

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of October 2016*

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Table of Contents

Mounting tensions ..... 6

Oil price uncertainty ..... 9

Regional isolation? ..... 10

PTI’s protest politics ..... 11

Muharram security ..... 12

Fourth Schedule in disarray ..... 13

Defusing tensions ..... 14

Helmets for bikers ..... 15

Impediments to CPEC projects ..... 16

Women as property ..... 17

Mining tragedy ..... 18

Missed opportunity ..... 18

Overseas workers’ dues ..... 20

Fallout of war on refugees ..... 21

Violent start to Muharram ..... 21

Turkish purge ..... 22

The PTI puzzle ..... 23

The real challenge is poverty ..... 24

Disrupted cultural ties ..... 25

Cricket: a clean sweep ..... 26

Geotagging seminaries ..... 28

Karachi arms haul ..... 29

Foreign policy woes ..... 29

Zikri leader’s murder ..... 31

Arrest for cyber stalking ..... 32

Promise of SDGs ..... 32

Right to information ..... 33

State of mental health ..... 34

Middle East carnage ..... 35

Higher gas prices ..... 36

Cap on school fee hike ..... 37

Nepra’s independence ..... 38

Reaction to Dawn story..... 39

Constitutional rule ..... 40

Nepra’s independence ..... 41

Reaction to Dawn story..... 42

Constitutional rule ..... 43

Hunger amidst plenty ..... 44

Weak Afghan state..... 45

Peaceful Ashura ..... 46

Farewell to the IMF? ..... 46

Anti-extremism steps..... 48

Nobel’s unexpected winner ..... 49

Public officials’ accountability..... 49

Stop child marriage ..... 50

In honour of Shahlyla..... 51

PPP’s rally in Karachi ..... 52

Failing the PSEs ..... 53

Bus tragedy ..... 54

PTI’s protest tactics..... 55

BRICS summit..... 56

Academic dishonesty ..... 57

Auditing asset declarations..... 58

Kabul-Taliban talks..... 59

Jerusalem resolution..... 60

MQM in disarray ..... 60

A campaign code..... 62

Pak-India cultural ties ..... 63

DPC rally ..... 64

Cross-LoC tensions ..... 65

Market closure timing..... 66

The age of xenophobia..... 67

Organ trafficking ..... 68

Lawyers’ behaviour ..... 69

Wrongfully hanged..... 69

Countering extremism ..... 70

A shameful incident ..... 71

Imran Khan’s warning ..... 72

Polio survivors ..... 73

Dance controversy ..... 74

Attack on police academy ..... 75

Curbs on MQM ..... 76

Blaming taxpayers ..... 77

Coarse language ..... 77

IMF chief’s words ..... 78

Pak-India tensions ..... 79

Karachi LG mess ..... 80

Ignoring the larger threat ..... 81

Down the spiral, again ..... 82

Nepra vs power ministry ..... 83

Sharbat Gula arrested ..... 84

Plea for sanity ..... 84

Schizophrenia verdict ..... 86

Pensioner’s suicide ..... 87

The cost of protests ..... 88

Houthi missile attack ..... 89

Decimation of wildlife ..... 90



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# Mounting tensions

Nearly one and a half billion people in two countries — India and Pakistan — appear to be held hostage to conspiracy, rumour and reckless warmongering. That needs to stop, and it needs to stop immediately.

On Thursday, 11 days after the Uri attack and seemingly an eternity in Pak-India sabre-rattling and diplomatic tensions, another layer of confusion and chaos was added to one of the world's most complicated bilateral relationships.

With the facts of the Uri attack yet to be established or shared with the world, a new, potentially larger, set of questions has now overshadowed an already fraught situation.

What happened along the Line of Control between midnight and early morning on Thursday is a story that Indian authorities appear to be very clear about and the Indian media has reported with relish. But virtually nothing has been independently confirmed about the events along the LoC, an area that is effectively cordoned off from the media in both countries and where the local population is unlikely to know the facts or be willing to speak candidly.

What is clear is that something did happen at several points along the LoC in the early hours of Thursday morning. At the very least, Pakistani and Indian forces exchanged fire in which two Pakistani soldiers died.

That is a sad, if long-standing, reality of the region: whenever tensions between the two countries are high, parts of the LoC see live ammunition fired, the lives of local populations disrupted and several casualties among security personnel and civilians.

Indeed, two summers ago, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi newly installed in office, the LoC saw a series of skirmishes that progressively escalated until reaching crisis point around mid-October. That set of events was supposedly meant to herald the start of a new, so-called get-tough policy by India.

Eventually, better sense prevailed and by September 2015 the DG Rangers and DG Border Security Force met and agreed to renew the LoC ceasefire. The Pathankot attack earlier this year, which involved infiltration across the Working Boundary, did not materially change the situation along the LoC, but unrest in India-held Kashmir and the Uri attack appear to have done so.

At this point, it is imperative to establish the facts quickly. The wild cheering that greeted the government's accounts of events in India may become a dangerous precedent and create a new set of expectations in a region where war in an overtly nuclear environment would be catastrophic for both countries.

Facts, however, would help nudge the situation towards de-escalation, given signalling from the Pakistani state and Indian government.

Pakistani policymakers, both civilian and military, have reacted sensibly, and appear to be resisting Indian attempts to bait Pakistan. But the media echo chamber — jingoistic, fiercely nationalistic and often removed from reality — can have unpredictable effects, especially when it comes to whipping up warlike sentiment among the populations of the two countries.

Quickly establishing two sets of facts, of events along the LoC on Thursday and the Uri attack, would switch a media narrative from punch and counter-punch and allow the two states to work on how to ratchet down tensions along the LoC.

The Modi government, despite its hawkish instincts and muscle-flexing, has indicated an awareness of the dangers of unrestrained rhetoric. Facts will help clear the miasma and introduce the necessary rationality into a debate that is increasingly unhinged.

Read: [How Pakistan should respond to a dangerous time](#)

Clearly, the problems in the region are not unilateral and one-directional. Pakistan has pursued flawed policies in the past and could do more to help end the menace of terrorism in the region. But this is not an area of straightforward cause and effect, nor are the broader issues of the Pak-India relationship of immediate relevance.

First and foremost, the priority of the leaderships of Pakistan and India should be to ensure that no matter what the circumstances and no matter what the concerns, the path to war is not taken.

India suffered a blow in Uri as it did in Pathankot. It has a right to expect justice and Pakistan has a responsibility to investigate any links to citizens of this country. But what has been unleashed in India since the seemingly exaggerated claims of so-called surgical strikes along the LoC is frightening and wildly destabilising.

If now is not a propitious time for a dialogue of peace, it is the time for some serious introspection.



Only a few days ago, the Indian prime minister talked of a joint war against poverty; he must now also resist the poverty of ideas and the temptation to take the low, dangerous road.

## Oil price uncertainty

AFTER enjoying a three-year bonanza of falling oil prices, Pakistan would be well advised to take a second look at what just happened at the Opec meeting in Algiers. The world's major oil-producing economies agreed to cut production by around 700,000 barrels per day, a modest reduction but possibly the first in a series of further such steps. The move was apparently helped by Saudi Arabia's change of heart. This is the first time Opec has been able to agree on coordinated output amongst its member states since 2008. And it could be a turning point in the saga of plummeting oil prices that has given breathing room to importers like Pakistan, but badly battered the fiscal health of exporters like Saudi Arabia, who have been forced to resort to massive pay cuts in government jobs and layoffs in the private sector to cope.

For Pakistan, the thing to note is the 5pc jump in oil prices when news of the agreement broke. The next milestone is the November meeting when the cartel meets again to decide who will bear what share of the cuts. Given that Saudi Arabia is now on board with cutting output due to its deteriorating health, most analysts are expecting that this event marks a turning point. From this point on, it is likely that oil prices will only move upward, although the speed at which that will happen is not possible to predict at the moment.

The prospect of rising oil prices presents the government with its most serious immediate economic challenge. Both the State Bank and IMF have repeatedly warned about this, as have most independent analysts. By some measures, Pakistan's external sector has benefited by \$7bn since oil prices began their downward spiral a few years ago. Meanwhile, inflows in the form of remittances, foreign investment and exports have been coming under pressure, although to varying degrees. Foreign direct investment and exports have fallen dramatically since the oil price bonanza kicked in, while remittances have started showing pressure more recently since July. In addition, the beneficial impact of declining oil prices has been offset by a corresponding increase in non-oil imports, meaning our import bill — which consists largely of oil — has been constant throughout this period when prices were coming down. This is the reason why the State Bank and IMF have both noted the increase in foreign exchange reserves by adding the caveat that this represents comfort only as long as oil prices do not climb.

That scenario may have kicked off in Algiers, and is likely to ramp up further in the months to come. The picture on the external front was never as bright as it was painted to be, and now at a crucial juncture, as the country exits an IMF programme, prepares to mount road shows for its bonds in global markets, and debt service obligations loom, the breakout of fresh uncertainty about the future of low oil prices calls for a cautious approach.

## Regional isolation?

ISOLATION is a word bandied about all too easily when it comes to discussing Pakistan's place in the international community. In this century alone, seemingly every other year there has been alarmist rhetoric, by external rivals and internal political neophytes that Pakistan is on the verge of global isolation. Indeed, isolation and its more draconian cousin, containment, are issues that no country with a modicum of international trade linkages and an interest in being part of the modern world should ever take lightly. No country should want to be in the situation that, for example, North Korea is in, notwithstanding the ties that country has had to Pakistan over the years. Yet, hyperbole and overwrought commentary aside, there are clearly problems that Pakistan has to contend with on the external front.

The call by Sri Lanka to postpone the Saarc summit may have been a mere formality given the earlier withdrawals, but the very fact that the Sri Lankan government felt it necessary to state that the "prevailing environment in the region is not conducive" to holding the summit is telling. Moreover, the condemnation by Sri Lanka of "terrorism in all its forms and manifestations" should not go unnoticed. A change of government in Sri Lanka in January 2015 installed an India-leaning administration in that country, but Pakistan-Sri Lanka ties are decades old and military and diplomatic cooperation have historically been reliable. With Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan and, of course, India already having declined to attend the November summit in Islamabad, five of seven countries in Pakistan's immediate neighbourhood are unwilling to attend a symbolic conference in the nation's capital. Surely, that must call for some serious debate — a debate that goes beyond passionate denunciations of Indian machinations.

Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Khurshid Shah has already made a sensible call for a joint session of parliament to discuss tensions with India and such a session can easily be expanded to discussing the overall regional security and diplomatic environment. Admittedly, joint sessions have not yielded substantive policy inputs in recent years, but they have become a symbol of democratic counsel, and command the attention of policymakers and sections of the public. If opposition

politicians can resist grandstanding and unnecessary political attacks and the government can demonstrate a genuine interest in parliamentary debate, a joint session could help at least frame a debate about Pakistan's foreign policy and national security policies more effectively. By any rational measure, Pakistan is far from isolated internationally. Yet, it is undeniable that countries with which Pakistan has had long-standing relationships — relationships that are worth protecting and nurturing — are increasingly uneasy with this country's perceived policies. To the extent that Pakistan has legitimate interests to protect, it must do so robustly and without fear of outside opinion. Surely, however, more effective diplomacy is called for.

## PTI's protest politics

NOW that the long-awaited PTI rally in Raiwind has been held, a number of important questions need to be asked. Foremost amongst these is what exactly has been achieved? No doubt the rally itself was a larger affair than most people were anticipating, but, given that its main purpose was to command the headlines, it cannot be said to have been successful. The announcement of a 'final showdown' was met with jaded applause because it was only the latest in a series of such dramatic announcements by party leader Imran Khan. If he is trying to build momentum for his electoral campaign, then sustaining it for another year and a half will prove to be a burden, especially given the prevailing discord within the party.

But there is an important fact that must be kept in mind after the follies of this style of perpetual protest have been pointed out — along with the personal nature of the attack by holding the rally near the private residence of the prime minister. That fact is that the PTI has a legitimate point in pursuing its politics of protest. There is, indeed, a dire need for accountability in the wake of the Panama Papers disclosures, and no amount of cynical acceptance of the questionable financial practices prevailing in the country should be allowed to cloud that truth. What else is the party supposed to do if all paths to pursuing the matter appear to be blocked? If no institution of state, from the tax authorities to law enforcement to the regulators, is able to raise questions about the concealed assets revealed by the Panama Papers — and allegations against the prime minister's family stand out on this count — then should political parties simply give up their efforts? Obviously not. Since it is difficult to find a way of pursuing accountability within the system, they are not left with much choice but to protest. If such a vital matter is clouded by the distressing events on the Pak-India front, it is unfortunate but not a reason to drop the matter. Keeping that in mind, the PTI's protest campaign, even if it is not likely to produce results and is quite often disruptive, can still be seen as justified by other opposition parties — unless, of course, the government decides to take corrective

steps, and investigates the allegations to show that it is serious about addressing corruption-related concerns.

## Muharram security

IN these times of terrorist violence, securing religious gatherings in Muharram — especially during the month's first 10 days — is a major administrative task. Countrywide, hundreds of mourning assemblies and processions of varying sizes are organised during this period, and gatherings in the major urban centres can attract thousands of participants. In years past, Muharram-related gatherings have been attacked by extremists with deadly consequences, but over the past few months sectarian violence — both targeted killings and mass-casualty attacks — has come down noticeably. As news reports have indicated, the authorities in different parts of the country are going through the paces, gearing up to ensure security during Muharram. For example, the Sindh chief minister has called for a ban on pillion riding from the 8th to the 10th of the lunar month, while cellular and internet services will also reportedly be blocked on Ashura. Meanwhile, the administration in Islamabad has imposed a ban on a number of clerics from different sects to ensure that communal peace prevails.

Despite the drop in sectarian violence in the run-up to Muharram, the state must remain vigilant as militant elements are always on the lookout for 'soft' targets to strike. For example, on Eidul Azha militants tried to attack a Shia congregation in Sindh's Shikarpur district. While militant groups may well be lying low, many of their political patrons — especially of the more sectarian variety — are very much active; the state must keep a close eye on these elements. Moreover, clerics of all denominations bear a major responsibility to not misuse the pulpit; at a time when religious passions are running high, provocative speeches can have destructive consequences, especially in cities and towns known to be sectarian flashpoints. And in this age of social media and 'instant' news, even local flare-ups can spread like wildfire on a national scale. The ulema, community leaders and the state must all put in extra efforts to ensure that Muharram is observed safely across Pakistan.

## Fourth Schedule in disarray

ONE would imagine that a document listing individuals described as “proscribed persons under the law” would be of paramount importance for a country in the throes of a do-or-die battle against militancy. However, the confusion surrounding the Fourth Schedule of the Anti Terrorism Act 1997, which catalogues precisely such individuals, is symptomatic of the way in which the state has approached the fight against militancy — scattered, disjointed and incoherent. For one, it seems the government has not bothered to keep the document updated. A consolidated list provided to Nacta by the provinces, GB, AJK and Islamabad contains around 8,000 names. However, according to a senior interior ministry official cited in this paper, 20pc of these people may be dead, while another 5pc have either left the country or are too old and infirm to pose any threat. Secondly, the law is not being applied even in the case of individuals included in it for apparently legitimate reasons. It is difficult to comprehend this lackadaisical approach. According to Section 11EE of the ATA, the Fourth Schedule is to include “any person who is an activist, office-bearer or an associate of an organisation kept under observation ... or proscribed ... or ... affiliated with any group or organisation suspected to be involved in terrorism or sectarianism”.

In order to prevent such individuals from disseminating their extremist/militant ideologies, the same section of the ATA places severe limitations on their social interactions. For example, with certain caveats, they are not allowed to visit institutions where persons under 21 years of age study, receive training or are housed permanently or temporarily. The same goes for public places such as restaurants, television and radio stations or airports. Neither can they be found at the scene of public meetings or processions, or in an enclosed location in connection with any public event. Nevertheless, on Thursday the leader of the banned ASWJ, Maulvi Ahmed Ludhianvi, was invited to the inauguration in Rawalpindi of the new building of the Taleemul Quran madressah which was burnt down during sectarian violence in November 2013. At the same time, the ASWJ leader, who recently returned from Haj without any impediment, is also among the 2,021 individuals on the Fourth Schedule whose accounts were ordered frozen by the State Bank a few days ago, also under a provision of the ATA.

Inconsistencies like these, of which there are many examples, serve only to degrade and diminish the government’s efforts against militancy; and embolden the very elements it claims to be fighting. The Fourth Schedule is a vital corollary of the National Action Plan: it should be rationalised and streamlined so that action is directed where required. Only a cohesive counterterrorism effort, in which all aspects are in sync, can triumph over the complex, multilayered problem that we face.

## Defusing tensions

NO escalation, no increase in tensions desired and no warmongering — the message from DG ISPR Lt-Gen Asim Bajwa from the Line of Control was both clear and welcome.

The combination of the Uri attacks and Indian claims of so-called surgical strikes had raised the spectre of escalating violence across the LoC and the Working Boundary and the frightening possibility of conflict spreading beyond the disputed Kashmir region.

While the facts about both the Uri attack and the Indian claims of strikes across the LoC have yet to be established, the leaderships of the two countries do appear to be aware of the dangers of brinkmanship in an overheated political environment.

Of course, far more sensible and a great deal more welcome would have been if the Uri attack had not precipitated over-the-top rhetoric by India, and, instead, diplomatic channels had been activated to ascertain the facts as quickly as possible.

Nevertheless, the belated onset of good sense by India and Pakistan's measured, restrained response throughout suggest that bilateral tensions may soon subside from the present acutely and unacceptably high level.

Surely, however, if tensions are to subside and Pakistan and India find a way to address each other's concerns through diplomatic dialogue, the political leaderships of the two countries need to re-examine their conduct.

On the Pakistani side, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the PML-N government have been virtually invisible at a time of serious Pak-India tensions.

Yes, there was a cabinet meeting and the government has issued several statements, but none of the national security forums that are within the civilian ambit have been activated and the prime minister himself has kept a remarkably low profile.

Being anonymous in a time of crisis will make it that much harder for the government to bring to bear its influence on foreign policy and national security.

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi needs to reconsider his approach of ignoring altogether the elected government in Pakistan.

Whatever Mr Modi may believe, it serves neither country's interests when an elected government is progressively shunned by a myopic leadership on the other side.

## Helmets for bikers

IT is the unhappy but mandated task of governments everywhere to enact legislation and enforce laws aimed at keeping the citizenry safe, even if the latter is initially myopic and reluctant to comply. This is the context in which the Sindh government's latest drive for traffic safety must be placed. In recent days, the administration has been running an advertisement campaign underscoring the need for motorcyclists and pillion riders to don helmets. In attempting to enforce the law, the Sindh government lags behind other places, with Punjab, KP and Islamabad having shown resolve in ensuring the wearing of helmets and seatbelts years ago. While it must be admitted that the results have been mixed — there always exist elements that try to get away with non-compliance — there is certainly greater awareness amongst road users now. The Sindh government must be commended for finally following suit.

That said, the governments of Sindh and all the other provinces need reminding that blindly issuing tickets to those who refuse to comply with the law is only part of the task. Consider, for example, the reports emanating from Karachi recently that in the wake of the recent crackdown, vendors of motorcycle helmets have raised their prices. Such malpractice needs to be checked, while it must be ensured that the protective gear available in the market meets safety and quality standards — greater demand can easily open the doors for substandard equipment. Further, the requirement for pillion riders to wear helmets has in some quarters raised hackles insofar as women are concerned. Yet the populace needs reminding that regardless of local apparel traditions, female pillion riders are also deserving of protection. Perhaps a concurrent awareness-raising campaign in this regard would help convince people of the importance of this. Meanwhile, state authorities should take heart from international experience, where the stringent enforcement of the law has eventually led to voluntary compliance.

## Impediments to CPEC projects

It appears the bouquet of power-sector projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has hit a number of road blocks of late. The latest in a series of snags that these projects have run into is the Matiari to Lahore transmission line, the first private-sector initiative in power transmission that Pakistan has seen. The line is vital to the overall CPEC vision because it will carry additional power to be generated under numerous other CPEC power-generation projects in Sindh, including Tharparkar and Hub in Karachi. If the line is not built, that additional generation capacity will have no means to get to load centres in Punjab, rendering it redundant. Given the \$2.1bn cost of the line, the Chinese were asked to build the project, but the tariff that they wanted was higher than what the regulator, Nepra, could allow. The net result has been a stalemate of sorts for almost a year now. In August, Nepra approved a tariff of 71 paise per unit, but the Chinese want a tariff of 95 paise instead, 30pc higher, and the government is spinning all its wheels to persuade the regulator to grant the revised tariff.

This is not the first time that we have seen a large CPEC project run into financial difficulties. Earlier, the complex of power plants envisioned at Gadani was scrapped because of the costs of building the jetty. Many investments in the Quaid-i-Azam Solar Park in Punjab have landed up in litigation because the government cannot honour the upfront solar tariff it offered to woo the Chinese. A large coal-fired power plant to be built in Kallar Kahar has also been scrapped due to an escalation in cost, while the Thar coal plants have landed up in litigation because of the costs of compliance with environmental regulations.

The fact that all of these were scrapped at advanced stages of execution shows the lack of foresight while highlighting the abundance of triumphant rhetoric under which these projects were being carried out. In almost every case, it is being discovered that the hidden costs are large enough to erode whatever cost advantages the projects are supposed to bring. Accommodating these costs in every case runs the risk of creating a separate class of investor in the power sector that enjoys privileged access to the sector's resources, from revolving funds to dollar-denominated settlement and a special security force. This situation must be avoided to safeguard the future integrity of power-sector investments. And the temptation to simply pass all these costs on to the consumers must also be resisted. If the investment coming under CPEC cannot justify itself on financial grounds, then it is worth considering why we should go down this path rather than walk the hard road of power reforms to promote competitiveness instead.



## Women as property

LAWS enacted in Pakistan that guarantee equality and protection for women have never been extended to Fata. Treated as personal property, their fate tied to tribal customs or *riwaj*, tribal women have limited recourse to the law under the colonial-era FCR. Because the underlying component of tribal society is patriarchal, women must live by the rules of engagement set by men. This is the context of a report in this paper over the weekend that focuses on the appalling practice of buying and selling women, a custom codified under *Turizona* law in Kurram Agency. Established under British rule in 1944, this law allows for tribal women to be purchased like cattle for the purposes of matrimony and at varying price tags — *rasmana* or money that the heirs of a woman receive when she is sold. Her price depends on whether she is single, married, widowed or even abducted. Indeed, such sordid customs — *vulvar* and *swara* included — must have no legal standing whatsoever in the 21st century. The challenge is to ensure that anti-women customary laws are not codified in the process of instituting reforms in Fata. However, pro-women reforms will not be widely accepted without changing the perceptions of tribal men. This is doable through education and instituting gender equality via legal and political reforms. One way to weaken tradition is to repeal outmoded laws that are replete with inhumane and discriminatory clauses.

Surely the government knows that what is due to women needs attention in the tribal region; laws justifying customs deny them their right to gender equality and fuel religious intolerance and violence, whether they disenfranchise women or subject them to forced marriages to settle feuds. The latter is criminalised in the rest of the country, but not in Fata. Even though political agents have appellate power over *jirgas*, they acquiesce in decisions adversely impacting women. The superior court's jurisdiction must be extended to Fata so that women can seek constitutional protection. That their lives have been gravely threatened by militancy and disrupted by military operations further underscores the necessity of removing legally enshrined gender-based discrimination when mainstreaming Fata. If ever there was the right moment for debate around reforming a much-neglected region and the status of its women, this is it. Further, for counter-insurgency to succeed, women as one of the most affected groups must be at the core of peace-building and political decision-making.

## Mining tragedy

BEHIND the words outlining the facts lies a world of tragedy and horror, leavened though it may be by some shining examples of human comradeship. On the evening of Sept 24, the rope of a makeshift lift carrying four Chinese engineers and a Pakistani electrician snapped, and the conveyance fell 1,000m down the shaft of the Dudder lead and zinc mine in Balochistan's Lasbela district. Two of the engineers managed to make their way out, but the others remained trapped. Of these, the two trapped Chinese engineers also in due course found a way to exit, but finding the electrician still missing, they headed back into the shaft in a rescue bid. They took with them the safety basics, but contact with them was soon lost. Now, with water flooding the shaft to a depth of 90m and the power system providing electricity and ventilation having been destroyed, there is little hope of the three men being found alive. Sadly enough, the rescue work was suspended on Sunday. Though all hope must not be given up, those of us who can continue to derive joy from the blue sky might want to take a moment to reflect on what these men must have suffered, and the courage it would have taken to head back into that shaft.

The tragedy should indeed provide a reason to ask how many such incidents and how many deaths it will take for Pakistan to take action to rectify the abysmal safety conditions that prevail in its mines. According to the miners' trade union authorities, up to a dozen men die every month during mining work. Again and again, tragedy produces hue and cry but little actually changes. The deaths of nine coal miners in Balochistan's Loralai district in February produced the expected responses — but not much else, unfortunately. Surely, the men who enter the tunnels and shafts to dig up the country's buried wealth deserve more than the callousness displayed by both state and society.

## Missed opportunity

ANOTHER multiparty conference, another missed opportunity. The political leadership of the country gathered in Islamabad on Monday at the invitation of the prime minister to discuss the national security and foreign policy challenges created by the recent Pak-India tensions. There were several substantive things that the leadership could have discussed, agreed upon and highlighted in the joint statement afterwards. Instead, the political leadership opted for an anodyne, instantly forgettable and regrettable set of talking points. Solidarity was expressed with the people of India-held Kashmir; unity on matters of unspecified national importance was reiterated; support was extended for the

armed forces; and condemnation and lamentations of various Indian acts were voiced. It was both unedifying and unimaginative, and certainly did not behave an assemblage of the senior-most political leaders in the country. Consider that the single concrete proposal in the communiqué was a call to reconstitute the national security committee of parliament — a move that hardly required such an extraordinary gathering.

That the so-called parliamentary group leaders were unable to draft anything meaningful bodes ill for the joint parliamentary session. Perhaps, however, the joint session will be free of the shackles and sensitivities of political rivals being invited to the Prime Minister's Office. If that does prove to be the case — though hopes cannot be too high at the moment — there are several things that parliament could discuss that are relevant to Pakistan's internal security and its external situation. Specifically, parliament could be told about the true status of the country's relationship with various international powers and informed why there is a growing perception of a drift towards regional and international isolation. How is it that a country of nearly 200m people with a reasonable economy and located at a self-declared geo-strategically vital centre is the subject of a relentless barrage of criticism and dissatisfaction by large chunks of the very international community that it wants to deepen its engagement with?

A frank assessment would also call for asking several tough questions domestically. Why, given the stated policy under NAP and countless statements by the political and military leadership, is a zero-tolerance policy against militants of all hues not yet visible? Why are several banned militant groups still able to operate openly and seemingly with impunity across the country? How is it that Pakistan is unable to even investigate certain alleged militant leaders and their cadres at a time of military courts and other constitutional distortions targeting anti-Pakistan militants? To ask those questions is not to internalise the blame for the cacophonous and myriad external allegations made against Pakistan. Surely, however, if Pakistan is to remain a responsible member of the international community, it must accept a certain set of responsibilities towards that community. What the parliamentary leaders' group could not ask, parliament should: why is Pakistan ostensibly doing everything it can and yet drifting further away from a global consensus?

## Overseas workers' dues

CONSIDERING the decades-old Saudi-Pakistan economic relationship, and the fact that around 2.6m Pakistanis work in the kingdom, citizens of this country are beginning to feel the pinch of the ongoing Saudi labour crisis. Over the past few weeks, hundreds of Pakistani workers have returned home due to financial hardships that several major Saudi firms — especially in the construction sector — have been facing. Last month, around 300 individuals were flown back to Rawalpindi, while smaller batches have been arriving in Karachi. The fact that the out-of-work labourers are back is welcome; eyewitness accounts from the workers, as well as Pakistanis still in the kingdom, suggest deplorable conditions prevailing in the camps the men had been housed in, including food shortages and lack of sanitation facilities. However, what is worrying is that many of these workers have left behind several months of pay; one recently returned worker told this newspaper that he was owed nine months of pay. Moreover, some foreign media outlets have reported that certain Saudi firms only returned their workers' passports after securing promises that the men would not pursue claims of delayed wages.

Pakistan is not the only country affected by the Saudi labour crisis; thousands of workers from India, the Philippines and other states are in similarly dire straits. There have even been extremely rare strikes in the kingdom — which have included Saudi workers — over delayed pay, while the kingdom has also recently announced cutbacks in the salaries and privileges of ministers and other public servants. All these indicators point to the fact that the Saudi labour crisis, and, in fact, the overall Saudi financial crisis triggered by the drop in oil income, won't be resolved anytime soon. The Pakistani state must use its good offices with the Saudi government to ensure the dues that workers have left behind are paid. These hardworking individuals have contributed to the economy and now, in their time of difficulty, the state must stand by them to see that their rightful wages are paid. In the longer term, a contingency plan is needed so that the returning workers are either absorbed locally, or sent to other foreign labour markets for employment. As things stand, the economic stability of the petrodollar-fuelled Gulf sheikhdoms looks a little shaky too, and Pakistan must be prepared for the fallout if more of its citizens are affected by financial woes in these places.

## Fallout of war on refugees

ON the one hand is Afghanistan, rent apart and mired in poverty and conflict. On the other is Pakistan that has hosted over the years millions of Afghan refugees whom it can neither afford to support, nor conscionably force to return. In this situation, tragedy is an expected outcome. Since 2002, the UNHCR has facilitated the voluntary return of over 3.5m registered Afghans from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Even so, some 1.5m remain, a fair number of whom are either born or have been bred in this country, or who are deeply invested here through livelihood or marriage to Pakistani citizens. No wonder, then, that there are a multitude of heartrending accounts. Consider the case of hundreds of Afghan musicians based in Peshawar who, as reported by this newspaper on Monday, are packing up to return to a country that is theirs in name but that they hardly know. Reportedly, some 80pc of Afghan artists have already left the city, not necessarily because they wanted to but because their status as aliens was being brought to bear against them. But back 'home', what many of them will face is grinding poverty and subsistence living, Afghanistan not being a country that can generally be considered conducive to the arts, regardless of the few admirable initiatives in Kabul.

It is necessary for Pakistan to acknowledge the contribution of Afghan musicians who have kept alive certain strands of musical tradition here, and who have introduced several barely remembered instruments. Yet it must also not be forgotten that musicians are hardly alone in their participation in the Pakistani culture and economy. The authorities in Pakistan need reminding that the repatriation programme for registered Afghans is — and must remain — voluntary, and on no account should space for them be squeezed. As for Afghanistan, it can only be hoped that the government will do its utmost to settle and find livelihood for all who choose to return, especially those in fields that are out of the ordinary.

## Violent start to Muharram

BARELY has the month of Muharram started that there has been a terrible reminder of the malign elements tearing this country apart. On Tuesday, four Hazara Shia women were killed and one was seriously injured in Quetta when gunmen opened fire on the bus in which they were travelling. This is only the latest instance of violence against a community that has long been in the cross hairs of sectarian terrorists in Balochistan. They have been mercilessly cut down in targeted killings as well as massacred in large-scale attacks, such as those that took place in Quetta in the first six months of 2013, which killed at least 220 and injured over 500.

However, although as a community the Hazara have suffered the most concentrated levels of sectarian violence in Pakistan, the scourge of sectarianism has eaten into the very vitals of this country's social fabric. Incidents such as the one on Tuesday pose an added danger. In Muharram, the traditional month of mourning, a few careless words uttered by overwrought religious leaders can easily inflame already heightened emotions and lead to widespread civil unrest. In the aftermath of the murders in Quetta, the administration must respond in a firm but sensitive manner to ensure that the situation does not spiral out of control. One of the measures that provincial authorities take every year to contain the tinderbox of tensions that prevail in Muharram is to ban the movement of incendiary Sunni and Shia speakers within their jurisdictions and across provincial lines. The list issued by the Sindh government on Tuesday includes around 300 names. Herein lies an indication of how pervasive the problem is, and the concerted efforts required to disrupt the networks that give sustenance, if not direct support, to faith-based violence.

The battle against militancy, undertaken with much fanfare a little over two years ago, may have by now at the very least hobbled the organisational framework of extremist outfits, but the latter's determination to inflict death and destruction — possibly through splinter groups — has clearly not been dimmed. On Eidul Azha some three weeks ago, the deadly intentions of two would-be suicide bombers were foiled by police at an imambargah near Shikarpur. In this case, as in a number of recent incidents of sectarian violence in Sindh such as the bombing last year of a Muharram procession in Jacobabad that caused over 20 deaths, the trail appears to lead to Balochistan-based terrorists. The pitfalls of a selective approach towards 'useful' non-state actors that is cynically premised on regional/local strategic objectives have been illustrated time and again with the blood of innocent Pakistanis in their tens of thousands. The prime minister has demanded action on moribund aspects of the National Action Plan. Can we hope that a clearer vision backed by the courage of conviction will prevail?

## Turkish purge

TURKEY'S massive post-coup purge shows no signs of abating. In fact, the targets of President Erdogan's wrath only seem to be increasing. On Tuesday, nearly 13,000 police officers were suspended for alleged links to Mr Erdogan's arch-nemesis, US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, while a Kurdish TV station was shut down. Moreover, the three-month state of emergency declared in Turkey after the failed July putsch has been extended for a further three months. It is not just the police or the military that are being

combed by the AKP-led government for signs of ‘traitors’; nearly all organs of state have been targeted. The judiciary, civil service and education department have been affected by the purge, while even the private sector is under surveillance. Around 32,000 people have been arrested for suspected links to Mr Gulen’s movement — dubbed by the state as the ‘Fethullah Terror Organisation’ — while 70,000 individuals have been investigated. Several of Mr Gulen’s family members have also been taken into custody. The media has not been spared either — over 20 radio and TV stations have been closed down by the state. These include outlets broadcasting in Kurdish, stations with left-leaning orientations, as well as channels representing the minority Alevi religious community.

While the Turkish state has every right to investigate and punish those involved in the failed coup attempt, this exercise should not be used as an excuse by Mr Erdogan and his allies to wipe out dissent. Simply branding all supporters and sympathisers of Mr Gulen, or those of Kurdish groups, as ‘terrorists’ and ‘traitors’ is unacceptable as it violates all democratic norms. Modern Turkey had seemingly come a long way from its recent troubled past when a strident military would often step in to crush democratic opposition and send elected governments home in order to protect what it termed as the ‘national interest’. Unfortunately, many of the current Turkish administration’s moves bear an eerie resemblance to the iron-fisted policies the country’s military dictators used to enforce. While the populist Erdogan government has indeed managed to check the power of the generals, it has also unleashed a ‘democratic authoritarianism’ of its own. As it is, Turkey is situated in a geopolitically sensitive neighbourhood, with a brutal civil war raging next door in Syria. In the interests of domestic stability and continuation of the democratic process, the AKP government should halt the purge and refrain from further targeting critics and opponents of the administration.

## The PTI puzzle

IMRAN KHAN, supreme leader of the PTI and would-be national conscience against corruption, is an individual of many words and frequent speeches. Seemingly, every day, in some part or the other of the country, via some medium or the other, on some stage high or low, Mr Khan speaks to his supporters, the undecided and the very nation itself. Perhaps never before has there been a political leader with so much to say on so many occasions and with such gusto. And yet, Mr Khan appears to suffer from an unusual allergy: parliament, the house of the elected representatives of the people of Pakistan. Yesterday, as the nation’s elected leaders gathered in the house of the people just off Constitution Avenue in Islamabad, Mr Khan and his PTI representatives were

conspicuous by their absence during the joint sitting. Mr Khan had thundered a day before his refusal to accept the legitimacy of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his disdain for a parliament elected by dodgy means — according to the PTI at least.

There is no gainsaying, lamenting or remonstrating with Imran Khan and the PTI. Theirs is a singular mission — the overthrow of the elected order and the installation of the PTI as the one true leadership of the country. To the extent that democratic means are pursued in order to achieve power, the PTI is well within its rights to try whatever strategy and tactics it deems necessary to achieve its objective. But the outsider must still marvel at and be perplexed by the party's decision-making. For what better podium, what better stage and what better opportunity for the PTI to deliver its message than a joint sitting of parliament, with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself seated nearby and forced to listen? If, in an incidental manner, a word or two was said about the Kashmir dispute and India's intransigence, all the better. But perplexing remain the PTI's ways.

## The real challenge is poverty

AMIDST the clamour of war this past week, the leadership of India and Pakistan at least managed to point in the right direction when talking about the challenges their countries face. That direction is poverty. Between them, India and Pakistan have the dubious honour of having the world's largest concentration of poor people. In both countries, close to 40pc of the population lives in poverty. Prime Minister Narendra Modi initiated the conversation when he asked the people of Pakistan to wage a war on poverty, illiteracy and infant mortality, "and let us see who wins". Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif responded saying that this challenge cannot be met with "blood and ammunition". It is surprising how true and welcome both statements are, and how sharp a reminder it is that the real challenges both leaders face are far bigger than what they see in each other.

At the same time as this cross-border exchange of poignant words was going on, another reminder came from the World Bank to both leaders that it will take more than words to realise this ambition. In two reports released back to back, the bank painted a bleak picture of the state of poverty in both countries. In one report, for instance, it pointed out that growth rates in South Asia are the highest in the world, making the region a "growth hotspot", and the future looks even brighter. But for India, the World Bank added "gains have been uneven, with greater progress in states and social groups that were already better off". On poverty, the bank slid into its customary diplomatic language, saying "India faces the challenge of further accelerating the responsiveness of poverty reduction to growth", meaning its 7.6pc growth rates are not doing enough to



help the poor. Pakistan's future growth is too reliant on CPEC-related spending, and poverty reduction is heavily linked to remittances, which face an uncertain future.

In essence, the report is pointing out that South Asia will remain desperately poor in spite of having the world's highest growth rates. The leaderships in both countries have a great deal to think about when it comes to this plain fact. Both countries spend far too much on their military capabilities and not enough on their citizenry, particularly the poor. And in large measure, poverty alleviation is seen by both as a byproduct of higher growth rates. Meanwhile, the poor are left to the mercy of forces beyond their control, such as droughts or uncertain remittances. The words exchanged between the prime ministers of two of the poorest countries in the world last week made for rather strange theatre. But if it is true that changing the subject is a good way to defuse tensions, then poverty is certainly the right topic to bring up at a time like this.

## Disrupted cultural ties

IT can only be described as regrettable in the extreme. The positions taken by and verbal sparring between the governments of India and Pakistan in the current unhappy climate are a reality. But even more unfortunate is the way in which tensions in the aftermath of the Uri attack have gone beyond the realm of the official and have spilled over into 'softer' spheres such as culture and sports, where one would have hoped for better sense and a more forward-thinking approach to have prevailed. One example out of several that have recently cropped up on both sides of the border is that of the 12-nation International Kabaddi Foundation World Cup that is to kick off this week in Ahmedabad, India. This country's players had been favourites to clinch the title, having enjoyed success in recent matches. But on Wednesday, Pakistan was suddenly barred from participating, with Deoraj Chaturvedi, chief of the International Kabaddi Federation, stating that the decision had been taken because of the rise in tensions between the two nations. "This is not the right time to engage with Pakistan," he was quoted as saying.

Earlier, Pakistani actors working in India found themselves on the receiving end of calls for them to be ejected from the country, or at least barred from carrying out their contractual obligations, while Indian television channels decided to take down Pakistani content. In Pakistan, meanwhile, cinemas have cancelled runs of Indian films, while Pemra, the electronic regulatory authority, has asked for Indian content on the local airwaves to be removed. The only purpose such knee-jerk and reactionary responses serve is to provide certain elements, be they state or non-state, or motivated by an

excess of nationalist, jingoistic or even commercial ideologies, the chance to twist the debate to favour their own agenda. It needs reiterating that when such a situation is allowed to develop, the task of returning relations to normal becomes that much harder — there is far more space that has to be clawed back from those who prefer to set their face against peace. Cooperation and collaboration between individuals, especially through fields such as sports, or the visual and performing arts — cultural exchange in other words — are a crucial form of confidence-building, and as in the case of South Asia, also demonstrate commonalities of tradition and thought. It is such an exchange, free from political impediments, that deserves to be the focus of both countries.

## Cricket: a clean sweep

THE World Cup journey has begun for Pakistan. The resounding 3-0 victory over the West Indies by Azhar Ali's men in the UAE has not only helped the Pakistan side regain the crucial eighth ODI spot in ICC rankings, it has also, to a large extent, restored the team's confidence to tackle the 50-over format. After being relegated to an embarrassing ninth spot following the 4-1 drubbing at the hands of England in the ODI series in August, it was clear that Pakistan would have to be among the top eight teams by September 2017 in order to feature in the 2019 World Cup. And it has been an admirable start. The manner in which the Pakistani players outclassed the West Indies underscored their determination to overcome the odds in pursuit of their goal of making it to the World Cup on the basis of merit, and not on the back of qualifiers. Young Baber Azam, of course, has emerged as a real find in the contest. Although he has been around for a while, Baber truly shone with his three consecutive hundreds, a rare feat in limited-overs cricket. Both Mohammad Nawaz and Imad Wasim, too, were magnificent and appeared all set to fill the void created by the absence of Shahid Afridi.

Nevertheless, the recent victory should not be seen as a barometer to gauge the true strength of Pakistan in ODI cricket. The fact that the West Indies fielded a rather depleted side sans superstars Darren Sammy, Chris Gayle, Dwayne Bravo, Andre Russell and Lendl Simmons clearly eased the task for Pakistan. Serious questions still remain over skipper Azhar's ability and skill to manage the side, despite the convincing win, and a stronger opponent is bound to pose a stiffer challenge. Coach Mickey Arthur, however, has apparently discovered a way to lift the team's morale since it has been posting totals in excess of 300 with consummate ease, while the bowlers and fielders have also performed admirably — all good signs indeed.

### Laws against rape and ‘honour’ killing

THERE is a welcome change in attitudes to gender-based violence in Pakistan, but progress remains uneven and cautious for the most part. On Thursday, a joint sitting of both houses of parliament enacted two important, long-pending pieces of legislation, including the Anti-Honour Killing Laws (Criminal Amendment Bill) 2015 and Anti-Rape Laws (Criminal Amendment Bill) 2015. The first stipulates that an individual found guilty of murder in the name of honour will be liable to a life term, ie 25 years, even if he is ‘forgiven’ by his victim’s family. The other legislation, the anti-rape law, introduces sweeping changes to the way rape cases are investigated and prosecuted. For the first time, the collection and use of DNA evidence to prove rape has been given legal cover. The law also sanctions police officials who sabotage investigations or obstruct justice in rape cases, and enhances the punishment for certain categories of the crime such as the rape of a minor or a physically/mentally disabled person.

The bill on ‘honour’ killings may well have remained in cold storage for even longer had it not been for a summer of gruesome murders of women at the hands of their families which were highlighted in the media. However, its enactment into law has been greeted with reservations in some quarters, mainly for the understandable reason that the crime remains a compoundable offence — ie, one in which a compromise can be effected. That is a particularly grotesque provision in the context of such killings where the family of the victim and the perpetrator are very often one and the same. Moreover, the new law does not take away judicial discretion over whether to sentence someone who has killed in the name of ‘honour’ to prison in the event of a pardon by the victims’ family. The best one can hope is that the enhanced jail term for this crime — earlier it was 10 years minimum — indicates the gravity of the offence, thereby encouraging judges to disregard compromise when deciding punishment.

Meanwhile, the anti-rape law serves the cause of justice somewhat better. By stipulating in-camera trials and the use of technological aids such as video testimony of victims and witnesses, it seeks to mitigate the humiliating ordeal rape victims are subjected to in court. This measure, along with that mandating the protection of their identity in the media, should encourage more victims to come forward and pursue justice. Excluding questions about their character from evidentiary proceedings is likewise a progressive step: a victim’s sexual history has no relevance in a rape trial. However, the definition of rape and consent in criminal law remains incomplete and outdated, a shortcoming that the anti-rape law does not address. Thus although both the recently enacted laws are a step in the right direction, they are certainly not the last word on the serious crimes they address.

## Geotagging seminaries

THE process of geotagging all madressahs in Punjab, in order to locate the seminaries through precise geographical data, is reported to have been completed. A report in this paper quotes a senior police official as saying there is hardly a madressah in the province “that has not passed through the geotagging process”. There were earlier reports that Sindh had geotagged most of the religious seminaries in its domain — apparently shrugging off the laziness that it had been earlier accused of. In mid-2015, as Punjab was said to be leading in the race to geotag madressahs, KP and Balochistan were making good strides towards completion of the task assigned to the federating units under the National Action Plan. Sindh and Gilgit-Baltistan, which also had a PPP government at the time, lagged behind. It would appear that an overall push for the completion of this segment under NAP compelled the counterterrorism departments in all federating units of the country to speed up the exercise. The achievement would, however, encourage voices calling for acceleration of the overall effort to combat and uproot militancy.

Geotagging is basic to data collection the world over these days. Here in Pakistan, much energy and attention has been focused on the provinces fulfilling this basic requirement of monitoring the activities of madressahs — to the extent that an impression has sometimes been created that geotagging seminaries would rid us of all our problems. In actuality, the exercise should signal the start, rather than the accomplishment, of the task. Also, tagging must not result in any complacency on the part of the law enforcers. There is no substitute to in-depth investigation. According to many experts on law enforcement, there is a dire need to combine the latest available techniques with the age-old system in place for long-term gains in the war against terrorism and extremism. The idea is not to make redundant the policeman on the street. Indeed, there have been genuine and reasonable calls for reviving and revitalising the traditional role of the local police force for effective intelligence gathering and the execution of other law-and-order functions. Empowering the police then must be accompanied by some reinventing. The law-enforcement machinery at the local level has to be brought up to date with the new methods used to deal with all kinds of situations. They must be prepared to explore and exploit data delivered to them through geotagging.

## Karachi arms haul

EVEN by the violent standards of Karachi, the size of the arms haul uncovered in a raid on Wednesday is astonishing. The authorities say the haul — seized from a storage facility in an abandoned house in the Azizabad locality — is the city's biggest weapons' seizure. Among the big guns recovered are anti-aircraft guns, grenade launchers and an assortment of other ordnance better suited to the battlefield. The location of the house where the weapons were recovered is close to Nine-Zero, the now-sealed MQM headquarters. Police say the weapons were to be used for acts of terrorism on Muharram 9 by "elements in London" in cahoots with RAW; this is obviously a thinly veiled reference to the MQM, especially the loyalist faction based in the British capital, though for some reason law enforcers have not directly named the party. As reported on Friday, the owner of the property was apparently coerced by 'political elements' to let them use the house as a weapons dump.

Despite the well-earned reputation of the MQM for violence, the fact that such heavy weaponry — including anti-aircraft guns — were recovered from this congested locality raises many questions. Primarily, how did such a large cache of weapons end up in one place, without the knowledge of the law-enforcement agencies, particularly the intelligence units? For example, many of the arms recovered were 'military grade'; how did they remain undetected? The authorities must release more information about the origin of the weapons, specifically the elements responsible for building up this armoury. The arms haul also shows how precarious peace in the metropolis really is. If the weapons had been used as intended, the consequences would have been grim indeed. The arms haul also justifies the need for more intelligence-based operations in Karachi to uncover more of the networks responsible for fomenting chaos in the city. The level of violence in Karachi — be it of the ethnic, sectarian or criminal variety — would come down considerably if more such seizures were made.

## Foreign policy woes

THIS much appears to be a consensus among the country's political leadership: serious and peace-minded diplomacy needs to be put front and centre of the country's foreign policy. Be it a Senate resolution passed on Friday, another passed by a joint sitting of parliament or the comments of the special Kashmir envoys sent to foreign capitals by the PML-N government, there is a sense that unless urgent corrective steps are taken, Pakistan may slip towards international isolation. To be sure, Pakistan is not globally isolated. Even countries that have expressed unease about certain aspects of this

country's overall national security policies have made clear that they want to continue to partner and work with Pakistan on several economic and security issues. Further, Pakistan does have legitimate grievances of its own. The state repression in India-held Kashmir, the interference by foreign countries in Balochistan, and the security threats emanating from Afghanistan are all serious issues that Pakistan can and must forcefully press on the global stage.

Nevertheless, a hard, honest look at Pakistan's international standing and security policies is called for. As political leader after political leader has stated in recent weeks, both in government and the opposition, Pakistan is being too narrowly defined globally because of a perception that self-defeating security choices are dominating the policy discourse. Putting trade and the economy at the centre of foreign policy and addressing all regional issues through diplomacy ought to be the way ahead. A Senate Committee of the Whole report has some sensible and practical suggestions that the government should seriously consider. There is also the matter of an unacceptable vacuum at the top of the foreign ministry with the continuing absence of a full-time minister. Served by a special adviser and special assistant on foreign affairs, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is simply not in a position to give the foreign ministry portfolio the kind of attention it deserves. Not appointing a full-time foreign minister has been an enduring scandal of the present PML-N government.

Finally, there is the issue of institutionalising decision-making. Critical foreign policy and national security debates should not be left to a flurry of meetings, joint sittings of parliament and special gatherings. There must be an ongoing conversation in various forums — in the government, in parliament, between the government and the military leadership. Unhappily, the PML-N government does not appear to understand that or to believe in regular, institutionalised, structured debate and deliberations. Nor too do the various opposition parties in parliament seem to have the appetite or interest in a sustained dialogue with the government and state institutions. The current challenging environment for Pakistan externally may well subside, but if the country is to emerge from it stronger, its politicians need to demonstrate a greater and sustained capacity for leadership.

## Zikri leader's murder

TWO separate acts of violence in Balochistan on Friday clearly show that the province's militancy problem remains unresolved. In one attack, separatist militants bombed the Rawalpindi-bound Jaffar Express train; at least seven people were killed in the Aab-i-Gum area in the bombing claimed by the proscribed Baloch Liberation Army. In the second incident, another banned separatist group — the Baloch Liberation Front — claimed the murder of Syed Mullah Akhtar Mullai, spiritual leader of the Zikri community, in Kech. Both incidents are condemnable and reflect the fact that the state has failed to protect targets that are known to be vulnerable.

The religious leader was shot only days after the All Pakistan Muslim Zikri Anjuman had issued a statement condemning acts of violence targeting the community on Sept 20 in Panjgur. According to the statement, the group's places of worship and houses of community members were set on fire. Over the past few years, there have been a growing number of incidents in which minority sects and communities have been targeted in Balochistan. There have been frequent attacks on the Hazara Shia community that have left hundreds dead. However, the Zikris have also been facing various types of violence. The Zikris are a small Muslim sect found mostly in Balochistan, though community members also reside in Karachi and other areas. There have been periods in history where the Zikris have had to face the wrath of the ruler of the day, but in modern times, their persecution became particularly acute during the Ziaul Haq dictatorship. Over the decades, as religious extremists established themselves in Balochistan, the persecution has only increased. In 2014, at least six Zikris were massacred in Awaran, while slogans have appeared in the province, warning the Zikris to 'convert' or die, signed off by an outfit calling itself Lashkar-i-Khorasan. While religious extremists have long been active against the Zikris — observers say the recent Panjgur violence was of a sectarian nature — it is now apparent that elements within the separatists have also turned their guns on the vulnerable community. For example, the BLF said Syed Mullai was killed because he was 'working against' the outfit; those familiar with Baloch politics say this means the religious leader was targeted for his pro-state sympathies. Squeezed between religious extremists on one end and separatist militants on the other, the Zikris need the state's protection, while those responsible for acts of violence against the community must be brought to justice.

## Arrest for cyber stalking

FOR all the wondrous possibilities of the internet, the anonymity it affords can bring out some of the worst impulses in men. Online spaces can appear inviting to misogynists where they can, in the safety of their cloaked identities, slander and humiliate women at will. On Friday, an assistant professor at Karachi University's psychology department was suspended after the university administration received a letter from the Federal Investigation Agency informing them about his arrest for having repeatedly posted indecent, doctored photographs of a female professor on a Facebook page. The woman in question has been working as a part-time teacher at KU as well as three other universities. Her ordeal goes back to at least two years during which she filed four complaints against the professor. The case was registered under Section 21 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 which deals with cyber stalking.

The harassment, abuse and trolling that are par for the course on the internet assume an altogether different and vicious dimension — replete with sexual connotations — when directed towards those belonging to the female gender. Articulate and assertive women are particularly the target of online abuse. The internet is also a friend to those bent on vengeance against former partners in intimate relationships; such attacks usually, though not exclusively, also target women. The echo chamber that is the online world amplifies the individual's humiliation: some instances of cyber stalking and harassment have even led to the victim committing suicide. In conservative societies like Pakistan, where women have to tread a fine line between tradition and personal aspirations for educational or career advancement, online attacks that cast aspersions on their character can be even more damaging. While Pakistan's cyber law contains several draconian provisions that limit individual freedoms and impose state hegemony on information, it appears to have been used judiciously on this occasion. Nobody should have to contend with the threat of cyber stalking.

## Promise of SDGs

THERE was a time when the word 'development' referred to a process that would transform society altogether into an image of the advanced industrial democracies, with abundance and freedom for all. This vision powered the great five-year plans of what was then called the Third World, or the underdeveloped countries, which saw economic growth, industrialisation and the advance of modern rationality moving hand in hand towards a society where an educated, urban citizenry awoke from the fatalism of the past and took destiny into their own hands. But things did not quite work out as planned,



and over time, a series of adjustments and compromises became necessary. There were debates about whether rising inequality had to be part of the process, and if a democratic or authoritarian state was best suited to oversee this process. In time, the vision dwindled and the debates multiplied, leading to a confusing array of meanings that came to be attached to the word 'development'.

Today, the goals and meaning of development, and the debate surrounding it, have become so diverse that many rightly ask whether the enterprise has any significance left beyond being a repository for tools and techniques for the maintenance of the status quo. The Millennium Development Goals came as a response to the confusion prevailing in the development camp, as an attempt to pull together the disparate efforts of 'development practitioners' under some sort of a coherent umbrella. With the MDGs reaching their target date in 2015, we now have the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that have been highlighted in a series of articles in this paper. Fans cheer them as a new vision combining people, ecology and the state in a single vision. Sceptics argue they are nothing more than a cherry-picked basket of objectives designed to placate contending factions in the donor community.

It is worth noting though that many of the goals have strong virtues, and if states can be expected to make even a modicum of progress on them, it will be an improvement. Goals such as poverty reduction, mitigating the impact of climate change or ensuring gender parity have the added benefit of cutting across lines such as ethnicity, caste or class, that typically divide developing countries. As such, even if the SDGs cannot be said to be a replacement for the glory days of the developmental dream, they carry much promise and deserve greater attention from the policy community. They give us goals where there has thus far been little more than debate, and yardsticks to measure progress where there has been rhetoric. For many of these goals, the time to debate and discuss has long passed. What is needed now is clear policy direction and road maps, and the SDGs are as good a place to start as we will ever have.

## Right to information

FROM a distance, it all looks as it should. In 2002, Pakistan became the first country in South Asia to promulgate a freedom of information ordinance. Over subsequent years, all the provinces passed legislation aiming for the same thing, and citizens' ability to access information from public bodies was recognised as a fundamental right through the insertion of Article 19A in the Constitution by the 18th Amendment. But like much else in this country, a closer look betrays chaos lurking under the surface. As pointed

out by experts and activists during a discussion organised by the Consumer Rights Commission of Pakistan in Islamabad late last month, the matter is caught between “the political enthusiasm to enact laws and the political will to implement them”. This is evident not only in the patchy quality of the various sets of laws, but also from the accounts of a number of citizens who have tried to access information from the government, but found themselves being completely stonewalled. The 2002 law was criticised on several counts, including being ineffectual and having a needlessly long list of exemptions. Even so, Sindh and Balochistan went on to replicate their federal counterparts in 2005 and 2006 respectively. KP and Punjab have done better, with the former putting in place the internationally accepted Right to Information Act, 2013, and the latter promulgating the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013. At the federal level, although the draft of an improved version of the right to information law has been circulating for years, and was even made public last year, it has not yet gone through.

What makes the situation even more dismal, though, is that even in Punjab and KP where the relevant laws are of an acceptable standard, they do not necessarily result in the disclosure of the requested information. The bureaucracies cling to secrecy on all counts, withholding information even from those whom they represent. Politicians, on their part, are quick to see the political capital to be made in preparing legislation, but prefer a fog to descend thereafter. All quarters need reminding that without effective right to information laws, Pakistan can claim to have neither press freedom nor freedom of expression generally; from this one point flow the channels leading to good governance. The denial of information is merely the other side of the censorship coin.

## State of mental health

ON World Mental Health Day, we have a good opportunity to examine the state of our mental health programme and identify ways of making basic mental healthcare a part of the national health vision. Given this year’s theme of providing psychological first-aid to those suffering from ailments such as depression, bipolar disorder, childhood trauma and psychosis, it is imperative that provincial stakeholders institute holistic preventive care provisions in their healthcare programmes. In short, mental illness should be brought out of the shadows, and the stigma attached to the treatment of debilitating disorders removed. Even if genes have a role in making some people more susceptible to psychiatric disorders than others, research shows that several social and environmental factors — poverty, social inequality, terrorism, migration, sexual and emotional abuse among them — increase the risks. So, instead of adopting a narrow

medical approach where patients are prescribed powerful drugs, trained primary healthcare providers must recommend relevant psychological therapies. Public education and awareness drives are part of the solution.

Although Pakistan has a mental health policy and related legislation, both remain unimplemented because of the abysmal public healthcare system. How the latter has adversely impacted the economic contribution of the country's burgeoning youth population is a significant consideration. It is a matter of concern that the government has not calculated the fallout of protracted mental health illness — often exacerbated by militancy and poverty. Then, WHO estimates Pakistan has some 320 psychiatrists only, demonstrating the lack of political will towards medical training and the provision of low-cost, accessible treatment. Given there are only five hospitals with mental healthcare facilities countrywide, there must be an effort to incorporate holistic treatment methodologies. Creating linkages between mental health departments and primary healthcare providers will decrease the disease burden as much as investing in child and adolescent health. Ultimately, the goal is to work towards a healthier, happier environment for those requiring medical intervention.

## Middle East carnage

BOTH the current Syrian and Yemeni conflicts have been marked by blatant disregard for human life on the part of all belligerents. In particular, civilians have been mowed down by all sides with little remorse. On Saturday, a funeral ceremony in Sana'a for the father of a senior Houthi rebel leader was bombed with devastating consequences; the Saudi-led coalition — which launched its offensive in support of Yemeni President Hadi in March last year — is believed to be behind the atrocity. Over 140 people were killed, while more than 500 have been injured in the attack that UN officials have termed "heinous". While the Saudis initially denied any knowledge of the raid, the coalition later said it will investigate the "painful" strike. Even Riyadh's American allies, who have been playing a key supporting role in the Yemeni aggression, have said they will "review" cooperation with the coalition. This is not the first time the Saudi-led force has been accused of targeting civilians. Hundreds of non-combatants have been killed as wedding ceremonies, along with markets and hospitals, have been hit in different Yemeni cities.

Meanwhile in Syria, the government continues its relentless assault to retake Aleppo, particularly the rebel-held eastern portion of what was once Syria's commercial capital. The Syrian state has applied brutal methods in its campaign, as nearly 300 civilians have been killed in the offensive that began over two weeks ago. Reclaiming Aleppo

has been a priority for Bashar al-Assad's forces as around 1,000 Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly Al Nusra) militants are believed to be holed up in the city. However, the Syrian state's scorched-earth policy to flush out the terrorists is unacceptable, considering the high civilian casualties. Efforts to halt the fighting have failed as Russia, which backs Mr Assad, and the Western bloc, which supports Syria's rebels, have sparred over details at the UN.

Yemen's situation is critical. Millions are reportedly to be food-insecure; in fact, the UN says the impoverished state is on the brink of famine. However, the bombing of the funeral is likely to make any negotiated settlement to the crisis highly improbable, as the Houthis and their allies have vowed to strike back and "mobilise". Perhaps the first salvo came on Sunday, when the rebels fired a missile across the border targeting a Saudi military facility in Taif — reportedly the deepest attack inside the kingdom so far. Moreover, a number of those murdered in the Sana'a raid were reportedly in favour of opening channels of communication with Mr Hadi and his foreign backers; now, the affected Yemeni tribes will likely support calls for a more martial response. As for Syria, the future looks equally grim. Mr Assad is convinced he can retake the entire country by force, regardless of the 'collateral damage', while the rebels — including the extremists within their ranks — have seemingly dug in for a long, bloody fight.

## Higher gas prices

IT has been known for a long time that the gas sector in Pakistan is in dire need of reform. Domestically produced natural gas accounts for almost half the country's primary fuel requirements, and much of the incremental demand comes from households. There is no doubt that residential consumers should have priority access to gas allocations, but at the same time, it is important to understand that many of them tend to be extremely wasteful. Industry stakeholders have long argued that impractical wasteful practices stem from the low price of gas which leads people to believe that it is abundant and cheap, whereas in reality it is scarce. They have argued for a strong upward revision of prices by almost 500pc in order to get ordinary consumers to realise the importance of conservation when utilising this precious resource. People need to worry about the efficiency of gas appliances when making their purchase, just as they do when buying electrical appliances such as air conditioners and fridges.

So the 14pc hike in gas tariffs that has just been announced may be a step in the right direction, but it is important to supplement this with an awareness campaign that should let consumers understand that gas is a precious resource and its supply is dwindling.

The recommendations of industry representatives may be too harsh for any government to own, but the dissemination of the message that gas is in scant supply and needs to be conserved presents no difficulties. Ultimately, Pakistan will turn more and more to imported gas to fulfil future requirements, and this will also need some amount of pricing reform to close the price gap between domestic and imported gas. Along the way, households across the country need to be made aware of the methods of conserving gas. Households will continue to be the largest consumers of natural gas, and shortages are encouraging all manner of malign practices — instead of conservation measures — such as resort to the use of illegal suction pumps and the use of gas generators that are run on domestic connections. Prices alone cannot be the medium through which to signal that a change in consumption practices is needed. The cottage industry in gas appliances needs to be regulated, and awareness created. By itself, price reform will always generate political challenges, making it difficult to walk the road in earnest.

## Cap on school fee hike

WITH the country badly in need of a system of cost rationalisation, the Sindh High Court's recent intervention on behalf of families of children enrolled in private schools may not bring huge relief to the overburdened. The court ruled that the annual increase in fees cannot exceed 5pc. This would appear to be a very reasonable and timely ruling by the court, but if Punjab's experience is anything to go by, private schools in Sindh will eventually get around the 'snag' and find ways of introducing more than a 5pc annual hike. Lahore has been resonating with long negotiations between private school owners and the government ever since a law was introduced last year forcing the schools to keep the fee increase below 5pc, at least for the time being. Following a lull during which parents were spared the dreaded fee shocks, the tradition of sudden and steep rises has returned in recent months.

For instance, a top-of-the-line chain in Lahore raised the three-monthly fee of a Class 5 student from around Rs57,000 to Rs 62,000. Likewise, the fee of a Class XI student was raised to Rs80,000 from Rs72,000. In both cases, the revision is more than the 5pc allowed by the law passed last year with much fanfare. The school may justify its move by arguing that it had been more than a year since it last raised the fee, but there are reports that the Shahbaz Sharif government actually yielded to the owners' plea for permission to raise the ceiling to 7pc-8pc. Not only this, some private schools have been found setting new benchmarks in bad manners and offering lessons in how not to conduct oneself. The social media was recently abuzz with news about how a reputed

school had told the parents of a student to pay up or be ready for humiliation. Such notices, lacking in respect, are becoming increasingly routine. And respect it is which should form the basis of any education.

## Nepra's independence

FOR nearly a couple of years now, a low-intensity war of words has been taking place between Nepra, the main power-sector regulator and the government. Nepra has greeted the government's claims that it is adding enough generation capacity to the power system to end load-shedding by 2018 with scepticism, first pointing out that the projects are insufficient or being inadequately pursued, and later that the transmission and distribution system will be unable to handle the additional load. More recently, it has earned the government's ire by refusing to grant a higher tariff for the Nandipur plant, by resisting pressure to increase the tariff for the Matiari-Lahore transmission line, questioning inefficient plants, and granting a tariff reduction of almost Rs3 to consumers in light of declining oil prices. The government has resisted all these moves.

Now the government has found its voice to give a 'befitting' response — to use the jargon much in vogue these days. It plans to introduce legislation that demotes Nepra to little more than an advisory body, compelled to work under government directives issued through the water and power ministry. Stripping the regulator of its power to work independently is the nuclear option in this rolling drama, and the government should avoid going down this route for a number of reasons. For one, the country needs more, not less, regulators acting in an independent capacity to safeguard the public interest. If the government is using power tariffs to cover its inefficiencies in other areas, the regulator is not only entitled, but indeed obliged to put up opposition. Second, the lack of an independent regulator will bode ill for future investment in the power sector on competitive grounds, and open the door to favouritism and all manner of acts that skew the incentive structure in the power sector.

In short, the move would be trading in a little short-term benefit at the cost of the power sector's long-term viability. This might be the last of the regulators in Pakistan acting in an independent capacity. Who can think of the last time the SECP acted forcefully against a powerful corporate? From the State Bank to the Competition Commission, all those institutions that have a history and a role in curbing the abuse of power by large capital, and preventing collusive relationships that fleece consumers, operate largely under government directions. The power sector is one place left where an independent body still functions. The government has shown a remarkable inability to work with others in almost every area, but given the massive activity happening in the power

sector it must not be allowed to sidestep the public interest in the name of speed or simply getting its way.

## Reaction to Dawn story

THERE are times in a news organisation's history that determine its adherence to the highest principles of journalism — its duty to inform the public objectively, accurately and fearlessly.

This paper recently reported an extraordinary closed-door meeting between top government and intelligence officials where the foreign secretary briefed them on what he saw as Pakistan's growing international isolation; following this, there was a discussion on the impediments in the way of dealing with the problem of militancy in the country.

The fallout of the story has been intense, and on Tuesday evening, the government placed Dawn's senior writer, Cyril Almeida, on the Exit Control List.

While any media organisation can commit an error of judgement and Dawn is no exception, the paper believes it handled the story in a professional manner and carried it only after verification from multiple sources.

Moreover, in accordance with the principles of fair and balanced journalism, for which Dawn is respected not only in Pakistan but also internationally, it twice carried the denials issued by the Prime Minister's Office.

Journalism has a long and glorious tradition of keeping its promise to its audience even in the face of enormous pressure brought to bear upon it from the corridors of power. Time has proved this to be the correct stance. Some of the most contentious yet historically significant stories have been told by news organisations while resisting the state's narrow, self-serving and ever-shifting definition of 'national interest'.

One could include in this list, among others, the Pentagon Papers detailing US government duplicity in its conduct of the Vietnam War; the Abu Ghraib pictures that exposed torture of prisoners at the hands of US soldiers in Iraq; the WikiLeaks release in 2010 of US State Department diplomatic communications; and Edward Snowden's disclosure of the National Security Agency's global surveillance system.

Even more so in Pakistan, where decades of a militarised security environment have undermined the importance of holding the state to account — something that certain

sections of the media have become complicit in despite their long, hard-won struggle for freedom — such a furore as generated by the Dawn report was not unexpected.

However, this news organisation will continue to defend itself robustly against any allegation of vested interest, false reporting or violation of national security.

As gatekeeper of information that was “verified, cross-checked and fact-checked”, the editor of this paper bears sole responsibility for the story in question. The government should at once remove Mr Almeida’s name from the ECL and salvage some of its dignity.

## Constitutional rule

AMIDST the din that frequently accompanies democratic politics in Pakistan, the knowledge that the path to the current juncture was rocky and arduous is often drowned out. With politicians and their parties already setting their sights on the next election year, it is worth remembering that the last polls were the first time the country managed a peaceful, constitutional transition between two elected governments. Younger generations have grown up with the knowledge that there is a firm Constitution that codifies affairs in this land, even if there have been dark periods when it has been suspended. But do they know the specifics of history that brought Pakistan to this point? Such are the questions that the Senate has tried to address through the Gali-i-Dastoor, or ‘Constitution Lane’, that has been created in a corridor in Parliament House in Islamabad. The display comprises an introductory video on what the Constitution symbolises and the struggles the people waged to uphold it. Beyond that is an elaborate mural depicting different periods in the country’s history, periods where the Constitution and the rule of law were adhered to, separated by dark bands of military rule. The first panel provides a copy of the 1935 Act which was adopted as an interim constitution. Later come pictures of state brutality during the Zia era, and so on through the years with eventual stasis being reached in the current democratic climate.

It is said that those who don’t learn from history are destined to repeat it. By that maxim, it would behove Pakistan to remind itself as often as it can of the lessons and experiences of the past nearly 70 years. If knowledge and historical specifics were to replace the hyper nationalism that is evident in many segments of the populace today, the gains made towards the rule of law, constitutional rule and democracy would be tremendous. The Senate’s contribution may be a drop in the ocean, but deserves appreciation nevertheless. Such moves need to be replicated at all levels, including in the curricula.



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## Hunger amidst plenty

THE 'good' news is that there are a few countries worse off than us when it comes to the proportion of population that experiences hunger on a daily basis. But, needless to say, that is hardly much consolation. The newly released Global Hunger Index, the rather anodyne-sounding measure that ranks countries based on four criteria related to the nutritional well-being of its people, in particular children, shows Pakistan ranked at 107 out of 118 countries. This is a dire place to be, and highlights the extreme inequalities that prevail in the country and the impact they are having on our future generations. Consider that many of the countries below us are net food importers, or torn by conflict, and one is left wondering what exactly is our excuse.

Pakistan might be one of the few countries that can claim to be self-sufficient in food for many decades, yet has a very high proportion of people for whom hunger is a daily fact of life including a large number of children suffering from the physical effects of undernourishment including stunting and wasting. Even though our ranking has improved since 1992, when the index first began to be maintained, there has been a marked deceleration in the pace of this improvement since 2000, when our GHI score was 37.8 and fell to 33.4 in 2016. By contrast, many other countries halved their scores in the same time period. These include Bolivia, Senegal, Vietnam and Nicaragua, to name a few.

What excuse does a country that produces enough food to feed each one of its citizen have when it comes to the fact that more than a fifth of its population is undernourished, that a tenth of its children under the age of five are suffering from wasting (reduced bodyweight compared to height), and almost half of its children are stunted due to undernourishment and hunger? No number of mega projects or high aggregate economic growth can turn these numbers around, as the data makes abundantly clear since the proportions remain largely unchanged since 1992 when the data first began to be maintained. The issue is not even on the radar, as is evidenced from the latest health policy, launched last month after a gap of 15 years, and which focuses largely on healthcare as a clinical issue. Pakistan's low ranking on the GHI, as well as other indices that measure social development, and its even more dismal performance in lifting its score over two and a half decades is as pressing a national issue as the power crisis or the state of public finances. Yet it comes in for no public discussion. This is beyond shameful. It is criminal neglect of the neediest segments of our population, who are, let us face it, victims of our greed. Let us make a commitment to change this, starting now.

## Weak Afghan state

IN area after area, district after district, province after province, the war between the insurgent Afghan Taliban and Kabul is tilting towards the former. From Lashkar Gah in the south to Kunduz in the north, and from Farah City in the west to a great deal of eastern Afghanistan, the country appears to be spiralling towards a slow collapse of the state. To be sure, the Afghan security forces are fighting fiercely, defending territory and quickly retaking fallen centres. Moreover, the US, though it now has a vastly diminished military presence in the country, is using its still formidable resources, particularly air power, to help the Afghan forces push back against the Taliban. It is a grim situation made worse by the sheer geographical spread of the insurgency hot spots — the pattern of a spring fighting season followed by a winter lull has been broken and there is little semblance of stability in the months ahead. Quite what can be done is not clear. No army, police or security force in the world can simultaneously grow in institutional strength while suffering the kind of high-impact losses and degradation that the Afghan national security forces are presently suffering.

For now, the focus must be on risk-mitigation on the battlefield and quietly improving the possibility of a future political settlement. Inside Afghanistan, this means urgently prioritising some areas for military action — turning around both the perception of a slow state collapse and winning back strategically important terrain. The Afghan forces are fighting bravely, but by all accounts suffer from a confused and weak leadership. Fighting counter-insurgencies and all-out wars depend as much on the material resources as on the quality of leadership. Perhaps with more direct foreign guidance, the situation can be stabilised quickly. Beyond that, the Afghan political government needs urgent in-house reconciliation — with the political leadership so frayed and seemingly at war with itself it surely is affecting the state's ability to coordinate its fight against the Taliban. For Pakistan, these are also tricky times. Whenever the fight against the Taliban is going poorly, Kabul looks to externalise the blame and the victim of that is usually Pakistan. Policymakers here ought to work to forestall that possibility by ensuring that at least coordination over border management issues continues and that both Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to act against cross-border militancy in each other's country.

## Peaceful Ashura

IT is indeed a relief that the commemoration of Ashura passed off without incident on Wednesday. Securing this annual religious observance is quite an administrative challenge for the state due to numerous reasons, primarily because during Muharram thousands of people gather for mourning assemblies and processions in cities and towns across Pakistan. These observances have often been targeted by sectarian militants in years past. But the administration was thankfully on its toes as police and paramilitary personnel — backed by the army in certain locations — fanned out across the country to thwart any threat to peace. In the early days of Muharram, there were a few sectarian targeted killings in Karachi. Condemnable as these crimes are, large-scale violence was mercifully averted.

An annual feature of the Muharram period has been the closure of roads and suspension of mobile phone services, either fully or partially. Unfortunately, due to the growth of sectarian militancy in Pakistan over the past few decades — and the militants' penchant for attacking 'soft' targets including religious gatherings and places of worship — such inconveniences have become a part of life. Although the height of the mourning period may have concluded with Ashura, smaller-scale gatherings will continue during the Islamic months of Muharram and Safar, while large gatherings and processions will take place on Chehlum. It is essential then that the administration remain vigilant. Perhaps the best way to provide security — apart from physically securing venues — is to carry out intelligence-based operations to bust cells of militants before they can carry out acts of carnage. In the days before Muharram commenced, a number of extremists were apprehended in various cities, and were reportedly planning to attack religious gatherings. While, sadly, the expansive security blanket across Pakistan has become a reality whenever religious occasions are observed, the fact remains that the best antidote to sectarian terrorism is uprooting the infrastructure of those outfits that spread hatred and division based on sect, religion or any other factor.

## Farewell to the IMF?

Now that the latest IMF programme has concluded, a few questions must be asked.

First, is this the last Fund programme for Pakistan? In the last 27 years, there have been only six in which Pakistan did not draw any resources from the Fund, making the country a "prolonged user" of IMF resources to use the Fund's own parlance.

Something critical is broken in the economic machinery of the country; it is a defect that has sent the country back to the IMF in a constant and never-ending cycle, and the emergency lender's facilities have been used more like an ATM than the emergency room that they are supposed to be.

The mission chief pointed towards the substantial reserves held by the country, as well as improvements in the power sector such as improved recoveries and greater efficiency as key achievements under the programme. He also mentioned improved revenue generation.

But given the yawning deficits on the external front, and the near-total absence of any structural reform of public-sector enterprises or the tax machinery, which has mobilised the increased revenue largely by squeezing existing taxpayers rather than netting in new ones, it is highly uncertain that the present moment of relative stability will last very far into the future.

This leads us to the second natural question: how deep are the changes that the Fund programme has wrought in the economy?

Granted three years is far too limited a time to change the underlying fundamentals of any economy — its revenue base, structure of exports, patterns of consumption etc — but how much headway has been made in earnest?

Pakistan's competitiveness has not improved appreciably over this period; in fact, exports have shrunk, reliance on remittances has gone up, and while the structure of public finances may have increased in quantum, it has not in quality. The economy has been stabilised, but indebtedness has grown. This is not an end-state to be happy about.

At the end of the day, it is important to realise that the IMF cannot want reform in Pakistan more than the authorities themselves do. If there is a deep and widespread inability and unwillingness to reform the state and its relationship with the institutions and stakeholders of the economy, then that stasis cannot change from external inducement.

Pakistan has historically used the IMF as an ATM machine, drawing resources and walking away, and that pattern has not changed materially. This has been made possible by a stasis in the political economy at home, coupled with a geopolitical imperative from abroad, where the great powers do not wish to unplug the country from global markets for fear of the consequences this could have for Pakistan's stability.

The programme may have ended, but its history and the endless cycles of Fund programmes are likely to be repeated.

## Anti-extremism steps

THE state has often rightly been criticised for taking half-hearted actions against militants and their supporters of the sectarian and religious variety, despite the fact that these elements have played havoc with national security. This criticism seems particularly justified when, despite the existence of a National Action Plan and a number of counterterrorism agencies, extremists are free to continue their activities, albeit in a more low-key fashion. But the state may be in the process of readjusting its lethargic attitude towards countering extremist groups. As some media outlets reported on Thursday, the CNICs of over 2,000 individuals on the Fourth Schedule — including the head of the proscribed Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat as well as Lal Masjid cleric Abdul Aziz — have been blocked at Nacta's insistence. Moreover, last month the State Bank also froze the accounts of those individuals on the Fourth Schedule.

To defeat terrorism in the long run, moves such as the ones mentioned above must be sustained and complemented by other acts that deprive hatemongers and sectarian demagogues of access to funds and space and the liberty to preach their divisive message. Cosmetic measures will be of no use. For example, despite the stated resolve to counter militancy by both the civilian and military leadership, sectarian and extremist figures belonging to 'banned' groups have had the freedom to lead rallies, appear on TV and even go for Haj. In fact, on Thursday, individuals from Lal Masjid reportedly made an appearance at Aasia Bibi's appeal hearing at the Supreme Court. With these facts in mind, we need to ask the counterterrorism authorities a few questions about the blockage of ID cards and funds. Firstly, what does the state plan to achieve in the long run? Will the affected individuals be brought to court, investigated and prosecuted if found guilty of spreading hatred and division? Will the de facto revocation of their national identity document prevent these individuals from rechristening their groups under new names; using mainstream and social media and rallies on Pakistan's roads to spread their venom? All those who want a more peaceful and progressive Pakistan have for long called upon the state to move in earnest against the preachers of hate and division. But the moves must be substantial and not just for temporary public consumption. Also, innocent people who have not indulged in spreading sectarian or hateful sentiments must not be targeted by these punitive measures.



## Nobel's unexpected winner

IT is no surprise that Thursday's announcement in Stockholm of the latest winner of the Nobel literature prize was met with gasps, followed by some laughter and much disbelief at the Royal Academy hall where the Swedish Academy made the news public, and subsequently around the world. The honour, considered a pinnacle of recognition, has traditionally been reserved for novelists, playwrights and poets. But this year, the Swedish Academy bestowed it on singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, pointing out that "his influence on contemporary music is profound". Around the world, millions — indeed, generations — will concur. Since the 1960s they have been riveted by the folk icon's seemingly effortless ability to produce lyrics full of imagery, literary allusions and depth. These have also resonated deeply with political movements and ideologies. For good reason is he said to have captured the spirit of a generation's coming of age, dissent and rebellion, with songs such as 'Blowing in the wind' and 'The times, they are a-changin'" being amongst the many that became anthems, particularly of the Vietnam War protests and the American civil rights movement. Bob Dylan has not been the only one of his generation to do this of course, but he certainly stands tall for the scope and span of his career: at 75, he is still writing songs and almost continuously on tour.

The criticism this year's award received has, therefore, not centred on any dispute about his achievements, but on whether songwriting deserves elevation in this manner. Can his work be considered poetry? And if so, is the Nobel honour on its way to being dumbed down? A more forward-thinking argument, though, would be that this decision holds out hope for an erosion of the wall that has long stood between high culture and pop culture. The gatekeepers need reminding that many of the greats of yesteryear that addressed the common man — Shakespeare, for example — went on to be considered producers of high culture. It is time these distinctions were erased, and creative work appreciated on the basis of its own merit.

## Public officials' accountability

A SUPREME COURT direction to the lower judiciary that public officials convicted of corruption should not receive reduced sentences has once again shone a spotlight on the problem of holding public officials to account. The direction has come as a bench of the Supreme Court has dismissed an appeal of a revenue officer in a case involving a bribe taken by the officer for transferring the title deeds of a small parcel of agricultural land. The offence itself is a classic case of the petty corruption rife at the lower tiers of the state, where interaction with the public is almost defined by inefficiency and corrupt

practices. While it is the duty of the courts to follow the letter of the law, the superior judiciary may want to consider being mindful of the spirit of its order being misinterpreted. Corruption at the lower tiers is intrinsically linked to a breakdown of the system and therefore care must be taken to not be seen to be launching a crackdown on the easiest targets and the most vulnerable officials.

To be sure, the Supreme Court has in recent times made it a matter of priority to take the executive to task for lack of accountability across the board, whether it involves high officials or those at the lowest tiers. Repeatedly, NAB and other investigation agencies have been hauled before the Supreme Court with one purpose in mind: ensuring that accountability is fair and equal, of the powerful and of the less powerful. The results have necessarily been mixed so far because corruption and accountability, or the lack thereof, are deep-rooted systemic problems that require structural redress. No amount of verbal or written orders by the judiciary will change what is essentially a problem of institutional and societal culture. Yet, for attempting to bring the matter to the fore institutionally, the superior judiciary deserves praise and support.

The real challenge is for parliament and the government, however. Institutional reforms simply cannot be undertaken without parliamentary legislation and parliamentary legislation will not go anywhere unless the government decides to act, or is compelled to act under parliamentary pressure. Yet, reforms of all stripes and in most domains occupy a dismally low place in the agenda of the PML-N as well as of virtually all opposition parties. While corruption continues to dominate the political discourse outside parliament, none of the parties involved in that debate seem interested in institutional and systemic solutions. Until that changes, true accountability, of the powerful and the less powerful, will remain elusive. Surely, while politics rages outside parliament, the same parties can at least find a way to work inside parliament on necessary legislation — it has happened before, so why not on such a critical issue?

## Stop child marriage

ENTRENCHED in gender discrimination and structural inequality, child marriage initiates a cycle of lifelong disadvantage for girls. According to a recent report by Save the Children, *Every Last Girl: Free to Live, Free to Learn, Free from Harm*, Pakistan is ranked 88 out of 144 countries where underage marriage, compounded by discriminatory social norms, affects large segments of the girl population. In Pakistan, because early marriage is attributed to poverty, lack of education, and tradition, women suffer at multiple stages of their lives. Girls are prevented from completing their

education; they endure increased health risks, and face domestic violence and abuse. That it is the state's duty to use its power to ensure that girls are accorded an equal chance to live, learn and be protected is forgotten. Consider the stark numbers: one girl under the age of 15 is married every seven seconds in developing countries, while one in three is married before the age of 18 and one in nine before the age of 15. Therefore, attention must be drawn to the suffering of child brides, including the increased risk of death and childbirth injuries when they have babies before their bodies are physically fit to reproduce. It is imperative for the state to institute protective legal and policy frameworks for girls' rights.

Earlier this year, the move to increase the legal marriageable age from 16 to 18 years was rejected outright by the Council of Islamic Ideology. Because brutal anti-women practices — from 'honour' crimes to sexual violence — have no acceptance in democracies advocating women's rights as human rights, it is inexplicable why the government must acquiesce to the demands of conservative lobbies at the cost of women's lives. From the legal standpoint, the minimum marriageable age for girls must be 18 in all related legislation. With Sindh's child marriage legislation as a precedent, the federal Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 and the Punjab Child Marriages Restraint (Amendment) Act, 2015 must both be revised as they determine the marriageable age for girls at 16 and 18 for boys. Such laws are in contravention of Pakistan's international obligations, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child included. Stopping child marriage has significant bearing on women's education and there is a clear multiplier effect to educating girls. Thus the state must challenge discriminatory social norms buttressing child marriage by using legal and advocacy campaigning tools — because educated girls are a development investment.

## In honour of Shahlyla

THE death of footballer Shahlyla Baloch has enveloped the country in a thick cover of sadness. Going by the tributes that have been pouring in, she appeared to have been a precocious young soul who had taken to football quite naturally. The enabling environment provided by her mother and two of her sisters, all of whom were involved in the game in one capacity or the other, must have been an encouraging factor. She was also lucky to have had coaches who were bold enough to compare her with the greats of the game and who trained her to be recognised as a most promising young footballer when she was only a child. Her passion for the game was said to have been insatiable, which reflects a general love of life. This makes it even more difficult for her admirers as well as those with little interest in the game to easily reconcile to her sudden departure.

It was not simply a single individual who died in that horrifying road accident in Karachi; the serene face of Shahlyla Baloch represented a rare hope and a national promise that were also lost.

The young player symbolised resistance against great odds. If this is a cliché which cannot do justice to her cameo, it is in our hands to come up with something better. This country has in recent years celebrated the contributions of brave and trendsetting young women such as Malala Yousafzai and Arfa Karim. The tradition set after Arfa's unfortunate passing a few years ago must be continued by honouring Shahlyla's memory. Arfa's genius is hailed by associating her name with top-notch IT projects in the country. It can be argued that women's sports, in fact sports in general in this country, is deserving of the attention of the authorities. Let Shahlyla provide the world of sports a much-needed stimulus. There can perhaps be no bigger honour to a remarkable young woman who was so much in love with football.

## PPP's rally in Karachi

THE PPP's impressive show in Karachi on Sunday sought to reinvigorate the party's political fortunes in the city at both the provincial and national levels. And though many moons remain before 2018's general elections, party chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari made his intentions clear by pledging to win the next national polls. However, as the young PPP leader must have learnt by now, there is a world of difference between engaging in political rhetoric and organising displays of street power, and translating these into success at the ballot box. This is not the first time the PPP has pulled in massive crowds in the recent past. For example, the annual birth/ death anniversaries of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto are usually marked by large rallies in Larkana, while even in Karachi Mr Bhutto-Zardari held a major show in 2014. But on Sunday, with the PPP high command in tow and the rally snaking through the streets of Karachi, the party tried to capitalise on the fluid political situation prevailing in the city and nationally.

The PPP chairman did not let the opportunity to take aim at the MQM — which is in the throes of internal crises — slip, while also hauling the PML-N over the coals by promising to 'free' the people from 'Takht-i-Raiwind'. But in order to mount a serious political challenge, the PPP has to reorganise itself. The party has seen many highs and lows over the decades; Bhutto introduced populist politics when he founded the party while Benazir Bhutto used its platform to fight Ziaul Haq's martial rule. Due to the charisma of both these leaders the PPP won four general elections. However, its performance in the 2013 polls paled in comparison; perhaps much of this was due to

the fact that Asif Zardari had little time for governance or the party's organisational affairs.

Whether the PPP wants to regain or solidify its position in Karachi, the rest of Sindh or nationally, it must concentrate on two words: good governance. Unfortunately, despite the party's struggle for democracy, when it comes to governance, especially in the recent past, the PPP's performance has been mostly lacklustre. Though the party chairman claimed he had brought 'change' to Sindh by replacing its chief minister, time will tell if the changes are systemic, or merely cosmetic. For example, despite Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's energetic drive to revive Karachi, the city remains submerged in rubbish, with its infrastructure in tatters. This is mainly because the provincial administration has appropriated many of the powers of local governments in Sindh. If Mr Bhutto-Zardari wants his party to regain power nationally come 2018, he will have to show people in the rest of Pakistan that the PPP is serious about responsible and responsive governance. For this, it is essential that he reorganises the party at the national level.

## Failing the PSEs

IF there is one area in which the government has utterly failed to bring about any improvement, it is in the state of public-sector enterprises. The last review of the IMF programme, released by the Fund's staff, points out that the accumulated losses of the three large public-sector companies and the power sector are now greater than the country's annual development programme. Standing at Rs1.365tr, they can be said to be at record highs today, though this is one record we will not hear the government bragging about. The PML-N came to power promising to rectify the dismal situation in the public-sector enterprises. So what went wrong? Looking at each case, it turns out that the government had neither the political will nor the capacity to undertake such a massive task. The attempted privatisation of PIA was clumsily handled, leading to protest and the eventual unfortunate tragedy amongst the striking workers. The steel mill was supposed to be given to the Sindh government, but that process has been stalled for a number of years now. We stopped hearing about the railways reforms, and now the government is busy pumping billions of rupees into it in preparation for a massive Chinese injection. The power sector has shown improvement in recoveries by five percentage points, and reduction of line losses by one percentage point, and further accumulation in the circular debt has been halted. But it is hard to tell how much of this is because of superior management, and how much due to falling oil prices, rising tariffs

and the new policy of recovery-based load-shedding which allocates more power to low-loss areas and dispenses with the need to increase recoveries in high-loss areas.

Admittedly, the pace of increase of these losses has been brought down, but that has not happened by putting them on any sustainable footing or by any strategic reform. It has happened largely through heavy-handed measures, or by passing on a significant portion of the burden to consumers. Nobody is arguing that privatisation is the only way forward, but the government has produced no vision of how to turn this situation around while retaining management control of these entities. This is a massive failure which must be emphasised each time we hear the government brag about accumulating its 'record-high reserves' or of having turned the economy around.

## Bus tragedy

ANOTHER terrible road crash has shocked everyone and brought us face to face with what we ignore at our own peril. This time the site of the early morning accident was Rahim Yar Khan. Initial reports blame overspeeding. Indeed, there are reports that the driver of one of the buses involved in the collision was warned that he was going too fast soon after he set off on a journey that proved to be the last one for many of his passengers. The combined death toll of the two buses was said to be somewhere between 24 and 30. Whatever the actual figure is, the fact remains that many lives were lost because of criminal negligence.

In fact, there is usually a pyramid of negligence behind public-transport road crashes. Although, pending an investigation, one cannot squarely blame the drivers of the ill-fated buses for Monday's accident, in a majority of cases, those driving public-transport vehicles are found to have been speeding in their bid to make a quick profit. There is often a whole system to ensure that these buses keep going on the roads, veering in all directions in an intimidating manner. And while the general maintenance of these vehicles might have improved somewhat, a lot of work must still be done to establish the benchmark of what can be allowed in the name of competition. What is also sad is the speed with which such accidents are forgotten and buried under a pile of statistics, as well as overshadowed in the news cycle by other reports. Such accidents will only be taken seriously when there is a concerted effort to investigate them and follow up with measures to prevent their frequent recurrence. The tendency to close the case after blaming the drivers is dangerous. The factors behind the rashness that is a dominant feature of public transport, intra- and inter-city, must be exposed. A good start may be to identify transport companies frequently involved in road accidents.

## PTI's protest tactics

IMRAN Khan and the PTI have a democratic right to protest, and the party's focus on the as yet unresolved Panama Papers issue is an important source of political pressure on the PML-N government.

The latter appears disinclined to allow an investigation of the first family and does not seem to take the public's concerns about corruption seriously.

Therefore, before addressing some of the more dangerous and overheated rhetoric of the PTI, it is necessary to focus on the core of the PTI's protest: the absence of any investigation by any commission or statutory body into what were certainly very troubling revelations in the Panama Papers.

Moreover, the PML-N government seems intent on shielding the first family from any inquiry that prioritises an investigation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's and his family's wealth and assets.

More than six months since the Panama Papers first became international news, the government's stance remains egregious and indefensible.

With or without the PTI protests, the PML-N has a duty to the public to demonstrate that the first family is not tainted by corruption.

Wrongheaded as the PML-N's position may be, it still has time to change course. With the Supreme Court scheduled to take up several petitions calling for judicial action on the Panama Papers issue tomorrow, the pressure is once again building. Rare is the political issue that remains at the centre of the national discourse for so long.

But in the case of the Panama Papers, a growing public unease about rampant corruption in the public sector and among the people's representatives appears to be behind the sustained interest in the matter.

The PML-N would be mistaken to believe that were it not for the PTI's relentlessness, the Panama Papers issue would simply disappear. Perhaps the government should note how the opposition remains united on the demand that the first family be investigated independently and transparently.

Where this is some concern about the PTI, it is with the tactics it is threatening and the incendiary rhetoric it deploys. The threat of a so-called lockdown of Islamabad on Nov 2

could lead to violence and clashes with law enforcement — an outcome that would be anti-democratic and that could trigger a grave crisis of democracy itself.

Mr Khan's freewheeling speeches and political rhetoric is often explained away by the PTI as a matter of style rather than substance. But Mr Khan does drift all too often uncomfortably close to a line that should not be crossed — that of the distinction between forcing better outcomes from within the democratic system and a heedless plunge into democracy-destabilising approaches.

If the government's approach has been unacceptably stubborn, the opposition should remain mindful that no-holds-barred protesting can have catastrophic effects on the democratic system. The Supreme Court may yet step in and offer a sensible way out. All sides should remain amenable to refining their strategies accordingly.

## BRICS summit

THERE was a time when the BRICS grouping was considered a serious affair by the world community. Comprised of the largest emerging world markets, the group was looked upon as an engine for the global economy, with a potential role in lifting economies out of the wreckage of the great financial crisis of 2008. BRICS has presided over the formation of large regional cooperation blocs and a multilateral development bank modelled after the World Bank. The latest summit of the group, held in Goa, India, had an extensive agenda — ranging from trade and investment to climate change. But India made a mistake in coming to the summit with a one-item agenda foremost in its plans, dwelling on terrorism, more specifically as it related to Pakistan. The results have not been impressive. In its treatment of terrorism, the Goa declaration does not add anything to the one at Ufa. Clearly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attempt to use the Goa summit as another opportunity to isolate Pakistan found little traction with the participants.

The dispute between India and Pakistan held another grouping of states hostage for many decades now. Saarc was formed to promote cooperation between the regional countries of South Asia; instead, it has become a valve to dissipate Pak-India tensions. Now it seems that Mr Modi tried to bring his grievances and the language of the long-standing Pak-India discord to BRICS, in an attempt to drag the grouping, with its world-encompassing agenda, into the quicksand of his country's disputes with its neighbour. The episode should awaken the Indian leadership to the basic fact that there is no alternative to dialogue and engagement between India and Pakistan. No country wants



war, and efforts to pull others into the dispute fail every time they are brought to international forums. A narrow approach to their grievances brings both countries to the point of stalemate. Mr Modi would be better advised to look for ways to include his country in OBOR, since this will be necessary for him to realise his ambition to include India in the Eurasian Economic Union. Pressing on with his misguided policy of isolating Pakistan is likely to do damage to both states' prospects of greater participation in the emerging regional connectivity arrangements that are the hallmark of the present moment. Mr Modi brought a small mind to a large gathering. It is time to change course.

## Academic dishonesty

MANY dream of transforming Pakistan into a 'knowledge society'; however, this dream will remain unfulfilled if those sitting in the hallowed halls of academia continue to take a soft line on plagiarism. As reported in this paper on Tuesday, the University of Karachi has failed to launch a formal inquiry against the acting vice chancellor of the Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science and Technology even after evidence emerged that the individual in question had apparently plagiarised. KU had awarded the doctorate. The Higher Education Commission has said the acting VC's PhD thesis, as well as many of his research papers, contains unacknowledged material lifted from other sources. Despite these serious allegations of academic misconduct, it is unclear why he continues to remain in charge of a major tertiary institution. For example, he reportedly managed to get 17 research papers published in seven months. Any serious scholar will testify that even a single research paper takes several months of painstaking inquiry to produce. In his defence, the accused professor said it is in fact others who have plagiarised his work.

The problem is larger than just one individual with questionable academic qualifications and work ethics; it is one of the academic culture prevalent in most of Pakistan's tertiary institutions. Unfortunately, far too many within the academic community here are willing to look the other way to protect one of their own. This attitude has only resulted in stunting the growth of Pakistani academia, as unscrupulous elements have used plagiarism to secure promotions and other short-term gains. The HEC has repeatedly said it has a zero-tolerance policy towards plagiarism. But clearly, this policy needs to be enforced more rigorously at institutions of higher learning across the country. By indulging in academic dishonesty, or protecting those who do, Pakistani academics are abandoning the pursuit of knowledge in favour of the baser goal of personal enrichment, while sullyng the reputation of the academy.

## Auditing asset declarations

THE move by the Election Commission of Pakistan to conduct random audits of asset declarations filed by election candidates is a long overdue step. The whole exercise of filing asset declarations by all elected representatives is a legal requirement for good reason, and not just a procedural formality. Elected members have been treating it casually thus far, with many failing to even fulfil the condition of filing asset declarations of their spouses and dependants as required by the law. Thus far, all declarations have been simply filed away, and old ones even removed from the ECP website. This turns the entire exercise into a meaningless formality, because the declarations submitted stand in stark contrast to the visible lifestyles that many of the lawmakers lead. For instance, several among them claim to not own a car, yet they are seen moving around in a motorcade. Clearly, these people are making full use of assets that they are unwilling to disclose in writing, raising obvious questions.

Hopefully, the ECP will not take this obligation lightly. Auditing asset declarations will require specialised expertise, as well as a rigorous selection methodology that must be truly and transparently random. If the names of important legislators from the ruling party should come up during the selection exercise, they will need to be pursued as vigorously as those of anybody else. If the exercise turns out to be weak, or is viewed as a tool to victimise political opponents, it will simply add to the pointless bickering that fuels so much of our political culture. Clearly, it will not be easy to avoid these pitfalls.

It would also be a good idea to monitor election expenses more vigorously. The same law that mandates the asset declarations also places a ceiling on how much candidates contesting the elections are allowed to spend. That ceiling is currently set at Rs1.5 million for national and Rs1m for a provincial assembly seat. But going by the kind of cash that is spent in some constituencies, for example the NA-122 by-election last year, which saw obscene amounts of money and gifts being showered upon the electorate, candidates are still able to assert they stayed within the ceiling by claiming that the funds were spent by their 'supporters'. Likewise, they get away with declaring negligible assets and claiming that the lifestyle they are seen living is paid for by others, including family members. Clearly, money raised from rackets is playing a growing role in politics, and in turn political power is being used to support and maintain these rackets as a quid pro quo. This is the jugular vein of contemporary Pakistani politics, and if the ECP wants to take action, it must do so in a strong and credible manner.

## Kabul-Taliban talks

THE news has been swiftly and emphatically denied, but in the past too there have been denials after the news was broken. In all likelihood, the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban have, indeed, met for tentative early talks in Qatar over the past month — a revelation that introduces a positive element into the relentlessly negative news from Afghanistan in recent months. While the Taliban do appear to be committed to waging war on the battlefield and incrementally expanding their zones of influence and areas of control across Afghanistan, the very notion that senior Taliban leaders are willing to meet Afghan government officials suggests that there is an understanding that total victory on the battlefield remains an unlikely possibility for the Taliban. That notion has been reinforced by the US and Nato commitments to not only finance the Afghan security forces until at least 2020, but for American troops to once again help fight the Taliban. With the National Unity Government also not unravelling, despite the clear and continuing strains, the possibility of state collapse in Afghanistan is low. And while there should be no illusions about the Taliban's capacity and willingness to wage an endless war, there is the reality that a war that cannot be decisively won opens the door to a negotiated, political settlement.

For Pakistan, the latest revelations offer both an opportunity and the possibility of further complications. According to news reports, Pakistan has not played a role in the recent contacts between the Afghan government and the Taliban, allegedly because both sides are wary of Pakistani involvement. That is not necessarily a problem for Pakistan: an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process has been the mantra of all stakeholders, internal and external, for a while and if a process can be kick-started without direct Pakistani assistance or involvement, that could be interpreted as a positive development. At the very least, Pakistan should not try and disrupt contacts between the warring Afghan sides — much of the blame that is heaped on it, including in the latest news reports, is linked to the belief that Pakistan prefers a negotiating process that gives it a prominent say in what is decided. Indeed, Pakistan should consider doing the opposite: encouraging whatever political contacts the warring Afghan sides want to have and discouraging cross-border militancy. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in Pakistan's interests, but the peace and stability must be forged by the Afghans themselves.

## Jerusalem resolution

JERUSALEM is one of the world's most sacred — and contested — cities. Yet what is beyond doubt is that ever since 1967, Israel has been occupying Arab East Jerusalem, a fact that virtually the entire global community recognises. However, any mention of the city's Palestinian and Arab character, and the fact that it is under illegal occupation, is enough to send the Israeli establishment — which considers the city its 'eternal capital' — into a paroxysm of rage. This is exactly what happened when Unesco recently passed an Arab-sponsored resolution critical of Israel's actions in the holy city. The resolution refers to "occupied Palestine" and terms the Zionist state the "occupying power", while criticising Israeli attempts to restrict Muslims' access to the Al Aqsa complex. As a result of the Unesco resolution, which was passed by a vote of 24-6, with 26 abstentions, Israel has 'suspended' cooperation with the UN's cultural body, while claiming that the resolution denies Jewish historical links to Al Aqsa, which Israel refers to as the Temple Mount. This accusation is patently false as the resolution recognises the fact that Jerusalem — Al Quds to the Arabs — is sacred to all three great monotheistic faiths: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. What the document highlights — much to Tel Aviv's chagrin — is Israel's high-handedness in Jerusalem. In the recent past, there have been calls by extremist Jews to demolish Al Aqsa and replace it with the 'Third Temple'.

Unesco has taken a bold step by passing the resolution, even though many in the Western bloc opposed it. The UN body in the past has also taken progressive steps where the Arab-Israeli dispute is concerned; for example, in 2011 it admitted Palestine as a member, for which it was punished by the US — Israel's biggest benefactor — as Washington blocked funds for the cultural body. The Unesco resolution may be a small victory for the Palestinians; but perhaps it offers this dispossessed nation the hope that, one day, they will be able to live with freedom and dignity in their homeland.

## MQM in disarray

OVER the past few days, an invective-filled exchange has been taking place in Karachi that has brought into the open the internal turmoil convulsing the MQM, while also involving those political factions that have broken away from it.

Many of the things being said about the party and its Byzantine, often bloody, internal workings were once discussed in hushed tones; now these stinging allegations are being repeated on national television.

The latest in a series of episodes was sparked on Monday when former Karachi city mayor and current head of the Pak Sarzameen Party Mustafa Kamal unleashed a barrage of allegations against Sindh Governor Ishtatul Ibad.

The tough-talking PSP chief accused the governor of indulging in ‘massive corruption’ and providing ‘oxygen’ to Altaf Hussain.

The normally mild-mannered governor has responded in kind, levelling similar charges against Mr Kamal.

The latest salvo came on Thursday, when the PSP leader called for a probe against the allegations made against him. Mr Kamal claimed he had approached Mr Ibad for a possible political alliance when the former returned to politics in March; apparently, their stars were not in alignment, which explains the venomous exchanges.

At present, it is clear that the MQM has split into four distinct factions — in addition to the Haqiqi faction: the loyalist group in London that has rallied around Altaf Hussain; the Farooq Sattar-led MQM Pakistan; the PSP which contains many former Muttahida cadres; and the Sindh governor who, while currently without political affiliation, was once an MQM stalwart.

All four factions have levelled serious allegations against each other, with murder, militancy and corruption being common themes.

Even Mr Sattar, once a diehard Altaf loyalist, has taken pains to distance himself from the party supremo after the latter’s inflammatory Aug 22 speech.

Perhaps the public muckraking is one way for these factions to clear their conscience. After all, all these individuals — Mustafa Kamal, Ishtatul Ibad, Farooq Sattar and others — were once central cogs within the Muttahida machine.

Their current ‘admissions’ confirm suspicions that the party was run more like a mafia racket, though it must be said that these high-ranking politicians could not have been completely unaware of the party’s undesirable activities, even if they were not involved. So why the lengthy silences and sudden appreciation for the ‘truth’?

All factions must admit that there was a dark phase in the MQM’s history when many misdeeds were committed, and that they were aware of them.

Whether it is the May 12, 2007, mayhem, the murders of Hakim Saeed, Azeem Ahmed Tariq and others, or the epidemic of violence Karachi suffered under the MQM's watch, the truth must come out, especially if what is being said is more than just political rhetoric.

Further investigations are in order, and if those involved in making these accusations are serious, they must present proof in court in order to bring the perpetrators to justice.

## A campaign code

CERTAIN aspects of electioneering in Pakistan have retained colonial-era features that many would say are out of sync with the modern age's staggering social changes wrought by superior technology. Large public rallies, for instance, were a most effective way of political mobilisation at a time when the literacy rate was shockingly low and modern means of communication were not what they are in this day and age. Today, Pakistan's electronic media has become perhaps the most important tool of mass communication and influencing thought — far more than the rallies of yesteryear. And yet, it is possible to dispute the proposed blanket ban on rallies contained in the draft code of conduct for the 2018 elections prepared by the Election Commission of Pakistan. True, for many the proposal might come as a relief as such mass gatherings are often associated with, and do cause, inconvenience to the public. However, public rallies are very much a part of the robust South Asian electoral culture and should not be dispensed with, although restrictions on their locations might be considered. In any case, corner meetings are more popular among candidates now.

In the same vein, the ECP's proposal to prohibit many other activities that appear legitimate appears odd. Why should, for instance, there be a ban on advertisements on electronic media and on banners, posters and flyers? The electronic media is a most potent medium for political parties to convey their achievements and future goals to voters. The ban on graffiti makes sense; it is an eyesore and disfigures buildings and infrastructure. But banners, posters and flyers do not fall in this category and must be considered a legitimate way of mass contact. Most bizarre is the ECP's suggestion that only state media should be utilised for campaigning, with Pemra, the electronic media regulator, allotting equal airtime to all contestants. That the ruling parties shouldn't misuse official machinery and state-owned media goes without saying, but the move to keep private radio and TV channels away is not logical. Instead, the ECP should incorporate a very useful clause in the Philippines' electioneering code whose Section 81 makes it unlawful for any foreigner to aid a party or candidate "directly or indirectly" in "any manner", or make financial contributions. There is plenty of time for all political

parties to study the code and cooperate with the ECP to help develop a sophisticated electoral culture.

## Pak-India cultural ties

IF any illustration were needed of the extreme pressure that India's right-wing lobby is exerting on citizens to link patriotism with hawkishly anti-Pakistan sentiments, one has only to turn to the video released earlier this week by Karan Johar.

With it, he broke the silence that he had so far maintained over the controversy that erupted over his upcoming film, a big-budget multi-starrer that counts amongst its cast Pakistani actor Fawad Khan. Mr Johar is a giant in a cinema industry that is amongst the world's largest.

That even he has been bullied into stating that in future he will refrain from engaging talent from the neighbouring country speaks volumes for how the citizens' loyalty is being questioned.

In the tensions that flared following the attack in Uri in September, cultural ties and representatives on both sides of the border have been prominent casualties.

In India, a cacophony of voices has called for the expulsion of Pakistani artists; even the few big names that dared present reasonable views have been hauled over the coals.

Unfortunately, in Pakistan, matters have been taken to an equally, if not more, damaging juncture. Cinema owners have decided to halt the screening of Indian films, while on Wednesday, Pemra, the electronic media regulator, imposed a complete ban on Indian content being aired on television and radio (which was otherwise legal as long as the limit of 6pc of airtime was not breached).

With this move, the state has now entered a phase where the fallout of soured relations is affecting the softest of targets ie cultural ties.

It bears repeating that in precisely such innocuous, mutually beneficial exchanges lies the path to eventual normalisation.

That both countries have allowed those who would take the fight further to dominate the narrative is regrettable in the extreme.

This pattern must be made to change, for without that, ie without better sense prevailing, any softening of stance at the level of the state will be of short duration.

## DPC rally

IN the shadow of the rising tensions between the PTI and the PML-N, an even more foreboding spectacle is readying itself. The Difa-i-Pakistan Council, an umbrella group of hard-right religious parties and banned militant groups, is preparing to hold rallies next week in Islamabad and Azad Kashmir to protest the violence in India-held Kashmir. Undoubtedly, the ongoing crackdown in the latter deserves the strongest condemnation and the plight of the people there ought to be highlighted at every forum. Yet, there is something deeply troubling about the return of the DPC — a delegation of which met the interior minister yesterday — and its determination to once again grab the national spotlight. Where the PTI, the third-largest party in parliament and the second-highest vote-getter in the last general election, has a democratic right to protest, the DPC's case for doing so is far more ambiguous. To begin with, several of its constituent groups are either banned or their leaders are on various local and international watch lists. Moreover, most of the religious political parties in the DPC have an ambivalent attitude towards democracy, constitutional supremacy and the rule of law.

Arguably, a mass protest by the DPC in the federal capital and in AJK could end up hurting the Kashmir cause internationally more than helping it. An outside world already impatient with Pakistan's perceived lack of progress in challenging certain militant groups may become even less willing to listen to the country's historically and morally correct stance on the Kashmir dispute. Locally, too, the DPC rally poses a challenge for a government that is already contending with pressure on multiple political and institutional fronts. What the government should most definitely avoid is to try to politicise the matter, as some of the PML-N's spokespersons attempted to do on Thursday when suggesting that the PTI and DPC are planning violence in the federal capital. A potentially serious question of national security should not be tarred by the usual brush of politics.

What, then, should the government do? Allowing or disallowing the proposed DPC rallies to go ahead as announced is only a small part of the challenge — the central issue is how an amalgamation such as the DPC is able to both pledge and feel confident about delivering a grand spectacle? The withholding of no-objection certificates for rallies or the imposition of Maintenance of Public Order notifications against sundry DPC leaders will be no more than the flimsiest of band-aids. What the



country needs are institutional responses to deep-rooted challenges. The national counter-extremism policy of Pakistan, to be formulated by a committee working under the banner of Nacta as announced recently, can become one of the elements of an organised, institutional response to the extremism challenge in Pakistan today. Entities such as the DPC cannot be wished away or temporarily swept out of sight — a long-term approach is the only viable option.

## Cross-LoC tensions

WHILE war hysteria in the subcontinent may have subsided somewhat, normalisation still eludes Islamabad and New Delhi. One disturbing sign of this came in the shape of a briefing the new defence secretary gave senators on Thursday in Islamabad. The official told lawmakers that India had moved an additional army division to the Line of Control while also bringing fighter jets to a forward base. The defence secretary also apprised the senators of the fact that India had committed 58 ceasefire violations at the LoC since last month's Uri attack. Moreover, on Thursday the Foreign Office summoned the Indian deputy high commissioner over "unprovoked ceasefire violations by Indian troops"; officials say a 28-year-old man was killed and several civilians injured due to Indian firing earlier this week. While these reports are indeed cause for concern, there is no reason to believe that cross-LoC tensions cannot be addressed through dialogue.

True, the Uri attack has put the peace process on the back burner and caused shrill, jingoistic lobbies to beat the drums of war; yet, neither establishment seems to be in the mood for the escalation of hostilities. In the peculiar environment of the subcontinent, this is positive news. The fact is that even in the immediate aftermath of the Uri attack, the DGMOs were in contact, as were the two countries' national security advisers. These channels should continue to be used to address the issue of LoC violations and other irritants. India's inquiries into the Uri incident can continue, but the Modi government should not forsake dialogue with Pakistan, while all sides should realise that the subcontinent cannot afford another war. At the same time, the root cause of the present bitterness, indeed of the bitterness that has poisoned Pak-India ties from the beginning ie the situation in Kashmir should not be forgotten. It cannot be denied that the current stir in the India-held region is indigenous. Instead of pushing the narrative of bilateral tension, India should realise that crushing the aspirations of the Kashmiris is not likely to dampen their quest for freedom. For both Islamabad and New Delhi, the better option is to forsake confrontation and bring all issues to the table — including prickly ones such as Kashmir and terrorism — and negotiate a way out of the morass so

that the people of both countries, as well as the Kashmir region, can look forward to a better future.

## Market closure timing

IN the project to regulate those aspects of citizens' lives that can pose problems, it should be a rule that governments announce remedial measures only when they have been carefully examined through the lens of fairness and enforceability. Unfortunately, this does not always happen in Pakistan. A case in point is the attempt made on several occasions, both at the federal and the provincial levels, to dictate when city markets should shut down, the aim being to save electricity, which has in recent years become a commodity the country finds itself increasingly short of. The idea is not a bad one, and could theoretically go some way towards plugging the shortfall; however, in most such instances, the state has been unable to enforce the regulation across the full spectrum of commercial areas in various cities and, importantly, has also selected unrealistic timings. A deadline by when businesses must wind up their activities across Sindh was most recently suggested by Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, who pitched 7pm, pending the input of stakeholders. This came on Thursday when government officials met representatives of traders' and businessmen's bodies at the Sindh Secretariat. Unsurprisingly, the latter group, while agreeing to the move in principle, said that 7pm was not feasible and suggested 9pm instead.

It is difficult not to agree with their proposal, given the realities of life in not just Karachi but also other urban areas. With office hours generally extending till 5pm, and given a milieu where increasingly both men and women work, early shop closures would not only inconvenience the citizenry they would also constitute a reason for violating the unreasonable timings. Given that a 9pm deadline has been suggested by the trade lobby itself, it is more likely to be adhered to. If the plan does go ahead with the change having been incorporated, the challenge for the administration will be to ensure the enforcement of the rules across the board, in large malls and shops frequented by the elite as well as smaller businesses.

## The age of xenophobia

ALL over the world, a new kind of populism is gaining momentum — one that is frightening in the kind of appeal it relies on for support. Its thrust is in two directions: the first against the democratic conventions enshrined in the discourse of rights, citizenry and tolerance; the second in the anger aimed at an amorphously defined other, whether resident minorities within a country or immigrants and refugees. There are other undercurrents too, such as resentment at growing inequalities and the tightening grip on power by big business, as evidenced by the anger directed at banks and trade agreements. But those animated by such strong feelings arising from the increasingly unrepresentative character of contemporary democracies through their near-complete subordination to the needs of big capital, are finding it hard to turn their anger into a viable political project. This has left the stage wide open for a more atavistic, xenophobic anger as the principal opposition to a discredited status quo. Bernie Sanders bowing out of the race, leaving the field to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, illustrated this perfectly.

Undoubtedly, this new populism has been many years in the making. Long before Mr Sanders, there were the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, and the Howard Dean campaign in 2004. And long before Mr Trump, there were innumerable congressmen who ran on anti-immigrant, xenophobic platforms. But today the firebrand variety of populism is on the march around the globe, capturing state power at the top in countries from India to Turkey, and upsetting national elections and referendums from Europe to Australia. A delicately drawn and embattled consensus around the politics of rights and citizenship, in place since the end of the Second World War and embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, now wears a haggard look in a world where inequities rule and state power is crumbling setting into motion some of the largest movements of people ever seen in history.

This new populism presents a stark challenge to the continuation of the democratic project. The biggest challenge it presents is the latent threat to the democratic experiment — not more than a few centuries old — from within through the ruthless suppression of dissent and the branding of all those who are not marching in lockstep with it as traitors, terrorists, agents of foreign powers or enemies of the state. The challenge for the old guard now is to advance a vision to drain the growing swamp of discontented constituencies that are flocking to the toxic allure of xenophobia and hyper-nationalism. Mounting an effective opposition to this juggernaut of hate is emerging as global priority number one. Citizens and intellectuals in each country where this trend is sweeping the landscape, must forge solidarity and find a way to face this challenge together.

## Organ trafficking

IT is Pakistan's shameful open secret that despite having passed legislation and set up regulatory authorities, the trafficking of human organs — almost always kidneys — continues. The incidence of this practice was at its highest around the turn of the millennium, and subsequently an estimated 2,000 vended kidneys were being transplanted per year. The passage of the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Ordinance in 2007, and then the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act in 2010 brought about a steep drop in the numbers, and it was hoped that the legislation, along with the promotion of cadaveric donation, would finally bring to an end this heinous form of exploitation. Regrettably, this has not been the case. As illustrated by an investigation by this newspaper last month, the numbers have been rising again over the past couple of years, and the tactics used to trap victims are becoming more extreme. In recent days, police carried out a raid on a building in Rawalpindi and recovered 24 would-be organ 'donors' who were being kept there in detention, having been stripped of their mobile phones and identity papers, etc. All of them desperately poor, these people had been drawn into the net of kidney trafficking gangs with the promise of being paid enough to create a much better life for themselves.

Though the trade of human organs is criminalised, it is argued by some that the 'donors' agree to their part of the bargain knowingly and willingly. That is distortion of the ugliest variety. The people freed by the police in the recent Rawalpindi case include brick kiln workers, bonded labourers and daily-wage earners — in other words, the poorest sections of society. 'Choice', in their case, is a meaningless concept. The scale of their exploitation merits the state acting with far more urgency than it has so far demonstrated, the first part of its challenge being the reform of the human organ transplant authorities in all the provinces. It is the job of these authorities to ensure that transplants do not involve organs obtained through coercion or payment. A few arrests were made in the recent raid, and one Rawalpindi hospital suspected of being involved in this crime was sealed on Thursday. Much more, however, needs to be done; all those colluding in this practice, at all levels, from agents to surgeons, need to be brought before the law.

## Lawyers' behaviour

A RECENT incident involving a group of advocates has once again highlighted the extent of lawlessness that exists among many members of the legal community. There has been yet another incident where a group of lawyers, who reportedly included the honourable office bearers of the bar association, actively helped two men accused of murder escape from the court premises in Lahore on Wednesday. Similar scenes have been enacted so many times, that it hardly comes as a surprise that the reputation of lawyers has been tarnished and that the term 'wukla-gardi' is reserved for categorising acts of violence and other violations of the law by members of the bar. Yet there appears to be nothing to suggest that a review is under way of such appalling behaviour, or that a reversal of this dangerous trend is being urgently sought from within.

At the same time, it is true that the use of such physical force by professional groups to resolve an affair is not restricted to lawyers. Other professionals working in the public area, for instance, doctors, and also at times members of the media, have been found wanting in situations that have required them to prove the sterling credentials of their profession. This underscores the need for introspection — these professional associations must address the issue of growing rowdiness in their ranks and the urge to self-righteously dispense 'justice'. Indeed, this is a sign of weakness, as it shows that by using violent means to achieve their goals these bodies are incapable of dealing with tough situations in a mature, wise manner. Indeed, the matter has reached such proportions that today not even a respected judge is safe from the wrath of the easily irritated lawyer who is sure he has — and may actually have — the weight of the entire bar behind him. It is time the bar associations gathered the courage and stood up with other counsel who do not believe in taking the law into their own hands.

## Wrongfully hanged

GHULAM Sarwar and Ghulam Qadir are names that must not be forgotten if the criminal justice system of the country is ever to be reformed. Even by the distressing standards of a broken justice system, the case of the two brothers is shocking: they have not lived to see their convictions for murder overturned on appeal by the Supreme Court because they were executed by the state before the appeals could be decided. An astonishing and macabre miscarriage of justice is made worse still by the fact that a full year has elapsed since the execution and the Supreme Court announcing its

acquittal verdict, suggesting deep anomalies and a fundamental lack of coordination between the judicial and prison systems.

The shocking matter calls for at least two immediate steps to be taken by the government. First, a moratorium on the death penalty should be reinstated. Second, a comprehensive, national index needs to be developed to record all condemned prisoners, where they are imprisoned and the stage of the appeals process each case has reached. This paper opposes the death penalty in all forms and in all cases and will continue to do so. However, the Ghulam brothers' case is not the only troubling matter to have emanated from the criminal justice system in recent days: the declaration by the Supreme Court that a medically diagnosed schizophrenic patient, Imdad Ali, can be executed by hanging has sent ripples of concern across medical and human rights fields.

Consider that while thousands of individuals in prisons across the country have been awarded the death penalty and await execution pending the appeals process being completed, the enforcement of capital punishment in several hundred cases since the lifting of a moratorium by the government has already yielded a storm of controversy. In good conscience, therefore, can the country really afford to stay the current course, instead of pausing and reviewing the entire system of capital punishment that is currently in place in Pakistan? Consider also this timeline: the murders the Ghulam brothers were accused of took place in 2002; the trial court handed down its verdict in 2005; the Supreme Court first took up the appeal against a Lahore High Court verdict upholding the brothers' death sentences in 2010; and it is only in October 2016 that the Supreme Court overturned the convictions. While the gravity of the death penalty means that a deliberate and measured appeals process is called for, there is also the matter of two lives spent 11 years behind bars — years that the executed brothers would never have got back, even if they had been alive today. Criminal justice reforms are necessary for a fair and just society.

## Countering extremism

WHILE the national counterterrorism effort sputters along, it is welcome that initiatives to address extremism — militancy's attendant evil — are also being taken. As reported in this paper recently, a national counter-extremism policy is being hammered out by a steering committee and a draft document should be ready by November. Those familiar with the process, being steered by Nacta, say the draft will then go to the interior minister for further action. The committee members will also get the input of administrative and law-enforcement officials, while deliberations with political and

religious elements, academia as well as other civil society groups have already been held. From the reports, it appears the policy will be a comprehensive document, covering all the necessary bases needed to counter extremism. For example, included in the 'policy themes' are educational reform, reviving culture, media engagement, etc.

Many experts and observers have long called for a policy to address extremism that complements the counterterrorism plan. Indeed, terrorism and militancy have a symbiotic relationship with extremism; in fact, extremism can be described as the 'gateway' to terrorism and is more insidious. The reasons for the present high levels of extremism are obvious as during the Ziaul Haq era religion was misused for geopolitical ends — mostly through the promotion of a narrow-minded curriculum and space given to jihadi forces. These myopic policies have resulted in today's divided and intolerant society. Correcting the mistakes of three decades will not be a quick process, but an effective, realistic counter-extremism policy can be a starting point. Some experts have called for a 'national dialogue' between sects and religions to promote harmony, while it has also been argued that religious justifications used by militants need to be deconstructed and countered. Along with these suggestions, as the steering committee has discussed, changes must be brought about in the curriculum, while the media must not be used by extremists to preach hatred. Moreover, to address extremism at the grass roots, the state must pursue madressah reforms regardless of the clergy's pressure tactics. But welcome as the initiatives to mould a counter-extremism policy are, we must ask how serious the state is when many of the very elements primarily responsible for the spread of sectarian and extremist venom in Pakistan are able to secure an audience with a senior state functionary, such as the interior minister. For a successful policy, it must move beyond statements and be implemented throughout Pakistani society.

## A shameful incident

THE resort to violence by a law enforcer against a journalist outside a Nadra office in Karachi is indeed condemnable, and a stern warning is in order. The footage of the incident is appalling — and has been played over and over again by the channels; it must be a source of shame for all those who have power and authority but do not guard against their misuse. According to many observers, the offence is all the more deplorable since the recipient of the security man's wrath was a woman. Indeed, there are no easy answers to the question raised: would the security man have acted in a different manner had the 'provocateur' been a man able to match his angry action? No new evidence is needed to confirm just how vulnerable Pakistani women are to verbal

and physical attacks, but maybe the issue here relates more to journalism than to their protection and rights. This was certainly a case of an overly assertive woman who wanted information for the people at large; the journalist's own approach to telling the story must also be examined.

Among the many points the incident has raised is an old one about respect for the uniform. And, also, to what extent should a journalist be allowed to go in his or her search for a story. The unfortunate incident, which has now been viewed by the whole country and by people living beyond, must now act as a catalyst for the rule books. There are surely some guidelines to be set for those who represent the government. All officials, beginning with those who are involved in public dealing, must be sensitised to their roles in accordance with changing public demands which are often reflected in the additional effort put in by restless journalists. Likewise, there has to be some kind of a realisation on the part of journalists about the need to keep their operations free of violence and unnecessary confrontation.

## Imran Khan's warning

WAS it political provocation, an implicit threat or a statement of fact? Or perhaps it was a bit of all three? The build-up to the PTI's promised lockdown of Islamabad on Nov 2 has already taken an unpredictable turn with Imran Khan's warning that if a so-called third force were to intervene in the days ahead and democracy derailed, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself would be responsible. Mr Khan is no stranger to incendiary political rhetoric and has frequently flirted with the bounds of democratic discourse. This paper has consistently maintained that not only does the PTI have a democratic right to protest, but that its position as the third-largest party in parliament and second-largest vote-getter in the last general election gives it an important place in the political order in the country. As such, the dismissive attitude of the PML-N government towards the fair and just PTI demand that the revelations in the Panama Papers be thoroughly and transparently investigated is deeply lamentable.

Nevertheless, the more mature and democratic course for Imran Khan to have taken would have been to maintain that the only solution is for more democracy, not less; for democratic institution-building, not the dismantling of the democratic order itself. After all, the current demands of the PTI, as far as the Panama Papers issue is concerned, are explicitly and avowedly about introducing a cleaner, more transparent and responsive system of government. What precisely is the role of the military that Mr Khan sees in the Pakistani polity? A fair historical account of Pakistan's weak institutions and low levels of democracy would suggest that much as the politicians have rebuffed



opportunities to strengthen the democratic order, the fundamental weaknesses of the system are rooted in unconstitutional interventions in the democratic system. In a moment of heightened civil-military tensions, Mr Khan should think twice — and then twice again — before blithely imperilling the democratic order. A cleaner democracy this country surely needs, but the system must remain democratic if it is ever to be cleansed of corruption.

Perhaps given the crucial moment in this country's history it is worth reiterating what precisely is at stake. The current democratic transition, begun in 2008 and on the verge of delivering a second full-term government and a second successful peaceful transition of power between parliaments, is still flawed in many ways and needs a great deal of improvement. The opposition of Imran Khan and PTI could be part of the necessary pressure to improve the government, governance and quality of public life. But let there be no misunderstanding: this democracy belongs to the people, is rooted in the Constitution and flows from the wishes of the founding father of this great nation. It is the only legitimate system and it is the only system worth protecting. Imran Khan should pay heed to being on the right side of history.

## Polio survivors

WITH the country reporting 16 polio cases so far this year, a substantial decrease over the previous years, and the virus hopefully in its dying phase, attention must concurrently focus on the rehabilitation of survivors. True, the government is putting in extra effort to eradicate the disease as it battles mindsets that reject polio drops as well as security threats in its aim to vaccinate children across the country. But it has yet to recognise the suffering of those left crippled for life. For the most part, polio survivors are left to defy the odds on their own, as illustrated in a report carried yesterday by this newspaper: Naqeebullah Ehsas's struggle as a polio survivor shows his resilience. Not able to walk, he crawled to school through a two-kilometre rugged stretch of land. When beaten viciously and unable to defend himself, he turned to education rather than wallow in self-pity. His determination is to be saluted, but his experience could have been less painful had he had some support from a caring state and access to free rehabilitation centres and mobility aids at a young age. This is an area where the state should invest greater efforts so that polio survivors are in a better position to cope with their handicap — even if the physical effects of the infectious disease are irreversible. It should think in terms of making the lives of polio survivors more comfortable and independent — and publicly encourage their determination to live productive lives.

Regrettably, the government lacks multi-disciplinary healthcare approaches aimed at treating and integrating polio survivors into society. While it is commendable that a coordinated national immunisation programme and the surveillance of high-risk populations has accelerated efforts to lower the incidence of polio, the goal being to reach the zero mark, medical interventions would provide survivors with more opportunities to lead independent lives. Consider where the healthcare infrastructure is weakly serviced is also where the polio virus has spread rapidly. It is because the government has failed to provide social and economic safety nets to the most vulnerable in society that development comes piecemeal. The provincial health departments must prioritise their resources and expertise for the rehabilitation of polio survivors, so that even after the virus is eradicated, such programmes will demonstrate the state's commitment to tackling the fallout of this crippling disease.

## Dance controversy

SUCH are the realities of modern-day Pakistan that when a voice of reason sounds, it tends to surprise. Into this category falls the statement made by Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, when on Sunday he attempted to put an end to the controversy over whether or not dance is being taught at some private schools in the metropolis, and if so, whether this was permissible. Earlier over the weekend, the managements of private schools had reportedly been sent letters by the education department, stating that the practice could not be tolerated. It was left for Mr Shah to point out the progressive values that the province rightfully tries to uphold: "The government of Sindh firmly believes in preserving and promoting culture and heritage as enshrined in the Constitution and it will not be dictated to by isolated extremist elements." He went on to add: "Dance and music are integral parts of a liberal society and we will continue to support such activities." The 'ban' now stands revoked.

This is exactly as it should be. With the Sindh government putting its weight behind the issue, there can be some hope of schools and colleges not just continuing with the cultural activities that may be part of their agendas as institutions, but of expanding them. While the subjects taught at these premises aim to give students knowledge and hone their faculties of reason, activities that fall into the domain of culture are what give young people a sense of their identity, history and shared belonging. This is invaluable in a society riven with divisions, where the push and pull of competing narratives leaves many feeling confused and rootless. The chief minister is to be commended on taking such an unequivocal stand, and it is hoped that the state administration as a whole, at

all levels, strives to promote the liberal values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Therein lies the country's salvation.

## Attack on police academy

THE death toll is shocking as is the seeming ease with which militants were able to attack a police training academy outside Quetta city; our thoughts must turn to the injured and the families of those who died. The first line of defence for much of Pakistan are this country's police forces — often targeted, unduly vulnerable and unconscionably under-resourced across most of the country. Particularly in Balochistan, where the police are institutionally marginalised in much of the province and where other security forces dominate, the plight of the law enforcers was already grim. Care then should be taken to help the larger police community recover from this devastating attack and protect morale. More than seven years since the Manawan Police Academy attack in Lahore, the failure to protect law enforcers in their own training camps is a grim testament to the state's failure to improve its institutional capacities.

Necessary also is a familiar, but important, set of questions to be asked of the security establishment when it comes to the safety of Quetta. After more than a decade of near-total control of the security policy in the province, all that seems to have changed is who is automatically blamed for particular acts of violence. Where earlier Baloch separatists were principally blamed, now alleged Indian- and Afghan-sponsored militants are reflexively accused. To be sure, Balochistan remains a hotbed of armed Baloch dissidents and hostile foreign interests. It is not a figment of a febrile imagination that outside elements continue to not only support some Baloch insurgents, but also seek to destabilise Pakistan in a murky tit-for-tat strategy. However, none of that changes the reality that much of Balochistan is effectively a vast no-go area for most Pakistanis and that security strategies are unable to establish normality, let alone peace, in the province. Part of the problem is surely the knee-jerk reaction to major incidents, typified yesterday by yet another high-level security meeting in Quetta, where once again old talking points appear to have been rehashed.

Finally, with competing claims of responsibility by IS and a faction of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi for the attack, it is time to acknowledge that it perhaps does not matter which splinter or sub-group was the architect of the attack. Zero tolerance is the only way ahead — a policy both in principle and in practice when it comes to taking on militant groups. While every attack does demand a detailed inquiry, it should also solidify the state's resolve to dismantle all militant groups. Blaming sanctuaries across the border or even foreign support is a political game when strong action is called for. The counter-insurgency

successes in Fata are a symbol of what is possible when commitment is total and resolve unshakeable. Militants want to terrorise the public and make the state tremble; it is time the tables were emphatically turned.

## Curbs on MQM

AS various factions and spin-offs of the MQM struggle to portray themselves as the 'genuine' representatives of urban Sindh, it is clear the security establishment is in no mood to tolerate what is being called 'MQM-London', better known as the pro-Altaf Hussain faction. On Saturday, the Rangers hauled away three Karachi-based leaders of the pro-Altaf group from the city's press club, scuttling plans by the party to address a news conference. The paramilitaries had taken up positions outside the Karachi Press Club, sealing approaches to the building. On Oct 15, the Rangers were also present outside the KPC at an MQM-London press talk; on that occasion, the men in uniform allowed the event to go ahead, though they kept a close eye on visitors to the KPC. Such tactics are unacceptable; in fact restrictions such as these on activities within the KPC were not even used during Gen Ziaul Haq's dictatorship. On Sunday, Sindh government officials said the three MQM leaders were being held for 30 days under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance as "their activities were prejudicial to the public peace and order". Pro-Altaf cadres have also been picked up from Hyderabad while some of the faction's offices have been demolished by the authorities.

These actions of the state are unacceptable primarily because it is undemocratic to disallow a political party from carrying out lawful activities, such as holding press talks or taking out rallies. The fact is that there is as yet no ban on MQM-London. So why the restrictions? In fact, a Sindh High Court bench, in response to a petition, called on law enforcers to "act strictly in accordance with the law" in the matter of the arrest of another pro-Altaf leader. Indeed, Altaf Hussain's Aug 22 speech may well have crossed the boundaries of legitimate free expression — as is often enough witnessed in the MQM supremo's case — while the party's history of using violence as a political tool is quite well known. Yet the authorities, instead of crushing the MQM's political activities, need to bring evidence of wrongdoing to court. Using high-handed tactics to clamp down on the pro-Altaf faction will only strengthen its narrative of victimhood and may alienate ordinary supporters from the state. The MQM should be allowed to carry out legitimate political activities, while any evidence of illegality must be produced in court. Come election time, the people of Karachi can decide who best represents them.

## Blaming taxpayers

THE reason given for the low tax base of the country by the prime minister's special assistant for revenue has to be rejected outright. According to Mr Haroon Akhtar, people themselves are to blame for the state's lax revenue effort because there is widespread evasion, the self-assessment scheme is misused and tax notices are seen as 'harassment'. It is true that there is a culture and mindset of tax evasion in this country, and the deep mistrust that exists between citizens and the state greatly complicates the task of broadening the tax base. But the tax effort is not a voluntary programme in any country, and governments are reasonably expected to advance the revenue interest of the state in spite of stiff opposition from vested interests in addition to the nimble efforts of the citizenry to evade and subvert the effort.

Mr Akhtar was probably trying to tell his audience of business leaders to be more forthcoming about their tax affairs, and complain a little less. But his tactless phrasing caused the message to miss its mark. Indeed, people are reluctant to pay taxes, but the real problem is the non-enforcement of tax rules. The FBR is seen as corrupt, and a culture of periodic amnesties and ad hoc exemptions has helped create the negative attitude Mr Akhtar referred to. The PML-N itself has contributed to the problem by politicising the tax efforts of previous governments, and then walking down the same path, bypassing parliament to implement key decisions and offering amnesties of its own once in power. The only reason Mr Akhtar came to the conference with no vision beyond a simple blame game is because his own party is at a loss on how to broaden the country's tax base. This is the main reason why he had little option but to assign blame. Recourse to such language and narratives sets into motion a destructive series of exchanges. Surely, people in official positions ought to exercise greater care.

## Coarse language

HAD tongues been horses, perhaps people could have wished for the adventure riders to depart from the scene at a gallop. But the fact is that the PML-N and the PTI, along with their respective allies, are in the midst of a vicious power game, with venomous words emanating from their mouths. Unfortunately, no matter how nauseating the fare, ordinary folk have no choice but to wait until the shrill cries and obscene taunts stop. Indeed, the verbal barbs have begun much before the actual showdown — Nov 2, when Imran Khan will attempt a lockdown of the capital is still some days away. But by some estimates, the politicians have already crossed all limits set by the standards of the

times. All caution has been thrown to the wind while the rivals have been flung before imaginary hungry wolves for summary disposal.

It is quite an even match, though the advice was for the government to not be provoked and maintain some semblance of decency. The days of 'suo motu' are long gone, and today if the PTI chief utters the second half of the term he is referring to the person of his chief political opponent. Likewise, this is not the moment for the defence minister to lecture the parliament about sharm and haya — two words so intrinsically woven in our culture that we proudly claim they have no equivalent in the English language. Instead, a clearly provoked minister jumped at the opportunity of linking blood-soaked Quetta with a hostile enemy and Imran Khan's protest movement, making it appear as a scheme against his government. And these are some of the instances in the quotable category — there are far too many expressions flying around that are unprintable, even if they are being telecast. While one can hardly expect the language of diplomacy from bitter foes, the two sides' failure to retain even a modicum of civility shows that they have not understood the values of maturity and sagacity that democracy teaches.

## IMF chief's words

SHE came, she spoke, she left. In her two-day visit, the IMF's managing director, Christine Lagarde, stayed on a single message: Pakistan has earned a "moment of opportunity" with stabilisation measures taken over the past three years under the IMF programme, but the real work of reforming the economy must now begin. She pointed to improvements in the fiscal accounts and reserves as achievements of the programme, while underlining that more work lay ahead for broadening the tax base, making growth more inclusive, and boosting competitiveness to raise exports. She peppered her speeches with quotes from the Quaid and Iqbal to urge the country's leadership to look inward for the drivers of its future growth.

But there was an illusory halo that hung over her pronouncements. For one, the environment surrounding her visit provided stark examples of why Pakistan has been unable to focus on reforming its economy. The cutthroat nature of its politics formed the backdrop to her visit as the airwaves crackled with tension over an impending 'shutdown' of the capital by the PTI, while a massive terrorist attack in Quetta a day after her arrival underlined Pakistan's enduring security challenges. The list of achievements the IMF chief listed under the programme also appeared to be selectively drawn. Yes, the macroeconomic scenario has stabilised since 2013, but the original programme promised a lot more. When the programme was originally approved by the

board in September 2013, the IMF's deputy managing director had himself said that "short-term macroeconomic measures must be complemented by significant structural and governance reforms" under the programme, pointing to the power sector as a crucial target of these reforms, and adding that "the trade regime needs to be liberalised, public-sector enterprises need to be restructured or privatised, and the business climate needs to be improved."

## Pak-India tensions

A FRESH set of crises has caused Pakistan-India relations — in the doldrums after last month's Uri attack — to plunge to even lower depths. On Thursday, India decided to expel a staffer of the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi for "espionage activities" after the individual had been detained by the Indian law-enforcement authorities. Delhi police claimed the Pakistani diplomat had been in possession of sensitive documents. The Foreign Office has rejected the Indian allegations as "false and unsubstantiated", adding that New Delhi's actions violate the protocols of the Vienna Convention. Meanwhile, the situation on the Working Boundary continues to remain tense, as an exchange of fire between both countries' security forces was also reported on Thursday. A day earlier, two Pakistani civilians were killed after the Indian Border Security Force resorted to mortar shelling. At least four people have been killed in the exchange of fire on the Pakistani side since Monday, while the military claims a number of Indian soldiers died in retaliatory fire. Similar tensions were witnessed last week along the Line of Control.

Considering the atmosphere currently prevailing in the subcontinent, both Islamabad and New Delhi must handle both crises with care and sagacity. On the diplomatic front, the incident concerning the Pakistani diplomat in Delhi should not be allowed to escalate into a nasty exchange of rhetoric or result in tit-for-tat moves. Whatever concerns either side has should be communicated through diplomatic channels and resolved. On the military front, there should be immediate de-escalation and stoppage of cross-border fire. Apart from the tragic loss of life, normal routines in the affected areas have been severely disrupted due to the hostilities. As reported in this paper, residents of border areas have had to move to safer locations in other parts of Punjab, while there have also been school closures in Sialkot district. While the government may be preoccupied with the political storm making its way towards Islamabad, it needs to remain alert and handle growing tensions with India with statesmanship and resolve. Normalisation and peace between Pakistan and India may appear to be a distant dream at this juncture; however, the least both states can do is to not ratchet up levels of animosity. This can be done by keeping the diplomatic and military channels of

communication open between both sides, and avoiding aggressive public posturing and statements.

## Karachi LG mess

THE tussle over the implementation of the local government system in Karachi, which is, in the opinion of many, the country's most chaotic and poorly managed city, appears to have attained ridiculous proportions. From the provincial government appropriating areas of crucial civic work, including waste management and garbage disposal, to the continuing incarceration of Mayor Waseem Akhtar, there seems to be little appreciation in the corridors of power for the immediate task at hand: sorting out the city's devastated civic and infrastructural affairs. To the contrary, it appears that active measures are being taken to further complicate the situation; the latest move came on Wednesday when, following a request from the Sindh government, the bank accounts of all municipalities were frozen. The institutions affected range from the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation to the union councils, which means that at all levels of local governance, work will be severely impeded and salaries suspended. The Sindh government says that this was done because of the realisation that the entire LG system had changed in 2010. No doubt, a rationalisation process may indeed be required; nevertheless, it is odd that appreciating this reality has come years after the change, and that the administration's response to the challenge was then initiated through the extreme step of freezing accounts with no contingency plan in place.

Such a dog-in-the-manger attitude shown by the party that has run Sindh for many years is inexplicable. In any case, it is not the PPP's job to manage civic affairs — that is the mandate of the local government. Great hopes were pinned on the recently inducted chief minister, who took charge with lofty promises of change and re-energising the system; unfortunately, for all his good intentions, the city remains a mess. One wonders if the motives behind the current move regarding the implementation of the LG system, dominated by the MQM, are political. If so, Karachi is being held hostage for the basest of reasons.



## Ignoring the larger threat

AMIDST growing concern for the democratic order and increasingly menacing rhetoric by the PTI, and elements within the PML-N too, have come sensible directives from the Islamabad High Court. The PTI is to hold its Nov 2 rally in an authorised space in Islamabad, while the government is forbidden from blocking roads and taking extreme counter-measures to prevent the PTI from holding its rally — counter-measures that would deprive the public from its right to free movement. Instantly, however, the PTI rejected the judicial attempt at bringing order to the party's plans and Imran Khan has vowed to go ahead and enforce a so-called lockdown of the federal capital. Extraordinarily, the political slugfest between the PTI and PML-N appears to have already accelerated to the point where orders by the superior judiciary itself are regarded as a mere distraction.

As if to underscore the increasingly bare-knuckled nature of the fight, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Mr Khan have engaged each other in a bitter political argument over alleged corruption by the PML-N, with Mr Sharif vowing to move the courts against the PTI supremo on grounds of defamation. The vicious, personal barbs hearken back to a dark period in this country's political history: in the 1990s the endless, bitter squabbling between the PML-N and the PPP eventually led to the wrapping up of the democratic order, following widespread public disillusionment with both parties. Mr Khan was only a political neophyte then, his PTI having been formed in the latter half of the 1990s. But the Sharif family ought to know better. Whatever Mr Khan's provocations and unbridled ambitions, it is undeniable that had Prime Minister Sharif accepted an independent and thorough probe of the first family's wealth and assets following the revelations in the Panama Papers, the country would not be on the edge of a precipice today.

While neither side appears to be in a mood to back down, it is perhaps important to reiterate what is at stake. The 1990s too was a repetition of an earlier period in this country's history. Indeed, if there is one constant in Pakistan's political history it is that when opposition politicians and the civilian leadership engage in unbridled sparring, it is the anti-democratic forces that ultimately triumph. Or as the inimitable Asma Jahangir has warned, politicians should be careful to not saw off the very branch of the tree that they are sitting on. An energised political landscape contesting issues of public importance and suggesting different policies is one thing. But a divided, bitter polity, led by ego-driven and vengeful politicians, is a short hop away from the ultimate breakdown. Imran Khan wants to be a first-time prime minister, while Nawaz Sharif wants to be an unprecedented fourth-term prime minister — but at what cost to the democratic system?

## Down the spiral, again

ALL the wrong memories are being stoked. When police barged in on a PTI youth convention on Thursday, trying to make arrests, the government that ordered them to do so was repeating the mistakes of two years ago. But when they followed up that action with the tear-gassing and violence in Rawalpindi yesterday, they compounded the folly, stirring memories of 2014 when police brutality led to the deaths of 14 people in Model Town, Lahore, and created a furore that has lingered to the present day. Yet, today the PML-N appears hell-bent on repeating its mistakes. Protesters are once more being pursued with strong-arm tactics in a futile attempt to stall the PTI protest planned for Nov 2, and containers loaded with export consignments, are being impounded to be used as hindrances for the caravans that are set to travel up the roads connecting Lahore with Islamabad — roads ironically that Nawaz Sharif proudly presents as emblems of his successful rule.

For his part, Imran Khan is vitiating the atmosphere with his incendiary rhetoric. It is true that protesting against corruption is his right, and that the Panama Papers need to be investigated. But the kind of firebrand language he is using does nothing more than poison the air and make any sort of engagement or negotiation impossible. In fact, there is good reason for the government's insecurity, given the memories of the last dharna. At that time too, Mr Khan had marched to Islamabad saying he was coming for a 'peaceful protest', but then proceeded to storm the red zone in the capital, with mobs from the PTI and PAT attacking parliament and the PTV buildings. He may claim that his followers engaged in no violence, but that is too fine a hair to split in the midst of such rancour. This time around, when he says once again that his intentions are peaceful, there are grounds to be sceptical, especially given the fiery rhetoric he and his supporters are using to exhort people to join them.

Both parties need to calm down. Pakistan's is still a fledgling democracy which needs to be strengthened in the face of all challenges; the ship of state should not be rocked beyond a certain point. Anti-democratic forces are watching carefully from the sidelines, and it is always they who have benefited from turmoil in the political space. Protest is a right, but spreading lawlessness is not. Supporters of the PTI should recall that protest tactics like shutting down cities used to be something they disliked when others, such as the MQM, resorted to them. Likewise, while the state has a right to take security precautions, it must realise that brute force of the sort seen over the last few days is counterproductive to maintaining peace.

## Nepra vs power ministry

TENSION is crackling between Nepra and the Ministry of Water and Power. The regulator has refused to grant the ministry's requests for a higher tariff on some occasions and called into question its investment plan for transmission and distribution system upgrades. It has doubted its promise to eliminate load-shedding by 2018 and demanded greater reductions in the power tariff in light of the falling oil prices which the ministry has refused to notify. More recently, it has asked why power dispatch from inefficient plants continues while more efficient plants are shut down. The latest salvo was fired in an open hearing when the Nepra chief once again questioned the merit order list of power plants to be kept running, repeating the complaint that inefficient plants were being operated while better ones were shut down, and much generation capacity lay idle while load-shedding was imposed upon the citizenry.

It is high time clarity was obtained on this matter. What is animating Nepra, and can the ministry issue a clear statement responding to the regulator's allegation? There is an insidious undertone to the charges which should be addressed as quickly as possible. For its part, can Nepra explain why it argues in one year that the government's generation plans are insufficient to meet its own targets, and the next year accepts that the generation targets can be met but there is insufficient transmission capacity to manage the augmented load? Changing the nature of its claims from one year to the next gives the impression that the regulator's complaints are lacking in depth, perhaps even frivolous. The power sector is seeing some of the largest investments in Pakistan these days, and it is important that the environment in which this is happening is free from needless controversy. Greater transparency is the best way forward, and although the power sector maintains a strong disclosure regime, with project details and tariff determinations all posted on Nepra's website, if there are so many complaints from the regulator then clearly more is needed. Perhaps the ministry ought to seriously consider a proposal to make some of the information from its own dashboard, which shows total generation from each individual plant in the country in real time, publicly available online. And an explanation of the merit order list for power plants would also help dispel the implications of Nepra's complaint.

## Sharbat Gula arrested

IN June 1985, an arresting image of a green-eyed young Afghan girl became the subject of one of the most iconic National Geographic covers of all time. Photographed by Steve McCurry at a refugee camp in Peshawar, Sharbat Gula was only 12 years old when she made the magazine's cover. Her unwavering stare, a mix of suffering and resilience, symbolised Afghanistan's war turmoil. Her arrest this week in Peshawar, on charges of fraudulently obtaining a Pakistani national identity card, comes as authorities intensify their crackdown on illegal Afghan refugees. If convicted, she can face 14 years in prison and a hefty fine. Legally, her arrest is justified because information was falsified for the purposes of an identity card. Nonetheless, certain factors must be considered: firstly, in tribal communities Afghan women are unaware of decisions taken on their behalf. And, as a poor widow in her forties, her personal circumstances might not have warranted her return to war-torn Afghanistan. That Sharbat Gula's plight reflects a bigger problem must be considered as the government pushes to repatriate Afghan refugees despite the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan. It makes sense then that most refugees are reluctant to return to a country battered by relentless cycles of war and chaos. After all, Afghans have become the second-largest group seeking asylum in Europe after Syrians.

Meanwhile, with only about 1.5m of the 2.5m Afghan refugees in Pakistan registered, the rest live in fear of arrest and deportation. Desperate, they resort to bribing officials for false identity cards — and Sharbat Gula's family may have done the same. Even if on humanitarian grounds alone, the government must release her. Yes, one could argue why she should be treated as an exception when hundreds share her fate. If only because her life has been hard and sad, she deserves a country to call her home. Her arrest — three decades after that haunting first photograph was taken — is another reminder that the suffering of Afghan people must never be forgotten.

## Plea for sanity

IN these dangerous, overheated times, it is a plea as much as advice: the leaders of this great and proud nation need to step back from the edge of the abyss.

No one appears willing to listen, not the civilians, either in government or the opposition, and not the military. But each of them must be reminded, and ought to remind themselves, why they hold public office, or are entrusted with the responsibility of being the elected representatives of the people.

This country's destiny and the success of its people depend on a democratic and constitutional order based on strong, representative institutions and the rule of law.

Those goals, the fundamental reason for the existence of the state, are bigger and more important than the fate and peccadilloes of the PML-N, the PTI or indeed any given era of military leadership.

But the more the current national leadership pledges to put 'Pakistan first' the more it becomes apparent that it is really 'me first' — a play for power at the expense of the good of the people and the republic.

The intensifying battle between the PTI and the PML-N is particularly dismaying because it has all the hallmarks of bygone eras, dark periods in this country's history that the most sustained democratic transition was supposed to have left behind.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is a vastly experienced politician, but seems unable to bury a personal tendency to allow political crises to escalate until they threaten to reach unmanageable proportions.

The Panama Papers could have been a watershed moment, a first family offering itself up for unprecedented financial scrutiny.

Instead, Mr Sharif opted to resort to political sloganeering. Even now, in this moment of democratic peril, the prime minister and his PML-N appear more interested in cracking down on legitimate political dissent than restoring the legitimacy of the mandate the PML-N received in 2013.

Lamentable as the PML-N's attitude is, the PTI's wilfulness is of historically tragic proportions. There are 19 months left until the term of the current parliament expires and a general election has to be held.

The government's intransigence and the PTI's principled opposition means the PTI has a realistic opportunity to compete for power at the next election.

If it does win in 2018, the PTI could expect to rule until 2023 — and the PML-N's stance on democratic continuity means it can be expected to remain in opposition without trying to overthrow a democratically elected government.

Clearly, there are no guarantees for the PTI — as indeed there are none that the present course of agitation will lead to ultimate success. But the PTI and Imran Khan should consider what kind of Pakistan they want to rule over.

A democracy gaining in strength, or a polity wracked by bitter divisions and the spectre of extra-constitutional forces willing to intervene?

## Schizophrenia verdict

THE Supreme Court recently ruled that schizophrenia is a ‘recoverable’ disease that fails to qualify as a mental health disorder under existing laws, thereby, clearing the path to execute Imdad Ali, a 50-year-old mentally ill prisoner. In response, his wife, Safia Bano sought a stay order, filing a review petition with the court on Oct 28. Not only is this verdict controversial and inhumane, it also sets a dangerous precedent. Fundamentally, it notes mentally ill individuals are not precluded from the death penalty. Moreover, it represents the cruelty that embodies the death penalty — a form of punishment that this newspaper does not endorse. And, it puts at risk the lives of other mentally ill death-row prisoners, including Khizer Hayat (he suffers from schizophrenia and has spent 17 years in prison). More shocking is the judiciary’s inability to recognise schizophrenia as a genetically determined illness, severe and incurable as extensive medical evidence has proven. Consider the response by the British Pakistani Psychiatrists Association in this newspaper. Explaining schizophrenia as a “remitting, relapsing illness”, they recommend evaluating mentally ill offenders, especially their capacity to distinguish between right and wrong at the time of committing the crime.

Even though certified by doctors as schizophrenic, Ali’s medical reports presented as evidence were dismissed by the court. Why? If the reports were not deemed credible, an independent psychiatric evaluation panel should have been appointed. Also, why did the jail authorities fail to approach the home department to move Ali to a hospital for treatment? If an individual has schizophrenia, he must be treated to determine if the illness is ‘recoverable’ or not. Because the system is rigged against the poorer mentally ill prisoners, their cases hinge on inept state prosecutors and jail authorities — again, underscoring the need for reforming the criminal justice system. Also, executing mentally disabled prisoners is a misinterpretation of medical jurisprudence and in conflict with international covenants — the ICCPR included. With Pakistan’s UN human rights review due in July 2017, the government must improve its civil and political rights record. Executions of the mentally ill do not serve any purpose other than tarnish our rights record. And because the court has failed to acknowledge that punishing a

mentally ill offender serves no criminal justice aims, it is imperative that Imdad Ali be given a presidential pardon. In doing so, the government would be showing its commitment to upholding human rights and dignity.

## Pensioner's suicide

ONE can only imagine what it would take for an elderly man to commit suicide. The recent case of one such individual, who had been making the rounds of Karachi's Civic Centre to obtain pension that he had reportedly not been paid for 13 months, leaves one reeling with anger. His family says he had been making repeated trips to collect what was his due, and the staff that he spoke to made fun of him and his efforts to collect his pension. The resulting depression, according to his family, led him to take the extreme step of jumping off the building, and not the lack of payment. The explanations given by KMC, where the man worked all his life and from where he expected his pension, and by Karachi's deputy mayor, somehow do not ring true. They claim that pension cheques worth Rs740m "have been readied" and will be disbursed once the Sindh government releases the funds.

Whatever amount may be ready, the fact of the matter is that if the pensioner had to suffer humiliation at the hands of KMC employees while visiting the office to ask for updates on his dues, then it just shows the level of dehumanisation that prevails in that organisation. Pensioners are one of the most vulnerable members of our society, and the sad part is that many governments, federal and provincial, balance their accounts on the backs of these aged people. Pensions are amongst the first payments to be blocked in the event of shortage of funds. The callousness that this category of citizens must suffer for each cheque is enough to break one's heart. For pensioners, that cheque means the world because it is their own money, and gives them a sense of worth and independence. Karachi's deputy mayor should do all in his power to determine whether or not the retired KMC worker faced humiliation, and ensure that others are not made to suffer similarly in the future.

## The cost of protests

IT is an easy argument to make either way, but people must make up their minds about it one way or the other. While protests remain a democratic right, the costs can be high. Indeed, the cost of the PTI protests to the country and the economy is very large, if measured in terms of the erosion of confidence, the muddying of the Pakistan narrative for foreign and domestic investors, and the weakening of the state's controls over the economy and its ability to discharge its regulatory and oversight duties. There may not be an immediate impact in terms of loss of output or damage to infrastructure, but the cost to the underlying pillars upon which a market economy operates can be immeasurable. However, some of these costs are avoidable.

Already, the state has impounded containers laden with export consignments to use as obstacles in the path of the protest caravans in a repeat of what was done two years ago when the same scenario played itself out. Needless to say, this tactic does incalculable harm to our exports that are already suffering. The stock market has lost more than 1,500 points since hitting its historic high this month, an indicator of the storms of uncertainty unleashed in the investor community. The former is an example of an avoidable cost, while the latter represents an enduring loss whose effects will linger long after the affair is over and the market has regained its momentum, because the damage done to investor sentiment in manufacturing will take far longer to repair.

Those participating in the protests may ask: what are the costs of not protesting? This is a fair question, because business as usual is also marred by its many dysfunctions, primarily poor governance, a bad security environment, and corruption. But, at the same time, it would be naïve for protesters to think that should they succeed in their goals, the dysfunctions will disappear. The path to repairing Pakistan's many dysfunctions is a long one, and progress on that road can only be gradual. The first thing to be fixed is the political system, more specifically the path to power and the means through which power is legitimised. The more we politicise that, the more we undermine the very tools with which any course correction can be undertaken. To fix the economy, the ship of state must be steady and resting on an even keel, and it must be clear to all contestants in the political arena that there is only one path to power — and that leads through the ballot box. Any loosening of this principle weakens the ability of the state to address its own dysfunctions regardless of the intentions of the rulers. These protests exact a cost from the economy that outweighs any benefits that the protest leadership promises.



## Houthi missile attack

THE Saudi-Houthi conflict took a dangerous turn as reports emerged on Friday that the Yemeni rebel group had fired a missile deep inside the kingdom. Accounts of the missile's intended target vary: the Saudis insist the attack was aimed at the holy city of Makkah, while the Houthis say it was targeted at Jeddah's airport, some distance from Islam's holiest site. The way the incident is being spun risks recasting the Yemeni conflict in overtly sectarian terms, much like the Syrian civil war is portrayed. The Saudis and most of their Gulf allies have seized the opportunity to question the faith and motives of the Zaydi Shia Houthis, and their alleged Iranian backers. The Houthis dismiss this as "political nonsense" and say they had no intention of targeting Makkah. It is, of course, difficult to believe that any Muslim group — regardless of the animosity it may bear towards Saudi Arabia — would consciously target Makkah, simply because of the revulsion such an act would cause across the Muslim world. The Yemeni rebels have, indeed, in response to Saudi military intervention, conducted cross-border attacks, including a salvo earlier this month targeting a Saudi base in Taif. But there is little evidence to support the thesis that they have purposefully targeted the holy cities in Hejaz.

While the missile attack is condemnable, the Houthi strike should not be used as an excuse by the Saudi-led coalition to escalate the war effort in Yemen. As it is, this impoverished Arab state has been battered by relentless conflict, especially since the Saudis intervened last year. The UN estimates that over two million people in Yemen require humanitarian assistance, while the threat of famine looms large. The number of civilians killed has been disturbingly high; on Oct 8 the coalition was accused of bombing a funeral in Sanaa, in which over 140 people were killed and hundreds more injured. The air strike caused an international outcry. If the Saudi coalition continues to pound Yemen, more extreme reactions from the Houthis — such as the missile strike — are possible. If the situation escalates, a wider regional conflagration with ugly sectarian overtones may result. That is why the international community — particularly regional and Muslim states — should intervene to bring the fruitless and bloody Yemeni conflict to a close. The rebels and the government should be persuaded to cease hostilities, negotiate a way out of the impasse and share power.

## Decimation of wildlife

IT is widely recognised that supporting humanity is extracting a heavy toll on the planet. Even so, on Thursday came a report that is nothing less than damning: since the 1970s, nearly three-fifths of all vertebrates — fish, birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals — have been wiped out directly as a consequence of human appetite and activity. If the prevailing trend continues, by 2020 — which is only four years away — the planet would have lost two-thirds of its wildlife stock. These are the findings of the conservation groups WWF and the Zoological Society of London, published in their joint biennial Living Planet report. Sadly, there is no mystery about why this is the case: with the human population having more than doubled in number since 1960 to the current 7.4bn, humans are simply eating, crowding and poisoning our planetary cohabitants out of existence. To make matters worse, while this particular study involved the tracking of changes in wildlife population sizes and not the number of species threatened with extinction, experts are in agreement that Earth has entered its sixth “mass extinction event” — when species disappear at least 1,000 times faster than usual — over the last half a billion years.

If humanity has a conscience, these findings ought to galvanise the world into action. There is, of course, an urgent need to save and conserve wildlife habitats, and an argument can also be made for mankind to change its dietary patterns. But many countries need to start with making their populations aware of the need to protect wildlife, Pakistan being a case in point. Our own record of conservation on the whole leaves much to be desired. From the snow leopards in the north to the marine life in our oceans, depletions and habitat loss are occurring, without people tuning in to the fact that this will take an environmental and economic toll on human communities as well. Can the trend be reversed? Only time will tell.

