

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of October 2017

Note: This is a compiled work by the Team The CSS Point. The DAWN.COM is the owner of the content available in the document. This document is compiled to support css aspirants and This document is **NOT FOR SALE**. You may order this booklet and only printing and shipping cost will be incurred.

Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

www.thecsspoint.com



10012345678902



BUY CSS BOOKS ONLINE

CASH ON DELIVERY

ALL OVER PAKISTAN

<http://cssbooks.net>

**ALL COMPULSORY AND
OPTIONAL SUBJECTS BOOK
FROM SINGLE POINT**

ORDER NOW

03336042057 - 03033884912

DOWNLOAD

CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines



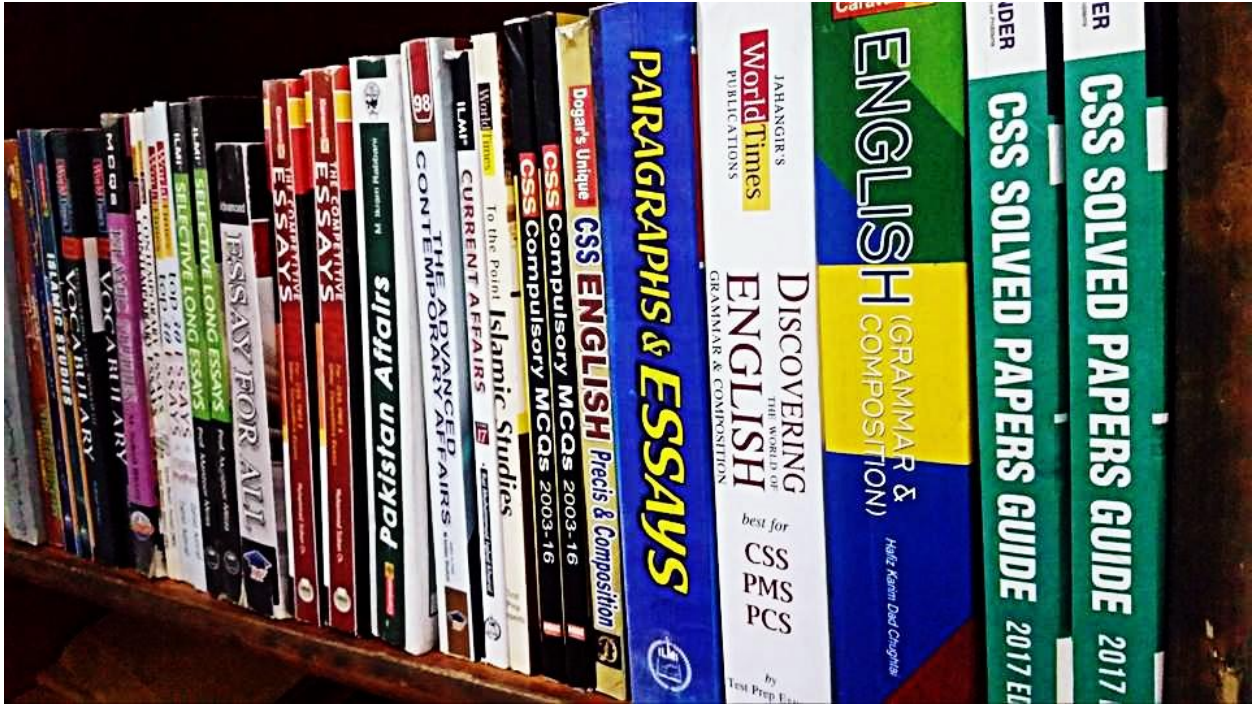
THE CSS POINT
Yes We Can Do It!

WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM

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

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

Email: info@thecsspoint.com



BUY CSS / PMS / NTS & GENERAL KNOWLEDGE BOOKS
ONLINE **CASH ON DELIVERY** ALL OVER PAKISTAN

Visit Now:

WWW.CSSBOOKS.NET

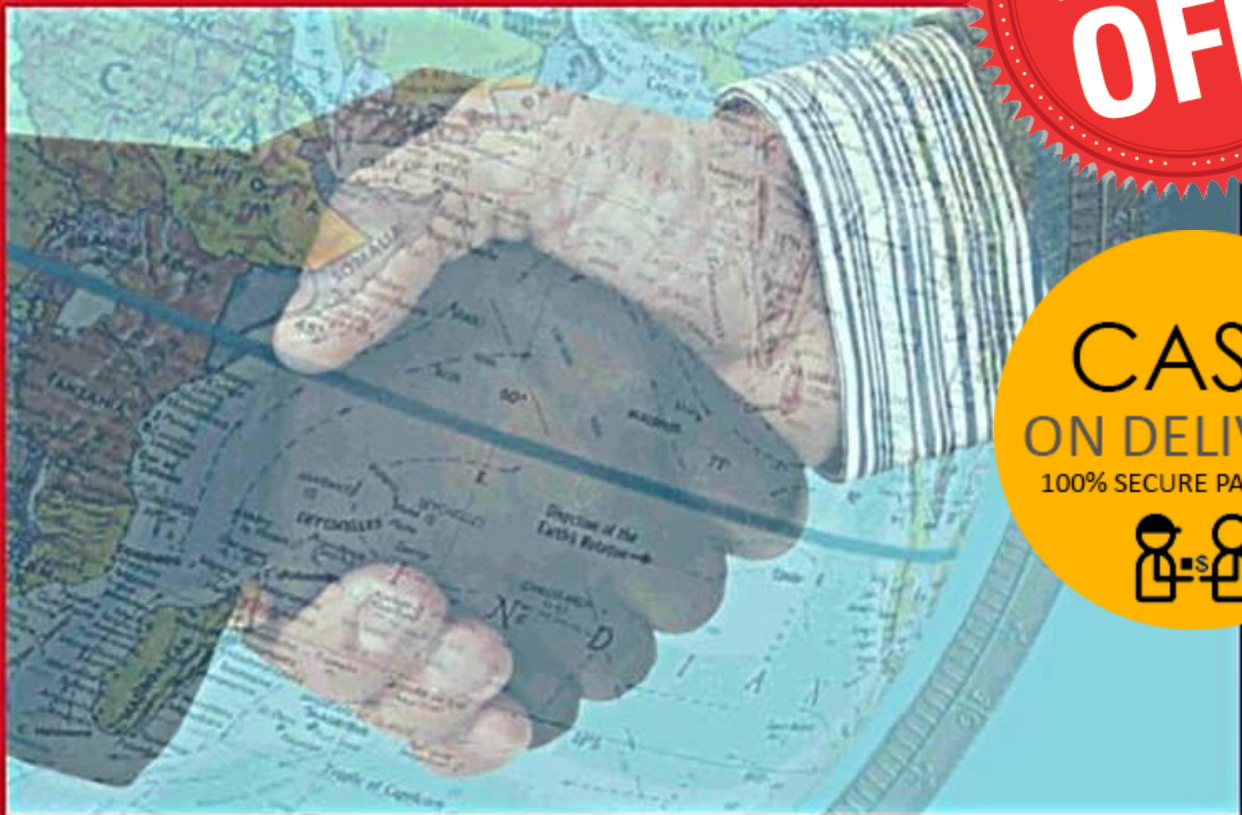
For Oder & Inquiry
Call/SMS/WhatsApp

0333 6042057 – 0726 540316

International Relations By Parkash Chander 31s Edition
For Order: Call/SMS 03336042057

Latest Edition

**20%
OFF**



**CASH
ON DELIVERY**
100% SECURE PAYMENTS



31st Edition

Comparative Politics & International Relations

for Civil Services (Main)

Prakash Chander
Prem Arora

Table of Contents

Tussle within the opposition.....	9
Monetary policy	10
Tourism challenge	11
Goodwill after Pak-Afghan meeting?.....	11
Tracking the SDGs	13
KCR: good news?.....	14
Poll law shenanigans.....	15
Access denied.....	16
Eclipsing the Taj Mahal	17
Growing internet use but slow results.....	19
US gun laws	20
'Disappeared' Turks	21
Who's in charge?.....	23
The HIV crisis.....	25
A deafening silence	26
Attack on shrine	27
Finding taxpayers	28
Giving up jihad	29
Lost opportunity.....	30
Organ traders busted.....	32
Taking sides on CPEC.....	33
Risks to the economy.....	34
Breaking the stigma	35
Trade ties with China	36
Fata's women voters.....	37
Criminal cops.....	38
Democratic destiny	39
Capt Safdar's tirade.....	40
Motorcycle ambulances.....	42
Military's view of the economy	43
Afghan transit trade.....	44
Child marriage bill	45

Sense returns to Pak-US relations.....	46
A house divided.....	48
Unfair taxation in GB.....	49
Hunger that stalks.....	50
Trackers in motorbikes	51
Turkish saga: defying the courts	52
Taxing pensioners	53
Mogadishu bombing	54
Back to the Afghan peace table	55
Dar's challenge.....	56
Journalists freed.....	57
Quetta attack	58
Regulatory duties	59
Hospital's callousness	61
In the interest of justice	62
After Raqqa	64
Medicine sector troubles	65
Nawaz or Shahbaz?	66
Manipulated stocks.....	67
Food fortification	68
Clampdown on free speech	69
Polluting our lives.....	71
Fighting TB	72
Constitutional limits.....	73
New alliance in Sindh.....	74
Disaffection on campus.....	75
A ray of hope for IHK.....	76
Ex-minister's arrest	77
Sri Lanka whitewashed	78
Tillerson's stopover.....	79
Arrest for overbilling.....	81
Sport and harassment.....	82
Pressure on Pakistan.....	83

Threat to journalists..... 84

Stifling social media 86

CPEC long-term plan 87

NA-4 pointers 88

Edhi Foundation’s woes 90

Institutional reforms 91

Excess power supply 92

Inhuman treatment..... 93

Another bailout for PIA 94

Cricket revival..... 95

Sindh literature fest 96

Tussle within the opposition

IS it to the benefit or the detriment of democracy in the country? The manoeuvrings among the opposition in parliament have shone a spotlight on the importance of the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly. It has been an evolution of the parliamentary system to give the leader of the opposition a significant role in the selection of candidates for key constitutional posts and to strengthen the accountability and electoral systems. Unhappily, however, theory has been stronger than practice so far as the past decade of democracy has seen a relatively smooth process between the government and the opposition in reaching necessary decisions on certain appointments, but the results from a perspective of strengthening democracy have been far from satisfactory. Particularly when it comes to the existing accountability regime, the PML-N and PPP have engineered a system that does not produce much by way of actual accountability.

So the PTI's quest to supplant Khursheed Shah as leader of the opposition in the National Assembly with one of its own members could provide a necessary jolt to the system. It is far from clear if the PTI effort will succeed. The party leadership has paid little attention to cultivating ties in the parliamentary opposition, while the PPP team is formidable and savvy. The PPP also has an advantage in its slightly larger parliamentary presence than the PTI and it will be loath to give up one of its most significant parliamentary cards ahead of the next general election. It is not merely prestige that is on the line. In a better world, the individual strengths of the PTI and PPP would combine inside parliament to produce a twin benefit. The PPP's intuitive understanding of the need to strengthen parliament would allow for necessary cooperation on constitutional matters with the PML-N government where necessary, while the PTI's determination to improve the quality of democracy would keep the pressure on the government to have better quality leaders in key constitutional posts.

After all, the whole point of joint government-opposition nomination of the NAB chief, members of the election commission and the caretaker government is to instal leaders who are willing to further the democratic cause rather than follow the wishes of the government or the opposition. Ideally, the PTI would not have wasted the past four years either trying to tear down the current parliament or ignoring its potential to force institutional change. That is what makes the PTI's current push to replace Khursheed Shah appear opportunistic and has created doubt about

whether the PTI's real intention is to simply damage the PML-N politically at a time the government is facing multiple crises or to in fact nominate quality leaders to the upcoming openings. A NAB chief who will investigate all impartially is what is needed, not a figure who will simply focus on one party or individual.

Monetary policy

THE latest monetary policy statement from the State Bank underlines the areas of dynamism in the economy, while simultaneously pointing to the growing weakness on the external sector as a source of concern. It describes the macroeconomic environment as “conducive to growth” and points to favourable estimates of major crops, increasing private sector credit off take and “growing productive imports” as “solid gains for the real sector”. But alongside this expansion in the real sector, the challenges to its sustainability are also rising, the statement adds in the next line. It indicates the high-wire act that the State Bank is now performing to support real sector growth with dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and it is a matter of time before we discover which of these two will define the future trajectory of Pakistan's economy.

History tells us that real sector growth in the context of falling reserves is a little like the music on the Titanic: it played on even as the ship sank. Nobody doubts that real sector growth is evident in the economy, though the composition of the imports can only partially be described as “healthy” or “productive”. The fact of the matter is, the economy is in the midst of a consumptive and construction boom while the two legs upon which it stands — fiscal and forex — are becoming increasingly wobbly. A government caught up in its legal and political entanglements is finding it increasingly hard to focus on the core problem, the current account deficit, and much of its time and energy is consumed ensuring the nascent power projects reach the start of commercial operations without suffering any further delays. The State Bank's words of caution, that “an improvement in the country's external account and its foreign exchange reserve relies upon timely realisation of official financial inflows along with thoughtful adoption of structural reforms to improve trade competitiveness in the medium term”, are probably going to be lost in the wind. Whatever “official financial inflows” are likely to materialise in the ongoing fiscal year will be debt creating, thereby simply putting the problem off by a few months rather than resolving it.

Tourism challenge

THERE was a time when the tourism industry in the northern parts of the country was so voluminous that it was fairly common to find locals speaking languages other than the indigenous ones, including Japanese and German — a measure of the number of international tourists visiting the areas. Over the past couple of decades or so, this thriving industry that attracted international and domestic visitors more or less died, as the scourge of terrorism and militancy hit the country. Thankfully, in recent years the lawlessness has been brought under a fair degree of control and parts of the north are accessible again. An international media organisation recently quoted the Pakistan Tourism Development Authority data as showing that international tourism to the country reached 1.75 million last year, while the number of domestic travellers was around 38.3m in Pakistan as a whole.

While it can be debated as to whether these figures should be taken at face value, it is certainly evident that tourism is picking up; there is need for investment in the infrastructure particularly in the north, badly affected by years of conflict and dereliction. It is therefore welcome news that the International Development Association, a soft loan window of the World Bank, is to give the KP government a \$50 million loan to implement a project aimed at developing tourist sites including Chitral, Naran and the Galliyat. The funds are to go towards strengthening institutional capacities, increasing private-sector participation, and improving destination infrastructure. Helpful though these funds will undoubtedly be, it behoves the KP government — and the tourism-related authorities of all the other provinces, too — to keep in mind that attracting tourists involves more than infrastructure. Also required is a culture of openness, tolerance, and a proclivity to embrace diversity — qualities that Pakistan has steadily been losing. This rigidity in society is perhaps the country's foremost challenge after tackling violence and militancy.

Goodwill after Pak-Afghan meeting?

Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani have held an important and necessary meeting in Kabul to try and put the Pak-Afghan bilateral relationship on a more stable footing.

What is particularly encouraging is that both sides appear to have come away from a series of meetings on Sunday with a relatively positive assessment of what transpired, suggesting that a modicum of much-needed goodwill has been generated.

Given the destabilising approach to the region outlined by US President Donald Trump in his South Asia strategy and the Afghan government suffering from a number of ongoing political and security crises, it was necessary that Pakistan and Afghanistan engage each other directly to prevent a further unravelling of ties.

While a true regional solution to Afghanistan's problems is needed, the fact remains that Pakistan and Afghanistan are the two countries with the most at stake. As previously Afghan and Pakistani leaders have also discovered, the two countries have no option but to engage in meaningful dialogue.

However, the necessity of constructive dialogue has not necessarily caused it to materialise in the past. Part of the problem appears to be that neither the Pakistani nor the Afghan side have approached a potential dialogue in a structured manner. Blame games, allegations and recriminations, and short-term demands at odds with long-term confidence-building measures have been plentiful; missing has been the belief that joint problem-solving is likely or possible.

In recent times, Pakistan has tried to change the ad hoc approach to the bilateral relationship by suggesting a list of priority areas for cooperation that can progressively reduce militant violence on both sides of the border and create the space for an intra-Afghan dialogue that all sides agree is necessary.

Until now, Afghanistan has not been particularly receptive to the newer Pakistani approach, choosing instead to insist that Pakistan is an impediment to peace regionally rather than a genuine partner in dialogue. It is hoped that Gen Bajwa's personal outreach to Afghanistan will help build some much-needed trust on both sides.

While military cooperation along the border and security issues dominate the bilateral relationship, the reference to trade and commerce and people-to-people contact in the ISPR statement was a welcome nod to the sheer range of ties that affect the two countries.

Civil-military cooperation may not be easy to achieve, but it is necessary for the long-term stability of ties with Afghanistan. A partnership inside Pakistan will make it more likely to achieve a partnership with Afghanistan.

Tracking the SDGs

EVEN with the best of intentions, it is unlikely many countries will achieve the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals given the confluence of multiple challenges facing world leaders — more poverty and disease, more inequality and injustice, and the growing impact of climate change. A comprehensive report in Dawn recently tracked the performance of Pakistan's crucial socioeconomic indicators, reminding the government that it has until end 2018 to get its act together before submitting its first progress report to the UN. Admittedly, there is a lot of work to be done to implement even certain critical goals. And because these are ambitious targets, they require mandated institutions and commitment — including national resources — if we are to achieve them by 2030 as stipulated. These are prerequisites for sustainable development that successive governments have not prioritised. National and provincial policies developed in silos do not help, especially when they are not supported by resources, timelines or political will. Consider just these statistics: 44 per cent of children in Pakistan are stunted and 60pc of the country is food insecure. Given this sorry state of affairs, trying to achieve the 169 targets that comprise the SDGs seems a pipe dream when even in the best of times it has been impossible to eliminate extreme poverty and inequality and effectively address climate change.

If the champions of reform who have aligned the SDGs with Pakistan Vision 2025 are seriously committed to people's betterment, they must adopt a realistic approach by selecting certain pressing issues — fighting poverty and improving health and literacy indicators — and deliver on their promises. Effective implementation that translates blueprints into reality is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. It is globally accepted that a locally driven approach is critical

for improving human development indicators. This becomes impossible when politics of greed, the kind witnessed at the provincial government level, cuts out grass-roots leadership as an effective partner. When infant mortality is the bellwether for broader progress on poverty and health initiatives, for example, local government infrastructure can prevent these deaths through poverty alleviation policies and medical care. Even before the promise of the SDGs — and its predecessor, the MDGs — past governments came up with snazzy policies and road maps. Political disinterest led to all of them eventually disappearing into the ether. A renewed chance at working in tandem with a global development agenda should motivate the government into meaningful action.

KCR: good news?

THAT the mere removal of encroachments should be considered a watershed moment in the frustrating journey toward implementing the decades-old Karachi Circular Railway project speaks volumes about governmental apathy on this issue. Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah broke this good news to Chinese Ambassador Sun Weidong last Friday, with the hope that the foundation stone of the project would be laid at Wazir Mansion on Dec 25. Before we thank the heavens for this agreeable bit of news about what the Sindh government would have us believe is its fast-track policy on mass transit, let's note that tenders are still to be awarded. This is to be done in mid-December, and Pakistan Railways has not yet acquired 360 acres of land for the KCR's right of way. This means the foundation stone laying ceremony depends upon the completion of the tender process and the railways' acquisition of the piece of prime land. Any procedural glitch here that could delay matters would hardly be a surprise for the people of Karachi who have been waiting decades for the project to materialise.

China came on board this vital project after the Japan International Cooperation Agency virtually walked out in a huff. It had finalised a comprehensive plan complete with economic and technical assistance, and all it wanted was the demolition of illegal structures built on the KCR land. No Sindh government obliged because of the extent of land theft involved. Now we hope the remaining formalities will be completed within the given timeframe and work on the KCR will begin in earnest. The chief minister did not say when the project will be completed so that the nation's biggest city can have a much-needed mass transit system, of which

the KCR is just one component. Work on two bus rapid transit lines is on. There should be no further delay in providing the citizens of this port city of 20 million a modern and well-integrated transport system that is fast, convenient and cheap.

Poll law shenanigans

A single clause has undermined, perhaps undone, the painstaking work of over four years that went into the consolidation of the country's electoral laws and preparing the ground for free and fair elections in 2018.

The legislative clause is enormously significant in the context of the current political crisis in the country, and may even have deepened the predicament.

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is once again the president of the PML-N, elected unopposed a day after the government ensured passage of the Elections Bill, 2017, in the National Assembly.

The PML-N argues that it has corrected a legal distortion that was introduced by a military dictator to separate legitimate civilian leaders from their parties.

But that argument is vastly undermined by the fact that the PML-N had to change the party constitution as well in order to re-accommodate Mr Sharif and that at no point during the years-long parliamentary debate on electoral reforms was any attention drawn to the need to change that particular rule.

Simply, Mr Sharif has had himself reinstated as the official leader of the PML-N because neither he nor his party is willing to accept his disqualification from public office by the Supreme Court as politically legitimate.

That is deeply worrying.

Controversial as Mr Sharif's ouster from the prime ministership may be, events from the explosive Panama Papers revelations to the final verdict of the Supreme Court raised a number of troubling questions about the Sharif family's wealth and assets.

Even if the disqualification itself was for judicially questionable reasons no independent legal observer would suggest that the case of Mr Sharif and his family did not deserve to be sent to the accountability courts.

So even if an immediate disqualification had not been ordered, the country did not deserve to have a prime minister facing a serious corruption probe.

Extending that argument to the head of a political party would be equally valid.

Shambolic and ill-prepared as the opposition was in the National Assembly, a PML-N majority guaranteed that a vote on a matter of intense personal interest to Mr Sharif would not be lost.

It should not have come to this.

A better path would have been for Mr Sharif to exonerate himself in the accountability courts and then attempt a return to front-line politics.

That he has chosen the more confrontational path suggests that another person-specific change, the next time a constitutional amendment to the disqualification criteria, may also be on the cards following Senate elections in the new year.

That is a distressing possibility, not least because it would deepen political uncertainty ahead of general elections instead of mitigating it.

Wise counsel does not appear to prevail at the moment, but it is hoped that common sense will assert itself sooner rather than later.

Access denied

A THOROUGHLY unnecessary and avoidable incident has raised questions about state institutions across the judicial, civilian executive and security gamut. This much is clear: former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's appearance before an

accountability court judge should have been open to the public, media and PML-N representatives. That access was barred by the Rangers is a matter that must be inquired into and the findings revealed. If the cordoning off of the court premises was merely a result of confusion and imprecise orders, the presiding judge, Islamabad authorities, and relevant security officials should meet urgently to devise a clear, precise plan for future hearings. If the incident was a result of wilful disobedience by security personnel, it should not be difficult to determine why, and hold accountable whoever was responsible for the disorder. It is perplexing that the incident took place at all. The possible indictment of Mr Sharif had guaranteed intense media coverage and political interest. Meanwhile, the Panama Papers hearings in the Supreme Court and the in-camera JIT proceedings have ensured adequate recent administrative experience in handling high-profile cases. If Monday's incident was a deliberate act, there is no discernible or plausible advantage that has been gained by whichever side was responsible for it.

Disappointingly, the PTI and other PML-N opponents have been unable to distinguish between the demands of partisan squabbling and the need for all institutions to respect the rule of law. The PTI may be entitled to gloat that the PML-N leadership was treated in a humiliating manner, but that overlooks a far more important matter: the media and the public were shut out of the proceedings too. As politicians ought to have learned by now, what is done to their civilian opponents today can be done to them at some point in the future. From a straightforward political point of view too, the PTI should have an obvious interest in ensuring that the accountability process against Mr Sharif is perceived as fair and just, given that the PML-N's electoral strategy is likely to emphasise the opposite. Beyond that, the Rangers leadership needs to re-examine its involvement in politically sensitive matters, whether or not of a judicial nature. The controversy created on Monday cannot have served the organisation well and its senior leadership should consider the damage to morale that becoming embroiled in political controversies can cause.

Eclipsing the Taj Mahal

IN today's India, it is sadly perhaps apt that an attempt is under way to relegate to the shadows the ultimate testament of love, the Taj Mahal. It emerged on Monday that the government of Uttar Pradesh, where the celebrated Unesco-designated

World Heritage Site is located, has removed it from the official list of tourist destinations in the state. A booklet released to mark six months of the BJP's coming to power in India's most populous state includes no mention of the Taj Mahal, one of the most iconic monuments in the world, and regarded as the finest example of Mughal architecture. In June, the hard-line UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had said that the white marble mausoleum did not reflect Indian culture. Official foreign visitors to the state are now presented with copies of the Bhagavad Gita and Mahabharata instead of Taj Mahal replicas, as was the custom before.

Only a state blinded by ancient hatreds and seeking to foist its narrow worldview on the people could so contemptuously cast aside what Rabindranath Tagore memorably described as "a teardrop on the cheek of time". The UP government's attempt to rewrite history in saffron colours and unravel India's multi-hued heritage may be a Sisyphean task, but it is one that will fray inter-communal bonds even further as well as exact a heavy toll on the country's international image. For the Taj Mahal belongs not only to India: as Unesco's recognition indicates, it belongs to all of humanity — much as did the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and Palmyra in Syria. The UP government's action is of a piece with the BJP central government's obsession with religious and cultural purity, an exclusionary ideology that underpins the recent lynchings of individuals belonging to minority communities and the Scheduled Castes. However, striking the Taj Mahal off the list of tourist destinations is a self-defeating, if vicious, act. It will not dim the monument's lustre; on the contrary, it will yet again highlight the darkness descending upon India.

Growing internet use but slow results

AN improved infrastructure, lower costs and a vast array of productivity and consumption possibilities have transformed internet usage in the country. In the Information Economy Report 2017, released this week by the UN Conference on Trade and Development, it has been estimated that 16m Pakistanis went online for the first time between 2012 and 2015, nearly 50pc of the internet usage base in the country at the end of that period. That is unsurprising, perhaps even an underestimation: the advent of 3G, 4G and higher-speed internet in the country is attracting millions of new users as smartphones in particular proliferate. Clearly, there is potential for even faster growth. A recent report in this newspaper examined CPEC-related plans for a revamped communications network in Pakistan, fibre optic connectivity with China and a new submarine landing station in Gwadar.

Growing internet usage, however, is not necessarily translating into greater gains for the country in the global digital economy. Part of the problem is a policymaking logjam. The UNCTAD report notes: "In Pakistan, in 2015 the government constituted a high-level working group to develop a Strategic E-Commerce Policy Framework for the country. The group, which has the full support of the prime minister, is led by the commerce ministry, and comprises officials also from the ministries of information technology and finance, the State Bank of Pakistan and the Pakistan Software Export Board." Laudable as that initiative may be, the results have yet to be seen — a bureaucratic morass from which few gains are ever realised. Progress on rationalising costs and tax structures, creating genuine, stable incentives for businesses, and promoting digital financial services is slow. The problem is especially acute in the fast-moving digital economy. The global advent of the 'internet of things', cloud computing, big data and 3D printing, for example, has already occurred while Pakistan is yet to implement global digital payment standards such as PayPal, though there are suggestions that it may finally be implemented.

There are also concerns about the government's ability to treat internet-based companies fairly in a system where arbitrary decisions can be taken. The possibility of banning websites at a moment's notice, without due process or advance notice, undermines the potential of e-commerce and stable rules that allow for the deepening of the digital economy. More generally, the Freedom on

the Net 2016 report by Freedom House highlighted a danger of perpetuating existing socioeconomic imbalances in the country with rural and less-well-off areas left behind the more lucrative urban markets in the race towards digitisation. As ever, the potential for a transformative change in the economy exists, but only if smarter, business- and people-friendly policies are introduced.

US gun laws

IF there is one piece of news that emerges at regular intervals from the US, it is about gun violence.

It is a sobering thought then that the carnage at an outdoor country music festival on Sunday in Las Vegas may not have been so shocking but for the huge number of casualties. Otherwise, it would have been just another one of the six mass shootings — defined as those with at least four casualties — that occurred in the US this past week alone.

But in what turned out to be the deadliest such incident in modern US history, at least 58 people died and over 500 were injured when Stephen Paddock, from his vantage point on the 32nd floor of a nearby hotel, unloaded his weapons into the crowd below. The firing only ended with Paddock's suicide, just as police stormed the hotel suite where he was holed up.

There they discovered an arsenal of 23 assault rifles, of which a dozen were fitted with a device that enables semi-automatics to discharge rapid fire rounds like automatics.

While Paddock's motives may be unclear thus far, the incident has revived the debate in the US about its lax gun laws that allow unstable and violent individuals access to deadly weapons, often with terrible consequences.

Between 2001 and 2010, there were over 400,000 gun deaths in the US, of which more than 153,000 were homicides. The solution, although not black-and-white, points towards strengthening regulations on the purchase of firearms, a position that a majority of Americans support.

However, efforts to bring about even common-sense restrictions fail repeatedly because they come up against one of the most powerful interest groups in the country: the National Rifle Association.

With its enormous resources that it pours into the election campaigns of many politicians, the NRA exerts an outsize influence over Congress. Therefore, when demands are made for gun legislation to be tightened, usually in the aftermath of a mass murder, most lawmakers obfuscate the issue with tropes about the constitutionally protected right to bear arms or the fallacious argument that it is people, not guns, that kill.

Significantly, even when mass murderers are driven by extremist motives, the response centres around the politics of religious extremism and its international dimensions while the clear and present danger is neatly sidestepped. The stonewalling on gun laws is as much, if not more, about politics.

‘Disappeared’ Turks

ALREADY indifferent to the vanishing of its own citizens, the government now appears least concerned as the same ‘magic’ is applied to foreigners residing in this country. Late last month in Lahore, the mysterious disappearance of a Turkish family, whose head had worked for the Pak-Turk schools here, triggered a wave of fear across the country. An element of greater dread was added when sometime later reports came in from Khairpur about an alleged kidnapping attempt of the Turkish family of another man said to be working with the same organisation. The gravity of the situation has to some extent been captured by a petition moved in the Sindh High Court. Acting upon it, the court on Tuesday restrained the government from deporting Turkish teachers working with the schools — a fate many fear could befall them after the Lahore incident in which Mesut Kacmaz, a well-known senior executive working with the Pak-Turk system, went missing along with his wife and their two daughters.

The Kacmaz family had been residing in Pakistan by virtue of having acquired refugee certificates from the UNHCR. Their disappearance is a reminder of how security agencies in the country — and indeed in other parts of the world — often swoop down on suspects and whisk them away. It is difficult not to link their case

to the aborted coup in Turkey last year for which the well-known cleric Fethullah Gulen was held responsible by Ankara. The events in Turkey led to Islamabad asking the staff of the Pak-Turk schools to leave Pakistan, and perhaps to warnings that their participation in political activities could annoy the PML-N government's friends in Turkey. If that was a step which spurred calls for fair treatment and transparency, the latest disappearance of the Turkish family and accounts of the alleged hounding of Pak-Turk schools could result in harsh criticism of the government here — and deservedly so. Transparency is sorely missing. The authorities here must rectify the situation.

While grievances of Iraqi Kurds are genuine, timing of the referendum is questionable

OVER the last century or so, the Middle East has seen its fair share of strife between religions, sects, empires and ethnic groups.

This seemingly eternal 'shatterbelt' appears to lurch from crisis to crisis. The latest confrontation has put the Kurds of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region on a collision course not only with Baghdad but also with its powerful neighbours Turkey and Iran, which have their own significant Kurdish minorities.

What has sparked the stand-off is a referendum held in Iraqi Kurdistan on Sept 25 in which the region's inhabitants voted to break away from Baghdad.

This has expectedly not gone down well with Iraq's leadership, with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi terming the vote "unconstitutional".

In the aftermath of the referendum, Baghdad has halted international flights to and from the region; Tehran and Ankara have also communicated their displeasure with the vote.

On Wednesday, Turkish President Recep Erdogan met his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani in Tehran. The Kurdish question reportedly topped the agenda, with both leaders clearly opposing the break-up of Iraq. The three countries — Iraq, Iran and Turkey — have conducted military manoeuvres to send a strong message to Iraq's Kurds.

Ankara and Tehran want to prevent their own Kurdish populations from taking steps similar to those embarked on by their brethren in northern Iraq.

It is often underscored that the Kurds have historically never had a state of their own in the Middle East; certainly, in the post-colonial make-up of the region, they have been distributed across Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria.

It is also true that they have endured much suffering, especially over the past few decades. Perhaps their darkest hour was under Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein, who was responsible for gassing the town of Halabja in 1988. However, their relations with Turkey and Iran have also been fraught.

The Kurds have fought a nearly four-decade-old separatist struggle against Ankara, while in Iran, the Kurdish population's relations with the government in Tehran have been strained both under the Shah and the Islamic Republic.

In many instances, Kurds have been denied the freedom to use their language and promote their culture.

While their grievances are genuine, the timing of the referendum is questionable. Instead of opening a new front, Iraq's Kurds, as well as their brethren in other states, must work with their governments to secure their rights, while countries with Kurdish populations must recognise these rights instead of indulging in sabre-rattling.

Who's in charge?

A deepening unease in the country needs to be addressed head-on by the civil and military leaderships.

Who is in charge of Pakistan? How much of the governmental paralysis is self-inflicted? Is the military willing to not just accept its constitutional limits but also support the civilian apparatus unconditionally? How will Pakistan respond to increasingly pointed criticism by the US of the military and the ISI's alleged ties to militant groups?

The answers to those and several other questions may well determine if Pakistan stays a democratic course or once again tumbles towards political chaos and military ascendancy. The disqualification of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif from holding public office was an undeniable jolt to the political order, but it did not have to escalate into the systemic crisis that is apparent today. All sides must bear some responsibility for the present impasse.

Certainly, Mr Sharif and his PML-N have committed a number of missteps. From the unsatisfactory responses to legitimate questions by the Supreme Court about the Sharif family's wealth and assets to the unwillingness to accept the binding legality of Mr Sharif's ouster, the PML-N appears to have put the personal interests of the former prime minister ahead of the demands of the democratic order.

Indeed, in the two months since Mr Sharif's exit, the government has effectively stalled, there being no clarity about where the locus of power lies and the prime minister's office reduced to an afterthought. Responsibility for that must primarily lie with the PML-N.

However, other elements have played a role too. It had been hoped that the Supreme Court would hand down a judgement that would not just be definitive, but also well argued and well grounded in the existing law, setting a sound precedent for future accountability cases. But that did not happen; instead, uncertainty has been spawned.

Yet, uncertainty regarding Mr Sharif's fate would perhaps not have morphed into a systemic threat had the military leadership acted decisively to support the civilian order. The recent trip by army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and DG ISI Gen Naveed Mukhtar was a positive and necessary step, but how difficult would it have been to ensure more senior participation by the civilian apparatus than that of the foreign secretary?

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif is touring the US at a time when the Trump administration is increasingly threatening action against the ISI. Would a joint civil-military front in the US have been so difficult to ensure?

Finally, there is the political opposition that is as opportunistic as ever. Unwilling and unable to learn the lessons of history, the opposition, in its keenness to defeat

the PML-N, appears eager to draw the military leadership deeper into the political morass. If democrats do not defend democracy, then for how much longer can a shaky democratic order stumble on?

The HIV crisis

WITH HIV infection rates climbing in Pakistan, a new national survey has found that 133,529 people are believed to have contracted the virus. This \$1m study — funded by the Global Fund and with UNAIDS support — not only warns of a resurging HIV/AIDS epidemic, but identifies new cases among injecting drug users, who comprise 33pc of all HIV cases in Pakistan, and commercial sex workers. Meanwhile, on Thursday this newspaper published a report on the rise in HIV cases and the need to scale up national response programmes before the virus spreads. Concurring with the findings of the national survey, our report investigates instances of institutional inadequacies and inequitable fund distribution in the treatment of HIV. The lack of political will, bureaucratic challenges and the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS not only prevent early diagnosis and treatment but also leave marginalised and poor sufferers — especially drug-users — with fewer healthcare options. Differing levels of treatment offered in the provinces has made it impossible to curb new cases. Halting treatment in KP, for instance, because of the lack of disbursement of funds, justifies the concerns of non-governmental partners working with the national HIV programme. They attribute this failure to poor administration, nonexistent health policies and lapsing funds.

Sexual health campaigns that target high-risk groups such as drug users, transgenders, returning migrant workers and sex workers is one way to address the stigma attached to sufferers of HIV and to mitigate the risk of transmission. Comprehensive control programmes must be integrated with other health strategies so that people have access to testing opportunities in healthcare settings and are provided lifesaving antiretroviral therapy. If accessible, these interventions will improve early diagnosis and fast-track treatment. Preventing further transmission and moving towards eradicating AIDs by 2030, as pledged by Pakistan as part of its SDG commitments, requires political will with a focus on education and treatment for all HIV sufferers.

A deafening silence

It was a political tour de force, a performance worthy of an information minister in a democratic regime.

Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor's news conference at the ISPR headquarters on Thursday was remarkable for the ground that was covered — and, crucially, for what was left unsaid.

This much is obvious: the DG ISPR was not riffing, ad-libbing or speaking off the cuff; his remarks were carefully prepared and his answers hewed to a carefully prepared script. Maj Gen Ghafoor's comments, then, almost certainly reflect the consensus view of the current military leadership on the range of national security, foreign policy, domestic politics and legislative issues that he expounded on. Which in and of itself has raised a profound question: why has the military leadership deemed it necessary to weigh in publicly on such a range of issues at this time?

There may be a temptation to view the intrusion into the civilian domain merely in the context of the current political crisis in the country. But a historical perspective would suggest that the intrusion is nothing new and indeed goes back to the very earliest years of the republic. Rare has been the occasion that the opposite was true.

The resignation of Gen Jahangir Karamat more than two decades ago had suggested that a clearer demarcation of the respective civilian and military domains may be possible, but that incident was soon overtaken by a second-term prime minister Nawaz Sharif's tinkering with the military high command.

There is also the unfortunate reality that the civilians have at times willingly ceded space — willing to trade constitutional prerogatives for a bit of political longevity. Undoubtedly, the pressure at the very top is intense, but a true democratic leadership would fight harder for principle than self-interest.

For all of Maj Gen Ghafoor's extensive comments and emphatic clarity, there was puzzling reticence on one matter. When asked why there had been no press

release after a marathon corps commanders' conference on Tuesday, the DG ISPR only offered that "Silence is also an expression".

Whether by design or inadvertently, the comment set off a storm of political speculation. Is the military leadership suggesting disapproval of the PML-N government and its seeming quest to return Mr Sharif to a front-line role in politics despite judicial misgivings?

Indeed, the perceived significance of the news conference was precisely the intensive military deliberations at a time when Pakistan is facing great uncertainty in its relations with the US and the country has a political government that has effectively stalled.

A deliberate silence should not have been an option. Be that as it may, the PML-N government and the military leadership must independently and jointly recognise that the present level of uncertainty in the country is deeply undesirable and unsustainable. The Constitution is supreme and the Constitution is democratic — and all sides must re-emphasise their loyalty to it.

Attack on shrine

THE illusion of comparative peace, however tenuous, has been shattered. On Thursday evening, at least 20 were killed and over 30 injured when a suicide bomber blew himself up at the entrance to a Sufi saint's shrine in Balochistan's Jhal Magsi district. It being the day of the week considered most spiritually significant, and one on which the shrine was hosting a bimonthly event, the number of devotees present was larger than usual. Had it not been for a vigilant security guard who prevented the attacker from entering the main precinct of the shrine, the number of casualties would have certainly been far higher. This was the first major attack on a shrine after the horrific suicide bombing at Sehwan Sharif in Sindh on Feb 16, 2017, that left 80 dead and injured more than 250.

Whatever the level of violence that prevails in a country, one is never completely inured to mass casualty attacks. And it takes just one major attack to roll back to some extent, at least psychologically, the gains made in counterterrorism until that point. Clearly, despite many intelligence-based operations in the country, there

remain groups of extremists who believe that anyone who does not espouse their austere brand of faith deserves to be annihilated. In fact, the explosion at Jhal Magsi was the third major attack on a shrine within the space of a year. A suicide bombing at the Shah Noorani shrine in a remote part of Khuzdar last November left over 50 dead and around 100 injured. After every such attack, the authorities vow that security will be enhanced at sensitive places, but complacency soon sets in. A couple more aspects are relevant here. Firstly, three out of four major terrorist incidents since the Quetta Civil Hospital bombing last year have been in Balochistan. It is well known that terrorist organisations — including elements from the militant Islamic State group — have found a foothold in the province, despite several operations against them. Several religiously motivated attacks in Sindh have also been traced to them. Secondly, Baloch-majority areas in the province — even where feudalism holds sway, such as in Jhal Magsi — have traditionally had a secular ethos. That is being corrupted slowly but surely by hard-line, radical elements that have insinuated themselves into Baloch society. The only route to a sustained solution is to reverse this trend and indiscriminately eradicate extremism in the province.

Finding taxpayers

THE finance minister has asked his tax authorities to find more tax filers this year, but it might surprise him to know that many of them are hiding in plain sight. For many years now, a misleading number has been doing the rounds, bringing a bad name to Pakistan globally. According to this figure, Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio, at 12.6pc, is amongst the lowest in the world. This has allowed many donor countries to complain that they are funding Pakistan's fiscal deficit, indirectly at least, at the expense of their own taxpayers while the government here gives a free ride to its own citizens. In addition, the fact is often rolled out that the total number of people on the country's list of active taxpayers — those who file tax returns — hovers just over one million, whereas it should be orders of magnitude above this.

This story is largely true, of course, but there is a distinction worth drawing here. The number of people who file their returns is far smaller than the number that actually pays income tax. Many citizens get their tax deducted at source, including government employees and armed forces personnel. After this, many of them feel that since they have already paid, filing returns is a mere formality that need not

concern them too much. If the Federal Board of Revenue can find a way to compile a list of all the individuals on whose behalf tax has been deposited by their employer, and release a new figure for the real taxpayers in the country, it would help illuminate an important gap that is warping our view of the revenue system. Since it is tax season, perhaps the FBR should be asked to come up with such a list, and follow up the exercise with an outreach effort to urge these individuals to also file their returns, thus giving their active taxpayer list a bit of a boost.

Giving up jihad

In the context of the current, arguably cynical and calculated backlash, the comments are perhaps appropriate. In the context of long-term challenges that state and society will inevitably have to confront, they are inadequate. Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal has rightly denounced elements that have threatened to declare jihad inside the country in recent days and emphatically asserted that only the state has the right to issue a call to arms.

The interior minister's comments echoed what has been asserted by Gen Qamar Bajwa recently, the army chief having publicly stated that the state must have a monopoly over violence and is the sole authority to declare jihad.

That the state is finally willing to push back publicly and firmly against extremist elements that not only reject the Constitution but also want to unleash violence inside Pakistan is a welcome change. A better future for all Pakistanis will not be won without confronting regressive groups operating inside the country.

Yet, there are two problems with the formulation that the interior minister has chosen. First, it does not acknowledge the role that the state itself has played in encouraging jihad among sections of the population and in regional conflicts. If there are groups and societal elements inside Pakistan willing to threaten jihad over all manner of perceived offences, virtually all of them have found encouragement at one point or another from the state itself to do so. The state has only gone so far as to recognise that sustained and sweeping counter-extremism efforts are needed across the country; little has been achieved or even attempted in practice.

The controversy that parliament has found itself mired in is an unfortunate illustration of the utter failure of the state to cleanse the public discourse of hateful rhetoric and its total failure to develop a national dialogue that is inclusive, rational and democratic. Are the elements urging violence today not a reflection of a state that unthinkingly and for long embraced ideas that are inimical to a modern, constitutional, democratic state?

Second, there is a fresh danger in the very idea that only the state can declare a certain kind of religiously mandated violence. For the state to protect itself and its people against external enemies, or to defend itself in the case of a declaration of war against Pakistan, there are thoroughly legitimate, legal and internationally accepted reasons for doing so that do not appeal solely to religious sentiment.

Where are these notions of a certain kind of religious edict being the exclusive domain of the state or necessary in any circumstances at all coming from? Instead of debating who has the authority to declare and wage jihad, the state ought to be working to ensure the total elimination of all non-state actors and militias. Pakistan must demonstrate that it is fundamentally committed to being a responsible member of a modern world order.

Lost opportunity

WITH an institutional and democratic crisis grinding on, parliament ought to have been at the centre of the national discourse. Unhappily, despite parliament-related news dominating the headlines in recent days, the institution itself may have been further diminished. The intense focus on parliament because of the Election Act, 2017, and a deadline to appoint a new NAB chief were an opportunity for the PML-N to boost the democratic process. An inclusive approach rather than a single-minded focus on rescuing PML-N boss Nawaz Sharif in some way from his political and legal troubles could have helped stabilise the democratic order. Instead, a controversial, Sharif-specific clause inserted into the Election Act, 2017, has scuttled all the democratic goodwill that the much-anticipated consolidation and strengthening of electoral laws could have created. Days later, with another Election Act-related controversy overtaking the furore over Mr Sharif's clumsy return as official PML-N leader, it is not clear what benefit has accrued to either the PML-N or Mr Sharif by allowing a disqualified candidate to head a political

party. But the damage done to parliament's reputation is quite clear. Once again, the PML-N has demonstrated its willingness to use its majority in parliament as a rubber stamp for its leader's wishes.

Similarly, with the accountability trials of the Sharif family casting a dark shadow over the selection of the next NAB chief, there was a possibility for a parliamentary debate and resolution on how to further the accountability process and overhaul the existing accountability mechanism, something all political parties have pledged to do for many years now. Perhaps predictably that has not happened, but an undeniable opportunity has been lost to demonstrate to the country that parliament takes true accountability seriously. Finally, infusing seriousness into regular parliamentary proceedings at a time of political crisis could have sent an important signal. Had Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and his cabinet made it a point to not just regularly attend parliament but to take committee proceedings and parliamentary questions seriously, it would have established that democratic continuity is not only possible but being practised too. Instead, there are valid questions about whether the country has a government only on paper. Surely, the people of Pakistan deserve better than elected representatives who appear to have forgotten their core democratic responsibilities.

Organ traders busted

AFTER years of inactivity, during which organ trafficking flourished in Pakistan, authorities appear to be cracking down on the unethical and illegal practice. Recently, the Federal Investigation Agency carried out a raid on a private hospital in Nowshera and busted a gang involved in the racket. Around 10 suspects have been arrested, including the doctor carrying out the kidney transplant, as well as the patient — an Afghan national — some medical technicians, and lower staff. The FIA has alleged that the raided hospital is owned by a drug inspector, and that further investigations should uncover other members of the gang. Earlier, an FIA raid in April on a private villa in Lahore, even as a transplant was under way, unearthed a large gang engaged in procuring organ ‘donors’, matching them with kidney patients, running the infrastructure and carrying out the procedure. The patients in that instance were Omani nationals.

Before 2007, when organ trafficking was criminalised in Pakistan through an ordinance, an estimated 2,000 transplants using vended kidneys were being carried out in the country every year. In 2010, parliament passed the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act, further cementing the state’s position on the issue. However, corrupt local police forces and oversight authorities hand in glove with unscrupulous individuals — including ‘middle men’ and medical professionals — revived the racket once again, centred mainly in Punjab. The impoverished populace in the countryside provided a steady stream of ‘donors’ selling their kidneys in return for some relief — which almost always turned out to be transient — from crushing debt. Feeding off their desperation were members of organ trafficking rings, especially the doctors, who minted fortunes in the process. After the FIA was given the mandate earlier this year to act against organ trade, there is a discernible change in the situation. At the same time, there is no room for complacency, or things will be back to square one in no time. Those involved in the organ trade have already proven that their avarice knows no bounds.

Taking sides on CPEC

The comments were incendiary and call into question whether even the so-called adults in the administration of US President Donald Trump understand the extent to which their words can cause damage.

The strategic rivalry between the US and China means the latter's Belt and Road initiative is unlikely to be looked on with great approval by any US administration. But US Secretary of Defence James Mattis has controversially waded into the CPEC debate by claiming that the "One Belt, One Road also goes through disputed territory", an obvious reference to CPEC's route through Gilgit-Baltistan.

The astonishing comment has seemingly aligned the US with India on CPEC and possibly even the Kashmir dispute — a potentially shocking development with far-reaching consequences that the Trump administration appears oblivious to.

Indeed, for a US administration that has remained studiously silent about the atrocities by Indian forces in IJK, it is remarkable that a senior official has decided to weigh in on the Kashmir dispute in a manner that blindly supports the Indian position.

When President Trump signalled a South Asia strategy in outlining his Afghan policy earlier in the year, was he really suggesting a plan of pitting India against Pakistan to further US strategic goals in the region? The mere possibility would have disastrous consequences for the region and beyond.

Even from a narrower perspective, Mr Mattis's attack on CPEC is deeply troubling. The corridor's vast potential of helping Pakistan become a trading hub and grow and diversify its economy is universally recognised. For Pakistan, there is an inherent challenge to ensure that CPEC's maximum gains accrue to this country and not to outside investors, workers and communities. But CPEC is an undeniably historic opportunity and represents a commitment to Pakistan that is unrivalled.

So why is Mr Mattis coming down on the wrong side of history and the wrong side of the true interests of the people of Pakistan in trying to tarnish the initiative?

The US has hardly been rushing to Pakistan's economic assistance in recent times. In fact, its officials have routinely threatened to withhold legitimate economic assistance for all manner of perceived offences. Unhappily, there is a history of the US trying to bully Pakistan into staying strictly inside the US orbit of influence.

The Iran-Pakistan pipeline, for example, was opposed by the US at a time of acute gas shortages here simply because the US was then pursuing the economic isolation of Iran. The pipeline ought to have been Pakistan's right to pursue and was in this country's clear strategic interest — but the US effectively vetoed it even though it was not apparent that American sanctions at the time necessarily applied to the pipeline.

Now it is CPEC that appears to be in America's cross hairs.

Risks to the economy

ONE by one, all the major institutional voices that speak on Pakistan's economy are lining up to point out that the problems on the external sector are growing, and that remedial action is becoming more urgent. Latest to join the chorus is the World Bank in its South Asia Economic Focus 2017 report. Such a report is usually issued in the run-up to the fall meetings of the IMF and World Bank in Washington D.C. It describes the external sector situation as “particularly vulnerable” and says immediate action is needed to rectify it through revival of exports, slowing down of imports and stabilising remittances. It also points to the political risks facing the economy. “The quitting of ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has enhanced political risks and created some policy uncertainty.” Ironically enough, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar will not be attending the meetings this year due to his own legal entanglements at home, which are part of the political uncertainty the bank is talking about.

More worryingly, the report forecasts that “capital and financial flows during FY2018 and FY2019 will only partly finance the current account deficit, which will result in a drawdown of reserves during these two years”. So the situation is expected to continue, and contrary to the State Bank's call for a “timely realisation of official inflows” to keep the current account stable in the ongoing fiscal year, the World Bank sees no real inflows capable of bridging the current account deficit in

the foreseeable future. The fact that real sector growth continues unabated is largely irrelevant now. The growing fiscal and current account deficits are the key risks facing the economy, and it is irrational to argue that the real sector growth will somehow help to stem or reverse this trend. The prime minister is clearly aware of this reality, and his cabinet has taken a few steps to try and encourage exports while raising regulatory duties on unessential imports. But given where things stand (the IMF had declared Pakistan's reserves to be "below comfortable levels" in July), far more vigorous action is required if the government wants to credibly avert serious pressures on the exchange rate this fiscal year. The World Bank's note is meant only to shape its Pakistan conversation at the fall meetings, but without a finance minister present, there will not be much of a conversation to be had this year.

Breaking the stigma

IT is important to take stock today — World Mental Health Day — of the extent to which we have been able to address mental illness as a public health concern. Over 16 years since the colonial Lunacy Act, 1912 — which quasi-criminalised being mentally ill — was replaced with the Pakistan Mental Health Ordinance, 2001, KP joined Sindh and Punjab this year in enacting its own mental health act. But these legislative changes have yet to provide even marginal relief to the estimated 20pc to 34pc of Pakistanis living with some form of mental disorder, exacerbated by the high prevalence of stressors such as poverty and violence. The most at-risk are inmates with serious psychiatric diseases, to whom the state still routinely awards death sentences, even though the diagnoses call into question the convictions. Then there are those who attempt suicide, which is still a criminal offence under the Pakistan Penal Code, and only inhibits the ability of families and healthcare professionals to provide necessary treatment.

Even when mental illness is not treated as a crime, cultural stigma is enough to leave many suffering alone and in silence; even if this is overcome, Pakistan has less than 400 practising psychiatrists. It will take a lot of time and effort to build our national healthcare capacity to fulfil our mental health needs, but treatment is just one aspect. Promoting mental well-being is as essential, and ought to be embedded as a key target in every sector of national development, including education and employment. Implementing policies that create supportive

environments in schools and workplaces can help normalise mental illness in public discourse and, more importantly, serve as a primary point of intervention for many who might otherwise fall through the cracks. Research conducted by Aga Khan University conservatively estimated the cost of Pakistan's mental health burden at Rs250m per annum. If the government lacks the resolve to tackle this perceived 'soft' issue, perhaps its economic price might awaken it to the larger social cost.

Trade ties with China

A NEW paper from the State Bank of Pakistan draws attention to the implications that our growing trade ties with China have for Pakistan's economy. Although CPEC commands all attention these days, the trade relationship between the two countries has largely receded into the background in the economic conversation. Yet it is here that both countries have taken the largest strides over the last decade, with Pakistan's share of bilateral trade reaching \$13.8bn in 2016, up from \$2.2bn in 2005, a near six-fold increase and possibly the fastest-growing trade relationship that we have with any other country. At the heart of this is the free trade agreement that both countries signed in 2006, and which has been stuck in negotiations for expansion since 2012 with the talks continuing to the present day.

The document, which does not represent the official view of the State Bank but is part of its Working Paper series, notes the rapid increase in bilateral trade. However, it argues that the trade relationship "remained tilted in China's favour" because the growth rate of Pakistan's imports from the former country was more than double that of exports since the agreement went into force. Today, China is the single largest source of Pakistan's non-oil imports, according to the paper. It is important to bear in mind that this is not uniformly a bad situation. It would be simplistic to measure the success of a trade relationship on the basis of the quantum of trade balance alone. As the authors of the report note, many of the imports coming from China consist of growth supporting capital goods, as well as 'import substitution' of those goods that were previously imported at higher prices from other countries but that now come from China. These are positive developments, and show that trade ties need not necessarily be in balance or surplus to be called healthy.

However, what matters is the future trajectory of this relationship, more than its past evolution. For example, at some point imports should either hit a plateau or enter into a decline as capital goods imported into Pakistan lift productivity and their output finds its way back into the Chinese market. Likewise, the substitution effect should not be expected to continue indefinitely. At the moment, 75pc of Pakistan's exports to China consist of raw materials — cotton and rice — while the majority of imports consist of finished goods and machinery. This relationship can be healthy only for a period of time; if it becomes a permanent state of affairs, its effects on the domestic economy can be harmful. It is imperative, therefore, that the government remain alert and vigorous when formulating its own economic interests as it negotiates the future of Pakistan's growing engagement with China.

Fata's women voters

THE most striking aspect of the figures recently released by the ECP is the 36pc increase in the number of women voters in the tribal areas — the highest in any demographic across Pakistan. In fact, Fata as a whole has registered the highest increase in the number of people eligible to vote. Of the 97m now registered as voters — up from 86.1m four years ago — 23pc are from the tribal areas. The numbers that comprise the electorate are calculated by Nadra on the basis of CNIC details on its database and the names verified by the ECP before it finalises the electoral rolls. The increase in voters from Fata, including women, can be explained by the travails of the tribal population due to internal displacement induced by military operations in their native areas. Firstly, registration in the relief camps in KP was contingent upon the possession of CNICs, a technicality that caused many women-headed households considerable difficulty in accessing services, including cash grants. Secondly, with the cessation in kinetic operations up north, many Fata residents are making their way back home and CNICs are mandatory for receiving the compensation packages — sometimes targeted at the women — announced by the government.

However, the inclusion of so many more Fata women in the national database will not necessarily translate into a presence at the hustings, for they procured CNICs as a matter of economic necessity, that too in a context which was a departure from the norm. Such an 'aberration' in the eyes of many among their male compatriots may have been 'tolerated' under those circumstances, but the full

weight of tradition is likely to assert itself when it comes to women exercising their right to vote. There are many instances of female disenfranchisement as a result of collusion, more tacit of late, between local chapters of various political parties. The huge spike in the numbers of women from Fata who are now in possession of CNICs also indicates how many of them have thus far remained excluded from the decision-making process of selecting their representatives. The ECP should push leaders of political parties to direct their local chapters to motivate these women to vote, and persuade men of the importance of their doing so. Moreover, if women's votes comprise less than 10pc of the total cast in a constituency, the electoral watchdog should exercise its discretion and declare the polling void.

Criminal cops

CRIMINALITY within the ranks of law-enforcement bodies is a global problem. However, it would not be wrong to say that in Pakistan, the issue has attained chronic proportions, with the common citizen fearing the police force rather than reposing his or her trust in it. From demands of 'chai paani' to much worse, people are often shaken down by men in police uniforms. These black sheep eclipse the good work dedicated police personnel have done, often laying down their lives to protect others. One particularly galling example of police criminality came to the fore when it was reported on Monday that policemen had been booked for kidnapping a citizen for ransom in Karachi. A magistrate informed a court that he had raided the Ferozabad police station and got released a man who had been reportedly kidnapped from his house by two policemen and their accomplices in civvies. The culprits had demanded Rs2m as ransom, after which the victim's family approached the court to ensure his release.

It is acts like these that help fuel the common citizen's disillusionment with the police, and by extension the state. When those who are supposed to serve and protect indulge in such brazenly criminal behaviour, how can people be expected to trust the police force? Such activities reinforce the narrative that the state exists to exploit the citizen, not to serve him. The Sindh IGP has taken some positive steps in this regard, primarily by introducing the '9110' helpline for citizens to register their complaints against police high-handedness. At the helpline's launch in August, the Sindh police chief said complaints could be registered against officers who refuse to register FIRs, keep citizens in illegal confinement, etc. Along

with such steps, there is a vital need to monitor the police internally and weed out elements that indulge in criminality. The police hierarchy must make it clear that there is zero tolerance for law enforcers who break the law.

Democratic destiny

EIGHTEEN years ago today, the country was plunged into yet another disastrous experiment against the constitutional, democratic order. Pervez Musharraf became the second army chief to violate his oath to the 1973 Constitution and the fourth overall to illegally rule this country. Like the first three spells of military dictatorship, the fourth also proved disastrous — harming the country and institutions alike. The dark final days of Gen Musharraf's rule some 10 years ago underlined the abiding problem of military rule; built on a negation of the people's right to choose their own leaders, it will inevitably be rejected by the public itself. No amount of window dressing or self-serving arguments will change the basic reality that military rule is incompatible with the democratic principles on which this country was founded, the Constitution and the political ethos of the Pakistani people. This country's destiny was and will remain democratic.

Undeniably, however, the democratic order stands significantly weakened today. A historic milestone, a third consecutive on-schedule election is within touching distance, but a slow-burning political crisis over the past 18 months has plunged the entire system into a state of uncertainty. At the outset of the country's latest transition to democracy, it had been apparent that while democratic continuity is essential, the democratic project needed meaningful, sustained institutional strengthening. Amending the Constitution to remove dictatorial insertions against the spirit of democracy was a key step, but democratic institutions have been allowed to atrophy. The national clamour for accountability, for example, represents a real and just demand, and there is no legitimate reason why the country does not have stronger accountability in all institutions. Had the issue been addressed in a meaningful manner by the country's elected representatives, the current political crisis would arguably have not been as severe. Trust in democratic institutions weakens when democrats are seen as trying to manipulate the rule of law to their advantage.

Of course, there is another side to the reality of weak democratic institutions. The democratic order in the country is only perceived as vulnerable to being overthrown because there are institutions that appear to follow their own rules and interests. Ultimately, Gen Musharraf was able to take over because a decision was made that the Constitution is, in fact, not supreme and that the intervention of certain institutions was needed to allegedly save the country from disaster. As long as that mindset exists, there will always be a threat to the democratic order in the country. In his memoir, *In the Line of Fire*, Gen Musharraf candidly admits that on the day after the coup, he had no idea about how to proceed or even what needed to be done. Therein lies a vital lesson: think about tomorrow before acting today; it will always be clear that democracy is the only path ahead.

Capt Safdar's tirade

It was a diatribe both repugnant and dangerous, not only in what was said but also in terms of its wider ramifications.

On Tuesday in the National Assembly, retired Capt Mohammed Safdar, having just secured bail from an accountability court, launched a vociferous attack against the Ahmadi community, describing them as a “threat to this country” and demanding that its members be banned from induction into the government and military service.

He also called for Nobel Laureate Dr Abdus Salam's name to be delinked from Quaid-i-Azam University's physics department, which has recently been renamed — by his own father-in-law, the former prime minister Nawaz Sharif — in honour of the celebrated Pakistani scientist.

The MNA's words are a repudiation of history, and if his prescription — that of faith as a condition of military recruitment — were to be put into practice, it would imperil our future as a nation. Many officers belonging to minority faiths have served this country with distinction; to name but a few, Group Captain Cecil Chaudhry, retired Major Gen Maneck Sopariwala and Wing Commander Mervyn Leslie Middlecoat. Some, such as the latter, and more recently army sepoy Lal Chand Rebari, have laid down their lives in the line of duty.

Merit alone must determine the composition of the armed forces; any other consideration would fatally compromise its professionalism and its capacity to defend the country's borders. To its credit, Pakistan's military leadership has consistently resisted any attempt to create communal or sectarian divisions within its ranks. To demand otherwise is to run counter to that pragmatic approach.

Not only that, Capt Safdar's tirade — one that any violent extremist would be proud of — clearly violates the country's hate speech laws as well as the objectives of the National Action Plan. The concept of inclusivity that our leadership is supposedly promoting as an antidote to intolerance in society brooks no exceptions.

However, when the floor of the assembly was being used to spew invective against a minority community, the people's representatives could only watch in craven silence, sometimes even thumping their desks in approval. Despite their lofty claims of countering religious extremism in all its forms, not one legislator had the spine or decency to object.

Until all Pakistani citizens are deemed equal before the law, until patriotism or the right to security of life and property is not contingent upon faith, aspirations for a more peaceful polity will remain a pipe dream.

Motorcycle ambulances

THE circumstances of the death of a woman from Kasur in Lahore's Jinnah Hospital have resulted in efforts by the Punjab chief minister to improve ambulance response times. Narrow streets and traffic had made it difficult for regular ambulances to reach the patients quickly. Hence the provincial government came up with an innovative idea: motorcycle ambulances to be operated by the Punjab Emergency Service (Rescue 1122). Comprising a fleet of 900 motorbikes and trained paramedics, these two-wheeler ambulances are equipped with first-aid kits, burn kits, automated external defibrillators and other vital life-saving equipment to deal with emergencies. This project will start off with 200 motorcycles operating in Lahore; then, gradually expand to nine divisional headquarters and later 36 districts. While this project has the potential to save lives in a congested city of dense alleyways and choked traffic lanes, it must work in conjunction with hospital ambulance services. First responders trained as paramedics must know when to call for ambulances when the emergency warrants hospital care. Given the Punjab chief minister's penchant for innovation, his project would work successfully if female paramedics are also inducted. The move will prove useful in Punjab's rural backwaters where tradition rules especially when it comes to pregnancy-related emergencies.

Meanwhile, inadequate public ambulance services have led to increasing mortality rates across the country. In the case of Sindh, the government has long relinquished its responsibilities. Without the dedication of Karachi's NGOs (the Edhi Foundation, Chipka and the Aman Foundation), many more lives would have been lost. Given this kind of shameful neglect of healthcare, it's time the Sindh government took a leaf out of Punjab's book. It must establish a well-equipped ambulance service within its rescue operations — the latter was launched last month with 24 ambulances for 13 public hospitals. Replicating Punjab's motorcycle project can work in Karachi but only once its ambulances operate efficiently.

Military's view of the economy

The big picture analysis that was presented is shared by most independent analysts and economists.

Macroeconomic stabilisation has given way to serious macro concerns about the health of the economy — what army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa is reported to have said in Karachi on Wednesday is not in much dispute.

Indeed, Gen Bajwa attempted an even-handed assessment by appreciating the strides the PML-N government has taken towards improving the country's infrastructure and electricity problems. And while the comment regarding sky-high debts may be simplistic, the government is struggling to explain the sustainability of the debt burden it has accumulated.

The state of the economy is very much a case of mixed signals with a triple threat — circular debt, the external position and the fiscal deficit — potentially reversing all the gains of the stabilisation achieved in the early years of this government. Indeed, rational analysts would suggest that unless urgent remedial steps are taken, the familiar embrace of the IMF may become inevitable.

To a general analysis of the state of the economy can be added a very specific problem: Finance Minister Ishaq Dar. The minister's accountability problems are an undeniable distraction compounded by the fact that they are tied to the political and legal fate of the Sharif family.

Considering Mr Dar's closeness to Nawaz Sharif and his role as political fire-fighter for the party boss, there is simply no way that he can be giving the affairs of the finance ministry anything more than a fraction of the attention they deserve. There is also a problem of Mr Dar being unable or unwilling to recognise that his prescription for economic growth and stability is no longer working.

There is near-universal agreement that the exchange rate must be allowed to adjust downwards, circular debt addressed, the fiscal deficit reined in and a realistic plan for shoring up reserves drawn up. But Mr Dar appears unable to see beyond matters of personal prestige.

For all the challenges presented by the management of the economy, however, there is a problem with the forum in which the military leadership has chosen to take up the matter. Such concerns are best communicated directly to the government, and under Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi there have been regular meetings of the civil-military leadership to raise such matters. Indeed, given Mr Abbasi's expertise, the economy can be discussed in more detail if necessary than under his predecessor. Were any such attempts made?

The problem with public comments is that they have the potential to be misinterpreted, raising questions about whether institutions are willing to work within their own domains. As Gen Bajwa rightly noted, true national security must be understood in an economic context too. But heed must also be paid to democratic stability.

Afghan transit trade

KABUL has once more relayed its intentions to postpone a review meeting of the Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Coordination body, through a message saying it wants India to have a place at the table before proceeding. These postponements are routine, and have been going on for some years. Since last year, even the preliminary meetings have been halted for the same reason. What is of note this time round is that the postponement comes after a meeting between army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and President Ashraf Ghani that had raised hopes of an improvement in Pak-Afghan ties. If there is a thaw under way, it is moving at a glacial pace. Given the positive chemistry on display during the meeting, it can be surmised that both countries are interested in moving forward, but that intention must quickly be backed up with actions on the ground. Talks on the Afghan transit trade provide the perfect opportunity for this, since they involve an enterprise that is good for both countries, although more beneficial for Afghanistan, and there is no baggage from the conflict that divides the two states.

The view from here is that Kabul's repeated postponement of the talks is being done at the behest of India. The question of overland trade between India and Afghanistan is an important one, and Pakistan ought to do more to find ways to advance the proposal, but it is debatable whether this means that India ought to have a place at the table when transit trade is discussed. Such talks are bilateral

in nature, and even though Pakistan has an interest in transiting its trade through Afghanistan to reach Tajikistan, it has never demanded that the latter have a place at the table during the talks. There may be some cheer in Kabul at the emergence of Chabahar as an alternative to Karachi, but freezing further talks with Pakistan because of this is a folly to be avoided. Not only are two ports better than one, but with the progress of CPEC, and the emergence of Gwadar, further opportunities are going to open to the east for Afghanistan. The government in Kabul should take a longer view of where it wants its external economic relations to be in the years to come.

Child marriage bill

IT is unfortunate when a country's democratic wardens use the smokescreen of faith to rebuff legislation aimed at protecting women and children.

On Wednesday, this disregard for women and child rights was witnessed in the corridors of power as a Senate standing committee rejected the federal Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Bill, 2017, terming it 'unIslamic' — a bill that proposes to increase the minimum marriageable age for girls from 16 to 18 years.

Citing 'scholarly' advice, the committee chairman, Senator Rehman Malik, claimed that underage marriage was acceptable according to religious edicts. As a long-time PPP stalwart, he should be more cognisant of women's rights. When traditions embedded in misogynistic attitudes lead to violence against women and children — 'honour' killing, rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence — they should be disregarded.

It is inexplicable why his committee should acquiesce in the interpretation of conservative lobbies at the cost of young girls' lives. Mr Rehman should recall that his own party has not only espoused the rights of women and minorities but has done battle with the right wing to push through landmark pro-women legislation — even while in opposition.

With 21pc of girls wedded by 18 in Pakistan, underage marriage is a form of violence that robs them of a childhood and education. The legal age for adulthood

is set at 18 — the age to vote and drive; the minimum marriageable age for girls must be the same.

Taking Sindh's progressive child marriage legislation (the brainchild of Mr Rehman's own party), 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.

Lawmakers must recognise that when girls as young as 10 are married off, they will drop out of school, suffer domestic violence, have complicated, sometimes fatal, pregnancies and never find a way out of the cycle of poverty and inequality.

Sense returns to Pak-US relations

After unnecessary tensions and squabbling, Pakistan and the US are once again demonstrating that cooperation between them is possible and realistic.

A series of high-level meetings in the US and Pakistan between officials of the two countries and the upcoming visits of the US secretaries of state and defence to Pakistan appear to have opened the door to a serious and frank dialogue.

Underscoring the potential for cooperation across a range of issues, intelligence sharing between the US and Pakistan appears to have rescued a young Canadian-American family of five from the captivity of the Haqqani network. It is surely too early to suggest that a new equilibrium in the bilateral relationship between the two countries will be found, but a quiet determination on both sides to focus on resolving issues rather than creating new problems could bring about some much-needed stability.

For the administration of US President Donald Trump, the lesson ought to be that hectoring and threatening Pakistan will not work. Indeed, Mr Trump's policy speech on Afghanistan was such a poorly thought-out affair that it threatened to derail the entire relationship.

Pakistan may not be cooperating with the US to the extent that the latter expects or demands. But, leaving aside the question of whether or not some of these demands are legitimate or in Pakistan's interest, Pakistan has consistently demonstrated that it does want stable ties with the US. To mindlessly jeopardise bilateral cooperation by arm-twisting Pakistan or threatening to give India a larger role in Afghanistan is to ignore that the US needs Pakistan to help establish peace in the region in the long term.

Now that the doors to engagement without humiliation have been reopened by the Trump administration, Pakistan has demonstrated that it remains a rational actor willing to adjust to new realities where possible and in this country's interests.

For Pakistan, the lessons are many. In dealing with an uncertain US administration headed by a mercurial president, there may have been a temptation to respond emotionally to unsavoury US rhetoric and demands.

Fortunately, it appears that knee-jerk reactions have been avoided for now and a more pragmatic approach has been adopted. That approach should focus on areas where Pakistan can cooperate immediately — cross-border militancy and the regional fight against the militant Islamic State group, for example — while patiently building support elsewhere for initiatives the US is not willing to embrace, such as dialogue with the Afghan Taliban.

Where the US is wilfully in the wrong, the recent aspersions cast on CPEC being an example, Pakistani officials should convey their firm objections and this country's determination to pursue its legitimate interests and relations with other countries.

If a reset in ties is not possible, a modicum of stability can surely be achieved.

A house divided

CHAUDHRY Nisar Ali Khan's declaration that there's going to be no forward bloc in the PML-N has come a little late in the day. The reassurance would have made more sense previously when the former interior minister appeared to be the solitary unhappy soul in the party. That was a far more peaceful situation for the PML-N than its conflict-ridden state today. The circumstances now are altogether different, and it is doubtful that a mere sincere statement by a somewhat estranged stalwart of the ruling league can clear the clouds that have collected all around. Many questions are being asked about an outfit that only a few weeks ago went about its business with reasonable confidence, sustained as it was by a big popular mandate and the not-so-bad progress report on account of its development work. In a dramatic turnaround, divisions in the ruling party have surfaced and deepened at a speed which should worry all those who still swear by the PML-N.

Over the past few days, there have been plenty of statements that highlight the various — clashing — strands of thought within the party. These could well have been seen as the kind of diversity of opinion that promotes democracy. But for a political organisation that, like so many others in Pakistan, depends so heavily on its central command for action, the various directions set by a spate of disparate remarks made by PML-N politicians appear to signify unrest within. Ruling party members have stood up in parliament in protest against their alleged monitoring over suspicion of links with extremist outfits. The prime minister and interior minister have distanced themselves from the diatribe of a PML-N MNA — the son-in-law of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, no less. Meanwhile, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif himself has loudly called for action against PML-N lawmakers after the recent controversy over a change in a law — which could well be a prelude to the chief minister regularly taking positions within the party that would bring him in confrontation with other members, unlike in the past where he was content to simply pledge his support to Mian Nawaz Sharif. Given the way things are in this country, all these instances which project various shades of opinion will eventually feed rumours of more groupings and dissatisfaction within the PML-N. The impression will take much more than a promise by Chaudhry Nisar to clear.

Unfair taxation in GB

ONCE again, Gilgit-Baltistan's business community is protesting against the taxes imposed on them, without an increase in their representation at the central decision-making level and without further empowering the GB government, which remains a 'sub-federating unit'. And once again, they have a point. One of the taxes at issue is the withholding amount on bank transactions of non-filers of income tax returns, which has been a challenge since residents here are not required to file tax returns with the federal government. Each time they conduct bank transactions, an amount is deducted from their account and there is no remedy. This is only one example of the myriad costs imposed upon the citizens of these areas.

The government can argue that most of the resources to fund the Rs54bn budget of GB comes from federal resources, as well as the Rs18bn development programme and the Rs3.3bn under the PSDP. But the fact of the matter is these resources are paltry by comparison to the requirements of the area, especially given the heightened significance the region is going to acquire as CPEC makes headway. The region is the only overland entry point for the corridor, and the rapid pace at which the centre has committed funds for CPEC-related projects, such as the Gilgit-Shandoor road and the Gilgit-Jaglot road, shows that when its own interests are involved, the federal government can suddenly locate the funds and pass them off as being used for the benefit of the inhabitants of the area. But the real sentiments of GB's inhabitants were evident in the protest in Gilgit, launched from Skardu; they demanded that more taxes should not be levied on the people until greater progress had been made in terms of incorporating them into the federation as equals. It is hard to disagree with this logic, and the federal authorities should realise the enormously unfair act of taxing a population while denying them representation in the decision-making bodies where these taxes are decided.

Hunger that stalks

HUMANITY today lives in a world of remarkable technological advancement and rapid development. Lest there be any sense of false comfort, though, there is the other side of the coin; the wars and conflicts raging across large swathes of the globe, inequality, wide-scale displacement etc. Today, as the UN marks World Food Day that commemorates the founding of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN in 1945, and tomorrow that is the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, bring further significant reasons for sobriety and policy rethinks. The International Food Policy Research Institute, based in Washington, D.C., recently released the 2017 Global Hunger Index which identifies those places across the world where interventions to address the issue are most urgently needed. The 119 countries are given 'hunger scores' based on indicators such as the percentage of the population that is undernourished, or of young children suffering from wasting or stunting. A score of 9.9 denotes low hunger. But countries including the Central African Republic, Chad and Sierra Leone have alarmingly high ratings ranging from 50.9 to 38.5 (some countries, including Syria and Libya, could not be given GHI scores because of insufficient data). Though the world has overall made some progress in addressing hunger, the situation still ranges from 'serious' to 'extremely alarming' in 52 of the 119 countries rated. And, not surprisingly, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have the highest levels of hunger, scoring 30.9 and 29.4 respectively.

Depressingly for a country that has an agricultural economy and produces enough to be food secure, Pakistan has performed poorly; in all of Asia, it has done better than only Afghanistan. We have been given a GHI score of 32.6, and have made negligible gains in reducing the levels of hunger in recent years. Worse, the number of children under five who are too short for their age, or stunted, has increased to 45pc. The reasons range from lack of access to food due to poverty, to external factors such as floods and climate change. But malnutrition has even been detected in a significant number of food-secure households, indicating that education, awareness and the dissemination of facts are key to successful intervention. From the scourge of child marriage to inter-generational nutritional deficiencies, the serpent is hydra-headed. These, rather than securing elections, are what policymakers need to focus on.

Trackers in motorbikes

THIS could either be seen as a bizarre attempt at thinking outside the box or a cruel joke at the expense of the suffering residents of Karachi. Faced with statistics showing that motorcycles are used in 95pc of crime incidents in Sindh, the provincial government, instead of instituting common-sense measures, is reportedly considering legislation making it mandatory for bikers to instal tracking devices in their two-wheelers. The proposed measure is in response to the incidence of street crime in Karachi, still stubbornly high despite the Rangers-led operation in the city which has otherwise brought down levels of major crimes such as targeted killing, kidnapping etc. While motorcycle manufacturers could perhaps be persuaded to instal reasonably priced trackers in the new two-wheelers, which could help in tracing stolen motorbikes, does the Sindh government actually believe that criminals can be netted through this hare-brained scheme?

Firstly, consider the numbers. More than 5m motorcycles are being used in Sindh, over 3m in Karachi alone. Are the traffic police going to check each one to determine whether it has a tracker? As pointed out by a cynic quoted in the Dawn report, the government has not even been successful in getting every biker to wear a helmet. If put into practice, one can only see the measure as affording yet another avenue for extorting 'chai paani' bribes from hapless bikers. Secondly, given the socioeconomic segment of society that uses motorbikes, even reasonably priced trackers of a quality good enough to serve the purpose would put a dent in the owners' wallets. Lastly, one may be fairly certain that criminal-minded bikers will not be lining up to get trackers installed. Instead of wasting time and energy in this Sisyphean task, the government should invest in high-quality closed-circuit cameras, ensure adequate funds for more police patrols, and do what is necessary to give autonomy to the police so it can work as a professional force. Ill-considered gimmicks are not the answer.

Turkish saga: defying the courts

A frightening overreach of executive power has seen a UNHCR-protected Turkish family reportedly extradited back to Turkey despite a high court stay order in Pakistan. The brazenness of the family's abduction in Lahore and the defiance of local and international law by authorities are matched only by the senselessness of the actions. Surely, whatever the imperatives of maintaining a close relationship with Turkey and the regime of President Erdogan, there is no need whatsoever for Pakistan to violate its own laws and international obligations in order to satisfy a foreign agenda. Indeed, it weakens Pakistan's case when it comes to legitimate objections by this country to ill-advised actions sought by other states. The US, for example, has made difficult demands of Pakistan in the past and even countries with which Pakistan has difficult relations, such as India, may try and use the mindless compliance with Turkish demands to put pressure on Pakistan. Surely, a path other than a clandestine extradition operation ought to have been possible in the Turkish family's case.

Of great concern, too, is the apparent defiance of high court orders. The superior judiciary has rightly attempted to stake out an equal space among institutions in the country; the system of checks and balances depending on empowered institutions willing and able to protect their constitutional domains. Perhaps there is an official and legally defensible reason by whatever authorities were responsible for the reported extradition, but that explanation must be demanded by the judiciary and it must be publicly presented. Legal counsel for Turkish families facing the prospect of extradition have claimed that not only has the attorney general stated that UNHCR-protected individuals cannot be deported but that an undertaking to the effect was given to the superior judiciary when the issue arose last September. That pledge is all the more important now that the UNHCR has been reported to have extended the asylum-seekers' protection to Turkish citizens from November 2017 to October 2018.

Ultimately, the weakening of legal protections of anyone residing in Pakistan affects everyone who resides in the country, citizen and non-citizen alike. The missing persons issue has been a blight on the rule of law for more than a decade. Indeed, before the original set of cases could be resolved — the disappearance of alleged militants and Baloch activists — the problem expanded to other sets of citizens. The recent, highly alarming, disappearances in Sindh are an example of

how hesitation by state institutions to firmly push back against illegal measures leads to the gradual expansion of those abuses. While all institutions pay lip service to the rule of law, few appear willing to abide by its true letter and spirit. The latest egregious decision by the state concerning Turkish citizens in Pakistan ought to be the final such example that is permitted or accepted.

Taxing pensioners

ONE of the most heartless revenue measures that the government has recently resorted to is a tax on the profit earned by pensioners and widows on Behbud Certificates and Pensioners Benefit Account of the National Saving Scheme. The tax was announced recently through a circular issued by the FBR, and is chargeable at 10pc of the profit earned. People who invest in these schemes are amongst the most vulnerable to price or income shocks, however mild. Their incomes are fixed for years on end, while inflation eats away their buying power year after year. They are no longer able to be members of the workforce in most cases, nor do they have the financial knowledge or the energy to seek out profitable investments for life savings in other areas like the stock market or property. They depend on the returns from these savings, which they have diligently accumulated over a lifetime of service, and they do not deserve to be burdened with the obligation to help balance the state's fiscal account.

Already this economy affords negligible opportunities for secure investments, and now those who need these instruments the most are finding out that they will have their monthly cheque reduced by another 10pc. At the moment, there is some confusion about whether the tax will be deducted at source, or whether beneficiaries will be asked to pay at the time of filing their returns. If the latter is the case, it will serve as a disincentive to file for pensioners. If it is the former, it will be a compounded injustice. These specific investments have always been exempted from income tax, for obvious reasons, although they are legally required to be declared as income when filing tax returns. If the government follows through on the SRO issued by the FBR on Sept 29, requiring a 10pc tax on these incomes, the least it can do is make a clear announcement to the effect to help dispel some of the anxiety that is permeating the community of retirees and widows who rely on these instruments. The fiscal difficulties of the state are real, and new revenue measures are inevitable in order to help bridge the deficit. But every effort should

be made to ensure that the weak and vulnerable segments of society are protected from this inevitability.

Mogadishu bombing

EVEN in an era where mass-casualty attacks have become an unfortunate norm, Saturday's bombing in the Somali capital Mogadishu was an atrocity of immense proportions. Over 300 people were killed while many more were injured as a truck bomb went off in a busy part of the capital, reportedly targeting the Somali foreign ministry. Somali officials have blamed the atrocity on Al Shabaab, a terrorist group with links to Al Qaeda, though the outfit itself had not, up until the time of writing, claimed the attack. In the murky world of terrorism, militants are quick to claim such attacks and gloat over them; in fact, the militant Islamic State group has been known to claim attacks with no ostensible link to it, such as the recent Las Vegas slaughter. Therefore, a thorough investigation is required to get to the bottom of this attack, and bring the perpetrators to justice.

As extremist militants have indulged in mass slaughter across the Middle East, Europe, South Asia and other parts of the globe, Africa seems to have fallen off the radar. However, as the Mogadishu bombing clearly illustrates, terrorist groups can strike in parts of the continent with lethal results. Al Shabaab has been active in Somalia for nearly a decade, while that country has not witnessed internal stability for nearly three decades, creating large ungoverned spaces where militants have thrived. Elsewhere in Africa, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, along with Ansar Dine in Mali, have played key roles in destabilising their respective regions and shedding innocent blood. What is needed is a pan-African approach to fighting militancy, with the African Union in the lead. The AU is active in Somalia, but clearly greater efforts are needed to fight the existential threat of militancy. Africa needs peace and security to uplift the conditions of the millions that inhabit its vast expanses. Critical to stability is countering the threat posed by extremist groups.

Back to the Afghan peace table

The revival of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group and a near-simultaneous flurry of drone strikes along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border have underlined the complexity of peace and security in Afghanistan.

The QCG meeting in Muscat, Oman, is a positive step because it suggests that the American and Afghan governments may have relented on their respective reasons for not seeking a dialogue with the Afghan Taliban.

The elimination of the group's chief, Akhtar Mansour, in a US drone strike in Balochistan in May 2016 had effectively signalled the end of the Obama administration's interest in dialogue with the Afghan Taliban. And, until the QCG meeting in Muscat, the administration of US President Donald Trump had indicated that it was not ready to invest in a dialogue process with the Afghan Taliban.

Meanwhile, the National Unity Government in Afghanistan, for reasons of domestic politics and factional squabbling, has appeared uncertain about whether it can or should engage with the insurgent group. The QCG's core purpose being to facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue, it is a welcome sign that the process has been restarted.

Clearly, with the Afghan Taliban declining to attend the meeting in Muscat, expectations need to be tempered at this early stage. The Trump administration's inconsistency on a range of global issues, along with the political uncertainty in Afghanistan, also adds to the complexity of the QCG's possibility of success.

But the high-level military and diplomatic efforts at engagement by Pakistan with a number of countries on Afghanistan and a gradual increase in China's role in the region suggest that at least one half of the QCG may be able to nudge the process along.

Much, however, may also depend on the parallel military war that is being intensified inside Afghanistan and along the border with Pakistan. The drone strikes and aerial bombing of what are reported to be Haqqani network strongholds in eastern Afghanistan and along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border suggest that

new, looser rules of engagement that the Trump administration has granted US forces in Afghanistan are being implemented.

What the current American action means for greater intelligence-sharing and cooperation between Pakistan and the US will become clearer in the days to come. The parallel, intense diplomatic engagement between the two countries, after a protracted period of tension, and the drone strikes, so far in Afghan territory, might be indicative of Pakistan's support for the US action that could put pressure on the Afghan Taliban, to a point where the latter agree to come to the negotiating table.

Among Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US, the issues that impinge on good, stable relations are well known at this stage; an open, honest and pragmatic dialogue among them is not only necessary but is surely in the realm of the possible.

Dar's challenge

ON Monday, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar broke his silence for the first time after his indictment and gave a lengthy statement before the media, rolling out the economic achievements of his government and urging the security establishment to be more patient in its thirst for resources. It is widely known that the minister is preoccupied with personal legal challenges, and his prolonged silence had only reinforced this impression. Now that he has spoken, his words deserve both scrutiny and reflection. When presenting his assessment of the economy, for example, it was to be expected that he would do his level best to diminish the criticism being directed at the emerging vulnerabilities. Specifically on the question of growing debt and the external sector, his presentation of the facts was tilted to make matters appear rosier than they are. For example, it may be true that total debt as a proportion of GDP has not risen as sharply as many say, but the real indicator is the proportion of debt-service obligations to revenues, in the case of domestic debt, and to exports where the external debt is concerned. Additionally, we need to include liabilities on publicly guaranteed debt in the figure as well when measuring the debt burden, because the large growth of sovereign guarantees in the last fiscal year is ultimately a liability of government account, and leaving it out artificially diminishes the size of the burden.

But the debate that the minister is actually engaged in is not really about the debt burden or the growing vulnerabilities of the economy. The real debate is actually about how the finite resources of the state will be spent. The army chief said in his remarks delivered in Karachi recently that the top priority of the state is to ensure security, and the allocation of resources needs to reflect this. Mr Dar's response is that development and security are both important priorities, and it would be a mistake to cater to one at the expense of the other. Since the resources of the state are finite, he argued, the need for them will never be fully met, whether for security or development. Therefore both claimants to these resources need to temper their expectations accordingly. This part of his statement deserves to be supported and his words need to be reflected upon carefully.

Journalists freed

IF Pakistan is a dangerous country for journalists, then those who report from Fata are among the most at risk due to militancy and security-related sensitivities in the area. This was yet again demonstrated by recent events in KP. On Sunday, Shahnawaz Tarkzai, a senior correspondent working in the tribal areas for Mashaal Radio, was abducted by unidentified armed men from a press club in Charsadda district. In a similar incident, Islam Gul Afridi who is based in Khyber and writes for Akhbar-i-Khyber's weekly magazine, was picked up while en route to Peshawar from Islamabad. Both were later set free unharmed, if shaken by the experience, and have yet to disclose anything about their ordeal. Besides these two, a freelancer and journalism student, Junaid Ibrahim, was taken away from his house in Swat. He has yet to be recovered.

In a security state with little accountability and a militancy problem, providing information to the public is in itself deemed a suspicious activity that must be controlled and manipulated. Journalists are thus routinely intimidated by various quarters: some, for the sake of self-preservation, either sanitise their stories, restrict themselves to 'non-controversial' subjects or even leave the profession. In the absence of any definitive evidence — which most likely will never surface — it is perhaps premature to point fingers, but the modus operandi in the recent incidents is not unfamiliar. At least both journalists have been freed; many others have not been so lucky. After Hayatullah Khan was abducted in Fata in late 2005 — following his report about a drone strike that killed a militant leader in North

Waziristan — and found dead six months later, a judicial inquiry was ordered. The report, however, was never made public, although he was the fifth journalist to be killed in Waziristan within a span of two years. It is this impunity and the government's utter lack of interest in bringing journalists' murderers to book that keeps alive the threat to the critical agents of public information in Pakistan.

Quetta attack

THE anger-inducing reality of Balochistan is that nothing seems to change in the province other than regular additions to the civilian and security death toll. Yesterday, yet more policemen were killed in Quetta in a murky war where the enemy is difficult to identify and the state's attempts to establish peace and stability appear to have failed. Some provincial leaders, such as Home Minister Sarfaraz Bugti, seem to believe their only job is to denounce either explicitly identified external enemies or shadowy internal threats rather than to assess where the security policy in the province is failing and what can be done to improve it. Mr Bugti and others of his ilk are part of the problem with their predilection for deflecting blame rather than either having the courage to resign or honestly recommending a change in policy direction.

While it remains true that not every attack can be prevented and even the most honest and well-meaning of policies will not lead to an immediate elimination of violence in Balochistan, the military establishment and federal and provincial governments need to urgently recognise that all tiers of security and political policy concerning the province must be reconsidered. If, for example, it is accepted that external actors are fomenting violence in Balochistan, the province has been under the virtual control of a narrow security-minded policy framework for more than a decade. Why, then, has a relentlessly hawkish perspective not been able to eliminate violence with origins and an external dimension that the state believes it is fully informed of? And if the violence is locally organised, how is a state that has undertaken vast counter-insurgency and counterterrorism operations across the country unable to bring a degree of peace and stability in Balochistan?

If there is a possible answer, it appears to lie in a state that is unwilling to allow the constitutional scheme and chain of authority to work in the province. The militarisation of security policy in Balochistan and the sidelining of any civilian

provincial or federal leadership that has advocated a policy of dialogue and engagement with domestic and regional elements have resulted in a policy that is unyielding and that has failed to deliver stability. There is no doubt that both external and domestic elements would prefer that Balochistan remain unstable; the more relevant question is what policy mix and improvements in the security apparatus will lead to elements threatening instability in Balochistan to be neutralised. It is surely not enough to know that enemies, domestic and regional, wish harm to Pakistan. What is needed is for this country's policemen, other security personnel and civilians to be able to live without the constant fear of being attacked. It is necessary and important to mourn the latest loss of life in Balochistan; perhaps it is also time to recognise that other lives can be saved with an honest reassessment of the security policy.

Regulatory duties

THE imposition of regulatory duties on nonessential imports is a sound idea in principle and shows that the government is mindful of the growing current account deficit.

However, similar rounds of duties in the past have failed to contain the problem.

This is the third time the government is resorting to regulatory duties.

Although the size and scope of the present round is bigger than previously, the fact that we have a third round at all is sufficient indication of the larger futility of this measure.

The first round of regulatory duties in late 2015 was on some 287 items, and the increases were meagre in comparison to the present case, with duty increases from 5pc to 25pc.

The second round came in the 2017 budget, when coverage was smaller but the duty increases were up to 60pc on some imported vehicles, particularly sports utility ones, with smaller increases of up to 25pc on imported and processed eatables.

It is not clear how much these duties contributed to any increase in revenue collection, but the current account deficit and the import of nonessential items has continued unabated.

In the previous year, they contributed 28pc to the overall increase in imports, whereas in the last fiscal year the contribution had risen to almost half.

Repeated resort to these duties as a means to curb the current account deficit shows that the government is running out of options in its toolkit to tackle this growing problem.

With this being its last year in power, and hobbled as it is by its legal and political entanglements, it is unlikely that it will be able to come up with a more robust plan of action in the near future.

So if this round of duties fails to contain the growth of nonessential imports, which is likely since the demand for these products is largely inelastic to price as they serve elite requirements, then more drastic action will become necessary closer to the end of the government's term, when it will probably be further hobbled by its difficulties.

It is understandable that resort to these measures at a time when the twin deficits — on the fiscal and external side — are both increasing, but it is time for stakeholders to start bracing themselves for a more disorderly adjustment down the road.

Hospital's callousness

WHEN the medical staff at a public hospital denies emergency assistance to a pregnant woman, their callousness and negligence is tantamount to serious malpractice. In the early hours of Tuesday, a woman in labour was brought to the Raiwind Tehsil Headquarters Hospital by her husband, a brick kiln worker. Shockingly, Sameera Bibi was denied admission to the hospital by a Lady Health Visitor who said that no gynaecologist was present — surely an explanation that would be outrageous at any fully functional hospital. Sameera Bibi, who passed out from pain, was forced to give birth on the roadside near this 60-bed hospital which is situated a stone's throw from the Jati Umra home of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. Constructed at a cost of Rs700m and inaugurated last summer by Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, the hospital has also been criticised previously for providing poor medical care to patients. So while the motorcycle ambulance project and other similar schemes by the PML-N allow the party to tick off their election promises' checklist, Sameera Bibi's heartbreaking experience — even though she and her baby were later given treatment at another facility — is a stark reminder of the general indifference towards the health of women and children. This is supported by figures that show that one out of 98 women dies in childbirth in this country.

Earlier, the Punjab government was criticised over the avoidable death of Zohra Bibi who was denied treatment at four public hospitals in Kasur and Lahore, before she died unattended to on the floor of Jinnah Hospital. Though the medical staff involved in the tragedy was suspended, they were paid salaries for their time off work; they have since returned to their jobs. Endemic medical negligence calls for sterner government action. Moreover, health authorities must shift the focus to affordable healthcare delivery mechanisms and public accountability measures to avoid mistakes and minimise patient deaths.

In the interest of justice

AFTER nearly three years of state-sanctioned violence during which 465 condemned prisoners have been put to death, any move in the opposite direction is welcome news.

Possibly under pressure from Western countries and international human rights bodies — although one hopes also from a desire to serve the ends of justice — Pakistan has decided to review the scope of the death penalty and consider reducing the number of capital offences.

Having recently been elected member of the UN Human Rights Council, and with its Universal Periodic Review coming up, Pakistan could certainly do with one blot less on its dismal human rights record.

At present, there are 27 crimes in the country that are punishable by death: among these are offences such as railway sabotage, drug smuggling and arms trafficking.

There has never been a considered debate about the death penalty in Pakistan, only an emotional response framed in binary terms.

The very lifting of the moratorium on capital punishment following the APS Peshawar attack on December 2014 was a knee-jerk reaction to a gut-wrenching event.

For a state on the back foot, faced with a furious, grieving public, the quickest way to appear in control of a rapidly unravelling security situation was to execute some of the approximately 8,000 prisoners on death row as a form of 'instant retribution'.

This became a pattern in Punjab — the province that carried out 83pc of all executions during this period — where hangings spiked in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks.

Moreover, although the lifting of the moratorium, at least after the initial months, affected both those convicted of terrorism-related offences and those on death row for other capital crimes, only 16pc of executed prisoners had been convicted in the

anti-terrorism courts — further evidence that the hangings were little more than a populist measure.

It stands to reason then that the decline in terrorist attacks has been on account of effective military action, rather than capital punishment acting as a deterrent, a theory anyway long debunked by multiple studies.

No debate about the death penalty is complete without considering the appalling state of the criminal justice system in Pakistan.

Unlike the privileged few who have the means to engage expensive legal counsel, the vast majority of litigants are at the mercy of state-appointed counsel too overburdened to provide a proper defence to those whose lives are on the line.

Shocking miscarriages of justice have come to light recently: prisoners executed before their appeals process had even been completed; juveniles sent to the gallows, death warrants issued for the physically infirm and the mentally ill, etc.

There have also been several cases where prisoners on death row have been acquitted after spending years behind bars.

That, if nothing else, is the most compelling argument against the final, irrevocable act of taking a person's life.

After Raqqa

IT is, indeed, welcome news that the militant Islamic State group has been successively losing territory it once controlled in Syria and Iraq. The Iraqi city of Mosul was liberated in July, and Mayadeen in Syria was freed some days ago; the recapture of the Syrian city of Raqqa this week — once considered the ‘capital’ of the brutal, self-styled ‘caliphate’ — comes as the latest major blow to the terrorist movement. While the Syrian and Iraqi governments have liberated much of the territory, Raqqa was freed by the US-backed, mostly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces. Taking advantage of the chaos unleashed by the Syrian civil war, IS swept through large swathes of Syria and Iraq, unleashing a reign of terror upon the territories and people under its bloody rule. However, concerted efforts by two distinct coalitions — one led by the Syrian state along with its Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah allies; and the other under the leadership of the US and its Arab allies — as well as the Iraqi government have now put the terrorists of IS to flight, as they abandon one town after the other to regroup elsewhere.

However, it would be premature to proclaim victory against the militants at this juncture. For one, IS still clings on to bits of territory in both Iraq and Syria. Until all areas are firmly within state control, the threat from the outfit will remain. Secondly, while until now IS and its opponents mostly squared off on the battlefield or engaged in gritty urban combat, after losing much of the territory under their control, the militants will diffuse and may well resort to a familiar tactic: asymmetric warfare and acts of terrorism targeting non-combatants. That is why states must monitor the battle zone and ensure that ‘jet-black’ terrorists do not escape and are brought to justice. However, care must be taken to respect the human rights of non-combatants who were forced to live under IS rule. Moreover, since the SDF, a mostly Kurdish force, has been at the forefront of Raqqa’s liberation, care must be taken to not carve out a semi-autonomous statelet in Syria that challenges the territorial integrity of that country. It should be noted that while gains have been made against terrorism, these will be undone if ethnic or sectarian fronts are opened after the defeat of the extremists. The prime goal of all actors in Syria and Iraq should be the defeat of IS and those of its ilk.

Medicine sector troubles

THE country has in recent months been held hostage to a swirling cloud of allegations of corruption involving some of the biggest political players. Has the glare of the spotlight being directed at them tended to obscure other areas where corruption is endemic? From an intelligence report prepared by the police in Punjab recently, it would certainly appear so. The document, the contents of which were published in this newspaper on Tuesday, found that of the 121 drug inspectors working in the province, 64 — roughly half — were allegedly involved in corruption. This means that as a result of bribery and nepotism, fake and expired medicines are being made available in the province. It was found that large numbers of drugs inspectors receive bribes from pharmacies and medical-store owners, and even quacks; in return, they turn a blind eye to the sale of substandard drug products. Some inspectors were found to have been collecting ‘samples’ of pricey medicines from stores on the pretext of getting them analysed, only to sell them to other pharmacies.

Corruption in the ranks of government services cannot come as a surprise in a country where not only is the scourge widespread but where the ability to cut corners also abounds. That said, this particular example of unethical behaviour has highlighted other areas of concern. It was hoped that after the Punjab Institute of Cardiology scandal in 2012, when over 100 patients reportedly died because of the spurious medicine being dispensed to them, some change in the country’s drug regulation practices would become apparent. True, in recent years, there has been a functioning drug regulatory authority in the country. But in reality, it remains a toothless entity, which is evident in its failure to ensure quality control as well as in its inability to purge the market of substandard medicine through stringent checks by inspectors. The Punjab government must clean up its act, and other provincial governments must investigate how far the rot has spread in their own jurisdictions.

Nawaz or Shahbaz?

The campaign to have Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif as PML-N leader has picked up.

On Thursday, Riaz Hussain Pirzada, a federal minister known for his occasional outbursts of unfiltered 'truth', declared how absolutely necessary it was for the younger Sharif to replace former prime minister Nawaz Sharif at the top of the PML-N hierarchy.

Soon, in reaction to Mr Pirzada's presser, a Punjab government spokesman commented on how pragmatism was the order of the day for the party. In other words, this was an endorsement of an idea by someone who is apparently close to the chief minister.

Not only that, there was another report on a meeting of 40 PML-N MPAs from various parts of the province in Lahore. The message emanating from the meeting was the same as had been earlier conveyed with varying degrees of forthrightness: replace Nawaz Sharif with his younger brother as the party head.

This development is not out of the blue. It is consistent with some statements that have come from what is increasingly being referred to as 'the Shahbaz camp' within the PML-N. These statements include those made by Hamza Shahbaz, elder son of Shahbaz Sharif and an influential MNA in his own right. The Sharif scion has been advocating a moderate approach after silently watching Maryam Nawaz doing aggressive politics along with her father.

It is generally believed that a more measured, less acrimonious thrust on the part of the PML-N would entail the passing of the leadership mantle to Shahbaz Sharif. Indeed, it is thought that there is increasing demand within the PML-N for such a change and that the party risks losing members to opposing forces if it delays such a transition.

This theory envisages the former prime minister and his daughter retaining a parallel role in the background in case the aggressive drive needs to be rekindled at some stage.

Mr Pirzada has also criticised the change in the law that allowed Nawaz Sharif to be elected as PML-N chief following his disqualification as prime minister; he appeared to suggest that no intra-party debate had taken place before the much-criticised person-specific amendment was rushed through parliament.

Consultation is unlikely even now since it could bring conflicts within the PML-N into public view. Ultimately, in true Pakistani tradition, it is for the family to decide which brother they deem fit to act as head of the PML-N and at what point in time.

But one thing is clear: Shahbaz Sharif being in charge would mean a mellowing of the party position. A shift from the former prime minister, who is understandably very bitter at his removal, to Shahbaz Sharif would signify a fundamental departure.

Though such a transition would not be easy to accomplish, it would perhaps mark the building of a new party altogether.

Manipulated stocks

WHEN Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi met a delegation of stock market brokers on Oct 14, little could he have known that the meeting itself would be used by some elements to allegedly stoke sentiments and swindle retail investors. At the meeting, the delegation of brokers and officials from the Pakistan Stock Exchange made a strong suggestion that the government should organise a bailout for the troubled bourse that has seen sustained and steep declines since May. The same community of brokers is hard-pressed to explain these declines, arguing at one point that political uncertainty is the driving force, and at another that the market was oversold in the run-up to its inclusion in the MSCI Emerging Markets index in May. No official word was received from the prime minister about what happened during the meeting, which took place at Governor House in Karachi, but shortly after it ended, it appeared that a few brokers began to put word out that the prime minister had agreed to a Rs20bn bailout on the lines of what was done back in 2008. Going further, they added that the bailout may be announced in the next 15 to 20 days.

This is a patently absurd statement, but once it saw its way into print, the brokers were able to use it to dupe retail investors into believing that a bailout was on its way, and that this would be a good time to start buying. On the next trading day after the appearance of the '15- to 20 days' claim, the KSE 100 index shot up by 945, with buying seen from all category of investors, including individuals. Individual investors can be convinced easily to start buying based on unconfirmed news of this sort, and once they build a little buying momentum early in the trading day, the rise in the index can infect other category of investors as well. Once a sucker rally of this sort gets going, the brokers in question can liquidate some of their own problematic positions. Of course, the situation prevailing in the stock market today bears no comparison to 2008, and as such all talk of a bailout should be summarily dismissed by the prime minister. But going a step further, perhaps the SECP should look into which brokers gave what advice to their individual clients on Oct 15 and 16, and whether or not the news was used to artificially inflate sentiments to create a short dumping opportunity.

Food fortification

GIVEN the tragic levels of malnutrition in Pakistan, it is no surprise that half the country's under-five population is stunted and one-fifth of the entire population undernourished. Last year, when addressing this chronic nutrition crisis, the UK's Department for International Development launched a five-year food fortification programme to provide financial and technical assistance to the government, mills and oil producers, for enhancing micronutrients in food in a cost-effective manner. With the potential to benefit women and children, this \$48m project aims to reduce anaemia and vitamin A deficiency in communities most at risk. On Thursday, the Punjab government announced it would collaborate with DFID on a food fortification programme to combat micronutrient malnutrition. Teaming up with industry bodies to support the fortification of staple foods (wheat flour, edible oil and ghee), such a mass-scale intervention is challenging. But it is not impossible. A good start would be for all political parties to pledge to stop hunger; in order to ensure continuity, projects combating malnutrition must not be owned by any one political party. Malnutrition must be tackled on a war footing by sustaining provincial collaborations and supporting multiple ministries and private partners in food programmes.

With food fortification assistance, the government must work on mechanisms for equitable distribution and transparency. Punjab with its eye set on the goal could lead the way. Because stunting is a result of malnutrition in the first two years of a child's life, the root causes of hunger must be tackled. This has not been the approach in Sindh where alarming levels of malnutrition and the government's reaction, akin to a head-in-the-sand ostrich, have fuelled the crisis. Multiple reports of child deaths in parts of Sindh are a blot on the conscience of this state whose responsibility it is to ensure a healthy population.

Clampdown on free speech

A growing crackdown against social media activists in the country ought to be a matter of deep concern to all right-thinking, law-abiding and democratic citizens.

The latest disappearances have been alleged by the PML-N itself, with no less a figure than former prime minister Nawaz Sharif denouncing what he termed as an "attack on freedom of speech" and a violation of the right of all citizens to "express his/her opinion and to disagree with others".

It is not the first time the PML-N has claimed activists of the party have been disappeared — members of the party were alleged to have been abducted on the eve of the NA-120 by-election in September — and, given Mr Sharif's ongoing tussle with state institutions, it may not be the last.

Politics has entered a dangerous new phase with the apparent normalisation of unlawful abductions of political activists.

While the PML-N has rightfully condemned the unlawful actions against activists of the party, it is the PML-N itself that helped open the floodgates with the controversial passage of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016.

At the time, free speech advocates, human rights activists and several opposition figures had warned that Peca was a law virtually designed to usher in an era of abuse of power by state officials and a crackdown against free speech.

Clearly, with the growing use of the internet and online propaganda by militant groups, there is a need to regulate the online space — but Peca was not the law to do so.

The PML-N had also earlier allowed the Karachi operation to expand into a political crackdown against the MQM, with many of the party's officials accusing the federal government and state authorities of unlawful detentions and the excessive use of force.

Then, too, human rights and free speech advocates had warned of a slippery slope towards greater curbs on political speech and lawful politics in the country.

Certainly, the war against social media activists has extended beyond the mainstream political domain to rights advocates, civil society and independent voices championing causes and politics that are deemed unacceptable by sections of the state.

With the mainstream media itself under various forms of pressure from a wide spectrum of entities, the overall climate for free and independent speech is poor and deteriorating.

The government now has a chance to help correct matters by involving parliament and inviting social and political activists to critique the existing framework of rights-related laws in the country and suggesting changes.

The rule of law is the bedrock of a constitutional, democratic society; it needs urgent repair and shoring up.

Polluting our lives

A NEW study by the prestigious Lancet Commission on pollution and health carries important pointers for Pakistan. It states, amongst other things, that the incidence of pollution is changing: concerns about ambient air, soil and chemical pollution are now greater than apprehensions relating to impure household air and water. This type of pollution is produced by “industry, mining, electricity generation, mechanised agriculture, and petroleum-powered vehicles”, each of which is growing in Pakistan. The fastest-growing polluters in the world are developing countries with high rates of growth coming from sectors that rely on these activities. This poses serious health risks to the most vulnerable populations, the poor, minorities and children. Beyond health, the study points out that pollution has consequences for the economy as well, and in some cases can reduce the growth rate of an economy by up to two percentage points.

This is important to bear in mind for a number of reasons. First, winter brings with it the smog that usually engulfs parts of Sindh and Punjab, causing a spike in respiratory ailments amongst much else, besides disrupting travel and business. Second, our future growth is heavily dependent on some of the industries listed in the study as the crux of the problem, especially coal-fired power plants. It can be argued that we need these industries to secure our future economic growth, but it must be asked what is being done to assess and mitigate the pollution impact that they are going to have. Third, with our push towards large-scale thermal power generation as part of the capacity expansion plan these days, it must also be asked whether we are locking ourselves out of the revolution under way in clean renewable energy. That revolution is sweeping across the world, replacing power from dirty fuels and electric cars that reduce emissions, while we are investing further in 19th-century technologies that are not only expensive, but bring their own health hazards with them. In the case of climate change, Pakistan’s argument has always been that it is not a major contributor of carbon emissions, and the impact is felt globally. But that cannot be said for pollution. We are already suffering from high levels of pollution, with some of the worst urban air quality in the region and the seasonal winter smog engulfing several areas of the country — and, in large part, the driver for this is local. It is high time to take ecological concerns more seriously.

Fighting TB

PAKISTAN'S lack of political will when it comes to prioritising effective responses to a host of preventable illnesses is responsible for the country's abysmal health indicators. Even after receiving millions in donor assistance to tackle communicable diseases, national control plans remain in a state of disarray. This is evident in the poor implementation of the country's 10-year plan to reduce tuberculosis by 70pc. A Senate sub-committee was recently informed that TB diagnostic services and essential medication for treating the disease were unavailable in hospitals in Balochistan and KP. Senators were told that not even one out of 95 TB diagnostic mobile vans earmarked for both provinces was operational. 'Inadequate security' is hardly an excuse; security personnel can accompany diagnostic vans, just as they provide protection to vulnerable polio workers in the country. It is critical to reach vulnerable communities in remote areas where TB cases multiply when individuals missed by the health system remain undiagnosed and untreated.

With 510,000 TB cases reported last year, Pakistan has the fifth highest incidence of the disease in the world. A highly communicable infection, delay in diagnosis and unsupervised drug regimens make it difficult to control TB. The usual therapy requires a six-month uninterrupted course of drugs to ensure efficacy, and most TB patients do respond to this course of treatment. However, the erratic consumption of medicines or leaving off midway during therapy has seen bacteria mutate to the point where it can become resistant to multiple drugs — which means a new therapy has to be considered for MDR-TB patients. Even among those that are undergoing first-line therapy, consisting of fixed-dose combination drugs, there are some who do not respond well and have to be given medicine in which the ingredients have been separated — such single-ingredient drugs are not always available in the country. Because the endgoal is eradication, policymakers must monitor the momentum of the national programme and its response to transmission trends and especially ensure that the most marginalised are not left out.

Constitutional limits

IT has become the theme of Nawaz Sharif, Maryam Nawaz and their supporters' politics: institutions must remain within their constitutional limits. While presumably for political reasons the targets of their censure are not explicitly mentioned, the criticism appears to be directed at the superior judiciary and the military establishment. Speaking in Lahore yesterday, Ms Nawaz once again spoke of the urgent democratic need for all institutions to stay within their constitutional limits. Certainly, the chequered political history of this country is largely a result of institutions straying outside their constitutional remit; it is also highly likely that it is past anti-democratic interventions that have prevented the country from becoming a stable, people-oriented democracy. Indeed, with unnecessary comments emanating from certain institutional quarters recently, it appears that all institutions do need to be reminded of their duty to protect and uphold the Constitution, which is fundamentally and inalterably democratic in nature.

More uncomfortable, though, for Mr Sharif, his daughter and their supporters is another question: what role have they played in allowing the democratic order in the country to slip towards the state of uncertainty that it is in today? At every stage of the Panama Papers saga, the Sharif family and the PML-N have had an opportunity to find a fair and just solution either through parliament or the superior judiciary. For months after the Panama Papers were revealed to the world last year, the Sharif family and the PML-N resisted the formation of a parliamentary commission to investigate the issue. As prime minister, it was only right — from the very democratic perspective that the Sharif family frequently insists it cares about — that Mr Sharif be investigated first. Later, for many months and across dozens of hearings, the Sharif family appeared either unable or unwilling to respond to specific questions about the history of the family's businesses and the wealth it had amassed. Surely, democratic, constitutional limits ought to be illuminated by the democratic spirit of the people's elected representatives themselves.

Worryingly, the partial blame that all sides must bear for the current political impasse and governmental gridlock has not led to introspection by any side. Instead, the blame game appears to be dangerously escalating. With Mr Sharif set to return to Pakistan, the political tension is almost certain to be ratcheted up further with the opposition likely to target him with greater vigour than ever. The

Sharif family strategy of going through the motions of defending themselves in the accountability court while verbally attacking institutions outside the court is a recipe for further instability. A danger is that the very institutions that the Sharifs are urging to remain within constitutional limits may be tempted to respond to the allegations against them. Cooler heads must prevail on all sides.

New alliance in Sindh

ON Sunday, under the watchful gaze of Pir Pagara, the anti-PPP tribes gathered at Kingri House in Karachi to plot a strategy for the next general elections. It was decided that a new electoral platform — the Grand Democratic Alliance — would register itself with the ECP and participate in next year's polls. Along with Pir Pagara's PML-F, the other members of the alliance are mostly mainstream Sindhi nationalist groups, as well as disgruntled former PPP elements, such as the Abbasis of Larkana and the Mirzas of Badin. It should be remembered that the pir cobbled together a similar alliance in 2013, which failed to dent the PPP's vote bank. The situation in Sindh is indeed strange: while the PPP's governance has been anything but exemplary, the voter knows that despite the visible lack of good governance, the alternatives are not at all impressive, eg most of the constituents of the GDA are the same mirs, pirs and waderas who have done little for the common man. The PPP knows this and has become complacent, some would say arrogant, as is reflected in the Sindh Assembly speaker's recent remarks in which he belittled the value of the vote.

Where mainstream parties other than the PPP are concerned, Sindh doesn't seem to matter. For example, the PML-N's top-flight leaders make fly-by-night visits to the province and announce multibillion-rupee projects for its cities and towns, but there is little long-term planning to establish roots in Sindh. The PTI, despite all its talks of change, has brought on board the same 'electables' and 'influentials' that have been part of Sindh's political scene for decades. The MQM, which rarely ventured beyond its comfort zone of the province's urban areas, is itself in disarray, though the PSP has made positive noises about bridging the communal gap between Sindhi and Urdu speakers. The nationalists are divided in two camps: one consists of hard-line separatists, the other is riven by internal division. Such a situation leaves the field open for the PPP. While Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has tried to spearhead development work, the fact is that power in Sindh does not

flow from CM House, but from Asif Zardari and his family members. This arrangement, unfortunately, has done little to uplift Sindh's condition, while there is little evidence of the formation of progressive political forces that can represent the province's working and middle classes.

Disaffection on campus

ON Oct 4, the Quaidian Students Federation in Islamabad's Quaid-i-Azam University went on strike with a charter of demands, including the reversal of a 10pc fee hike, improved students' resources such as housing and medical facilities, and the reinstatement of students suspended or expelled following a clash between ethnic groups in May. After a lengthy shutdown, the QAU administration finally acceded to all but the last demand. Classes resumed yesterday after most QSF student councils ended their strike. This episode should have given the administration some pause to consider the deep sense of alienation among this multi-ethnic coalition of students, and reflect on its power to ameliorate or exacerbate it. Unfortunately, it chose force over dialogue, and instigated a police crackdown on the remaining protesters, with scores detained. Such heavy-handed actions are emblematic of the way we treat our increasing, and increasingly disaffected, young population.

While there must be a no-tolerance policy of violence among students, QAU ought to address its own security lapses, de-weaponise the campus, foster cultural diversity and harmony, and develop community policing strategies. Ultimately, the root causes of campus violence must be analysed. Banning student unions 30 years ago did little to curb campus violence; on the contrary, it has arguably exacerbated it by depriving students of necessary democratic incubators. Add to this the feeling that there is little investment in their welfare and education, even as enrolments increase and fees are hiked, and it is little wonder that students feel they go unheard, and are backed into a corner and forced to agitate. Much like parenting, discipline must only be used as part of a multifaceted strategy to support our youth's physical, social and intellectual development. Punitive measures not only widen the fissures between students and administration, they also gloss over the genuine need for reforming a broken system. Instead of treating students like would-be criminals, let us treat them like the future leaders we want, nay, need them to be.

A ray of hope for IHK

It may not necessarily signal a wholesale change in policy by the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but the appointment of a special interlocutor for India-held Kashmir is a welcome step in the right direction.

Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh's surprise announcement of former Intelligence Bureau chief Dineshwar Sharma as a Kashmir interlocutor empowered to speak to all Kashmiri groups — code for meetings with the All Parties Hurriyat Conference — is necessary acknowledgement that the Modi government's strategy of force is not succeeding in IHK.

The profound violence inflicted on the Kashmiri people for more than a year by the Indian security apparatus has predictably failed to suppress anti-Indian sentiment in the region. Instead, it has politicised a new generation of Kashmiris, who have seen schoolmates and neighbours suffer brutal attacks including being blinded by pellet guns. It is hoped that the announcement of an interlocutor on Kashmir will quickly lead to an end to the daily violence and humiliation that ordinary Kashmiris are enduring.

The willingness to engage the Hurriyat is important for several reasons. Three years ago, India cancelled foreign secretary-level talks with Pakistan after the latter's high commissioner to India had met Hurriyat leaders. That episode marked not only a fresh low in Pakistan-India ties, but also the beginning of a more aggressive approach in IHK by the Modi government.

The Hurriyat, an umbrella group that accommodates a range of opinion on the Kashmir dispute, remains an important player because unlike other regional groups that the Indian centre frequently engages in dialogue with, it does not accept the illegitimate Indian rule.

A Kashmir dialogue that does not include separatists is essentially meaningless and holds no hope for reducing violence in the region. Certainly, the mere announcement of a Kashmir interlocutor by the Indian government will not

automatically or even necessarily lead to a change in policy or a reduction in violence.

Previous special missions and emissaries from New Delhi have failed to bridge the chasm between New Delhi and the people of IHK. Much will depend on the final mandate the interlocutor is given and the Modi government's willingness to accept and implement difficult recommendations.

Now that the Modi government has bowed to the inevitable and recognised the need for dialogue inside IHK, there is another obvious next step: dialogue with Pakistan. Just as Indian dialogue with the people of IHK is necessary, there is no possibility of reaching a permanent resolution to the Kashmir dispute without engaging Pakistan.

And while the Kashmir dispute is central to a long-term peace between India and Pakistan, there are many other issues that the two countries need to address — urgently — through dialogue. The approach of polls in Pakistan and then India should not delay dialogue; as the experience around the last set of general elections showed, campaigns only produce further uncertainty.

Ex-minister's arrest

IT was a strange sight outside the Sindh High Court in Karachi on Monday as TV screens flashed footage of NAB personnel jostling to take former Sindh information minister Sharjeel Memon into custody. Mr Memon, along with 11 others, was arrested by the accountability watchdog for allegedly embezzling over Rs5bn of public funds. However, the PPP leader did not surrender himself to the authorities easily, staying within court premises to avoid arrest before he was finally whisked away. The high-profile arrest has once again put the accountability process in the limelight, particularly in Sindh. The PPP has cried foul, with party chief Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari claiming the law is applied differently in Punjab, with reference to the corruption investigation of the Sharifs. However, while questions may arise about how differently the cases of Mr Memon and retired Capt Safdar have been handled, it would not be correct to label Monday's episode part of a witch hunt. After all, the NAB chief is chosen with consensus, including that of the PPP. The

PPP should cooperate with the investigators and Mr Memon and the other accused must prove their innocence in court instead of playing the victim card.

Accountability is absolutely necessary for the progress of Pakistan, as the country is viewed as one of the most corrupt on the globe. Particularly, financial corruption in the public sphere hampers development efforts and creates disillusionment among the people. Transparency is vital for good governance and a first step towards eliminating the culture of kickbacks and graft. Unfortunately, anti-corruption efforts here have themselves long been tainted by lack of transparency and have been used to penalise political opponents. Instead of complaining of victimhood, parties would do well to unabashedly condemn the corrupt within their ranks. While singing the praises of democracy and good governance, it does not behove political parties to condone corruption on the side. The elected representatives of the people must put themselves up for public scrutiny, especially where the use of state funds is concerned. Having said that, the accountability process should not exclusively focus on politicians. Members of other state institutions — the military, the judiciary, the bureaucracy — must also be held accountable if there is suspicion of financial impropriety. Only a thorough and transparent process that holds all organs of state accountable can give the nation hope that the culture of financial corruption will be eliminated.

Sri Lanka whitewashed

PAKISTAN'S first ever 5-0 whitewash of Sri Lanka in the ODI series is special on more counts than one. Though some critics still point out that the islanders' squad was the weakest ever to be pitted against Pakistan, the credit must be given to Sarfraz Ahmed and his men for regrouping in the shorter format following the shock 0-2 Test series loss preceding the ODIs. They not only emerged as a dominant, rampaging unit to crush the opposition, but also managed to thwart the odds; these included injuries to Azhar Ali and Mohammad Amir; Mohammad Hafeez getting reported for a suspect bowling action; the approach of bookies in mid-series; and the poor form of opener Ahmed Shehzad.

However, the positives dominated. To begin with, fast bowler Hasan Ali was in brilliant form. The youngster's exuberance has often inspired the team in recent games and he has clearly assumed the role of Pakistan's pace spearhead since

the Champions Trophy success last June. The maturing of young Shadab Khan is another positive. He is fast becoming a decent all-rounder — something the national team desperately needs. Sarfraz's experimentation and rotation policy also paid off considering the feats of dashing opener Imam-ul-Haq and rookie pacer Usman Shinwari — both are bright prospects for Pakistan and could serve the team for many years. Indeed, there is huge talent in Pakistan cricket today, for which the credit ought to be given to the Pakistan Super League. In stark contrast, Sri Lankan skipper Upul Thiranga failed to motivate his team enough to put up a serious challenge in the series. The Sri Lankans have grappled with many problems of their own including a tug of war within their cricket board, the collapse of schools cricket which had produced so many stars in the past, and the retirement of stalwarts Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara. All that has taken its toll on Sri Lankan cricket, which is currently at its lowest ebb.

Tillerson's stopover

AMERICAN Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's short visit to Pakistan, sandwiched between trips to Afghanistan and India, has underlined the difficulties in the Pakistan-US relationship in the Trump era.

Echoing US President Donald Trump, Mr Tillerson offered a tough message — a familiar do-more-against-militancy demand — but also held out the possibility of cooperation with Pakistan.

What is difficult to gauge is how far the US is willing to go on both sides of the cooperate-or-else message: how much pressure is the US willing to exert on Pakistan and what kind of beneficial cooperation is the US willing to offer Pakistan?

In addition to the vexing inconsistency of the Trump administration, there is often a dearth of detail and specifics in the policy and strategy domains that can leave allies frustrated.

Perhaps US officials have been specific in their private conversations with Pakistani officials, but a do-more mantra without a road map to closer, more durable ties with the US is akin to bullying by a superpower. Bilateral ties cannot and will not be helped if mindless hectoring by the US continues.

That Mr Tillerson has chosen to use even stronger language in Afghanistan and India when referring to Pakistan is sure to make Pakistan's hackles rise.

There is no quicker formula to undermining relations with Pakistan than lecturing this country from Kabul or New Delhi.

As Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi reiterated in his public remarks to Mr Tillerson, Pakistan is committed to the fight against militancy and playing its role to re-establish peace and security in the region.

However, with Afghanistan and particularly India, Pakistan has a number of legitimate grievances that need to be addressed.

The issue of cross-border sanctuaries, for example, cuts both ways along the Pak-Afghan border.

Peace inside Pakistan is unlikely to be established until anti-Pakistan militants on the Afghan side are either eliminated or denied sanctuary.

Lecturing Pakistan, as Mr Tillerson and other US officials are doing, without recognising its legitimate security interests, is a recipe for more regional tension.

Nevertheless, Pakistan must acknowledge the realities of the region and a new US administration.

The long war against militancy has seen Pakistan achieve several successes against anti-Pakistan militants, and groups that have taken up arms against the state and society have been significantly depleted.

While there must be no let-up in that aspect of the war against militancy, it is time for the state to consider how to embark on the next phase towards the total elimination of terrorism, militancy and extremism in the country.

For too long, external demands have been used as a shield against hard questions internally.

That the US and some of Pakistan's neighbours are demanding something does not automatically make it right — or, indeed, wrong.

Only a zero-tolerance policy towards militancy will achieve true peace for Pakistan.

Arrest for overbilling

THE news that Nepra, the power-sector regulator, has been empowered to 'recommend' the arrest of officers in power distribution companies in cases of overbilling may gladden our hearts, but emotions will not solve the problem of transmission and distribution losses. The energy minister proudly declared on the floor of the National Assembly that an amendment to the Nepra Act will now see all complaints of overbilling go directly to the regulator that can recommend arrest if wilful overbilling is discovered. But sadly, the reality is that Nepra is not the right forum to deal with overbilling complaints due to their sheer volume as well as the regulator's distance from the operating machinery of the distribution companies. Besides, there is the sheer complexity of the complaints involved. The main result of this law will be that hapless consumers will be directed to heavily overburdened Nepra offices and endure prolonged delays in the handling of their complaints in case of overbilling. Beyond that, if the minister genuinely believes that the officers of the distribution companies will rectify their actions for fear of arrest on the recommendation of Nepra, then there remains much for him to learn about the billing and recovery machinery of these companies.

Overbilling has been the bane of many ministers in charge of the power sector. It has its roots in the dysfunctions of the distribution companies, especially the pervasiveness of rackets within these organisations. Field officers are given targets to meet when issuing bills, and their incentive is to charge consumers arbitrarily and deal with the complaints later. At present, those complaints land up at the billing office itself, thereby creating an inherent disincentive to push too far when issuing inflated bills in order to meet a target. But if the new law is passed, consumers will go elsewhere with their complaints, and how far Nepra is able to force field officers to attend hearings and answer for inflated bills will determine how much of a disincentive the new law is to engage in the practice. Fact of the matter is, the billing machinery of the distribution companies suffers from intrinsic weaknesses. They have a difficult time serving bills to consumers with clout, and

the culture within which they operate demands some level of discretionary action. Until this culture is changed, punitive measures of this sort will only complicate things further.

Sport and harassment

IT is a sad reflection on society when allegations of harassment are given short shrift by those whose responsibility it is to investigate such charges and take action.

The recent case in which Syeda Sadia, the former goalkeeper of the women's hockey team, alleged assault by her head coach is an example.

According to Sadia, the coach tried to hit her, but was stopped by Tanzeela Aamer, secretary of the Pakistan Hockey Federation's women's wing.

Following the player to her room, he apparently attempted to assault her again, threatening to ban her if she reported him.

Her roommate, who tried to intervene, has been expelled from the team on 'disciplinary grounds'.

For such a serious charge, an official inquiry is essential. Ms Aamer should have supported a probe.

Shockingly, she dismissed the need for one, calling the coach a 'thorough gentleman', even though Sadia claims she has fielded off other advances by him. He denies the allegation.

There can be no two opinions: gendered assault and violence must not be tolerated under any circumstances; tragically, women suffer on account of these in most spheres of life, including sports.

Action is avoided in such cases of harassment because preserving an institution's reputation outweighs harm done to the victim.

Our culture of misogyny is such that women alleging sexual harassment or abuse are discredited, as is evident in the case of PTI lawmaker Ayesha Gulalai.

It is almost a given: as a woman you will not only be humiliated for your experience but disbelieved; the resulting silence only nurtures predators.

The suicide of cricketer Haleema Rafiq is another tragic example of not taking such allegations seriously.

Disbelieved when she said the chairman of the Multan Cricket Club had demanded sexual favours, she eventually took her own life.

Because such predatory behaviour is both overt and insidious, workplaces must define what constitutes harassment and initiate prompt action against the offenders.

For women, staying silent should no longer be the safest option.

Pressure on Pakistan

Rare is the minister who goes to parliament and briefs its members in a candid manner.

On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif briefed the Senate on US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's trip to Pakistan and, in speaking with clarity and authority, demonstrated once again what had been missing in the Foreign Office for over four years.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's decision to not appoint a full-time foreign minister was one of the more perplexing mistakes of his third term. Mr Asif's comments in the Senate, however, painted a picture of a Pakistan-US relationship that is deeply strained, rejecting the Trump administration strategy in the region as a creation of the US military and responding to a list of alleged militants that the US handed over to Pakistan by reminding the Senate that Pakistan has presented its own list to Afghanistan.

If there is a US South Asia strategy that is emerging, it appears to involve the US, Afghanistan and India acting together to put pressure on Pakistan to do more in the fight against militancy, inside Pakistan and regionally.

To push back against the unfair or unrealistic aspects of that strategy, Pakistan ought to consider drawing up its own South Asia strategy: a coordinated approach towards the US, Afghanistan and India, recognising the interconnectedness of its ties with them.

The strategy should also be proactive, suggesting what steps Pakistan can take and what it needs those countries to do for the interests of all to better align. Currently, it appears that Pakistan complains to the US about India and Afghanistan, lectures Afghanistan on India and lets bilateral problems with the latter interfere with the necessary dialogue that needs to occur on Afghanistan.

That has the collective effect of achieving very little in terms of advancing Pakistan's interests in the region, leaving it vulnerable to concerted pressure from the US, India and Afghanistan.

A South Asia strategy by Pakistan would necessarily entail a domestic dimension too. As the foreign minister has acknowledged before, Pakistan continues to have the problem of some militant and extremist groups being able to operate relatively openly here.

Peace and stability in the region will not be established on a piecemeal basis involving one country at a time. If Afghanistan is unstable and denied peace, there are always likely to be spillover effects in Pakistan. If certain groups are allowed to operate on Pakistani soil, the dialogue with India risks being derailed by regional spoilers. If India continues to see Pakistan's western border as a weakness to be exploited, Pakistan will be unable to broaden its fight against militancy, which is currently focused on anti-Pakistan militants.

Simply, if Pakistan is to be stable and peaceful over the long term, Afghanistan and India must reassess their policies towards this country and vice versa.

Threat to journalists

RECENT events have once again highlighted the multi-dimensional threat to journalists in Balochistan.

Starting Monday, virtually no newspapers have been delivered in the province following calls to newspaper offices by banned separatist groups that they would prevent the distribution of papers for not publishing news about their activities.

Printing presses in Quetta have also reportedly been warned.

Fearing they too would be targeted, agents, hawkers and transporters have refused to distribute any dailies in the province. About two weeks ago, the Balochistan Liberation Front issued a press release in which they threatened violence against media owners and journalists for being complicit, they alleged, in the news blackout.

By any standard, even in a country where the media is constantly under pressure, Balochistan is the worst place to be a journalist.

This is not only on account of the number of journalists who have been killed in the province in connection with their work, but also because media persons are forced to navigate threats emanating from multiple quarters in order to stay alive.

There are feuding tribes with shifting allegiances, extremist organisations and ruthless insurgent groups, as well as instruments of the state, including the Frontier Corps, intelligence agencies and the military; all of which want to use the media to further their agendas.

For journalists, that means an impossibly delicate balancing act: if they appear to 'favour' one group, it places them in the cross hairs of another.

Journalism in Balochistan, especially where local papers are concerned — and about Balochistan in the case of national dailies — has thus been virtually reduced to a farce.

Self-censorship is rampant; human rights violations, particularly in more far-flung areas, go unreported; and editorialising is a bygone practice in local papers, because no editor can afford to articulate a point of view. Press freedom is

complemented by another constitutionally protected right — the right to information.

Both rights are being violated.

The state which should distinguish its actions from those of non-state actors instead of resorting to the same tactics, is partly responsible.

Information is not only that which is deemed kosher by official quarters; journalists have a duty to document the news, whatever the news may be, and convey it to the public.

The fact is, even while threats such as those hurled by separatist groups in the last few days are condemnable, intimidation at the hands of everyone is a constant.

Stifling social media

A PALL is descending on digital spaces, and threatening every citizen's democratic right to free speech with real-life consequences. It comes as no reassurance, then, that while Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal insisted people would be allowed to air their political opinions on social media, he also announced that the FIA would spearhead the creation of a framework to monitor its use. There is a long history of politicians and dictators asserting that the state is being 'maligned' or 'belittled', and using this claim to crush dissent and enforce obsequience in both public and private realms. Given that his government passed the draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, as a PML-N member Mr Iqbal bears some responsibility in this erosion of rights. And with all the baggage of his predecessor's tenure, the onus is squarely on him to assuage any misgivings of his ministry's intentions.

To do so, rather than developing a framework to monitor social media, the existing framework of digital legislation ought to be critically examined, and Peca amended so that cybercrimes are strictly and narrowly defined. The IT experts and digital rights activists the minister wants to consult had made recommendations for Peca, but were sidelined; their advice must now be incorporated. As an investigative body, FIA has no jurisdiction to define what constitutes appropriate use of social

media, and there should be severe limits on its ability to monitor citizens' online activities. True, emerging threats of 'fake news' and foreign attempts to influence elections, which the minister cited, require careful, transparent inquiry. But what is not needed is the securitisation of the one space where it is the people who wield power. Increasingly, we have seen their power affect real change; social media has helped topple dictators, brought corruption to light and exposed sexual predators. If this upsets the status quo, so be it — the people's reckoning has been a long time coming.

CPEC long-term plan

After suffering from a series of delays, the long-term plan, or LTP, for the China Pakistan Economic Corridor is now ready for finalisation at the seventh meeting of the Joint Cooperation Committee to be held in Islamabad on Nov 21.

At the last JCC meeting held in December 2016, the plan was discussed and both sides agreed that the "LTP shall be finalised and approved by March 31, 2017, at the latest" according to the minutes of that discussion. But that date came and went, and we were told that the document was awaiting the signature of the then prime minister who was a bit caught up in his Panama Papers-related entanglements.

Then we were told that the LTP would be finalised during the One Belt, One Road summit held in Beijing in mid May. But the government delegation returned from the summit promising that the plan would be finalised in a couple of weeks.

Since the details of the plan had already been published by Dawn while they were away, we were also promised that immediately upon its finalisation, the full LTP would be made public to dispel some of the anxieties caused by the particulars. Then the trail went cold.

This is the first time we have heard of the plan since then, and Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal has again repeated his commitment to make it public after finalisation. Whatever may have been the reasons for the delay, the fact that we now have a date for finalisation is progress, and the minister must be held to his promise of disclosure.

The LTP is the most detailed long-term plan that has ever been proposed for Pakistan, and its ramifications for the economy are deep and broad.

Contrary to the image of CPEC as an enterprise involving roads and power plants, the LTP shows that the real nature of the engagement with China that is about to begin goes far beyond infrastructure investments and enhanced connectivity.

The real game of CPEC appears to be to prepare the economy, society and culture of Pakistan for a massive influx of Chinese investments and personnel. This could indeed prove to be a positive development, and provide the economy with a boost given the scale of the investments being contemplated.

But the public has a right to know exactly what is being negotiated under this arrangement, and to assess and debate its merits. There can be no two opinions about this.

As soon as the plan is finalised at the next JCC meeting, the clock will start ticking for Mr Iqbal to deliver on his commitment and make a full disclosure of all the contents of the LTP.

A redacted or abbreviated version will not do. Full disclosure is what he promised, and that is what he must ensure.

NA-4 pointers

THE by-poll in NA-4, easily won by the PTI, is a tribute ultimately to the fascinatingly diverse political culture of Peshawar and KP. It has space for everyone and a few more. The result reinforces some old and a few, more recent trends. That the PTI has retained the seat is not surprising. The party is a force to reckon with, especially in KP where it wields considerable influence by virtue of being in power. The PML-N came second, but its reliance on JUI-F for extra mileage at the polling booths did not have any visible effect, which is what had been predicted before Thursday's vote. The ANP, a few votes shy of the PML-N's

total, is on the mend, just as on the other side of the 'ideological' divide the Jamaat-i-Islami's popularity is on the decline. Among the new trends, the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan took another giant step towards proving that it was a religious-political party with a presence and ambition across the country. Only last month, it had surprised everyone by doing better than many big parties in a Lahore by-election. In Peshawar, the Barelvi outfit again secured more ballots than the much-fancied JI and sent signals to everyone around that they ignored its growing presence at their own risk.

Lest we forget, the PPP also contested the NA-4 election with much fanfare. It came fourth. If the PPP's vote tally was respectable in comparison to, say, its showing of late in Punjab, the result did nevertheless vindicate criticism of Mr Asif Ali Zardari's thinking of putting the party's fate in the hands of a few 'electables' of his choice. The PPP chose to have as its candidate the son of the MNA from the PTI whose death had necessitated the by-poll. It was a case of a desperate party partnering a 'leftover electable' at best — a man no other party wanted to field. The move paid the party and the chosen individual no dividends. On the other hand, the PTI's winner in the election comes from a family that had traditionally done its politics from the ANP platform. Arbab Amir Ayub had only joined the Imran Khan camp in May this year and his victory in the sphere of pragmatic Pakistani politics confirmed his own prowess as well as the PTI's status as the party to join for all those looking for power in the near future.

Edhi Foundation's woes

IT is an unfortunate reality that this is a country where the population is increasing as fast as land in the urban areas is becoming a scarcity. It is also a place where corruption is endemic, and where so-called 'land mafias' — another term for groups that through bribery and the use of coercive tactics take land over illegally — thrive. This practice appears to have been given a free rein, with the authorities either ignoring it or, allegedly, colluding with the land grabbers. Perhaps it is not altogether shocking to learn then that such a blatant transgression is occurring in the case of an organisation whose work is exemplary and dedicated to humanity — the Edhi Foundation. On Wednesday, Faisal Edhi and Bilquis Edhi — who have been running the foundation after the demise of Abdul Sattar Edhi — were at the Karachi Press Club to say that the charity's centre in Thatta had been forcibly closed. They alleged that the land mafia was hand in glove with the local administration and the local police, and that the issue was apparently a property dispute with a private party. The closure, they explained, was on the orders of a local court, and, in fact, was a cover-up for the encroachment made on the centre's land by the group.

It was only a few years ago, in 2014, that Edhi senior himself was robbed at his organisation's Karachi head office, even though his work and his team's efforts had brought succour to the poorest of the poor, those that had nowhere to turn, in the country. So while cynicism may be part of the reaction to Wednesday's events, it is also appropriate that, taking notice of the matter, Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah remarked that a person such as Faisal Edhi should not be rendered so helpless that he had to reach the administration and the government through a press conference. The Hyderabad commissioner has now been directed to look into the matter, as well as to provide adequate space to the Edhi Foundation so that it can continue to function until the land dispute is resolved. It can only be hoped that matters are resolved as speedily as possible. It would be catastrophic if the people of the area were denied the services of an organisation that is a household name in the country.

Institutional reforms

IT may be destined to become just another one of the many campaign promises and manifesto pledges that politicians routinely make. But in specifically calling for institutional reforms of the FBR and NAB, PTI supremo Imran Khan has shone a light on a much ignored part of the democratic project: the strengthening of democratic institutions. Since time immemorial, and certainly since the latest transition to democracy began nearly a decade ago in this country, opposition politicians have attacked governing parties for their failure to strengthen institutions of accountability, justice and law and order. Mr Khan, too, is often guilty of speaking in sweeping generalisations that do not amount to a road map for the strengthening of democracy in the country. Yet, he remains perhaps the only senior politician in the country who does return to the subject of institutional reforms often enough to keep the subject a part of the national democratic conversation. Now, more than ever, there is a need for the debate about institutional reforms to be intensified.

A large part of the problem in recent years has been the PML-N and specifically the Sharifs' apparent disdain for institutional decision-making — disdain that has seen a perhaps historic weakening of apex regulators, executive agencies and public organisations. While the specifics may vary, no reasonable assessment would conclude that the FBR and the State Bank are institutionally stronger today. Similarly, be it Nepra or the SECP, neither can be assessed as performing its core duties of protecting the public or the investors' interests satisfactorily. In the realm of law and order and counterterrorism, Nacta remains in the doldrums; NAP has become an afterthought; and police reforms, where the PML-N government in Punjab could take the lead, have been denied. In parliament, the public affairs committee is virtually toothless, while the current PML-N government appears least interested — as did the previous PPP-led dispensation during its rule — in overhauling the accountability process.

Certainly, the solution to the shortcomings of this government or the previous one or, indeed, provincial governments across the country is more democracy, and not less. Political leaders such as Imran Khan, and even those within the PML-N where a power struggle is intensifying, can lay out a road map for institutional reforms that go beyond naïve notions of eliminating corruption in 90 days and turning Pakistan into an economic powerhouse within a period of five years. The reference by Imran Khan to the unjust taxation policies being implemented by the FBR is

particularly pertinent. If the organisation were given true independence and autonomy, it could surely broaden the tax net to include the many income tax evaders in the country instead of heaping further taxes on a few sectors and segments of the population. True, there can be legitimate policy differences about the balance between equity and economic growth, but the political capture of regulators and the financial institutions of the state prevent a meaningful debate from being held. It is impossible for any one leader, party or government to solve Pakistan's myriad challenges, but if the transition to democracy is to be sustained and strengthened, the debate about reforms needs to be urgently taken up.

Excess power supply

IT may feel good to learn that the country will soon have excess electricity generation capacity, beyond what is needed, but it is worth bearing in mind that this comes at a price. Whether or not the power from a plant is being utilised, the payments still need to be made. It is, therefore, critical when engaged in a power-sector expansion plan that accurate demand forecasts are drawn up, and that the government contracts only as much power as will be required, with perhaps a small margin to be held in reserve. The prime minister has now taken note of the fact that the projected surplus in the next four months will range between 2,400 MW and 3,400 MW, and has ordered that some of the less efficient plants that are of older design be shut down during this time.

But if we already have a surplus, why are more power plants continuing to be commissioned? Earlier this year, this debate took place within the water and power ministry, which has since been renamed the energy ministry. Two senior officials, the then water and power secretary and managing director of the National Transmission and Despatch Company, had both warned about the dangers of contracting overcapacity, because the capacity payments will place a massive burden on government finances. Both were removed from their position, and a new argument was floated that the power demand projections under which the capacity expansion plan has been drawn up did not take 'latent demand' into consideration. Both these officers had argued for a cap on contracting more generation capacity beyond what was already in the pipeline, and as a result, had run afoul of powerful vested interests whose investment plans were adversely impacted by the cap. The vested interests won, and the officials lost. But now the situation we were warned

about is coming to pass, and from here onwards the amount that the government has to pay as capacity charges will rise very sharply. There are no reliable estimates put out by the government on the amounts that will have to be paid, but we do know that it will be in tens of billions of rupees per annum. Excess capacity in the power sector is not something to be proud of. It is a sign of poor planning, or worse still, of caving in to vested interests.

Inhuman treatment

IN the lawless landscape that is Pakistan, it has become a cliché that the laws are only as good as the ability to enforce them. Less talked about is the relationship between effective legislation and people's awareness of it — so that laws can serve as prohibition mechanisms too — and the long-term project of turning the face of society in general towards progressiveness. This complexity was amply in evidence through a tragedy reported from Tando Mohammed Khan in Sindh. On Friday, residents of the area with the help of police freed a 10-year-old boy who was found in chains in the local seminary. The child told the police that he had suffered six days of this treatment. The irony lies in the fact that the seminary head said that the boy's family had asked for him to be chained, because the child used to run away from the facility. It is his good fortune that he was found after his cries happened to be heard by employees of a radio station next door. As matters stood when reported, the head of the seminary and the boy's father and elder brother had been arrested.

The law will no doubt now take its course, but this child may well carry the scars of the ordeal with him forever. And sadly, it is a certainty that this boy will not be the last child to be subjected to such ill treatment, just as he was not the first. The country has managed to put on the law books legislation curbing corporal punishment for children, particularly in places of learning. Indeed, Sindh passed a provincial law in this regard earlier this year. Yet the citizenry's knowledge about the laws is largely absent, as is even the realisation that people, and most of all children, have a right to humane treatment and dignity. In tandem with beefing up the law books and implementing the rules, Pakistan needs to urgently start educating the citizenry about the rights of the country's children.

Another bailout for PIA

IT is getting a bit tiring to hear of public-sector enterprises being bailed out repeatedly at the taxpayer's expense. The latest example is that of PIA that only recently jettisoned its choicest route from Karachi to New York. A sum of Rs13bn has been approved for the ailing national carrier as a government-sponsored bailout for its losses. The airline's losses now amount to almost the size of the circular debt in the power sector, if one excludes the outstanding stock held by the Power Holding Company. They have more than tripled over the past five years, and the pace of their accumulation is also increasing. One is entitled to ask where all this will end because clearly it is not a situation that can continue forever.

The national carrier is not the only problem here. The larger baggage of the public-sector enterprises that the government is carrying magnifies the challenge. It is now virtually impossible to say how much money the taxpayer is pouring into these white elephants, since the government's own disclosure template conceals more than it reveals. Nobody wants to see these enterprises shut down altogether, but they cannot continue to receive taxpayer money to help run their payrolls and service their debts. At some point, there has to be a workable solution, but successive governments have failed to find a way forward. This government claims it tried, especially in the case of PIA, but the clumsy handling of the privatisation effort collapsed at the first step when the government tried to convert it into a corporation, sparking protests from the unions that led to fatal clashes in the end, and the closure of the effort altogether.

We can agree that privatisation may not be the only solution in all cases. But it is impossible to argue that endless subsidies and bailouts is the answer in any way. Therefore, a way forward that follows a middle path between the two is the only solution in the case of PIA especially. One thing is certain though: bringing in another highly paid CEO or MD at the top will not work as repeated changes of management have shown. Something has to change in the governance structure of the enterprise, starting with the board of directors, as well as changing the status of the company to make it less possible for political elements to interfere in its functioning. After that, the open skies policy needs to be revisited. State-owned airlines are thriving in many other countries, so it ought to be clear that government ownership by itself is not the problem. The government should agree to further bailouts only if it has a vision for the future of the airline. Otherwise, it is just

throwing good money after bad, and sinking public money into a bottomless quagmire.

Cricket revival

SUNDAY, Oct 29, 2017, will go down in the annals of Pakistan cricket as a historic day — a day when international cricket returned to the country after an absence of over eight years. Nearly everything took a back seat to cricket on that day as Pakistan played the Sri Lanka team in a T20 match in Lahore, emerging victorious yet again after the 5-0 ODI triumph in the UAE earlier this month. It was a happy event for the Pakistanis, and fans turned up in their thousands to fill the Gaddafi Stadium, sending a message to the world that no kind of terrorism could dent the country's resilience. The Sri Lankans, too, were offered a tumultuous welcome, having been the target of the terrorist attack in the city in 2009. It was this terrible incident that had caused Test-playing nations around the world to refuse cricket tours to Pakistan. The national team was forced to fulfil its international commitments in the UAE, where games were played before sparse crowds much to the chagrin of the players and fans in this cricket-mad country. It is hoped that Sunday's game has put all that in the past.

The detractors, though, were quick to highlight the downside — the extraordinary security measures (as many as 10,000 policemen were deployed) that were in place for the match, and the opting out of half-a-dozen Sri Lankan players including skipper Upul Tharanga, Lasith Malinga and others. The critics contended that this was not the ideal scenario for a cricket match and that Pakistan needed to do a lot more to convince leading teams such as South Africa, Australia and England to revive full-fledged tours to this country. Such arguments cannot be dismissed out of hand; nevertheless the picture is not all that bleak — with a fair bit of light at the end of the tunnel for which the PCB deserves much credit. The West Indies cricket team is set to tour Pakistan for three T20 games next month while a number of Pakistan Super League matches are scheduled to be played in Karachi and Lahore in February next year. Besides, the Asian Cricket Council has decided that the Asia Cup for emerging players will be held in Pakistan, which is a significant development, especially considering the fact that India is supposed to be part of that tournament which is set to be played in April 2018.

Sindh literature fest

HEALTHY cultural activity is a sign of a society's vibrancy and its commitment to art and learning. Over the past few years, there has been a positive change in Sindh with a number of cultural festivals and conferences organised focusing on Sindh's literature, arts and folklore. In this regard, the second iteration of the Sindh Literature Festival wrapped up on Sunday in Karachi; over three days, writers, thinkers, politicians and artists discussed the major questions of the day with relation to Sindh and from Sindh's perspective. As the organisers put it, the festival is meant to celebrate Sindh and Sindhi, as well as other major languages that are spoken in this province, including Urdu, Balochi, Seraiki and English. One interesting aside came from the Sindh culture minister, who suggested that Karachi's name be changed to its 'original' nomenclature, Kolachi. Minister sahib should know that what Karachi and other cities and towns in Sindh need most is good governance, not cosmetic name changes. However, all said and done, the literature festival is a welcome addition to Sindh's cultural calendar and we hope it becomes a regular feature, highlighting art and literature in Sindhi and other languages spoken in the province.

With the onslaught of globalisation, English and other dominant languages, have hampered the progress of many local languages. That is why festivals and literary activities are needed to provide a platform to the latter variety. State patronage is essential to support the publishing of books in the languages spoken in Pakistan, as well as to establish centres for their preservation, research and teaching. It is equally important for the private sector and civil society to help languages prosper. For example, there is a vibrant Sindhi print and electronic media. Along with the state's support for Pakistani languages, civil society — through providing such cultural platforms — can contribute to maintaining linguistic diversity in this country and bringing people together through sharing the languages spoken in this country.