

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of November 2017

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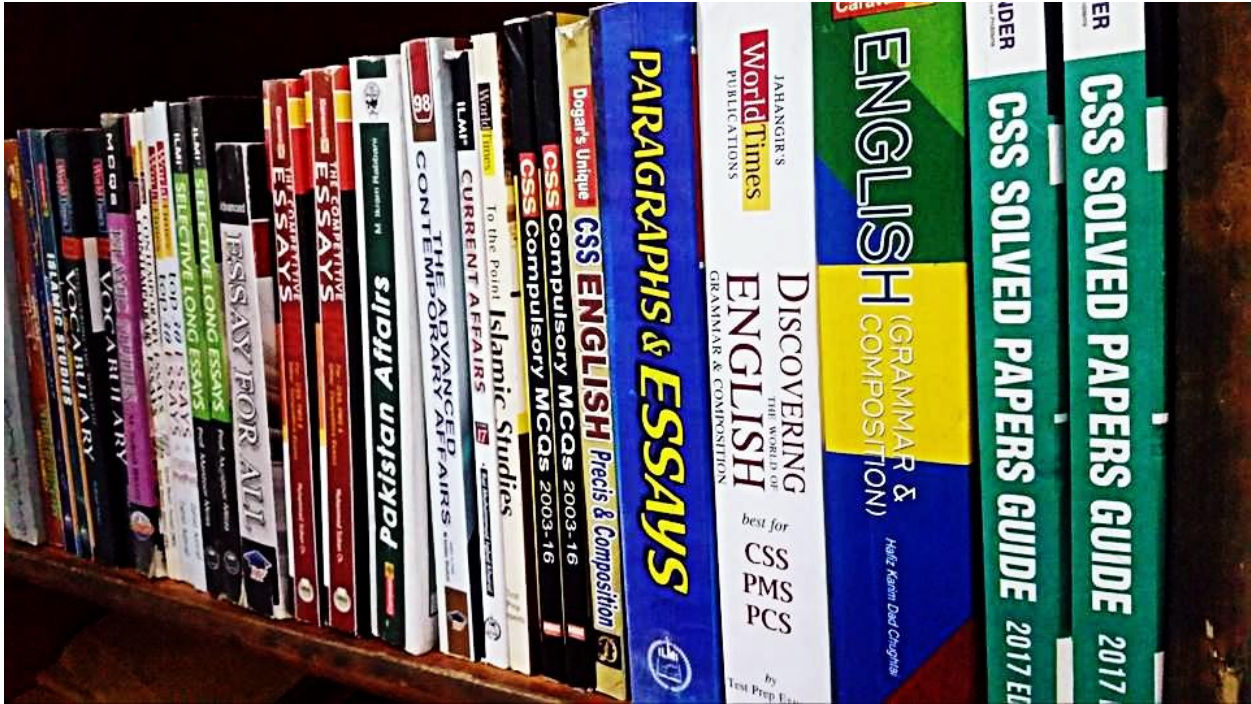
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Questions after PML-N meeting

THE Panama Papers saga is turning into a Sharif family saga that the country neither needs nor deserves at the moment. A Sharif summit in London attended by Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi appears to have been an attempt to paper over the cracks in the Sharif family and the PML-N. It remains to be seen whether former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Prime Minister Abbasi were able to forge a united party strategy, but the London spectacle was awkward enough to raise a number of questions. A key problem is the uncertainty about the elder Sharif's intentions. Did Nawaz Sharif reinstall himself as president of the PML-N as a prelude to forcing a constitutional amendment through parliament that will allow him to contest elections again? If so, does that mean Mr Sharif intends to become prime minister for a fourth time, irrespective of the outcome of his trial in an accountability court?

While there can be legal and normative arguments about the wisdom of such a path taken, there is little doubt that it would deepen the political crisis in the country. At what point do Mr Sharif's personal ambitions and stubbornness become detrimental to the demands of democracy in the country? Or perhaps the principal dispute in the Sharif family and the PML-N is which branch of the family — Nawaz or Shahbaz — will lead the party into the next elections as a prelude to an inter-generational transfer of power? There again, a great deal of the blame for the uncertainty must be borne by Nawaz Sharif himself. If Maryam Nawaz is the former prime minister's preferred heir apparent, Mr Sharif has allowed much confusion on the matter to accumulate. While Ms Nawaz's increasing political profile is no accident, at no point has Mr Sharif expressly spoken of a desire for his daughter to succeed him as party leader. Leaving aside cultural and family nuances, the PML-N is the largest political party in the country and issues of leadership and succession ought to be approached more professionally and transparently.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the Sharif family leadership struggle has left Pakistan with a government only in name. The claim by Mr Abbasi that he had taken a one-day leave from the government to attend the London huddle underlined the extent to which the business of the state has become subservient to intra-PML-N politics. With Nawaz Sharif having pledged to return to Pakistan this week, why could the meeting not be held here? While individually such decisions can seem trivial, collectively they can lead to an erosion of public support

for the political class, which in turn could result in the rise of anti-democratic forces in the country. The PML-N has a right to choose its own leader, but as a governing party, it has responsibilities to the country too.

MQM defection

THE steady drip-drip of MQM-P leaders defecting to the PSP continues. On Sunday, Karachi's Deputy Mayor Arshad Vohra announced his decision to quit the MQM faction headed by Dr Farooq Sattar and join the Mustafa Kamal-led PSP. He claimed that his former party had no vision and that it had failed to meet its promises to the people of the city. It appears the MQM-P leadership was apprehending this very development when it recently threatened en masse resignations of its legislators from the national and Sindh assemblies if more of its lawmakers switched sides. Mr Vohra was being treated as a suspect in the FIA investigation into the money-laundering case against MQM founder Altaf Hussain, and it was only two days after being summoned by the FIA for a grilling about his business transactions etc that he declared his allegiance to PSP.

The circumstances under which Mr Vohra has quit MQM-P clearly illustrate the machinations to influence Karachi's political scenario, an 'intervention' that cannot but have an impact on a wider scale. With his defection in the immediate aftermath of the investigating authorities turning up the heat on him, can one dispute that joining the PSP offers the deputy mayor, at least in his perception, some measure of protection? A number of other MQM legislators have gone down this path since the PSP emerged as a full-fledged rival to the MQM — a party then still capable of 'dealing' with defectors in its own way. The establishment has long used compromised, or allegedly compromised, individuals to further its own agendas. The MQM itself is a good example of this political meddling. First, Gen Zia patronised the original MQM to counter the PPP's ambitions in Karachi. When it overplayed its hand, MQM was cut down to size, and the Haqiqi faction engineered as a 'check' on it. And who can forget Saulat Mirza's 'confession' from death row, containing sensational disclosures about the MQM leadership, that earned him a temporary reprieve? With the party's factionalisation this time around, Altaf Hussain and his cohorts in London have found themselves excised in the bargain. Certainly, the MQM's violent history is well known and those responsible should be held to account. However, the establishment's manipulation of Karachi's

political landscape to 'remodel' the MQM to suit its present requirements will only exacerbate the ethnic divide in the city and alienate millions of those who live there.

S&P on the economy

THE report by the credit rating agency Standard & Poor's that the outlook on Pakistan's economy is 'stable' should inject a little sanity into our economic conversation. Much has been made about the debt levels in the economy, and whether or not there is a 'financial emergency'. The debt levels are indeed high, and given the state of our declining reserves, the debt-service obligations will weigh heavier with each passing month. Even so, it cannot be argued that we are in the midst of a 'financial emergency' or a crisis. Not at this point. However, Standard & Poor's is a credit rating agency that examines a country's ability to service its foreign debt obligations, nothing more. When it says the outlook is stable, what it means is that in the forthcoming year, it sees little likelihood of the country becoming unable to service its external debt. The report says nothing more and nothing less than that.

So if the outlook is stable, it cannot be taken to mean that all is well in the economy, while, at the same time, dispelling the notion that a crisis-like situation is upon us. For our own purposes that go beyond the narrow interests of foreign creditors (since the citizenry and government authorities ought to be worrying about the sustainability of the macroeconomic framework), we need to look at more than what S&P has in order to draw our own conclusions. At the moment, the country's fiscal and external accounts are stressed due to rising power-sector payments, bleeding public-sector enterprises and a rigid revenue base that is choking the domestic investor. Next we need to be concerned about the declining reserves amidst skyrocketing imports and stagnant exports. Taken together, these pressures mean that if the tendencies are not checked in time, they can, at some point down the road, create crisis-like conditions in the country, necessitating an approach to the IMF. Discussions, therefore, need to continue on what corrective responses can be taken now.

Balfour at 100

THIS day marks the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, a brief document signalling imperial Britain's intent to carve out a Jewish state in Palestine. While the Israelis may be celebrating the event, for the native Arab population of Palestine, this infamous document was perhaps the first step in a nightmarish journey that would culminate in the Nakba or 'catastrophe' of 1948, with the founding of the state of Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were, in the years after this declaration, expelled from their homeland, doomed to wander the earth in indefinite exile, or forced to live under the brutal rule of Israel. In the document, Lord Arthur James Balfour, British foreign secretary at the time, wrote to Lord Walter Rothschild, a prominent British Zionist, stating that "His Majesty's Government" viewed with favour "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. ..." British Prime Minister Theresa May has said she will mark the date with "pride". However, the brutalised Palestinians living under oppressive Israeli rule in Gaza, Ramallah and the rest of the occupied territories hardly share Ms May's enthusiasm.

With one stroke of the imperial pen, Britain made a promise to give away land that did not belong to it. In the final years of the First World War, from the crumbling remnants of the Ottoman Empire, the British promised Palestine to the Zionists without taking on board the native Arabs' aspirations. The opposition to the Balfour Declaration and the subsequent founding of Israel should not be seen through the crude binary of Muslim versus Jew; the founding of Israel was unjust because it created a colonialist settler state in the heart of Arab territory, which treated the native Arabs with contempt. While Lord Balfour promised that "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. ...", the fact is that the land itself belonged to "non-Jewish communities in Palestine" and was expropriated. The violence unleashed by Zionist gangs to drive the Arabs from Palestine is part of history. While Jews had lived in Arab societies for centuries, the Zionist entity now sought to ethnically eliminate the Palestinians from their homeland. Moreover, Israel has expanded considerably since its founding in 1948, devouring Arab land with an insatiable appetite.

A major outcome of the Balfour Declaration and the founding of Israel has been the sense of rage felt across the Muslim world at the treatment of the Palestinians. This grave injustice has also played a role in radicalising many across the Muslim world. A century after their nightmare began, there is no sign the Palestinians will

get a homeland — as envisioned in the two-state solution that was agreed upon by the Arabs and Israelis in 1993 — anytime soon. Today, there may be celebrations in Tel Aviv and London, but in Palestine, there are only tears.

Dispute with IPPs

ANOTHER adverse ruling in a court of international arbitration against Pakistan has come in, and this time it does not involve foreign investors. The independent power producers took a case of residual payments owed to them from the time of the great settlement of 2013 to international arbitration in London, as their contracts specify. Their argument was that an independent expert appointed to decide on the status of payments due to them had already decided in their favour, with the report being filed before the Lahore High Court. Since the government continued delaying the payout, the IPPs took their case to London. Now word has arrived that the arbitration court there has not only ruled in favour of the payout, but has also attached interest payments to be paid for the delay, taking the total amount to Rs14bn.

The sum is not large enough to jolt government finances, but still points towards the steep-payments-related dysfunctions cropping up in the power sector. The IPPs will likely have a difficult time actually realising the amount involved in the award since the procedure for getting the order enforced is a long and complicated one. But there is little doubt that they have scored a moral victory and helped highlight the financial constraints that hamper the functioning of the power sector, despite the government's constant claims of having sorted these out. Contracting more generation capacity — to the point where there will soon be a surplus in the country — when the government is unable to make payments on existing capacity, or, as in this instance, on past consumption, illustrates the folly that is guiding our power-capacity expansion plan. On top of that, it is now worth asking when was the last time the government actually managed to win a case of arbitration in an international forum. Undoubtedly, there would be a few examples, but they are overshadowed by a string of adverse rulings in the recent past — from the Reko Diq case to Karkey Karadeniz. These repeated failures in international forums highlight a core dysfunction in our policy environment, where contracts are easily inked and just as easily abrogated, with little to no recourse for the investor. Fixing

such a policy environment is a crucial priority, but that might be too big a job for any single political government.

Teaching for tomorrow

WITH progress in education remaining painfully slow in this country, the focus must be on quality teaching by improving recruitment and retention of teachers. The latest Unesco Global Education Monitoring Report underlines the overwhelming problem of poor teaching, while reiterating the need for government accountability in education. However, it warns against blaming teachers for poor test scores and absenteeism, noting that such censure is unjust and unconstructive. It is purposeless to assign blame to any one stakeholder when teachers and schools cannot work in isolation from government and community input. That said, the education crisis merits the collective attention of politicians, teachers, schools and parents. Meanwhile, Pakistan spends only 2.65pc of its GDP on education. When the level of teachers' pay is linked to the quality of a country's education outcome, lack of money compromises standards. This could not be truer for Sindh where administrators have spent meagrely on salaries and facilities for decades. For the record, the chief minister's latest 'intervention' includes rehabilitating infrastructure and academic quality for 4,524 schools. Given Sindh's abysmal education record, schools sans boundary walls and toilets, and ghost teachers, he has his work cut out.

With 5.5m children out of school, of whom 60pc are girls, most will go through life without basic reading and math skills; only 49pc of grade five students are able to read in English and half of them can do two-digit divisions. However, apportioning blame only to schools is not fair. For inclusive and equitable education it is critical to analyse the impact of culture, student skills, parental support and curriculum. Moreover, the futility of using student test scores to evaluate teachers' performance has been proven. Using this benchmark only means teachers will remain attentive to quick learners for results, and ignore weaker students. Because teachers contribute meaningfully to the lives of tomorrow's nation builders, they must be supported and teaching must be valued as a worthy vocation.

Selective accountability?

IT may be a consensus decision, but it is a wrong one.

All parliamentary parties have rejected including the military and judiciary in the ambit of a new accountability law, dealing a blow to the hopes of a unified, across-the-board accountability mechanism.

There is a twofold objection to including the military and judiciary in the same mechanism as other public servants: both have their own mechanisms that are already functional; and their inclusion in a law covering politicians would threaten to politicise them if the accountability mechanism is manipulated and abused.

However, neither of those reasons are adequate or acceptable.

Arguably, the internal mechanisms of both the military and judiciary are not as effective as they ought to be and since the very purpose of overhauling the regime for public servants is to create an independent and autonomous organisation, the issue of politicisation can be addressed at the outset.

Unhappily, parliament itself has created several excuses for other institutions to keep themselves out of the purview of a new accountability law.

The issue ought to have been addressed years ago, with both the previous PPP-led coalition and the current PML-N government having vowed to introduce a new law.

Instead, all governing parties have found it mutually convenient to drag out the matter, while the PTI has preferred street politics over federal legislative strengthening.

And with parliament taking up the matter of accountability in the midst of Nawaz Sharif's and his family's legal woes and allegations of interference in the democratic process by some state institutions, there may have been doubts about the intentions of the government at the moment.

An across-the-board accountability bill could have become embroiled in Mr Sharif's political war with other institutions.

In the end, parliament has exposed its continuing weakness by not even being able to debate the matter or put forward recommendations for a transparent and effective mechanism across all institutions of the state.

Failure at this stage, however, does not mean failure in perpetuity.

If a new national accountability commission with meaningful powers and true autonomy is established and it goes on to effectively carry out the task given to it, the process of accountability in the country could gradually be depoliticised.

Once it becomes clear that parliament has created a good law and the new or overhauled commission is an example of democratic strengthening, it may become possible to expand the latter's mandate.

To target corruption is not to target institutions; indeed, reining in corrupt officials strengthens institutions.

Parliament is the supreme lawmaking body in the country and uniformity of laws across institutions is a desirable outcome.

If this parliament does not have the courage to implement across-the-board accountability, future legislatures should revisit the matter.

Inquiry into NTS

EVEN in a country where means and connections are often the stepping stones to success, national oversight authorities retain their importance if we are to preserve the few islands of meritocracy that exist.

Recent developments related to the National Testing Service are thus extremely disheartening and suggest that the rot goes much deeper than had been suspected.

On Wednesday, NAB launched an inquiry into the alleged leak of the answer key to the entrance exam for public-sector medical colleges and universities across Sindh on Oct 22.

The issue had sparked protests by parents and students who claimed that the answers were available for sale on social media a few hours before the exam.

Two days after the inquiry was announced, the FBR raided NTS's premises and confiscated its tax records on the grounds of 'irregularities', and reportedly arrested some individuals.

This seemed to be the sequel to a special audit earlier this year which found that the organisation was functioning without a corporate strategy or rules of procurement among other lapses which were conducive to huge misappropriation of funds.

For an organisation responsible for ensuring quality and standardisation across several sectors to be suspected of corruption and deliberately undermining merit is a disgrace.

An oversight authority's workings must be transparent and meet the most exacting standards rather than acquiring the very qualities it is supposed to weed out of the system.

The scope of NTS's work indicates the importance of its role. Aside from admission tests to many higher educational engineering and medical institutes, it also

conducts assessments for scholarships and for recruitment and promotions in both the public and private sectors.

Rumours of malfeasance and ineptitude have swirled around the institution for some time, but things now seem to have come to a head.

NAB has done well to institute what is clearly a long overdue investigation into the shenanigans at NTS.

When deserving people find their path to higher education blocked and the doors of opportunity closed off because people in authority were looking to enrich themselves, disaffection and disillusionment are the result.

They learn a cynical life lesson: dishonesty pays while hard work does not.

The other side, that which benefits from unfair means to obtain admission in higher educational institutions or climb the professional ladder, also takes away the same message.

The long-term result is deleterious and profound, impacting the quality of governance and service delivery.

Smoggy relations

THE noxious smog engulfing large parts of upper Punjab is yet another reminder that Pakistan and India have much to talk about beyond geopolitics.

According to many reports, the smog is coming from the burning of agricultural waste in Indian Punjab, and satellite imagery actually shows the widespread prevalence of the farm fires.

There is little to nothing that the provincial authorities here can do to reduce the intensity of the smog, although much can be done to mitigate its impact, such as issuing alerts and raising awareness about steps that citizens can take to protect themselves from its harmful effects.

In addition, the capacity of public-sector hospitals to deal with smog-related respiratory ailments can also be increased.

But when it comes to actually dealing with the causes, Pakistan needs a channel of communication open with the Indian government, preferably at the provincial level, to raise the matter formally.

It is not clear whether the practice of burning agricultural waste is new and why smog of this kind has not been seen in the longer-term past.

Last year it was there, but the usual smog that has engulfed Punjab's cities comes later in the year, and has been linked by a couple of studies to chemical pollutants produced from coal-fired power plants across the border.

Problems such as pollution, climate change and water flows know no boundaries, and both countries are facing a rising arc of challenges from these with each passing year.

Whatever may be the sentiments on either side, at some point both India and Pakistan will have to talk to each other about these issues, or they will suffer the consequences together.

Given the huge impact that these challenges have on the lives of the masses on both sides of the border, a pragmatic approach is becoming increasingly urgent.

Clarity of mind is needed on both sides before the smog in the air, and in their relationship, can be cleared in a more permanent way.

Delimitation deadlock

THE first shadow has already been cast on the forthcoming general elections as a mysterious deadlock has surfaced among three large political parties over delimitation of constituencies in light of the new census. At issue are three interconnected concerns that are foundational to the conduct of an election. First, the law requires that constituencies be demarcated on the basis of the latest census data, so a comprehensive delimitation exercise has to be undertaken to redraw the constituency map across the board. The ECP has made it clear it needs to have the powers to begin the exercise latest by Nov 10 so that it can be completed by April. This is crucial because after this, electoral rolls need to be drawn up and the filing of nomination papers of candidates needs to commence if the 2018 general election schedule is to be met. Any procrastination with regard to these core tasks that lie at the heart of the electoral exercise could lead to a delay in the general election itself, creating profound uncertainty in the country.

Next to the delimitation exercise, and intimately connected to it, is the question of the total number of seats in parliament and the seat shares belonging to each province. Going by the provisional census data released thus far, Punjab is set to lose nine seats in the National Assembly, while KP will gain five, Balochistan three and Islamabad one; Sindh's share stays constant. This is potent political arithmetic. Thus far, the only thing the leading political parties have managed to agree on is keeping the total number of seats in parliament constant. Beyond that, the Sindh-based parties are contesting the census results, arguing that large-scale undercounting has taken place in their province. And the Election Bill 2017, which must become law to kick-start the process of delimitation, fell prey to a deadlock in the National Assembly on the day that it was introduced.

The deadlock is surprising because it came after two days of consultations among the various parliamentary parties, led by the speaker, during which a consensus was reached. But on the day the bill was introduced, and when it was supposed to be passed, the Assembly had sparse attendance, and at least two of the main parties — the PPP and MQM — had a change of heart, saying they no longer supported the bill. On the second day of debate, attendance was even sparser, and no effort worth its name was expended to break the deadlock. It seems the ruling party has also lost its enthusiasm for the bill as much as the opposition parties from Sindh. Unless this situation changes immediately, and at the moment

there are few signs that it will, the forthcoming election schedule could well hang in the balance.

Jinnah's daughter

passed away in New York on Thursday at the age of 98.

She had only visited Pakistan twice in her lifetime. The first time was when Mr Jinnah passed away on Sept 11, 1948, and the second and last time in 2004 at the invitation of then president Musharraf to witness a cricket match between India and Pakistan.

On that final trip to the country in whose creation her extraordinary father had played such a pivotal role, she visited Lahore and also Karachi, where she laid a wreath at his tomb. But even though she was a distant figure for most Pakistanis, with her death, this country's final, tenuous link with the founder of the nation has gone.

The country must mark her passing with a tribute befitting the Quaid's daughter. All the more is such a gesture called for, given that successive governments did not try to persuade her to live in Pakistan or even visit on a regular basis. In fact, the state that owes so much to Mr Jinnah barely acknowledged her existence.

Much like her parents' marriage which was opposed by the Parsi family of her mother Rattanbai Jinnah, Ms Wadia's own marriage met with resistance from her father, ironically because her prospective husband was a non-Muslim.

That created a rift between father and daughter, at least for some time. Nevertheless, she spent many years with Mr Jinnah — who brought her up after her mother died at the age of 28 — and lived through the tumult of the events leading up to Partition.

Unfortunately, whatever passed between them is now consigned to history, for the daughter was as intensely private as the father to whom she bore a striking resemblance.

As for what she felt about Pakistan and how far it has strayed from Mr Jinnah's vision, no one knows; she only had gracious words for this country. May his dream for Pakistan come true, she wrote in the visitors' book at the Quaid's mausoleum.

Her decision not to live in this country has, among other reasons, long been the target of right-wing ire, a section of which even issued a statement against her when president Musharraf invited her to visit the country. Sadly, the true daughter of the nation was never recognised unreservedly as such, especially by those who have perverted Mr Jinnah's aspirations for Pakistan.

Journalists in danger

IN Pakistan, journalists have to face pressures from both state and non-state actors while carrying out their routine duty ie informing the public of the facts. At times, media workers have paid with their lives, sometimes for upsetting powerful quarters by their reporting. Just in the past few days, a well-known journalist was attacked in the federal capital itself. If a prominent journalist can be attacked with such impunity in the capital, we can only imagine the hazards that district correspondents must face in far-flung towns of the country. It is thus no surprise that Pakistan has been ranked amongst the most dangerous countries of the world for journalists. On Thursday, the Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, advocacy group Reporters Without Borders said Pakistan came in 139th out of 180 countries. Other countries in the region — such as Bangladesh and India — are in the same boat.

While Pakistan does have a free press compared to many other regional states — such as the Gulf sheikhdoms, where even a tweet mildly critical of the state can land one in hot water — the dangers journalists face are still considerable. Those standing in the way of press freedom include elements of the establishment, militant separatist groups, religious extremists, political elements as well as criminals. While the state says it is committed to media freedom, its intentions are made questionable because so few of those who have attacked journalists have been brought to justice. Speakers at a moot in Islamabad on Thursday called for passage of a law to protect journalists. Such a step should be welcomed as it may dissuade those who seek to harm journalists. However, simply passing laws will not be enough: the state must practically demonstrate that it stands by freedom of

the press by probing violence against journalists and punishing the perpetrators. Without these, the state's commitment to the freedom of press and expression will remain suspect.

Red centenary

ONE of the defining moments of the 20th century was the Russian Revolution, in which the ancien regime of the czar was overthrown, to be replaced with a radical Marxist state. The subsequent October Revolution, which led to the establishment of Soviet Russia, would unleash momentous events that would shape much of modern history, including the creation of the USSR and the outbreak of the Cold War in the aftermath of the Second World War. Tomorrow, as we observe the centenary of the October revolt, it would be useful to examine the impact communism had on geopolitics, as the tussle between the Eastern and Western blocs touched nearly every continent.

While the West may indeed have 'won' with the fall of the USSR in 1991, the influence of socialism on global events was significant. It exposed the worst predatory aspects of capitalism and tried to give the worker and the peasant a fairer deal by sharing with them the fruits of their labour. The USSR was also influential in supporting numerous liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America, helping the wretched of the earth throw off the imperial yoke. Socialist states strived to put bread on the citizen's table, along with providing the people health, education and shelter. However, the USSR and the system it championed failed to create a sustainable socialist utopia. Inequalities persisted, especially in certain states where the party bosses lived in luxury while the comrades toiled on. History also witnessed some truly monstrous regimes, such as the bloody rule of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and Ceausescu's repressive state in Romania.

This part of the world was not immune to the East-West tussle. Early on, the Pakistani establishment decided to pin its hopes on the Western bloc, becoming part of US-led defence pacts. India, on the other hand, became a firm Soviet client. The fact that the Pakistani left was riven by internal divisions — especially in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split — did not help matters. In Pakistan, the closest the left came to mainstream power was through the PPP of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, which mixed 'Islamic socialism' with a populist political message. It is also true that this

region suffered, and continues to suffer, because of the East-West conflict, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and the cold warriors of the day, led by president Reagan and Gen Zia, decided to confront the Soviet behemoth. Afghanistan has not seen stability for decades, while Pakistan still reels from the impact of that episode. The Soviet style of socialism may have failed because of the totalitarianism and authoritarianism it promoted, but the fact is that the injustices and class war that socialism highlighted remain relevant even today, and need to be considered by all governments in an attempt to create more just societies.

A century behind

GENDER inequality is so pervasive that it will take a century to close the global gender gap at the current rate of change. This sobering piece of information, according to new research by the World Economic Forum, points to regression in global gender parity at work and in politics. The widening gap is attributed to deeply ingrained gender stereotypes halting progress for half the world's talent pool. The Global Gender Gap Report, the WEF's annual benchmarking exercise, states it will be another 217 years before women achieve economic parity — more than the 170 years calculated in last year's report. The reality that women are underrepresented and underpaid from the start of their careers, and that the gender gap is even wider in senior positions, is very evident in countries such as Pakistan. Measuring progress on the basis of economic, health, education and political indices in 144 countries, the gender gap index lists Pakistan at 143. Given that Pakistan's position on the index has remained constant for two years, this shows increasing levels of discrimination against women. The report is a shameful reminder that women are second-class citizens because myopic policymakers have failed to eliminate the forces behind gender inequality; a plethora of anti-women practices limit society's expectations of what women can or should do.

Depriving women of a voice, of their right to vote, of equal wages, of safe workplaces, etc has had detrimental sociopolitical and economic repercussions. Because gender imbalance has a vast bearing on growth and future economic readiness, policymakers should realise that the country's economic engine is hugely dependent on women's input. The closure of gender gaps should be linked to national policies addressing the lack of education and skills, cultural stereotypes, discrimination at work and the effects of unpaid care and family responsibilities.

Also when women have a political voice, there are more chances of a just society with fewer human rights abuses. For instance, even in the more conservative societies of Fata and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, innovative peace education ventures led by women have helped build social cohesion in some areas. Key to closing the gender gap is increasing female leadership because, as studies show, women hire and mentor female talent — more so than male bosses. If more young women advance to the top — despite the usual resistance — earning the same money and respect as men, then, there's a chance that the playing field will become level for everyone.

Polluted glaciers

POLLUTION caused by vehicles and power plants is wafting up to the mountains in the north, with particulate matter landing on glacial ice, and accelerating its melting. A former head of the Met department is correct in reminding us that building massive roads that cut through the mountains and bring large numbers of smoke-emitting vehicles may sound like a nice idea for raw economic growth, but the environmental impact of this activity needs to be closely considered too. The mountains are a very fragile ecology; it might be necessary to cut roads through them to allow larger flows of traffic, but framing proper environmental guidelines to regulate what kind of vehicles are allowed on the roads should be an important priority. This is not for sentimental reasons alone. Hard economic logic demands that the impact of this vehicular traffic, and the emissions from the plains that are travelling up to high altitudes, be taken seriously because our future hydrology depends on it. The glaciers and the overall water cycle of the mountainous of the north are central to the economy of the plains because this is where the crucial water supplies come from.

However, sentimental reasons for preserving the ecology should not be discounted. The reports one hears of the idyllic streams of the once pristine Khunjerab Pass being choked with plastic garbage and of parking lots being built to accommodate the growing truck and tourist traffic is heartbreaking. Babusar Pass has already been destroyed by massive cottage industry catering to tourist traffic. Deosai will suffer a similar fate. While it's good that domestic tourism is increasing in such parts, care must be taken to provide facilities to ensure the local ecology is not damaged. The same goes for emissions. It is not difficult to develop

a system whereby tourist traffic is only allowed to travel in approved vehicles that undergo yearly emissions tests and to have codes for trucks that wish to ply these roads. We must not trample carelessly on the country's precious glaciers and mountains in a hasty push to increase trade.

Saudi purge

For decades, Saudi Arabia was known for its resistance to change. And even when changes were introduced, the pace of their implementation was often glacial.

However, over the past few months, under orders from Mohammed bin Salman, the young crown prince, change in the kingdom, it appears, has been occurring at breakneck speed.

The events of this past weekend have caused seismic shifts within the Saudi establishment. In one fell swoop, the crown prince has rounded up highly influential figures in the kingdom, including princes, ministers and business magnates.

The reason? An ostensible anti-corruption crusade. A new anti-corruption body was hurriedly put together, with the crown prince as its head, and swiftly went to work rounding up some of the most powerful men in the kingdom.

The people rounded up are no two-bit fraudsters: they include Al Waleed bin Talal, the billionaire prince known for his investments spanning the globe, as well as Saleh Kamel, a non-royal who headed one of the kingdom's top business houses.

Along with the detentions for supposed graft, Mohammed bin Salman had Miteb bin Abdullah, late King Abdullah's son, removed from his position as head of the powerful National Guard that keeps an eye on internal dissent.

At face value, the anti-graft campaign should be welcomed; after all, princes and other powerful Saudis are known to skim off 'percentages' from huge contracts. However, there seems to be more at work here than just a desire to crack down on financial sleaze.

The crown prince appears to be solidifying his grip on power by sidelining potential opponents. Soon after his father Salman became king in 2015, Mohammad bin Salman's uncle Muqrin was relieved from his duties as crown prince. The position then went to Mohammed bin Nayef, his elder cousin. He too was edged out to make way for the monarch's son.

While Saudi Arabia has always been an absolute monarchy, some form of participation in government affairs has existed in the shape of power-sharing agreements between leading princes, the clerics and tribal chiefs. However, the Saudi heir seems to be upending these decades-old arrangements in favour of total control.

Indeed, he seems impatient to implement his reform agenda and replace the elder generation with fresh blood. However, alienating other power centres, indeed trying to neutralise them, may actually hamper any attempts at reform as internal divisions are fuelled.

At present Riyadh is at war with Yemen, while its other neighbours — Iraq to the northeast and Syria in the far north — are also unstable. Its rows with Qatar and Iran also show no sign of being resolved soon. In such a precarious regional scenario, the crown prince must handle internal reform carefully.

Those states with strong relations with the Saudis, such as Pakistan, must watch and wait to see how the power games in Riyadh play out.

Trouble in paradise

THE latest leak of papers from a leading law firm with posts in multiple offshore jurisdictions known to be tax havens is a treasure trove of information about how the rich park their wealth in the darkest corners of the world — without the scrutiny of legal and tax authorities of any state. Many prominent Pakistanis, including former prime minister Shaukat Aziz, feature as clients of the firm. They now need to answer a few questions about the discovery of their wealth in these shady locations. They can argue that everything done in offshore jurisdictions is perfectly legal, and they might even be right in advancing that claim. The laws, after all, were written by the rich for themselves, and are unlikely to cross the powerful interests of the controllers of capital. But there is such a thing as common sense, which informs us that vast pools of money parked in the darkest corners of the world have a story to tell. Telling that story is also legal. So at a minimum, let all sides assert their legal rights, and let more light be shed on these offshore jurisdictions through more such leaks, and let more questions be asked. These jurisdictions and the gimmickry contained within them are a crucial part of the machinery that is turning this world into a monstrously unequal place.

For starters, the Pakistanis whose names feature in these revelations, termed the Paradise Papers leaks, should now be made to explain whether or not the money in question was earned in this country. Additionally, more needs to be understood about how these funds are transacted, and how the companies incorporated in these jurisdictions can just as easily be instruments for handling ill-gotten gains and laundering tax-evaded wealth, and perhaps even play a role in handling funds that are used to pay for terrorist activity. After all, under the cloak of such secrecy, anything is possible. The shell companies of these offshore jurisdictions are playing an increasingly important role in such activity, and giving it the veneer of legality. The law and other arms of the state are helpless in acting against them, but the press is not. Regardless of its legality, therefore, the ownership of offshore firms needs to be repeatedly exposed and interrogated aggressively in public, until authorities around the world recognise and acknowledge that there is a problem here that needs to be resolved through concerted action.

Witnessing art

IT would have been inconceivable to imagine even a few years ago that the brutalised megacity of Karachi could host a major public art event. Showcasing the work of over 140 local and international artists in 12 historical venues, the recently held Karachi Biennale — Pakistan's first ever such event — is a testament to the city's resilience. That it follows on the heels of several public art initiatives over the last few years is indicative of the artist community's emergence from the cloistered 'white cubes' of commercial galleries, into more socially conscious forms of art production and circulation. This in itself is cause for celebration, for the positive and therapeutic effects of art should be accessible to all. It also opens up a necessary dialogue on how citizens relate to their city and its aesthetic values. The event's footfall over the last two weeks is a signal that, despite living in a city predominantly designed on socioeconomic stratification and securitisation, Karachiites thirst for a more communal, and ultimately beautiful, urban experience.

For precisely these reasons, there is still room for growth and improvement. Future events must adapt the biennale model taking into account local contexts, and the organisers' own position of power in relation to the public and public spaces. Although free and open to all, most venues were in gated buildings; tackling the perception of these spaces as gentrified enclaves has to be addressed in planning. Meanwhile, utilising heritage sites must ultimately serve to promote and help fund their conservation. Organisers should also consider including local artisans to elevate their craft and remove distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow art. Linguistic inclusion must be facilitated by making all materials available in both English and Urdu, and cultural literacy cultivated with ongoing, open tours. There is also need for deeper, sustained outreach and participation with the city's many communities. While still in its infancy, the Karachi Biennale Trust is clearly engaging with these issues, and this will hopefully reflect in a more inclusive biennale in 2019.

From census to polls

THE deadlock between the major political parties over how to conduct the delimitation of constituencies after the latest census is an entirely unnecessary controversy that can, if prolonged, impact the election timeline. As such, all the parties that have staked out tough positions now need to step back and consider the bigger picture. Ensuring that the census count is accurate and its results have the confidence of all major stakeholders, particularly the political parties, is undoubtedly crucial — especially considering the electoral as well as the resource-allocation implications of the data. But the parties must make sure that the ongoing debates about the veracity of the data should not be allowed to put the election itself in the balance. The consolidation of democracy is far from complete. Peaceful elections and the handover of power — after completing the full parliamentary term of five years for the second time in this nation's history — to the next civilian government is the bigger picture here. All other issues should be seen in light of this.

The census data impacts the electoral exercise in three important ways. First, there is the question of the total number of seats in the national and provincial legislatures, which are pegged on the country's population. Second is the share of seats in the National Assembly belonging to each province, which is pegged on each province's population as a proportion of the total. The third is the delimitation of constituencies on the basis of the population headcount to ensure that there is no great disparity in the number of voters from one constituency to the next. It appears that a consensus exists between all the parties on the first point to freeze the number of seats in the National Assembly for the time being. There's also limited contention on the second point, except for Sindh where the provincial assembly has expressed its disapproval of the census numbers for the province. The main point of contention is the third — the delimitation of constituencies along the lines suggested by the new data.

There are strong grounds to argue that the elections should go forward on the basis of the 1998 census data to give more time to sort out differences among the parties. Some might argue that the law requires the elections to be held under the latest census information, but that requirement applies to the latest officially published data only. The publication of the latest census data can be delayed till after the elections, yielding enough time to run sample surveys in select areas to

verify the findings of the census before finalising it. At this point, the timely conduct of elections is a bigger priority than the verification of census data, and if one of these has to be postponed in favour of the other, the parties should agree that the elections come first.

Medicine shortage

THE mess that is the drugs' market in the country seems only to be growing worse. After various debacles concerning the industry, from problems of regulation and the implementation of law to the ability to check the constitution of medicines, we now have the Pakistan Young Pharmacist Association alleging that the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan is responsible for the unavailability on the market of some 200 lifesaving drugs. In Lahore on Monday, the PYPA accused Drap of corruption, nepotism, and procedural shortcuts in terms of appointments and promotions. The allegations include appointing but not paying multiple dozens of pharmacists for over a year, junior officers being given charge of positions that ought to have gone to individuals more senior in the profession, and even artificially creating a shortage of lifesaving medicines in the market on the alleged basis that some companies are allowed to make more profit than others. Meanwhile, also on Monday, at the Senate in Islamabad, several senators expressed concern at what they referred to as the unchecked trade of spurious medicines and the 'cartelisation' of the pharmaceutical sector. However, the Minister of State for National Health Services Saira Afzal Tarar told the Senate that there was no shortage of medicines in the country — and had not been for over six months. She insisted, in fact, that the present government had done more work over the last three years to ensure the quality of drugs in Pakistan than had been done over the last 70 years.

Which version are we to believe? Ms Tarar's statement appears to be directed at the political lobby, while the PYPA has its own grievances. True, there have often been reports of the shortage of certain medicines — it is a continuing and distressing problem in the country — but the situation has not yet reached emergency levels. Even so, it is the job of the minister and the government she represents to make the situation clear and to also work towards tackling other challenges in this sector. It is an open secret that the market in this country is awash with spurious medicines. There is not just a dearth of drug-testing

laboratories, there is also the fact that even essential medicines are sold on the black market to people who require them urgently. It would be clichéd to say that the lack of governmental will is playing with people's lives; unfortunately, clichés often hold true, as in this case.

Rights of the disabled

IT is unfortunate that continual state failure to preserve the rights of disabled persons across areas such as education, work and social security has exacerbated extreme inequalities. Given this context, it was hardly surprising that disabled persons protesting near the Sindh Assembly on Monday demanded that the government implement an increase in job quotas from 2pc to 5pc. This is also a promise the chief minister made last December. And, though the province has passed the Sindh Differently Abled Persons (Employment, Rehabilitation and Welfare) Amendment Bill, 2017, some months ago, stipulating exactly this increase, it appears the latter remains in cold storage. Political inertia and paying lip service to social justice are at the crux of this delay. Also, there can be no legislative implementation without creating by-laws and such. Adept at passing bills, Sindh passed similar legislation in 2014 (replacing the 1981 federal law) that also lapsed into oblivion. Such habitual callousness hardly befits a ruling party that vociferously claims to be a champion of the vulnerable.

Challenged with a litany of missed socioeconomic opportunities, disabled people often face poverty and societal discrimination; consider the lack of wheelchair access in workplaces and public transport as just one disincentive. Despite ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2011, the state has not consolidated policies for tackling disabilities. Then, inaccurate data on disabilities renders it impossible to make interventions. The 2017 census puts the figure of disabled persons at less than a million in a population of over 207m — even the head of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics notes this is an 'unrealistic' figure because people with disabilities were counted only on the first day of the exercise in a random manner. Furthermore, the glaring lack of legislation deprives a proportion of our citizenry of full economic participation. The state must shift the discourse from sympathy to empathy towards disabled persons so that they can exercise their right to equal participation in society no matter where they stand on the spectrum of disabilities.

is not checked soon, we may not be too far off from a time when one of our major cities would have to be evacuated. Already across the border in Delhi they have declared an emergency, although the next step is not very clear.

Last year, the authorities in Lahore had to forcibly shut down steel smelters in the city's outskirts to reduce emissions.

And smog is not the only problem now.

The finances required to pay for the operation of this infrastructure as well as the necessary reforms to operate it efficiently are far from robust. The development model advanced by this government is now in serious contention here. The smog will lift at some point, but the wrath of nature and the countervailing pressures of the market will exact a heavy toll from this model in the days to come.

Jalalabad murder

THE unfortunate murder of a Pakistani mission staffer in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, must be condemned in the strongest terms. Nayyar Iqbal Rana was shot at a shop in the Afghan city on Monday by two motorcyclists. The slain official's body was repatriated to Pakistan on Tuesday and was buried in Islamabad, with senior functionaries, including the foreign minister, participating in the last rites. At this point in time, it is unclear what the motive behind Rana's murder was. Indeed, the security situation in nearly all parts of Afghanistan is extremely precarious, while there are a number of anti-Pakistan elements active in that country. A Foreign Office spokesman has said the matter had been taken up with Kabul while the FO has also lodged a protest with the Afghan charge d'affaires in Pakistan.

This is not the first time Pakistani officials or institutions in Afghanistan have come under attack. The Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad was stormed by attackers reportedly linked to the militant Islamic State group in January 2016. A number of Afghan troops were killed in that incident. Earlier still, the Pakistani embassy in Kabul was attacked in 2003 by a large mob. There are a number of actors in Afghanistan who harbour anti-Pakistan feelings. These include Pakistani militants who have taken refuge across the border, as well as elements linked to hostile governments. Nangarhar, the province where Jalalabad is located, is known to

have IS safe havens. Moreover, there are also camps within the Afghan establishment that have no love lost for Pakistan. Whoever is responsible, the Kabul government must investigate this murder and bring the perpetrators to justice. Furthermore, the Afghan government must also provide foolproof security arrangements to all Pakistani missions and officials working in that country. It is incumbent on the host country to provide security to foreign missions as per international diplomatic norms. Pakistani officials working in Afghanistan must also exercise caution, considering the prevailing situation.

Sindh's theatre of the absurd

There was no honeymoon period. The marriage of inconvenience between the MQM-P and the PSP is off to the rockiest of starts, with duelling news conferences, U-turns galore and biting uncertainty.

Another round of political engineering appears to have been unleashed by shadowy forces and it could have dangerously unpredictable consequences for a volatile city like Karachi. Indeed, the whole of Sindh may have to brace itself for a new round of political instability if rumours of the purpose behind the MQM-P and PSP 'merger' are to be believed.

Difficult as it may be to discern a coherent plan in what is clearly a reluctant merger, there is speculation that ahead of next year's general election an array of political forces in Sindh may be clubbed together to present a united challenge to the otherwise seemingly unbeatable PPP at the provincial level.

Engineering a challenge to the PPP's political dominance in Sindh is something that has been attempted before and it appears that old habits die hard, with no lessons learnt. Unhappily, the squabbling MQM-P and PSP appear heedless to the possibility that they are increasing the space for anti-democratic forces in the province.

If a merger was desirable or an electoral inevitability, a better path would have been for internal restructuring in the two parties before a publicly declared set of meetings to discuss a common platform.

Both the MQM-P and PSP continue to have unacceptable militant elements within their ranks and it is imperative that they shed all such elements ahead of the next election. The propensity for violence in certain sections of both parties is well known and internal reform is necessary.

Instead, by attempting a merger in murky circumstances and then quickly falling out, the MQM-P and PSP have created further excuses for political engineering by anti-democratic forces. There is no scenario in which interference in the democratic process by anti-democratic forces can work to the long-term benefit of political parties or the people of Sindh.

While the PPP's governance record is poor and the MQM has been wracked by internal strife in recent years, political stability has been elusive in Sindh in part because the Karachi operation morphed into a political project from a security-focused beginning.

The incorporation of militant wings in political parties was an issue that had to be addressed by the state. But the quest to return peace and stability to the city should never have been allowed to turn into a question of who has a legitimate right to govern Sindh.

Indeed, the descent of Karachi into violence in recent years could be traced to an artificially lopsided balance of power in the province under the Musharraf regime.

There is no panacea to the problems of Sindh and the powers that be ought to recognise that they are creating new problems with their misguided approach to the politics of the province.

World Bank warning

IN its own coded and diplomatic style, the World Bank has warned that the government's growth story is now at risk given the scale of the macroeconomic imbalances growing within it. All through last year as the chorus of voices warning about these imbalances got louder, the World Bank largely maintained a studied silence. But with the issuance of its half-yearly Pakistan Development Update, that silence has been broken and another powerful institutional voice has entered the conversation around the outlook on the economy. In its warning, the bank follows the same template that the IMF and the State Bank do. The real sector is indeed growing, it says, with the growth rate for the economy set to come in at 5.5pc for this year, and climbing to 5.8pc next year. This, of course, assumes that "political and security risks will be managed" the report adds in a nod towards the escalating difficulties of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

But the growth rate is now haunted by the difficulties of the external sector. "Pakistan will need to continue with economic reforms and pursue policies that make the country compete better in global markets," the bank's president said during the launch of the report. Some of the measures taken by the government to try and compress the trade deficit, such as the increasing resort to regulatory duties, are the wrong road to take, the president cautioned during the event. The growth rate going forward will be heavily driven by spending — personal as well as government — and that spending, in turn, will be driven by rising remittances and election-related expenditures. But the current account deficit, that jumped by 112pc year on year in the first quarter of the fiscal will rise to 4pc of GDP by the end of the year. This would be slightly below what it was at the end of the last fiscal year but still at an unsustainable high level given the relative paucity of foreign exchange inflows. Election spending could boost the growth rate of the economy, even if temporarily, but the fiscal deficit could jump to 6pc of GDP in the process. This would mean rising levels of debt to pay for the gap. Timely corrective steps are required, the report warns, to avert an abrupt slowdown. But the longer these steps are delayed, the harder it will be to say what exactly they should entail.

Preventing extremism

VIOLENT extremism is increasingly being viewed as a combined security and development challenge. A long-lasting solution to curbing militancy requires the state to move beyond its national counterterrorism operations and adopt a holistic approach. In this context, activist and dancer Sheema Kermani recently urged the government to allocate at least 1pc of GDP for cultural pursuits given that the arts — and sports — are vital conduits for promoting pluralism and tolerance, especially in communities that are vulnerable to the influence of militancy. She made this recommendation while presenting a new UN report on the impact of fundamentalism on the cultural rights of women, noting that militant groups have a history of violently curtailing artistic expression with their absolutist interpretations of religion. Banning traditional festivities, targeting events at universities, bombing Sufi shrines, killing Swat's women dancers, attacking actors, musicians and poets all constitute violent acts by militant groups to terrorise populations. Under no circumstances should the government tolerate such direct challenges to its writ by those who compromise the security of its citizenry. When violent forces try to eliminate fundamental cultural rights, the state must not collude with or give in to the will of regressive groups — especially when the latter punish cultural expression, supposedly incompatible with rigid religious interpretations, through campaigns of harassment, abuse and outright violence.

To ensure that the values of pluralism and tolerance are ingrained in our counterterrorism strategies, cultural policies reflecting international human values must be adopted. The hydra-headed monster which is militancy and terrorism draws strength primarily from young recruits and marginalised segments of society — this fact alone should be enough for the government to work on ways that complement existing counter-extremism strategies. However, these cannot be peripheral actions. They must form part of national policies deemed critical to creating alternatives for protecting our youth from all forms of radicalisation.

Impractical steps against gun culture

DEWEAPONISATION is a laudable goal, a necessary step towards a more peaceful and secure society. But effective policies are debated thoroughly and implemented methodically.

A newly sworn in Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi had pledged in parliament in August to address the issue of deadly arms in the hands of the citizenry and it appeared to be a sincere desire to help put the country on the path towards less violence and intimidation.

Now, the federal government has issued a notification suspending the licences for all prohibited bore weapons with immediate effect and giving all licence holders the option of either receiving a small payment in return for handing in their weapons to the state or converting the licence for automatic weapons into semi-automatic weapons by Jan 15, 2018.

There are a number of problems, however, with the government's approach.

First, as the gun debate in the US had demonstrated, a broad-brush approach based on prohibited bores or automatic weapons does not necessarily address all the dangers that modern firearms can pose.

There appears to have been no study conducted on the impact of the government's newly announced measure or, indeed, any consultation held with security experts on what is the most effective way to approach deweaponisation in the country.

For all of Mr Abbasi's undoubtedly good intentions, there does not appear to be any true seriousness of purpose in the matter.

Second, the focus on licensed weapons, while inevitable and necessary, does nothing to address the issue of illegal and unlicensed weapons that proliferate across the country.

Indeed, licensed weapons holders could argue that they are being penalised for remaining on the right side of the law, while illegal weapons are amassed by unscrupulous elements who do not necessarily fear the law acting against them.

Third, what will happen after Jan 15, 2018?

If, as is likely, only some licence holders act on the notification, what penalties does the government envisage for the weapons that will become illegal to be held by the public after January?

Indeed, can the government even guarantee that it will not reverse its step under political pressure in the run-up to the elections next year?

Finally, there is the issue of militant groups and militant wings of political parties.

Does the government really expect such elements to simply hand over their weapons to the state or replace them with supposedly less deadly weapons?

Ultimately, the problem with ill-considered and half-baked policies is that it increases the distortions in the system, hurts law-abiding citizens and creates more uncertainty rather than less.

Lebanese question

A NEW crisis appears to be brewing in the Middle East, this time threatening the fragile stability of Lebanon.

It all started with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri's shock resignation on Nov 4 announced from the Saudi capital Riyadh.

This was, of course, only one of the many startling events that would take place in Riyadh that night; a missile reportedly fired by Yemen's Houthi militia was also shot down over the Saudi capital's airport, while in perhaps the biggest story coming out of the kingdom, several top royals and tycoons were rounded up on the orders of the young crown prince as part of an 'anti-corruption' purge.

While the situation in Saudi Arabia is extremely fluid, perhaps the most immediate issue the world should be worried about is Lebanon; from the looks of it, the small Levantine country may be headed for another war.

Recently, the Saudi foreign minister said that if Hezbollah remains part of the Lebanese government, Riyadh would consider this “an act of war”.

The armed Shia group has ministers in the Lebanese government and its political wing is one of the main power players in Beirut.

Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah, on the other hand, said on Friday that the Saudis have declared war on Lebanon by “detaining” Mr Hariri. In such a combustible situation — with volatile statements coming from all sides — the possibility of a fresh armed conflict breaking out in Lebanon is not remote.

It should be remembered that Lebanon witnessed a brutal civil war from 1975 to 1990.

The hostilities involving different religions, sects and nations only ended after a peace deal was hammered out in the Saudi hill station of Taif. In Lebanon — due to its sectarian power-sharing system designed by former colonial master France — power is parcelled out among the nation’s numerous sects.

The country’s confessional system is perhaps unique in the world, with high public offices reserved on a sectarian basis.

Despite the delicate balance, Lebanon has been relatively stable since 1990, apart from the Hezbollah-Israel war of 2006.

It has also largely managed to shield itself from much of the Syrian conflict.

However, with the Saudi-Iran confrontation reaching alarming proportions, Lebanon may once again become a proxy battlefield for world and regional powers.

All efforts must be made to avoid a new conflagration. Perhaps if Mr Hariri were to return to Lebanon and clarify matters, temperatures could come down significantly.

Musharraf’s ‘alliance’

THE dream flickers on.

From self-imposed exile to treat a suspicious back ailment that allowed him to escape a treason trial, retired Gen Pervez Musharraf has announced a remarkable political alliance.

Remarkable because several of the members of the purported alliance have expressed their surprise at their inclusion in the group.

Undeterred by such technicalities, Mr Musharraf appears willing to devote his time to save Pakistan from the depredations of the very politicians that he tried to save the country from nearly two decades ago.

The PPP and PML-N are horrible, the public is hoodwinked and only Mr Musharraf and his ramshackle alliance can now deliver the kind of miracle progress and advancement that the former dictator's decade-long rule was unable to do.

Mr Musharraf also appears poised to return the country to his version of enlightened moderation, with his new alliance roping together the left and the right of the political spectrum. If only the people could understand that he knows what is best for them.

Pathos aside, the twilight of Mr Musharraf's political career is a reminder of the distortions that continue to be injected into the political system by anti-democratic forces.

The new alliance is just the latest in a long line of peripheral political entities either cobbled together by or vying for the support of the establishment.

In virtually all such instances, the voter has proved too savvy to fall for the naked political manipulation.

On occasion, however, power has been flexed behind the scenes to ensure favourable outcomes — sometimes stealing whole elections and at other times rising to become a serious distraction for mainstream political forces.

It remains to be seen where Mr Musharraf's latest desperate attempt to remain politically relevant falls. Will it become a comedic punchline or something more unsavoury and menacing?

However, shame alone should have prevented Mr Musharraf from trying yet again — his stint in power was a disaster for the country and the institution he once led.

Meddling in politics

WHAT was widely speculated has been confirmed by one of the protagonists himself.

Mustafa Kamal, once MQM mayor of Karachi and now furious critic of his former party, has admitted that the security establishment brokered the already-frayed alliance between his PSP and the MQM-P.

The episode is only one of several in recent days that suggest political engineering of the electoral landscape is once again being taken up in earnest.

Put bluntly, it amounts to a form of pre-poll rigging to manipulate and undermine the democratic process.

Unhappily, not only does it appear that anti-democratic elements in the state believe that meddling in the democratic process is necessary, but that sections of the political class, too, are welcoming this interference with enthusiasm.

Nearly a decade since the latest transition to democracy began, the democratic project is arguably being weakened in fundamental ways. The upshot for democracy in the country is surely bleak.

Perhaps the most dispiriting aspect of the latest round of political engineering unleashed in various parts of the country is how many elements from across the political spectrum are willing to participate in the undermining of democracy and how unapologetic figures such as Mr Kamal are about behind-the-scenes efforts to boost their electoral and political prospects.

It is possible that the silence of mainstream political parties is encouraging the audacious interventions in the democratic arena. The PML-N and PPP — the parties that led the last two elected governments in the country — appear unable to mount even a weak defence of the democratic order at the moment.

Some ministers from the PML-N have indirectly referenced the Karachi machinations while a few outspoken PPP leaders have bemoaned political interference; but the collective response amounts to a tacit acceptance of the political engineering under way.

And while fear may be preventing mainstream political leaders from speaking out against the artificial, new ultra right-wing groupings that are materialising, these politicians ought to know that silence will only embolden these sections to the detriment of all Pakistanis.

What is also striking about the latest round of political engineering in process in various parts of the country is that there is no attempt made to conceal the machinations and no denials coming forth.

Once upon a time, during the tenure of former army chief retired Gen Jehangir Karamat, there was at least an attempt to distance the security establishment from politics. And during several suspicious episodes over the past decade, at least denials of interference have been issued.

Certainly, with a general election on the horizon and the leadership of the largest political party in the country, the PML-N, embroiled in conflicts with the state and inside the party, there has been space created for anti-democratic interference.

But the perpetrators of that interference ought to realise that undemocratic politics has failed in the past and will fail in the future.

Rape in Myanmar

A THUS far little publicised aspect of the sickening brutality visited on the Rohingya in Myanmar has come into the open — the sexual violence against women and girls by the Myanmar soldiers.

These depredations, including gang rape, forced public nudity and humiliation and sexual slavery, which also resulted in the death of many victims, further hastened the minority community's mass exodus to Bangladesh.

It took a visit by Pramila Patten, a special representative of the UN secretary general, to the camps in that country where some 610,000 Rohingya have taken refuge, and the stories she heard there, to shed light on this aspect of the crisis.

Her observations, she said, suggested that the women and girls had been "systematically targeted on account of their ethnicity and religion" and that many of the attacks could be described as "crimes against humanity".

Sexual violence has long been used as a weapon of war.

While men and boys can also be targeted, it is most often women and girls who bear the brunt of this vicious tactic.

War in any case often goes hand in hand with the abeyance of norms of civilised behaviour.

But sexual violence, often used as a deliberate strategy, denotes something more.

Aside from the terrible physical and psychological impact on those directly subjected to it, it humiliates, terrorises and dehumanises an entire community, reducing it to a commodity at the mercy of man's basest instincts.

In a patriarchal society, the effects are even more far-reaching.

Pregnancies as a result of rape serve to weaken the integrity of the targeted ethnic group and break down social bonds in a way that can make it difficult for the community to recover.

As such, this form of violence is a particular feature of ethnic cleansing campaigns, where the objective is not just to subjugate but obliterate the other side.

In the last two decades alone, there have been a number of such conflicts: Bosnia, Sudan and Rwanda to cite but a few.

Before the ongoing Rohingya crisis began, the most recent examples include the atrocities of Boko Haram in Africa and the sexual slavery of Yazidi women and girls in Iraq by the militant Islamic State group.

Fortunately, there is increasing recognition of conflict-related sexual violence as a war crime, including a UN resolution to that effect.

But while bringing the perpetrators to justice is vital, the international community must also devise mechanisms to support the victims.

Hockey defeat

PAKISTAN has finished fourth at an international hockey tournament in Australia in an event that featured just as many — ie four — teams.

The outcome hasn't created too much of a stir in the life of a country for which defeat on hockey grounds the world over has become routine.

Just before this, the national team suffered a drubbing at the Asian championship, ending up number three out of four participants.

The people here have become quite used to receiving this news of failure, in contrast to the joy their side's frequent victories brought to Pakistanis in the past.

The conversations that would once centre on not just favourable results but also the sheer skill with which the Pakistanis played the game are gone.

In their place, there is an uneasy silence that is only sometimes broken with a reference to the distant past.

It is an exercise about living in a bygone era that does not come easy to those who are still hoping for a change in fortunes here and now.

It is true that the world of sport, by its very nature, does not deserve the dark diction and the gloom-and-doom predictions that are rampant about other areas and fields.

The sporting idiom takes exception to an overemphasis on who won and who lost. Instead, it advises — again and again — an approach which hails participation and interaction over the results of the contest.

But it is also true that, over time, much pride has come to be associated with sporting events, which does eventually lead to references to national morale and national pride in the context of successes and failures.

The Four-Nation International Festival of Hockey, where Pakistan suffered its worst international defeat — at the hands of Australia — and where the country lost to New Zealand and twice to Japan is a reminder that measures to revive the game are simply not working.

It is time to reassess what is going wrong and to rectify the mistakes.

No trace of the missing

MISSING persons continue to remain undocumented and missing — and it appears that the courts and parliament are powerless to do anything about this terrible blot on Pakistan's human rights record.

On Monday, seemingly helpless representatives of the federal and KP governments appeared in the Supreme Court empty-handed; they had been required by a special bench to present basic data on the country's 45 declared internment centres.

The information that had been demanded included up-to-date lists of detainees, the offences they have been charged with, whether or not they had faced trial and the length of their incarceration — in sum, the bare minimum information the state should have for any individual in its custody.

But the court simply gave the representatives another fortnight to produce the data.

Meanwhile, following a meeting of the Senate Committee on Human Rights, Senator Farhatullah Babar has called for setting up a new commission on enforced disappearances because the existing one has failed to produce results and to publish a six-year-old report on missing persons.

Taken together, the events suggest a defiance of the law by some elements within the state and an abdication of duty by other parts of the state to ensure that citizens have their rights and institutions act according to the law.

What is particularly dispiriting is that despite the passage of several years and facilitation by the law, the state appears unwilling to take a reasonable position on the issue.

The first military operations in the country are now more than a decade old, while the Action in Aid of Civil Power Regulations, 2011, provided a legal framework to bring missing persons within the ambit of the law.

Surely, by now a reasonable solution to what is admittedly a vexing problem ought to have been found.

The only reasonable conclusion to be drawn at this stage, however, is that there are some state elements that reject the notion that accountability and transparency ought to apply to at least some security issues.

The public, the courts, parliament, the governments and, indeed, the families of the suspects, simply have to trust the judgement of nameless and faceless figures wielding great power over the lives of alleged terrorism, militancy and extremism suspects.

Certainly, the long fight against militancy calls for special measures and greater flexibility in dealing with an internal threat that is shadowy and evolving.

But the state's duty is to progressively bring its actions within the ambit of the law — that is what separates the justness of the fight by the state from the terrorists, militants and extremists who seek to inflict harm on the country and its people.

Today, there is no justification for defiance of the law, just as there is no rationale for the continuing phenomenon of missing persons.

Fake police encounters

THE Pakistani police culture of 'encounter' is being severely threatened by an unlikely source: the necessity and the popular urge to capture neighbourhood and city activity on CCTV and mobile-phone cameras. Such footage has exposed the policemen involved in staged encounters. This month, footage from a bystander brought the horrendous practice into greater public focus. It showed a police official in Faisalabad pumping bullets into the visibly surrendered body of a man. The police version of the incident was that the victim, Asif Sardar, had fired at a motorcycle squad of the Gulberg police when he and his 'accomplice' were signalled to stop. Now an autopsy report confirms he "was shot multiple times at point-blank range". A four-member committee formed on the orders of the Punjab chief minister and headed by the Sheikhpura regional police officer is probing the matter. Few, however, think that the recommendations put forth by this team are going to lead to any revolutionary steps towards preventing the law enforcers from

resorting to this ugly method of self-righteously dispensing justice and punishing those they deem guilty.

To begin with, over time the trigger-happy police have assigned to themselves a mission that not only provides them with instant results and satisfaction but that also appears to be a cover-up for their overall inefficiency. Then the system that sets a policeman — albeit of senior rank — to catch a policeman is inherently flawed. In such cases, there has to be timely intervention by an authority outside the police force to take up allegations of fake encounters. That authority is nowhere in sight in the country and the police are routinely allowed the easy option of staging encounters to hide the missing parts of their investigation. For example, not too long ago, police told the Sindh High Court that two people who had been marked as missing had actually been killed in two separate encounters earlier this year. The human rights ministry in Islamabad does take notice of excesses by government functionaries — including those perpetrated by the police — but it has yet to come up with any short-term model let alone a proper system to question and curb the tendency of policemen to act as on-the-spot executioners. In the absence of an authority empowered to deal with the menace many other Asif Sardars will find themselves at the mercy of the law enforcers.

Diabetes danger

KNOWN as a 'lifestyle disease', diabetes affects millions of Pakistanis, and if greater efforts are not undertaken to control the ailment, the nation may have to confront another health epidemic. In fact, health experts speaking in the context of World Diabetes Day, which was observed on Tuesday, have called for urgent action to curb the rising prevalence of diabetes. At one seminar in Karachi, medical experts, quoting the National Diabetes Survey of Pakistan, said the prevalence of diabetes in people aged 20 and over was more than 26pc. Doctors have observed that there has been a sharp rise in diabetes prevalence in Pakistan. While type 1 diabetes cannot be prevented, the type 2 variant is indeed preventable if the right lifestyle options are adopted. Unfortunately, worldwide an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, unhealthy food choices and lack of physical activity have all contributed to an increase in diabetes cases. The same factors are at work in Pakistan and national health authorities need to consider ways and means to prevent the spread of the ailment here.

As diabetes is a non-communicable disease, the state needs to launch awareness campaigns to identify the risk factors that can lead to the ailment. Experts note a healthy lifestyle is essential in preventing diabetes; healthy eating and physical activity are particularly highlighted. Experts have also called for regular screening of blood sugar levels to check for any signs of trouble. With lifestyles and dietary habits changing in Pakistan, it is essential to immediately start addressing the dangers posed by diabetes and other ailments linked to unhealthy lifestyles. As it has been noted, processed foods are considered the leading cause of diabetes in children. Rather than wait for a full-blown epidemic, it would be wise for the state and health practitioners to help spread awareness about the benefits of eating healthier and staying fit amongst all age groups, especially youngsters drawn to junk food. Diabetes can be prevented if we make the right lifestyle choices.

Taliban resurgence?

EIGHT years ago, Operation Rah-i-Nijat was launched to free South Waziristan Agency from the grip of the Pakistani Taliban.

It was a massive operation and countless sacrifices were made, but eventually the state's writ was established in the militancy-infested parts.

It would take many more years for IDPs from the agency to be allowed to go back, but this year a semblance of normality appeared to be returning to South Waziristan.

However, the return of the local populace has brought with it a resurgence of the Taliban, a worrying development for South Waziristan and the wider Fata region.

As reported in this newspaper yesterday, the Commander Nazir Group, a Wana-based Taliban faction, is, under the guise of a local peace committee, attempting to ban social and cultural activities in parts of the agency and restrict women's movement.

The measures hearken back to the early days of the Taliban takeover in various parts of Fata — a disturbing reminder that peace in the region remains elusive, however much the local political administration may try to downplay the events.

Part of the problem is that the Commander Nazir Group was never fully dismantled in South Waziristan, despite major operations in Wana and the Mehsud-dominated regions of the agency.

Militant leaders belonging to the group are reported to have their own areas of jurisdiction to settle personal, family and property disputes and to impose fines and penalties — brazenly bypassing political authorities and effectively establishing parallel administrative systems.

Some members of the Commander Nazir Group are believed to even operate their own prisons. While there is only one known check-post that the group is currently operating, it has been seen patrolling other parts of South Waziristan.

If their activities are not quickly curtailed, the group may feel emboldened to return with force in Wana and even spread its operations to other areas. The state must respond quickly and firmly to the incipient return of the Taliban.

Also necessary is for the recently returned populations to be told that they will be protected — and for vulnerable members of all communities to be assured of their rights.

Women in particular face pressures from both sides, with a jirga held in South Waziristan in September announcing curbs on women's liberties.

The rise of the Taliban in Fata and the many military operations that have been conducted to clear the region of them have made clear that the area cannot be allowed to return to a pre-Taliban era.

The region must be progressively brought to a par with the rest of Pakistan socially, economically, politically and administratively.

No group — not the Taliban nor other regressive elements in Fata — should be allowed to curb the rights of anyone there.

Certainly, the challenges are many and the path to normality will be long — but there must be zero tolerance for vigilantism and non-state justice.

Executions and ATA

THE death penalty is a needlessly cruel punishment that not only fails to deter crime and terrorism but is also an inhumane measure for any civilised country. Since Pakistan lifted the moratorium on executions after the APS Peshawar attack in December 2014, 480 prisoners have been put to death — juveniles and mentally and physically handicapped prisoners included. Despite the populist narrative that capital punishment counters terrorism, only 30pc of those executed have been convicted of terrorism by anti-terrorism courts, according to Justice Project Pakistan. In its report, *Trial and Terror: the Overreach of Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act*, JJP documents the fundamental weaknesses in the anti-terrorism legislation including an unclear definition of terrorism, extraordinary policing powers, increased risk of torture and coerced confessions. With 86.3pc of those sentenced to death convicted for non-terrorism offences, it is obvious that ATCs are not only trying terrorists. Because there's a difference between trying 'jet-black' terrorists and criminals that fall outside this description, the scope of the definition of terrorism must be amended so that only crimes pertaining to militancy are tried under the ATA. Salient criticisms against the ATA include depriving litigants of quality legal representation and fair trial, executing prisoners before their appeals process is completed, hanging juveniles and sending the physically handicapped to the gallows — all underscore the need for rethinking the law's application and efficacy.

The impact of ATCs on juvenile offenders is one of its most egregious violations. Underage delinquents are often deprived of procedural safeguards. With at least six juveniles executed to date (such as Aftab Bahadur who was convicted when he was only 15), these courts must not have the power to try underage offenders. Senator Farhatullah Babar encapsulates the most compelling reason for juvenile cases not to be tried in ATCs: "The rush to carry out executions is a reaffirmation of the truth that the state does not care about people's lives and is least concerned about how they die." Moreover, many of those that JJP interviewed alleged suffering police torture; more than half of them said they were illegally detained

and tortured before being formally charged. Confessions in police custody must be inadmissible as evidence. Our message for the state is that when it sanctions executions, it is not only abusing the true spirit of justice, it is also showing apathy towards human rights.

Film censorship

THERE is no shortage of text in Pakistan's rulebooks that can arbitrarily be used to try and control information, even hijack narrative.

From vague clauses about the 'national interest' to directives about how 'institutions' can be discussed, these are often brought into play to mask what are attempts at outright censorship.

It is especially cultural narrative that finds itself in the cross hairs of a myopic bureaucracy with an unnecessarily thin skin.

The latest example of this is the Shoaib Mansoor film *Verna*, which on Tuesday was banned by the Central Board of Film Censors in Islamabad.

While such a decision is not considered binding on all the provinces, given that the subject has been devolved, and Punjab and Sindh have their own, independently functioning censor boards, the fact is that such pressure from the centre can — and does — have an effect.

From various quarters, the vow came that the film would be allowed to play.

While a full board meeting of the CBFC last night apparently decided to revoke the ban, the movie can only be screened with cuts, another name for censorship.

In any movie, if certain scenes are not suitable for audiences of a given age, screening certificates carry an age-advisory clause.

However, the greater question here is, what can there be in narrative fiction, created and produced for mass distribution in a country such as Pakistan (the

cultural likes and dislikes of which are well known), that lead to efforts to censor and restrict; fiction by definition lies in the realm of the imagination.

Those in positions of administrative power in Pakistan like to delude themselves that it is their responsibility to decide what citizens may or may not consider suitable, and take decisions accordingly.

In truth, the people have the right to vote with their feet; it ought to be up to them to decide.

The climate threat

THE success of Pakistan's visit to Bonn for the 23rd United Nations Climate Change Conference, also known as COP23, should be judged not by what the delegates bring to the conference, but by what they bring back from it.

In COP 22 last year, Pakistan submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution document which contained the country's vision for meeting the goals of greenhouse gas emissions reduction that were decided in Paris.

That document dwelt at length on the infrastructure needs of the country, particularly water and energy, on the growth rates being targeted, and the financial requirements for taking steps to mitigate the impact of climate change and extreme weather events.

The document revealed a greater concern for financial resources and infrastructure requirements than for any climate-related vulnerabilities the country may be facing.

Given how much emphasis the government has put on calculating the finances required for the INDC, there is now the risk that climate policy could become yet another vehicle for attracting foreign inflows rather than engaging in any real capacity building.

The government claims that it needs \$40bn by 2030 to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 20pc, and another \$14bn every year to adapt to climate impacts.

The amounts are impressive, but they should not become the end goal of the exercise. If the government starts to see climate action as just another way of attracting foreign exchange inflows, it would be disastrous.

The minister of climate change has already mentioned that one of the purposes of his ministry is to “secure global funding”. This is a dangerous mindset, which sees only the resources and not the responsibilities.

As a special report in this paper pointed out on Wednesday, the real arena for action on climate change is now the provincial governments.

COP23 is also trying to bring in local governments into the effort, because those centres of government that are closest to the ground are considered by the international community to be best situated to deliver the results needed to build resilience.

But thus far, besides the passage of the Climate Change Act in March, there are few indications that any centre within the government is taking climate change very seriously.

The law created three bodies to deal with climate: a council, an authority and a fund. What output can any of these entities show? How many times have they even met? How well has the government resourced them?

The fact that climate change remains far from the centre of the national conversation is one indication that the newly created entities are not yet effective.

The way things are, Pakistan has a long way to travel before it even realises the challenge. Unfortunately, the consequences of climate change have a far shorter distance to cover before landing on Pakistani shores.

Balochistan killings

ON the very day that a National Security Committee meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and attended by the senior-most military leadership, praised the state's efforts in Balochistan to establish peace and stability, the province was again rocked by violence.

The attacks on Wednesday are significant because they have widened the recent pattern of violence in the province.

While the police are clearly being targeted in Balochistan, the killing of a police official along with his wife and young family members is highly unusual and may represent a broadening of the terror threat in the province.

Meanwhile, the killing of 15 young men from Punjab near the border with Iran could have been a human smuggling operation gone grotesquely wrong, but reports suggest the Punjab residents were separated from a larger group before being killed, indicating a deeply troubling re-escalation of separatist militant violence in the province.

The disconnect between the state's assessment of the situation in Balochistan, as indicated by the NSC meeting, and the reality in the province could not be more stark.

The flawed approach of dealing with Balochistan primarily through a security prism and suggesting that state-sponsored economic development is a panacea for the province's problems continues to prevail.

With a fresh wave of violence having seemingly been unleashed across Balochistan, urgent action is needed.

On the security front, the police force must take steps to better protect its officers to allow them to carry out their duties.

The repeated targeting of police officers appears to be an attempt to destroy morale and sow fresh fear among the people — if the police cannot protect their own, the general public is deeply vulnerable.

There must surely be a few defensive steps that can be taken by the police, while the overall intelligence and security apparatus must be able to find and degrade whatever network is responsible for a succession of attacks on the force.

On the political front, whether from inside Balochistan or outside, and from inside the provincial and federal governments or outside, there is a need for a fresh attempt at a grand consensus on policy in the province.

The security-centric approach pushed by the military leadership and meekly accepted by the Balochistan and federal governments is not working.

Friends of Balochistan need to come together and have the courage to speak truth to power. The status quo must not be allowed to prevail.

Petrol additives

AN ongoing war of words between one of the country's leading auto makers, Honda, and the oil companies has yielded up an important piece of information that both the government and automobile owners should note.

Honda has alleged that oil companies are adding large quantities of manganese to petrol to boost its octane count.

The government required all local petrol to be of 92 Ron recently, an upgrade from the 87 Ron that was sold before this decision.

Now we're being told that in order to fulfil this requirement, oil companies may have taken the cheaper option of adding manganese instead of procuring superior fuel in the case of imports, or investing in refinery upgrades in the case of locally produced fuel.

Manganese is used as an octane booster across the world, but because of its severely harmful effects on the environment and auto engines, its use is strictly regulated, with caps on how much can be added.

In its own tests, Honda alleges that local petrol contains almost double the quantity of manganese that is recommended for a cap by global authorities.

Meanwhile, the Oil Companies Advisory Council says simply that local petrol is fully compliant with government specifications.

The trick is in the wording: apparently government specifications contain no cap on how much manganese is allowed to be added to petrol.

The oil companies argue that the problem is not their fuel since no auto company has come forward with complaints other than Honda whose cars are the only ones to run on Euro IV engines amongst local assemblers.

But the auto maker's complaints are now beside the point. Manganese as a fuel additive is extremely harmful for the environment and human health, and if the oil companies are using it to boost their octane count, the public has a right know.

The oil companies must be made to reveal how much manganese they add to petrol, a fact they are keeping under wraps.

Delimitation exercise

THE agreement reached by all parties in the National Assembly for the delimitation of constituencies on the basis of provisional data from the latest census is a heartening development amid the political gloom. The fact that the parties were able to come together and forge an agreement that prevents the next elections from possibly being delayed, or adversely impacted, shows that political maturity still exists, and on the key question of how power should be obtained and transferred in this country, there is consensus. The 24th Constitution Amendment Bill which empowers the delimitation exercise to be conducted under provisional results passed with near unanimity — 242 voted yes while one MNA opposed the bill. Going forward, it will be necessary to hold this rope tightly and not allow grievances arising from the census exercise to muddy the outlook on the coming elections.

The consensus will be tested once steps begin to be taken for the third-party audit. Further discussions will need to be held on selecting the third party to conduct the audit, on how the 5pc census blocks to be audited will be selected and what methodology will be used, and perhaps most importantly, when the exercise will be held. The agreement simply says that it should be done “within the next three months”, but the later it gets the less time there will be to sort out any issues that the audit throws up. Then there is also the matter of what will happen in case discrepancies in the data are found. In fact, there are several other question marks. For example, does an audit involve returning to the field or simply looking at the data brought in by the field staff and checking to see how it was processed? Will the selection process for the blocks be random? And what if none of the blocks whose results are under contention are selected for the audit?

The parties should keep their dialogue going and make an extra effort to anticipate as many of the snags the exercise could encounter as possible. As the elections draw nearer, and more crucial decisions have to be made, it will be necessary that the nascent delimitation exercise not throw up more issues. The government has shown admirable political dexterity in defusing the situation, and its agreeing to expand the sample of the auditable blocks should be welcomed. But with the consensus in place, all other parties should also show equal maturity by not turning the process into a frivolous point-scoring forum. The government should take serious note of the difficulty it had in mustering its own votes, let alone in forging the consensus. The preparation for and conduct of the elections will require much political dexterity in the future, and political parties should keep all doors open for cooperation.

TTP sanctuaries

MERE acknowledgement, especially belated, of the existence of a problem will not necessarily move both countries in the direction of addressing the issue. But so dire have Pak-Afghan ties been in recent times that small improvements could augur bigger changes. On a visit to the US, Afghanistan Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah was asked about the presence of TTP sanctuaries in his country and his response was one of refreshing candour. Admitting the existence of banned TTP elements on Afghan soil, the Afghan CEO blamed it on ungoverned spaces, so-called insecure areas, and not on any policy decision by the National Unity Government. It remains to be seen if the verbal candour on his part leads to actions against the TTP sanctuary problem in Afghanistan, but it does appear that the recent high-level diplomacy and military engagement between Pakistan and Afghanistan has helped improve the overall mood in the relationship. In particular, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's trip to Kabul seems to have helped the two sides positively reassess the relationship and perhaps create the space necessary for meaningful reciprocal actions. As ever, pragmatic engagement has proved to be more beneficial than rancour and threats.

For Pakistan, the challenge remains twofold: addressing the Pak-Afghan cross-border militancy problem on both sides; and helping restart an Afghan dialogue process that was halted by American indifference and Kabul's hostility. Patience will necessarily be required, but there is no known or foreseeable alternative to a strategy of gradual trust-building and peaceful engagement. Since both sides have legitimate grievances, an atmosphere where each side can express its priorities and seek compromise and a middle ground can help break the impasse. But courage and boldness will also be required. Gen Bajwa's direct approach and intensive diplomacy appear to be a good complement to the hard-line approach of the administration of US President Donald Trump on Afghanistan. If there is an area in which Pakistan should consider tweaking its approach, it is internally on the civil-military front. The outreach to Afghanistan has been almost wholly handled by the military and the civilian government appears to be merely rubber-stamping the security establishment's preferences in forums such as the National Security Committee. A lopsided civil-military approach may limit the improvements that can be brought to Pak-Afghan ties, especially in civilian-led areas such as trade and people-to-people contacts.

Traffic mess

EVEN the most casual observer of the streets of Pakistan would testify that the situation is absolute chaos. To many who fight their way through urban areas every day, it seems that the quality of the roads is perpetually deteriorating, the number and mix of vehicles constantly growing. Now, there seems to be empirical evidence of this. At a recent meeting of the Sindh Assembly's committee on home affairs in Karachi, officials of the Anti-Car-Lifting Cell produced data related to the number of vehicles in the city and the nature of crimes committed in this regard. According to the excise and taxation department, some 700 new motorbikes are registered in the city every day. The figure bears emphasis — 700 every single day. This is, of course, apart from the cars, vans, lorries and so forth. It turns out that in 2007, there were some 800,000 registered motorbikes in the metropolis; today, there are nearly 3m.

These figures are a general indication of the growing numbers of vehicles on the streets of the country. This is something to think about — and not only in terms of the congested traffic conditions that cause long delays; carbon emissions across the world have reached critical levels, and the authorities here should realise the dangers posed to public health and the natural environment. The fact is that the country — especially the megacity of Karachi — simply cannot defend the absence of a cost- and fuel-efficient public transport system anymore. People need to commute, and they shouldn't have to totally rely on private transport to do so — just as they don't in much of the developed world. But beyond that, once the country makes this a priority, is the reality that mass transit systems need to organically gel with the areas in which they have been set up. In Lahore, for example, where a multi-billion-rupee mass transit system has been set up, there are credible concerns for the cultural heritage. Pakistan can only get ahead through concerted planning.

Pak-US ties: a complicated path

THE Pak-US relationship is likely to back in the spotlight during the next two weeks as at least two senior US officials, Secretary of Defence James Mattis and chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Joseph Dunford, are set to visit Pakistan.

By now, it is apparent that any senior US military delegation will insist on the 'do more' aspect of President Donald Trump's strategy on Afghanistan, likely demanding that Pakistan take fresh steps to curb the alleged presence of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network on Pakistani soil.

If presented as a belligerent demand, the Pakistani reaction may be equally sharp — worsening tensions in an already fraught relationship.

A far more sensible approach would be if each side were to draw up a list of priorities in the context of the Trump South Asia strategy and work towards a middle ground.

As Pakistan has rightly insisted, and many US diplomats have concurred, the path to long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan is a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban.

What is the best path to get to a common end?

President Trump's strongman approach to problems from North Korea to Syria suggests that he is willing to give the US military a wide latitude in Afghanistan, but there is no realistic scenario in which the Afghan Taliban are defeated by a combination of US and Afghan security forces in the foreseeable future.

That necessarily means a strategy of militarily degrading the Afghan Taliban in order to force them to the negotiating table — something the US has grudgingly recognised, but has done little to make possible.

Complicating the time line are the Afghan parliamentary elections scheduled for 2018 and presidential elections for 2019.

With political uncertainty likely to hover over Afghanistan for the next couple of years, the Afghan government may not be in a position to negotiate with the Afghan Taliban and the latter may be disinclined to negotiate within a political framework that is unsettled.

The combination of all those factors may lead the US to fall back on blaming Pakistan for lack of progress in the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan — an unwelcome situation for this country.

Clarity of purpose and strategy, then, at this time is necessary.

Work with the US where possible to advance peace in Afghanistan and other regional interests of both sides and prepare for a bumpy road ahead if quick successes are not won.

Barred from voting

THE premise that democratic progress is contingent on women's equal participation is a reality lost on our state.

Instead, highly gendered roles dictating women must not participate in public life have resulted in an increased electoral gender gap at 12.17m, according to recent data from the Election Commission of Pakistan.

The country's electoral roll estimates the total number of voters at 97.01m — 54.5m of them men and 42.42m women. In response to this widening gap, the ECP has initiated a women voter registration campaign countrywide which, if implemented with tenacity and will, should ensure access to the ballot box for more women.

Earmarked for 79 districts, this campaign will see mobile Nadra registration vans issuing identity cards so that female voters are registered.

All doable, but implementation with political parties and civil society leading the way will determine the success of these electoral reforms under the new Elections Act, 2017.

Mass registration is the first step that will enable women to vote in the next election.

That the electoral gender gap is prevalent in 20 districts in the country with the largest voter gap in 17 districts of Punjab, followed by two districts in KP and one in Sindh, should be enough for the government to eliminate pervasive institutional and traditional barriers hindering electoral equity.

While mobilising women voters, the ECP must also send out a clear message to political parties that it will not tolerate the disenfranchisement of women as was evident in the 2013 elections in parts of KP when an illegal, misogynistic agreement between mainstream political parties kept women voters at home.

Repeatedly banning women voters is an offence that must not go unpunished. Under new legislation, the offence carries a three-year prison sentence and a fine of Rs100,000.

Holding town hall meetings and running campaigns urging more female participation in conservative constituencies with a history of barring female voters will inform communities why voting matters.

Also, it is a drawback when women are excluded from political party hierarchies because they are not considered influential enough to be awarded party tickets.

Female voters not only have the effect of electing more women into office, their votes also reshape the policy agenda and women's relationship with politics.

Political parties must know that if women comprise half the electorate, all candidates will have to compete for their votes — and that calls for rethinking political priorities.

Disability abuse

ALTHOUGH the prevalence of child abuse in our society is being increasingly exposed and discussed, children with disabilities — who are four times more vulnerable to abuse than non-disabled children, according to WHO — rarely factor into the conversation.

That changed last week, when video footage emerged of the physical violence inflicted on deaf students by their school bus conductors.

The school's head was suspended for attempting to conceal the abuse, and the Lahore High Court ordered provincial authorities to submit a report on the incident and directed the IGP to have police present on every public special education school bus.

That swift action was taken is laudable, even though it must be asked whether the police solution is sustainable, or if they will be appropriately sensitised and trained in sign language.

But none of the measures address the core issue: deep-rooted discrimination against Pakistanis with disabilities, and their wholesale erasure from public policy planning, compounded by underreporting of their population in the recent census.

The outcry over this incident must be galvanised into a sustained response to disability-related issues. For example, the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities, 2002, identified two focal areas — early detection, treatment and rehabilitation, and education.

With only 1-2pc of children with disabilities attending school, the strategy was twofold; strengthen special education for children with moderately severe to severe disabilities, and promote inclusion in mainstream schools for those with mild to moderate disabilities.

This policy must be revived at the national and provincial levels. Many countries have successfully adopted the inclusive model; investing in accessible spaces and teacher training is both cost-effective and improves overall learning outcomes.

It also ensures that the next generation of non-disabled citizens are more empathetic than we are.

One incident has come to light, but countless more children with disabilities are suffering from abuse and deprivation on the margins.

Moving them to the mainstream — and ensuring their social, political and economic integration — is the only way to guarantee their rights as equal citizens.

Post-antibiotic era

“THE end of modern medicine as we know it”, with humanity hurtling towards a “post-antibiotic era in which common infections will once again kill”. This was the warning put out by the World Health Organisation in 2015, as it strove to alert the world to the clear and present dangers resulting from the misuse, or overuse, of antibiotics: the fast-proliferating growth of multidrug-resistant bacteria. Antibiotic resistance is rising to dangerously high levels everywhere, says WHO. Currently, some 700,000 deaths annually are attributable to infections by drug-resistant pathogens globally, and if the situation goes unchecked, this number could increase to 10m by 2050.

One response has been WHO calling for a World Antibiotic Awareness Week that just ended on Nov 19. As the matter is discussed worldwide, has Pakistan a reason to be concerned — not just in terms of being affected but also in the context of culpability? Distressingly, yes. It is well known that the irresponsible use of antibiotics is rife across the country. First, there is the issue of the drugs being easily and openly available everywhere, without a prescription being required. The state, despite the existence of several overseeing bodies including the Pakistan Medical Association and the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan, has utterly failed to regulate or even seriously debate the high sales of antibiotics, or to study how far that is commensurate with the actual health needs of the population. Add to this the other, significant, challenges: self-prescription (which is the result of the over-the-counter sales of prescription drugs), and prescriptions issued by unqualified personnel. By the PMA’s own reckoning, there are over 600,000 non-registered medical practitioners in the country. After this, in the long line of Pakistan’s mea culpas, come irresponsible antibiotic prescriptions given out by

even genuine medics, aggressive advertising — which, again, the state has been unable to control — by big pharma, the tendency of people to pass unused pills on and/or to discontinue a course halfway. All said, where the future of the successful use of antibiotics seems grim around the world, in Pakistan it would appear to be doubly so.

True, there have been a handful of initiatives, such as the Development of National Policy for Containment of Antimicrobial Resistance by the federal health department. Though some solutions have been offered, the success of such initiatives, if any, is difficult to discern. The number of deaths occurring as a result of antimicrobial resistance in the country have not been collated, but going by anecdotal evidence, they are high. In a country beset with issues of poor vaccination practices, hygiene challenges, illiteracy and unawareness, and an extremely patchy healthcare system, the costs may well be staggering. Far from the politics that take up the attention of our legislators and policymakers, these are issues that merit immediate action.

FBR's challenge

NOT many are surprised by the fact that more than a year since their contents were revealed to the world, the Panama Papers have failed to create any serious tax-enforcement action within the country. Officials of the Federal Board of Revenue recently said that the revelations can serve the purposes of producing headlines in the news media, but are not enough to activate serious tax action. In particular, they say, that it is not enough to know that a certain individual or entity owns an offshore company. They need to have details of the assets connected with that company to be able to proceed. This may well be the case. But the fact of the matter is that no serious action, whether related to tax evasion or the stashing away of ill-gotten gains, can be expected in this country simply because those making the rules are themselves involved in the enterprise. Many of those who have been named in the Panama and the Paradise Papers are either at the helm of affairs, or exercise clout and influence. It is little surprise, therefore, that the state lacks the tools with which to inquire into their affairs.

A line has been doing the rounds for many years now, saying that Pakistani laws, especially the Protection of Economic Reforms Act of 1992, prevents any inquiries

into cross-border foreign currency transactions. This line is only partially true. There are numerous other laws that can be invoked if wrongdoing is suspected — in the State Bank's foreign exchange manual for example. What is missing is the will at the top. So long as top government policymakers are themselves seen to be involved in corruption and money laundering, there is little that the tax, regulatory or law-enforcement authorities can do. Adding to the problem, if allegations of money laundering and corruption are politicised in an exercise of selective enforcement, it makes the entire process more of a witch hunt than a means to plug the loopholes that enable the cross-border movement of illicit or tax-evaded wealth. The FBR officials are partially right when they point out that their hands are tied in the face of these disclosures. What is more important to note is how central illicit flows of money are to the normal functioning of Pakistan's politics and economy. Curbing this will take more than a few disclosures.

Stolen gold antiquities

OUR country has yet to recognise that heritage when preserved helps us learn from the past while progressing towards the future. Because of our disregard for cultural heritage we are witnessing the tragic erosion of our architectural and historical legacy. This was evident in a report in this paper on Sunday noting the theft of gold antiquities in the form of exquisite jewellery worth millions of rupees from a Unesco world heritage site. Declared a protected site in 1980, Sirkap dating to the 2nd century BC is an ancient city in Taxila known for its enviable historical links to pre-Greek times. It is the site of a Gandhara-civilisation stupa dating back to Ashoka's period — and in a state of terrible neglect. Despite financial allocations for preservation, the fast deterioration of Sirkap is due to the inability of Punjab's archaeological department to get on with the task of preservation. Then, the theft of priceless artifacts is demonstrative of how dispassionate our champions of heritage actually are. Even if these artifacts were unearthed during restoration and allegedly pocketed by workmen removing wild grass near the ruins of a residential complex, Taxila's custodial authorities should have ensured protection by not allowing conservation works to continue unsupervised.

Last year, Punjab's archaeology department was given Rs70m to preserve Taxila. Surely this allocation will go at least some way in bringing in world-class archaeological expertise rather than local rogue contractors to work on centuries-

old sites. Given that many excavators facilitate the global black market trade in antiquities, the authorities should have known better. In the case of the missing Gandhara cruciform relic casket excavated in 1962, the museum at the University of Peshawar has yet to take action which is telling of lack of national pride. Because heritage matters, the country should start talking about history again, calling for schools to emphasise heritage so our youth learn how cultures have influenced one another for centuries; and for better protection of our cultural heritage as a country.

The politics of siege

THE democratic right to protest has been hijacked and the federal capital and the country's fourth most populous city, Rawalpindi, have virtually been held hostage. It ought to have been an unacceptable state of affairs. But a misguided protest by far-right religious parties, led by the freshly minted Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah, and a mishandled response by the federal government have snowballed into a full-fledged political and law-and-order crisis. Leave aside for a moment the reason for the protest and the demands of the protesters who have made life miserable for hundreds of thousands of commuters between Rawalpindi and Islamabad for over two weeks now. If it were any other group of citizens — nurses, teachers, government employees or farmers — would their protest have been allowed to disrupt the lives of the denizens without any end in sight? Why, then, is this impunity afforded to a gathering that has threatened violence, made extreme demands and undermined the democratic order in the country?

To be sure, the democratic right to protest must be protected against undesirable and illegal encroachment by the state. However, the core of the TLY's complaint has already been addressed by parliament and demands such as the sacking of federal ministers cannot be countenanced; it would set a terrible precedent and encourage future protests. Just as clearly, the protesters must not be evicted in a violent manner. The clumsiness of the state security apparatus could trigger violence that may spiral out of control. A negotiated settlement, with all institutions of the state firmly lined up to bring a peaceful end to the protest at the earliest, is the only sensible path out of the crisis. The failure to do so until now is a reflection of the lack of coordination and communication among state institutions. A firm, united message from all major institutions has not been in evidence so far.

The problem, however, clearly goes beyond the latest siege of Islamabad. Whether it was the PPP and PML-N's 'long march' politics or the PTI's several attempts to paralyse life in the capital, the democratic right to protest has morphed into dangerous demonstrations of street power. There is a line between legitimate democratic protests and protests that destabilise democracy or are anti-democratic — and it appears that line has been crossed in Pakistan. Quite how new rules can be negotiated among the political class is unclear, but it is apparent that this new phase of politics of sieges is unsustainable. Making parliament the locus of political activity could be one way of pulling back from the brink. Another possibility is that the mainstream parties determine new rules for protests in Islamabad that allow protesters to make their point without massively disrupting daily life. If the danger of escalation is not addressed, some kind of dreadful violence may materialise sooner than later.

Nepra Act Amendment

AT a time when the rest of the government wears a beleaguered look and is virtually succumbing to policy paralysis, the move to amend the Nepra Act and reallocate some of the powers of the key power-sector regulator seems to be vigorously moving along. The latest amendment that has just been passed in the National Assembly and that awaits the Senate's approval aims to put the burden to check overbilling of consumers on the regulator's shoulders, with stiff penalties for the staff of the distribution companies who are found to be involved in the practice. Moreover, the new act also creates an appellate tribunal where Nepra decisions can be appealed, instead of in the high courts that are already overburdened with thousands of cases against the regulator's decisions. Tariff determinations have been left out of the ambit of the tribunal, giving it the power only to refer a tariff determination back to the regulator with guidelines.

The marked urgency in passing the bill can be seen in the manner in which it was brought before the house through a supplementary agenda with no proper debate, and in the face of opposition protests. The devil is likely in the details, but the avowed aims of the amendment are to be lauded. It seeks to create a competitive electric power market and "to make special provisions for the development of renewable electricity markets" in the country. As such, it recognises a new

category of an entity, subject to regulation, called a “market operator” who is responsible for the “organisation and administration of trade in electricity and payments settlements among generators, licensees and consumers”. On the face of it, these are progressive steps. Our power sector has long needed to move towards market-based pricing and exchange of electricity, and if the bill genuinely aims to do this, then the minister for power has a massive job to finish in his remaining few months. The rushed timeline on which the government appears to be moving to ensure passage of the legislation suggests that the real goals are far humbler and aim to accommodate the needs of a few parties who want to challenge Nepra determinations or create regimes of privileged access to the scarce electricity in the system. The Senate should ask for a more thorough debate and seek Nepra’s input on the bill’s provisions before deciding.

Sanitation workers’ killing

THE everyday struggle of sanitation workers in Pakistan is reflective of the skewed priorities of a state that has abandoned its marginalised populations. Often drawn from Christian and Hindu communities and suffering socioeconomic discrimination from the day they are born, sanitation workers have limited avenues to better their livelihood prospects. In addition to such unforgivable prejudice, the recent cold-blooded murder of three sanitation workers in Sadiqabad, Rawalpindi, has led to a wave of fear. The men, who were shot while doing their job, were employees of a Turkish waste management company operating in Punjab. Earlier too, two workers from the same company had been shot dead. When services are outsourced to foreign companies, there are expectations that the latter will offer competitive wages, decent equipment and, above all, secure conditions to workers. The waste management company and the Punjab government must now push for an immediate investigation and the authorities must pay the pledged compensation to the bereaved families. It has been learnt garbage trucks will have security guards for protection — at best a temporary measure to assuage concerns. Unfortunately, our security framework lacks vigilant policing and intelligence gathering in densely populated cities; hence the writ of the state continues to be challenged.

Counterterrorism officials believe that the likely perpetrators could be sympathisers of the militant Islamic State group and that eliminating non-Muslims fits in with their

violent ethos. If there is evidence to defend this hypothesis, then, terrorist cells should be identified and their members prosecuted. Recall that the authorities pulled down an IS flag in the Khana area of Islamabad in September — an area close to Sadiqabad. Shelving these heinous murder cases because they are simply not high-profile enough would be tantamount to giving the perpetrators a licence to spread more terror. Innocent lives must not be cut short because of the evil machinations of those perpetuating fear in an already beleaguered population.

A win for ex-PM

THE parliamentary numbers were always in favour of the PML-N, but the vote had the appearance of a mini referendum among the party's MNAs on the leadership of Nawaz Sharif.

In the end, the PML-N easily passed the test, defeating an opposition bill in the National Assembly that sought to strip Mr Sharif of the PML-N presidency.

If the PML-N had been wrong in diluting the consensus on election reforms by inserting a provision that allowed a disqualified Mr Sharif to hold party office, the opposition could have thought twice about trying to pull what was effectively a parliamentary stunt.

The opposition move may have backfired in that it forced the PML-N into uniting behind its leader at a time when Nawaz Sharif and his children are under legal siege.

For now at least, Mr Sharif's political fate remains an open question.

Can Mr Sharif make a political comeback? While the avenues for a return to public office remain few, the ousted prime minister appears to be banking on political fortune more than legal reality.

In the past, political figures whose careers were assumed to be over have made improbable comebacks. PPP supremo Asif Zardari is an example of a stunning turnaround in political fortunes.

Mr Sharif himself is a beneficiary of the political order bestowing a legitimacy that anti-democratic forces have tried to snatch via fixing the rules of the system.

His return to Pakistan after years of exile under military dictator Pervez Musharraf saw electoral wins that carried the PML-N to power in Punjab first and, at the next election, the centre.

With a third on-schedule election slated for next year, Mr Sharif appears to be hoping for firm electoral support as a prelude to forcing his way back to power.

The uncertainty over the duration of Mr Sharif's disqualification from public office — has the Supreme Court judgement in the Panama Papers case rendered him ineligible for public office for life or a shorter duration? — may also be feeding Mr Sharif and the PML-N's hopes.

Be that as it may, the effects on the democratic order of Mr Sharif's fight to keep his political career alive are surely not salutary.

If a return of parliament to the centre of political activity was a welcome change, the drama leading up to the vote on Tuesday in the National Assembly demonstrated how a single politician, admittedly the largest figure on the national stage, can steer the entire democratic process for personal advantage.

Mr Sharif still faces a formidable challenge in the accountability court and his strident political tone on his and his children's trial suggests that a negative verdict is expected.

Better, then, for the Sharifs to defend themselves vigorously in the accountability court — a conviction there would further undermine Mr Sharif's prospects of a return to direct electoral politics.

CPEC Long Term Plan

THE seventh Joint Cooperation Committee meeting ended on Tuesday leaving more questions than answers in its wake.

This was supposed to be the meeting to finalise the so-called Long Term Plan for CPEC, which details all that will be done in the country under the umbrella of the corridor till the year 2030.

Yet, at the end it is not clear whether we have a final LTP or if some more work remains to be done.

The details shared with the public after the meetings ended are far too scattered to build a picture of what all has been agreed upon.

To this day, the public does not know what exactly their government is committing their country to.

All we know is that the plan is so massive in its scope as to be a 'game changer' for the country, and a few details about some projects that are being implemented within its framework.

If this is true then it is all the more important to have wider public buy-in so we have a clearer idea of how exactly the game will be changing.

But what we do know is that in reality the game is far bigger than what the government is projecting, and it is only just beginning.

Going forward, it is crucial that the government live up to its pledge to bring greater transparency to its dealings with the Chinese.

The pledge has been repeatedly given by the minister leading the negotiations, Ahsan Iqbal, in multiple forums including on television, and he must adhere to it.

The full, detailed LTP document must be made public, not any shortened or summarised version of it.

Of late, we have begun to hear language coming out of the Planning Commission that seeks to retreat from this pledge.

In one place, for example, the commission has said that the plan “will be shared with all stakeholders”, without elaborating who they consider to be a stakeholder.

The minister, when asked about his intentions to make the detailed plan public, simply said “it would be a good idea” without giving any indication as to when the step will be taken.

In all his earlier pronouncements, he was clear that the LTP document can only be made public after it had been finalised.

Now that we have crossed that threshold, it is time for the minister to deliver on his word.

Juvenile offenders

THE juvenile justice system should not just be about punishing crime; it should also concentrate on rehabilitating young offenders.

This was the message put forth by singer Shehzad Roy — who is also a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime — while visiting detained juveniles at Karachi’s Youth Offenders Industrial School on Tuesday.

Stressing the importance of rehabilitation for juvenile detainees, Mr Roy paid bail for six offenders who could not afford the amount.

While Mr Roy's noble gesture has given these young men a new lease of life, it has also exposed the state's disregard for the all-important notions of juvenile justice.

Despite the watertight provisions of the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, 2000, young offenders often face the same punishments meted out to adult offenders because of the fundamental weaknesses in the juvenile justice system.

These include inadequate legislative protections, scant birth-registration mechanisms (that prove age) and the absence of age-determination protocols (when juvenile cases are presented in court).

Alarming, lax implementation of the law has resulted in the state sanctioning the execution of at least six juveniles.

Even the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its 2016 remarks on Pakistan's fifth periodic report was "seriously alarmed at the reports of execution of several individuals for offences committed while under the age of 18 years".

More disturbingly, the Anti-Terrorism Act has the powers to override the JJSO when the matter relates to a terrorism-related crime.

Although the JJSO prohibits the preventive detention of children below 15, under the ATA security forces can apprehend, detain and try juveniles in anti-terrorism courts.

The state is reminded that there are different processes to deal with juvenile and adult offenders, and that the absence of special juvenile courts is a travesty of justice.

Only civilised societies recognise that reforming young offenders will benefit not only them but also communities by making them safe from crime.

Lengthy prison terms only generate persistent offenders.

Polls in the balance

WITH the stakes as high as they are, it is puzzling to see the PPP continuing to voice reservations about the 24th Constitutional Amendment Bill that will empower the Election Commission of Pakistan to begin the process of delimitation of constituencies based on the provisional results of the latest census. For the third time in a row, the bill was on the agenda of the Senate on Wednesday, but there was no vote because not enough senators were present. The PPP is the only major party now actively voicing reservations about the delimitation exercise, and the Senate chairman, who belongs to the PPP, warned about the impact that further delays in the passage of the legislation could have on the timely conduct of the general election. The chairman, Raza Rabbani, is a powerful voice in Pakistan's politics, and widely regarded as a man of conscience and integrity. His warning to his own party, which included a reference to the PPP's compromise on the accountability bill as well, should be taken seriously.

As far as it can be discerned, there appears to be one key sticking point: who will be the 'third party' to conduct the audit of the 5pc census blocks that has been agreed upon? In addition, the PPP's parliamentary leader in the Senate, Taj Haider, has pointed to indications that the government may be trying to retreat from its commitment to audit census results in 5pc of the census blocks, even though the prime minister himself had given the assurance on the floor of the house that it stood by its commitment. Beyond this, the only other objection left is that the PML-N is not putting in enough effort to turn out the vote for the bill in the Senate given five of its own senators were absent when the bill came up.

The first reservation is the most serious one and it is surprising that the parties had not agreed as to who the third party would be before forging this consensus of carrying out an audit. In fact, what is being called an audit is a re-verification exercise where enumerators will be sent out into the field one more time to count the population in 5pc of the census blocks. Some believe the army should carry out the exercise, while others believe it should be an international organisation like the UN. Another important point that the parties seem to have not thought through is what will happen in the event the audit throws up discrepancies with regard to the original results. With much left to work out before the delimitation exercise can even begin, it is worthwhile to expedite the process. All parties should heed the counsel of Mr Rabbani, and work in good faith to see this process through.

D.I. Khan assault case

Last month, in a remote village in Dera Ismail Khan, a teenage girl's life was upended.

Setting out one morning to perform the mundane task of getting water, she was abducted, stripped naked and forced to walk through her village. Now, it has emerged that she might be further victimised by the apparent existence of footage of the spectacle.

The news of this assault shocked the nation, even making international headlines. But the media spotlight and the victim's petition to the Peshawar High Court has once again exposed that, for all of Pakistan's legislative progress, women still face immense obstacles to accessing justice, particularly for gender-based crimes.

Despite legislation to protect women, a lack of sustained willpower to implement reforms has, day by day, ossified the weaknesses of the criminal justice system in supporting victims, and the wilfully regressive, all-too-prevalent mindset of treating women as pawns.

At the community level, women must contend with the brutality of the male-constituted jirga system that uses them as bargaining chips in resolving disputes and sanctions 'punishments' against them.

While apparently not directly involved in this assault, the local panchayat did arbitrate over a dispute between the victim's and the main suspect's families years ago. That the situation only escalated — from the accused kicking the victim's mother then, to assaulting her now — is indicative of the culture of impunity for violence against women perpetuated by such alternative forms of 'justice'.

At the police level, women contend with uncooperative officers who often prevaricate and minimise such attacks as petty rivalries instead of calling them violent crimes.

Consider that the victim's mother claims she was initially prevented from registering an FIR, and that when it finally was registered later that day, the victim was pressured to lessen the charges. Curiously, within this interim, the police registered another FIR — this one against the victim's brother.

Finally, at the political level, victims are forced to witness elected officials use their clout to settle political scores instead of protecting their vulnerable constituents. Often running their parties like jirgas, politicians have themselves been complicit in curtailing women's constitutionally guaranteed rights.

Expecting women to negotiate all these obstacles after being victimised is inhumane.

The rot is deep, and only if the state demonstrates its absolute commitment to investigating and prosecuting every such crime, free of prejudice and external pressures, can we call ourselves a just society.

Indian journalist's murder

THE murder of journalist Sudip Dutta Bhaumik in Tripura, India, the second journalist to be killed in the north-eastern state since September, is a bloody reminder of the increasing threats and violence against journalists in the region. According to the editor of the Bengali-language Syandan Patrika, Bhaumik was killed on the orders of a commandant of the Tripura State Rifles inside a paramilitary base which he was visiting to investigate the commandant's alleged role in a financial scam. In September, Indian journalist and activist Gauri Lankesh was killed in Bangalore allegedly for her strident criticism of right-wing and extremist Hindu politics. This week, a suspect in the Lankesh case has been detained by Indian police though not for direct involvement in her murder.

What is particularly troubling about the rising threats against journalists in India is that the violence appears to be worst at the new intersection between right-wing ideology and militarised Indian nationalism. The BJP government's enthusiastic embrace of the Indian military and its willingness to give it a greater role in policymaking and the national conversation could have far-reaching consequences not just for India but the region too. Right-thinking Indians have

warned that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his version of the BJP are dragging the country towards the abyss. Time and again, when Mr Modi's promises of economic and political reform have sputtered, there has been recourse to the politics of exclusion and hate. While the victims have been numerous, journalists have faced the particular ire of right-wing activists. That must stop. A free media is fundamental to an informed polity. Brave journalists in India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan have exposed crimes and investigated misdeeds by public officials. In the face of rising threats to journalists, the states in each of these countries need to renew their commitment to a free media and protect journalists from violence.

Back to load-shedding

THE government, undoubtedly, would like to call them 'teething troubles', but there is mounting evidence that the power sector is slowly being engulfed by uncertainty following the commissioning of the new RLNG generation plants. First came the large-scale shutdowns from Nov 2 to Nov 7, which were partially attributed to the smog causing tripping, but in equal measure were a result of the transmission system being unable to maintain stability in a lower-supply scenario, as well as disruptions in the supply of gas. Now we have another bout of load-shedding in some swathes of the country, once again owing in large measure to a decrease in gas supply, with orders sent to the new power plants to plan for sharp reductions. Along the way, we have seen orders to shut down furnace oil power plants that have caused a near-crisis situation in the oil supply chain as depots and refineries are choked with large stocks of the dirty fuel with no offtake.

It turns out that switching from oil- to gas-based generation involves some complexity that the government had not foreseen. It also turns out that upgrading the transmission system to accommodate enhanced generation and the dispatch of electricity places larger demands on system stability that were not properly planned for. Next to come are the unforeseen financial consequences since the billing and recovery mechanisms have not been reformed to keep pace with the larger number of units that will be sent out. After that, we will see the macroeconomic consequences once debt service and profit repatriation on the projects begins, placing a strain on an already depleted stockpile of foreign exchange reserves. In short, with the enhanced capacity having just been

activated and the government unprepared, we are beginning to witness the consequences of a plan that focused excessively on adding raw megawatts to the system. Perhaps these issues will be sorted out with the passage of time, and in hindsight will, indeed, appear as little more than ‘teething troubles’. But the difficulties of managing the enhanced generation raise fears that the larger consequences of the added megawattage with no attendant reforms will show up in the circular debt and the consumer tariff. The government has its task cut out for it to ensure that the fruits of its success do not become an emblem of its own failures.

Two responses to protests

UNDER a democratic leadership, the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in public spaces is one of the cornerstones of civil liberty. However, the state’s implementation of this principle — often depending on who is protesting — leaves a lot to be desired. This was evident in the case of the schoolteachers from Ghotki, Sindh, who were subjected to police highhandedness on Thursday in Karachi. The teachers were demonstrating against the corrupt practices of the authorities that have deprived them of their salaries for two years when they were set upon by baton-wielding policemen. The state is due a few reminders: all citizens have a right to bring peaceful pressure to bear on the government as long as sit-ins and rallies remain non-violent as was the case with the protesting schoolteachers. Also, when protesters observe a reasonable time, place and manner for protesting, the police cannot thrash them to break them up. While violence is not the answer to demonstrations of this kind, the level of impunity afforded to some groups of protesters attempting to derail the democratic order through aggressive means is quite simply astonishing. This has been on display for almost three weeks in the capital and Rawalpindi, where far-right religious elements led by the Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah went so far as to beat policemen and journalists — legally punishable actions. The state’s indecisiveness on how to deal with them has been critiqued because the protest has paralysed the twin cities.

Meanwhile, instead of cracking down on protesting teachers, doctors and the like, the state must consider their genuine grievances, negotiate with them, and in the longer run, take steps to rectify matters. In the case of the Ghotki schoolteachers, what more evidence is needed than the province’s education minister conceding

to corrupt practices prevalent in education, including the hiring of 23,000 ghost teachers in Sindh? If complaints regarding the status and salaries of teachers are not addressed, quality learning for our children will suffer.

Saudi-led coalition meeting

AFTER its formation was first announced nearly two years ago, the inaugural meeting of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition's Ministers of Defence Council is scheduled to take place tomorrow in the Saudi capital Riyadh. Optimists have dubbed the Saudi-led outfit the 'Muslim Nato' while critics have described it as a 'phantom army'. Indeed, many across the Muslim world — particularly in Pakistan as this country's former army chief Raheel Sharif heads the alliance — will be watching Sunday's proceedings from Riyadh keenly to try and ascertain the exact shape and form the outfit takes. Until now, there has been mostly opacity surrounding the coalition, particularly its *raison d'être*. Both the Saudis and the government here have only issued vague generalised statements about why the coalition has been set up. As a press statement giving details of the upcoming meeting put it, the IMCTC seeks "to fight all forms of terrorism and extremism. ..."

Fighting terrorism is a noble goal and indeed — especially where the Muslim world is concerned — an existential need. As Friday's horrific tragedy in Egypt has shown, the militant bands that roam the Middle East and its peripheral regions are still very much capable of mass slaughter. While the militant Islamic State group and other such concerns may be on the verge of defeat in Syria and Iraq, elsewhere branches of the terror outfit, such as in Sinai and other regions, pose a considerable challenge. Hence, a viable counterterrorism coalition of Muslim states that can share resources, funds and expertise can do much to cleanse the region of such killers. Yet the problem with the Saudi-led coalition is that rather than being an inclusive anti-terrorism alliance, it smacks of partisanship. Proof of this lies in the fact that while the IMCTC claims to have 41 Muslim states in its ranks, this list does not include Iran, Iraq and Syria. It is baffling why such major Muslim states have been left out unless, of course, this has been done deliberately on sectarian grounds.

Saudi Arabia, especially under the watch of its ambitious crown prince, has adopted an aggressive policy towards many regional states, including Iran. While

the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is over three decades old, the vitriol of the past few months has been especially toxic. For example, on Friday, so close to the IMCTC meeting, the Saudi crown prince dubbed Iran's supreme leader "the Hitler of the Middle East". If the prince's comment is any indication of the type of tone the IMCTC meeting may adopt, there is reason for concern. Pakistan made the right decision by choosing not to participate in the Yemeni quagmire despite Saudi pressure. If the IMCTC turns out to be a Saudi platform to bash geopolitical enemies and advance sectarian narratives, then this country would best stay away from such a misadventure.

Deplorable media blackout

THE disturbing and chaotic events of Saturday have shattered the PML-N government's credibility. As vigilante mobs took to the streets across the country and threatened the life and property of law-abiding citizens, the federal government dissolved into a mass of confusion, contradiction and incompetence.

Instead of calming a nervous and fearful public, the government itself appears to have panicked and made several critical errors. Two of those mistakes, however, stand out for their egregiousness and unacceptability.

A sudden, blanket ban on TV news channels and attempts to shut down the public's access to social media platforms and news websites were a shocking overreach of executive power by a government that appeared to be in a blind panic.

Then, as if to confirm the disarray and panic in the upper echelons of the PML-N government, an error-laden notification was issued to try and draft the military in to quell the protests.

A civil-military huddle on Sunday afternoon may have helped restore calm nationally, but the Faizabad protest continues and the shocking mistakes of Saturday cannot be glossed over.

A media ban – in this case, sudden, across-the-board and effectively plunging the country into a news blackout — is simply intolerable.

Some of the media coverage of the abortive Faizabad operation may have been problematic, but the government and the regulator had every opportunity before and during the police operation to reach out to media houses and counsel fair and legitimate restraint.

The PML-N has unmatched governmental experience and the party has shown a keen interest in harnessing the power of social media to project the party and its governments' achievements. Ignorance is not a possibility here.

There is no excuse or justification, none whatsoever, to silence the media to try and cover up the government's mistakes.

An even more sinister aspect of the sudden ban is that the steps taken appear to have been contemplated in advance. While the execution of the ban was mercifully uneven, a blueprint appears to have been generated allowing for similar or more draconian measures in future.

Does the state now view the media as an enemy that has to be contained or defeated? If so, the dangers are more acute than either the public or the media itself may have been aware of.

The other mistake, for which the military leadership must also shoulder some of the blame, was for the civilian government and the military leadership to trade public messages about the best response of the state to the protesters and their demands.

Revealing further incompetence, the first government notification requesting the military's assistance was riddled with errors. Some semblance of stability appears to have returned after the prime minister-COAS meeting yesterday, but lessons must be learned quickly. The danger has not passed.

Massacre in Sinai

EVEN though extremist militants have indulged in acts of numbing violence across the globe, Friday's attack on worshippers in an Egyptian mosque was horrific by all standards. In what appears to be a well-coordinated assault, over 300 people

were slaughtered in Egypt's remote Sinai region by terrorists in a bomb and gun attack. While it is not clear exactly which outfit is responsible for the slaughter, there are strong suspicions that killers linked to the Islamic State militant group were responsible for the massacre. According to news reports, the terrorists were flying the flag used by IS, while militant groups affiliated with IS have been active in Sinai over the past few years. The apparent 'justification' for the attack seems to be that those inside the mosque were the 'wrong' kind of Muslims. Media reports say those close to the Sufi way of thinking frequented the mosque, while there are also claims that members of the Egyptian security forces were praying there. Both these groups — Sufis and security personnel — have come under attack around the world, including in Pakistan, by militant outfits. Sinai in particular has been the centre of activity for IS-backed fighters, while terrorists from the area have targeted Egypt's Coptic Christian minority in a number of ferocious attacks. While Egypt has witnessed horrific violence instigated by Islamist groups over the past few decades, the latest wave of terror seems to be linked to regional turmoil, specifically transnational terror concerns such as IS.

While Egypt's military-led government has promised a tough response to Friday's terror, the frequency of attacks over the past few years has proved that the challenge is considerable and the generals need to do more to neutralise terrorist groups. But the problem is not Egypt's alone. Militancy is a cross-border phenomenon and requires a multilateral approach to defeat it. While IS may be on the verge of collapse in Syria and Iraq, its affiliates and likeminded concerns across the region are still very much capable of immense brutality. That is why it is essential that the major states of the region come up with a joint strategy to tackle the terror threat. The defeat of IS in Syria and Iraq shows that a multinational effort, led by regional states, can work. Leaving ungoverned spaces where militant groups can thrive and working in isolation will only increase the militant threat to the region and beyond.

Pakistan-India cricket

INDIA'S persistent failure to honour its cricket commitments with Pakistan for a bilateral series could see the Pakistan Cricket Board file a case in the International Cricket Council in January 2018 to settle the long-standing dispute. The PCB is seeking compensation from the BCCI, the Indian cricket board, for not honouring

an MoU signed between the two boards in 2014 under which Pakistan and India were to play six bilateral series from 2015 to 2023. Unlike his predecessors, PCB chairman Najam Sethi has pursued the matter and is confident about getting a favourable verdict from the ICC. He recently said that lawyers were giving final shape to the case against the BCCI. The PCB is confident of success; since 2015 it has offered the BCCI multiple options including playing at neutral venues because the Indian government does not want to send the team to Pakistan or to invite the Pakistanis over, for security reasons. The PCB appears to mean business this time as it has allocated \$1m for contesting the case in the ICC and other courts if it fails to get a favourable decision.

However, given the Indian government's propensity to mix politics with sports, and the ICC's reputation as a toothless tiger in such cases, many here aren't too optimistic about the PCB's success. Besides, the ICC's currently being headed by an Indian, Shashank Manohar, does not help either. Although Mr Manohar, during his tenure as ICC chief, has largely been impartial in matters involving his native country, he has been a bystander in crucial matters such as India's defiance of the ICC's future tours programme or its continued refusal to make use of the decision review system. Both apply strictly to all other cricket-playing nations. If the deadlock persists, it would be detrimental for the game since there are few contests in cricket that are as exciting or financially viable as a Pakistan-India match. The stupendous monetary and viewership success of the Champions Trophy final in England last June was just one example of this.

Capitulation

IT is a surrender so abject that the mind is numb and the heart sinks.

The deal negotiated between the state, both civilian and military facets of it, and the Faizabad protesters is a devastating blow to the legitimacy and moral standing of the government and all state institutions.

In one brief page and six gut-wrenching points, the state of Pakistan has surrendered its authority to a mob that threatened to engulf the country in flames. The federal law minister has been sacked — in return for a promise by the protesters to not issue a fatwa against him.

Whether a decision made out of desperation or fear, the upshot is that the state has accepted that mobs and zealots have a right to issue religious edicts that can endanger lives and upend public order.

The decision to compensate the protesters and use public funds to pay for the damage to property caused by the protesters turns on its head the fundamental responsibility of the state to ensure law and order. The pledge to prosecute whoever has been held responsible by a government inquiry committee for abortive legislative changes is to invite further protests and violence.

Something profound changed in the country yesterday and the reverberations will be felt for a long time. How has such catastrophe befallen the nation? Devastating incompetence and craven leadership by three sets of actors appear to be the reason.

The PML-N government helped create the crisis and then managed to exacerbate it at every step. Until the very end, when the government used the veneer of a court order to try and forcibly evict the protesters from Faizabad, there were gargantuan failures of planning and shockingly poor tactics. The political opposition also played a miserable role, fanning a crisis for the most myopic of political reasons and searching for a pyrrhic victory.

Finally, the military leadership appears to have to let rancour towards the government in an ongoing power struggle affect its role in bringing this phase of the crisis to an end.

The government has been humiliated and the military leadership has further improved its standing with sections of the public for helping end the protests — but at what cost to the country and its people? A menacing precedent has been set by the protesters that will surely embolden others and invite copycats. It is no exaggeration to suggest that no one is safe.

Zealots had already demonstrated the power of mob violence and the strength of the politics of intolerance and hate. Now, a blueprint has been created for holding state and society hostage. Despair is not an option for a nation state, but neither

can there be a pretence that a significant setback has not occurred. Is there anyone, in state or society, to help repair the damage?

Auto policy takes off

THE new Automotive Development Policy 2016 is starting to bear fruit, and the country will be better off for it. For decades now, the auto sector has been the exclusive preserve of three companies, and consumers have lacked choice when venturing into the market for locally assembled models. Finally, news is starting to come in that the incentives given in the auto policy to attract new investors into the field have yielded results. If things go smoothly, by 2020 there could be up to nine more companies in the market, vastly expanding the choices available to consumers, unleashing genuine price competition, and taking a huge leap towards eliminating the menace of premium charges for timely delivery. The policy will also do much to discourage imports of used cars, which are an unnecessary cost on our reserves, as well as the maintenance costs they exact from the owners. All things considered, ramping up indigenous assembly is clearly the superior option, and that was the goal the auto policy set for itself last year. This year it has started bearing fruit.

There is another view to be considered here. For a long time, we have been being told that nobody is interested in investing in Pakistan due to the political and security situation. This argument is often given when people ask questions about the costs of the Chinese investment being aggressively solicited. The auto policy makes clear that given the right policy incentives, there are indeed foreign investors keen to come to Pakistan and compete in a promising landscape that offers sound opportunities for growth. With similar policy wherewithal, the same can be done in so many other sectors, such as oil marketing and cement to list only two examples. It is vital to understand that Pakistan's economic fortunes can be unlocked with the application of mind, and sound policymaking, instead of a constant search for a big brother, or saviour, who will come and solve all problems in one go. The auto sector does not touch the lives of the poorest amongst us, but if the competition that is unleashed by the new policy can generate activity in the smaller engine class vehicles, it will certainly be of benefit to the middle and lower middle classes once assembly gets under way in earnest. That alone will be its vindication in the years to come.

Protecting Katas Raj

WHEN legend has it that the pond at the Katas Raj temple complex in Punjab was formed by Hindu deity Shiva's falling tears, one can only imagine the significance this sprawling ancient site must hold for Hindu pilgrims and tourists in general. With temple structures reportedly dating back thousands of years, and also featuring the remains of a Buddhist stupa, mediaeval sanctuaries and havelis, Katas Raj is revered for its once overflowing waters of a cerulean hue. However, recent reports reveal a decrease in the pond's water level because an aquifer has come under stress — water is being diverted by tube wells for use in nearby cement factories and homes. Taking note of the site's overall environmental degradation, a three-member Supreme Court bench headed by the chief justice ordered both the federal and Punjab governments to form a committee to look into ways to mitigate the damage. This isn't the first time that overexploitation of water sources has adversely impacted the pond's water levels — a similar scenario played out in 2012. When factories and residents in Chakwal have no steady water supplies, they rely on subsoil water from tube wells. Clearly, the challenge of water scarcity is at the heart of the matter — one that the local government must address. Also, quarrying activities in the Salt Range causing further damage to this site must be investigated and limited.

To a great extent, administrative lethargy hinders preservation efforts in this country. For instance, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif had inaugurated a water filtration plant at the cost of Rs1m at this site in January, but it has not been operational because of missing electricity connections. Given that industrial projects close to historic sites not only damage heritage but also diminish tourism revenue, the state must enforce relevant environmental assessment measures and monitor activities. Our centuries-old heritage should be a source of pride, not one of exploitation for profiteers.

The long road to recovery

Picking up the pieces after a devastating shock to the system is not easy.

Pakistan is not the country it was until mere days ago. Yet, failure is not an option and it is time to ask searing questions.

Has extremism truly gone mainstream? Or was capitulation by each and every institution of the state to a violent mob a last-gasp attempt at salvaging a modicum of stability in order to allow the state an opportunity to regain its composure before it can press ahead with its counter-extremism project?

Surely, decisions made in desperate, fearful moments cannot mean that for all time and for all intents and purposes the country has surrendered to extremism. Pakistan has had to contend with several such inflection points in its recent history.

The decisions made in the aftermath of 9/11 and the US-led war in Afghanistan; the events leading up to and after the Lal Masjid operation; the assassination of Benazir Bhutto; the military operation in Swat; the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad by US special forces; Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan Agency; the Army Public School attack in Peshawar — each of those, and several other episodes have underlined both the fragility and resilience of this country.

What ought to be clear is that business as usual is absolutely no longer an option. The National Action Plan was Pakistan's halting, uncertain attempt at devising a counter-extremism strategy, but it has gone nowhere. While there may have been several good ideas in NAP, none of them have been implemented to any degree that any sensible or rational analysis can deem satisfactory.

The significant strides made in the fight against anti-Pakistan militants who have taken up arms against the state and society have masked the broader failures in the fight against extremism.

There is simply no measure, no analysis and no assessment that can suggest that Pakistan is a country less threatened by extremism of any and every stripe than it was threatened by a decade ago. More desperately, there is a real sense that the state's capacity to even understand the scale and scope of the problem has been undermined by its head-in-the-sand approach to extremist challenges.

If there is to be a solution — and it is not clear that there is an obvious solution — it may have to start with a simple premise: no more, no longer and never again. A zero-tolerance approach to bigots, zealots and mobs.

This country has the greatest of men, the most remarkable of leaders in the 20th century, as its founding father. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the best of all statesmen, who knew not hate or bigotry or violence, is the reason this country exists. To his ideals we must return, to his vision we must re-commit ourselves.

Acknowledge extremism; defeat extremism; and let Jinnah's Pakistan prevail.

Stock market rackets

AN old racket now faces a new challenge. The stock market has long been known as a hive of insider trading, front running, wash trades, pump-and-dump schemes and leakage of proprietary trading data of individual brokers against a payment. But now a new shareholder, in the shape of a Chinese consortium that owns controlling stake in the newly divested stock exchange, wants to instal a Canadian managing director, and is facing stiff resistance from the broker community. At the same time, a loud and aggressive protest by some brokers against what they allege to be illegal leakage of trade data of buy-and-sell orders of individual Unique Identification Numbers has triggered an investigation from the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan. The investigation is unlikely to get any further than the last such inquiry conducted a few years ago, leading to a report in 2014 which has been buried ever since.

But the SECP's inability to get to the bottom of one of the oldest and most deeply entrenched rackets in the stock market does not mean that the new shareholder and management of the PSX will be equally helpless. Technology provides all sorts of answers to detect such rackets and identify the culprits. Only the will to pursue the racketeers will be required, and given the new landscape following the historic divestment of the bourse last year, this could well be forthcoming. The divestment of the bourse is a goal more than a decade in the making, and now that it has been achieved, the real story can begin. The new owners and the soon-to-arrive managing director should pay careful attention to the politics of the broker community, especially as they revealed themselves in the Oct 24 meeting, which

descended into a shouting match as per some reports. This close attention will help them to determine who stands where in these rackets, and where opposition is likely to originate if and when they press ahead with tackling these rackets. Plugging the leak of proprietary data should be an important priority for them. Divestment of the bourse was never meant to be an end in itself. It was a means towards ending the culture of racketeering that permeates the stock market, and the moment presents a good opportunity for the new shareholders to begin that task.

Another ‘honour’ killing

IF the state has no tolerance for ‘honour’ crimes, it must not permit a parallel and illegal judicial system to perpetuate a regressive adjudication process. Disregarding law and fundamental rights, jirga justice approves heinous ‘punishments’ such as murder in the name of ‘honour’ and swara — when young girls are forcibly married off to settle disputes or as punishment for crimes by male relatives. Recent reports note an escalation in brutal ‘honour’ crimes in Karachi with couples murdered for marrying of their own choice. On Monday, police exhumed two bodies buried in gunny sacks in a graveyard. The couple was allegedly murdered by relatives on jirga orders for ‘dishonouring’ their families. Given the brutality of this case, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah ordered the police to arrest all perpetrators. For this, police competency is required as honour crimes evade legal and judicial prosecution. Mr Shah noted that “Karachi is not a tribal area where jirgas are held”. But this is not the first case of honour killing in Karachi, and the 2004 ban on jirgas is openly flouted. Reinforcing punishment for jirga members, often influential persons, under the anti-honour killing law and anti-jirga law is imperative.

The state must strengthen the courts so that women, especially, are not used as bargaining chips, stripped of any agency, and with no right of representation and appeal. The murder of a Pakhtun couple electrocuted in August in Karachi, despite both families not wanting to carry out the jirga-sanctioned murder, is the result of outsourcing justice. The dead cannot cry out for justice; it is the duty of the living to find justice for them. Yesterday, after more than two months, a judicial magistrate in Karachi issued non-bailable warrants for four jirga members implicated in this case. Because jirgas have cloaked misogyny as tradition and

legitimised violence as justice for far too long, the state must end this system before more bodies are buried in unmarked graves.

Skewed priorities

Nawaz Sharif is unhappy and he wants the country and the world to know it.

But Mr Sharif's reaction to the end of the Faizabad protest is puzzling. The ousted prime minister would like the country to believe that not only does he disapprove of his government's handling of the protest, but that he was unaware of the decisions being made to try and bring the protest to an end.

Yet, on Saturday, when the police-led operation to try and end the Faizabad protest was under way and protests had begun to erupt in cities across the country, Mr Sharif was pictured in a meeting in his Raiwind residence with Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif.

In that meeting, Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal reportedly briefed Mr Sharif about the police operation as did the Punjab chief minister on his government's plans to deal with protests erupting in the province.

But after the spectacular failure of those plans and the shocking concessions made to the protesters, the three-term prime minister and president of the PML-N would like to pretend that his government's decisions have nothing to do with him.

There are two other elements of Mr Sharif's self-serving description of the events of the past few days that are disturbing. First, the former prime minister is reportedly concerned that the outside world will once again see Pakistan as a defender of extremism and this may impact investments in the country, particularly Chinese investments under CPEC.

Consider for a moment what that implies: Mr Sharif is more concerned about the image of Pakistan in foreign capitals than the security of the denizens of Pakistan's cities, including the federal capital, which was under siege for nearly three weeks.

While the country must be mindful of the image of Pakistan in an interconnected world, the obsession with foreign perceptions and desperation to please external benefactors is arguably part of the reason the country lurches from crisis to crisis.

The PML-N government's fundamental duty is the people of Pakistan — ensuring their safety and security and protecting their rights. If that duty is kept front and centre and informs all governmental decision-making, the country's image will automatically improve and concerns in foreign capitals will dissipate.

Second, Mr Sharif's lament that governance is suffering is to ignore that he is the reason his government is deeply distracted. Ever since the Panama Papers issue erupted, and certainly since Mr Sharif's ouster in July, the federal cabinet appears to exist largely to help Mr Sharif deal with his legal and political struggles.

Moreover, the succession struggle in the PML-N between Mr Sharif's side of the family and Shahbaz Sharif's family appears to have severely damaged necessary coordination between Lahore and Islamabad. Arguably, the Faizabad debacle began with Mr Sharif's own selfishness in recent months.

Diminishing forests

IT is unfortunate that when faced with dire circumstances we tend to resort to inaction rather than contemplating how we ourselves might have gone wrong. Take the ongoing debate around deteriorating air quality; instead of facing up to the causes and looking for long-term solutions, our government shows disinterest in tackling a pressing challenge. In this case, deforestation has an adverse effect on air quality. On Wednesday, this newspaper published the findings of a report by the Sindh forest and wildlife secretary that showed forest cover has declined by 80pc since 1971 in the province. While presenting its findings to the Supreme Court recently, the authors noted Sindh's forestlands presently cover a negligible 100,000 acres. In a scathing indictment, one that requires investigation, the report revealed 145,245 acres owned by the forest department had been illegally acquired by private enterprises through collusion with the revenue department. Despite legislation regulating forest conservation and timber harvesting, the decimation of tens of thousands of trees by illegal timber mafias continues. Now

that it is laid bare before the Supreme Court that entrenched corruption, weak governance, faulty internal policies and political apathy are responsible for selling off swathes of once-lush forestland and the felling of majestic trees for decades, action to recover the encroached land and regenerate forests must be a critical goal.

While regenerating its forests, the government would do well to study KP's — by all accounts successful — Billion Tree Tsunami Afforestation Project. However, in 2013, KP's forests had also been depleted beyond their regenerative capacity because of the collusion of the forest department and profiteering timber contractors. After the government clamped down on illicit timber traders and conducted a satellite-based demarcation survey of forestland, it was able to reclaim much of the encroached land. Besides administrative action, involving community forest guards in the fight against the timber mafia and protecting forest enclosures for planting trees have offered locals ownership of their woodlands. Integral to the survival of populations, forests are unique plantations, naturally able to decrease pollution because they lessen the effects of severe weather and add oxygen to the atmosphere which leads to rainfall. For these reasons alone, the consequences of decades of felling of trees will pan out to be disastrous for health, livelihoods and food security. It is disheartening that so far there is no clear indication of coherent national policies to mitigate climate change — especially strategies focused on preserving agriculture and forestation.

Police officials' ordeal

THE long-term implications of the agreement between the government and the leaders of the Faizabad sit-in can be gauged in a nutshell by the abduction of two police officials allegedly at the hands of some of the protesters.

They were kidnapped on Sunday from a hospital in Rawalpindi where they were present in connection with the death of a man during the clashes on Saturday.

Harrowing details have emerged of their ordeal since they were found alive, battered and bruised, a day later. According to the two sub-inspectors, they were kept deprived of food and water and brutally beaten by their kidnappers.

Even more horrifying, the latter also threatened to douse them in petrol and set them alight. That they did not act upon the threat was apparently either because their hostages begged for their lives and convinced them that they were not at fault or because of the agreement subsequently reached between the government and the protest leaders.

The injuries suffered by one of the policemen are severe enough to keep him away from work for over a month.

If the kidnappers were indeed participants of the dharna, the fact that they will almost certainly suffer no repercussions for their brazen act of criminality is a body blow to the police's morale and its professionalism.

Notwithstanding their shortcomings, which are largely on account of lack of resources and training, as well as an excess of political meddling, the police is first in the line of fire.

In recent years, their job has been particularly dangerous: hundreds of them have been targeted by extremists, killed while trying to foil suicide bombers, etc.

Explore: How dharna politics threaten system stability in Pakistan

In developed countries, there are serious consequences for those who commit crimes against the police because the latter plays such a critical role in good governance.

In Pakistan, however, while they are expected to incur the very considerable risks that go with their job, their protections are being further whittled away — ironically enough, by the state itself.