mid-course revisions have the effect of diminishing transparency and fuel suspicions of wrongdoing, besides leaving one with the clear impression that important matters are being pursued in haste. Already the Chinese projects under CPEC have

bypassed government procurement rules and are not open to competitive bidding. If government-mandated transparency rules are further subverted by circumventing approvals through midway changes, it only means that the entire project is being executed in the dark. Given the enormous impact that even minute and highly technical details can have on the final cost, which is ultimately borne by the consumers, it is imperative that each of the technical and financial parameters agreed to at the outset be adhered to, or the project be returned for fresh approvals.

Sindh's education woes

SINDH Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah seems finally to have woken up to one of the most pressing challenges facing the province, and the country: the abysmal state of the public education sector. Presiding over a meeting to review the overall performance of the education department on Wednesday, he observed that illiteracy was the basic problem behind all our woes. This can be considered something of an overstatement, but of two facts there can be absolutely no doubt: first, progress requires an educated and skilled workforce that must at the very least have basic literacy at its command, and second, Pakistan has over the decades experienced a steep fall in the quality and quantity of educational services it provides to the population. This can be blamed on a variety of reasons, including the low allocation of funds and a scarcity of resources, as well as a lack of commitment at the administrative level to bring about tangible improvements; the rate of population growth too has played a role. In some areas, schools are too far for children to travel to; there are schools without basic infrastructure such as toilets and drinking water facilities, as well as 'ghost' schools that exist only on paper or 'non-functional' schools where staff doesn't bother to show up, in many cases despite continuing to draw a salary. The sins of omission and commission are many, in Sindh and the rest of the country, and the bottom line is this: neither the state nor provinces are fulfilling their constitutional obligation to have every child in school.

So the fact that the chief minister has directed the education department to ensure that the problems are fixed, be it the provision of infrastructure or curriculum reform or the availability of scholarships, must be welcomed. Yet it is hoped that the resolve is not eventually exposed as mere rhetoric. Fixing Sindh's education woes involves a multi-pronged strategy of considerable proportions. Has Mr Shah the determination to make it happen?

The Reko Diq disaster

THE drama that has surrounded the grant of a mining lease for the Reko Diq copper and gold mine has refused to subside, and the biggest loser in the affair is, unfortunately, the economy of Pakistan. Mining leases are always a controversial affair, particularly in third world countries that lack the geological and financial expertise to be able to independently price mineral resources. Pakistan has a poor track record in its minerals sector, which is largely controlled by small-scale contractors who operate more like racketeers than professional mining concerns. This is the reason why coal reserves in Thar have lain untapped ever since they were discovered, why rich mineral mines in Balochistan are either shut, or operated by crude contractors who use highly destructive extraction techniques. This is also the reason why outlandish claims suddenly find wide circulation in our public discourse, such as when the prime minister showed up in Bahawalpur claiming that enough gold has been discovered there to solve all our problems, or when the government plowed billions of rupees into a scam of a coal gasification project in Thar.

So it was almost inevitable that when a mining lease was granted in Reko Diq, it would become controversial from the outset. Without a sound geological profession in Pakistan, and with practically no expertise in pricing underground mineral resources, any claim by anybody with a morsel of information could be used to drive the controversy. So we were told that the equity sharing relationship in the transaction is all wrong, that the royalty negotiated is far too low, that the value of the reserves in the area is far higher than what we are being led to believe. Confusion was easily generated when the original company to which the lease was given sold its stake to another company rumoured to be a 'front' for another massive international gold-mining giant.

Yet the central fact at play here is that minerals in the ground are utterly worthless if they are not extracted, refined, and brought to the market. Pakistan clearly lacks the expertise to do this by itself, so there is no choice but to reach out to international players. As soon as we do that, we enter into a world that is profoundly unfamiliar to us. The logical thing to do would be to hire the expertise that is needed to negotiate a good contract. But once given, contracts have to be honoured unless strong evidence exists of wrongdoing. At the moment, the government appears to be losing its battle to regain Reko Diq from the Tethyan Copper Company because it cannot produce strong evidence of wrongdoing. This episode will either discourage other investors from dealing with Pakistan, or drive up the cost due to enhanced 'country risk'. It is always worth bearing this in mind when proceeding against a foreign investor.

Mubarak rehabilitated

ON Friday, Hosni Mubarak, the former Egyptian strongman whose fall from power was one of the early — though truly pyrrhic — victories of the Arab Spring, went home a free man. Earlier this month, he had already been cleared by a court of involvement in protesters' deaths in 2011; on Friday, Mr Mubarak was allowed to leave a military hospital where he had been detained and proceed to his private residence. Indeed this 'rehabilitation' of the former dictator signifies the fact that despite the hopes and aspirations the mass uprisings across the Arab world had created in 2011, the ancien régime in nearly all states is still very much alive and in charge. Mr Mubarak ruled Egypt with an iron fist for three decades, only to fall in 2011 after thousands of Egyptians took to the streets to call for representative rule. The halcyon days of the Egyptian 'revolution' were, however, short-lived as the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Mohamed Morsi — who was modern Egypt's first democratically-elected ruler — was sent packing by the military one year after Mr Morsi took oath as president. Since then, the generals have been back in power in Cairo, ruling with a civilian facade, while Egypt's masses continue to toil under difficult circumstances.

Mr Mubarak's freedom is not the only reminder that the Arab Spring has failed to usher in a new, peaceful Middle East. Syria is in ruins, as the opposition movement against Bashar al-Assad morphed into a brutal civil war that was soon taken over by extremists such as the militant Islamic State group and the offspring of Al Qaeda. Yemen, where another strongman, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was sent packing, has also descended into a grinding civil war, in which the Saudis intervened militarily to check the Houthi militia, whom Riyadh considers to be a proxy of its archrival Iran. The Saudis' destructive bombing forays have exacted a high civilian toll in Yemen, and have failed to restore their Yemeni allies to power. Elsewhere in the Arab world, kings, potentates and presidents-for-life continue to lord it over the people, with no chances of representative rule emerging. To make matters worse, extremists have entrenched themselves in large areas of Iraq, Syria, the Sinai and Yemen. Unfortunately, there is very little at present to give hope to the Arab masses: their societies are in disarray, while the international order has also been rocked by the rise of narrow populism.

Unending ordeal

IN 2015, when the Kasur child abuse scandal came to light, one of the victims, a teenager who had been sodomised for eight years, had said he contemplated killing himself every single day. A report in this paper on Monday revealed the victims' continuing struggle to rebuild their lives. In the two years since the story broke, most of them have stopped going to school. Others have left their village and quit jobs, even changed their identities. Survival means the past must remain a secret. The crime was horrific: large numbers of children were filmed while being sexually abused, and parents blackmailed over the footage. That these children have not been offered rehabilitation opportunities promised by local authorities, including therapy intervention, is evidence of the government's shameful indifference towards child rights. The trauma that the victims have endured can have long-lasting effects on their psyche, and lead to multiple problems. Sexual abuse is a risk factor for borderline personality disorder, depression and anxiety. Abused children are more liable to repeat the cycle of abuse as adults. Economic consequences often include costs associated with increased juvenile and adult criminal activity, mental illness and domestic violence. While some of the perpetrators in the case have been convicted, the authorities should also have ensured that police officials who had failed to lodge complaints were also punished.

On average, 11 children are abused every day, according to a report by Sahil, an organisation campaigning against child sexual abuse. Almost half of the victims are between six and 15 years. In certain conservative communities, where discussion about sexual matters is taboo, child rape is not understood for the violent crime that it is. Public messaging campaigns to address such misperceptions and safe centres for reporting child rape are needed. Rehabilitation opportunities through education and employment will help victims abandoned by their communities. And access to trained counselors in district clinics is an essential component for recovery. The state must do its duty by victims of child sexual abuse.

New lease of life for old suspicions

The continuing furore over the events leading up to the Abbottabad raid in which Osama bin Laden was killed is perhaps inevitable given the unwillingness of all sides to publicly acknowledge the issues.

Consider the latest twist in the public debate. In response to a leaked letter purporting to show that the then-PPP government conspired to presumably allow US spies into the country en masse, former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has demanded an explanation for how Bin Laden lived undetected inside Pakistan for many years and how US forces were able to penetrate Pakistani airspace and launch a ground operation.

Mr Gilani is right, but his riposte does not address the principal though unspoken allegation against the PPP: the security establishment's concern that alleged secret cooperation between the PPP and the US government was meant to somehow either undermine the military's authority or subvert the national interest.

Therein lies the problem. The historical civil-military strife reached another high point in the early years of this decade as Pak-US relations plunged to another low. Bin Laden was the world's most wanted terrorist, so merely helping to track him down should not have been cause for a significant civil-military rupture.

The Bin Laden episode, then, was an indication of a deeper malaise: the civil and military sides of the state had drifted apart to the extent that both sides believed the other was out to harm it. Indeed, in the dredging up of allegations that the PPP facilitated American spies, the original fear is detectable — namely, that the US was interested in far more than simply tracking down Al Qaeda and was perhaps conducting espionage against India- or Afghan-centric jihadi groups tolerated by the state here at the time, or even gathering information on Pakistan's nuclear programme.

Therefore, any political facilitation to the American effort, even if narrowly focused on Al Qaeda, was viewed with immense suspicion and hostility by the security establishment.

Whether the political government was unduly careless or the security establishment overly paranoid can perhaps be answered with the unveiling of the Abbottabad Commission report. Mr Gilani was again correct in demanding that the report be made public — the people deserve to know the facts and the state needs to absorb the lessons from the tumultuous Bin Laden episode.

But the current national furore suggests that the more fundamental questions, about who is to steer national security and foreign policies and based on which principles, remain contested.

Ideally, the civilian and military leaderships should find a way of working together until constitutionally mandated civilian leadership in all policy domains becomes the norm.

However, harmful old suspicions still appear to lurk in the background, undermining the trust of both sides in the other. The true national interest cannot be served if legitimate policy differences are either denied or regarded as anti-state.

Monetary policy

THE latest monetary policy statement released by the State Bank shows the economy in the midst of a very mixed trend, with demand and investment both rising, but the current account deficit ballooning. The State Bank says that the nascent growth in the economy has pushed imports higher, while growth in remittances and “lack of any sustained improvement in exports” has caused the deficit to rise to \$5.5bn. In the past, inflows under the financial account helped paper over current account deficits, but this time even though “net financial flows remained higher, these were not sufficient to finance the current account deficit”. We are told that with recent policies designed to boost exports and curb non-essential imports, “the current account deficit may be contained in the coming months”, but it has been some time since these measures were announced and their impact is not yet making itself felt. In the absence of any other policy interventions, the growing current account deficit could undermine the nascent growth achieved since 2013, and deserves stronger attention, particularly from the State Bank.

It would be easier to buy the State Bank’s assessment that the difficulties on the current account are only temporary, and simply the natural price to pay for rising growth and investment, if we had not heard this story before. It is worth remembering that the State Bank was saying much the same thing from 2004 onwards, when the current account deficit began to balloon, and the promised boost in exports that we were told will come once the imported machinery begins commercial operations did not arrive in quantities sufficient to balance the gaping deficit. This time the vulnerabilities are larger because the growth impetus given to the economy through the large financial inflows over the past three years is meagre by comparison to what we saw in the middle 2000s, and large-scale outflows are set to begin once the Chinese projects start commercial

operations. The declining reserves need to be taken more seriously by the State Bank. In the closing months of the fiscal year, if the current account deficit continues to show deterioration, whether or not the ensuing gap is bridged with debt creating financial inflows, we will know that this is the fiscal year when the tide began to turn. External difficulties have engulfed growth spurts in the past, and we need to know why this time round things will be different.

Scourge of domestic abuse

THERE are times when true stories and research come together to graphically illustrate grim reality. On Friday, a two-day seminar concluded after discussing the findings of a new study on the perils of being female. Entitled Intimate Partner Violence and Men in South Asia: From Research to Action, the study finds that while laws do exist that refer specifically to violence against women and domestic abuse, the policies in Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh (the focus of the study) are fragmented and poorly implemented. Resultantly, this is an endemic problem, fed in great measure by patriarchy and male notions of masculinity, honour and control. On the very day the discussion at the seminar was reported in the press, another news item bore witness to just such a tragedy: a woman in North Karachi had been strangled to death; the police quoted her husband as having confessed to flying into a fit of rage over her inability to serve breakfast on time. The autopsy found that the woman had regularly been beaten. And the circumstances of the couple's marriage provide insight into yet another dimension in which women's rights are routinely violated: the wife had been 18 years of age, the husband 47, and the union had been arranged according to her father's preferences.

The ugly truth is that Pakistan has, on a policy level, failed to address the issue of violence against women, particularly domestic violence (which is perpetrated outside of the spousal unions too, such as by fathers, brothers and brothers-in-law). Such violence occurs in the shadows and is considered a family's private matter. Legislation has been enacted, but only in Punjab have we seen any real effort deployed towards effective implementation, such as the setting up of helplines and shelters. While the other provinces need to follow suit, an additional fact deserves reiteration: what also and crucially needs to be addressed is patriarchy, and notions of men's 'ownership' of women. For Pakistani women's suffering to be alleviated, social attitudes need to change.

Smuggled cars

IF one wants a better idea of the kinds of distortions that a heavily protected auto sector can create in a country like Pakistan, with porous borders and a massive informal economy, just take a look at the thriving trade in 'Kabuli vehicles' across Balochistan. Informal estimates given by dealers suggest there could be as many as 50,000 smuggled vehicles being driven in Quetta alone. In part, this racket is the product of porous borders and lax law enforcement. But in equal measure, it is also the product of an auto sector that is famously unresponsive to the needs of the lower segments of the market, those looking for a car below the Rs1 million price point. The racket thrives mainly because this vast segment of the market is not served well in Pakistan, while close by are the Gulf countries that offer a rich supply of lightly used cars that any enterprising smuggler can pick up and arrange to have driven over here.

Not only does the racket deprive the state of its share of revenue in the form of customs duties and excise taxes, the vehicles it traffics in are also commonly used by criminals and terrorists. This is why it needs to be reined in, but since it has deep economic roots, the response will need to be more carefully designed than a simple, heavy-handed law enforcement drive. Maybe it is time to consider opening an overland avenue for used cars to be imported into the country, with different duty rates applicable to them, and perhaps restrictions on where these cars can be driven, a scheme similar to the NCP vehicles of the Northern Areas. Ultimately though, the biggest priority here is to find a way to urge the auto assemblers to move beyond serving only elite needs, and also search for profits towards the lower and more populous segments of their consumer market. Clearly, there is a vacuum there which needs to be filled.

Raheel Sharif's reticence

Undeterred by the controversy that the possibility of an appointment had generated, former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif and the government appear to have accepted Saudi Arabia's offer for the retired general to lead the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism.

But the latest criticism of the decision by the PTI and ambivalent comments by senior government officials indicate that there remains a great deal of concern and uncertainty.

Saudi Arabia is clearly an important ally of Pakistan and the IMAFT should be assessed on its merits. With 39 countries reportedly on board — though it remains unclear which

countries are willing to provide troops — and the seemingly determined backing of the Saudi leadership, the IMAFT could become an important platform to fight terrorism and extremism in the Muslim world.

At the very least, there is a need for greater coordination and cohesion among Muslim-majority states, but the moribund Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, though it has a larger membership than the IMAFT, does not appear to be in a position to forge such a consensus.

Yet, there remains too much that is unknown about Pakistan's role in the IMAFT and its overall goals. The PTI's response to the government's decision and the ambivalence shown by some government officials suggest a continuing concern inside Pakistan: is the real purpose of the alliance to combat all forms of militancy, whatever hue and colour, or to pull countries closer into the Saudi orbit of influence and away from Iran?

Given Gen Raheel's experience with militancy and expertise in counter-insurgency and counterterrorism measures, a purposeful, empowered, all-embracing IMAFT could have a significant impact. It is puzzling, then, that the government and Gen Raheel himself have preferred a veil of secrecy instead of frankly and publicly stating the policy objectives.

As a retired military chief seeking a high-profile job that will likely involve a great deal of shuttle diplomacy, why is Gen Raheel not seeking the government's approval to address the media and respond to the misgivings in person? Surely addressing the nation's concerns ought to be the priority.

Similarly, and as rightly demanded by the PTI, why has the government avoided a debate in parliament on its broader policy objectives? Indeed, it was to parliament that the government turned two years ago when Saudi Arabia demanded that Pakistan contribute to the Yemen war effort. And there was an unequivocal parliamentary consensus on the matter — namely, that while Pakistan must do everything it can to protect Islam's holy sites in Saudi Arabia, it was not in this country's interest to be drawn into Middle Eastern conflicts and sectarian proxy wars.

The government's unnecessary evasiveness and the clandestine manner in which Gen Raheel's imminent appointment has been handled have created an impression of secret deals — an impression that must be emphatically dispelled in parliament.

PPP's tired formula

ASIF Ali Zardari is on yet another gold-digging expedition in Punjab, no map for success in hand but with apparently a fair idea that an election may beckon sooner than the date marked in the appointment register. The PPP co-chairman, who usually smothers his sentiments in favour of reconciliatory politics, is suddenly delivering caustic lines as he attempts to set a path for his party members to pursue. Much of what he summons at his command in these demanding moments would rank among rhetoric of the most common order. He says his party has never lost an election in Punjab fairly, an assertion more likely to convey a sense of desperation rather than bring in some instant marks for the PPP. His emphasis on fielding his children to drum up support for a revival of the party may also prompt negative talk — except that in Pakistan, like so many other countries, the prospects of change in a political party's outlook are often, if not always, tied to the young members of the family relieving their elders at the top of the hierarchy. The promise of the children taking over from him may even provide some kind of a hope for a PPP preparing to enter electioneering phase. However, much more needs to be undertaken before the people of Punjab can start taking the PPP seriously again.

Those insistent on reinvigorating PPP in Punjab have not been too imaginative with their remedies. They have largely relied on a formula where the party is cast as a viable left-leaning, progressive option. Reams of paper have been wasted on longingly recalling the PPP's original ideology without as much as a silent acknowledgement from the crowd in the country's most populous province. A more realistic approach which deals with the idea of such a revival on the national level brings into sharp focus the performance of the PPP set-up in Sindh. At the cost of sounding repetitive, this is exactly where Mr Zardari's focus should be instead of him spending his energies on roaring, supposedly Punjabi-style, for the intended amusement of the gallery. If Mr Zardari and family are really serious about renewing the party's fortunes, they could do well by suspending all talk about the shining dynasty and glorious sacrifices by the martyrs and search deep and long for a twist in the story, a hitherto elusive spark hidden somewhere that can inspire the people.

Regulators and transparency

IN a string of similar court actions, the Islamabad High Court has now told the government that shifting the regulators under their respective line ministries is an action that requires wider approvals and cannot be undertaken simply through an executive notification. The order is not going to have any impact since the shifting of the regulators had not yet begun due to two similar orders issued by the Peshawar and Lahore high courts earlier in February. So with the latest order, the notification to move five key regulators to their respective line ministries now stands struck down thrice. Few notifications have suffered such comprehensive defeat in the courts. The government should take note of the fact that unilateral actions of this sort that can have wide ranging impact if implemented, ought to be undertaken with consensus and wider public awareness about their intentions and the objectives that they are supposed to serve. One is reminded of the hastily issued notification that sought to change PIA's corporate structure, which also sparked a destructive series of consequences leading ultimately to a humiliating withdrawal of the order.

With the power sector in the midst of a massive expansion and investment spurt, the importance of transparency in key decisions becomes even more important. There are far too many decisions of a technical nature strongly impacting the rights of the consumer that have to be taken during the course of this process. Matters that may sound mundane, such as what costs to allow as pass-through items and which ones must be borne by the project sponsor, can end up shifting the burden of inefficiency and misgovernance of the power sector onto the consumer. The oil and gas sector has similarly seen a big push to pass the cost of 'unaccounted for gas' onto consumers. The temptation to slowly and steadily transform the power and natural gas system into a surrogate revenue apparatus, through a series of incremental steps whose financial impact can add up to hundreds of billions of rupees annually, must be resisted at every forum.

The power sector needs to undergo far-reaching reform in the next few years to be able to absorb the volume of investment that is coming into it. Most importantly, this reform must touch on pricing, and allow a greater role for market forces to set power prices rather than relying on the outmoded methodology of upfront and cost-plus pricing being followed currently. In order to undertake this reform, the government needs to ensure that the wider roadmap being followed is publicly communicated. This will prevent suspicions from engulfing every move. But if these reforms are pursued in the dark, with a small number of people in the know, then we can expect to see more notifications suffer the same fate as this one.

Full disclosure

THE decision last week by Chief Justice Mansoor Ali Shah of the Lahore High Court to publicly disclose the salary and perks he receives, and to appoint a public information officer for the court under the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013, is laudable. And it ought to be emulated by other institutions across the political, bureaucratic and institutional spectrum. The principle at stake is straightforward: income and perks provided by the state are the people's money and ought to be publicly disclosed. Unhappily, that principle has been undermined by all institutions over the decades and a debate on rationalising salaries and perks has been avoided. True, the reality of the marketplace and populist sentiment can sometimes collide. Chief Justice Shah's remuneration may be regarded as high by some sections in a country where poverty is still endemic and the minimum wage relatively low. Yet, the need to attract competent, professional and scrupulous judges is also apparent as is the competition that the public sector faces from the private sector for recruitment. As with institutions and the public sector across the world, there is a balance that must be struck. Openness and transparency can help get the balance right.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty is in the matter of land. The state providing land at subsidised rates to individuals in public service is a controversial practice that needs to be urgently reassessed. In this regard, the focus can sometimes be on the military, but the practice extends to other institutions too, especially the bureaucracy. Indeed, there exists no comprehensive list of who in public service is entitled to subsidised or free land. On occasion, there are short-lived controversies of residential land allotments to retired bureaucrats, judges or military officers, but never an across-the-board policy reassessment. The reasons for that are mundane but pernicious. A political class steeped in patronage does not view land distribution as a problem and may even consider it advantageous. Beneficiaries in the bureaucracy and judiciary have an incentive to continue the system. And, of course, a military rooted in colonial-era practices and attitudes towards land sees allotments as both necessary and highly prized. Change will be slow in coming, but it is inevitable. The ongoing census may reveal a dramatic growth in the country's population and even conservative estimates suggest the pressures on land are already intense. Adequate compensation for public officials is necessary; excessive compensation wrong.

Mosul ‘collateral damage’

THE battle to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul from the clutches of the militant Islamic State group has been particularly grinding. The difficulty faced by the American/Iraqi coalition in retaking Mosul has been illustrated by the fact that while the campaign was launched last October, a considerable portion of the city still remains under IS control. In fact, the campaign has been marked by a slow advance by the Iraqi/US forces, street by street, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. However, in recent days, disturbing reports have begun to emerge from Mosul concerning the deaths of civilians in coalition air strikes. The US has acknowledged recent air strikes in which around 100 civilians are said to have perished; Iraqi officials say the final death toll could cross 200. A similar pattern has been witnessed in Syria, where the US is also targeting IS, albeit without coordinating with the Syrian government. Around 50 people were killed in an American air strike earlier this month; while the US says it targeted a meeting of Al Qaeda militants, independent observers say a mosque full of civilians was hit.

War is indeed grim business and when confronted with enemies such as IS and Al Qaeda — who have no qualms about using non-combatants as shields — governments have a difficult task to not harm civilians while battling militants. However, such a large number of civilian deaths as ‘collateral damage’ is unacceptable. It appears that since Donald Trump moved into the White House, he has given his generals more latitude in carrying out strikes; one monitoring group says there has been a considerable rise in the number of civilian deaths in Iraq and Syria in December, the last month of the Obama administration, and in March, under Trump’s command. Both the US and Iraq need to make more stringent efforts to protect civilians as they move to dislodge IS. Or else civilians will be caught between the murderous militants and governments that mow them down while trying to ‘liberate’ them.

Populism and platitudes on display

AN immutable law of politics is once again on display in the country: when one side is attacked, the other must respond. PPP supremo Asif Zardari’s broadside against the PML-N and the government’s performance in Punjab elicited a response from Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif — himself on a trip to Sindh — a reaction spurred on perhaps by the installation of a politically more active governor in the province. Now, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has written to the prime minister to object to the alleged favouritism the federal government is showing to Punjab by disproportionately locating new natural gas distribution projects in Mr Sharif’s home province, a move that Mr Shah

has alleged violates the Constitution. While there exists a framework for disputes over natural resources between the provinces to be resolved, the heated political rhetoric on both sides suggests a troubling pattern.

Perhaps the PPP anticipates that an early election may be held and perhaps the PML-N is keen to demonstrate in the run-up to the general election scheduled for next year that the ruling party is not focused only on Punjab. But as a third election in the decade-old transition to democracy approaches, it does not appear that either of the country's historical governing parties has been able to nudge the level of political discourse towards greater sophistication. While all parties have to court votes and a degree of populism is inherent to the electoral process, the danger in Pakistan is that an unchanging style of politics may trigger disillusionment among the electorate and potentially undermine the democratic project itself. The cynical politics on display in recent days borders on the nonsensical. The PPP led by Asif Zardari is in search of political crumbs outside Sindh because of the disastrous reputation the party has built for itself since 2008. No amount of aggressive commentary and platitudinous speech-making by Mr Zardari will change that reality.

For Mr Sharif and the PML-N, the lack of interest in politics outside Punjab has been apparent over two election cycles, and it will take more than late, campaign-style dashes to Sindh to shed what has become a firm and indisputable political reality. In nearly four years of rule at the centre, Mr Sharif has yet to shake the perception that many of the CPEC projects and the vast infrastructure spending in the country have disproportionately benefitted Punjab and are set to further do so. True, as Pakistan's richest and most populous province, a growing Punjab can have positive spillover effects for the other provinces and the federation. The PML-N government at the centre has vigorously denied the allegations and there may be some merit in its responses to some of the wilder accusations against it. But a prime minister seeking to govern from a narrow provincial political base does not serve the greater interests of the federation.

Moving too fast?

THIS is a repeat of the repeat of the repeat. Just when Pakistan Railways was getting all the right reviews an accident has occurred, this time at Sheikhpura, killing at least three and injuring several. Khawaja Saad Rafique's journey as railways minister has been replete with sweet, satisfying runs that are invariably followed by bad news. It is like a formula film whose director is setting the audience up for an abrupt advent of tragedy by first throwing in a healthy dose of feel-good sequences. The railways under the talkative minister is said to have come out of its moribund state and moving towards

a stage where a transformation can at least be hoped for. So much about the trains has improved; the time register, to begin with. Freight traffic that had come to a virtual halt before the PML-N government took over has improved. Passenger trains have been turned around just when they were about to depart the scene, and passenger confidence has been sufficiently restored to ensure a sizeable portion of estranged and wary travellers have returned to the railways ticket offices. All this has been made possible by big investment, not of just money but of ideas. To compare; at one time the number of passenger trains leaving the Lahore junction, where Pakistan Railways is headquartered, had dropped to around 50 from a peak of more than 100. Plenty of revamping later, the figure now stands just short of 90.

Therein lies the contrast. It is indeed successes like these which make everyone wonder as to why the current, very active setup is so lacking in effectively addressing a fundamental problem, that of safety. One possible short answer to this may be that like so many other typical PML-N advances the railways initiative, too, suffers on account of speed. The government is keen on doing the job and it is eager to do it fast, in the process having little time to deal with some basic issues that need elaborate strategy arrived at after long deliberations. The minister in charge says security involves many more than just the railways. But this is a very powerful government, capable, surely, of ridding the train routes of dangers bred by too much activity and too lax security around the rail tracks, which were on the verge of being abandoned in recent years. It should also concentrate on this aspect with single-minded commitment.

In memory of Edhi

A NEW commemorative coin in memory of Abdus Sattar Edhi is a fitting tribute to a man who spent his life in the service of the most disadvantaged amongst us. The coin will be issued in limited quantity only, with a denomination of Rs50. There is no monetary value one can attach to the services rendered by this saintly man however, and one can only hope that, after doing this, the government might want to honour his memory by drawing inspiration from his example as well. After all, in the course of piling honours upon him and his memory, it is easy to forget that in providing essential services to the poor he filled a space that the state had abandoned. Our previous commemorative coins have been in remembrance of people who have left a political legacy — the Quaid-i-Azam, Allama Iqbal and Benazir Bhutto — or to mark milestones such as the country's 50th anniversary. This is the first time that a coin has been minted in memory of a non-political figure who embodied the most basic values that we should all aspire to live by.

Most commemorative coins have limited circulation, eventually becoming collectors' items since they are cast in small quantities. It is hoped the same will happen in this instance too. Edhi's memory does not deserve to be turned into a medium of exchange in retail transactions, tossed from hand to hand with casual disregard. More specifically, if the coin is of a large denomination; large denomination coins and currency notes need to be strongly discouraged because they facilitate a cash economy. Hopefully the State Bank will issue the coin only once, in a tribute to the ambiguous blend of the ephemeral and the eternal that the lives of great human beings represent. Edhi deserves to be remembered for his deeds, and honoured with emulation. Hopefully the federal cabinet, that approved issuing this coin, will also reflect on how it can live up to the standards set by him.

Power sector tussle

AFTER what appeared to be a recovery since 2013, the power sector seems to be headed back to a situation where it is choked with debt and gripped by antagonism between power producers and the purchaser. The Private Power Infrastructure Board has addressed the power producers in strong language, accusing them of trying to "malign the government" after the producers had taken out an advertisement threatening to invoke their sovereign guarantees if their outstanding bills were not paid promptly. The PPIB described the advertisements as "ill-founded, baseless, disparaging, malicious and false statements", and went on to say that the power producers were trying to cause "panic, unrest and distress...to harm the national interests" and that this action "amounts to creating civil unrest". Clearly, the gloves are off. The tussle is not restricted to words only. The power producers have already activated their sovereign guarantees, which for the moment the PPIB has managed to fend off on a technicality.

This situation cannot, and must not be allowed to, continue for much longer. In many ways it hearkens back to the years of the previous government that saw big tussles between power producers and the government, due mainly to the circular debt. But as the Secretary Water and Power has pointed out in a recent article, the circular debt grows out of multiple cash streams, for which different parts of government are responsible. Holding together a sector that depends in part on subsidies paid by the finance ministry, on tariffs and targets decided by Nepra, on tax refunds processed by the FBR, on fuel shipments and payments managed by the ministry of petroleum and so on, can become so complicated that a failure in one part of the system quickly causes bills to accumulate in another part.

To reform this entire unwieldy enterprise was one of the central promises made by the PML-N government. They made the promise in their campaign; they repeated it after the first mammoth circular debt retirement with which they began their term; and again when they made their first approach to the IMF. But since then, talk of reform subsided and the management of the power sector moved ahead with a few changes, but no large-scale reforms. This approach, business as usual with a little tinkering at the margins, now appears to have run its course. Another large-scale settlement may soon be required, and since the PML-N is counting on winning the next election with the massive megawatts from the new CPEC plants, it will need to ensure that all turbines in the system are revving at full capacity. All the focus that the party has given to the power sector has been on adding more megawatts, with not enough attention given to reforming pricing and system structure. The bill from the neglect is now piling up.

The boys' clubs

In a country where women's rights and their contributions are generally disregarded, if not actively trampled, the findings of a recent report on their representation in the corporate sector are hardly shocking.

It appears that of the 559 listed firms on the Pakistan Stock Exchange, only 21 have female directors on their boards — a dismal number given that their male colleagues number some 4,000. Similarly, a mere 32 independent female directors sit on the boards of other, non-listed, companies.

This aspect of the corporate world came under discussion on Wednesday in Karachi at a ceremony at the PSX held to support the agenda of Women on Board-Pakistan. Predictably enough, speakers said that female executives ought to be offered greater opportunities to climb the corporate ladder, and pointed out that 162 female executives had trained and qualified under the directors' training programme initiated by the Pakistan Institute of Corporate Governance.

This is unsurprising, because at such high levels of power, whether in the corporate world or in other sectors, there is no shortage of those paying lip service to gender equality and many who perhaps genuinely believe that men and women should have equal opportunities in the workplace. As always though, the devil lies in the detail.

When it comes to women-friendly policies at the institutional level, such as paid

maternity leave, a workplace free of harassment and a gender-blind promotion structure, most are found lacking.

The recent appointment of Sima Kamil as the head of United Bank Limited is heartening — but it is an anomaly. And yet why single out the corporate sector alone for operating like a boys' club when parallels can be found everywhere, the realm of politics being amongst the most obvious.

There is much patting of backs in Pakistan over the fact that this was the first country in the Muslim world to elect a female prime minister. Her achievements notwithstanding, though, the sad fact remains that women that do participate actively in politics tend to be allowed to do so on the coattails of their fathers or husbands.

It is a matter of record that despite their numbers being low, women's performance outstrips that of their male colleagues in the assemblies; even so, political parties remain reluctant to nominate women for general seats.

Pakistan is of course not alone in this imbalance vis-à-vis women's participation in the workforce; but there is no doubt that the glass ceiling is lower here.

Unsafe mode of travel

THE public transport dilemma in Pakistan encourages many to dream up out-of-the box solutions. While some of these solutions, such as the introduction of ride-sharing services in our cities, have eased the public's burden to some extent, others, such as the proliferation of motorcycle-rickshaws, or Qingqis, raise valid questions of public safety. After the Sindh High Court had earlier ordered the vehicles off the roads, on Wednesday the Supreme Court allowed Qingqis to be operated across the country, but with an important caveat. Only those motorcycle-rickshaws that are produced by government-approved manufacturers will be allowed to ply the roads. Certainly, it can be argued that the livelihood of thousands of drivers who operate these vehicles is in question and that Qingqis offer commuters an affordable alternative to packed and too few buses, especially in Karachi. However, these concerns cannot trump the issue of safety, which is where these flimsy and dangerously unstable contraptions, that are essentially retrofitted motorcycles, fall far short of any acceptable standards of roadworthiness.

This where the court judgement could have gone further, for the state must do more

than ensure that motorcycle-rickshaws that are allowed to operate are produced by government-approved manufacturers. It must also require these vehicles to have standardised structures certified by a body such as the Pakistan Engineering Development Board. This is essential if the life and limb of passengers is to be protected, for travelling at high speeds, Qingqis with their rickety structures can turn into deathtraps for commuters should a mishap occur. There is yet another aspect of safety that necessitates keeping souped-up Qingqis off the roads. Fashioned as they are from motorcycles, they provide a further impetus to the theft and snatching of two-wheelers. Taking the long view, the core of the problem remains that our cities, especially Karachi, lack a functioning public transport system. While ride-sharing apps are welcome, they are a drop in the ocean and out of reach for the lower-middle and working-class commuter.