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Editorials for the Month of July 2018

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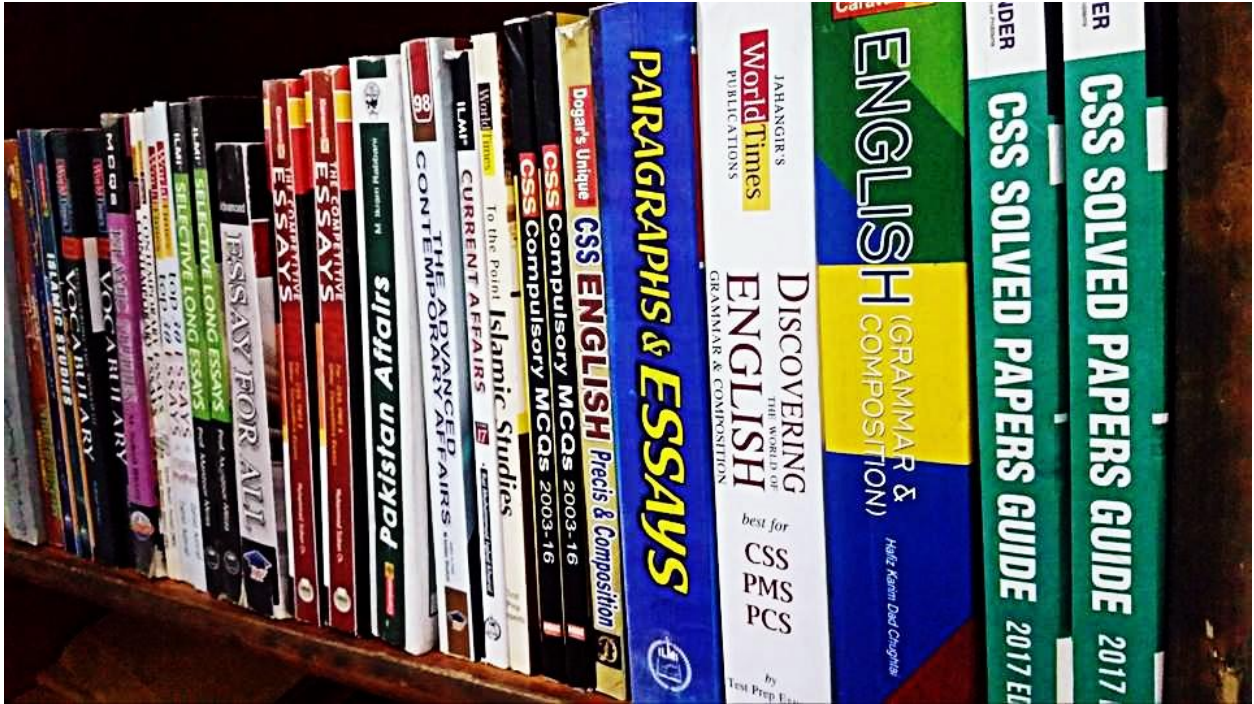


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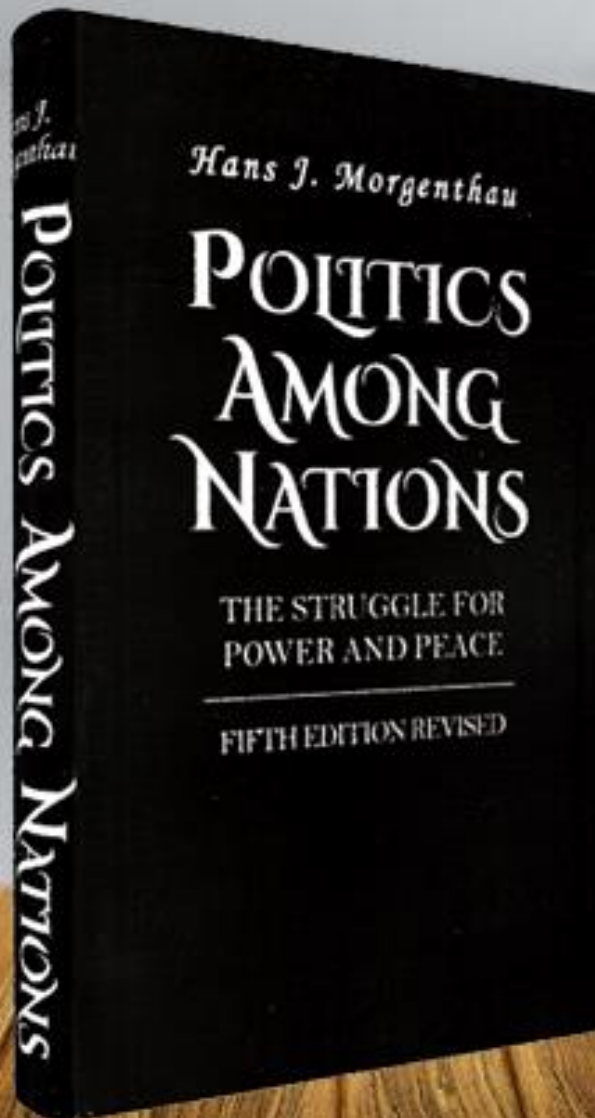
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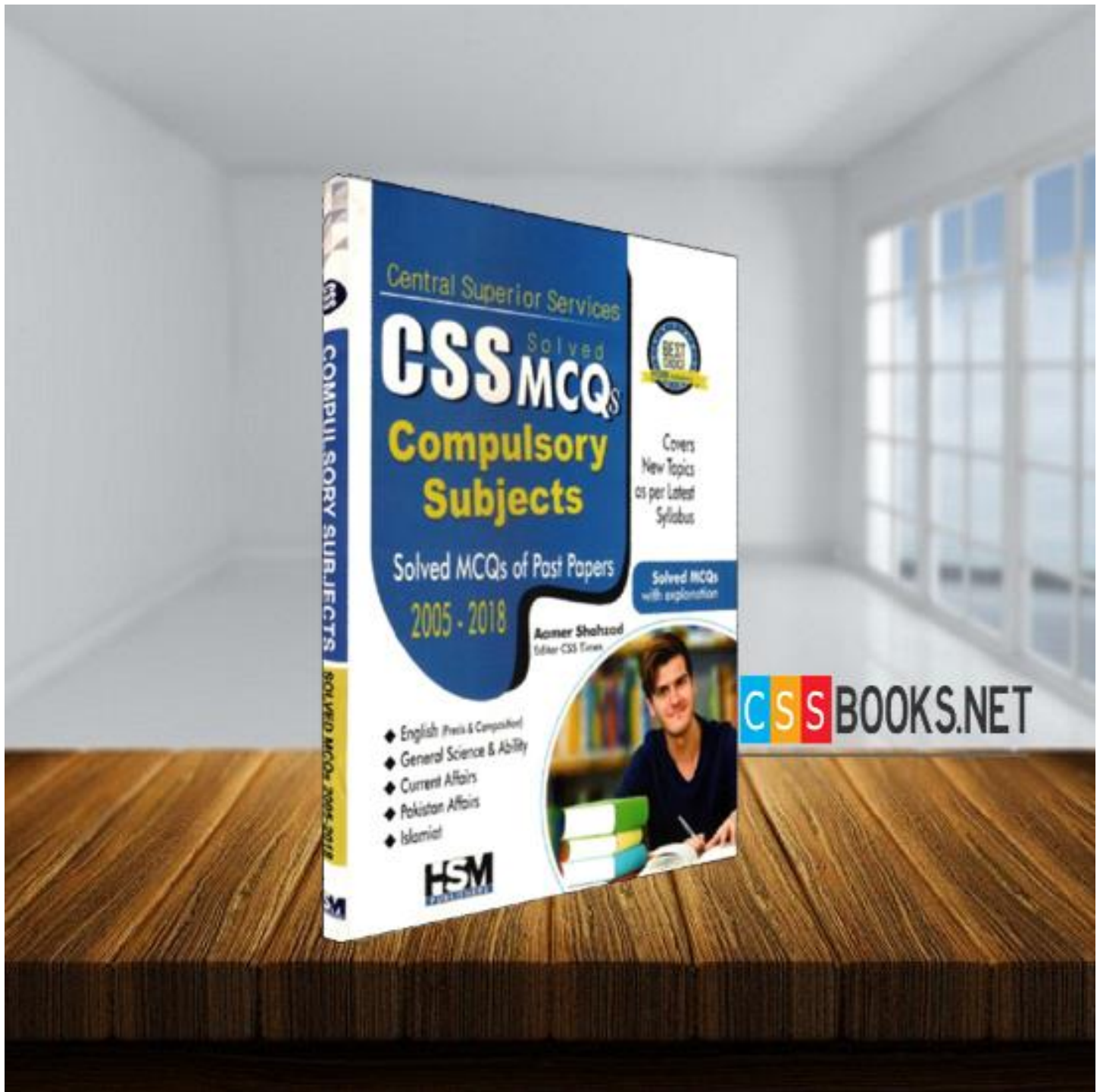
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In The Run-Up To Election Day

IF there is to be a semblance of competitive and fair elections from this point onwards, now that the candidate lists have been finalised by the ECP, it will require a change of attitude by institutions and political parties themselves. First, the role of institutions. It is fairly clear that thus far the run-up to the general election has been marred by too many instances of candidates being sidelined and taken out of the electoral equation on one pretext or another. While the application of the law cannot be suspended and those seeking public office must be subjected to more scrutiny than the average citizen, a process involving multiple steps and several layers of vetting has led to the finalisation of the ballots in each constituency. For an election to be reasonably fair and for the voter to have a clear understanding of the choice she has, there needs to be certainty about the candidates and their party affiliations on the final ballot.

With polling day scheduled for 24 days from today, there ought to be no further unnecessary interventions by institutions. The public ought to have a chance to familiarise itself with the final candidates and their party affiliations at the constituency level before deciding whom to cast its vote for. Unless compelling evidence is produced or immediate action is absolutely warranted, the ECP and the courts should not derail further candidacies between now and election day. After the poll, matters can be revisited if the evidence warrants an intervention. Second, political parties themselves ought to put an end to the bartering and seat adjustments that can blight election day. Certainly, qualified candidates have a right to seek the ticket of any political party, and political parties are expected to try and maximise their prospects of success. But last-minute and eleventh-hour deal-making and bartering can undermine the fairness of an election. The voter should be presented with a clear and fixed choice on the ballot paper.

Finally, political parties and institutions of the state should recognise that the democratic process itself is under scrutiny in the country. The country is on the verge of a historic general election because there is a broad institutional and political consensus that civilian elected governments are the only stable and viable path to governing the country. However, there are quite obviously deep divisions between sections of the political class and sections of the state. The national political leadership is also arguably more divided than it has been at any other point

since the 1990s. How institutions and political parties choose to conduct themselves in the final weeks going into the historic general election could have a long-lasting effect on the democratic project in the country. It is hoped that good sense, caution and a spirit of conciliation will prevail. A fiercely contested election should not lead to an unravelling of politics.

Women In Election

IT seems that with the approach of election day, there is growing evidence of aspiring women candidates getting a raw deal from political parties. In a few instances over the past few days, tickets have been actually taken back from women candidates and handed over to men, who are regarded as more likely to win the contest. These women left out at the last minute have joined the ranks of others like them who have been conveniently ditched by their parties in the run-up to the polls. In an overwhelming majority of cases, the sidelined women have paid the price of not belonging to influential families. Even in cases where women candidates have been nominated, it is usually because of the non-availability of suitable male aspirants within the family. The cynical view is that we can only have women nominees when and if the traditional influential families are forced by some internal compulsions, such as no male relative eligible to contest, to allow them to participate. In that context, some have gone as far as to praise a Pervez Musharraf-era clause that barred those who did not possess at least a Bachelor's degree from taking part in the polls. That was an unfair condition, although it did force many families to field younger-generation candidates in the 2002 general election, among them some women.

The tokenism of today — which has the political parties grudgingly agreeing to a sprinkling of women candidates in the contest — is no doubt disheartening. The presence of women on the electoral board is in no way commensurate with their potential and their rightful share in running the affairs of this country, of which politics and elections are an integral part. Yet there are signs which need to be built upon until a more reasonable gender-based ratio among the election candidates can be achieved. One aspect of the campaign so far is that the protests against this anti-women bias are now far stronger than they had been during previous elections. Consequently, parties have been on the back foot trying to defend their pro-men, pro-patriarchy decisions, often conceding just how

unreasonable some of their last-minute constituency solutions have been in the context of women candidates. This should be an incentive for those looking for some kind of gender balance, if not gender equality, to push ahead with their demands. The lords sitting over the masses are not going to yield unless pressed hard enough.

Monsoon Preparation

THIS is the first time in well over a decade that an interim government is presiding over the country during the monsoon season. Considering Pakistan has seen large-scale flooding over five years since 2010, the likelihood of another extreme weather event hitting the country in the next few months is higher than it has been in the past. Such an event can come in many forms. In the past, we have seen large-scale floods caused by massive rainfall, as well as a cloudburst above Chitral that triggered multiple simultaneous glacial lake outbursts that destroyed the entire district. It takes concerted efforts, particularly on the part of the provincial governments, to coordinate the response to such an event. And with an interim government in place, with single ministers holding multiple portfolios and the entire state standing in a holding pattern effectively, the chances of a quick and well-coordinated response after the event are significantly lower.

It is imperative, therefore, that local administrations in flood-prone areas start preparations early. They must identify flood-prone areas, inform residents that in the event of a flood they must rush to high ground, test whatever flood-warning systems they have in place, and coordinate which dykes must undergo breaches if there is a flood peak travelling through the waterway. But above the level of local governments, the centre must meet officials from the Met department and get a briefing on the state of the early warning system, and find out how far in advance the Met authorities can issue an alert. After that, they must create points of contact between the centre and provincial governments to coordinate the response in the event of an alert being issued. There is a lot of work that goes into preparing for a possible flood, and much more to manage its effects. The interim governments at the centre and in the provinces must not be caught napping as the monsoon season approaches.

Water Crisis: Treading Carefully

THE water crisis in the country is undeniably alarming. Serious action is required and long-term solutions will almost certainly include a combination of increased storage capacity and better utilisation of water already available in the system. Given the urgency of the problem, it is perhaps welcome that all institutions of the state are beginning to emphasise the gravity of the water crisis and the need for innovative solutions. But for effective interventions the right institutions of the state must address specific problems. Water storage and management are clearly an area of expertise and constitutional responsibility of the executive. Other state institutions ought to aid and encourage the executive in finding timely and comprehensive solutions to the national water crisis. It is quite possible that is what Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar has in mind with his recent remarks about dams being a large part of the solution to the water crisis and funds for building two large dams being raised through loan recoveries that banks may have waived earlier. But great caution is needed at the intersection of the law, finance and water.

On the issue of loan recoveries from businesses and allegedly politically connected wealthy individuals over the decades, it is possible that undue favours by state regulators may be unearthed in an exhaustive financial analysis. Yet, it is perhaps relevant to keep in mind the origins of the matter that the Supreme Court has again taken up with urgency. According to media reports, the current probe by the court can be traced back to hearings initiated by former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry in 2008 regarding loan write-offs during the regime of Gen Pervez Musharraf. The era of judicial interventions under Mr Chaudhry is almost universally regarded as highly controversial and, in the case of economic decision-making, is believed to have caused untold losses to the public exchequer. While fat cats and rogue businessmen should be pursued fearlessly, it is important that the foundations of the economy not be rocked in misguided pursuits. It is hoped that the superior judiciary will proceed with caution, keeping front and centre the constitutional separation of powers and the authority of the executive.

In the area of water policy, the enormous social, economic and political dimensions of policy interventions ought to make the judiciary even more cautious. Funding, building and maintaining dams and managing water flows are areas where the executive not only has constitutional authority but the greater expertise among the institutions of the state. Yet, the next federal and provincial governments ought to

recognise the severity of the water crisis in the country and make it a priority to find national solutions to the water crisis. It has become apparent that inaction by the country's political leadership can invite outside interference. Surely, then, the next elected governments ought to make water a national priority.

PPP Manifesto

THE PPP has come out with an incredibly detailed manifesto promising a world of opportunity to the nation. But, two important questions come to mind; how is it different from the last two editions? And, will it this time, be put into action?

In 2008, the party laid out similar plans. It vowed decisive action on water security, poverty alleviation, labour policy reform, energy security, empowerment of women, and enhancement of the rule of law.

The 2013 document made almost identical commitments. Additionally, it also included details on how the PPP had lived up to its promises when in power. However, when it came to the polls, the electorate manifested its disagreement with all such claims as the party's vote plummeted to half.

What it achieved was modest to say the least, and the markers of success were not met. In 2008, the PPP announced that it would build 100,000 homes for the poor, and a budget allocation was made. Nothing happened and the funds lapsed.

In its manifesto the party had declared it would ensure local government elections, but we had to wait until 2016 to see them in Sindh.

To its credit, the PPP has always spoken of empowering women, and has introduced some positive legislation towards this end. However, much remains to be done.

By 2015, it had the lowest average wage for unskilled female workers. The province also had the dubious distinction of showing the lowest percentage of employed women relative to men — 14pc to 86pc. In 2014, after six years of PPP rule, the province had the highest incidence of violence.

Meanwhile, the issue of press freedom, a growing area of concern in this country, has been given short shrift in comparison to its 2013 manifesto.

The most worrying aspect is that all three manifestos glanced over civil service reform with vague statements about even vaguer plans. Considering Asif Zardari's guarantee of a government job for every family in the country, it suggests that there will be no reform but just a ballooning of an already bloated bureaucracy — cementing the notion of growth without development and, in the process, doing away with concepts of competence and meritocracy.

But, this time the PPP has a new face in Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. Would he, somewhere in the future, be able to claim that the PPP will transform Lahore into Karachi, without it sounding more like a threat? Will he be able to deliver on his promises? For as Carl Jung put it, "you are what you do, not what you say."

Trump's Palestine Plan

WHILE the Arab-Israeli peace process is practically dead, thanks mainly to Tel Aviv's brutality and American support of the Israeli occupation, a new 'peace plan' piloted by Donald Trump is said to be in the works.

As reported, Mr Trump's son-in-law and Middle East point man Jared Kushner recently toured the region to drum up Arab support for the so-called 'deal of the century'. While no official version of the plan has emerged yet, credible sources have leaked details and the news for the Palestinians is not good: if the plan is implemented, it will effectively normalise the occupation and condemn the Palestinians to live as second-class citizens in their own land under Israeli overlordship.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has reportedly refused to consider the plan while veteran Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told the media that the plan will "eventually ... normalise the Israeli apartheid in Palestine". Unfortunately for the Palestinians, key Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, are said to be backing the plan.

According to the leaked details, the Palestinians will be told to forget Jerusalem and make do with Abu Dis — a suburb of the holy city — as their capital, while the Arabs will also be denied the right to return to lands snatched from them by the Israeli occupiers over the decades.

It is difficult to see the Palestinians accept such a humiliating offer. Moreover, Israel will maintain security control over the Arabs while illegal Israeli settlements will be legitimised. After seven decades of strife, peace is sorely needed in Palestine. However, it must be a just and honourable peace, recognising the Palestinians' national and human rights, preferably in the shape of a viable two-state solution.

Yet, with a right-wing government in Tel Aviv bent upon smothering Palestinian desires, and its powerful backer in the White House supporting Israel's every move, such a peace is a distant dream. What is even worse is that the Palestinians' 'Arab brothers' appear to have abandoned them in their hour of trial.

Forgotten Balochistan

IT is to all intents and purposes a politically forgotten province. Thus far, Balochistan has not featured in the election campaigns of most national political parties. It is not even clear if the leaderships of the major political parties intend to visit the province before July 25.

The deafening political silence on Balochistan ought to be of concern to all democratic-minded and right-thinking citizens of the country. In every way, politically, socially, economically and in terms of security, Balochistan is a province that is hurting.

The latest spell of national political engineering began in Balochistan with the snatching away from the PML-N of the coalition government it led in the province. The long-running security troubles in Balochistan have scarcely improved.

Socioeconomically, conditions in large parts of Balochistan are routinely ranked at the bottom of provincial and district indices. While Balochistan may have the fewest seats among the provinces in the National Assembly, the dire situation in the province ought to have drawn the attention of the national political leadership.

That the extremely worrying situation in Balochistan has not attracted the attention of the national political leadership in their campaigns so far is itself a new worry. From the very beginning of the latest low-level Baloch insurgency to wrack the province, it had been apparent that only a political solution could put an end to the violence.

After the regime of Pervez Musharraf ended in 2008, five years of a PPP-led provincial government scarcely brought about any improvement. In 2013, the return to electoral politics of moderate Baloch nationalist parties, which had boycotted the 2008 polls, created fresh hope in the beleaguered and troubled province.

For a while it had appeared possible that Baloch political moderates may be able to persuade the security establishment to try and make peace with Baloch separatists. But that hope quickly dissipated, and Balochistan settled into a familiar pattern of a political government without much power and a security establishment controlling more than it should.

Yet, for all the failures so far, if true and positive change is to be effected in Balochistan, the national political leadership cannot abandon the province. Indeed, the collapse of the PML-N-led provincial government following what was effectively an intra-party coup, underlined the dangers of a political vacuum in an unstable province.

Instead of national politics helping stabilise Balochistan, the province was turned into a breeding ground for political conspiracy at the national level. If the major political parties believe that by all but ignoring Balochistan in their campaigns their electoral hopes in the other provinces and at the centre will not be negatively affected, they are likely mistaken.

Teetering as the democratic project may be, the national political parties ought to consider that the federation cannot be strengthened if one province is virtually cut off from the rest. Please, campaign in and for Balochistan.

Petrol Price Hike

THE sharp hikes just effected in the prices of petrol, diesel and kerosene were inevitable given the recent depreciation of the rupee. It would be wrong to fault the caretaker government for taking this step that will be keenly felt by consumers, because keeping prices constant after a depreciation of the exchange rate would mean the administration would have to pay a subsidy on these products, something that was phased out many years ago. The step only brings the true price of petrol to the consumer, a fact that was being concealed with the artificial exchange rate prevailing before the depreciation. Rather than criticise the caretakers, a lesson should be drawn from the dangers of mismanaging the exchange rate.

The step is a reminder of the massive pressures that have built up on the economy on account of maintaining an artificial exchange rate for such a long period. The price increases in petrol and diesel are likely to be followed by similar hikes in the import price of gas, and will necessarily impact power tariffs as well. Combined hikes in the price of fuel and power are likely to boost inflation, which will cause the State Bank to consider possible hikes in the discount rate. In short, the entire economy is pregnant with inflationary pressures that once unleashed can impact aggregate demand and the growth rate. At the moment, it is difficult to say how far this cascading impact of the exchange rate adjustment will go, and how deep its eventual impact could be. But as the effects of the exchange rate adjustment work their way through the economy in the weeks to come, we will discover just how robust former finance minister Ishaq Dar's growth story really is. The next government will undoubtedly waste no opportunity to remind the nation of its economic inheritance. But it too must realise that avoiding the same mistakes of its predecessor that gave in to the demands of populism by not passing on the full cost to consumers is easier said than done. So long as the economy remains stuck behind a low-productivity barrier and low revenue base, it will have no choice but to repeat the same mistakes all over again: borrow and spend to spur a shallow and artificial growth process and create a short-lived sense of prosperity among the citizenry. In the meantime, there is little sense in venting against the fuel price hike.

Shaming Politicians

IT is a troubling trend. A number of election candidates have been confronted by ostensibly unhappy voters, quite often to the applause of those who draw pleasure from the public humiliation of well-known figures.

While on the face of it, the people might have been protesting against the missing basic amenities, and highlighting their grievances through publicly accosting canvassing politicians, the problem is a deeper one.

Ideally, these basic jobs should be left to local government representatives; however, the bigwigs who sit in the assemblies are greatly to blame since they are guilty of concentrating authority in their own hands, leaving the lower tier powerless.

In a way then, these protests, notwithstanding allegations that they target specific parties and personalities to stop them from campaigning freely, have everything to do with the centralisation of power. Protests are part and parcel of the deal, but the manner in which they are registered does raise alarm.

While the method the protesters have adopted may be a sign of the latter's frustration, it does not necessarily establish them as voters asserting their choice. With elections just three weeks away, a more profound and lasting snub would have been for them to vote out inept politicians.

Much emotion is going into this election. People have learnt the uses of a mobile phone complete with camera, internet and access to social media sites where they expose underperforming politicians.

The mainstream media is ready to provide them a platform since such news has a big market. The scenes showing a politician — a sardar, head of political party, a former minister, etc — are eagerly lapped up and seen as evidence of the public's anger.

But this is precisely the point that needs to be made. The kind of passion that is on display — stoked by new and old actors who like their elections served with a lot of controversy — could give way to more violence in the coming days. That would be most unfortunate.

Amnesty Scheme Deadline

GIVEN the flood of declarations, the government has taken a practical step by extending the deadline of the amnesty scheme till July 31.

Going by the emerging numbers, it appears the state is likely to gather far in excess of Rs100bn as tax revenue from the scheme once it ends. The extension does no harm to the scheme or the momentum behind it while adding to the gains for the state.

Now that the deadline has been extended, however, it is important that expectations of a further loosening of the terms or another extension be tempered. There is an ingrained culture of laxity in this country when it comes to tax-related matters, as evidenced by the constant extensions in tax-filing deadlines, and that culture needs to end along with the practice of not filing returns.

Up till now, people can claim to have had a number of valid reasons, such as the Supreme Court's ruling in favour of the scheme coming less than 20 days before it was due to end, to ask for an extension. But now that hurdle has been crossed, and calls for further delays, using events like the general election or other developments as an excuse, must not be entertained.

What must also be resisted is the demand to allow the repatriation of foreign funds through exchange companies. Banks are the correct channels to use for transacting business, and the entrenched habit of using exchange companies as a surrogate channel for sending business-related remittances must also end.

The State Bank is correct in its stance on this debate, and with a wide extension already in place, the government should speak with a unified voice to all potential declarants that the scheme's parameters have been decided, all lacunae removed, and further demands for changes are no longer being heard.

The success of the scheme is tempered by what it has revealed. The amount of money hoarded by Pakistanis in foreign jurisdictions is substantial, and this data must be revealed by the government once the scheme ends. The declarants are entitled to their privacy, but releasing data in aggregated form does not violate that.

The government must ensure that data about tax collected, as well as value of assets declared and the number of declarants who availed the scheme is made public.

In addition, we should also be told how many of the foreign assets declared were actually brought back to the country. The massive accumulation of wealth in secret jurisdictions will soon carry grave risks, and the pressure on those who evade their tax obligations is mounting.

Once the scheme ends, the changes in culture that it might have helped bring about must be used to ensure that we never go back to past practices of building vast hoards outside the country.

Airline Safety

SUO MOTU proceedings in the Supreme Court have underlined that the CAA, which oversees and regulates all aspects of civil aviation in the country, may still be exposing the general public and aviation employees to intolerable risks. The suo motu proceedings led by Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar have focused on crashes this decade of aircraft operated by Airblue, Bhoja Air and PIA and the non-payment of compensation to heirs of victims. The shocking details in the 2014 report of a judicial inquiry into the Bhoja Air crash of April 2012 have been revived in the Supreme Court this week and served as a reminder that the public has few assurances that a similar incident will not occur again. The judicial inquiry had found that Bhoja Air had flown and the CAA had allowed an aircraft which did not have the relevant airworthiness certificate to fly, while the airline itself was in poor financial health and its staff not properly trained to deal with emergency situations and bad weather. What is not known, and may come to light in further proceedings in the Supreme Court, is if the CAA is carrying out its oversight and regulatory responsibilities with greater care today.

A few years of relatively stable growth in Pakistan has greatly increased air traffic in the country: more than 20m passengers take to the skies in Pakistan each year and air traffic may grow in the double digits annually for years to come. If those passengers are to be kept safe and airline safety in the country is to be at par with global standards, it may be necessary to do a thorough audit of the CAA itself. It

is not known what, if any, steps the CAA has taken after three fatal air crashes this decade. International aviation experts note that a better measure of airline safety may be to consider a range of incidents and accidents, and not just plane crashes, that affect an airline. How would PIA and private airlines measure up against more comprehensive estimates of safety? Suo motu proceedings are perhaps not ideal for sustained and irreversible improvements in the work of regulators. The next federal government and parliament should take up the issue of airline safety and the CAA's overall performance. Both the safety of an ever-growing number of air passengers and the constitutional prerogatives of the executive will be at stake.

UN Chief & Rohingya

THE miserable plight of the Rohingya has drawn international attention, and on Monday, UN Secretary General António Guterres visited members of the beleaguered community in a Bangladeshi refugee camp to hear their ordeal. Mr Guterres, who described their situation as “a humanitarian and human rights nightmare”, minced no words while discussing the plight of the Rohingya on his visit to the Kutupalong refugee camp. Around 700,000 people had fled Rakhine state in Myanmar after last year's ethno-religious violence, most of which targeted the minority Muslim Rohingya community. “Let's be clear where the responsibility is — it is in Myanmar,” the UN chief said during his visit. The military-dominated government in Myanmar considers members of the community ‘Bengalis’ and refuses to give them citizenship rights.

While there have been efforts to repatriate the refugees, the situation in Myanmar is still not conducive for their return. Less than 200 people out of hundreds of thousands have opted to return to Myanmar; most say they won't until their citizenship rights and safety are guaranteed. The Myanmar authorities have punished a general who reportedly led the violent campaign against the Rohingya after the EU applied pressure. However, this is just a drop in the ocean. Myanmar needs to do much more to help reintegrate the Rohingya into society, take steps to guarantee their safety and punish those responsible for the rape and murder of members of the minority community. A just and humane solution must also be reached to address the question of citizenship for the Rohingya. Up till now, the world has done very little to protect the Rohingya from violence and intimidation. However, it is hoped that after the UN chief's personal attention to their plight,

things will change and the global community will send a strong signal to Myanmar that the human rights of the community must be respected. The authorities in Myanmar cannot allow extremist elements to persecute the Rohingya.

Nawaz's Dilemma

THE first phase of a historic accountability trial of former prime minister and PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif and his children may end with further confusion and uncertainty about the legal and political fate of Mr Sharif.

In comments to the media in London yesterday, Mr Sharif has indicated his preference to return to Pakistan after his ailing wife, Kulsoom Nawaz, regains consciousness.

With no clarity on when her condition is likely to improve, Mr Sharif has requested the NAB court to reserve its judgement in the first of three accountability references against him until he can return to Pakistan and is present in the court to hear the verdict.

With the NAB court scheduled to announce its verdict tomorrow, it remains to be seen if Mr Sharif's request will be entertained. Certainly, both Mr Sharif and the NAB court are in a difficult situation.

The NAB court must comply with the orders of the Supreme Court to wrap up the accountability trials at the earliest. In addition, regardless of what the verdict in the first reference against Mr Sharif is, it is likely to affect the PML-N's poll campaign and perhaps the election outcome itself.

Meanwhile, Kulsoom Nawaz's medical condition is undeniably serious and Mr Sharif's desire to see his wife conscious before he returns to Pakistan, where he could be jailed immediately, is understandable.

Yet, Mr Sharif left Pakistan with the explicit guarantee that he would return to Pakistan and continue to attend the NAB trial as mandated by the court. And while it is possible to sympathise with Mr Sharif regarding his wife's immediate medical condition, both Mr Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz have attended their trial

in the Islamabad NAB court while Kulsoom Nawaz has been receiving medical care in London.

Therefore, if the court declines to delay announcing its verdict, Mr Sharif should return to Pakistan immediately and be present in court when the judgement is announced.

From a political perspective, it is apparent that the absence of Mr Sharif has immediately and significantly impacted the PML-N's election campaign. Shahbaz Sharif and the rest of the PML-N leadership do not appear to have ignited the public imagination, and the PML-N appears to remain a party that responds primarily to the political appeal of Nawaz Sharif.

That the country's major political parties are so dominated by personalities who appear to be a permanent part of the political landscape is certainly disappointing from a democratic perspective.

It was hoped that democratic continuity would help identify and empower the next generation of political leadership in the country, but an across-the-board failure to foster democratic traditions in political parties appears to have stifled the latter's evolution.

If Nawaz Sharif is determined to remain the face and identity of the PML-N, he must make a difficult personal decision and return to Pakistan immediately.

Flooding in Lahore

PREDICTABLY enough, the torrential rains in Lahore on Tuesday and Wednesday have been the harbinger of bad news. At least 15 people have been killed, including several who were electrocuted, and municipal workers have had to resort to boats to rescue people stranded on roads that turned into canals. The construction of the upcoming multibillion-rupee Orange Line Metro project brought more chaos when a massive sinkhole opened up in a newly carpeted portion of Mall Road under which an underground station is being built. That not only brought the civil engineering work at the site into question, but also raised concerns that

the rainwater pouring into the crater would compromise the foundations of the station and the historic buildings in the vicinity. The eight-hour-long deluge proved to be the highest rainfall ever recorded for the city in a single day in July. Inevitably, the ensuing mayhem provided much fodder for political opponents and social media to mock the former chief minister's claims about having turned Lahore into Paris.

The city is no stranger to urban flooding; one of the worst instances was four years ago when nearly 20 people were killed because of the monsoon downpour. Then as now, despite the challenge posed by a catastrophic volume of rain concentrated within a short span of time, the solution is not rocket science. What is needed is an overhaul of the aging sewerage infrastructure and a methodical solid waste disposal system across Lahore. The fact that the flooding is not so severe in some of the areas where drainage has been widened and upgraded in the course of building new roads, and where a better solid waste management programme is in place, proves the point. There are also other factors that go hand in hand with a rapidly growing metropolis and which have the potential to disrupt municipal functions. For example, unplanned urbanisation and changes in land use can result in encroachments on drainage outlets, and infrastructure built according to the requirements of residential areas cannot cope with the demands of commercialised spaces. Moreover, many industrial units within Lahore — particularly the smaller ones — discharge untreated effluent into open drains. In the event of flooding, residents are also at risk of coming into contact with these industrial chemicals, thereby compounding the health hazard posed by pools of stagnant water. People should not have to fear the coming of the rains every year.

World Cup Mania

REGARDLESS of which team goes on to win the FIFA World Cup 2018 later this month, the tournament, hosted by Russia, has already seen enough upsets and high drama to go down as one of the most gripping sporting contests. Defending champions Germany's elimination in the group stage, for the first time in 80 years, turned the entire tournament on its head in the opening week and set the tone for the roller-coaster spectacle that it has been so far. The four-time World Cup champions, who won the title at Rio de Janeiro in 2014, lost to an unfancied South Korea 2-0, triggering a series of shock exits of favourites including South American

football giant Argentina, Portugal and the 2010 World Cup winners Spain who were sent packing by lowly ranked Russia. The topsy-turvy show of leading teams has narrowed the gulf between the minnows and giants of international football. The hugely improved skills displayed by lesser teams such as Iran, Iceland, Russia and South Korea have threatened the very best in a tournament that has surpassed viewership benchmarks many times over. One of the highlights has been the emergence of French teenage sensation Kylian Mbappe who saw his team through to the quarter-finals in a memorable clash against Argentina. Ironically, the match all but brought down the curtain on Lionel Messi's illustrious career.

Argentina, the 2014 World Cup finalists, looked a shadow of their former selves as they lost 3-0 to Croatia and were held 1-1 by debutant Iceland. Russia 2018 has also become the first World Cup tournament to make use of the video assistant referees technology that has come under fire by some quarters, especially after the England-Tunisia game and a few others that saw penalties being awarded to the wrong teams. However, the unpredictability of competition notwithstanding, the quarter-final lineup still gives the enthusiasts much to look forward to. France are up against Uruguay, Brazil are pitted against Belgium, Croatia confront Russia, and England take on Sweden. May the best team win.

Disturbing Electoral Entry

THE normalisation of the religious far right and the militant right in national politics ought to be of great concern to all right-thinking and democratic citizens of Pakistan.

It is not clear if a so-called policy of mainstreaming of militant groups is being surreptitiously foisted on a largely unsuspecting electorate or if the religious far right and militant groups have themselves identified a political opening of a lifetime.

What is apparent, however, is that the 2018 general election will likely witness a historic participation of radical and fringe religious groups, some explicitly militarised and others less so.

In terms of candidates fielded, the eventual votes polled and the number of seats won, the 2018 election may rival or perhaps far outstrip the 2002 general election outcome, which saw the rise of the MMA.

But the MMA comprised largely of mainstream religious parties with electoral and parliamentary track records. The recent rise of a disparate group of ultra-right and militant electoral contenders and their supporters is surely without precedent.

How has this happened? The sudden political rise of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan; the rebranding of the Muslim Milli League, which failed to convince civilian institutions that the party ought to be registered with the ECP; and the sudden removal of legal impediments for candidates affiliated with the ASWJ are of particular concern.

Certainly, the right of individuals to participate in an election, as candidates or voters, must not be limited or infringed upon unless there is a compelling legal reason or judicial verdict declaring otherwise. At the very least, however, all candidates should be required to renounce violence and pledge their support for a democratic, constitutional form of government.

But the rhetoric of the far right can often be considered hate speech, an incitement to violence and an attempt to spread sectarian discord. When it comes to groups with an external militant orientation, participation in the general election could leave

Pakistan on the wrong side of international law and a global consensus against militancy.

Yet, while some mainstream political parties have been subjected to exceptional scrutiny and several mainstream politicians have struggled to get their names on a ballot paper, the new ultra-right religious crop has faced virtually no public scrutiny.

Perhaps more astonishing, for example, than the TLP's ability to field 150 candidates for the National Assembly across the country is that none of those candidates appears to have encountered any resistance during the nomination process overseen by the ECP.

Meanwhile, the Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek, the latest incarnation of the LeT's political wing, has managed to field 50 MNA candidates in Punjab and KP — again with virtually no known scrutiny.

The contentious issue of mainstreaming and the myriad policy and legal questions it raises cannot simply be brushed away. The democratic system may not survive such ill-thought-out tampering and interference.

XDR Typhoid Crisis

AS evinced in recent days, come monsoon season and Pakistan is awash with multiple crises. Yet one emerging issue, endemic in the country and exacerbated at this time of year, has failed to receive the sustained attention it merits. Earlier this year, the revelation that a typhoid outbreak, which began in Hyderabad in 2016 and has since spread to Karachi and other districts, features a strain of the disease that is extensively drug-resistant (ie worse than multidrug resistance and one step closer to total drug resistance), sent shockwaves across the global medical community. On Wednesday, the US triggered an XDR typhoid-related health warning for travellers to Pakistan. Given our poor immunisation record and inability to implement comprehensive disease prevention and control protocols, one need not be reminded of the possibility of escalating travel restrictions, such as those imposed due to polio in 2014. For those of us living in Pakistan, however, there is no comforting answer to the question of whether authorities have taken the

requisite steps to protect citizens from this deadly outbreak. In Sindh, the epicentre of the crisis, though a programme to immunise 250,000 children against typhoid has been under way, the worsening conditions of the province's water and waste management systems, poor access to potable water and questionable hygiene practices and food preparation methods have left many people vulnerable to infection.

The consequences could be catastrophic. Patients with XDR typhoid are currently being treated with fourth-line drugs, but doctors warn it is not a matter of if but when this last line of defence is no longer effective. The emergence of XDR typhoid dovetails into the broader issue of the exponential rise in antimicrobial resistance in Pakistan to many infectious diseases (including TB, Staphylococcus and E. coli) brought on by hazardous trends of over-prescription, self-medication and misuse of antibiotics, and its overuse in the livestock industry. Add to this inadequate or absent diagnostic practices and a dearth of reliable laboratory facilities; since many febrile illnesses tend to mimic each other but require different drug regimens, health experts have warned against rampant treatment of undiagnosed fever. The effect of drug resistance on an overburdened healthcare system cannot be overemphasised; treatments for MDR and XDR diseases require administration in hospital settings, and are lengthier, costlier and riskier than conventional therapies. This is a national health emergency that needs urgent tackling.

Fire Hazards

A FIRE at a foam-manufacturing unit in Karachi's SITE area on Thursday has once again highlighted the dangers high-intensity blazes pose to our cities and towns. While no fatalities had been reported at the time of writing, several firefighters were reportedly injured. The Sindh capital is no stranger to fires; in May a child died when a blaze consumed huts in a slum area, while in April a fire swept through the City Courts' malkhana where case property was stored. Previously, there have been deadlier infernos. Shamefully, a modern firefighting system does not exist in one of the world's largest cities; in fact, the city's mayor has said that if two major fires were to break out at the same time, the fire department would not be able to handle the situation.

The fire department's problems are many. Billions of rupees are needed to overhaul it, while 10 times the number of fire stations that presently exist are needed to properly cover the city. The equipment of the fire department is either not enough or not in perfect working order. All this is not reassuring news as the city is practically a tinderbox with poor enforcement of building codes, and numerous fire hazards. And given the vertical growth the metropolis has been experiencing, the need for a modern fire department equipped with snorkels is all the more keenly felt. As it is election time, all those parties vying for votes from Karachi must spell out what they intend to do to overhaul the city's civic services. A modern fire service should be amongst the top priorities of the next federal and Sindh governments. Ignoring this key area would be an act of gross negligence.

What Next For PML-N?

DISQUALIFIED from holding public office, disqualified from holding party office and now, sentenced to 10 years in jail by an accountability court — it has been a year of massive political and personal setbacks for Nawaz Sharif.

The legal dimensions of the accountability court judgement will be pored over by independent analysts and can be assessed at a later date. The political fallout of the judgement, however, begins immediately and there are pressing questions for the PML-N.

With an appeal against the verdict in the high court almost certain, it remains to be seen whether Mr Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz face immediate jailing — that is if they return to Pakistan in the near future. In comments to the media in London after yesterday's verdict, Mr Sharif once again pledged to return to Pakistan, but did not indicate when he would do so.

The former prime minister should abide by his pledge to return to the country, and whatever his and the PML-N's misgivings about the legal process against him, face the courts as per the law and Constitution.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

Surely, as a self-professed democrat striving for the rule of law in Pakistan, Mr Sharif should lead by example and submit to the courts as required.

For the PML-N, there are tremendous questions and little time to find satisfactory answers before the July 25 election. Shahbaz Sharif's news conference after the verdict yesterday suggested a narrow defence of his elder brother: criticising the NAB process, but more or less silent on the wider political engineering against parts of the PML-N.

But Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz, who has been convicted and sentenced to jail for seven years and now faces disqualification from elected office, took a harder line in their reactions to the media in London, suggesting the rift in the PML-N and in the Sharif family may continue. A divided party, even in the best of political climates, is unlikely to perform well in a general election.

With Shahbaz Sharif having declared that the PML-N will continue to campaign and take part in the general election, the hardliners and those advocating a more conciliatory approach within the PML-N need to quickly arrive at an adequate compromise if the PML-N is to remain one of the major parties in the next parliament.

For Pakistan, there is a double disappointment. Notwithstanding all the dubious legal manoeuvres against Nawaz Sharif, his family and the PML-N in recent times, the Sharif family ought to have explained in a forthright and credible way the source of the family's vast wealth. Such an explanation may not have changed the course of the law against the Sharifs, but it could have set a welcome and much-needed political precedent of transparency and self-accountability.

The other disappointment is that a second consecutive historic peaceful transition of power has been sullied by the familiar machinations of anti-democratic forces.

IHC Verdict

EACH and every citizen of this country has a fundamental right to equal protection of the law. However, that right cannot possibly be upheld if the judiciary itself appears to consider some Pakistanis as being worthy of contempt or deserving of discrimination on the basis of their religious beliefs. Parts of the Islamabad High Court's detailed verdict in the case pertaining to the amendments made last year to the Khatm-i-Nabuwat oath in the Elections Act 2017 are therefore extremely disturbing. Authored by Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui and announced on Wednesday, the judgement holds that it is the people's right to know the religious affiliation of civil servants working in various capacities. To that end, it has directed the authorities to close any loopholes which allow members of minority groups to conceal this information. In the court's view, this is simpler for the Ahmadis to accomplish, because their "names and general attire" do not distinguish them from the majority, thereby allowing them to "gain access to dignified and sensitive posts resulting in accumulation of all benefits...."

It is with good reason that some minority communities in Pakistan live in a state of constant insecurity. Disproportionately targeted by the blasphemy law, they have been lynched by mobs and seen their neighbourhoods ransacked and livelihoods destroyed. However, there exists a particular animus against Ahmadis who were declared non-Muslims through a constitutional amendment in 1974. For some sections of society, it seems this was not enough, and singling them out for discrimination — in education, employment, business, etc — is almost celebrated as a virtue. Even when terrible violence has been visited upon them, such as the attack on an Ahmadi place of worship in Lahore in May 2010 that killed nearly 100, compassion for them is found wanting. Religious persecution is abhorrent: there are no exceptions. As it is, non-Muslims cannot be appointed to some of the highest offices in the land. Surely, the state should not now give the impression that certain minorities should be hunted down and further sidelined by society.

Axact Case

A LONG and winding journey hit an important milestone as a judge convicted Axact chief executive Shoaib Sheikh and 24 others and sentenced each to 20 years in prison. There is still room for appeal in the case, but given the changed circumstances, there is reason to expect that the fortunes of this group have finally changed. The case has been before various courts since May 2015, when an explosive exposé in the New York Times revealed how the company Axact, which bills itself as a 'software exporter', was in reality in the business of selling fake college degrees and other credentials in a world-encompassing racket. The scope of the racket was breathtaking. In a global industry of so-called 'paper mills', they are reputed to be one of the largest, and follow-up investigations by media houses in the UK and Canada showed how hundreds of people working in sensitive professions like nursing and paediatric care had found jobs, with fake credentials purchased from entities controlled by Axact. They thus put the lives of very large numbers of people, including children, at risk.

It is crucial that justice be done in this matter. All the hallmarks of clear criminal activity are apparent. Judges have recused themselves without a word of explanation, prosecutors have quietly left, leaving in their wake cryptic explanations, and, in one case, the house of a special prosecutor had a grenade thrown in the lawn. Unsurprisingly, police investigations into that action never advanced. Another judge who acquitted all the accused later admitted to having received a lavish bribe for his decision. This became the grounds for resurrecting the case and the latest verdict. Witnesses have either withdrawn their testimony, have been found dead under mysterious circumstances or have simply disappeared. Meanwhile, another central member of the gang that ran this racket was arrested in the US and pleaded guilty after only a few months in custody. The entire racket was described in minute detail during those court proceedings. The mountain of evidence that has now accumulated demands fair and transparent action. Given the kind of resources that this group has managed to summon to its aid, it is clear that the racket goes far beyond just the sale of fake degrees. The whole story must be told. The whole affair has heaped ridicule on our justice system, and it is high time this ended

Irrefutable Evidence?

WHILE all are equal before the law, the quality of judgements and the judicial reasoning offered in important cases, especially in those that are precedent-setting, ought to be unimpeachable and of the highest order.

A year since Nawaz Sharif was stripped of the prime ministership by the Supreme Court and nearly five months since he was barred from holding party office, the legal controversy over those two judgements, at least in independent legal circles, has not abated.

While the Supreme Court's verdicts are binding and presumably irreversible and Mr Sharif has abided by the judgements against him in the highest court of the land, there continues to be confusion and uncertainty about the applicability of the disqualification criteria against those seeking elected office.

It had been hoped that a trial in a NAB court, where rules of procedure and evidence must be adhered to, and the prosecution and defence can put their best case forward, would dispel some of the lingering uncertainty about proof of crimes committed by Mr Sharif and his family.

Worryingly, early assessments of the NAB judgement suggest that rather than a water-tight and irrefutable case of corruption against Mr Sharif having been assembled by the prosecution, it was a presumption of corruption against Mr Sharif that his defence was unable to adequately refute that is the reason for the handing down of a lengthy jail sentence.

Certainly, from a political perspective, the Sharif family's inability to provide a credible explanation for the vast wealth and assets under family control is deeply damaging. The old ways of politics as a business need to be shed by the political class.

Yet, a significant opportunity appears to have been missed by the state.

More than two years have elapsed since the publication of the Panama Papers, a lengthy Supreme Court process was completed last year, and a trial that is many months old will continue in the NAB court.

Surely, to set a meaningful precedent that will strengthen the democratic project, the state ought to have unearthed and presented in the trial court irrefutable and compelling evidence of criminal conduct and financial misconduct by the Sharifs.

The inability of the state prosecution to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt the means through which the Sharif family acquired the London apartments will likely continue to leave the accountability process against the Sharifs open to accusations of political motivations.

That, it should be clear, would be a disservice to the cause of transparent, impartial and non-partisan accountability.

If the cycle of politicians accused of corruption making a political comeback at a later date is to be left behind, the accountability process must be impeccable and beyond all credible allegations of partisanship.

Can it really be said that the legal process against Mr Sharif has thus far laid down good law and precedent that will survive the test of time?

India's IHK Policy

INSTEAD of seeking a political solution to the rising discontent in India-held Kashmir, the BJP-led government in New Delhi is applying its usual heavy-handed tactics to suppress popular unrest in the region. Ahead of young Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani's second death anniversary, being observed today, the Indian state had started clamping down on parts of the held territory to prevent public observance of the day. The killing of Wani galvanised anti-India feeling in IHK as thousands took to the streets, only to face the wrath of Delhi's military enforcers. However, despite the brutality that they have had to face, the Kashmiris' spirit of resistance and their quest for rights have not been dampened. Along with public curbs on the observance of Burhan Wani's anniversary, leading Kashmiri leaders, including Yasin Malik, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Ali Shah Geelani, have been detained by Indian forces.

While cracking down on Kashmiri demonstrators is an old tactic used by India, the powers that be in New Delhi have also imposed governor's rule in J&K by sending a shaky coalition in the state of the BJP and the Peoples Democratic Party packing last month. While the coalition — never a promising union — formed in 2014 did not achieve much, imposing New Delhi's direct rule means that India will only tighten its grip and intensify its militaristic response to Kashmiri resistance. However, this violent response has only drawn more recruits to the movement as members of the educated middle class are also willing to take up arms against New Delhi. The reasons for this are apparent. According to a UN report released last month, in the aftermath of Wani's 2016 killing, "Indian security forces used excessive force that led to unlawful killings and a very high number of injuries". While India has expectedly dismissed this criticism, it must realise that the brutal tactics it uses in J&K are being witnessed the world over, and pushing the Kashmiris towards militancy. New Delhi's humiliation of the Kashmiri people — tying a demonstrator to a military jeep, crushing a man to death with a vehicle — has only further alienated the people of the region. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's response to the unrest may be motivated by politics — he wants to appear 'strong' on militancy going into an election year — it will only exacerbate the situation. The sooner India realises that the solution to the Kashmir issue lies in dialogue and political accommodation, the better it is.

Voice Of The Youth

A YOUTH bulge with ready access to smartphones is not an advantage for politicians accustomed to going through the motions every electoral cycle and making the same promises they have no intention of honouring.

Most young people, armed with social media tools at their fingertips, are aware of the way governments are expected to deliver in more developed democracies, and the power of the vote in shaping policy.

This demographic also tends to be comparatively less likely to defer to considerations of class, biradari, ethnicity, etc — in other words, some of the factors that have traditionally ensured voter apathy and predictable outcomes.

According to the latest electoral rolls, out of a 105.96 million-strong electorate, around 46m are aged between 18 and 35 years; of them, 7.44m range from 18 to 25 years, and many will be voting for the first time. In 2013, there was a palpable interest in the polls from younger people determined to make their voices heard.

Keeping in mind that the enthusiasm may have somewhat been tempered by subsequent developments — also known as realpolitik — one cannot predict with any degree of certainty that young people will turn out in large numbers this time as well.

The intention at least seems to be there. According to the findings of a UNDP report released a couple of months ago, although only 24pc of youth trust politicians, 90pc of men and 55pc of women among them 18 years and above intend to cast their ballot.

Clearly, young people may be cynical but they are not jaded.

They also have higher expectations of their representatives, something that a few former legislators found out when they were heckled by groups of their young constituents furious at them for asking for their votes despite having done little to earn them over five years.

These may be only a few isolated examples, but they could be a portent of things to come; if not this year, then certainly in the elections ahead.

India's Myopic Approach

ONE glance at India's actions is enough to establish that, far from wanting a normalisation of ties with Pakistan, the country is bent on increasing tensions with its neighbour. It has become increasingly common for Pakistani nationals — even Pakistan-origin nationals of another country — to find themselves being denied visas by India. This low-profile but extremely damaging form of prejudice against people-to-people contact has in the past been exercised against pilgrims, theatre groups, performers and others. Now the category of those in the crosshairs of a myopic bureaucracy has been broadened to include academics. The Association for Asian Studies has since 2014 held its AAS in Asia conference in various

countries of the region. This year's event was scheduled for New Delhi from July 5 to 8. While delegates from many nations were welcomed, a Feb 19 letter from India's foreign ministry to one of the co-organisers of the conference reportedly instructed that Pakistani scholars be excluded from the event. It recently decided to deny visas to such invitees.

The move has not been without consequences, necessarily muted though these have been. As reported by the Indian media, nearly 80 scholars from a range of international institutions have mooted a resolution that conferences no longer be held in countries that display exclusionary policies. Further, the protesting academics raised enough funds to rent a hall at the seminar's New Delhi venue so that their 'banned' colleagues could join them digitally. This show of defiance is praiseworthy, and it can only be hoped that some modicum of pressure is brought to bear on the Modi government to rationalise its stance. Hifalutin ideals of peace and dialogue are entirely hollow in a situation when the people who represent the best of both countries' cultures and intellectual proclivities are barred from interacting. Apart from presenting inconveniences to guests and their hosts alike, it is an action that is not befitting of a state that claims to be the world's largest democracy and that sees itself as an emerging global power.

PML-N Manifesto

THE PML-N has launched its manifesto for election 2018 with great fanfare, perhaps in an attempt to fight off the pall cast over the party by the recent proceedings in court. The party's promises ahead of the 2018 poll appear to be a follow-up to the pledges it made in 2013. Back then, the stated aim was to correct the system, primarily in the area of energy, and focus on other infrastructure development and law and order. However, an independent look at the document suggests that much of what was promised remains undelivered. Development has been patchy, with the smaller provinces accusing the federal government of favouritism. True, militancy has been controlled, but this is in spite of the PML-N rulers' inaction. The manifesto ignores these sore points and claims that the party has built a sufficient base for it to carry on. In 2013, the PML-N had made the provision of employment a top priority — a goal it struggled to achieve in its five-year term. But it appears the party is confident that, if elected, it can pull off a quick recovery in the area of employment and the financial sector as a whole, in part

because of the megawatts added to the national energy grid during its tenure. The PML-N is aiming for 7pc GDP growth and revival of top-gear economic activity spurred on by tapping into local potential and attracting foreign investment. In an attempt to link its name to the provision of better public transport facilities, it promises to introduce Lahore-like commuter services all over the country. To address issues of disparity and favouritism, it pledges to spend more in areas which lag behind to bring them at a par with those that have already travelled quite a distance.

The document has obviously been written playing on what is looked upon as the strong points of the PML-N's new head. It might be a statement of intent but it is also a reminder of what Shahbaz Sharif believes he can bring to the table. The party has hardly tried to engage with those who say that the former chief minister's favourite themes encroach deeply on other issues such as health, education and environment which are in greater need of intervention and investment. The promise, essentially, is to turn 'Punjab speed' — a reference to the pace of development work in the province — into 'Pakistan speed'. But is this exercise in the rest of the country going to be less arbitrary than it was in Punjab?

Across-The-Board Accountability

HE promised to return to Pakistan before leaving the country to visit his ailing wife in London, and now, after his conviction and sentencing by a NAB court, he has pledged to come back later this week.

Nawaz Sharif ought to dispel all uncertainty and return to Pakistan as promised. Whatever his, the Sharif family's and the PML-N's concerns about the NAB judgement may be, there is a legal process to be followed and Mr Sharif must continue to submit to it.

The democratic project will not be strengthened if national political leaders chart a course for themselves that is outside the rule of law and the Constitution.

From a democratic perspective, however, it is apparent that the next parliament will need to turn its attention to an area that the collective political leadership has

ignored for too long: transparent, fair and meaningful accountability of all public officials.

Ostensibly, there exists a political consensus to overhaul the country's accountability laws and mechanisms. Successive parliaments and federal governments have pledged to reform NAB or replace the premier accountability institution with an empowered, autonomous and transparently functioning organisation. Yet, a decade has gone by and the country is no closer to a system of accountability that is across the board, non-partisan and trusted by wide a cross section of the public.

It is also true that in a decade of democracy, despite all major political parties having been in power at either the provincial or federal tier for a substantial period of time, none has itself acted against its party members for corrupt practices. The PTI has named and shamed allies and some of its own party members in KP, but no meaningful action was taken. Indeed, an embrace of so-called electables and big-spending politicians by all political parties virtually endorses corrupt practices among politicians.

It also remains true that other institutions of the state have been reluctant to include themselves in an across-the-board accountability regime run by independent professionals and legal experts.

so between politicians being unwilling to act against party leaders and members and institutions of state demonstrating enthusiasm for accountability of politicians but not of unelected institutions, the system is delivering what appears to be selective accountability once again.

Positive change is possible, but it will require courage and statesmanship by the political class and a spirit of cooperation by other institutions.

Certainly, those who seek the vote of the people and elected office should be held to a higher standard of conduct than the average citizen. But politicians cannot be treated as second class and third rate by other institutions.

The lack of accountability is not the only reason why democracy is still weak in Pakistan, but the absence of meaningful accountability can be and has been used

by anti-democratic forces to achieve political ends. The next parliament must deliver an across-the-board accountability process.

Dubious Poll Role For Security Forces

EMPOWERED by parliament and constitutionally autonomous, the Election Commission of Pakistan is responsible for organising and conducting the general election.

In the discharge of its duties, the ECP is also empowered to request the assistance of the executive and state institutions where it deems assistance necessary.

It had been hoped that the first general election to be held since significant electoral reforms were legislated by parliament would see an assured ECP taking greater charge than ever of the full polling process in order to guarantee transparency and fairness.

Yet, the code of conduct issued by the ECP has envisaged a new and unprecedented role for security forces assisting the polling process. Security personnel on deputation from the armed forces will now have a role in the transmission of the election results from polling stations to the ECP.

The code of conduct does specify that election officials are overall in charge of the polling and counting processes and that the result of the count and ballot paper account at the polling station level must be shared with polling agents of candidates and election observers if they request copies.

But it is discouraging that rather than expanding its control of the process, the ECP has seen fit to involve other entities in an unprecedented manner for certain crucial aspects of the poll process.

At a time of heightened political controversies and allegations by some major political parties of anti-democratic interference in the electoral process, surely the ECP should have sought to demonstrate that civilian institutions are capable of delivering on the full range of their duties and responsibilities.

Instead, the ECP seems to have taken a more inert approach to managing the election process than is desirable. Certainly, a balance is needed: too heavy-handed an approach by the ECP could stifle genuine electoral competition.

Yet, the selective and seemingly random interventions by the ECP thus far have hardly inspired confidence. It has become apparent that merely stipulating greater powers for the ECP has not translated into the automatic strengthening and more effective workings of the ECP.

Perhaps the political parties too should take some responsibility for the present less-than-ideal state of affairs concerning the ECP.

The years-long delay in reaching a consensus on electoral reforms in parliament; the PML-N unnecessarily creating controversy by allowing Nawaz Sharif to become party president after his disqualification from public office; and nominating members of the ECP without necessarily considering their executive expertise have, among other factors, prevented the ECP from emerging as the authoritative constitutional body that it is envisaged to be.

Nevertheless, the ECP should itself clarify why it has deemed it necessary to create a role for security personnel in the transmission of election results from the polling station to the ECP. Even if checks and balances are in place, what was the need for such a move?

Probing Bank Accounts

THE inquiry into 29 bank accounts at Summit Bank through which funds allegedly belonging to close associates and business concerns of former president Asif Zardari (including Rs15m identified in the FIR as belonging to the M/S Zardari Group) were transacted raises important questions. The facts appear damning. Details of one account are given in the FIR, along with identities of 15 depositors and 13 beneficiaries of vast sums, ranging from Rs5m to Rs2.5bn for a total of Rs2.855bn paid out of the account and Rs4.145bn deposited into it. Moreover, the account was opened in the name of an individual who denies all knowledge about it and says his signatures were forged, a fact confirmed by investigators. The bank is owned by an associate of Mr Zardari, Hussain Lawai, which adds fuel to the

notion that the PPP leadership has been caught red-handed transacting the proceeds of corruption. Until the people mentioned in the FIR appear before the courts to record their versions of what these funds represent and why they were routed through bank accounts of dubious veracity, this impression may not be dispelled.

The question of timing, though, asserts itself. The transactions date back to 2014-2015, and the first inquiry was initiated in July 2015. There is reason to believe that all these details came on the radar of the authorities after many of Mr Zardari's associates were picked up by unknown agencies as far back as 2010. The Suspicious Transactions Report of the Financial Monitoring Unit seems to have been issued in February this year, triggering a separate inquiry into which the earlier one in 2015 was amalgamated. It appears that these details, which have been known to the authorities for many years, have suddenly begun to move forward weeks before the election. The impression of corrupt practices that these details create is unmistakable, but so too is the idea that they are being advanced for political ends. The probe must now proceed without let or hindrance to clear the air, since open and transparent legal action is the only way to move past impressions towards the facts, and to accord punishment where it is due.

Tri-Series Cricket Win

PAKISTAN'S victory in the tri-series final against Australia on Sunday has not only brought joy to fans but has also boosted the credentials of Sarfraz Ahmed and his men as a front-ranking team in international cricket. The magnificent six-wicket win at Harare is further proof of the newfound doggedness and mental strength that the cricket team have shown this summer. Subsequent to their tour of the UK and Ireland in May-June, where they got the better of debutants Ireland at Dublin and a formidable England side at Lord's in the Test matches, the Pakistanis have now confirmed their standing with their most recent performance in Zimbabwe. To skipper Sarfraz's credit, his never-say-die approach has clearly rubbed off on talented teammates such as Fakhar Zaman, Haris Sohail, Babar Azam, Fahim Ashraf, Shadab Khan, Hasan Ali, Mohammad Amir and others who have pulled off so many fine wins in recent months. The Harare win was Pakistan's ninth successive T20 series victory, which keeps them firmly in position as the world number one T20 side in ICC rankings. Since the 2016 World T20, Pakistan have

not lost a T20 series, defeating England, the West Indies, Sri Lanka, Scotland, New Zealand and now Zimbabwe and Australia.

In left-handed Fakhar, Pakistan seems to have rediscovered a Saeed Anwar who was such a gifted player in the 1990s and won many laurels for the country. Fakhar's array of shots, coupled with his fine temperament, has worked well. His breezy 91 in Sunday's final is a testament to that, as was his brilliant century in the Champions Trophy final against India last year at The Oval. The Shoaib Malik factor merits special mention too. The veteran all-rounder has established himself as a finisher, a quality often lacked by previous national players. Thankfully, national selectors have consistently picked players on the basis of merit, while head coach Mickey Arthur and his support staff have groomed the squad well for the challenges at hand. All this is a positive sign for Pakistan cricket.

Back To The IMF

THERE is growing awareness that Pakistan is firmly on the road back to the IMF for an emergency loan as the country's foreign exchange reserves head towards the critical mark of one month's import cover. It is an open question when that point will be reached, considering that the recent rounds of exchange-rate depreciation have given a boost to exports. But that boost may not last long, and the depreciations have also driven inflation since they are responsible for the rise in the price of fuel imports, both petroleum and natural gas. The debate on timing aside, the fact that Pakistan is set to repeat the cycle of depleting foreign exchange reserves, followed by an approach to the IMF, shows that despite growth in the real sector, the fundamental dysfunctions of the economy remain entrenched in the five years since 2013 when the Fund's support was last availed.

Now that the awareness of an impending return to the IMF is spreading, some anxieties are being stoked along the way. A recent report in the Financial Times, citing unnamed officials, pointed out that being in a Fund programme would mean opening up the financial details of all CPEC loans and grants, as well as the financing terms on which other Chinese loans have been taken for balance-of-payments support. The report cited unnamed officials as saying that such an eventuality has been the topic of discussion between Pakistani and Chinese officials — and if true, it sounds a bit like blackmail. One can only hope it has not

come to this, but if it has, then the government is treading on a dangerously narrow ledge.

It may well come to that though, given that Pakistan is fast running out of options to shore up its reserves. Already at least \$2bn have been drawn from the Chinese as balance-of-payments support, and the currency swaps position also shows some drawings. With options running out, and the deficit on the current account persisting, a future course of action is becoming urgent. The interim government has done the right thing in refusing to engage in what amounts to a strategic policy choice that goes far beyond the mandate of a caretaker set-up. What is needed is work to begin on what a potential letter of intent might look like and what sort of commitments Pakistan is ready to make in return for a Fund bailout so that at least the outline of an action plan can be left behind for the new government which would then not have to start from scratch. It is always better to go to the IMF with an action plan. The caretakers could encourage that conversation among government, business and economists. That would be within their mandate.

PTI Manifesto

The PTI manifesto for election 2018, much like the rallying refrain of the party leader these days, is loudly calling for drastic change. The main slogans of ‘the road to a new Pakistan’ are justice and humanity, building on the 2013 document whose salient points stressed education and health, as forms of social justice.

The new manifesto is a different ball game and sets extremely ambitious targets. It envisages some 10m jobs and no less than 5m low-cost housing units. It vows to bring back to Pakistan looted wealth and revive at least 100 industries.

The document ticks economy as the most crucial area for whosoever comes to power. In a significant statement of intent that will have a direct effect on politics in the area, the 2018 document backs the creation of a new province in southern Punjab.

Among its other pledges is the goal to transform Karachi, but it is more careful in its choice of words when it comes Balochistan, although it finds it safe enough to ‘champion’ reconciliation in this most complicated province.

Quite in the manner in which it is often credited with bringing the professional class to assert their presence in the affairs of the state, the PTI says it will have experts from abroad to look after the construction of the 5m houses it seeks to build.

The manifesto also emphasises the green revolution and speaks of the party's penchant for tree plantation as a statement of its intent to improve the environment. This is obviously a tall order, especially when the PTI is up against a PML-N model which can be accused of many things but can never be faulted for inaction.

The fight against corruption is central to the existence of the PTI as a party to power politics in the country. Much of its political message revolves around the need to uproot the ghosts of the past that plague the system.

In the 2013 manifesto, the PTI had promised to end corruption within three months. However, evidence that targets are sometimes impossible to meet was provided in the speech that Imran Khan made during the launch of the 2018 manifesto on Monday.

He admitted that the PTI was unable to evolve a system of accountability in KP, where the party has just completed a five-year term in power, and where some of its initiatives, such as the ones in the infrastructure sector, have come in for criticism over a lack of urgency and direction.

The loud, uncompromising tone of the manifesto will ensure an even stricter monitoring of the implementation of the ambitious plans. Mr Khan must have no illusions. By his claims he has ensured that the whole country is watching him.

‘Spiritual Combat Power’

A NEW category of officers has been introduced in the Pakistan Navy. According to an official statement issued on the occasion of a ceremony held in Karachi on Saturday at the Pakistan Naval Academy PNS Rahbar, the 54 graduating cadets of the short service commission course included, for the first time, 32 religious and motivation officers. Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi who leads the naval force, and

was the chief guest at the event — at which, apart from the cadets, 45 Pakistani and 43 midshipmen from friendly countries were among the graduates — stated that the step had been taken in order to enhance the men's 'spiritual combat power'.

That unfortunately was the extent of elaboration about this rather unorthodox measure, and one hopes that more details will be forthcoming. However, given the navy chief in his speech also emphasised the importance of eradicating terrorism from Pakistan and the military's determination to do so, it would be reasonable to assume that this is an effort to neutralise or pre-empt any radical tendencies within the personnel. Pakistan's history illustrates the dire consequences of allowing religious extremism to seep unchecked into the body politic. During Gen Zia's time, for instance, mullahs with obscurantist leanings were brought in to interact with the soldiers and military units were required to take non-combatant clerics with them to the front line. The indoctrination that resulted from such a short-sighted approach also spilled over into other sections of the military, and the navy has first-hand experience of this. In September 2014, there occurred a failed attempt by no less than a group of serving naval officers to hijack a frigate from the Karachi dockyard for terrorism purposes — in what turned out to be Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent's first major attack. Now that the armed forces leadership has openly declared its intention to root out extremist violence, deradicalisation efforts must take place at every level. Only constant vigilance can prevent a return to the mayhem of not too long ago.

Violence On The Campaign Trail

TUESDAY'S suicide blast in Peshawar that claimed some 20 lives has brought Pakistan face to face with a reality that many of us have been too timid to confront: the run-up to polls in this country can be a dangerous phase for politics and can slow down campaigning. The dead included the ANP's Haroon Bilour, whose father was killed in a similar attack in 2012.

That the horrifying attack took place as Mr Bilour was canvassing is proof that we are not yet rid of the militant elements that had held us hostage for a number of years.

The incident exposes the lack of adequate safety measures for politicians in general — especially after state security was curtailed for them, among others, some weeks ago.

The administration and everyone else who is responsible for holding peaceful elections are duty-bound to ensure that the right measures are in place for the smooth conduct of this sensitive exercise.

Theories which assert that security for electioneering and poll candidates are an undue luxury must be shunned in these days, in favour of a more pragmatic, and humane, approach.

Pakistanis know well how quickly an election can degenerate into a situation where violence is perpetuated to tip the scales to the advantage of the favourites.

The 2013 poll was one of the most violent in the country's history. Data from the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies listed some 148 terrorist attacks across Pakistan between Jan 1 and May 15, 2013.

As in the case of the latest blast in Peshawar, the militants publicly owned these attacks. Along with the ANP, the PPP and MQM were threatened and frequently attacked by the militants, which damaged their electoral campaigns.

Clearly, these parties, which represent a large section of the Pakistani electorate, did not enjoy the kind of protection that the state should have provided to them in 2013. They were left to find their own defence to fight the vicious onslaught.

That they were unable to do so and secure themselves during the poll season showed adversely in the election results. It wasn't just their loss; the cost was paid by the people of Pakistan as well. The 2013 election was reduced to an uneven contest that did not fulfil the requirements of democracy.

The recent attack in Peshawar, a city fit to showcase Pakistani pluralism given the many shades of politics that it boasts, is a grim warning that the ghosts of 2013 may revisit us again in large numbers — unless the country is ready and vigilant enough to stop their advance which has clearly begun.

Questionable ECP Move

THE contrast could not be more stark, and worrying, from a democratic perspective. The Election Commission of Pakistan has now ordered the suspension of a democratic institution ie the local governments in the provinces, ostensibly because members of these elected set-ups may “influence” the poll outcome by denying candidates in the general election a “level playing field”. LG officials had already been barred from participating in the general election campaigns of candidates, and no evidence has been presented by the ECP of these officials seeking to influence the election or disrupt the electioneering of rival party candidates. The unprecedented decision by the ECP to suspend a democratic institution appears to be both arbitrary and illogical. Will the ECP suspend the provincial and federal governments when the next LG elections are held? It ought to be remembered that the LG systems in at least three provinces have been widely criticised as toothless and not empowered. How have they suddenly become such a potent threat to the fair conduct of a general election?

Contrast the deeply flawed and arguably unjustifiable attitude of the ECP towards the elected institution of the local governments with the almost blind trust reposed by it in the security forces that have been tasked with helping ensure the integrity of the polling process. A notification issued by the ECP has granted the powers of a first-class magistrate to personnel of the armed forces in charge of security at

the polling stations. Remarkably, the ECP has stipulated that magisterial powers conferred on personnel of the armed forces can be exercised if the polling station's presiding officer fails to act on a complaint. That, in effect, puts the presiding officer, who reports to the ECP, in a subordinate position to the person in charge of security at the polling station. The ECP is a constitutionally autonomous institution, but it is not unaccountable. In recent weeks, as the ECP's role has necessarily grown larger ahead of the general election, the chief election commissioner and other members of the commission have virtually disappeared from public view. The flurry of ECP notifications ought to have been explained at news conferences and the media given the opportunity to put questions to the commission. The focus in a general election should rightly be political parties and the candidates; institutions tasked with the conduct and organisation of the election ought to remain in the background. But when decision after decision is stoking controversy, the ECP ought to clearly justify its actions or else reverse course immediately.

Bail for Rao Anwar

FOR the justice system to appear credible, it must punish all those who are found guilty, including the high and mighty. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, there seems to be one law for the common man, and another for those who have the 'means'. On Tuesday, an antiterrorism court in Karachi granted bail to suspended police officer Rao Anwar in the murder case of Naezebullah Mehsud. The aspiring young model — along with three others, all dubbed Taliban militants — was gunned down in a bogus encounter in the outskirts of Karachi in January, which Rao Anwar is accused of masterminding. While it is true that all suspects are innocent until proven guilty, it appears that the police officer, believed to be patronised by powerful quarters, is getting preferential treatment. He has been granted bail though he is accused of murder, whereas often those accused of lesser crimes, but without connections, are denied bail. The suspended SSP's house in Malir cantonment has been declared a 'sub-jail'. Whenever appearing in court, Mr Anwar is brought without handcuffs, while all the other accused are denied this 'privilege'. All this while, both a Supreme Court-mandated joint interrogation report, as well as the former head of Sindh's Counter-Terrorism Department have said that the encounter in which Naezebullah and the others was killed was fake, and that Rao Anwar had a central role to play in it.

Encounters, in particular, are a matter of shame for our law-enforcement system. It is, therefore, important that those police officers involved in this heinous act be brought to justice. While Rao and others of his ilk were believed to freely play the role of judge, jury and executioner across Karachi's vast expanse, the Nageebullah killing brought into focus the issue of fake encounters like few cases before it had. Therefore, it is imperative that all those involved in this case are tried and brought to justice, and that no preferential treatment is given to any suspect, no matter how powerful. Those in uniform who kill with impunity must be sent a strong message.

Nawaz's Return

NAWAZ Sharif is set to return to Pakistan today. Other than the likelihood that officials of the National Accountability Bureau will arrest Mr Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz upon their arrival in Lahore, there is a great deal of political and legal uncertainty.

What is clear is that all sides — the caretaker governments in Punjab and at the centre; the PML-N and its supporters; and NAB and the judiciary — must act lawfully and responsibly.

The PML-N has alleged that an undeclared crackdown by the caretaker Punjab government is already under way against its leaders and supporters, and that measures will be taken to prevent the party from marching or gathering in Lahore today.

It is not clear to what extent the PML-N's allegations are accurate, but there do appear to be ill-advised and unacceptable attempts by authorities in Punjab to curb the PML-N's political activities ahead of Mr Sharif's return.

Certainly, the caretaker administrations at the centre and particularly in Punjab have a duty to maintain law and order.

But pre-emptive measures taken against a political party at what ought to be the height of a general election campaign suggest a degree of partisanship and politicisation that a caretaker administration cannot indulge in.

Indeed, the constitutional requirement for and the whole exercise of selecting a caretaker chief minister is to prevent the provincial apparatus from being used by powerful political elements against their opponents.

The caretaker Punjab chief minister, Hasan Askari, ought to immediately clarify his administration's position on the allegations of the PML-N and issue an order that any steps designed to curb peaceful political activities that have already been taken are to be reversed.

Mr Askari's stint as chief minister began in controversy, but it had been hoped that as a known public figure and academic, he would exercise his authority carefully and impartially.

Now is the time for Mr Askari to demonstrate that he truly is independent and non-partisan.

There is also a need for the PML-N to guarantee that its political activities today and in the days ahead will remain peaceful.

Mr Sharif is returning to Pakistan after publicly pledging to come back before his last departure to visit his ailing wife in the UK.

While Mr Sharif has been convicted by a NAB court in one accountability reference against him, there is still a lengthy multi-stage appeals process ahead.

Meanwhile, the NAB trial is set to continue. The PML-N must respect the law and not attempt in any way to use street power to try and put pressure on the courts and the state.

It is welcome that Shahbaz Sharif has called for all PML-N supporters to remain peaceful, and it is hoped that Nawaz Sharif will reiterate that message.

Cooler heads and better sense must prevail, especially with a general election to be held days from now.

Defending Minorities

GIVEN the current climate of intolerance, it is a bold stance — and the right one. Opining on the recent detailed judgement of the Islamabad High Court authored by Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui, which stipulates that a declaration of faith is compulsory for joining the judiciary, armed forces or civil services, the caretaker minister for information and law, Syed Ali Zafar, said that such a court order must be challenged as it is invasive, discriminatory and contrary to fundamental human rights. Indeed, the implication that being able to discharge the duties of one's public office is contingent on one's personal beliefs, rather than the relevant qualifications and experience, works to the disadvantage of practitioners of minority faiths. To hold office, "it is enough [that] you are a citizen of this country", Minister Zafar rightfully argued, yet the truth is that in practice we have strayed far from the constitutional ideal of equality before the law. It is a slippery slope from enforcing ways to 'distinguish' between religious groups to outright demonisation and targeting of minorities — and as a country we are arguably hurtling towards the point of no return.

The question of why, in a country with an overwhelming Muslim majority, a country that our founding fathers fought so hard to create so that we may practise our faith freely, are religious minorities perceived with such suspicion and hostility has never been satisfactorily answered. There is no evidence of attempts to 'betray the state' by defrauding the public on the question of one's faith, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest why minority communities would want to shield themselves from persecution by not practising their faith too publicly. The list of crimes against them is endless. Yet a false narrative of besiegement, perpetuated by the far right, is motivating a reactionary tendency to weaponise religious sentiment — and stoking a paranoia that, if history is any guide, cannot be satiated by appeasement. No one ought to be under any illusion that they are somehow immune from this inquisitorial mood; even the powerful have been attacked for trying to defend minorities. Yet such individuals are outliers; in large part, our political class either have their heads in the sand or have taken part in hate campaigns themselves. This nation needs not one but a thousand brave voices to speak up and reaffirm the words of the Quaid: "You may belong to any religion, caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the state."

Declining Dolphin Numbers

THE knock-on effects of changes in the normal order of things seldom, if ever, receive much attention in Pakistan. A couple of months ago, it was reported that acute water shortages in the flow of the Indus were leading to the large-scale deaths of freshwater turtles. Denied their normally bounteous habitat, the reptiles were meeting the grim fate of being killed by poachers. More recently, on Tuesday, it emerged that a sub-population of the Indus river dolphin, an endangered species and functionally blind, might have been locally wiped out between the Jinnah and Chashma barrages on the same river. A survey carried out by experts from the World Wildlife Fund for Nature-Pakistan, the Zoological Survey of Pakistan, and provincial wildlife departments, failed, for the second year in a row, to spot a single specimen of the species' sub-population in the given area covering more than 70km. While this does not necessarily mean the extinction of this sub-population — which in any case earlier estimates had put at not more than five dolphins within this section of the river — it is noteworthy that the reason being given is the same: decreased water flows.

This is sad news for the Indus river dolphin, efforts for the conservation of which have been under way for at least a couple of decades. It is found in five sub-populations over the stretch of the Indus, separated by the barrages, which in themselves have hampered the movement of the species, thus contributing to the risk to its survival. True, decreased river flows are not the only factor in the decline in the numbers of this mammal; other concerns include the fact that they have been confined to just 20pc of their natural habitat range because of development activities, that they become accidentally caught in fishing nets, pollution, etc. But the decline in population numbers should surely be taken as a warning that Pakistan stands to lose its biodiversity unless a long-term view is adopted.

Campaign Carnage

MORE blood has been spilled on the campaign trail as terror rears its ugly head once again. Still reeling from the suicide bombing in Peshawar that claimed the life of ANP's Haroon Bilour and 21 others on Tuesday, this country was dealt two more blows yesterday.

In Bannu district, JUI-F leader Akram Khan Durrani narrowly escaped an IED attack on his convoy. Then came the news of a grisly suicide bombing at a political gathering in Balochistan's Mastung district. Among the long list of casualties is BAP candidate Siraj Raisani, brother of former Balochistan chief minister Aslam Raisani. These attacks, among several others in recent days, have one thing in common: none are routine electoral violence.

This sudden upsurge in terrorist incidents calls for several urgent responses. First, state protection must be extended to all candidates who ask for it — without delay. All three candidates who came under attack this week had survived previous attempts on their lives.

Confirming his brother's death, Lashkari Raisani claimed that he and his brothers had been receiving threats. That successive governments have failed to rationalise an objective system for allotment of police details, thereby encouraging its abuse, is a concern that must be dealt with at a later juncture, but not at the expense of having inadequate security measures in place right now.

Electioneering is a public activity requiring a guarantee of public safety. It is a poor indication of the health of this election if on-ground campaigning is suppressed or forcibly suspended.

Second, the fact that these mass-casualty attacks were carried out without apparent warning indicates lapses in intelligence gathering. There was, and remains, a clear need to intensify such operations in sensitive areas, and around parties and candidates who have remained on hit lists.

The chief election commissioner has called for a security briefing from Nacta today; any intelligence on attempts to attack and sabotage the election process must be swiftly relayed to the relevant agencies and acted upon.

In order to ensure peaceful elections, the authorities should not only beef up security but also mobilise the entire intelligence apparatus to do the job they are actually meant to, ie preventing attacks.

Lastly, with only 10 days between now and polling day on July 25, every effort must be made to ensure that the election is not derailed by elements hostile to the democratic process, for that is what the perpetrators of these attacks are. In many ways, the real battle in 2018 is between pro-democracy and anti-democracy forces.

Even now, it is not too late, if the political class were to stand in solidarity to defeat these elements. Over 100 Pakistanis lost their lives this week exercising their democratic right to participate in defining this country's future. It is time to realise what is at stake.

A Landmark Judgement

AMIDST a flurry of controversial judicial activism has arrived a judgement that ought to be a shining beacon for judicial independence, clarity and a necessary commitment to upholding the fundamental rights of the people as guaranteed by the Constitution. In what is surely a landmark judgement, Justice Athar Minallah of the Islamabad High Court has laid down a clear and much-needed judicial marker against enforced disappearances and missing persons. The case before Justice Minallah concerned an individual who was abducted from his home in Islamabad in the presence of his family in March 2016. The individual has not yet been recovered, and multiple agencies of the state failed to provide the court with adequate information. In Justice Minallah's judgement, not only have senior security officials been personally fined for failing to perform their duties, the state has been ordered to pay maintenance to the missing person's family. Most importantly, henceforth individuals involved in abducting and detaining citizens in unknown locations may be charged under the antiterrorism laws. Perhaps a single judgement is unlikely to immediately and automatically turn the tide against missing persons. But this one could help reframe the debate about missing persons, which has slipped further away from the centre of national discourse even as incidents of people going missing continue, perhaps even increase.

There are undeniably serious security threats that confront Pakistan and its people. But Pakistan's long fight against terrorism, militancy and extremism is nearly a decade and a half old and will need to be fought for what appears to be at least many more years. Even considering the unacceptable argument that the urgency of the threat necessitated taking quick actions that may have not been in full compliance with the law in peacetime, enough time has elapsed for the state to have put in place the rules and arrangements necessary for lawfully and humanely dealing with militancy suspects. Militants, terrorists and violent extremists are enemies because they want to overthrow the lawful, constitutional and democratic state of Pakistan and impose their tyranny on the people. In fighting that enemy, the state must not abandon the foundational values, principles and laws of the country. Justice Minallah has struck a necessary blow against unchecked state power; it is hoped that others in the superior judiciary and the state apparatus will also help end the scourge of missing persons and enforced disappearances.

NICVD Success

THE fact that Pakistan's public healthcare infrastructure is generally of poor quality and dreadfully overloaded throws into even greater relief the success stories that do exist. The first example that will spring to many minds in this regard is that of the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation, which a group committed professionals has turned into a world-class facility. Another such story is that of the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases in Karachi. What was originally a small heart clinic in the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre has since 1979 functioned as a large-scale, specialist, autonomous public-sector institution, with the current governing body coming under the Sindh administration. Earlier this week, it made history when a female heart patient was successfully given a Left Ventricular Assist Device, or LVAD, implant for the first time in Pakistan. On Thursday, this achievement was followed up by a second surgery carried out by Dr Pervaiz Chaudhry. The doctor, his team and the hospital deserve felicitations on their dedication, particularly given the fact that the procedure, which otherwise costs nearly Rs11m, has been carried out free of charge.

It is hoped that such successes continue to be followed up, by not just the NICVD but other institutions as well. The latter would do well to take a leaf out of the heart

facility's efforts regarding preventative healthcare. It has been for some time now that the institute has been operating mobile chest pain units in Karachi and other parts of Sindh. These have proved ideal, free-of-cost and approachable services for patients whose heart problems would otherwise have gone undiagnosed or been checked out at great cost. As recently as February, the NICVD was directed by its board of governors to induct dozens more such vans across the province. Over the years, thousands of patients have been given assistance at such units. Without doubt, these interventions are the way forward. The public healthcare sector in the country might be in less of a shambles were a few far-sighted decisions to be taken.

Strong-Arm Tactics

NAWAZ Sharif has returned to Pakistan, and the former prime minister and his daughter are in the custody of the law. That is the right state of affairs at the moment.

Mr Sharif has abided by his repeated public pledges to return to Pakistan and the law must be allowed to take its course without impediment or unlawful resistance. What is troubling, however, has been the role of the caretaker administrations at the centre, and particularly in Punjab, in attempting to disrupt and prevent the PML-N from lawfully gathering to protest the incarceration of the party's de facto leader.

Certainly, the return of Mr Sharif was a politically charged event and the authorities in Punjab needed to be prepared for a law-and-order situation developing on the day.

But sensible planning and preparation by the authorities and what unfolded in Lahore and other parts of Punjab ahead of Mr Sharif's return were vastly and unacceptably different.

The caretaker administrations at the centre and in Punjab have much to answer for. Mr Sharif was returning to Pakistan to be arrested. Nothing the PML-N supremo had said in the run-up to his return suggested that he was seeking a violent confrontation between his party's leaders and supporters and law-enforcement personnel.

Arguably, physical resistance, violence or untoward incidents triggered by his supporters would run counter to Mr Sharif's stated political aims. The PML-N leadership and supporters who took to the streets and wanted to proceed in the direction of the airport had repeatedly called for their protest to remain peaceful. There is another reality in Punjab and the rest of the country: the caretaker administrations and law enforcement are at the peak of their election-related duties.

Facilitating political activities from mammoth rallies to corner meetings is the express duty of law enforcement and the caretaker administrations.

The crackdown that unfolded against the PML-N across Punjab, particularly in Lahore, simply cannot be justified, excused or overlooked. Violence, intimidation and threats by the state against peacefully assembling citizens, poll candidates, political activists and party supporters has shredded the reputation of the caretaker Punjab government, and the silence of the caretaker federal government has incriminated it too. Attempts to curb mainstream media coverage of Mr Sharif's return and the PML-N's political activities on the day are also deeply regrettable.

Do the caretaker administrations understand or acknowledge the oath of office they have taken?

There is justifiably much direct criticism of Punjab's caretaker chief minister, Hasan Askari, and the team of ministers he has personally selected. Ostensibly designed to prevent political parties from using the machinery of the state against their political opponents, the caretaker system may have inadvertently become vulnerable to interference from elements within the state itself. If Mr Askari cannot perform his duties as required by the law and Constitution, he should consider resigning.

Monetary Policy

THE State Bank has all but confirmed that the economy has now hit the choppiest of waters ever since the growth process began a few years ago. The latest monetary policy statement, which announced a one percentage point increase in the key discount rate, the largest increase since monetary tightening began, is only

the tip of the iceberg. The statement is littered with language that should be cause for serious concern at the policy level. Of course, there is little that the interim government can do about it since the measures required go far beyond its mandate. To give an example, the State Bank says aggregate demand “has proved to be higher than previously thought”, and the provisional estimate for the fiscal deficit for fiscal year 2018 is now 6.8pc as opposed to 5.5pc estimated in May. The current account deficit has come in at \$16bn from July to May, compared to \$11.1bn in the same period last year, despite multiple rounds of exchange rate depreciation and a rebound in exports. Whatever improvements we may have seen in exports and remittances, “the sheer size of imports continues to pressurise FX reserves”. Perhaps with this in mind, the bank has warned that “the near-term management of the country’s external accounts is of critical importance”. The urgency is now palpable.

The net reduction of foreign exchange reserves of \$6.7bn seen till July 6 is now the headline story of the economy, and the unsustainably high levels of demand in the economy will be the big challenge to contain. Without rapid and large-scale stabilisation efforts, through further depreciation in the exchange rate and sharp cuts in spending, along with rate hikes on the most elastic taxes (usually petroleum and power), the situation will not be brought under control. The question asked through the years when the government touted its growth story now asserts itself aggressively: can the economy afford this growth? For next year, the State Bank has estimated the growth rate to come in at 5.5pc, considerably below the target of 6.2pc set by the government. From here onward, the waters are going to get choppy still since the driving forces — growing fiscal and external deficits — are unlikely to go away on their own. The party is over, from the looks of it. The days of growth are over, and stabilisation measures are around the corner, in a repeat of a cycle that is decades old.

Election Observers

AS the democratic experiment continues in Pakistan — despite all obstacles — and polling day draws near, it is essential for the electoral process to be seen as free, fair and transparent. For this, press releases from government functionaries claiming that the process is fair are not enough. Observers, foreign and local, as well as the media, must be granted access to assess for themselves how transparent the elections, and the run-up to them, are. However, there seem to be some hiccups. As reported in this paper on Saturday, the European Union Election Observation Mission to Pakistan has said that due to late accreditation, it would not be able to assess key aspects of the July 25 polls. Giving details, the mission said “due to a series of bureaucratic delays”, members of the team arrived in the country in late June and early July, though as per their methodology, they needed to be in Pakistan in early June. However, the EU body said it would continue to observe the elections in Pakistan and present its report on July 27.

The polls, firstly, must appear credible to the people of Pakistan — the most important stakeholders in the electoral process. Secondly, the world community must be assured that Pakistani democracy is evolving and that all pillars of the state are working towards the goal of transparent polls. For this, foreign observers must have free access, and it is hoped that accredited teams from the EU and elsewhere do not face any further obstacles in their work. Moreover, the local and foreign media must also be given free access to the polling process. The world over the fourth estate plays a key role in pointing out irregularities in the electoral process, and Pakistan should be no different. Indeed, fair elections face many obstacles in this country — from unfair electoral practices and allegations of pre-poll rigging, to physical elimination of candidates. The only way to improve the process is to open it up to constructive criticism at home and abroad.

Bloodbath In The Run-Up To Polls

IF there were any doubts that Pakistan still remains vulnerable to terrorism, the past week has put an end to them. Three separate attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan and around 150 people killed — including ANP leader Haroon Bilour and Balochistan Awami Party candidate Siraj Raisani — and over 250 injured.

Claims of responsibility for the carnage have come from quarters with which the public is wearily familiar. However, whether attacks such as these are carried out by the TTP, the militant Islamic State group, Jamaatul Ahrar, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi or any of the other outfits that have left a trail of destruction in their wake, they all subscribe to an equally violent ideology and have a common objective: to destabilise this country and the region as a whole.

And, as we have seen, Pakistan is particularly susceptible at this moment. The run-up to elections — not to mention polling day itself — can provide the space for such outfits to demonstrate their lethality. For the process of electioneering often brings politicians and crowds of people within close physical proximity, a tempting target for those trying to attack the very foundations of a state.

The vulnerabilities inherent in such a situation require extra vigilance by law-enforcement agencies and minutely worked-out security protocols for candidates' campaigning schedules. But a lot more is at stake, for vigilance of another, long-term kind is also critical — the kind that underpinned the moribund National Action Plan and aimed at zero-tolerance for extremism in all its manifestations.

Instead, the state is doing the opposite by 'mainstreaming' individuals and groups with a history of violence and anti-state actions. There is a clear difference between religio-political parties that engage with the processes of parliamentary democracy, and those that hold it in contempt and will ultimately undermine it.

Certainly, some extremist organisations have been banned, but radicalised elements espousing similar ideologies have been allowed ingress into the body politic through the back door. It is not surprising that many ultra hard-line outfits stay silent in the face of such slaughter as we have witnessed last week and cannot bring themselves to condemn the groups involved.

Even when some ‘mainstreamed’ organisations express grief at the loss of life, their words ring hollow because not only are they affiliated with, or an extension of, banned organisations, but they themselves have not renounced violence.

This is not to say that ‘regular’ political parties are blameless in this disquieting state of affairs. On the contrary, most of them have become well and truly complicit in co-opting extremist elements, with a proven capacity for violence, within their ranks.

For the sake of a few seats, they have appeased and cajoled, and thereby enabled, the forces that will sow further discord along sectarian lines and incite faith-based violence. Are they prepared to live with the inevitably dire consequences that will flow from their expediency?

CPEC Achievement

THE promised overhaul of Pakistan’s communications framework that was a part of the Long Term Plan for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has seen a major phase reach completion — an achievement that is to be lauded for the benefits it brings to ordinary citizens and the strategic advantages it provides to both countries. The Pak-China Optical Fibre Cable project was inaugurated on Friday, having been completed over a period of two years. The project’s main features are the 820km underground Optical Fibre Cable from Rawalpindi to Khunjerab and the 172km aerial OFC link from Karimabad to Khunjerab. As reported, a communication link has been established with the Chinese side on the border and has been successfully tested for end-to-end connectivity.

Being the first land-based communication link between Pakistan and China, it should immediately ensure secure communication with regard to CPEC-specific projects and other sensitive information exchanges that would no longer necessarily be routed through Europe, the United States or India. As highlighted in previous reports, the existing network by which Pakistan connects to the world has been developed by a consortium that includes Indian companies as partners or shareholders — a security risk that has been voiced by officials in the past. Eventually, the plan will also provide security in the form of a backup route for Pakistan’s internet traffic, which is currently entirely dependent on undersea cables. Those living in the long-ignored regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan

will finally have meaningful access to high-speed internet, which is a big step up from the poor to non-existent set-up of the past. Eventually, connectivity will ensure economic growth in those areas, especially in information and communication technologies and the telecom sector. Overall, given proper consideration and investment by the government, the impact of this project could be wide-ranging — from faster, cheaper internet to e-governance and more. It is hoped that this step will quickly be followed up with further development of the digital corridor highlighted in the LTP, which would position Pakistan as a cost-effective communication highway for China and the landlocked Central Asian states that would look to connect to the world through Gwadar. It is also hoped that in the long term, connectivity through China will not necessitate the imposition on Pakistani citizens the many censorship mechanisms currently set up by China for their own state.

Change In Global Opinion

A HISTORIC report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on widespread human rights violations in India-held Kashmir has been rightly endorsed by the UN Secretary General António Guterres. The secretary general has also appeared to support UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein's call for an independent international investigation of the massive rights violations by the Indian state in IHK. Mr Guterres's remarks, particularly urging India and Pakistan to find a peaceful solution to the Kashmir dispute, are likely to get a cold reception in hawkish circles in India, but they are eminently sensible and suggest that the tide of international opinion on India's oppressive and deeply troubling actions in IHK may be changing ever so slightly.

While undeniably the many strands of the Pak-India relationship, the Kashmir dispute and other issues that remain to be resolved are interlinked, the international community has had a tendency to overlook the gross human rights violations and excesses of the Indian security forces against the brave, defiant but often defenceless people of India-held Kashmir. That must change. The report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is important for two reasons: it casts a light on the appalling violations by the Indian security apparatus while making clear that without an independent international investigation, the true extent of violations cannot be known. India has used its international influence to conceal

the shocking and shameful treatment of the people of IHK from the global public. It should no longer be allowed to get away with the torture, maiming and worse of a courageous people.

Power Of The Vote

THE run-up to what was widely expected to be a fiercely competitive election has been indelibly marred by militant violence and political controversy. But a historic third consecutive on-time general election will be held next Wednesday and it is imperative that voters nationally both be encouraged to vote and feel safe doing so.

For all the necessary attention on candidates and political parties, an election is ultimately, and the ultimate, democratic expression of the will of the people. It is the people of Pakistan that the state must answer to and work for, and it is through the people's vote that their elected representatives are meant to be chosen.

Certainly, the significant political controversies and several decisions of the ECP, the caretaker set-up, the judiciary and the non-elected state apparatus have helped create a climate in which it may no longer be possible to credibly claim that the general election is free and fair. But the power of the vote still remains.

One of the unquestionable gains in the admittedly wobbly and flawed transition to democracy over the past decade has been greater voter participation and public interest in the political process. Low voter turnout helped undermine the electoral process for much of the country's history, with such turnout likely a result of a combination of voter apathy and political knowledge that many election outcomes were largely predetermined.

But the 2013 general election was unprecedented for voter participation nationally, and through five years of the last parliament and a number of by-elections, voter turnout and political engagement remained high.

Indeed, one of the biggest factors that can help entrench democracy and keep anti-democratic forces at bay is if the Pakistani people consistently and in large numbers vote and participate in the democratic process. Eight days from a difficult

but historic election, the voter has a chance to make his or her voice heard over the din of manipulation and farce.

Yet, a voter cannot be expected to turn up at a polling station despite a significant risk to his or her physical safety. Between now and the election, the ECP, the caretaker governments and the vast security apparatus to be deployed to help secure the election ought to work to reassure the public and urgently publicise safety measures that will be in place to protect voters.

The unnecessary controversies that the ECP, the caretaker government and security establishment have been drawn into will not be erased. But the final stretch of the campaign and polling day is another opportunity for Pakistan's institutions to demonstrate a commitment to upholding the rule of law, securing the peace and supporting the democratic process.

The media can also help play a role by vigorously promoting information crucial for voters on polling day. It will not be easy, but July 25 could yet be salvaged as a reasonable day for democracy.

Medicines That Hurt

IT is tough to decide whether this is a reassuring or a disturbing sign. On an alert by the European Medicines Agency, the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan has asked nine pharmaceutical companies to recall medicines for high blood pressure in the country. It seems the EMA has detected an impurity — N-nitrosodimethylamine, a probable carcinogenic — in the valsartan active ingredient supplied to manufacturers in parts of the European Union and in Pakistan. Drug officials say the action proves their efficiency — which should, in theory, provide Pakistanis with a reason to feel safe. However, the feeling is short-lived when there is so much else to consider within the local context. In a report that appeared yesterday, a Drug official told this paper that 95 per cent of all medicines available in the country are manufactured with raw material imported from abroad. Next he dropped a bombshell by saying there is no system in Pakistan to monitor the quality of raw material that goes into the making of medicines, while voicing objections to the very lax rules which allow an importer to get a licence and enter what is actually a very sensitive business.

With rules so lenient, we are treading on thin ice where public health is concerned. Drap has in recent times loudly claimed expertise in monitoring drugs sale and manufacturing in the country. The least that can be expected of the authority is that it is able to test raw material and finished medicines. The pharmaceutical companies are required to contribute to a research and development fund. There is no reason why some of the fund cannot be utilised for the purpose of monitoring the making of the drugs. But for all this to happen, the authorities in Pakistan must first demonstrate the will to guard the people here against all kinds of malpractices. The suspicion instead is that no one is concerned about how the drug makers and sellers are playing with human lives. This impression is based largely on just how rare it is for the government watchdogs to catch those involved in any kind of irregularity. Contamination of drugs is a huge issue. In this case, it was a warning against its use in Europe which alerted Drap. Given Pakistani apathy, we might otherwise have never found out about it. We will be doomed if we were to be dependent on outside warnings to get rid of our ills.

PTI's Karachi Plan

OVERFLOWING gutters, a nagging (and growing) shortage of drinking water and mounds of rotting garbage are amongst Karachi's major problems.

Over the last decade or so the PPP has run the Sindh government, and the MQM has represented the metropolis in the national and provincial legislatures, as well as running its local bodies. Due largely to the neglect and mismanagement of lawmakers belonging to both these parties, civic problems have assumed crisis proportions.

Therefore, as election day approaches, many voters in the city will be asking candidates in their constituencies what solid plans they have to address the city's major issues.

The PTI, in this regard, has attempted to address Karachi's water, garbage and sewage crisis through a 'plan of action', details of which were published in this paper on Monday.

The party says the city's water crisis can be addressed through desalination, while it has also suggested creating energy from waste.

Critics have given mixed responses to the PTI's plan. Some have suggested that the (broken) system already in place should be fixed and then new options can be explored.

While water and sanitation experts and urban planners can better critique the plan and give the party constructive criticism on how to improve it, the PTI's effort needs to be appreciated as none of the other mainstream parties vying for Karachi's seats have come up with any sort of plan to address its civic problems.

Indeed the PTI will have a tough time in winning enough seats to form the government in Sindh, or even dominating all of Karachi's seats. Nonetheless, whichever party comes to power in Sindh after July 25 will need to address the key civic problems the PTI has highlighted in its document.

Emotional slogans about representing Karachi and having its mandate are not enough; the voters want clean streets, water in their taps and the mountains of garbage that line the city's roads cleared away. Whoever wants to represent Karachi must address these problems.

Tumbling Economy

WITH the most recent round of depreciation in the exchange rate, anxiety is mounting in the business community regarding the direction the economy is taking.

Most specifically, the one question people are now increasingly asking themselves, and each other, is where does this all end? Where is the exchange rate going to settle before 2018 finishes? All the answers to this crucial question are speculative at the moment, mainly because the underlying fundamentals themselves are changing rapidly, and the policy environment is marred by deep uncertainty.

The question is important because a significant amount of Pakistan's exports use imported inputs, so if the price of these inputs rises so does the cost of the final product, thereby eating into whatever gains might accrue from the exchange rate depreciation.

Also, with every depreciation the price of energy rises since most fuels in Pakistan are imported. The recent hike in petroleum prices was attributed largely to the effects of the exchange rate rather than any hike in international oil prices, or to a raise in the rate of taxation for oil products. This has cascading inflationary consequences for the economy, which eats away whatever income gains people might have experienced during the couple of years of real sector growth.

Yet it is necessary. The currency depreciations by themselves may not be the solution to the external sector deficits, but they are a necessary precondition. The economy is currently burning around \$1.2 billion of foreign exchange reserves every month, and given the size of the current account deficit and minus the short-term debt obligations that need to be met in the near future, this leaves barely enough for two months of imports.

Without a depreciation, levels of aggregate demand (especially for imported consumer goods) will remain unsustainably high, and the interbank market will need to be resupplied with dollar liquidity at regular intervals, through whatever means. With persistent shortages of foreign exchange in the interbank market, there is little else for the policymakers to do as a starting point other than get the price of the currency (the exchange rate) to reflect the fundamentals.

So where is all this going? It is no longer enough to hear that soon Pakistan will return to the International Monetary Fund, as caretaker Finance Minister Shamshad Akhtar all but said on her recent visit to Karachi. It is now important to know what that entails: a sharp reduction in aggregate demand and government expenditures, mid-year revenue measures, continuing depreciation of the currency, high inflation, higher interest rates.

All of these are now around the corner, and their cumulative impact is a sharp deceleration in growth. There is a lot the country needs to be prepared for if the situation on the external front is to be stabilised, and the time for that preparation to begin is now.

A Turning Point?

IT is a necessary and welcome recognition by the US. If peace is to be achieved in Afghanistan, the US will have to participate in a dialogue effort. But multiple US presidential administrations have resisted acknowledging that reality, partly spurred by the Afghan state's concerns about the Afghan Taliban seeking to bypass the government in Kabul. Now, reportedly frustrated by the lack of progress in a war in which he reluctantly agreed to extend US participation at the urging of his national security and military leaderships, President Trump seems to have signalled a willingness for his administration to engage the Taliban in talks. Mr Trump's decision should be quickly welcomed by all protagonists in the Afghan war and immediate efforts made to resume what appears to be a stalled dialogue effort. President Ashraf Ghani's government has already made an unprecedented offer of dialogue with the Taliban and lingering concerns about the Afghan state being sidelined in talks between the Taliban and the US should not be allowed to veto what could be a historic opportunity. Similarly, Pakistan should recognise that this is a chance to work with the US to help bring peace and stability to the region rather than to meaninglessly continue trading allegations with the US.

For the Taliban, the two primary, long declared impediments to successful dialogue have been the US's unwillingness to directly engage with them and to discuss a withdrawal of US forces. President Trump's obvious frustration with a never-ending foreign war and the inability of the generals to deliver measurable gains in the war effort have likely helped break down the resistance in the US national security and military apparatus to talks with the Taliban. Certainly, a willingness to engage them does not mean that the Afghan government or Pakistan are not included in an initial talks effort that can be quickly widened to involve other big regional actors, such as China, Russia and Iran. While there could be several reasons why the US initiative may flounder or be impeded by forces inimical to peace, there is one compelling reason for all sides, from the Afghan Taliban to the Afghan government and from global powers to regional actors, to want dialogue and for a peace process to succeed: the threat of the militant Islamic State group in Afghanistan. A momentous opportunity may beckon; peace in Afghanistan should be the primary, urgent goal for all sides.

Avoidable Tragedy

IT is nothing less than the stuff of nightmares: families out for an evening of joyrides suddenly hit by tragedy that could easily have been averted. This is what occurred on Sunday night at Karachi's Askari Amusement Park when a carousel ride collapsed, pinning dozens of people under its weight. The frisbee pendulum ride, called Discovery, was reportedly about 40 feet off the ground and loaded with passengers when its shaft collapsed, killing teenager Kashaf Samad and injuring at least 24 others. The machinery, apparently imported from China, is said to have failed due to either substandard constituent material or a design fault, which could have resulted in a weight imbalance. Shockingly, the park had been inaugurated just weeks ago, on Eid-ul-Fitr.

Exemplifying the aphorism of too little, too late, on Monday the PIB police registered on behalf of the state a case of unintentional murder against the park administration. Karachi DIG East Amir Farooqi also alleged that the park administration did not have any proper rescue efforts in place. However, the provincial government cannot be absolved of responsibility either: two days before the facility's opening, its managing director told the press that no official had visited the park as yet vis-à-vis safety checks, but an International Organisation for Standardisation team would visit "in a few days" — a shockingly lax attitude to such an important consideration. Neither has any clarity emerged as to which government body is responsible for inspecting and issuing NOCs to such amusement areas. This appears to be a glaring, deadly gap in the system for a country where mechanised amusement parks are good business given the rapidly burgeoning population. Aside from pursuing the question of negligence on the part of this particular park's authorities, it is necessary for the province — indeed, the country as a whole — to urgently get its house in order. For now, amusement parks across Sindh have been temporarily closed and inspections ordered; but the greater danger lies in the lack of regulation and enforcement of standards.

A New Charter

THE Charter of Democracy was a blueprint for returning Pakistan to a constitutional, democratic, rule-of-law government; steering national institutions back towards their core and separate roles as defined in the Constitution; and making the state more responsive to the social and economic needs of the people and their security concerns. Negotiated between what were then the two largest political parties in terms of popular support and signed by two two-term prime

ministers, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, it was a landmark political achievement. Now Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has called for a new and revised charter created by consensus among all democratic forces in the country to address the new challenges to the democratic and constitutional order in Pakistan and threats to the rights, peace and security of the people. Mr Bhutto-Zardari's suggestion is welcome and ought to be considered by all mainstream political forces in the country.

The original charter attempted to put a constitutional- and rights-based discourse at the centre of national politics after the bitter political experience of the 1990s followed by the dictatorship of Gen Pervez Musharraf. While its recommendations are still widely applicable today, and many remain partially or wholly unimplemented, a new document could focus on updated proposals to address persistent problems and focus on the more current security and economic challenges that have become apparent over the past decade. From the threat of terrorism, militancy and extremism to a familiar but perhaps much bigger economic crisis on the horizon, there are challenges apparent today that did not loom as large in 2006. Similarly, unlike the alternating and abridged governments of the 1990s, the past decade of elected dispensations has delivered historic achievements in successive parliaments that have completed their terms and the peaceful transfer of power. There have also been important changes to the structure of the state and to governance following the sweeping reforms of the 18th Amendment supported by a firm and continuing national political consensus.

A new charter of democracy, then, could seek to consolidate the constitutional gains made over the past decade while addressing new national challenges that have emerged over the past decade. Undeniably, the changed political environment and dynamics of the country could make a fresh political consensus possible. The original charter perhaps became possible because Ms Bhutto and Mr Sharif had finally recognised that when democratic forces fight among themselves, it is anti-democratic forces that ultimately benefit. But times have moved on, and today, there are new political forces in the country, not least the PTI. The upcoming general election is already mired in controversy. Yet, the PTI, PPP and PML-N have been able to find consensus on electoral reforms, and parliament was able to approve historic Fata reforms, for example. Consensus on the core issues of democracy, fair play, security and economic stability may be possible.

HRCP's Poll Warning

THE Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has issued a stark warning that all right-thinking citizens, institutions of the state and political parties should consider the implications of.

With the run-up to the polls marred by widespread allegations and credible evidence of unfair electoral practices, threats and intimidation, the country's pre-eminent human rights organisation has warned that polling day itself could be marred by serious controversy and electoral rigging.

If that bleak scenario does turn into reality on July 25, the democratic order in the country could come under severe and perhaps unmanageable strain. There is still time for anti-democratic forces to reassess the situation and reverse course and allow the will of the electorate to express itself freely and fairly on election day.

For all the controversy, the many undesirable decisions taken by the ECP and the caretaker governments, and the grotesque militant attacks suffered by the public and political campaigns, the 2018 general election still offers genuine and wide-ranging political choices to the voting public.

There are also vital economic, governance and security decisions that the next government and parliament will have to make, and it is imperative that whichever party or coalition comes to power it should be widely accepted as credible and legitimately elected.

If the integrity of the vote is to be protected and the necessary minimal credibility of the 2018 election result ensured, the recommendations of the HRCP should be heeded.

The ECP, the caretaker administrations and state institutions must not simply reiterate their commitment to ensuring a free and fair election at this late stage, but should also draw up, implement and widely publicise a set of concrete actions and commitments that can reassure political parties and the public that polling day will be as free and fair as possible.

Arguably, no general election in Pakistan's history has met the electoral standards enforced in advanced democracies, but it had been hoped that general elections would progress towards the ideal of a free and fair poll.

There were already multiple threats that the public, candidates and political parties have had to contend with — from militant violence to familiar electoral coercion in the less-governed parts of the country — before the possibility of widespread polling-day rigging revealed itself and threatened to override the will of the people.

More than 70 years since Independence, the people of Pakistan need and deserve a relatively clean voting process on July 25.

Language, Please

IT seems that a lot of people are talking at the same time at the top of their voices on stage and in television shows and corner meetings.

Barbs are flying, tongues are wagging and scandalous personal attacks against political opponents have become the norm. By the looks of it, we are in for the loudest election in this country's history — maybe, the dirtiest as well. Almost everything that comes to mind is permissible here. At one meeting, a senior PML-N leader lost his cool. Apparently under pressure because of the tough competition from his opponent, the former speaker of the National Assembly reportedly blurted out deeply acrimonious words, dubbing those voting for the PTI as 'beghairat' — people without honour — reminiscent of the 'jaag Punjabi jag, teri pagg noon lagg gaya daagh' (Punjabi beware) slogan the Sharif camp had raised three decades ago in 1988 in a close contest.

The rashness comes in when parties and individuals are desperate for a win. Sentiments expressed with excessive intensity betray just how close the fight is. Emotions are better controlled when contests are one-sided. However, the language that has been used in the election campaign so far is shocking, given that inter-party exchanges are an essential indicator of just how mature and tolerant a society is and, consequently, how democratic. The ugliest part is that some of those who indulge in cheap and vulgar talk happen to be top-level

politicians who have held important government positions in the recent past. Among them is the former KP chief minister who was so overcome by passion and his urge to retain power that he tried to ridicule the supporter of a political party, using appalling vocabulary. Whereas his uncalled-for outburst has led to some demands that the Election Commission pull up the loose-talking veteran politician, ideally, the rebuke must come from within the party. Except that no party has time for such niceties in the scramble for power.

Transparent Trial

A WRONG decision has been officially denied and now reversed. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif has already been sentenced and jailed by an accountability court in a trial that is continuing and must be completed in accordance with the law.

For the sake of transparency, fairness, the public's right to information and the historical record, it is important that the full trial be conducted on normal court premises and with the media having full access. For reasons unknown, the caretaker federal cabinet appeared to cast doubt on the remainder of Mr Sharif's trial being conducted in the venue used until now, a NAB court in Islamabad, and appeared to green-light a trial inside prison.

That highly unusual and wholly unnecessary decision, which the caretaker government has denied it had taken, has now been clarified: Mr Sharif's NAB trial will continue in the same Islamabad court premises where it has been held until now.

Why is a continuing trial in open court necessary? Article 10-A of the Constitution guarantees the right to a fair trial to all individuals. The spokesperson of the caretaker federal cabinet has himself now stated that a fair trial can only be guaranteed in open court.

The charges against Mr Sharif and his family members are of a financial nature and have nothing to do with the very rare and very few exceptions in which a closed-door trial may be justified. Indeed, the very purpose of accountability is to

publicly assemble proof of wrongdoing against public officials and punish them in a lawful, transparent manner so as to deter others from engaging in corruption.

The security argument is also not very convincing for an accountability trial inside jail. Certainly, the public and media interest in the trial of Mr Sharif could increase further after his initial conviction and jailing, but the NAB court premises in Islamabad can surely be secured against potential threats to the safety of the trial, the media and the public.

Partisan rancour aside, the NAB trial itself needs to be insulated against further unnecessary controversy. The PML-N has predictably denounced the verdict against Mr Sharif and his daughter, while opponents of the PML-N have, as was expected, hailed the sentencing and jailing of the two.

But independent legal analysts have raised serious questions about the judgement handed down in one of the three references against Mr Sharif. It is not clear why the judge who delivered that initial verdict has recused himself from the remainder of the trial, but the controversy and recusal have reinforced why the need to observe due process and deliver a judgement firmly rooted in existing law, precedent and a reasonable interpretation of the relevant statutes are so important.

The caretaker federal cabinet has made the right decision and it must be abided by until the conclusion of Mr Sharif's trial.

Tackling 'Fake News'

SOCIAL media has become ubiquitous in modern life — and so, too, has its propensity to be misused to spread false information with serious real-life consequences. The largest of such platforms, Facebook, has been undergoing a reckoning of sorts over a series of scandals, including revelations of privacy breaches, proliferation of hate speech and election manipulation, most notoriously of the 2016 US presidential election. In Sri Lanka, Myanmar and India, rumours spread largely through Facebook and its subsidiary, WhatsApp, have led to attacks

on ethnic and religious minority groups. In a whirlwind campaign in recent months, the company has announced new checks and balances, specifically to protect elections — including Pakistan's — from interference. In the run-up to July 25, it is now also publishing advertisements in leading local newspapers, including Dawn, informing the public of how to identify false information in Facebook posts and forwarded WhatsApp messages.

That Facebook is attempting to quell the epidemic of misinformation on its platform is, on the surface, a positive move. And the fact that it is specifically working to educate the public on how to discern the credibility of information on social media may, hopefully, have some impact. But, beyond image rehabilitation for the social media giant itself, how effective will such measures be? Fundamentally, Facebook profits from the commodification of its users' data, and it has a track record of cooperating with state surveillance and censorship across the globe. How will it ensure, for example, that the systems it has introduced to curb fake content can't be 'gamed' by vested interests to use to their advantage? Who gets to decide what is or isn't 'fake'? And what guarantee is there that it won't be party to mass state censorship to prevent it from being banned in any more countries? All these are issues that Facebook has yet to adequately address. Even if such measures could be tamper-proof, there is no realistic way to check the millions of fake posts being spread through private channels such as Facebook Messenger, closed or secret Facebook groups, or WhatsApp messages. No amount of digital literacy outreach will quell users' inherent bias towards information that validates their worldview. In that way, the medium is very much the message. These problems are so systemically entrenched in such platforms that only a complete reassessment of how they operate may make a true difference.

Melting Glaciers

NEWS coming in from Gilgit about the potential formation of another glacial lake in Ghizer district should give pause to the big plans being made in nearby areas. Further details are awaited as proper damage assessments are carried out, but it is now known that a glacial lake in Ishkoman valley is increasing in size and had already flooded an area of 10km at the time of writing; meanwhile water continues to pour in. With an extraordinary heatwave in the area this summer, the melting of the Barsuwat glacier has been more rapid than normal, and the debris that blocked

the mouth of the river has caused a large lake to form above it. The lake now poses a danger to those living along its perimeter, and significantly, also to downstream areas that include Gilgit, because if it grows and bursts the blockage, it will send a torrential flood of muddy water and heavy debris hurtling down the river.

As time passes, more such dangerous situations should be expected in the mountainous north of the country. Chitral district has already seen multiple glacial lake outburst floods in recent years, most significantly in 2015 when large parts of the district were destroyed by them. According to a UNDP estimate, more than 3,044 glacial lakes have already formed in Gilgit-Baltistan and KP, of which 33 are considered hazardous. Now another one has emerged in a key location, potentially posing a risk to an important city like Gilgit. With all the plans being made in this area for future transit trade, the importance of paying closer attention to climate and environmental hazards cannot be overstated. There can be much debate on the steps required in the long term to manage these risks, but for now immediate attention should be given to Ghizer district to release the waters that are building up and prevent the lake from becoming so large that it destroys livelihoods on a large scale and increases the risk to populations downstream.

Election Security

IT is a welcome reiteration and clarification that ought to be followed in letter and spirit by the vast security apparatus that is to be deployed for the security of the polling process.

On Thursday, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa visited the military's election support centre in Rawalpindi and re-emphasised that all military personnel deployed for election duties must strictly comply with the code of conduct given by the ECP. The army chief also reinforced that all military personnel are only performing a facilitative role and that the polling process is to remain under the control and authority of the ECP.

While the ECP had attempted to dispel concerns of political parties, candidates and independent election watchdogs, the unprecedented numbers in which security personnel have been drafted in for polling day-related duties and the highly unusual powers delegated by the ECP to military officers overseeing security in the polling station had, among other factors, continued to attract controversy.

The violence and allegations that have marred the campaign phase and the run-up to polling day ought to concern all right-thinking and sensible citizens committed to upholding the Constitution and the democratic order. A spate of militant attacks culminating in the shocking massacre in Mastung has bloodily underlined the very real and continuing security threats to the country and the democratic process.

It is fairly clear that an already lacklustre campaign season was further vitiated by militant violence. So it is imperative that the polling process and polling day itself be secured to the maximum extent possible by the state and the security apparatus.

While the country's politics may appear to be more divided now than at virtually any other point over the last decade, there is at least a firm national consensus, across all political parties and institutions of the state, that the elected, constitutional order must continue.

The national political and institutional consensus on democratic continuity will rightly be further reinforced if the polling process is made secure enough for large numbers of Pakistanis in all parts of the country to feel safe when turning out to vote. The intense political engagement that is apparent across the country and has been partly reflected in significant turnouts in by-elections through the last parliament deserves a chance to be expressed in a high turnout.

A security apparatus that is focused primarily on securing polling day and providing an environment as free and fair of threat and intimidation as possible would surely be a boost to the democratic order. The historic achievement of two consecutive parliaments completing their terms and the possibility of a peaceful transfer of power to the next legitimately elected government are undeniable democratic milestones.

The people's right to vote in an environment free of fear, intimidation and the threat of violence of all kinds should be kept front and centre.

New Israeli law

SINCE the founding of the state of Israel, efforts have been made by Zionist settlers to erase all vestiges of Palestine's Arab identity. The latest in this long series of injustices is the recent passage of a law by the Knesset that defines Israel as the "national home of the Jewish people". While that in itself may sound like an innocent affirmation of national identity, a closer reading of the law reveals that it is an exclusionary, sinister piece of legislation. For example, the law states that the right to exercise national self-determination in Israel "is unique to the Jewish people". The status of Jerusalem as the "complete and united" capital of Israel is affirmed, flying in the face of international opinion while Jewish settlement is viewed as "a national value". Moreover, the status of Arabic has been downgraded compared to Hebrew. It is, therefore, clear why this law has been derided by Arabs living in Israel, Palestinians, as well as right-thinking Israelis. Arab members of the Knesset protested against the passage of the law, while senior PLO leader Saeb Erekat called it a "dangerous and racist law" that "legalises apartheid". But, such a move was not unexpected from Israel's right-wing government, which appears bent upon subsuming Palestine's Arab character.

Looking at the passage of the law from a historical perspective, it is part of a series of steps the Zionists have taken to deny Palestinians their land, dignity, and even their right to life. The violence many Zionist settlers unleashed on native Palestinians is a matter of historical record; there are credible accounts of massacres of Palestinians carried out by gangs such as Irgun during the Nakba. From thereon, violence and dislocation have been the unfortunate fate of Palestine's Arabs. But Israel has not been content with this; far from staying within its original borders, Tel Aviv has rapaciously gobbled up Arab land, including the flashpoint holy city of Jerusalem, while illegal settlements continue to mushroom. Therefore, the 'nation state law' is only the reaffirmation of hard-line Zionist plans: to one day wipe out all existence of Palestinians from Palestine. This law also puts paid to any hopes optimists may have had in the two-state solution. The right wing that rules Israel is clear: there will be no two-state solution, and any arrangement that attempts to give the Palestinians their rights and their land will be resisted.

Marghazar Zoo Death

THE insensitivity to the pain of others in this country is simply astounding; just as troubling is our acquiescence in a culture of violence that has claimed many victims, man and beast. While there are several safeguards — whether or not they are effective is another story — aimed at protecting human life, when it comes to the animal kingdom, we seem to be bereft of all humane values. Take the case of government-run zoos where this lack of compassion can truly be witnessed. Here, the animals languish until death, often untimely, overtakes them. This week, the bear at Islamabad's Marghazar Zoo died. Over the last couple of years, the facility, run by the Municipal Corporation Islamabad, has lost 15 animals including lion cubs, nilgai, zebras and an ostrich. The zoo management claimed that they died natural deaths; in the case of the bear, the city's chief metropolitan officer quoted a postmortem report that identified an intestinal tumour. The level of the zoo's disinterest in its charges can easily be gauged: the bear lived alone in a small enclosure, the elephant Kavaan has been without a mate for six years and is housed in an inadequate shelter, and the ponds for water-loving birds are dirty and full of algae. There is a vet, but he is also the deputy director of the zoo and is reportedly more focused on that job.

Yet why single out the zoo in Islamabad? Peshawar Zoo, inaugurated in February, subsequently saw a string of deaths, most of which the administration shrugged away as ‘natural’ deaths — even though its snow leopard died in an enclosure with no air-conditioning on a day when temperatures hit 26°C, and a monkey was killed by a wolf placed right next to the simians’ cage. Lahore Zoo’s elephant Suzi died at the untimely age of 30, while Karachi Zoo’s losses are similarly high. If this is the level of suffering in Pakistani zoos, it would be best to shut down such shameful facilities altogether.

Hung Parliament?

TO address the enormous political, economic, security and social challenges that confront the country, a strong federal government with a clear electoral mandate is surely needed. But it is not apparent that what the country needs and deserves it will get on July 25. Imran Khan’s candid admission that no party may win a majority in the election and exhortation to the public to turn out and vote, reinforce independent election analyses and political opinion that a hung parliament remains a possibility. That would be an unfortunate outcome. The Constitution does ensure that a prime minister will be elected by the next parliament. Article 91(2) requires the National Assembly to be convened by the president 21 days after a general election. The new assembly must first elect a speaker and then, to the exclusion of all other business, vote to elect a prime minister.

Article 91(4) of the Constitution sets out a clear procedure in case no candidate wins a majority vote of the total membership of the National Assembly: “...if no member secures such majority in the first poll, a second poll shall be held between the members who secure the two highest numbers of votes in the first poll and the member who secures a majority of votes of the members present and voting shall be declared to have been elected as prime minister”. But electing a prime minister, as the Constitution guarantees, does not guarantee a stable government. Certainly, the existing split in the upper house of parliament ensures that at least legislatively, the next federal government, whether comprising of a single party or several parties, will necessarily need to reach out across the aisle. But the National Assembly is critical because it alone determines who is elected prime minister and votes on the annual finance bill.

A coalition government would not be new in this latest era of elected governments. From 2008 to 2013, the PPP led a coalition of several parties. That coalition survived the short-lived experiment of a national government when the PML-N withdrew its support and opted to sit in opposition after a few weeks of uneasy power sharing with the PPP. In the 2013 campaign, the PML-N's strategy of focusing primarily on Punjab kept alive the possibility of no one party winning a majority in the National Assembly. But a coalition government in 2018 would face very different challenges. Political controversies and widespread allegations of electoral meddling have cast a shadow over the pre-poll phase. The PTI, PPP and PML-N may well be the three largest parties in parliament and there is no likely combination of those parties that can produce a government, let alone a stable, well-functioning one. Two of the three largest parties in parliament sitting in the opposition is also unlikely to promote stability. A significant voter turnout, regardless of the result, could help mitigate uncertainty. Please vote.

Bail For Rao Anwar

THE judicial process is being followed, but justice so far is not much in evidence. Rao Anwar, despite his name being credibly linked with some of the worst excesses associated with corrupt law-enforcement personnel, has obtained bail in the second case pertaining to the murder of Naqeebullah Mehsud and three others earlier this year. The notorious cop had been booked by the police for having allegedly planted firearms on the men after killing them in a staged encounter on Jan 13 in Karachi. Contrary to the former SSP Malir's claims, Naqeebullah, it turned out, was an aspiring model, and none of the four victims had any terrorist links. The outcome in court on Friday was virtually a foregone conclusion. For the same accountability court had a few days ago granted bail to Rao Anwar in the case of the men's abduction and murder, accepting the defence's argument that the police official was not present at the scene of the purported shootout.

The saga of the so-called encounter specialist beggars belief, both for the scale of the long-standing allegations that have earned him his sobriquet and for the fact that he has faced not an iota of accountability for his actions. According to the police's own records, nearly 450 people died in shootouts ordered by Rao Anwar between 2011 and 2018. Not one cop lost his life in the process, yet these 'encounters' failed to even prompt an inquiry. After the Supreme Court itself took

notice following public protests, it seemed for a while that Naqeebullah's murder may have been one killing too far. But the bizarre aftermath has made a mockery of the legal system: Rao Anwar took two months to comply with the Supreme Court's repeated orders for him to surrender, a disappearance evidently so successful that no military or civilian authority was able to smoke him out; his residence in Malir Cantonment was controversially declared a sub-jail; and he was the only one of the policemen accused of Naqeebullah's murder not brought to court in handcuffs. His insouciance during the court proceedings, moreover, seems to indicate he believes he has an ace up his sleeve that, incredible as it may seem, is no match for the justice system. If the trial is not to be a scathing indictment of the weakness of this country's institutions, no suspect should be given special treatment or allowed to see himself as being above the law.

Online Abuse

TAKING note of the intensifying degree of mudslinging against candidates online, the Senate Standing Committee on Interior has urged the government, in particular the PTA and the FIA, to crack down on such antisocial and defamatory behaviour. Some of their suggestions are naïve at best, and unreasonable at worst. Only a month ago, another Senate body was informed that the FIA's cybercrime investigation unit is too understaffed and ill-equipped to deal with most complaints. Given the vast, distributed nature of the internet, even a well-resourced investigative body would not be able to intervene as swiftly as it seems the legislators would like to bring such miscreants to book. One view floated in the meeting was that the time had come for 'stringent measures' to be implemented to check the proliferation of such content; one can only surmise that this would entail a prohibitive approach. Authorities have flirted with this idea before; then, as now, blanket bans on social media platforms are not only draconian but also demonstrably unwieldy.

It is understandable for politicians to want to shield themselves from vitriol, but the fact is that many of them are responsible for cheapening our political discourse. Only recently, the ECP issued notices to four senior politicians for using unbecoming language against their opponents. Online abuse, often perpetrated under the cloak of anonymity, might up the ante, but it is still in large part a

reflection of the divisive rhetoric being expressed in the mainstream. Perhaps this election season might engender some empathy among our politicians for the many victims (particularly women) of online abuse, who don't have the privilege of being able to legislate to improve digital rights or strengthen the FIA's capacity to hold abusers accountable. Meanwhile, the prescription our politicians are looking for is hidden in plain sight — the ability to self-regulate, tone down the invective, display moral leadership, and reassert our basic, common values of dignity for all.

Controversial Verdict

THE unexplained urgency with which the trial has been completed has overshadowed the crime that was alleged. For justice to be fair, it must be transparent and adhere to due process. Failure to ensure transparency and due process in the dispensation of justice are themselves an injustice, not least because it may allow an individual credibly accused of a crime to escape lawful punishment. The merits of the case against Hanif Abbasi, a PML-N candidate for the National Assembly from Rawalpindi, are difficult to assess because of the unexplained haste with which the trial has been completed. At a minimum, it does appear that Mr Abbasi may have faced credible accusations that required a strong defence against. But an alleged crime punished in extraordinary circumstances by a court of law has necessarily turned attention to what amounts to a serious undermining of the judicial process itself.

To begin with, set aside that Mr Abbasi is a politician who was to contest a general election in a few days' time. A verdict delivered in the middle of the night resulting in a lifetime sentence for any individual, private citizen or public-office seeker, is a simply shocking abuse of the judicial system. It is incomprehensible that any judicial process, let alone one where the life of an individual hangs in the balance, sanctioned by the law and the Constitution can allow for such gross violation of due process and judicial transparency. But it would be wrong to heap all blame on the judge of the Control of Narcotic Substances Court of Rawalpindi. The judge of the anti-narcotics court had been given an extraordinary deadline by the Lahore High Court to complete the trial, which had meandered typically through the judicial system for many years, before the general election on July 25.

Perhaps Mr Abbasi's middle-of-the-night conviction and sentencing is explicable if his political affiliation with the PML-N and the already deeply controversial general election are considered. This is where the true extent of the damage to the judicial system wrought by a strangely executed judgement becomes apparent. The judicialisation of politics now appears to be morphing into the criminalisation of a certain kind of politics and some political parties. All stakeholders in the judicial system should consider the potentially disastrous consequences of the path being taken in the name of accountability. Perhaps recognising the troubling implications of holding an election in a constituency where one of the leading candidates has been judicially eliminated virtually on the eve of polling day, the ECP has postponed voting in NA-60. Better sense needs to prevail on all sides.

Militant Candidates

IN several constituencies, candidates with strong links to sectarian militancy and jihadi groups are being allowed to contest the general elections. What is most worrying is that the institutions that have the legal and constitutional powers to block these elements' entry into electoral politics are looking the other way.

Chief of the banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat Ahmed Ludhianvi is contesting the polls as an independent from Jhang while the sectarian outfit's Karachi-based leader Aurangzeb Farooqui is also fighting for a National Assembly seat from the platform of the Rah-i-Haq party.

Read: Bringing militants into the mainstream

Ludhianvi was taken off the Fourth Schedule by the caretaker set-up, while Farooqui is being backed in his constituency by the PTI, PML-N and a former provincial minister belonging to the PPP.

In Punjab, cadres of the Milli Muslim League — the political front of Jamaatud Dawa — are taking part in the polls under the Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek banner. In Balochistan, Ramzan Mengal, an ASWJ leader, is running for a Quetta seat while Shafiq Mengal, the alleged leader of a feared death squad that is believed to have had both sectarian and Baloch nationalist targets, is campaigning for a Khuzdar seat.

But it is not just the state and security establishment that appear to be playing ball with violent extremists; mainstream parties have also courted hardliners for votes. For example, it is of concern to note that former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi sought the ASWJ's electoral support recently.

Extremist elements who forsake the way of the gun, eschew the path of religious and sectarian hatred and respect democratic norms have a right to become part of the electoral process.

However, in the aforementioned cases, there is little evidence that any of these individuals and organisations have renounced the politics of hate and violence. This puts a question mark over the state's counterterrorism strategy.

If extremists are allowed to contest for seats and make it to the legislatures without renouncing violence, what is to be made of NAP's goal three which states that "militant outfits and armed gangs will not be allowed to operate in the country"? What good is banning organisations when they reappear with new names, and when militant leaders run for office?

As for political parties courting extremists for votes, they should realise that should the hardliners get their way, the whole democratic edifice will be wrapped up and replaced with something much darker.

Schools In Wrong Areas

THE insufficiency of public-sector schools, coupled with the plummeting standards of the latter, has resulted in the mushroom growth of private schools. Given that the country's population is heavily skewed towards the young, and the fact that there is growing awareness amongst all sections of the population of the importance of education, the running of schools has turned out to be very good business — often, a ruthless one that will mow down impediments wherever possible. Consider, for example, that while in all cities there exist zoning laws and regulations delineating areas reserved for commercial activities from those meant for residential or amenity purposes, private schools (amongst other commercial facilities) spring up everywhere to cater to the needs of the population, with no

thought for the rules. This phenomenon is especially a scourge in residential areas, where the more or less parallel school timings mean that streets become choked and residents are thoroughly inconvenienced, all because private schools aren't bothered or don't have the resources to purchase or lease proper premises in the mandated areas.

It is against this backdrop, then, that Islamabad's Capital Development Authority's action on Friday to seal 12 private schools operating in residential areas must be appreciated. This is a drop in the ocean; there are about 360 schools that operate in residential areas in the capital, but a start has been made. It is true that in the short term, students will be affected. Yet this must be contrasted with the reality that such hole-in-the-wall institutions overwhelmingly lack the space for adequately sized classrooms and necessary facilities such as libraries and playgrounds. In the long term, city authorities must work on upgrading city planning practices so that while educational institutions are kept out of places where they have no business to operate, the sectors earmarked for them are not too far from residential areas, or so densely packed that access becomes a problem. As in all other facets of city planning, research and measured thinking are vital.

Militant Threat

THE campaigns are now over and tomorrow the country will vote in a historic but controversial election.

From a security perspective, polling day is undeniably a mammoth responsibility. More than 100m citizens eligible to vote in simultaneous national and provincial elections is an administrative exercise that is vast and with few comparisons across the democratic world.

But the inherent complexities of securing the polling process have been compounded by a spate of terror attacks that has indelibly marred the campaign phase.

The assassination of Ikramullah Gandapur, a PTI candidate for the provincial assembly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the failed attempt on JUI-F leader Akram Durrani should not be dismissed as two more incidents of militant violence.

While the carnage in Peshawar and Mastung — and the sheer loss of life in those attacks — against Haroon Bilour and Siraj Raisani were on a different order of magnitude, the assassination of Gandapur and the attack on Mr Durrani suggest that militants still have the capacity to select their targets seemingly at will.

Mastung bombing: 128 dead, over 200 injured in deadliest attack since APS, IS claims responsibility

The threats faced by candidates and voters are not solely from organised and entrenched militant networks.

For example, the threats of violence against Jibran Nasir, an independent candidate from Karachi, by religious extremists suggest that the democratic project is under attack on multiple fronts.

The space to advocate the politics of tolerance and inclusivity and reject extremism and hate appears to have further shrunk, and there is a possibility that far right religious groups may make historic gains in parliament on July 25.

A vast and unprecedented security net is to be thrown around the polling process across the country. If the net is to be effective, it will require immense cooperation across the many different security organisations and institutions that have been assigned duties to protect the polling process.

It is hoped that security coordination will be effective and respectful, and that the caretaker governments and the ECP will be assertive in carrying out the constitutional responsibilities assigned to them.

Despite the political controversies and militant violence that have blighted this election season, the state should put its best foot forward in the polling phase and demonstrate to the people that their fundamental right to choose who represents them in government can be secured.

As to the future, lessons from yet another bloody campaign season will have to be learned. A comprehensive security plan to secure all phases of the election from

violence surely needs to be drawn up in advance with input from all relevant institutions.

A consensus approach would have the benefit in minimising disruptions and adverse executive or judicial orders.

In 2018, the necessary focus needed on security was impeded by valid but ill-timed concerns about VIP culture in security assignments and political controversies that beset state institutions. On polling day, a firm focus on security will be needed.

Iran-US Verbal Spat

IT is a pity that the conduct of international relations has come to this: the president of the United States is threatening a sovereign nation (Iran) via an angry tweet — that too in all caps — using unstatesmanlike language wholly unsuitable to a leader of a world power. But as Donald Trump's tenure has shown thus far, name-calling and conducting sensitive diplomacy through Twitter is all par for the course. Mr Trump fulminated that Iran should “never, ever threaten the United States again” or else the Islamic Republic would suffer consequences “few throughout history have ever suffered before”. It seems the US president was miffed by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's earlier comments that should the US go to war with his country, it would be the “mother of all wars” while adding that peace with Tehran was “the mother of all peace”. While world leaders, especially in times of tension, are known to make hyperbolic and ultranationalistic speeches, these comments are troubling considering the current situation in the Middle East. Unfortunately, many in the US administration appear to be looking for a confrontation with Iran; a little before Mr Trump's bombastic tweet, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that he wanted all states to stop buying Iranian oil by November (effectively declaring economic war on Tehran). Expectedly, the harsh comments emanating from Washington have engendered hard-line responses from the Iranian establishment, including the supreme leader and commanders of the Pasdaran.

It seems that there are very few sane voices left in Washington where the Iran file is concerned. In fact, many of those who cheered earlier American wars in the Middle East (eg National Security Adviser John Bolton) are back in the saddle and close to Mr Trump who is not exactly known for his deft diplomacy and

understanding of global affairs. However, Mr Rouhani was not entirely wrong when he said that a US-Iranian conflict would be the “mother of all wars”; certainly, the likelihood of such a conflagration swallowing up an already volatile region is not remote. While Iran’s European interlocutors are working to save what is left of the nuclear deal and trying to find a modus vivendi, America is on the warpath. However, to save the nezam, the Iranian establishment appears ready reply in kind if threatened. That is why for those who want a peaceful global order it is imperative that this conflict be averted, and Washington take the lead by toning down its rhetoric.

Campaign Finances

It ought to be apparent that political controversies, militant violence and clashes between institutions cannot create the space necessary to build sustained and legitimate pressure on the political class to enact meaningful reforms. The significant violence and controversies in the latest campaign season have rightly been the focus of public interest and media coverage. But this election has also been a test of the electoral reforms enacted by parliament, and in one respect ie campaign spending limits, the attempted reforms have proved to be an utter failure. An increase in official spending limits from the previous Rs1m for provincial assembly and Rs1.5m for National Assembly candidates was clearly required. If the law and its implementation are to be effective in limiting the spending of candidates in an election, they also need to be realistic.

However, perhaps aware that the state cannot be seen to officially endorse a vast amount of money spent on election campaigns, thereby preventing potential independent and less well-off candidates from entering politics, and perhaps wary of a public backlash at a time of heightened public accountability, parliament revised the spending limits only marginally upwards. The official limit in 2018 is Rs2m for a provincial assembly candidate and Rs4m for a National Assembly candidate. While certainly a big sum of money, considering the prevailing campaign requirements and the large number of voters in a constituency, the amount could have been revised upwards more realistically. The upshot of a marginal increase that has no bearing on reality is not only that candidates are encouraged to flout the law but that the open violation of spending limits could

become a problem later for winning candidates faced with the axe of disqualification. Certainly, a balance is required: the obscene amounts alleged to be spent in some close races in wealthy constituencies cannot be endorsed. But if the worst excesses are ever to be curbed, the law must also reflect reality. Campaign and party finances are issues that need to be revisited by the next parliament.

First Woman CJ

PAKISTAN finally has its first female high court chief justice. On Monday, Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar announced that Justice Syeda Tahira Safdar is to head the Balochistan High Court. Having been Balochistan's first female civil judge as well, Justice Safdar is no stranger to making history. Currently, she is senior puisne judge of the BHC, and was also part of the three-member special court set up to try Gen Pervez Musharraf for treason. Ironically, and perhaps fittingly, the announcement by the chief justice came at the launch of a memoir by retired justice Fakharunnisa Khokhar in which she has written about how she was passed over for promotion as chief justice of the Lahore High Court.

That it has taken 70 years for a woman to head a high court in Pakistan despite several notable names having made it to the superior judiciary — justices Majida Rizvi, Khalida Rasheed Khan, Yasmin Abbasi, among others — is partly due to the discrimination that is inherent in a patriarchal culture. This in turn is also responsible for an often uncivil and misogynistic courtroom environment, especially in the lower courts, which demands tenacity of the highest order from women lawyers and judges. These difficult working conditions have traditionally discouraged many women from entering the legal profession or at least taking on roles within it that require a more public profile such as that of litigation lawyers and judges. It was for good reason that Justice Mansoor Ali Shah, soon after being appointed chief justice LHC, constituted a supervisory committee to look into problems faced by female judicial officers. Despite these obstacles however, women are increasingly entering the legal profession — there is already a fair number of them in the district judiciary. Hopefully, many more will be following in Justice Safdar's footsteps — and onward to the Supreme Court.

Cricket Win

THE Pakistan cricket team's 5-0 whitewash of Zimbabwe in the recent ODI series has been a lopsided affair, though a record-breaking one for the visitors. The host team, which has been grappling with serious problems, including poor remunerations, player revolts and lack of international exposure, wilted all too easily against a buoyant Pakistan side, depriving the fans of a real contest. To make things worse, Zimbabwe were without their leading players Brendon Taylor, Graeme Cremer, Sean Williams, Craig Ervine and Sikandar Raza. It's not surprising then that the Pakistani batsmen, led by Fakhar Zaman, took advantage of a pedestrian bowling attack. Fakhar's meteoric rise in the shorter form of the game has been a factor in Pakistan's recent successes including the Champions Trophy win in England last year and the tri-series victory in Zimbabwe. He almost single-handedly destroyed the hosts by scoring over 500 runs in the series and became the fastest to reach the 1,000-run mark in ODI history. Fakhar has found an able opening partner in Imam-ul-Haq who also scored three hundreds in the series. They put together a number of century stands including a world-record 304 in the fourth ODI.

There were also other positives to draw from. With all-rounders Shadab Khan and Fahim Ashraf looking the part, the emergence of a genuine pacer like Usman Shinwari, and Hasan Ali's coming of age, Pakistan is among the three favourites for next year's World Cup. Leading up to the mega event, though, are sterner tests including back-to-back series against New Zealand and Australia in the UAE, followed by a tour of South Africa. Still, the future looks bright for Pakistan cricket.

The Power To Choose

TODAY belongs to the voter. Political parties have campaigned for the people's vote, but the campaigns ended at midnight on Monday. Institutions of the state have shaped the pre-election landscape, but an on-time election has been achieved. Anti-democratic forces, inside the democratic process and outside, may attempt to distort the electorate's verdict, but polling day distortions could be more difficult to execute than before. Shocking violence indelibly marred the campaign phase; a vast and unprecedented security net that has been thrown around the polling process could help reassure the public about safety concerns. Today, the

voters of Pakistan, whoever they choose to vote for and wherever they cast their vote, will have an opportunity to demonstrate that the power to choose can at least partially counter the controversies, allegations and undeniable interference that have tarnished the run-up to the election.

Certainly, much will also depend on how the ECP, the caretaker administrations and the security apparatus conduct themselves today. A raft of constitutional and legislative changes this decade was designed to create an effective ECP and neutral caretaker set-ups. Unhappily, even the significant autonomy and powers given to the ECP have not encouraged it to emerge from the shadows of state influence. The ECP has unprecedented administrative and legal tools at its disposal to, realistically, hold elections that are progressively free and fair as compared to previous polls. Thus far, the ECP has not lived up to the elevated democratic expectations of it as an institution; but it can repair some of the damage to its reputation by conducting a smooth polling process, from voting to counting to the announcement of results starting later today. Similarly, the caretaker administrations have been more visible and controversial than they ought to have been thus far, but assisting the ECP smoothly in the background today could help demonstrate that wholesale change and perhaps the disbandment of the caretaker system is not necessary.

On polling day, thoughts must necessarily also turn to what happens after 6pm, when voting ends and the counting begins. The political, economic, security and long-standing social challenges in the country undeniably require a strong mandate at the centre. In a post-18th Amendment federation, however, the role and responsibilities of the provinces are substantial, and it is possible clear mandates to govern will emerge in the provinces. That could help mitigate some of the tensions at the centre of the federation, but the risks to national political stability cannot be ignored. Two factors could dominate. If the PTI wins, its declared primary focus on combating corruption will need to be built on rule-of-law and impartial foundations. Fighting corruption is necessary and vital to a stable and prosperous Pakistan, and, therefore, it is important that anti-corruption be firmly rooted in transparency and fairness. If the PML-N wins, the party must not make the legal fate of de facto party leader Nawaz Sharif the centre of its political and governance agenda. Mr Sharif's trial and appeals process must not be tainted by political interference by his party. The democratic process is more important than the legal or political fate of any one individual, and must remain so.

Finally, all sides must reflect on why democracy has suffered reversals and lost strength and vitality in recent years. Anti-democratic forces have played a part and an activist judiciary must also take some responsibility, but so should the political parties. A consistent failure to strengthen democratic institutions and the willingness of political parties to allow anti-democratic forces to weaken political opponents will need to be addressed relatively soon by the next parliament. For today, however, a simple message: please vote.

Appreciating The Voter

A DEADLY attack in Quetta has marred what was otherwise a largely peaceful polling day across the country. It appears that while the unprecedented security net thrown around the polling process was quite effective, the unique and harrowing circumstances of Balochistan rendered the province pervasively vulnerable.

It is too early to reasonably assess if the Election Commission of Pakistan was able to manage the voting process across the country better than in previous elections.

There do appear to be at least some indications that persistent problems — such as access and entry to polling stations, barriers to women voting in some parts of the country, low-level, localised political violence, disruptions etc — were once again in evidence on polling day. That ought to be unacceptable.

Setting aside the political controversies and widespread allegations, the ECP as an institution in its current form has more independence, is better resourced and has more experience in conducting elections than any previous version of the commission. Surely, the ECP can be expected to progressively improve the voting experience for the public.

The real challenge to do so may not be in big cities or parts where there is a media presence, but in less-accessible, far-flung and remote areas. The ECP must do better.

What can be unequivocally applauded is the electorate. In a bitterly divided polity and with the overall results far from certain ahead of polling time, in hot and humid conditions across much of the country, the voter was overwhelmingly disciplined and patient everywhere.

Some skirmishes between political parties and supporters of candidates have been reported, but they do not appear to be widespread.

Provincial and national turnouts will be confirmed by the ECP in due course, but it is already apparent that large parts of the electorate deeply value their right to vote as guaranteed by the Constitution.

The roots of democracy include strengthening democratic institutions, but the commitment of the people to freely choosing their elected representatives is what truly binds the democratic process together.

Too often, democracy in Pakistan is cast as a private struggle among elites and institutions having little bearing on the life of the average citizen.

That suggestion is not just untrue, it is also a dangerous assertion that can only undermine democracy. The Pakistani citizen has consistently and courageously demonstrated a commitment to the electoral process, and democratic continuity permits that widespread sentiment to express itself. The Pakistani voter is deserving of respect and admiration.

Finally, at the time of writing, it is unclear who will lead Pakistan at the federal level and in the provinces. Overnight, the picture may be — hopefully, will be — clear.

Whichever parties or coalitions emerge victorious, they must approach politics with a more democratic and conciliatory spirit. For national stability, politics cannot be allowed to return to an era of open warfare.

Prison Conditions

WHERE prisoners at Adiala jail in Rawalpindi are concerned, there may be a silver lining to having former prime minister Nawaz Sharif among them, even if he is

housed in separate, secure barracks. For that has prompted his brother, Shahbaz Sharif to raise objections to the living conditions in the prison — located in the same province of which he himself until recently had long been chief minister. Even though the former chief minister's disquiet was on account of the erstwhile premier's discomfort behind bars rather than any realisation of the general prison population's plight, they too may stand to benefit. In a letter to the caretaker prime minister and caretaker Punjab chief minister, Shahbaz Sharif mentioned the lack of health and medical facilities, humidity, lack of air conditioning, unhygienic food, and poor sanitation in the jail. Taking notice of the allegations, the chairman of the National Commission for Human Rights has directed a two-member NCHR team to visit Adiala prison in the coming week.

The NCHR statement rightly describes the squalid conditions as a blatant violation of prisoners' human rights. Moreover, Adiala jail is not an exception, but more of a rule. Among the findings of a report released a few months ago, prisons in Pakistan house 57pc more prisoners than the official capacity — the eight most crowded among them have an occupancy rate 300pc to 500pc higher. Aside from stripping individuals of their dignity — a basic right of even the most violent, disruptive convict — living in such a confined space has serious health consequences, including the spread of disease and a heightened risk of mental illness. Intolerably close physical proximity also increases the possibility of tensions between prisoners boiling over into serious confrontations. Moreover, many detention facilities are housed in old, colonial-era buildings where sanitation and hygiene pose significant challenges. Yet no government in recent years has seen fit to express any serious interest in improving conditions that currently affect 78,000 plus people — including juvenile prisoners and inmates' children — who are behind bars. According to an NCHR member quoted in the Dawn report, the committee has in the past made a number of recommendations to this end, but to no avail. With the pressure for accountability growing louder with each successive government, perhaps politicians should make more of an effort towards prison reforms. After all, conditions in jail may one day affect them in the most direct way possible.

Railways' Audit

THE woes of Pakistan Railways are not new, and a recent audit report conducted by an independent auditor and submitted to the Supreme Court on Tuesday paints a gloomy picture. According to the report, from FY2012-13 to FY2015-16, PR has been accruing tens of billions of rupees in losses every year. Moreover, 70pc of the revenue is said to go towards pensions. The report has questioned the quality and age of tracks, the condition of locomotives and coaches as well as PR's telecommunication system. Summing up PR's ill health, the report says that "it is essential that the organisation be run with proper planning and in an efficient manner" in order to make it sustainable.

Successive governments have made tall claims about 'fixing' the railways and bringing this essential mode of transportation into the 21st century. For example, it was mentioned earlier this year that PR would be 'upgraded' in order to align it with CPEC. However, as the audit report has pointed out, proper planning is missing where management of PR is concerned. While some relatively successful experiments have been conducted, such as the Business Express and Green Line trains, in general terms, PR is not a customer-friendly mode of transport. What is needed are clean trains that run on time and transport passengers to their destinations in safety and comfort, as well as modern infrastructure including better tracks and signalling equipment to ensure a safe journey. Also, PR is significantly underutilised where hauling freight is concerned, putting pressure on the nation's road network. For the average Pakistani, domestic air travel is expensive while road travel, though affordable, is not comfortable and can be time-consuming. Under a proper, professional management there is no reason why PR cannot be turned around and its massive losses plugged. The incoming government must make the transformation of Pakistan Railways into a profitable, people-friendly enterprise a priority as the citizens of this country deserve a modern rail network.

Time To Move On

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan — a long, quintessentially Pakistani struggle to achieve the summit of national politics has finally succeeded. Imran Khan will be the next prime minister of Pakistan and, irrespective of the significant controversies in the run-up to polling day and in the hours after polling closed, it ought to be recognised that the PTI leader enjoys genuine national political appeal.

In an address to the nation yesterday, Mr Khan set out in a broad-brush manner his economic and governance reforms and foreign policy priorities. Mr Khan struck a sensible note in his speech and he ought to be given the political space to try and turn his ideas into reality.

Read: 'From a politician to a statesman' — analysts react to Imran's victory speech with cautious optimism

To Pakistan's enduring bad luck, the implementation phase of reforms and policy changes has been relatively poor across most governments. That must change. A more prosperous, modern and just Pakistan that is at peace with its neighbours is an agenda that surely all Pakistanis agree on.

Mr Khan has tried to put his and the PTI's best foot forward, but the ECP has delivered a stunningly disastrous performance. The shocking mismanagement of the process of counting votes and announcing results at the polling station has made it necessary that the entire ECP senior leadership resign after the election formalities are completed and a high-level inquiry be conducted at the earliest.

At this stage, it cannot be known if foul play, gross incompetence or a combination of both resulted in the unacceptable delay in the announcing of preliminary results on election night.

What is equally troubling are the allegations by virtually all major parties other than the PTI that polling agents were excluded from the counting process and that in many cases they were not provided the legally mandated statement of count in its official form.

It is perhaps to the credit of the opposition that the shocking violations of election protocols and norms have not already plunged the overall outcome of the election into doubt.

Surely, a decade of national, provincial and local government elections across the country and an ECP that is empowered, independent and resourced ought to have precluded the disturbing events and controversies surrounding what is the core function of the Election Commission at the heart of the electoral process in the country.

The defiance and blanket denials of ECP officials who have appeared before the media so far are also confounding. In a country where democratic institutions are weak and politics in yet another divisive phase, with the pre-poll phase blighted by controversies, allegations and militant violence, a transparent and fair polling process was absolutely necessary.

But after the reappearance of persistent voting-related problems during polling hours, the ECP presided over a historic bungling of the counting process and the announcement of results. There must be accountability for the fiasco.

The split screen of politics in the country at the moment — the PTI celebrating victory and the new opposition in a clamour over allegations of unfair practices — is perhaps unsurprising. The 2018 general election was already mired in controversy before the ECP's failures on election night added to the confusion and uncertainty.

All sides must try and navigate the days and weeks ahead with common sense and caution. Imran Khan's acceptance speech yesterday was an encouraging sign. Opposition parties should route their complaints and protests through official channels.

In the long term, the aim of all parties should be to strengthen parliamentary democracy through robust debate, with the opposition keeping a vigilant check on the government's performance. State institutions ought to give the democratic process the space it needs to survive and thrive.

Accessing The Vote

ACCOUNTS of people with limited mobility trying — and more often than not failing — to vote on Wednesday have once again highlighted the near total disregard given to issues of physical accessibility in Pakistan. The ECP, for its part, had claimed to have conducted accessibility audits of polling stations and recommended installing ramps; then it announced in late June that people with disabilities could apply for a postal ballot; and, just before polling day, reiterated that facilitating PWDs and senior citizens would be prioritised. Unfortunately, these

largely turned out to be unimplemented procedures and half measures. Many PWDs and the elderly were assigned polling booths on the first floors of buildings, and were reported to have either stayed home or left without voting. Though it remains to be seen how many availed the postal ballot scheme, such a method for a vulnerable group of people deprives them of the security of the secret ballot.

Pictures circulating on social media of officials carrying old men to their polling station, are testament to the determination of those coming out to vote despite such impediments, and the generosity of those who sought to help in any way that they could. But individual gestures are no substitute for the institutional guarantee of an inclusive voting experience. With a little bit of foresight and planning, the ECP could have mitigated this issue. Yet, it is not singularly responsible for such glaring oversight. Had previous governments ensured that public infrastructure works met the requirements of the 2006 Accessibility Code, more buildings would be safe and accessible today. So, too, would public schools, had there been any movement on the proposal for inclusive education in the 2002 National Policy for PWDs. All people are entitled to participate as equal members of society. In this regard, we still have a long way to go.

Sweida Massacre

THE numbers are chilling. In an orgy of violence orchestrated by the militant Islamic State group in the southern Syrian governorate of Sweida on Wednesday, there have been reports of nearly 250 deaths — around 135 of them civilian. The terrorist group had unleashed a series of suicide bombings and gun attacks in the area mostly inhabited by members of the Druze community. While the Syrian government and its backers — Russia and Iran — as well as the US-led coalition have been successful in freeing much of Syrian territory from IS, the recent attacks show that the self-styled caliphate can still carry out acts of mass violence. While IS does not have the same capabilities it had when it swept across large swathes of Syria and Iraq, it is not a spent force.

The key to defeating IS, and other militants in the region, lies in a stable Syria. While the level of violence there has come down, with the Assad regime having the upper hand against its opponents and jihadi groups, a sustained campaign against militancy cannot succeed unless the civil war comes to a negotiated end. And that scenario does not appear to be on the horizon. If anything, there is a threat of new fronts opening up in Syria; Israel has been indulging in misadventures by repeatedly violating Syrian sovereignty and launching strikes inside the country, targeted at Mr Assad's Iranian allies. Tel Aviv believes that Iran and Hezbollah are perilously close to its positions in the occupied Golan. Moreover, the US support to Syrian Kurds has not gone down well with Turkey. Unless these issues are resolved, the battle against militancy will only be half won.

Foreign Policy Plan

A DOMESTIC agenda has long dominated the PTI's politics, but as the party prepares to assume power for the first time at the federal level it will need to turn its attention to matters of foreign policy and national security too.

In a welcome move, then, the incoming prime minister Imran Khan spent a portion of his victory speech on Thursday addressing what kind of relations Pakistan would seek and maintain with its neighbours and global powers under his government.

The views expressed by Mr Khan were sensible and aspirational in a positive manner. Perhaps most importantly, Mr Khan began his comments about foreign policy by recognising that for Pakistan to achieve its social and economic potential it must be at peace with its neighbours in the region.

A foreign policy and national security agenda rooted in such an outlook could help Pakistan overcome some of the chronic problems that have held it back from playing a significantly positive and mutually beneficial role in the region and beyond.

Of particular interest are surely Mr Khan's comments about three countries that Pakistan has complicated and strained relations with: Afghanistan, the US and India. Even as a foreign policy neophyte, at least in terms of leading a national

governing party, Mr Khan is likely aware that the gap between sentiment and action is substantial.

Nevertheless, to hear a first-time governing party's leader speak warmly about long-term aspirations such as an open border with Afghanistan can help set the right tone for his interactions with that country's leaders and may indicate a willingness to try and reset the civil-military imbalance in the foreign policy and national security arenas domestically.

Peace in Afghanistan is an urgent regional priority, and Mr Khan's support for a peace process is welcome. In terms of relations with the US, of which Mr Khan has frequently spoken critically in the past, the PTI supremo was more modest in his goals, but arguably rightly cast the immediate fate of Pakistan-US relations as tied to peace in Afghanistan. Mutually beneficial and balanced relations, as Mr Khan said he will seek with the US, are worth pursuing.

Inevitably, Mr Khan's comments about India in his speech have drawn significant interest nationally and internationally. Expressing a commitment to seeking better ties with India on a reciprocal basis has put Mr Khan in the mainstream of national politics.

Despite the sometimes heated campaign rhetoric, there is a consensus among all major national political parties that ties with India must improve — a consensus that is invaluable and is arguably missing from Indian politics today.

Explicitly linking the fight against poverty to regional trade was also an important assessment by Mr Khan as was his criticism of the Pakistan-India blame game. India should pay heed to Mr Khan's offer to go the extra mile to address all issues, including the Kashmir dispute.

Women Voters

ASIDE from the successful candidates, another big winner of the general election on Wednesday were the women of Pakistan, specifically those in conservative parts of the country. For until now, they had been kept disenfranchised by

regressive quarters in the tribal areas and even in parts of Punjab that consider women irrelevant to decision-making on any issue of importance.

Traditionally, every opportunity to choose a representative of the people — whether on a national or local level — was preceded by tribal elders and local chapters of political parties striking agreements to bar women from the hustings. When written agreements triggered protests from civil society activists, they resorted to verbal pacts to maintain the status quo.

That this abhorrent trend is beginning to change is due to the dogged efforts of women legislators who have pushed for election results in constituencies with a lower than 10pc turnout to be declared null and void. Last December, the ECP cancelled the result of a local government poll in Lower Dir because of the abysmally low female turnout.

The very act of casting a vote is empowering, which explains why men in some social milieu find the notion of female suffrage so intolerable. Some of them will continue to resist in the name of ‘traditional norms’ that are particularly set in stone where women’s agency is concerned.

Even this time around, there were pockets where female participation in the voting process was negligible or absent. For that to end, the ECP must continue to demonstrate it will not stand for any violation of the right of franchise.

Overall however, faced with the threat of having their own vote voided by an electoral watchdog prepared to hold them accountable for suppressing the female vote, men in many of these areas ‘allowed’ the women to cast their ballot on Wednesday, some actively encouraging them do so.

The ECP deserves credit for extending every effort to include more women on the electoral rolls and warning of action if they were prevented from voting, also issuing directives to the local administrations of Swat, Lower Dir, Upper Dir, Shangla, Swabi and Battagram to ensure female participation in the polls.

That women lined up to vote — even in parts of violence-plagued Balochistan — and stand as candidates in some of the most conservative areas, is a testament

to their enthusiasm for participating in this fundamental exercise of democratic rights.

World Hepatitis Day

WITH an estimated 12-15m of its citizens likely infected with hepatitis B and C, Pakistan has the ignominious status of having one of the world's highest prevalence rates of viral hepatitis. In October last year, the country's first-ever National Hepatitis Strategic Framework 2017-2021 was launched, with targets to reduce HBV- and HCV-related deaths by 10pc, and new cases of infections by 30pc, and with the broader goal of eliminating this disease as a major public health threat by 2030. The theme for World Hepatitis Day this year is to 'find the missing millions' of undiagnosed people suffering from this disease. This is crucial for Pakistan, where the lack of a dedicated hepatitis surveillance system and, resultantly, inadequate epidemiological data at the federal and provincial levels, leave potentially millions without access to targeted and timely healthcare services. Acknowledging these limitations, the drafters of the NHSF were forced to rely on the insufficient and outdated findings of the 2008 National Hepatitis Survey. With a range of interventions needed to improve prevention, diagnosis and treatment, it will undoubtedly be difficult to achieve these objectives in the absence of accurate data.

But it is not impossible to stem the tide of the hepatitis epidemic. Indeed, medical advances and cheaper drugs have dramatically reduced the length of treatment and risks of side effects, and improved patient outcomes, in recent years. Meanwhile, addressing the massive shortcomings in blood transfusions and other healthcare practices, and our water and waste management systems, can to a large extent prevent the spread of not just hepatitis but other deadly diseases. Imran Khan has in the past actively campaigned on HBV prevention, and both previous KP and Punjab governments have made progress in improving healthcare service delivery. Though this 'silent killer' is all too pervasive in Pakistan, a positive trajectory is in sight, provided that there is sufficient political will and financial backing to overcome this crisis and reform the dysfunctional public health sector.

Economic Road

IF there is one thing the economy abhors, it is uncertainty. Not knowing who will be running things, what ideas will animate the new dispensation, what objectives it will set as its priority, are all questions that have swirled around Pakistan's economy for almost a year now. The serious bouts of uncertainty began last July with the unexpected currency movement, followed by Ishaq Dar's troubles and his replacement with a new team. It continued through further currency adjustments starting December and the large-scale dollarisation, the drama around the Financial Action Task Force meetings and the approach of the budget, followed by the handover to an interim government and the outcome of the elections. Much work has remained at a standstill through all this as business and industry leaders have looked around searching for answers about where things might go, and important decisions regarding management of the foreign exchange reserves have been held in abeyance while topping up with short-term debt instead.

All this needs to end now. More than anything else, and certainly before anything else, the economy needs a hand on the tiller, and some sense of direction. With a PTI government now firmly on its way in, an early announcement of who the finance minister will be is essential, as are public pronouncements by the named individual about what priorities the incoming government intends to pursue. The minister designate should begin meeting top finance officials at the ministry and State Bank, as well as hold informal discussions with people from the IMF's representative office in Islamabad, among others. Just the sight of somebody working to take charge of this crucial portfolio will inject some much-needed confidence into the economy, and go some way towards parting the clouds of uncertainty that have hung over the outlook for far too long now.

While he or she is at it, perhaps the incoming finance minister can also consult key members of the opposition parties, including people from the outgoing finance team. This exercise can be kept more discreet, but it will be useful to let word of these meetings circulate in order to send a signal to the markets that the new government intends to make an effort to firewall politics in economic management. This is one of the biggest fears hanging over outlook on the economy — that the incoming government will become embroiled in the politics of settling scores, pursuing vendettas, or launching a series of wild goose chases before coming around to the critical tasks at hand. The current account deficit has hit \$18bn, while

the budget deficit has already blown its annual target. The process of breathing confidence into the economy should begin now as a matter of priority, and continue in parallel with the politics shaping up.

Election Observers

FOR an election to be seen as free, fair, and transparent, the role of international election observers is important, and their assessment has a bearing on a country's democratic credentials in the eyes of the world. At a news conference in Islamabad on Friday, two such observation missions, one from the European Union and the other from the Commonwealth, contended that army troops deployed at polling stations did not interfere with the process and confined themselves to assisting the presiding officers. The observers did, however, express several concerns about the environment in which the election was held. Mentioned in the EU mission's preliminary report presented on the occasion, among these concerns was the less than satisfactory security situation, with a number of attacks on party leaders, candidates and election officials. Further, the report notes the emergence on the country's electoral landscape of extremist parties and individuals with a history of violence or even affiliations to terrorist outfits.

Aside from this, the observers' assessment also mentions "a systematic effort to undermine the former ruling party" through the judiciary, which "reshaped the political environment ahead of the elections". The EU mission chief at the press conference brought up the strictures on the media as well, which he said resulted in self-censorship. This is particularly significant, given that reports by international election observers tend to be carefully worded. Local human rights organisations and political analysts have been making similar assertions. Nevertheless, sometimes the word of global bodies carries more weight, both locally and internationally, as they are seen to be unencumbered by local biases or considerations. The questionable pre-poll developments and the muzzling of the media are now also part of the international election observers' record. It is edifying to glance through the report issued by the Commonwealth observer mission after elections in 2013. While noting the extremely high incidence of violence in the pre-election phase, it quoted a Pakistani civil society network of election observers as saying that the violence "was not met with an effective counter-attack by state security forces, raising concerns of patronage of certain political interests". As to

media freedom five years ago, it held that “Privately owned media outlets are relatively independent from state influence...”. Although this is but a preliminary report, one could argue that while in some ways Pakistan has made progress in the democratic exercise of holding elections, it is regressing on certain important fronts.

Progress For Minorities

THE spectre of a possible ultra religious right and militant right presence in parliament has given way to a wholly welcome first: the election of Mahesh Kumar Malani, a Hindu candidate of the PPP, on a general seat from Tharparkar. Mr Malani is the first Hindu candidate to be directly elected to the National Assembly since the reintroduction of a joint electorate system in 2002; a feel-good story from an election that has otherwise been blighted by controversy, allegations, violence and fear. Mr Malani’s victory follows the election in March of Krishna Kumari Kohli on a reserved women’s seat in the Senate, giving the PPP the distinction of once again leading the way on non-Muslim representation in the elected assemblies. Certainly, Mr Malani and Ms Kohli should be evaluated on their individual records as parliamentarians and legislators, but the PPP is laudably attempting to create fresh space in an otherwise stifling political environment for progressive, non-Muslim voices. Without the support of mainstream political parties, the voices at the margins of the national discourse will not be easily heard.

It is not merely non-Muslim religious groups that are underrepresented in the competition for general seats; women, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups are routinely overlooked too. For women and non-Muslims, what was created as a constitutional safeguard may have inadvertently become an impediment to greater political participation. A significant quota for them in all elected assemblies via party nomination and indirect election has perhaps given the major political parties an excuse to not bring more of them into ministerial or decision-making legislative roles. Mere numbers do not translate into true representation, and the country’s mainstream political parties should be encouraged to create meaningful space for all in national politics. The spread of toxic rhetoric and hate speech in recent times in the national discourse will surely have had an impact on non-Muslims groups and their perception of politics. The

incoming parliament should consider steps that can be taken to reassure all disadvantaged groups.

Where Independents Rule

OVER the last three decades, Pakistan has held enough general elections to be familiar with the current post-poll phase. This is a period in which the independents reign.

The PTI is wooing the latter, even though the scenes of some of them being flown in private jets under the watchful eye of Imran Khan's chief trouble-shooter might not have everyone's approval. But technically, there's nothing wrong in these visits to Bani Gala. The Punjab crown is at stake and the independents can tip the scales in favour of the PTI.

A government in Punjab is crucial to establishing Mr Khan's writ across the country. It is also vital to the existence of the PML-N which appears to have lost the race to form a government at the centre. Hamza Shahbaz, who is leading the PML-N's push for power in the biggest province, has been emphatic in demanding that his party's — and his family's — attempt to set up a government in Punjab be respected.

The PML-N has a big presence in the Punjab Assembly. The 129 members it has in the house is testimony to its deep roots in the province, especially central Punjab, in both the rural and urban areas not too far from Lahore.

Still, the PTI appears far more likely to succeed in forming the provincial government. Though the PTI was behind the PML-N when the results for the provincial seats first came in, Imran Khan's tally has since improved after five or six independents joined the PTI.

Not just that, it can be presumed that the PML-Q, which won seven seats in the Punjab Assembly after striking a deal with the PTI, will be more inclined to join the Khan camp — unless the Sharifs are able to miraculously woo Chaudhry Pervez Elahi, which may not be possible if the PML-N is reluctant to give up the office of chief minister to their one-time friends from Gujrat.

The PPP also has six members in the Punjab Assembly, but so far the party's attention has been focused on establishing a government in Sindh. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has categorically said he wants to play an effective opposition role in parliament — an assertion that has poured cold water over the plans of those politicians who were striving to put up a joint opposition to alleged rigging in the July 25 election.

This was a path-defining moment even though it seemed the PPP could have come up with several reasons to say that the general polls had been rigged. Maybe, the PML-N's decision to sit in the National Assembly is in part inspired by the PPP; the N-League's members-elect are certainly looking forward to taking their seats in the house. Perhaps the fireworks are being kept for later.

The independents, meanwhile, are helping the proceedings in a big way. They would be hoping that their role is not forgotten and that they are rewarded for their efforts in the interim before the parties take over.

Right On Course

It would be correct to say that the seats tally is not a reliable indicator of the strength of the latest entrant in the national election scene, the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan.

The TLP has surprised everyone by taking two provincial seats in Karachi but the signs of its real potential are spread over areas of consistent performance in Punjab and in Sindh, especially in the cities.

This outfit has notched up a benumbing 2.2m votes in its first general election. It is impossible to analyse which parties it has hit the hardest. A rather narrow frame applied to the problem would show that since both the leading parties in the election, the PML-N and PTI, are described as right wing, the TLP, as a faith-based group, would cut across their votes indiscriminately.

But last Wednesday's election is more proof of how hazardous it is to apply old standards to unprecedented developments. The TLP symbolises a real threat for

all those who have been in the political arena long before its leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi made his first motivational speech.

Not least, they are challenging the older religious-political parties, such as those that are grouped in the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal.

The MMA hasn't quite lived up to the pre-poll projections in KP, but then this Jamaat-JUI-F combine was not slated to make a huge splash in the province this time round. It is believed that the PTI has to a large extent incorporated those elements that have made it acceptable to the moderate, right-of-centre voters, to the disadvantage of the MMA parties.

Also, Imran Khan is right now at the peak of his popularity, particularly in KP, where he has not just overwhelmed the Jamaat and the JUI-F, but has also reduced the ANP, PML-N, and the PPP to a bare-minimum presence.

This rise of the PTI in KP, where the religion-based parties had or still have a big following, is chiefly responsible for these parties not scoring well in the 2018 election.

It doesn't necessarily mean that the maulanas have lost all clout in the country's politics. Together, the TLP and MMA took some 4m votes, whereas the vote count of the PPP, which came third with 43 seats, stood at 6.8m.

The TLP on its own crossed the 40,000 mark in many constituencies and it featured prominently in the coup against Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari in Lyari, once a PPP stronghold. This was no mean achievement for the new anti-status quo force.

CNN Vs Trump

DONALD Trump's relationship with the media is far from smooth. The US president, who rarely shies away from making sweeping statements and stoking controversy, often lambasts the media for airing 'fake news', especially if the news in question is critical of him. CNN often tops the list of media organisations Mr Trump loathes, and recently a reporter for the network was banned from covering a White House event. Apparently, the extreme step was taken as the reporter

asked “inappropriate” questions. Surely the US president and his media managers know that it is the press’s job to ask tricky questions of those in power. However, what is heartening is that nearly all major media outlets in the US — including right-wing broadcaster Fox News, which is said to have Mr Trump’s stamp of approval — rallied around CNN and its journalist.

News organisations have a right to take a political line, and as long as coverage does not scandalise or libel a subject, criticism must be accepted by public figures. That is why the US president’s move has raised hackles as such behaviour is unacceptable in a state with a free media. The American media’s solidarity over Mr Trump’s banning of the reporter must be appreciated, and we in Pakistan can also learn from this episode. In Pakistan, politicians and others in the nation’s power corridors have mixed feelings towards various media organisations; the latter often take differing lines where support or criticism of political parties is concerned. However, where protection of the right to freely publish or broadcast the facts is concerned, there needs to be unity amongst the Pakistani media’s ranks. This means that if any channel’s transmission is blocked, or any newspaper’s distribution is disrupted, all media organisations must speak with one voice to condemn such tactics. Where freedom of the media is concerned, there simply cannot be a compromise in a democratic society.

Rigging Complaints

BEFORE extraordinary demands are made, the regular channels of dispute resolution ought to be exhausted. The controversies surrounding the general election are many, and the apparent bungling of the vote-counting process and the announcing of results by the ECP has made it clear that litigation over the election will continue for some time. It is therefore thoroughly premature for the PML-N to demand that a judicial commission be formed to investigate the general election, which the PML-N and a number of mainstream political parties, other than the PTI and its purported allies, have widely denounced as unfair and non-transparent. A judicial inquiry into a general election would hardly be unprecedented. It took an inquiry by then chief justice Nasirul Mulk to finally settle in July 2015 the controversy that the PTI had kept alive over the fairness of the general election held in May 2013. But that challenge by the PTI amply demonstrated why it is

preferable from a democratic perspective to avail the constitutional and legal options first.

There are several reasons for the judicialisation of politics in the country, which has arguably reached undesirable proportions, and one of the factors is the haste shown by civilian politicians to refer seemingly every political and institutional dispute to the courts. The courts do have a role to play in the adjudication of election disputes, but first the ECP must be approached. If after a hearing and decision by the election authorities, an aggrieved party still believes it has a case to pursue, there is an appeals process that can be taken to the Supreme Court if necessary. Compounding the uncertainty over last week's election results are the myriad failures of the ECP in the vote-counting process and in the announcing of results. While the ECP has done well to open up some constituencies for a recount — and should open up others if they are serious doubts about the fairness of polls there — it has yet to thoroughly investigate and produce a report into the failures after voting on July 25. Hence, it cannot be known yet if a high-level judicial inquiry into the overall conduct of the election is required.

There also remains the parliamentary route. After the National Assembly is sworn in, there will be a significant opposition in parliament. The combined strength of the opposition parties will not allow the government to easily sweep aside charges of electoral fraud. In addition, incoming prime minister Imran Khan has already indicated that the PTI will not try and block challenges to the election results. If Mr Khan has pledged to cooperate in good faith, it would behove the opposition to take up the PTI government's offer first. If all other avenues for redressal and inquiry fail, the option of a judicial inquiry could be taken up as a last resort.

MQM's Reckoning?

AFTER more than a three-decade hold over Karachi's electoral politics, the MQM faced a sobering reality on election day: its once tight grip over the metropolis has loosened as in both National and Sindh Assembly constituencies in the city, the PTI carried the day.

Perhaps it would be premature to write the Muttahida's political obituary; still, the electorate, part of which is possibly on the lookout for a national party to solve their

problems, has sent a definite message to the MQM, that emotional slogans and entreaties to ethnic sentiments are not enough, and the voter wants results.

While it is still too early to analyse the election results from the city, a few pointers may explain the surprising outcome. Of course, amongst the prime reasons behind the MQM's predicament was the constant infighting between the PIB and Bahadurabad factions.

While public disagreements between Muttahida leaders were once unthinkable — especially under Altaf Hussain's watch — ever since the supremo was sidelined after his controversial 2016 speech, there has been a very visible power struggle within the MQM's various factions.

The farcical 24-hour marriage with the PSP is a small example of the lack of direction within the MQM.

Secondly, many of the party's diehard, ideological supporters stayed home over Mr Hussain's boycott call. And when all is said and done, it is also true that in the aftermath of the security establishment's 2015 crackdown on the MQM, the party's ability to indulge in 'management' of the polling process has been significantly reduced.

The MQM has cried foul over rigging allegations; yet, it is ironic that in elections past the party was accused by its opponents of indulging in rigging, stuffing ballot boxes, and in general, 'managing' the poll process under the threat of violence.

Today, despite all allegations of irregularities during voting, it is a fact that there is an air of political freedom in Karachi, and the people are generally free to vote as they choose.

From here on, what is the future of the MQM? While it has a genuine vote bank in urban Sindh, and to its credit the party has sent members of the middle class to the assemblies, the Muttahida's reputation for violence has stuck.

Perhaps the first step would be to acknowledge the wrongs of the past, especially the party's violent strikes and its promotion of an aggressive political culture in Karachi.

The election results may be humbling for the MQM, but this could be a moment to introspect, shed the baggage of the past and look forward to a less controversial future.

Detained Fishermen

FISHERMEN from Pakistan and India continue to be detained for ending up in each other's waters. There are at least 327 Pakistanis in Indian jails currently, a large number of them fishermen. The number of Indian nationals in Pakistani jails is 418, according to a report submitted to the Supreme Court of Pakistan which is set to take up a petition pressing for efforts for the return of Pakistanis imprisoned in India. Of these 418 Indians, 365 belong to the fishermen's community. These are not small numbers. Thousands have suffered a similar fate before them. Batches upon batches have been held and large groups have been released amid much cheering and picture-taking after spending time in captivity. Still, there is no permanent solution to an act that has not been associated with sinister motives. This indicates that Pakistan-India brinkmanship continues to trump humanitarian concerns.

The expression of political will to end the arrest of fishermen on either side has been there for some time. It has been more than 11 years since an eight-member committee on prisoners consisting of four former judges each from Pakistan and India was formed. If the gathering of so many top legal minds appeared to be a promise for quick redress, the sad news is that this committee has not been able to meet since October 2013. It has been thwarted by tensions between the two countries, which has always cast a dark shadow on the fate of these cross-border fishermen, quite frequently increasing the period of their detention and leading to a situation where even highlighting their plight becomes an issue. But before it got stuck, the committee had called for fast-track trials of these fishermen, demanding that both governments provide good lawyers to the detained lot. This is where Pakistan can set an example for India to follow. The country must not hold the 418 Indians unduly. Pakistan must find ways of letting them go and demand that India reciprocate the action.