

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of April 2019*

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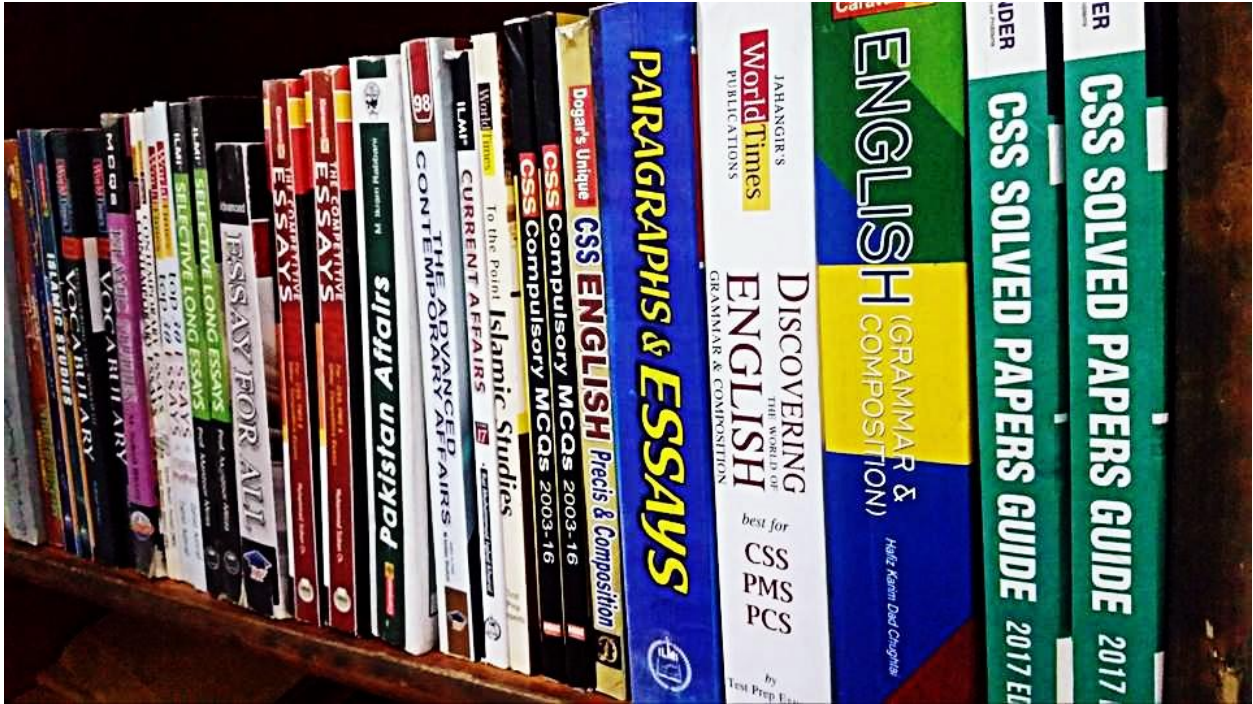
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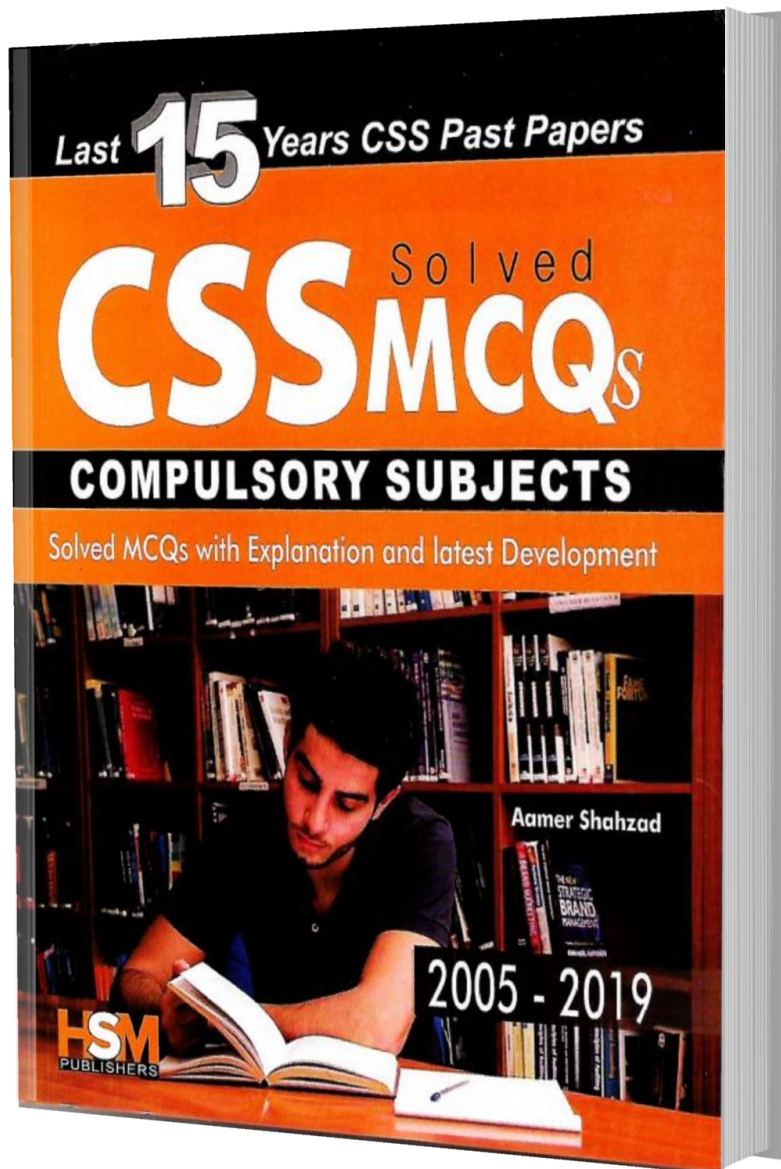
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**Contents**

Curriculum reform ..... 10

Email security ..... 11

Monetary policy ..... 12

Power reform ..... 13

Karachi package ..... 14

ODI drubbing ..... 15

At a crossroads ..... 16

Audacity of hope ..... 17

Rising cost of living ..... 18

Bhutto’s legacy ..... 20

Rules for NAB..... 21

Toxic water ..... 22

Yet another amnesty scheme..... 23

Child abuse ..... 24

Strength in diversity ..... 26

Focus on NAP ..... 27

Peshawar BRT ..... 28

Overcoming the challenge..... 30

F-16s & disinformation ..... 31

Karachi donkeys’ role ..... 32

Political circus ..... 33

Currency crackdown..... 34

Breathing poison ..... 36

Juvenile jails..... 37

IMF talks ..... 38

Iran floods..... 39

Fishermen released ..... 40

Pasdaran designation ..... 41

Merger of forces..... 43

Model courts .....	44
PM on the BJP.....	44
Rwandan genocide .....	46
Funds for Haqqania .....	47
What's up at the stock market? .....	48
Tale of neglect .....	50
Netanyahu's victory.....	51
Hazarganji blast .....	52
Jallianwala Bagh .....	53
Julian Assange's arrest.....	55
Destructive course.....	56
Defending criticism.....	57
Executions in Saudi Arabia .....	59
Internet freedom.....	59
Revenue shortfall .....	61
Banning militant groups .....	62
Women voters.....	63
Spring offensive.....	64
Support for Hazaras?.....	65
The fight for human rights.....	66
Punjab IG's exit.....	68
Harassing journalists .....	69
Debate on presidential system.....	70
Battle in Peshawar.....	71
Prey to procrastination.....	73
Ormara massacre .....	73
Cabinet turmoil.....	75
Cricket chaos .....	76
Cabinet shake-up.....	77
Threat to wheat crop.....	78
World Cup team .....	79



An inhumane justice system.....	80
VAT aspirations.....	82
Immunisation campaign .....	83
Polls in former Fata .....	83
The debt trap.....	85
Earth Day 2019 .....	86
Sri Lanka blasts .....	87
PbBC's resolution.....	88
Medical malfeasance.....	89
Security concerns .....	90
Anti-polio panic .....	92
Foreign tourists.....	93
Sri Lanka's IS link?.....	94
Pakistani prisoners .....	95
More provinces.....	96
Sexism in politics .....	97
Human trafficking.....	99
Press freedom hero .....	100
Polio tragedy.....	101
PM on Afghanistan .....	102
Punjab's centres of power.....	103
Kashmir's example.....	104
HIV cases.....	105
Pre-Ramazan prices .....	107
Belt & Road Initiative.....	107
Perilous work.....	109
Imprisoned in India.....	110
PTI in a bind .....	111
Iran & NPT .....	112
Antibiotic regulation.....	113

## Curriculum reform

THE need to reform the curriculum in Pakistan — particularly to purge it of biases and material that promote hatred — is one that has been highlighted by various quarters. This need becomes all the more acute when the radicalisation of society continues at a frighteningly quick pace, when, for example, students who have studied at institutes of higher learning take the path of militancy and vigilantism. As experts at a conference in Lahore highlighted on Friday, the education system should be free of ethnic, religious and social discrimination. Pointing to a key need of the times, they said that students' mindsets must be broadened. Considering the promotion of jihadi ideology in the Zia era, and its deadly by-products — namely a rapid radicalisation of society — these suggestions are not without merit. And while those who have studied in madressahs are usually blamed for spreading extremism, the curriculum taught at public and private schools also has a part to play in promoting obscurantism.

While steps have been taken to add more inclusive topics to the curriculum — for example, the Quaid's famous Aug 11 speech — experts note that our textbooks are still not entirely free of bias. Education must not be reduced to making pupils regurgitate narrow ideological shibboleths; instead, textbooks must impart lessons that awaken the spirit of inquiry within young ones and help give them a more progressive perspective. Religions, sects, ethnic groups and nationalities must not be demonised and history must not be twisted. Instead of focusing on narrow interpretations, religious studies should focus on compassion and brotherhood. It is not an easy task to undo decades of indoctrination through the curriculum; however, the provinces, under the jurisdiction granted to them by the 18th Amendment, can take the lead by reviewing their textbooks and removing material that promotes hatred and obscurantism. Instead of brainwashing our youth with doubtful notions, the education system needs to equip them with the tools necessary to compete in the world of tomorrow

## Email security

THE Senate Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecommunication recently turned the spotlight on a serious yet inadequately debated data security issue by asking government officials to stop using private email addresses when sharing sensitive information online. Based on the discussion, it appears that classified government information is being shared through private Yahoo or Gmail accounts, instead of official government emails, raising the alarm over the risk to their data. It was also noted that, despite being told to switch over to secure government emails when sharing critical information, officers are reluctant to comply and continue to use their private accounts.

The secure transmission of government data is crucial. In an age of cyberterrorism, where digitally stored information is susceptible to hackers and foreign intelligence agencies, it is of utmost importance that sensitive data be transferred and recorded securely. The fact that officials are often careless and resistant to the idea of using official email addresses is disturbing, especially given the nature of the data they are sharing and the implications of a breach. The committee's attention to this issue and its proposal regarding the formulation of a cyber governance policy is a step forward, but it requires expertise and dedicated focus when it comes to the technical aspects of digital security and its implementation. Switching over to official email addresses is one solution, but the question arises about whether the security systems in place for government accounts are secure enough to withstand cyberattacks. In the past, government departments, such as the foreign affairs and defence ministries, and even the IT ministry, have had their websites hacked by groups claiming they were Indian; the Supreme Court's website, too, was hacked in 2011 during chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's era. Recently, prominent entities, including ride-hailing app Careem and some banks in the country, reported data breaches. In this environment, the government must ensure that it formulates a policy which stipulates that not only do officials use government email addresses but also that those emails are secure. The state's IT teams should actively bolster all layers of security. The policy must also consider learning from international companies that have endured tech breaches and put effective mechanisms and penalties in place. A careless approach to this issue is unacceptable. Instead of resisting, officials should initiate a discussion on whether

government servers are secure enough to be transmitting sensitive information.

## **Monetary policy**

THE State Bank of Pakistan raised the key policy discount rate by 50 basis points on Friday, citing persistent inflationary pressures on the back of a high fiscal deficit, as well as continuing weaknesses on the external front despite a narrowing of the current account deficit and billions of dollars of bilateral inflows to shore up the reserves.

The rate hike is a continuation of a pattern that began in late 2017 when these pressures were building up, and is an unambiguous signal that despite the government's triumphalist rhetoric of having plugged the external financing gap and stabilised the economy, much work remains to be done.

The rate hike will undoubtedly serve as a drag on the economy, which is already reeling under the weight of a severe contraction in the GDP growth rate, as well as adversely hit the fiscal framework by raising the cost of debt servicing for the government.

Since growth and fiscal deficit are at the heart of the government's difficulties at the moment, it is worth thinking about why the State Bank would take a step that would negatively impact both priorities at the same time.

The answer is quite simple: the pressures weighing on the economy, far from abating, are only growing. With the current account deficit coming in at \$8.8bn in the eight-month period from July to February, it means foreign exchange reserves are eroding at a rate of just above \$1bn per month on average.

So with the \$4bn in assistance from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the government bought itself four months of time, which is now squandered. With the \$2.2bn in Chinese assistance, the government has borrowed another two months, just enough time to get to an IMF programme.

Meanwhile, the fiscal deficit has grown faster as revenue shortfalls multiply each month and expenditures — particularly those that are security related — grow at the fastest pace in many years. And the current account deficit

has narrowed, while exports have “remained flat” in dollar terms, as per the central bank.

Businesses are now choking on the fumes of the aggravated slowdown in the economy that these vulnerabilities have brought about. They are borrowing more but investing less.

As the slowdown ripples through the economy, nobody is left untouched by the spectre of inflation and unemployment. If the economy had made some sort of a turnaround, such a rate hike would not have been necessary, nor would the tone of the State Bank’s monetary policy statement been as gloomy as it is.

Serious maturity is needed at this time, and a completely unsentimental view of the economy must be taken. Slogans and rhetoric will not carry the country through; the tough choices that are looming ahead will require deft politics to manage. It is time to buck up.

## **Power reform**

A PML-N leader and former minister for power, Awais Leghari, has warned the people to brace themselves for long hours of power blackouts as temperatures go up in the coming weeks. He has accused the PTI administration of incompetence and of doing little to improve power-sector governance that requires plugging transmission and distribution losses, recovering unpaid bills from consumers, as well as preventing widespread electricity theft — particularly by influential commercial and industrial users. While Mr Leghari’s remarks were hardly unexpected given the level of acrimony that exists between the past and present rulers, it is true that all these factors are responsible for the country’s crumbling power sector — but they have been so for decades and the PML-N must also share the blame.

The fact is that successive governments have intentionally avoided fixing the inefficient and corrupt power supply chain because of political expediencies. Although it must be credited for ramping up generation in its five-year tenure as well as the establishment of three efficient RLNG-based power plants, the PML-N rulers also wilfully chose to ignore the constant warnings of experts that building capacity without carrying out power-sector

reform would only increase consumer prices and the state's liabilities in the form of inter-corporate debt. So it should not surprise anyone if the new government, which has been in the throes of a financial crisis since its inception, is unable to use the 'surplus capacity', or if a large number of consumers cannot afford electricity, or if the state has accumulated over \$11bn in debt it owes to private power producers and fuel suppliers. Nevertheless, the PTI government needs to realise that it does not have the luxury of time on its side. It cannot continue to hide behind the argument that the power crisis isn't its own creation for very long — and do nothing to fix it. The collapsing power sector will make or break the economy. Unless radical policies are implemented to create an independent, competitive 'energy market' in the country, the government will continue to raise electricity prices and borrow more to pay the producers for the system inefficiencies of the sector without any significant increase in generation.

The state-owned oil-based generation plants are least efficient and in dire need of new investments. Since the government does not have cash in hand at the moment it could, among other strategies, consider partnering with private operators to upgrade the plants and to fix the inefficient, decaying power supply infrastructure. Professional management is required to eliminate the losses. Last but not the least, the country needs to move away from inefficient, centralised power distribution from the national grid to smaller, smarter grids. The smarter generation-distribution model will make it easier for the authorities to find partners in the effort to improve governance of state-owned power companies.

## **Karachi package**

KARACHI is often described as an 'orphan' city, and with good reason. With its potholed, sewage-filled roads, rampant crime and garbage-strewn lanes, it can be rightly concluded that, despite being Pakistan's economic powerhouse, Karachi is a metropolis without ownership. Therefore, whenever governments — federal or provincial — announce ambitious 'packages' for the city's development, the news is received with cautious optimism by the inhabitants of Karachi, mainly because such promises are high on rhetoric, and low on substance. On a visit to the city over the weekend, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced a multibillion-rupee

package for Karachi's uplift — Rs162bn to be exact. The amount is intended to cover a range of areas including transport, sewerage and infrastructure development. While this may be music to Karachiites' ears, much political wrangling has followed the announcement, with the PPP, which rules Sindh, saying the centre's moves are 'unconstitutional' in the wake of the 18th Amendment. There has also been some controversy over the fact that the Sindh chief minister did not attend or —depending on whom one asks — was not invited to be part of Mr Khan's activities in Karachi.

It is unfortunate that rather than working together to solve Karachi's massive socioeconomic and infrastructure problems, the centre and Sindh governments are politicking over the issue. Indeed, the Sindh government should not be bypassed where the provincial capital's development is concerned, and the chief minister should have been part of the events related to Mr Khan's visit. Having said that, it is also a fact that the Sindh government has neglected the megacity as well as other major urban areas of the province — mainly by taking over municipal functions under Sindh's current local government law. While devolution of powers from the centre to the provinces must be supported for a stronger federation, it is also essential for the provinces to delegate powers to the district and local governments. The Musharraf-era local government law may have had many flaws, but it was delivering on several fronts, and Karachi witnessed considerable development under this system. The fact is that the Sindh capital needs all the financing it can get. And along with the money, there needs to be a strong elected local government answerable to the citizens of the city. Islamabad and the Sindh authorities must stop politicking over Karachi and give the city the attention and funds it badly requires, along with an effective local government system.

## **ODI drubbing**

ALL is not well with Pakistan cricket. At least that is what the recent 0-5 drubbing the national team received at the hands of Australia in the UAE signifies.

It is true that Pakistan were without their leading players including skipper Sarfraz Ahmed, Babar Azam, Hasan Ali, and others. But the Aussies, too, were not at full strength.

It was expected, therefore, that the series would be an even contest.

But what transpired was a whitewash that surprised even the team's worst critics.

In hindsight, it was not a wise move by the PCB and the selectors to allow the top players to rest so close to the World Cup, which is to commence in England on May 30. Continuing matches for the past five months and burnout fears for the leading players were cited as the prime reason for the hasty decision. However, had the authorities implemented a well-thought-out player-rotation policy starting early last year, it would have provided rest to the top players while grooming many fine youngsters.

The thrashing by the Aussies has punctured Pakistan's belief that it was on course in its World Cup preparations. The team's morale is low and, apart from the few rested players, none of the others are a certainty for World Cup selection.

However, there are some positives. The return of Haris Sohail and Rizwan Ahmed to peak form is a good omen. Both slammed two centuries each and, despite their contrasting batting styles, can boost the fledgling middle order. The potential of prolific Abid Ali who slammed a century in his debut match and the blossoming of pacer Usman Shinwari augur well too.

The selectors should discard players like Shoaib Malik and Umar Akmal who have run out of steam. If the lessons from this tour are not learned, it will diminish the team's ranking and prestige. It is imperative that the players do not lose focus and regroup swiftly to appear at the top in the lead-up to the World Cup.

## **At a crossroads**

IT was in a charged atmosphere of national reckoning following the APS Peshawar attack that parliament — with little debate, let alone resistance — passed the 21st Amendment, granting military courts jurisdiction to try civilian terror suspects. Yet, we were told that the measure was a 'temporary' imperative to combat terrorism and militancy, that the criminal justice system was too broken to respond to the need of the hour, and that the inbuilt two-year sunset clause would guard against any permanent status for this



'exceptional' move while these two issues were being addressed. It was promised that the balance of power would be restored once we made it through this critical juncture, and that there was across-the-board commitment to get civilian institutions to that point.

Four years, one extension and a still dysfunctional criminal justice system later, the country is again at a crossroads. Yet, there is a disquieting air of déjà-vu, of going through the motions, to resurrect the military courts now that they have lapsed again. With the current government having expressed its intent to do so (despite its platform of governance and legislative reforms) and given its atypically solicitous signals towards opposition parties on the subject, the onus of putting up a strong resistance lies with the latter. But it is these selfsame parties that were responsible for extending the courts' term in 2017, and now, with the mounting pressure their top leaders currently face from the accountability courts, there is a fear that they will capitulate in order to preserve their own interests instead of correcting course and returning to the path of constitutional democracy. Under the aegis of a new chief justice, there is a chance of genuine criminal justice reform, as he has repeatedly expressed since assuming office. The motivation for structural rehabilitation of civilian justice must not be disincentivised further by shifting responsibility on to the military courts again. Moreover, a recent Peshawar High Court judgement, which is now under appeal in the apex court, has exposed a troubling lack of due process and standards of proof in military court operations. Indeed, it has led to a divergence from the Constitution's essential principles of trichotomy of power, judicial independence and fundamental rights; resurrecting the courts will only lead to the normalisation of democracy-eroding traits. The sun must be allowed to set on military courts — this time, for good.

## **Audacity of hope**

IT was a rather bumpy landing on Sunday for an intrepid young man's dream. Mohammed Fayyaz had constructed a mini aeroplane for whose maiden flight he used a link road as a runway.

Watched by a 500-strong crowd at a location in central Punjab, the aircraft reportedly took several rounds in the air before touching down on the improvised landing strip.

The local police arrested Fayyaz when he was unable to produce a government-issued permit for his flying machine, which they also took into custody along with its paraphernalia. An FIR was filed for negligent conduct with respect to combustible material and machinery.

The court on Monday slapped him with a fine of Rs3,000 as permitted under the law and ordered that he be released.

While it is fortunate the audacious fellow did not have to do any jail time, the context of his foiled endeavour adds real pathos to the story.

Fayyaz told local media later that he belongs to a poor family and had to discontinue his studies after matriculation, which put paid to his aspirations to join the air force.

To make ends meet, he now works two jobs — running a popcorn stall during the day and serving as a guard at night. It makes one wonder how many bright young sparks like Fayyaz never get to fulfil their potential in a country that invests so little in its people.

Read more: [Can Pakistan be the next Silicon Valley?](#)

An education based on rote-learning, in a society that values conformity over individuality, can only stunt the imagination and stifle the creative instinct.

Many individuals on the cusp of life have to confront the bitter reality that by and large, neither intelligence nor merit can compensate for a lack of financial resources and connections. Most end up in dead-end, tedious jobs to support their families.

Fayyaz's tenacity in the face of such odds is remarkable and one hopes he continues to innovate. Pakistani youth should not have to fight such uphill battles for their dreams to take flight.

## **Rising cost of living**

LAYPERSONS can be forgiven for feeling a little lost in the battle of percentages that is quietly being waged as the data for price inflation shows a sharp spike under way for a few months now. The latest data showed the Consumer Price Index rising by 9.4pc in the month of March compared to

the same period last year, the largest increase in five years. Every political government trembles at the prospect of rising inflation, and when the data shows a steep increase, the government is right to stand up and take note. Managing inflation and its attendant expectations are among the most critical and most complex political and economic obligations to be shouldered by those in power.

Given the sensitivities, the government has rolled out a series of explanations offered up in different times and at different forums about the nature and impact of the rising CPI. Specifically, they present three arguments to blunt the edge of the political backlash that rising inflation naturally gives rise to. First, they argue that the increase is due to an economic adjustment that is necessary because the previous government left them an economy riddled with massive imbalances. Second, they say that the worst of the price increases might be over by now, given that the bulk of the price hike due to devaluation and fuel and power price increases has been incorporated already. Third, they assert that the poorest quintile of the population is relatively less impacted by the increase in the Sensitive Price Indicator. This segment has seen an 8.8pc increase in the price level of sensitive items versus the top quintile, which has seen a 16.2pc increase.

The first of these points is valid, and will remain so for many months to come. The economic adjustment that this government has to undertake is a long-drawn process and its adverse fallout will remain for at least another year. The second reason is a little difficult to agree with, especially considering that the exchange rate is once again coming under pressure and another large round of fuel price increases has just been passed through. The third reason may be factually correct but provides little solace to those in the lowest quintiles, who have to spend far more than half their monthly income on food. Every percentage point is painful for them, and an 8.8pc increase is more or less what they had to suffer in previous years too (such as in 2011) when the SPI showed a sharp rise, yet its burden fell more evenly between the upper and lower quintiles. The fact of the matter is that no explanations can undo the pain that inflation brings, and the nature of politics is such that the incumbent rulers have to absorb the ire of the population in these periods.

## **Bhutto's legacy**

FORTY years after his execution, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto — though a controversial figure for many — remains a potent symbol of resistance and an example in popular leadership.

Several Pakistani politicians are seen to be attempting his style of populist politics, just as work progresses on projects carrying the Bhutto tag.

The country continues its experiments with democracy, and Mr Bhutto's consensus Constitution — now in an amended form with several changes hitting at the very soul of the document — is fighting to build upon its promise of empowering the people.

Another of Mr Bhutto's major legacies, the PPP, though confined largely to Sindh, claims to be leading the struggle against anyone who might want to snatch the rights given to the provinces by the 18th Amendment.

At the national level, the PPP is striving to rediscover the magic ZAB formula that catapulted an idealistic set of people to the status of power holders a few years after the party was formed.

The anti-India sentiment may still be considered a plus for politics, but much else has faded away. The feel-good socialism the founder of the PPP invoked, even if more out of necessity than conviction, is fighting its own battle for survival.

Similarly, the pan-Islamism that Muslim leaders of the era championed is absent from the current discourse. The Bhutto family itself has gone through a tragic journey since the Rawalpindi hanging of April 4, 1979. Even after four decades, the sham trial which sought to paint the popular leader as a murderer has not quite seen its logical conclusion.

Those who have been in power, including PPP governments, have failed to bring closure to the case that sent Mr Bhutto to the gallows. The case of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, too, some three decades after her father's death, remains unsolved.

Unfortunately, the PPP, despite waging a difficult struggle through years of outright and quasi-dictatorship, has yet to build upon that promise of hope enunciated so many years ago.

It continues to use the good name of its 'martyrs' to try and curry favour with the people — a strategy that has met with little success in provinces other than Sindh, though the party remains a significant force in national politics.

Tainted by allegations of corruption and misgovernance, and often accused of toeing the establishment line because of political compulsions, there is a need for introspection and corrective action to regain lost ground.

It would be a death blow to the vision of its founder if the party were to swerve to the right or not do justice by the people in whose name it was created.

## **Rules for NAB**

A RECENT report in this paper on a meeting between civil officers and the NAB chairman at the KP Civil Secretariat last week emphasises a commonly heard refrain regarding how the anti-graft watchdog operates. The officials entreated the chairman to explain why — despite NAB being established two decades ago under the National Accountability Ordinance, 1999 — no rules of business had yet been devised. With several of the complainants having been the subject of NAB inquiries, they painted a desperate picture of feeling intimidated and humiliated by NAB investigative officers who wield broad, arbitrary powers. In the absence of established protocols, a playbook of disturbing tactics has evolved: arresting individuals before formal charges are framed; lengthy period of physical remand; allegations of blackmail, harassment and even extortion by IOs; and public smear campaigns facilitated by calculated leaks to the press. This has led to assumed guilt at the outset, with individuals' reputations left in tatters even if they are eventually exonerated. Conversely, the presumption of innocence denied to the accused is provided wholesale to NAB officials under the 'good faith' clause of the NAO. Essentially, this has enabled potential abuses of power in the form of false allegations and smear campaigns to go unchecked, with little chance of the wrongly accused receiving a public apology — let alone providing the bureau with any incentive to reform and avoid wasting resources on frivolous fishing expeditions.

Time and again, NAB has come under scrutiny for conduct that has lent the nation's accountability process an inquisitorial air, becoming increasingly synonymous with politically motivated selective targeting on the one hand, and convenient plea bargains struck in cases of blatant high-level corruption on the other. Meanwhile, recent custodial deaths have led to allegations of torture and neglect by NAB officers. And, only last month, a high-profile alleged suicide of a retired army officer was linked to the psychological distress of having multiple NAB inquiries initiated against him. The lack of rules of business for NAB, and an absence of parliamentary oversight, has — ironically — created a lack of accountability of its own. To allow it to continue down this path would be a gross disservice to the nation. That the national exchequer has been deprived of billions of rupees due to rampant political corruption over the years is without question. But those responsible for recovering looted public money and holding to account individuals guilty of its theft must be held to equally scrupulous standards.

## Toxic water

ACCORDING to a recent report in this paper, samples of chicken feed and water collected from various poultry farms across Karachi for lab testing at the Karachi University were found to have traces of heavy metals in them. The amount of lead, nickel, copper, iron and chromium found in poultry feed exceeded the WHO guidelines. Meanwhile, the water sample contained significant amounts of iron, lead and nickel, along with arsenic. According to the researchers, the source of the contamination was linked to the untreated industrial waste being dumped into the rivers, lakes and sea, and the mixing of sewerage lines with water lines. This revelation should not come as a surprise to even those who give the headlines only a cursory glance. Words upon words — and warnings — have been written in these pages about the damage caused to the environment and public health due to untreated industrial waste, sewage and plastics directly entering water bodies. In case it bears any repeating, our water is toxic. And not only does this impact marine life, but the poison finds its way into the bodies of land mammals and birds. Exposure to metals, for instance, leads to a range of health problems that include damage to the lungs and kidneys, as well as the central nervous, respiratory, cardiovascular and reproductive systems.

Rarely is food and water tested in labs, and food authorities struggle to find the required human resources and capital to tackle the enormous challenges before them. But the problem of contaminated food and water is too large for a single authority to tackle. In fact, it is the failure of the state to effectively govern and one of the discontents of unchecked capitalism devoid of any social consciousness or a sense of responsibility towards the public's welfare that must primarily be blamed. The natural law is: what goes around, comes around.

## **Yet another amnesty scheme**

IT is now becoming a monotonous affair. With almost ridiculous regularity, an amnesty scheme is announced year after year, yet the undocumented economy, tax evasion, money laundering and illegal income-generating activities remain — in fact, they continue to thrive.

Evidence that such schemes bring no benefit to the country is piling up, but for some reason our political class — irrespective of the party they belong to — keeps going back to them.

The best evidence that these schemes bring benefits to a few only lies in the fact that, less than a year after we had one such scheme widely subscribed to, the new government feels compelled to announce another.

The full details are still being worked on, but Finance Minister Asad Umar has let it be known that the scheme will allow the whitening of undeclared assets, and that it has been introduced “on the strong demand of the business community”, according to one report. Some suggestions also exist that, unlike the last scheme, this one could be open to participation by bureaucrats and politicians as well.

Whatever the details that will eventually emerge, the government must remember the track record of previous such schemes; the fact that another is required today simply means they are ineffectual.

What response does the business community give when asked why they did not take the opportunity to whiten their undeclared assets back when they had the chance to do so last year?

And perhaps while he's at it, Mr Umar should also recall the visceral opposition he, together with the rest of the senior PTI leadership, put up to the same scheme when it was introduced last year. He castigated then finance minister Miftah Ismail for not devising the deal in a transparent manner, without input from parliament or the cabinet. It is now imperative he live up to his own standards, and get parliamentary approval for his version of the amnesty, rather than use an ordinance or some other purely executive power to get it through.

Most importantly, amnesty schemes that allow the whitening of undeclared assets run completely against the promises made by the PTI to its voters so far.

The last scheme had a clause that the proceeds of crime would not be allowed to be whitened through it, and none other than Mr Umar himself publicly mocked this provision, saying it was unenforceable and the government would never know whose assets had been accumulated through criminal proceeds vs simple tax-evaded wealth. There might well be a "strong demand from the business community" for this, but it is neither necessary nor beneficial for the government to oblige the community at every turn. They have been given subsidies on gas and two mini-budgets full of incentives. It is time to turn this tap off and start the business of running the country.

## **Child abuse**

SAHIL, a nonprofit organisation working for the rights and protection of children, recently published its findings on instances of child sexual abuse carried out last year. Taken from 85 newspapers, the results are horrifying: 3,832 cases of sexual abuse were reported in 2018.

The majority (63pc) of cases were reported from Punjab, followed by 34pc from Azad Kashmir, 27pc from Sindh, 4pc from KP, 2pc from Balochistan, 3pc from Islamabad, and six cases from Gilgit-Baltistan.

Out of the total number of victims, 55pc victims were girls and 45pc were boys.



When keeping in mind that these are simply the number of reported cases in a country where people are understandably apprehensive about reaching out to law-enforcement agencies over crimes of a sexual nature, it becomes clear that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

#### ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

So many children — with no agency, and taught from a young age to obey and not question adults — suffer in silence, particularly due to the culture of shame surrounding the topic.

In many cases, the perpetrators of sexual abuse and violence are acquainted with the victim and/or his/her family members.

On the same day that Sahil's findings were released, the tragic end of 12-year-old Ali Hassan from Lahore was reported. On his mother's instructions, the boy had left his home to collect some money from his neighbours. He never returned. Three weeks later, his body was found. Strangled to death, his body was then burnt by his kidnappers, who did not want his identity to be revealed. The case may not have been sexual in nature but revealed the dangers faced by our most vulnerable segment of society.

Better laws are needed for the protection of our children, including, as suggested, the creation of child-friendly courts.

Just last month, a 14-year-old boy was on his way to a coaching centre in Rawalpindi when he was shot dead after resisting a rape attempt. Another boy took his own life after being sexually assaulted by two adult men in Battagram. His ordeal was filmed by the monstrous perpetrators, who then tried to blackmail him with the images.

The list of victims is endless. It did not start with Zainab in 2018, or with Kasur in 2015. Indeed, the abuse and sexual abuse of children is this nation's hidden shame. The cycle of violence will only end when the culture of silence ends. We need to start having that difficult conversation now.

## **Strength in diversity**

ANY public institution that seeks to serve the people recognises that its workforce must reflect the demographics of that society. Who better to do this and address the concerns of a vulnerable community — and sensitise others about issues specific to them — than its own members? The recent announcement by IGP Sindh pledging to recruit and ensure a 5pc quota for transgender people in the provincial police department is a heartening first step towards that end. Pakistan's trans community has had a fraught, often traumatising, history in interactions with the police, or any public institution for that matter. This endeavour can go a long way in repairing their relationship. Given how disturbingly prevalent violence against trans people is in Pakistan, inclusion in the force can improve their safety, as increased visibility in mainstream society (particularly in positions of authority) helps dispel social stigmas, and empowers trans people to report crimes to the police without fear. Moreover, precedents of this kind can spur other institutions to adopt trans-inclusive policies of their own — which are, it ought to be stressed, mandated both by federal legislation passed last year and numerous prior orders by the higher judiciary.

The announcement appears to be part of a broader strategy of rehabilitating Sindh Police's image to appear a more people-friendly institution, as the IGP also spoke of recruiting minorities and those with disabilities. Given how important police-citizen contact is in shaping public perceptions about the force, this signals a welcome shift in focusing on overlooked community policing functions to ensure public safety. But inclusion doesn't end at simply reforming hiring practices; there must be a holistic strategy of professional development to ensure equality of opportunity for recruits from marginalised backgrounds, as well as sensitisation of all officers to eradicate unconscious biases in interactions with, for example, trans colleagues. There is much more progress to be made, but with every step towards institutional diversity and inclusion, we as a society are further strengthened.

## Focus on NAP

IN the aftermath of the horrific 2014 APS, Peshawar, tragedy, political forces in the country, along with the security establishment, pledged to take firm action against militancy of all sorts, as well as those providing the support structure for hatred and violence.

While there has been progress on many points of the NAP agenda, it is key that there is no let up in momentum and that the state maintains surveillance of the elements out to foment violence in the country.

In this regard, Minister of State for Interior Shehryar Khan Afridi, while speaking at an event in Islamabad on Thursday, said that actions against proscribed organisations were being taken not under pressure of the Financial Action Task Force, but as envisioned under NAP.

“No one will be allowed to use our land against any country,” he said, while briefing diplomats in the federal capital.

In a similar vein, the army’s top brass announced at the last corps commanders’ conference that the military would support all stakeholders in implementing NAP.

It is a positive sign that all institutions of the state are on the same page regarding NAP.

Indeed, recent actions against militant outfits such as JeM and LeT, taken in the aftermath of the Pulwama event, indicate that the PTI-led government realises it must crack down on violent actors.

However, it is important that the state does not rest on its laurels.

Considering the strength of the jihadi infrastructure nurtured since the Zia era, it will take some time and considerable effort before it is dismantled.

The nation has paid with thousands of lives in the battle against militancy, so it is important that all violent actors are put out of business, to ensure these lives have not been lost in vain.

Moreover, equal attention must be paid to all 20 points outlined under NAP.

For instance, many sectarian outfits and those responsible for promoting hate speech are still active, though keeping a low profile.

As was reported, Maulvi Abdul Aziz of the Lal Masjid infamy recently led Friday prayers at the same mosque in Islamabad.

The fact that such a controversial cleric was able to pull this off indicates that loopholes exist.

In order to root out militancy and push the country in a more tolerant direction, the process of identifying and prosecuting hatemongers must be ongoing.

There must be zero tolerance for those promoting hatred of religions, sects, ethnicities and nationalities.

While freedom of speech is inviolable and needs to be protected by the state, those promoting violence against individuals or communities cannot be tolerated.

Moreover, choking the funds of hatemongers and violent entities is essential for Pakistan's own security.

Madressahs and religious institutions that are dedicated to religious studies are fine; but institutions that promote jihadi thought and sectarianism cannot be allowed to function as usual.

The state must win the battle.

## **Peshawar BRT**

A RECENT 27-page report by the provincial inspection team on the progress made on the multibillion-rupee Peshawar Bus Rapid Transit project has presented a picture of large-scale ineptitude, mismanagement of public funds, shoddy design and planning, and a political recklessness that has resulted in the wastage of money, inconvenience to commuters and local businesses, and immeasurable harm to the environment including the city's air quality.

The detailed inquiry was carried out on the orders of KP Chief Minister Mahmood Khan after public outrage over the project was expressed.

In particular, questions were raised regarding the project's completion, since the route runs along the GT Road — the city's main artery and economic lifeline.

The Peshawar High Court, too, demanded more transparency and asked why the project — which was supposed to be completed in July 2018 — is still far from over.

Kick-started in haste on October 2017 by the KP government, less than a year before the 2018 general elections, the initial six-month deadline has been extended several times, without even meeting its latest target, which was last month.

The reasons given for the latest delay include unfinished work, the non-availability of buses, and apprehension over the traffic bottlenecks that have been created in its wake, with 11 choking points having been identified along its 26km-long route.

Since being initiated, the project has gone through several stages of 'make, break and remake', while the initial loan taken from the Asian Development Bank of Rs49bn has risen to a whopping Rs67.8bn.

The PTI government's own good work carried out in the previous five years towards easing traffic congestion seems to have been demolished by one rash decision.

And there are still some questions being asked about whether or not the completion of the BRT project will actually improve the city's traffic and commuting issues.

It is also worth remembering this government's own criticism of the previous dispensation's emphasis on the metro projects that were undertaken in Punjab, which it then tried to replicate in Peshawar — as opposed to focusing more on health and education.

Given the mounting criticism and growing embarrassment, the government recently sacked the transport secretary and the director general of the

Peshawar Development Authority, who it held responsible for the delays and poor execution of the project.

The Peshawar BRT should stand as a lesson in political hubris.

Competence surpasses confidence. But it is a different story in this case.

## **Overcoming the challenge**

THERE is so much pessimism and gloom around us that we often tend to overlook some positive aspects. For example, Pakistan has a large pool of brilliant and entrepreneurial young men and women who are pushing boundaries in several spheres of life — the economy, music, education, healthcare, service delivery, etc — in a very challenging socioeconomic environment as they try to make a difference. The most heartening thing about this younger generation of social and business entrepreneurs is that among them are many women who are rising to the top, despite society's taboos. Yet in most cases we tend to ignore these innovators and disruptors until their talent and work is appreciated and recognised internationally. The induction of five Pakistanis and a start-up on the widely respected Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia list of entrepreneurs and game changers this year once again underscores that there is no shortage of talent in this country. Indeed, it is time to celebrate their success. But one must also reflect on why many other talented men and women with 'unicorn' ideas are unable to realise their dreams.

Those who made it to the list, or who have been able to realise their dreams, are the lucky ones who succeeded in spite of numerous social and financial challenges. Many others looking to make a change around them are thwarted by their circumstances. So many ideas die prematurely because of a lack of access to finance or support from the government, while social constraints prevent our young women from undertaking any venture. With two-thirds of the population below 35, the energetic younger generation has what it takes to push for a radical change in this country if given the right environment. The government has said much about its efforts to revive the economy; it must also concentrate on making policies that nurture the talent of young entrepreneurs. Without this, it will not be able to help enterprising young men and women change the destiny of this country.

## **F-16s & disinformation**

AMIDST the fog of war, the truth is often lost as propaganda is trotted out by the belligerents to confuse and demoralise their opponent. Indeed, 'information warfare' is an area that many modern militaries have become skilled in. It is only later that the truth is salvaged, and what emerges can be sobering. Following the Pulwama episode, which brought Pakistan and India to the brink of war not too long ago, jingoism and war hysteria were at their peak on both sides, with the Indian media playing a particularly vitriolic role in drumming up support for war. However, as a report in the American publication Foreign Policy has lately revealed, the Indians' claim that their military had shot down a Pakistani F-16 fighter jet during the crisis has turned out to be fictitious. Basing this claim on sources within the US defence establishment, the publication has said that all of Pakistan's F-16s were "present and accounted for". This admission should be sobering for the ultranationalist hawks in the Indian establishment as well as elements within the Indian media. It shows jingoism and war hysteria cannot always cover up the facts, which often emerge sooner or later.

Perhaps the lesson to be learnt from the whole post-Pulwama crisis in general, and the tale of the F-16 in particular, is that when disinformation is spread and promoted in such a toxic manner, it feeds into the larger narrative and ends up vitiating the atmosphere. This can have grave consequences, such as dragging two nuclear-armed states close to war. Moreover, when disinformation becomes the norm, even after the crisis abates, the road towards normalisation is all the more difficult. The war clouds may have dissipated over South Asia for the moment, but the mistrust between India and Pakistan currently is at extremely high levels. Chances of bilateral dialogue are quite slim, while even progress on the Kartarpur Corridor project has stalled. Perhaps matters may normalise once the Indian elections have been held. But the current atmosphere of mistrust created by disinformation and demonisation remains a major obstacle in the path of normal ties, and is likely to persist for some time. Perhaps that is why, in the interest of peace in South Asia, it is essential that both establishments deal with regional crises in a constructive and statesmen-like manner, instead of letting untruths and half-truths poison the narrative.

## **Karachi donkeys' role**

NO one would argue that Karachi doesn't have a serious garbage crisis. The sticking point, however, is how to solve the megacity's solid waste management problem. Sindh's political class has so far responded to the issue in two ways: implement large internationally funded projects spearheaded by foreign and local consultants, or outsource this essential public service to private foreign and local firms. Both methods have proved disappointing, costly and unsustainable, as they neglect meaningful engagement with civil society, academia and impacted communities, and fail to account for the existing undocumented infrastructure of garbage collection. But another solution, one that acknowledges ground realities as opposed to taking a top-down approach, was recently proposed by the local chapter of an equine welfare charity. Highlighting the vital role Karachi's donkeys play in moving the city's refuse, particularly in underserved areas, as well as the risks to donkeys and their owners, it proposed not only providing adequate support and services to these informal workers, but also integrating them with Karachi's municipal and solid waste management authorities.

The suggestion is sound, as it manages to address several overlapping issues at once: providing public services to vulnerable communities; regularising informal livelihoods; and building a culture for animal welfare. Tens of thousands of Karachi's households rely on the operations of donkey carts. Relatively small-scale interventions such as veterinary care for working donkeys, social safety nets for their owners, and training and resources to limit exposure to health risks, can mean the difference between sustainable livelihoods and deeper poverty. This, of course, is only one part of the equation to resolving Karachi's garbage crisis. But, given the pollution-linked and vector-borne diseases associated with it, policymakers must acknowledge that accountable, responsive governance is not brought about through flashy infrastructure projects alone. A pro-poor strategy that recognises the needs of marginalised communities can be both efficient and humane.



## Political circus

POLITICS in general is not for the faint-hearted; in countries like Pakistan, with its stunted democratic institutions, it can be an especially ugly business.

Anyone who had hoped, naively perhaps, that the election last year would bring down the political temperature must by now have been thoroughly disabused of the notion.

The acrimony between the PTI government and the opposition, within and outside parliament, shows no sign of abating, or at least abating for long enough to appear more than a just a strategic and self-serving blip.

The latest back-and-forth between Prime Minister Imran Khan and Asif Ali Zardari is a classic illustration of the vitiated atmosphere.

Mr Zardari, as the noose of accountability tightens around him still further — likely as part of a bigger, more Machiavellian exercise indicative of the perils to democracy — exhorted PPP supporters on Thursday to march on Islamabad and oust the government.

Mr Khan could have chosen to ignore that provocative statement. Instead, while addressing a public gathering in Khyber district, he declared he could arrange a container for the PPP leader in Islamabad — alluding to his own extended dharna atop one in late 2014 — but that Mr Zardari would not be able to sustain such a protest for more than a week.

While much of the civilian leadership seems to have descended into a squalid free-for-all, the PTI as the party in government has greater responsibility to set the tone for political discourse.

Instead, it has goaded and sidelined the opposition, even if that has thrown a wrench in legislative proceedings; which is perverse, because these tactics largely derail the government's own agenda.

For example, it took nearly six months to form the National Assembly's standing and functional committees because Mr Khan was adamant Shahbaz Sharif not be given the PAC chairmanship, a post that by parliamentary convention goes to a member of the opposition.

There is a similar impasse over a proposed briefing by the PTI government to lawmakers about NAP implementation; the opposition demands it be held in parliament while the government wants only the heads of the parliamentary parties to be privy to it.

Another stand-off between both sides, which is only just showing signs of being resolved, pertains to the appointment of two ECP members.

The PTI, with its razor-thin majority in parliament, can ill afford to be so inflexible.

At the same time, the opposition must stop exploiting its numerical strength to be needlessly obstructionist on matters that must be urgently addressed. It should also show the maturity to rise above its parochial interests — largely tied to the fortunes of certain beleaguered party leaders — and, instead, act as the representatives of the people.

The effects of the prevailing dysfunction on governance are deleterious. Politicians in a fight to the death against each other ultimately hollow out the democratic process from within.

## **Currency crackdown**

BY announcing that it intends to launch a “crackdown” against “hoarders and speculators” of foreign exchange, the government may well have aede a bad situation worse.

There are two reasons why this is so. First is that the announcement signals desperation, because usually crackdowns of the sort they have in mind are the last resort in such situations, not the first.

And the second is because the whole effort appears to be poorly coordinated since the State Bank, which held a meeting with the heads of exchange companies on the same day that the announcement was made, did not even know that such a decision was under consideration.

The decision was made in Islamabad in a meeting chaired by the finance minister and attended by, among others, the interior secretary.

The FIA was given verbal instructions to proceed with a crackdown, but the investigation agency does not usually go ahead in such cases without guidance from the State Bank, because it is the latter that has all the information regarding foreign currency transactions on a daily basis.

Now having made the announcement, if the government fails to stabilise the exchange rate in the open market, the signal that the markets will receive is that the state has run out of options, and that devaluation has become inevitable.

The finance minister may well have a point when he emphasises that further devaluations are no longer necessary since the real effective exchange rate is now in equilibrium and the interbank market is stable. But having a point and communicating it effectively to the markets are two different things.

Since the open market is where all the volatility is, the problem is a combination of ingrained expectations of an impending devaluation among more retail clients and a genuine shortage in supply since the exchange company heads report that there are no sellers for the dollar these days, only buyers.

Clearly, sentiments are looking past the finance minister's assurances to rising inflation and the downward trajectory that the rupee has been on in past months.

Dealing with such sentiments is a delicate task. Putting out the message that the exchange rate is stable is only part of the signalling that is required.

Preserving one's own credibility is also important, and refraining from publicly speaking about any crisis, or the enormous pressures the economy is facing, is also critical. The finance minister put out a message himself, in his live webcasted chat with his social media team, that the economy faces unprecedented pressures. He has even used the word 'bankruptcy' in his public comments.

Such messaging creates perceptions that contradict his assertion that the exchange rate is stable; people will inevitably ask themselves how they should secure themselves against further erosion of their purchasing power.

The government now needs to project confidence and a sense that things are firmly under control in order to stabilise the situation.

## **Breathing poison**

THE reality is inescapable, and it is terrifying: the air we breathe is killing us. Pakistan is second on the list of the top 10 countries with the highest mortality due to air pollution; India and China tie for first place. These are among the findings of a major study by the US-based Health Effects Institute and compiled in a report titled State of Global Air 2019. According to its data, a total of 2.4m people died in China and India from air pollution-related conditions in 2017; in Pakistan the same year, 128,000 deaths were attributed to the same cause. The health burden is incalculable: air pollution is the fifth leading cause of premature death globally, which makes it more lethal than malaria, road accidents, malnutrition or alcoholism, and nearly as deadly as tobacco use. Children are particularly susceptible due to their physiology. In fact, minors in South Asia can expect to have their lives cut short by 30 months due to the toxic air. Excessive particulate matter is a daily peril for Pakistanis: according to the report, 52pc of people in this country are exposed to household air pollution. That's not all: Pakistan's entire population lives in areas that exceed WHO's air quality guidelines.

These chilling figures call for an immediate, top-down course correction. Not only do we have a national emergency on our hands, but the situation has a bearing on our international commitments. Among the SDGs are specific environmental targets, including improvement in ambient air quality. Legislators had a recent opportunity to engage with experienced advocates in this field. Air Quality Asia, a global advocacy group that drives change through national policy, held a meeting in late March with a gathering of parliamentarians. Indeed, the country's leadership has a critical role to play if we are to stave off disaster. Examples from our own part of the world illustrate how decisive government action can turn back the clock on toxic air. China, for instance, declared war on particulate matter a few years ago, strictly implemented emission limit regulations, and began to adopt clean-energy technology. As a result, it has begun to see steadily falling rates of air pollution. Pakistan, however, has adopted an inexplicably paradoxical approach. While environmental awareness and the importance of a 'green

Pakistan' have increased, the country is embracing coal-fired power ever more tightly. Can cheap electricity ever be a substitute for breathable air?

## **Juvenile jails**

THE Child Rights Unit of a non-profit organisation, Dastak, has revealed some glaring lapses of the law in its data collected over the past two years on child prisoners in Punjab. First, there are 33 juvenile prisons and two borstals in the province, but children are sent to the district and central jails, sharing space with adult convicts. Second, children under the age of 16 are kept in police custody, despite this being against the law. Third, disturbingly large numbers of child prisoners have complained about torture and abuse at the hands of the police. They are also made to engage in labour, despite it being forbidden. Last, the CRU found children who had allegedly committed offences related to the Anti-Terrorism Act or Control of Narcotic Substances Act being tried under those laws and at risk of being given the death sentence or life imprisonment. Unsurprisingly, the CRU found a lack of knowledge and understanding of the law of the land amongst the very people responsible for implementing it. There was also a lack of vigilance over the visitors who came to see the juvenile prisoners, with some suspecting that members of criminal syndicates are given free access to vulnerable children.

In 2018, the Juvenile Justice System Act sought to improve upon the flaws in the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (2000), and incorporate the spirit of the UN's Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Our justice system — particularly where it concerns children — must continue to strive towards being more restorative, not retributive. Juvenile detention centres must provide a safe space for children to learn, grow and transform. While the walls of the prison are a less-than-ideal confinement for anyone, children are particularly susceptible to abuse and exploitation. Given that they are not fully developed, to subject them to unfairness at an impressionable age is risking not only the life and future of the child, but society at large. More often than not, broken children grow up to be broken adults.

## **IMF talks**

FINANCE Minister Asad Umar is off to Washington, D.C. to finalise an IMF programme, and he has promised that by the end of the month, Pakistan will once again be in a Fund programme.

It is a bit odd to view this as a not unwelcome development, since, regrettably, decades of mismanagement of the economy has brought us to a point where entering into an IMF programme is considered grounds for relief and some sort of saving grace for economic management in the country.

However, decades of experience with the IMF have also taught us that these programmes are rarely ever easy and almost always exact a steep political price from the government of the day.

There have been some rare exceptions — at a time when Pakistan has had closer ties with the US, for instance, in the early 1980s or the mid-2000s, and when it could count on pressure being exerted on the Fund via the White House. That option is hardly available at the moment.

Standing on the cusp of an IMF programme is not the right time for the ruling party to display a thin skin towards its critics, especially on economic matters.

Economic pain is always difficult to bear, and even harder to spin away or distract people from; and it almost always draws the most bitter opposition and tough questioning from the party's own support base.

The moment before his departure for the spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank was a bad time for Mr Asad to lash out against his critics. In fact, it would have been a good opportunity to project confidence and signal a firm hand on the tiller, while giving a clear picture of the path on which the economy is about to embark.

We will know more about how long, and how intense, the economic pain is going to be once the data projecting the growth rate is made public.

At the moment, the World Bank has slashed its growth forecast to 3.4pc, below what the State Bank had said a few months ago, ie 3.5pc.

Next year's projections show the slowdown intensifying further. What is also troubling is the total absence of a viable tax-broadening vision, something that governments usually announce in their first year in power.

With a slowing economy will come diminished revenues, and without a base-broadening initiative in place, the burden of narrowing the fiscal deficit will naturally fall upon those who are already in the tax net.

The finance minister must ensure that the economy does not become part of a vicious circle where revenue measures serve as a brake on the economy, and the slowing economy necessitates further taxes.

The road ahead is an uphill one. The finance minister should prove that he can soothe the rising levels of anxiety in the country.

## **Iran floods**

IN times of crisis, for example, when natural disasters strike, it is advisable to put politics aside and help others — even geopolitical adversaries — in their hour of need. However, the unfortunate fact is that cold realpolitik often trumps humanitarian principles, as we have seen in the case of the recent deadly floods in Iran. Around 1,900 communities have been inundated while at least 70 lives have been lost as several Iranian provinces have been battered by the deluge. However, getting help to Iran has proved to be difficult, because, according to the Iranian Red Crescent, American sanctions imposed after the US withdrew from the JCPOA, as the nuclear deal is formally known, have created obstacles in the smooth flow of relief. The Red Crescent says the sanctions have prevented it from accessing cash. On the other hand, Pakistan has offered support and sympathies to the Iranians, with both the prime minister and foreign minister reiterating their resolve to help their western neighbour in this difficult phase. “We stand ready to provide any humanitarian assistance required” to Iran, Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted.

Unfortunately, under the Trump administration the US has taken a vindictive, inhuman approach towards Iran. Whatever Washington's geopolitical differences with Tehran, the Americans could have taken the initiative to build bridges with Iran on this occasion by lifting restrictions on relief goods

and funds so that aid flowed freely to those affected by the floods. But realpolitik can be incredibly cruel and those currently calling the shots in Washington have proved this to be so. While Pakistan, a country of limited means and plenty of internal problems of its own, has come forward in a spirit of neighbourliness and humanitarianism to support Iran, the most powerful nation in the world has proved that, to it, politics trumps humanity. The US should reconsider its rigid stance, and allow goods and funds to flow freely to victims of the floods in Iran. Moreover, the European states — that have kept channels open with Tehran even when relations between Iran and the West have been testy — should step forward and help foreign aid reach Iran. If the US thinks helping increase the Iranian people's misery by blocking much-needed aid will make them rebel against their government, it might find itself mistaken. If anything, such misplaced steps will only add to anti-Americanism in Iran, as the Islamic Republic's citizens suffer due to cruel US sanctions.

## **Fishermen released**

A PHOTOGRAPH carried in yesterday's edition of this paper showed Indian fishermen smiling as they stepped into a Karachi train en route to the Wagah border in Punjab — perhaps a rare moment of joy in a lifetime marked by hardship. They were part of the first batch of 100 fishermen that are to be released as a goodwill gesture by the Pakistani government. Hundreds more are expected to be released this month, according to a government spokesperson. Fishermen from both sides of the border are largely poor and illiterate and accidentally enter the 'enemy's' territory in their search for sustenance, as there is no clear line distinguishing the border in the water. They are whisked away by coastal guards and end up languishing in the jails of a hostile country. Even when they are released, largely thanks to the efforts of non-government organisations, their confiscated boats — their source of livelihood and a large investment for them — are never returned. Earlier this year, India handed a list of 347 Pakistani prisoners trapped in Indian jails to the Pakistan High Commission, as a reciprocal gesture to Pakistan handing over of a list of 483 Indian fishermen to the Indian High Commission. The lists included minors as well. A release or swap of



prisoners was expected following the move. But all hopes were dashed as tensions rose between the two countries, following the Pulwama attack and subsequent cross-LoC tensions.

Most disturbingly, the body of an elderly Pakistani fisherman beaten to death by jail authorities in India was returned last week. Several vital organs — his eyes, brain and kidneys — were missing. Similarly, when the body of another Pakistani prisoner stoned to death by fellow inmates in an India jail was returned, he was missing his heart, lungs, stomach and a portion of his brain. It is time for India to follow the Pakistani government's goodwill gesture and release Pakistani fishermen with dignity — alive — on humanitarian grounds, if nothing else.

## **Pasdaran designation**

EVER SINCE assuming office — in fact even before, while he was on the campaign trail — Donald Trump has been vociferous in his criticism of Iran.

Egged on by the hawks in his cabinet, the US president appears convinced that the only way to deal with the Islamic Republic is to set Washington on a collision course with Tehran.

While US-Iran relations have been confrontational ever since the events of 1979, possibly no American administration since the Islamic revolution has been as hostile to Iran as Mr Trump's set-up.

America's unilateral departure from the nuclear deal last year was perhaps the biggest indication that Washington is not interested in mending fences with Iran.

The listing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, as the Pasdaran are known internationally, by the US as a "foreign terrorist organisation" on Monday, means, however, that not only does the US want to isolate Iran, but also that the war lobby in Washington is itching for a confrontation.

This is the first time the US has designated a foreign military unit as a terrorist outfit.

The Pasdaran were created amidst the heat of the Islamic revolution, as an ideological force meant to protect the ideals of the new Iranian establishment.

Today, the force is Iran's premier military unit; its external operations wing, the Quds Force, has been used by Tehran to project its influence across the region, including in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and, reportedly, Yemen.

One state particularly worried by the Iranian moves in the region is Israel, which has welcomed the listing.

In fact Benjamin Netanyahu, who is currently fighting for his political survival in Israeli elections, has thanked his "dear friend" Mr Trump.

The message from Washington is that only the US — and its clients — are allowed to project power across their borders, and when it comes to the Middle East, only America can play hegemon.

However, the US should be the last to call out anyone for interfering in others' affairs.

A brief review of the past few decades of Middle East history is enough to show that, far from nurturing democracy in the region, America has destroyed functioning states under its imperial nation-building projects.

The invasion of Iraq and the destabilisation of Syria are just some of the failed American experiments in the region that have left devastating consequences, including dysfunctional states and ethnic and sectarian fissures.

The US may have a bone to pick with Iran, but labelling a state's military unit as 'terrorists' is strange; even during the height of the Cold War the US did not use such terms for the Red Army, and vice versa.

If the Trump administration is looking for a fight, then it should be aware that such recklessness may have unintended and uncontrollable consequences for all, particularly the people of the Middle East.

## Merger of forces

ONE of the most complex aspects in the process of erstwhile Fata becoming a cohesive part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is the merger of their law-enforcement forces. On Monday, the KP government took a decisive step towards it when it announced the induction over the next six months of around 28,000 Levies and Khasadar personnel into the provincial police. The challenges that are bound to arise from their induction partly stem from the conditions in which they have traditionally worked. While the Levies have some similarity with the police, in that it is a regular force with certain criteria for selection, promotion, etc the personnel are poorly trained and ill equipped. The Khasadar force, on the other hand, is a far more loosely structured entity. Although like the Levies, Khasadar personnel too are recruited locally, they receive no training and equipment; even their weapons are their own. This unique arrangement, a legacy of colonial times based on the idea of collective and territorial responsibility, was a financial inducement the British gave the tribes in order to ensure their own safety in the tribals' respective areas. Further, a Khasadari is a hereditary asset that can be bought, sold, or transferred among members of a tribe.

Training the Levies and Khasadars to a level comparable with the provincial police will be a significant undertaking in terms of time and resources. The regulation of the Khasadar force to bring them into a formalised framework has already met with some resistance; people do not often give up their privileges easily. Moreover, as can be expected in the case of such informal systems, a considerable degree of corruption has set in, particularly with regard to remuneration. Thus, the induction of only one family member of each Khasadar — who may himself be long deceased — could give rise to intra-family disputes. Then there is the financial burden that the merger will entail. Currently, the salaries of Levies and Khasadar personnel add up to Rs8.6bn of the budget; the merger will cost the KP government an additional Rs4.5bn. Perhaps because of its unique security challenges, both historical and more recent, the area comprising erstwhile Fata has a number of different civilian law-enforcement agencies. Thus KP now has a law-enforcement personnel to citizen ratio exceeding that of Punjab, the country's most populous province. Some streamlining and rationalisation is obviously required. The merger in its entirety must be very meticulously planned and executed.

## **Model courts**

ACCORDING to Article 37 (d) of the Constitution, every citizen of the state has the right to “inexpensive and expeditious” justice. And yet, one of the foremost grievances against the legal system in this country is its sheer lethargy, resulting in a massive backlog of cases, many of which are described as ‘frivolous’ by litigators who say these will never be resolved, wasting precious time and resources in the process. At the beginning of the year, an estimated 1.9m cases awaited the new chief justice, Asif Saeed Khosa, who had said he wanted to build “... a dam against undue and unnecessary delays in judicial determination of cases”. He proposed the setting up of model courts in every district of the country to conduct daily trials on murder and narcotics-related cases (for now). The idea of model courts, as they exist today, was first introduced by him. The courts were under the supervision of Justice Mansoor Ali Shah, albeit restricted to Punjab. Unlike the district courts, which suffer from budgetary constraints, model courts have greater administrative and technological facilities. They deliver verdicts under an agreed timeline, without adjournment. Additionally, a monitoring and evaluation cell under the command of the chief justice or chairman of the National Judicial (Policy Making) Committee reviews the workings of the courts every two months.

While all this sounds commendable in theory — and model courts have indeed had success in parts of the country — introducing them across Pakistan will present its own set of challenges, particularly when we remember Chief Justice Khosa’s own complaint about the lack of judges in the country. There is also a fear that, if not handled carefully, model courts may eventually devolve into a parallel legal system, as opposed to remaining a complementary one. Lastly, despite the maxim that justice delayed is justice denied, ‘speedy justice’ can be misused as a cover for denying a fair trial. In the quick dispensation of ‘justice’, due process must still be ensured.

## **PM on the BJP**

PRIME Minister Imran Khan appears to have developed a taste for offering meaningful insights on politics inside neighbouring countries.

This time, he has reflected on the Indian general elections that are due to begin today. Mr Khan has assumed that a BJP victory is more likely to boost chances of peace between Pakistan and India.

“Perhaps if the BJP — a right-wing party — wins, some kind of settlement could be reached,” Mr Khan remarked in an interview, adding that a government led by the Congress party might be too apprehensive of a possible backlash from right-wing elements to move forward on peace.

The Pakistani leader voiced his sentiment on the eve of an election which many Indian commentators say could unleash a new wave of narrow nationalism, ie Hindutva, in their country, with repercussions for the region and beyond.

At the same time, Mr Khan did acknowledge the massive alienation of the Muslim community in India, and in held Kashmir, and went on to criticise Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP for practising the politics of fear.

Mr Khan’s views on the possibility of a right-wing party being more amenable to a settlement could well be based on the Pakistani experience of previous interactions with the BJP, including the visit of then prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who visited Lahore in 1999 — however, the bonhomie proved short-lived when the Kargil conflict erupted.

Again, in 2001, the right-wing BJP and Pakistan’s military president Gen Musharraf appeared close to a deal in Agra before hopes for a peaceful solution to the Kashmir dispute were thwarted.

The self-confessed architect of that fiasco, L.K. Advani, later faced the wrath of his own comrades of the Hindu right wing for praising Mr Jinnah.

But Mr Khan would do well not to raise his hopes, especially given Mr Modi’s record.

While there have been a few optimistic moments, such as Mr Modi’s visit to then prime minister Nawaz Sharif in Lahore, Delhi’s hostility to Pakistan has been rising under the BJP.

Snubs, complaints and threats have been par for the course, while the fear of war between the two nuclear-armed countries has still not dissipated after India’s unprovoked Balakot strike and Pakistan’s justifiable retaliation.

Meanwhile, the Congress party will hardly be pleased with Mr Khan's billing.

The prime minister — a budding analyst who had only recently raised hackles, and many an eyebrow, with his overly candid views on an interim setup in Afghanistan — would do well not to make public statements that may be seen in a negative light and be construed as interference in a country's internal affairs.

Times are sensitive, and Pakistan does not have good relations with either Afghanistan or India, both of which are in the midst of an uncertain period. A mature approach is needed by those at the top.

## Rwandan genocide

TWENTY-five years have passed since the world stood by and watched as one of the worst genocides of modern times unfolded in Rwanda. In a span of four months, 80,000 Rwandans, largely belonging to the Tutsi minority community, along with moderate Hutus, were killed, while scores of others were raped, disfigured and displaced during the bloody campaign. It seemed as if friends and neighbours turned against one another overnight. However, the hatred and resentment had been simmering below the surface for years, exacerbated by hate speech and dehumanisation campaigns that reduced the Tutsis to a subhuman status. Prior to the genocide, the propaganda machinery pushed narratives that likened the minority group to 'cockroaches' and 'snakes' that were not worthy of human life and dignity. Favoured by the former colonial powers, the Tutsis were unfairly demonised as an internal and external threat after Rwanda gained independence; they were blacklisted as 'traitors'. In the 100 days of bloodshed that followed the assassination of Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana, militias roamed and hunted the land freely. Even as the body count kept rising, and the scale of the killings became apparent, the international community did not act. Most victims were brutally hacked by machetes; others were shot dead. In the most sadistic accounts, however, women, men and children had their body parts cut off so that their death could be as prolonged and as painful as possible. How does one recover from witnessing such trauma?

Since that bloody period, Rwanda has made great economic and social strides, aided by considerable and sustained efforts at reconciliation

between the two ethnic groups. One of the first steps the new government undertook was to remove all references to ethnicity in identification documents, highlighting shared identity and eliminating differences that were so easily exploited in times of tension. But beyond the physical scars of violence, there are the emotional scars: the immense feelings of guilt, despair and intergenerational trauma that will not be erased as long as the memory of that time and violence lives on. The international community must also make it a point to never forget the pain of the Rwandan genocide, our shared humanity and responsibility towards keeping one another safe, particularly vulnerable minority groups. Otherwise, we repeat the mistakes of the past. Given the events that unfolded in Darfur, Myanmar and other parts of the world since then, perhaps we already have.

## **Funds for Haqqania**

THE relationship between the PTI and the late Maulana Samiul Haq's party is not new.

While the ruling party may have initially been drawn to the murdered cleric's JUI-S due to the mutual animus between the PTI and the JUI-F, the KP government appears to be constant in its support for Darul Uloom Haqqania, the controversial seminary located in Nowshera and known as 'jihad university'.

This sobriquet is, of course, well earned, as the madressah has been churning out fighters since the days of the Afghan jihad, while it counts members of the Afghan Taliban amongst its alumni.

As reported in this paper on Wednesday, the KP government has diverted Rs30m meant for higher secondary schools and given them to the Haqqania madressah. This would be the third time the KP administration has showered its munificence on the seminary; in the 2016-17 budget, it had allocated a whopping Rs300m, while in February, Rs277m were reportedly allocated to the Haqqania madressah.

It is not clear if contributing funds to seminaries — that too have courted a fair bit of controversy over the years — is part of the PTI's naya Pakistan vision.

By all means, madressahs need to be mainstreamed, so that their alumni can contribute to the national economy along with studying religious subjects.

However, mainstreaming must be done across the board, and state largesse must not be limited to handpicked seminaries, that too with political considerations underlying the generosity.

More importantly, funds should not be diverted from the education department at the cost of mainstream schools.

the PTI should realise that these are public funds and not those of the party; therefore, it needs to explain to taxpayers why money meant for secondary schools is ending up subsidising a madressah.

Furthermore, when the prime minister has hinted that he wants to take Pakistan in a more tolerant direction, is giving funds to a madressah with such a hard-core reputation the best way to go about it?

## **What's up at the stock market?**

IF anybody is having one bad day after another these days, it is the stock brokers. Retail investors whose money is stuck in the exchange are, as usual, the unwitting victims in all this.

But it is the brokers who have to resort to sleeping aids to be able to get a good night's sleep, because the spectre of broker defaults has raised its ugly head once again.

The stock market has seen two consecutive years of declines now after hitting a 'historic high' in the heady run-up to the inclusion in the MSCI index back in June 2017, when the giddiness seemed to know no limits.

Since hitting its peak of 53,124 points back in May 2017, one month before the reclassification into Emerging Market status by MSCI, the market ended trade yesterday at 36,787 points. That's a fall of 30pc, and it is enough to make the hardest stomachs a little weak.



The worst thing that the government can do at this point is look for ways to come in for a rescue. The last people in Pakistan who deserve to be rescued with taxpayer money are stock brokers.

It was bad enough that the government caved in to their demands and extended them sweeping tax breaks in the mini-budget of January 2019.

If a crumbling trade and cries for help from the broker community melt the heart of those in Q block, it will be a travesty.

First of all, there is no moral case for why the state should protect the interests of stock brokers.

It is not like they are exporters or industrialists, who either bring in valuable foreign exchange or provide large-scale employment and value addition in our society.

Second, these are some of the most unscrupulous elements in our economy, and past experience with bailing them out has yielded no results for retail investors, despite tall and vigorously made promises.

Instead, the government should start getting tough through the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan.

A powerful signal needs to be sent to the broker community that any default on client obligations will be dealt with an iron fist.

Any one among this fraternity who even thinks of abandoning their clients and fleeing abroad should realise that those days are long gone. If ever there is a need for the government to get tough on economic stakeholders, this is it.

Far more than currency dealers, it is the stock brokers who prey on the people's trust and their vulnerability, and who need to learn that betting and speculating with people's savings is risky business.

The market is going to fall further in days to come. The government must safeguard the interests of the small saver, even if a few brokers need to pay till penury for it.

## Tale of neglect

ARTICLE 25-A of the Constitution declares that the state is obligated to provide free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of five and 16. And yet, despite being enshrined as a fundamental principle of the state, education remains one of the most neglected sectors in the country. With a population predicted to swell to 240m by 2030, according to some estimates, the challenges of a growing young population and the lack of resources and opportunities that await them will continue to haunt this country for years to come. Taking notice of this, Chief Justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa reminded the federal and provincial governments of their obligation to provide quality education to the citizens of the state. He asked the representatives of the provincial governments to appear before the court and present whatever data and information they had collected on the issue, and explain what they have done to fulfil their duty. In the absence of government schools, private schools have cropped up all over the country, many of which charge exorbitant fees that most middle- or working-class families simply cannot afford. Towards the end of last year, the former chief justice Saqib Nisar had ordered several upscale private schools to decrease their fees by 20pc after protests by parents erupted over the hike in school fees.

The privatisation of education and healthcare was encouraged by previous governments as a means of filling gaps in the provision of quality services; but it was also a way for the state to hand over its responsibility of meeting the basic needs of its citizens. There is one group, however, that continues to be excluded from this understanding between the state and the private sector: the poor. And even though government schools provide free text books and do not charge fees, there are other expenses such as uniforms, copies, stationery and transport that the poor struggle to afford, particularly in households that have many children. The budget for education and healthcare continues to be a dismal percentage of the total fiscal budget. There are few schools, and most tend to be at the primary level. Secondary and tertiary schools are even rarer. On the other hand, unregulated madressahs can be found in nearly every street and neighbourhood. Rather than admonishing private sector institutions for being exclusive and elite, which they certainly are, the state should examine its own role in creating such inequalities.

## Netanyahu's victory

WITH Benjamin Netanyahu all but assured of victory in Israel's recently held elections, the future of the Arab-Israeli peace process and the two-state solution looks doomed.

Netanyahu appears set to head a right-wing coalition — having courted some of the most fanatical Jewish outfits during the course of the campaign — and become prime minister of Israel for a record fifth time.

However, it would be naive to expect him to adopt a more measured posture and conciliatory tone towards the Palestinians.

As the polls neared, he had made it clear he would annex Israeli settlements on Arab land — settlements considered illegal by the international community.

To paraphrase the words of senior Palestinian leader Hanan Ashrawi, Netanyahu wants to build Greater Israel on the ashes of Palestine.

And perhaps what is most unfortunate is that he has the support of the Trump administration to accomplish this odious task, while the Arab and Muslim worlds remain deep in slumber.

Perhaps the Netanyahu victory can be explained in the context of the global rightist surge, with far-right parties across the world either taking power, or becoming kingmakers in respective national politics.

In the meantime, progressive political elements the world over are withering in the face of the rightist march. Some of Netanyahu's election allies are downright fascist, calling for the "transfer" of the Palestinians from their native land.

This, and the prime minister-elect's grim track record where respecting Arab rights is concerned, does not bode well for the peace process.

Perhaps the only hope for the Palestinians to secure justice is for the international community to make it clear to the Israeli leadership that it will not condone Tel Aviv's brutal treatment of the Arabs.

However, this is easier said than done, with the international community in disarray, and the US protecting Israel from all criticism.

The Palestinians have been in purgatory for over seven decades; chances are slim that they will get the respect and justice they deserve any time soon, especially after the latest Israeli elections.

## **Hazarganji blast**

ONCE again, the streets of Quetta have witnessed a bloodbath, shattering the illusion that a semblance of peace had returned to the Balochistan capital.

At least 20 people were reportedly killed in the blast in the city's Hazarganji area at a vegetable market on Friday.

Nearly half of the victims belong to the embattled Shia Hazara community, and the attack has raised concerns whether it signals a return to the bloodletting of old targeting this group.

While a senior Quetta police official said the Hazara were, indeed, the target of the attack, the Balochistan home minister contradicted the claim, saying the atrocity did not target 'a specific community'.

Of course, the Hazara have faced intense violence in Balochistan, with targeted killings being a regular feature in the past, while in January and February 2013, over 200 community members were massacred in two massive blasts in Quetta.

While the frequency of attacks against the Hazara had come down considerably over the past few months, Friday's attack shows just how vulnerable the community in particular and the population in general in Quetta is.

The fact that the community's traders have to be accompanied by an armed FC escort to the Hazarganji vegetable market to ward off potential attacks reflects the level of anxiety and tension that the Hazara people face; an FC trooper was amongst those killed in Friday's blast.

All this points to an abnormal, surreal existence for the Hazara, and more importantly, indicates that the forces responsible for sectarian violence in Balochistan are still very much capable of wreaking havoc.

While the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi was responsible for earlier attacks, it needs to be investigated which outfits are behind the latest violence.

Last month, a number of Levies personnel were killed by TTP militias in Ziarat; does this point to new players in the game of sectarian militancy in Balochistan?

The BAP-led Balochistan government, and the federal administration must take solid steps to root out the infrastructure of violence in Quetta and the rest of Balochistan.

Cosmetic steps may bring temporary respite, but what the administration and security establishment must do is attack the core of the problem: militant and sectarian groups active in the province.

The Quetta 'Safe City' project has reportedly run into delays; this bureaucratic lethargy needs to be addressed as it is costing valuable lives.

With better policing and intelligence-based operations, the elements responsible for acts of terrorism in Balochistan can be neutralised, provided the civil and military leadership give the issue the importance it deserves.

## **Jallianwala Bagh**

BRITISH Prime Minister Theresa May recently expressed her "deep regret" for the Jallianwala Bagh carnage whose centenary India, Pakistan and Bangladesh sombrely observe today. As the Indian media has pointed out,

in a press conference in Brussels the next day, Ms May “sincerely regretted” not delivering Brexit on time. The inability to cleanly apologise for the brutality and callousness that marked British rule reveals, unsurprisingly, that lessons from history are not always easy to learn. The old apathy laced with bouts of cruelty towards the ‘natives’ seems to have never left South Asia though the British went home more than 70 years ago. From Srinagar to Trivandrum, from Quetta to Dhaka, the promise of real freedom has eluded the quest for democracy in the successor countries, while many of the trappings of colonial high-handedness were quickly adopted as the norm on the mottled dawn of Independence by the new rulers. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place in Amritsar on April 13, 1919, when British troops mowed down a peaceful congregation of mostly Sikh men and women. Over 15,000 people had gathered on Baisakhi day in the public park that had a single narrow opening. They were assembled to protest the abusive Rowlatt Act, and Gen Reginald Dyer set out to silence them. Promptly, and with no warning, 1,650 rounds were fired with powerful rifles. Between 500 and 600 people died — according to some estimates, the figure was much higher at 1,000 — with three times that number wounded.

The bloodletting was seen as a reaction to the rare camaraderie that Hindus and Muslims had achieved in recent years. Guided by Mr Jinnah and Mr Gandhi since the Lucknow Pact in 1916, the unity posed an existential challenge to British rule. Some scholars have averred that the history of unpartitioned India would have been truly rewarding had the British decided to leave in 1919 — as a reward, if for no other reason, for the sacrifices that Indians of different religious hues had made for the war effort. Instead, the demeaning law was inflicted, requiring Indians not to hold meetings and to crawl in a street of Amritsar where a female Christian missionary was injured during protests against the banishment of Hindu and Muslim leaders from the Punjab. The colonial era may have ended but laws from that period still dog India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, sometimes enforced by the military, occasionally by civilian rulers, and increasingly so by state-backed mobs, which is an innovation on how the British crushed the quest for truer freedoms.

## Julian Assange's arrest

THE arrest of Julian Assange by British authorities is deeply troubling.

The WikiLeaks founder has always cut a controversial figure; both he and his organisation have arguably engaged in questionable conduct over the years.

Yet the broader implications for press freedom the world over are sinister.

Only last month, former US intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning, previously imprisoned for downloading US military and diplomatic documents for WikiLeaks in 2010, was again jailed for refusing to testify before a grand jury.

Mr Assange now faces the possibility of extradition to the US, where he has been indicted on a conspiracy charge in connection with his interactions with Ms Manning.

The US government's position with regard to these two individuals, as well as whistleblower Edward Snowden, is indicative of an illiberal attitude towards those demanding greater accountability and transparency of public institutions.

The pioneering work of WikiLeaks has revolutionised public-interest journalism — by using cryptography to link publishers with whistleblowers, it sent shockwaves through the upper echelons of power that continue to reverberate.

The 2010 leaks shed a critical light on US foreign policy, particularly the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

As a co-publisher of the 2010 leaks, this newspaper helped define national discourse on the contentious US drone programme in Pakistan, and enabled a more critical, informed view of the relationship between the two governments.

From uncovering state secrecy over human rights violations and possible war crimes, to exposing the corrupt, tax-dodging practices of the global elite, WikiLeaks and journalists have in recent years set in motion a trailblazing

model of investigative reporting, empowering people to question power, and the abuse of it.

Clearly, this is why the US government is so tenaciously pursuing Mr Assange's prosecution — to protect the mechanisms used by the status quo to maintain itself.

Should the extradition of Mr Assange go through, it would set a terrible precedent, eroding the progress made by press freedom campaigners to democratise access to information and its attendant redistribution of power to the people.

The impact of this, too, would be felt the world over, particularly in countries where a free press is already under assault.

## **Destructive course**

IN a parliamentary form of government such as ours, it is the house of representatives where political debate should take place, where differences between parties should be aired. However, in the country's current political climate, politicians are butting heads in rallies and on Twitter in a manner that smacks of a fierce election campaign. What is worse, given we had a general election less than a year ago, there is already increasing talk by opposition politicians to collectively bring down the new PTI government. On Tuesday, after meeting with former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman told this newspaper he was confident he could mobilise the efforts of the opposition to dislodge "an installed government led by a puppet prime minister". Some days ago, Asif Zardari said as much at a rally to commemorate Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's death anniversary, exhorting party supporters to be prepared to march on Islamabad and throw out the government. Imran Khan, at another gathering, declared in response he would provide a container for Mr Zardari in Islamabad, taunting him that he would not be able to sustain a weeklong protest.

Even while the government is short on grace and restraint, the opposition is adopting a dangerous and irresponsible path. Both the PPP and PML-N know well that the fall of an elected government — beyond the immediate, and temporary, gratification of the party that comes to power in its place —



has serious long-term repercussions that negatively affect the democratic system as a whole. History shows us that dislodging a government through street power is virtually impossible. The last time that happened was 40 years ago when widespread civil unrest resulted in Gen Zia staging a coup against Bhutto's elected government and declaring martial law. The political climate in Pakistan is vastly different today, shorn of the idealistic notions that once animated the public. Dislodging an elected government in these times is done through behind-the-scenes engineering that ultimately eviscerates the system, and leaves the beneficiaries with limited independence in certain critical policy areas — after all, there's always a quid pro quo.

There is a growing realisation that the PTI government is proving alarmingly clueless about how to rescue an economy in free fall, perhaps the biggest challenge at this point. Given this, and the drastic cuts in development budgets, all the talk about poverty alleviation seems little more than populist hokum. In short, the situation provides plenty of fodder for the opposition, in parliament and outside. Granted, the accountability process appears blatantly one-sided, and the government gratingly self-righteous. However, the opposition should be aware that the timing, tenor and content of its recent rhetoric about regime overthrow comes across as being motivated by the fact that many among its senior leadership are facing corruption charges. True or not, that does undermine what could be legitimate criticism of the government's performance.

## **Defending criticism**

AT a time when critical voices are increasingly being branded 'subversive', even a passing observation, made in the right forum, acquires deep significance.

Heading a Supreme Court bench constituted to oversee the implementation of the Diamer-Basha dam project, Justice Sheikh Azmat Saeed recently remarked that he would "always prefer even unfair criticism to silence" in response to the attorney general drawing the court's notice to a talk show that aired criticism of the project.

It is a refreshing change of pace, given that the air of groupthink which pervaded the project and its fundraising drive not only left many questions unanswered, but had citizens wondering whether they could even voice concerns without facing a backlash.

Indeed, the apex court itself adjudicates on the basis of majority judgements and dissenting opinions authored after exhaustive deliberation — in recognition of the fact that jurisprudence is strengthened by active, rigorous debate.

Why then should the same not apply to all matters of public policy?

Criticism, even if it is unfair or uninformed, provided that it is made in good faith at least opens up the space to respond to such arguments and defend one's position, ensuring that important decisions are not made without consultation, consensus and oversight.

Responsiveness and accountability in governance can only flourish in a society that encourages countervailing forces against absolute authority.

Yet what we have witnessed in recent years is growing intolerance towards any form of critique. This has led to an erosion of fundamental rights, as the principles of inalienability and universality undergirding them are set aside when there is growing impunity, even justification, for attacks on critics.

'Securing national interests', 'preserving Pakistani culture', 'promoting a positive image' — these have become catch-all phrases adopted by those who believe that undermining a free press, clamping down on activists and threatening vulnerable groups are appropriate routes to national cohesion.

Drawing arbitrary lines between who does or doesn't have a say, or what can or cannot be said, creates a murky and unaccountable regime that rules by diktat rather than the people's will.

Coercing silence is especially dangerous in a society where democratic traditions have never been allowed to secure their roots, and conformity is prized — often even above conscience.

Those who wish stability and progress for this nation would do well to recognise the hubris of allowing a cacophony of yes-men to drown out the voices of reason.

## **Executions in Saudi Arabia**

IN a travesty of justice, Saudi Arabia on Thursday executed a Pakistani woman. According to Justice Project Pakistan, Fatima Ijaz was the first Pakistani woman to be executed in that country since 2014. She had been incarcerated in the Dhaban prison of Jeddah, facing charges related to drug trafficking. Two other Pakistanis — her husband Mohammad Mustafa, and Abdul Maalik — were also executed the same day as the sentence on Fatima Ijaz was carried out — this, even though Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have friendly ties and are apparently working on a prisoner transfer agreement. “These executions are particularly worrying in the face of the announcement by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman made in February this year to release 2,107 Pakistanis imprisoned in the kingdom. The promise, however, has yet to be fulfilled,” the JPP statement said. Only 250 nationals have returned so far — those whose cases for repatriation had already been under consideration. By way of comparison, since the announcement of the crown prince, there has been a spike in the number of executions of Pakistani nationals in the kingdom.

Prime Minister Imran Khan had made a personal request to Mohammad bin Salman for the release of prisoners to which the crown prince had readily agreed. However, the matter continues to be delayed — perilous for those on death row. One of the top executioners in the world, Saudi Arabia has been routinely criticised for its poor human rights record. Trials conducted there have been called unfair and opaque, with foreign prisoners unable to understand the proceedings or to gain access to proper translators and lawyers, and often lacking consular aid. While it is for Saudi Arabia to put its justice system in order, Pakistan must make a more determined effort to convince the Saudi authorities to provide its incarcerated citizens better access to justice, while strengthening consular assistance itself. Other countries have done so and Pakistan could learn from them

## **Internet freedom**

THE launch of a fresh report on Pakistan’s digital trends has turned the spotlight on a host of milestones and challenges for both citizens and the state.

Titled Pakistan's Internet Landscape 2018, the report compiled by Bytes for All is a comprehensive document which maps online patterns of activity and their impact on the social, economic and political rights of citizens. The writers of the report pertinently note that it has been released at a time when Pakistan and other countries in the region are witnessing a tussle between a vibrant civil society and a controlling state, which forces both citizens and governments to confront the issues of control when it comes to freedom of expression.

Above all, the report highlights that although internet penetration is increasing in Pakistan, the key issues are lack of access; the potential for online abuse; and censorship.

When it comes to internet usage and access, the urban-rural, socioeconomic divide still exists, leaving Pakistan behind other countries in lists such as the Economic Intelligence Unit's Inclusive Internet Index 2018, which ranks Pakistan 68th amongst 86 countries. But the report also notes that even with these challenges, usage has increased manifold, presenting a host of new questions.

For instance, the report highlights that regarding blasphemy online, an environment of fear has emerged with the possible addition of clauses specific to blasphemy in the already controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act. It argues that this could result in harm both online and offline through the abuse of laws, and says that false blasphemy accusations, as well as the targeting of minorities, was witnessed this year.

Another troubling trend noted by the report is the issue of child pornography. While the report notes that awareness is being created and some arrests are being made, it says 2018 is "just the tip of the iceberg" and that this year saw focus shift to child pornography being produced and disseminated online from within Pakistan.

When it comes to the issue of censorship, the report talks about how different tactics are employed to intimidate or silence journalists online. It mentions specific cases in which warnings through official channels, such as the FIA, Twitter or even confiscation of devices, are tools through which the state imposes censorship in the digital space. In addition to these tactics, it

describes how online 'mob justice' warriors spewing hate speech lead to self-censorship.

Overall, the report does not paint a happy picture for the direction in which Pakistan is headed. The gender gap and urban-rural divide in terms of access mean currently the internet is only for a few citizens. If the overall digital environment is plagued with these issues, promising areas such as e-commerce will not be able to thrive. The new government must focus on these areas and work towards an inclusive, free and safe digital space.

## **Revenue shortfall**

FINANCE Minister Asad Umar has reiterated that his government is now close to a deal with the IMF on a bailout package, but the growing revenue shortfalls being reported by the FBR should be a serious cause for concern for him.

As per the latest report, which builds upon similar reports that were received earlier, the FBR is headed towards a near-historic revenue shortfall of Rs450bn if the present lacklustre pace of revenue collection continues.

The shortfall is against targets set by the government itself, and not by previous administrations, so the present set of rulers cannot make the excuse that the targets were unrealistic. The slow revenue collection owes mainly to the virtual absence of a vision on the part of the present government when it comes to the crucial question of increasing the tax base.

It has been pointed out before, and it bears repeating, that the effort launched by the government to serve notices on high-net-worth individuals who are either underreporting their income (in view of their visible standard of living) or are simply not filing their tax returns, is a good exercise to encourage compliance, but it can never be considered a revenue-generating measure.

Such exercises have been going on for over 10 years now, but have never succeeded in raising large amounts of revenue. Other than this, the only idea the FBR seems to have for increasing revenue generation is to squeeze compliant taxpayers harder through the aggressive use of the tax body's discretionary authority.

The backlash that this has engendered from the business community is going to eat away at whatever little goodwill the government has left.

A base-broadening exercise involves a larger vision, something akin to legislating on a Value Added Tax, or the greater and more cerebral use of the Active Taxpayer List and penalties for non-filers of tax returns.

On both these fronts, the government is either backpedalling or refusing to entertain bigger ideas. Entering an IMF programme with no vision on broadening the base of taxation will be a recipe for failure, since the programme will require a significantly ramped-up revenue effort, and without broadening the base, this will increase the burden on compliant taxpayers beyond what they are bearing today.

One-off gimmicks like a tax amnesty scheme or the sale of public assets to raise money are not the way forward and certainly no replacement for a comprehensive vision of reform.

## **Banning militant groups**

SPEAKING in Kohat last week, Minister of State for Interior Shehryar Afridi, in reply to a question, said the government was evolving a mechanism to prevent leaders of banned outfits from taking part in elections. Considering Pakistan's many problems with militancy, this is a welcome announcement and it is hoped that a foolproof mechanism is formulated by the civil administration and the military establishment to prevent militants and their sympathisers from reaching the elected houses. Loopholes in the law, and the apathy of the state, have allowed notorious hatemongers to become elected representatives of the people; in fact, both dictators and democrats have pandered to these elements for votes and support at different times. However, if Pakistan is to take effective and long-lasting action against jihadi, sectarian and other types of militants, stronger steps are needed to prevent the militant infrastructure from flourishing.

Since at least the Musharraf era the state has talked about banning militants. But what has been happening so far is that outfits are proscribed on paper, yet they play a strange cat-and-mouse game with the state, merely changing names, while leaders of supposedly banned groups freely travel the country

(and abroad at times) and keep spewing hate. If an organisation is banned, then its leaders and cadres must not be allowed to operate freely, its fundraising abilities need to be neutralised, while its organisational capabilities also need to be checked. There was some resolve in the aftermath of the APS Peshawar tragedy to tackle the militancy scourge; yet that resolve seems to have dampened. It is hoped that the federal government and the provinces work out a coordinated plan to check the operations of militant groups. As Friday's atrocity in Quetta has shown, the militant infrastructure very much exists, and if the state remains complacent about the threat, more havoc is likely. Therefore, those who champion violence and hatred, and those who provide them political support, must all face the law.

## Women voters

RECENTLY, the Election Commission of Pakistan released its district-wide data on the gap between female and male registered voters in the July 2018 elections. The ECP revealed there were 12.54m fewer registered women voters, although women constitute nearly 50pc of the total population of the country. The figures highlight an unfortunate decline in the political participation of women, as the gender gap between registered voters during the 2013 elections was smaller at 10.97m. The most prosperous province, Punjab, alone accounted for over 1m of the missing registration in 2018. Most surprisingly, Punjab's capital, Lahore, led the gap with 616,945 fewer female voters. While the large number may be because the city has a bigger population than many other parts of the country, that is not a good enough excuse for the exclusion of so many women from the democratic exercise. This gender gap and the continued exclusion of women from the political process highlights structural inequalities that continue to act as barriers for the vast majority of Pakistani women, despite their prominent and vocal presence in politics and their efforts in pushing progressive legislation.

Ahead of the general elections, both the ECP and Nadra made considerable efforts in ensuring greater participation of women. Along with the poll network Fafen, Nadra updated its electoral list and helped women get their CNICs to have their votes registered. Meanwhile, thanks to the efforts of women legislators, the ECP declared the results of three constituencies null

and void due to the low turnout of female voters last July. For the first time, the election monitoring body made it compulsory to have at least 10pc of votes in each constituency cast by women. Although still a relatively low percentage, it is important to have such measures in place in a society such as ours, where misogyny is deeply entrenched and where women's voices are often ignored and dismissed.

Despite these efforts, much more needs to be done. All too often, so-called progressive parties have joined hands with conservatives to bar women from voting through 'understandings'. In 2013, the PML-N entered into an agreement with the Jamaat-i-Islami to disallow women from casting their votes in Buner, while the PPP and ANP had entered into a similar agreement with the Jamaat in Lower Dir. Implicit in the marginalisation of women from public spaces and the decision-making processes or keeping them away from 'serious' and 'worldly' issues is the belief they do not belong in that world. And yet, they are affected by its decisions. Politics affects them as much as anyone else, it is important that they participate. Parliament needs to be more aggressive in pushing affirmative action and encouraging right-thinking legislators. Until society changes, and until women, men and transgendered people are truly equal in the eyes of the law and society, such measures should continue to be in place.

## **Spring offensive**

WHILE the prospects of peace in Afghanistan appear tantalisingly near, the fact is that much ground needs to be covered before a lasting end to the decades-old conflict in that country can be reached. Even as the US and Afghan Taliban interlocutors have been engaging in shuttle diplomacy over the past several months, with the Qatari capital Doha the usual venue for their rendezvous, the insurgents have been continuing their violent activities inside Afghanistan. Last week, the Taliban announced the start of the 'spring offensive', a dreaded annual ritual that signals the start of the fighting season as the weather in Afghanistan turns warmer. The offensive comes in the wake of an operation launched by the Kabul government against the Taliban last month. Moreover, as the Taliban and the Kabul government continue to fight, the UN has lifted a travel ban on a number of senior figures of the militia, ostensibly to allow them to attend peace talks.



To many, it might appear strange that the Afghan Taliban are suing for peace on the one hand, and continuing to wage war on the other. However, such tactics have been used by both states and insurgents throughout history, and are part of strategic calculations. From the outside, it appears that the Taliban are continuing with their violent activities in order to approach the Americans from a 'position of strength' at the negotiating table. Though the ethical and moral justification for this practice may be questionable, the fact is that the Taliban have managed to sustain their campaign against the US-backed Kabul government, and the only way to end the violence would be to keep engaging with the group and bring them to terms. The onus is on the Americans to expedite the peace process so that a negotiated settlement can be reached. However, the Taliban's insistence of keeping out the Afghan government is unacceptable; they must shed their rigidity and talk to the elected government in Kabul. In fact, in the next phase of negotiations, Ashraf Ghani's representatives and those of the Taliban should meet directly, facilitated by regional states and the international community. Ultimately, foreign elements can play a supporting role, but the peace process must be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. And where needed, Pakistan can offer its good offices to help end this bloody war, that has not only affected Afghanistan, but has also had a major impact on this country.

## **Support for Hazaras?**

NOT too long ago, the government of Pakistan and many of its citizens appeared enamoured of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, whose actions in the wake of an attack on Muslims in her country turned many here into admirers of her compassionate and determined style of leadership. But while our leaders heaped praise on her humanity, their response to the deadly attack on the Hazara community in Quetta on Friday, and its subsequent sit-in, has been inadequate. There appears to be a lacklustre effort by the government to reach out to and pacify the protesting members of the minority Shia group who continued their sit-in even amid heavy showers and cold weather before ending it on Monday night. The response from the government has included a visit by the maritime minister to Quetta, where he condoled with the families of the victims and gave assurances about investigating the incident. On the fourth day, other PTI leaders visited Quetta and gave similar assurances. The protesters, who set

up their camps to condemn last week's blast at the Hazarganji vegetable and fruit market, rightly demanded that elements involved in the suicide attack be arrested, steps be taken to ensure their protection and the implementation of NAP take place "without any discrimination". Above all, their fresh demand was that the prime minister himself visit and engage with them to chalk out a future for a vulnerable community battered by violence and hate.

It is a pity that governments past and present have fallen short when it comes to standing by Pakistan's minorities — especially the Hazara community, whose plight reflects an existential struggle. Token condemnations through tweets are a far cry from Ms Ardern's gestures, which politicians here gushed about in the aftermath of the Christchurch attacks. Instead of simply praising Ms Ardern, the government should strive to embody her qualities of empathy and courage. More leaders should aspire to be like her across the world — especially in Pakistan where she is hailed as a champion.

## **The fight for human rights**

THE July 2018 general elections ushered in a new political party to power and with it — for many — the hope of a 'new Pakistan' that championed 'justice' above all else.

However, the noise created around the elections and in the months leading up to it led to the abandonment of other serious issues that were overshadowed by politicking, horrific bouts of violence, and the various controversies that ensued following the announcement of the results.

In its recently released annual State of Human Rights report, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan finds that the state of human rights deteriorated during the election year, as essential rights were trampled upon or ignored in the rush to power.

The advocacy group listed all the human rights violations that plagued the country in 2018, beginning with a clampdown on the press that holds power to account.

Other issues highlighted included the enforced disappearances of people; the alleged extrajudicial killings by law enforcement; the large backlog of cases and prisoners' rights ignored, along with the prevalence of torture; the rampant violence against women and crimes committed in the name of 'honour'; the sexual abuse and murder of children; child labour and the violation of labour rights; the ill-treatment and murder of transgender people; and the religious intolerance, discrimination and persecution faced by religious minorities.

It is worth remembering that most of these violations concerning the rights and dignity of individuals and marginalised groups precede this government, and indeed previous governments, as they are deeply embedded malaises in our society.

While noting the gains made by parliamentarians in pushing progressive legislation, the fact is that mindsets do not change easily and implementation of the law is poor.

For instance, despite the jubilation surrounding the passing of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in May, 2018, which guarantees the transgender community the right to self-identify, the realities on the ground remain dismal as they continue to be subjected to violence, harassment and ridicule.

Pakistan has repeatedly affirmed before the UN its pledge to uphold, promote and safeguard universal human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

Yet most citizens and even law enforcement remain unaware of people's rights — or the concept of inalienable human rights, in general, which gets muddled in political rhetoric, or is perceived as an alien concept in a society not used to individual liberty and equality.

But the fight for human rights is essentially a fight for the powerless, the underrepresented and the ignored in a society where might is right. In the past, many governments have rejected such reports on human rights abuses.

This government, which came to power on the promise of 'change', must ensure human rights by listening closer to those on the margins of society. Only then can we truly say we've voted in a new Pakistan.

## Punjab IG's exit

BUREAUCRATIC reshuffles are routine when it comes to running administrative matters. If an officer is not performing, the state has the power to transfer him or her and replace them with a more competent individual. However, when transfers and postings occur with abnormal frequency, it gives rise to speculation that something more than just performance is being judged; that perhaps it is political compulsions that underlie the exit or posting of an officer, rather than professional competence. The recent change of the Punjab police chief has certainly raised eyebrows; outgoing IGP Amjad Javed Saleemi was replaced on Monday by Arif Nawaz. This would perhaps be considered a routine matter if it were not the fourth time in eight months that Punjab's top police officer was changed — with all transfers taking place under the PTI government's watch. Regarding Mr Saleemi's exit, the speculation doing the rounds is that the top brass were not happy with his performance, and it is being alleged that he had a 'soft corner' for the PML-N.

While public servants should not let their political affiliations get in the way of their work, it is also not fair to penalise officials based on their political preferences, especially if they are performing their duties ably. More importantly, the independence of the police cannot be achieved until there is zero political interference in the force's affairs, and until officers are allowed to complete their tenure. If evidence of serious misconduct or lack of performance comes to light, then there must be a transparent procedure and an oversight body that should deal with the matter to ensure justice is done. Officers should not be transferred simply on a whim: each time the Punjab IG has been removed over the past eight months, no reasons have been given for the move. And it is not just Punjab where police officers have failed to impress their political bosses. In Sindh, former IG A.D. Khowaja — widely seen as a capable officer — had a rough innings with the provincial administration as the PPP-led Sindh government tried to remove him several times on apparently political grounds until the Supreme Court ruled that he

must complete his tenure. If political forces in 'naya Pakistan' want the police to deliver, then tenure must be respected and officers not sent packing based on political likes and dislikes.

## Harassing journalists

FROM baseless treason cases, to inquiries against journalists for displaying images of Jamal Khashoggi on social media, and now the case against Shahzeb Jillani — it is obvious that legal means are increasingly being deployed to pursue the extra-legal end of silencing free speech and expression in Pakistan.

For airing views critical of the government and state institutions — views not dissimilar to those expressed by many journalists, activists, politicians and even on occasion by members of the judiciary — Mr Jillani has been indicted by the FIA on charges including cyberterrorism, hate speech and defamation.

Moreover, the law-enforcement agency has initiated the process on a complaint lodged by a serial litigant. The charge sheet reads like quintessential McCarthyism; criticism is conflated with subversion, and unsubstantiated allegations of collusion with 'foreign agencies' of 'enemy countries' have been made with no corroborating evidence to support them.

Not only is it curious that such cases are often filed by habitual private petitioners (rather than the presumably offended parties they claim to be defending), but there is a troubling tendency of such suits being prolonged indefinitely.

Clearly, if the FIA considers the charges against Mr Jillani to be as serious and actionable as they make them appear to be, the investigating officer would have been present for the hearing on Monday. He was not.

If the motivations behind this case — to intimidate and harass one journalist, and send a clear message to others — are apparent to all free- and right-thinking individuals, why then do the courts entertain such frivolous petitions, and that too at the taxpayers' expense?

Why has the FIA been given extensive licence to interpret and enforce an already murky and ill-defined cybercrime law as it sees fit?

And if such strong-arm tactics to silence critical voices in this country are not checked, what is the logical conclusion?

A fourth estate that reflects the opinionated diversity of a democratic polity, or the censored monotony of an authoritarian regime?

The sword of Damocles looms over Pakistan's independent press.

## **Debate on presidential system**

THERE has always been an urge in this country to invent and innovate, in the name of the people and good governance, out of frustration, more ambition. Pakistan experimented with various ideas in constitutional law before settling for the 1973 Constitution. There have been military dictators imposing themselves on people and political leaders dreaming of capturing absolute power as 'amirul momineen'. And just as the country trudges along a difficult path towards some kind of clean, stable and efficient governance, in a throwback to the times when talk about a central benevolent authority, the 'mard-i-momin' or the 'mard-i-haq' was at its peak, the long-sleeping giant — the alternative known as the presidential system — is back roaring again. Don't we know the menu from our previous visits to that territory? The innovators are going to remind us we need to throw away the yoke and be liberated, served by an equally democratic system crafted to serve our needs, where the president is directly elected since they already have in mind that someone to run the country under the new system.

Gen Ayub Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Gen Ziaul Haq, Mian Nawaz Sharif, Gen Pervez Musharraf have all in their time been blessed with advisers favouring a presidential system for them. However, the fault lies not in the tools but the hands which operate them. The Pakistani system may be feeble, even inadequate, but that is because it has not been allowed to develop in the light of popular experiences with power. Too many doubters have been allowed centre stage and conspiracies given space to flourish. What is needed is a categorical snub to these self-serving leaders who pretend to

guide us from our 'perpetual backward state' by doing away with an 18th Amendment here and an almost child-like talk there of bringing in a presidential system. Instead of engaging in this debate, the opposition should firmly remind them that this parliament is not mandated to change the structure of the Constitution into one that establishes a presidential form of government. In order to do so, it will have to do away with the Constitution, elect a constituent assembly and go for a presidential system. The alternative is a referendum on the issue, on which the Constitution is vague if not silent.

This latest round of debate on the presidential system could well have been necessitated by an inability to generate enough opposition to the 18th Amendment — which is found troublesome enough for many of the current lot of rulers to publicly wish its demise. Very recently, the PTI was loudly introducing a fully representative system at the local government level. Given the fate of those who flirted with the idea of a new system in the past, Prime Minister Imran Khan and his well-wishers would be best advised to concentrate on improving and rebuilding that lower end of the system.

## **Battle in Peshawar**

THE 17-hour-long standoff in Peshawar which left five militants and one police official dead has reinvigorated the debate about how safe the country is today after having waged an extended war against terrorism.

The encounter flashed some spectacular images — none more so than the one where the entire structure of a house where the militants were holed up crumbled to the ground under the force of a huge explosion.

What does this event signify? For one, it highlighted the state's sustained resolve to fight the perpetrators of terror.

At the same time, the incident brought back distressing memories of Pakistan's long and fierce battle against violent extremism, a menace fuelled both internally and from the outside. Clearly, some battle-hardened elements are still determined to shatter the hard-won, albeit relative, reprieve.

There are aspects of the prolonged siege that must be examined for the information they can provide to further reinforce our counterterrorism tactics.

However, many experts and those with knowledge of operations against extremist outfits have hailed the incident as by and large a successful encounter.

The security forces ultimately overcame the militants, said to belong to the TTP, although an assistant sub-inspector unfortunately lost his life very early in the battle.

Even that loss could perhaps have been avoided, especially when we are repeatedly told that the law-enforcers had prior intelligence about militants being present inside the besieged house.

As to why the face-off lasted as long as it did, there are several explanations, some fairly prosaic.

One of them says that the persistent rain made it more difficult for the security forces to overpower the militants inside the building.

Perhaps more plausibly, the site of the incident being a congested — and upscale — locality may also have demanded cautious handling. Pakistan has suffered long and deep at the hands of terrorists. It must take no chances of the gains being reversed nor allow itself to become complacent.

Indeed, given the increasing gaps between acts of terrorism, Pakistanis will be inclined to be satisfied with the official reassurances voiced after the gun battle and that are going to be offered in the days to come, that this was an isolated incident.

One contention that the people would want to believe is that the law-enforcers, with the counterterrorism experience they have acquired in recent years, displayed such hours-long perseverance because they were confident they had matters under control.



## **Prey to procrastination**

ANY reason seems good enough to delay a revival of the Karachi Circular Railway, a project that has shown an extraordinary resilience by staying on paper for decades. The latest cause for procrastination is a vitriolic exchange between the federal and Sindh governments at a level of acerbity that could lead to its abandonment — at least during the present political dispensation. Using his own name and that of the prime minister in the third person, the federal railways minister said on Sunday if the KCR wasn't built when Sheikh Rashid and Imran Khan were at the helm, it would never be built. More important, Mr Rashid dropped a bombshell when he claimed that no plan had yet been finalised for the KCR's revival. The railways minister did not specify who he was blaming for the purported absence of the KCR's design and feasibility, but the Sindh government reacted immediately, with the provincial minister for transport Awais Shah contending that the railways minister himself was "a key hurdle" when it came to one of the crucial elements of the project — encroachments. Sindh was ready to do its part, said Mr Shah, but Mr Rashid and other railway officials were the problem, adding that the encroachments would never be demolished as long as the current railways minister was in office.

It is a pity that such a vital project for a megalopolis like Karachi should fall victim to politics. Years ago, frustrated by the bureaucratic and political wrangling, Japan pulled out of the scheme, and all we can do is hope that the Chinese will show a higher degree of tolerance. It is time the federal and provincial governments showed maturity and rose above petty politics to work together to make the KCR a dream come true. Of course, a functional KCR will only meet a small portion of Karachi's mass transit requirements: even more so given that the federal-funded green line too is making progress at a snail's pace.

## **Ormara massacre**

LESS than a week after the bloodbath in Quetta's Hazarganji area, another massacre of innocents has taken place in Balochistan, this time in the coastal town of Ormara.

As reported, at least 14 people were shot dead after buses in which they were travelling were stopped on the Makran Coastal Highway by armed men in the early hours of Thursday.

The assailants methodically and cold-bloodedly selected their victims after checking the passengers' CNICs. Most of those slain are said to be members of the security forces — navy and Coast Guards personnel — while a conglomerate of banned separatist groups has claimed responsibility for the atrocity.

Over the last few months, it appeared that militant activities — of both sectarian killers and Baloch separatists — had reduced in Balochistan.

However, the events of the past few days show there is no room to be complacent, and that the threat to people's security still very much exists in the province.

Of course, this is not the first time such a brutal modus operandi has been employed by separatist groups. In 2015, a similar massacre took place in Mastung when non-Baloch passengers, almost all of them Pakhtun residents of Pishin district, were pulled off two Karachi-bound coaches and killed.

There have also been a number of incidents in which migrant labour has been targeted by separatists. On Oct 31 last year, for instance, five construction workers hailing from Sindh and Punjab were murdered in Gwadar district.

Needless to say, such bestial acts of violence are utterly indefensible; they must be denounced in the strongest possible terms and the perpetrators brought to justice. Those who believe these actions will help highlight their cause are mistaken.

On the contrary, they are a betrayal of the legitimate cause of Baloch national rights within the federation of Pakistan.

There has been widespread condemnation of the Ormara tragedy, with all political forces weighing in. However, Baloch nationalist parties must be particularly forthright in stating that violence and murder are unacceptable and illegitimate methods to attain political goals.

The struggle for Baloch rights must be achieved through political means; anything else will only exacerbate the miseries of those in the province that are caught in the midst of the state and the separatist elements.

The insurgency appears to have subsided of late. In fact, the savagery latent in this attack may be evidence that the militants are getting desperate, but it also shows that they remain capable of unleashing terrible havoc.

A genuine reconciliation process is direly needed that involves the state, Baloch nationalist parties, and even the disgruntled elements.

The people of the province have legitimate grievances that have been allowed to fester for decades, giving rise to insurgencies, over and over again.

These grievances must be acknowledged and discussed in an open, democratic manner, and real solutions put in place to address them.

## **Cabinet turmoil**

Flanked by empty chairs on the stage, Asad Umar cut a lonely and forlorn figure in his farewell press conference as he announced his departure as finance minister, and his continuing loyalty to Imran Khan.

Gone was the bravado, the aggression and machismo with which he countered his political opponents. Only the night before, he had been scheduling appointments for the fateful day and vehemently denying “rumours” of his impending separation from his ministry in a TV appearance. Whatever it was that happened on the morning of April 18, happened suddenly.

The fact of the minister’s removal is one thing, but the circumstances tell a story all their own. Mr Asad managed to salvage his dignity by facing the press corps right after his announcement and putting on a brave face, reiterating his faith in the party and its mission, demonstrating rapport with the reporters — and doing it all with a smile.

Now it is the government’s turn to salvage its dignity. For seven years, Mr Khan presented the erstwhile finance minister as the answer to the contry’s problems.

His entire campaign seemed to have two planks only: eliminate corruption, and put Mr Asad in the finance seat.

Eight months into his term, the fight against corruption has yet to yield any major victory, while Mr Asad has been eliminated.

What does this say for the position the government is in?

The prime minister now needs to explain his decision to remove Mr Asad from the finance ministry in more detail, especially considering that the latter failed massively to live up to expectations.

The timing is also worrisome. The talks with the IMF are at an advanced stage and the budget is at hand.

There is a brand new finance secretary in place, so it is not clear who will be providing the much needed continuity in the days ahead and the party appears ill-prepared with a replacement.

In short, the removal of the finance minister at such a critical juncture has prolonged the period of uncertainty the economy has limped along with for more than a year now.

The replacement will have to find his or her feet fast and hit the ground running.

A gruelling set of policy decisions await — something Mr Asad hinted at in his press remarks — that will have a very negative impact on the government's popularity.

Indecision will only aggravate matters, something the government cannot afford at this moment.

## **Cricket chaos**

IN keeping with its age-old tradition of shooting itself in the foot while taking key decisions, the Pakistan Cricket Board has yet again botched up matters by getting into a rumpus with its own Board of Governors. However, the ugly falling-out that transpired in Quetta on Wednesday at the BoG meeting was pretty much on the cards after the PCB's top brass had put out feelers last

week about giving absolute powers to the newly-appointed managing director, Wasim Khan. Such a move would make the BoG virtually redundant. The second proposal — to ridiculously revamp the domestic cricket structure by abolishing the departmental and regional teams and usher in a hitherto untried provincial system — was also bound to create considerable ill will.

The PCB should have opted to debate the proposals in the Quetta meeting rather than impose them on the BoG members. Moreover, the row should not have come into the public gaze; only decisions reached with consensus needed to be announced. Among the golden rules of corporate success is to maintain confidentiality about such differences and handle them discreetly. Alas, the PCB remains completely oblivious to this. The most unfortunate aspect of the nasty row is its timing since it coincides with the all-important announcement of Pakistan's World Cup squad. At a time when the game's apex body needed to ensure a trouble-free scenario for the national selectors to be working cohesively to name the best possible outfit for the mega event in England, commencing May 30, there is utter mayhem in the ranks. The entire episode has shown PCB Chairman Ehsan Mani and his aides in a bad light — not just as administrators, but as people lacking the required level of expertise about cricket. Once run by experts and lovers of the sport, the PCB has become a motley body of vested interests that do not necessarily seem to strive for the game's benefit. That needs to change quickly if Pakistan is to do well at the upcoming World Cup.

## **Cabinet shake-up**

IT seems that, eight months into power, Prime Minister Imran Khan is all set to begin anew. Mr Khan's first attempt at setting up an effective government at the federal level has been disastrous. His latest action has seen ministers reshuffled, stepping down or being let go of. New ones have been inducted at a time when the lack of direction at the top has raised serious questions about the ability of the first set of ministers that Mr Khan had installed with the promise that they would usher in change. Indeed, it is not only about bad governance; it is clear that his latest attempt to set things right must extend to his party too. The difference between his first and most recent attempt at forming an efficient and capable government is that, apart from dealing with

the problems sown by preceding administrations, he must now also contend with issues that have cropped up because of the PTI's own misrule since August 2018. Needless to say, his team has been generous with its contribution under this head.

A considerable period seems to have elapsed between the time Mr Khan took charge and now. High hopes have been replaced with a sense of trepidation. The original choices, which included prominent PTI names, have been dispensed with. The prime minister is now stuck with a second-choice ministerial panel assigned the unenviable job of pulling the country, and those at its helm, out of the current mess. The impression that he has to work with an even more compromised cabinet will hold unless he specifies, directly to the people or through parliament, the reason why he believed that the reshuffle was necessary and how the change in portfolios and new appointments will yield positive results. Public morale must be lifted and the people taken into confidence.

Mr Khan has been dared by his opponents as well as supporters to deliver on the promises he made during the poll campaign and after. There are warnings of growing factionalism within the PTI — the frequent brawls in public are a testimony to the internal turmoil. Mr Khan's tendency to rely overly on late imports into the PTI from other parties could be the cause of a lot of heart-burning. Then there is the eternal reality that all Pakistani rulers face: they are beholden to recommendations from domestic as well as international players to come up with a working setup. Mr Khan must realise that not all selections are easy to refuse — and at the same time guard his own reputation as someone with a mind of his own. He must find ways to assert himself to ensure that he is not just a spectator burdened with a title without the powers to justify it. No one said it was easy to be the prime minister of Pakistan.

## **Threat to wheat crop**

HEAVY rains accompanied by high winds and sporadic hailstorms in parts of Punjab earlier this week have damaged the standing wheat crop on a vast area. In a few southern districts, the crop has been flattened, and in others the harvest is delayed. The exact extent of the damage is now being assessed by the agriculture bureaucracy to quantify the losses. The food

security ministry, however, seems to indicate that the damage is not significant. Hopefully, it will not affect the overall provincial output target of 19.5m tonnes for the present harvest. Yet many individual smallholders may have suffered substantial losses that will increase their indebtedness and reliance on middlemen for expensive loans for future harvests. The government has promised to compensate the affected farmers once the girdawari (crop assessment) is complete. It has always been the standard official response. This practice needs to change. Immediately, the government should not only compensate the affected farmers but also ensure that the smallholders get access to cheaper loans to buy inputs for their future crops. Microfinance banks are well placed to serve the needs of the small farmers, who form more than 80pc of the landholdings below five acres because of their presence in remote areas, if the government agrees to subsidise the loans. A workable plan needs to be designed where growers can easily get insurance for their crops against calamities that are beyond human control.

The recent unusual rains are but a sign of the changing climate of the region. The change has become more visible in recent years in the shape of unpredictable weather, new diseases, increased pest attacks, diminishing crop output, etc. If not tackled on a war footing, the changing climate could indeed affect the nation's food security and have a deep impact on the overall economy of the country, which largely depends on agriculture. This week's rains, for example, have not only damaged the wheat output but also delayed cotton sowing in the affected districts. It is time the government took the lead in educating farmers about changing weather patterns, improving extension services to train them in modern cultivation practices and new technologies, developing climate-resilient seed varieties, and bringing farmers, researchers and policymakers on to one platform so that they can develop solutions based on modern methods to mitigate the effects of climate change on crops. Otherwise, we should prepare ourselves for greater damage to the agricultural sector.

## **World Cup team**

IN a rare instance, the national cricket selectors have got it nearly right by naming a competitive 15-member squad for the World Cup set to commence

in England on May 30. The team's 'unpredictable' tag makes it quite a challenge for anyone to choose the perfect outfit, but taking into account the chaos and confusion preceding the final selection, where form and fitness are concerned the selectors haven't done a bad job. That said, some worries need to be addressed. Although it is a balanced team in terms of the number of openers, middle-order batsmen and bowlers, contradictions remain. While pacer Mohammad Amir has been dropped for lack of form, similar criteria have not been adopted while selecting senior pro Shoaib Malik and young Fakhar Zaman who have not performed well over the last one year. Perhaps Shoaib Malik could be replaced by Mohammad Rizwan as a specialist batsman. Meanwhile, Imad Wasim and Mohammad Hafeez have been given further time to prove their fitness.

While other teams have developed at least one or two rapid strike players or 'pinch hitters' especially at No.6 position, there are none in that category to lift Pakistan in death overs. A team total of 300 is now the new normal and strike rates of well over 100 are required, but skipper Sarfraz Ahmed and his men have found it hard to accomplish this with regular frequency. Besides, going into the World Cup Pakistan still don't know who will bat at No 3 between Haris Sohail, Mohammad Hafeez and Babar Azam. Sarfraz has indicated that he might bat at No 4. But it is risky in such a high-profile tournament to experiment since he has not previously batted at No 4. Once again, we are relying on pure talent and luck going into a World Cup. It worked in 1992 but despite being one of the top-seeded teams in all previous World Cups we have reached the finals only twice. Let us hope that this time we can renew the spirit of 1992.

## **An inhumane justice system**

THE inhumane workings of Pakistan's criminal justice system are once again highlighted in evidence so stark that it should give pause even to a ruthless state apparatus. Between 2010 and 2018, the Supreme Court overturned death sentences in no less than 78pc of the 310 appeal cases that came before it during this period, ordering either an acquittal or a review, or commuting the sentence. In 2018 alone, it upheld the death penalty in only 3pc of the capital punishment cases that came before it. These are just a few among the findings of a research project by two human rights



organisations — one Pakistani and the other UK-based — that were presented on Friday in a report to the federal law minister. Consider another statistic in the document: of the apex court's reported judgements in capital cases between 2010 to 2018, 39pc were acquittals. In other words, the court found that those sentenced to death in nearly two out of five cases were wrongfully convicted — people who could have paid the ultimate price for a crime they did not commit.

Pakistan's criminal justice system reeks of dysfunction at every stage. Planted evidence, custodial torture, forced confessions, false testimony, endless adjournments — these are only some of the problems it is riddled with. And yet, or perhaps it is further evidence of its being cruel in the extreme, there are 27 capital crimes on the statute books. Litigants without resources are of course the most affected: they cannot afford to bribe their way out of the legal quagmire, and their fate is often in the hands of overburdened state-appointed counsel. However, as one can see from the above study, and umpteenth others, trial courts have few qualms about not only convicting the accused on flimsy evidence but also sending them to death row. It is almost as though the state revels in its power to take the life of its citizens. Even a reprieve sometimes comes too late: in 2016, the Supreme Court acquitted two brothers of murder, only for it to be discovered they had been executed the year before. Military courts, set up in the wake of the APS attack — and thankfully not given a second extension — sentenced at least 310 people to death and executed around 60 through an unprecedentedly opaque modus operandi.

True justice is based on a respect for human rights, the acknowledgement that every individual has a legitimate expectation to be judged for his actions fairly and transparently. The socioeconomic status of litigants must not determine their chances of having their liberty, let alone their life, snatched away. Most nations, except for some of the most retrogressive ones, have abolished the death penalty. We must do the same, and do so without delay. The collective conscience of this nation must refuse to accept any more state-sanctioned murder in its name.

## VAT aspirations

IF the government follows through on its interest, conveyed to the IMF, of implementing a value added tax, it will be the first strategic economic reform measure announced by the PTI government. All the other moves thus far have either been raw adjustments, or virtually dead-on-arrival schemes such as separating tax policy from the FBR, a move that has proved largely abortive. VAT is perhaps the oldest item on Pakistan's structural reform agenda, brought into an IMF programme back in 1988. It has remained a key structural reform measure on most Fund programmes signed since then, with the latest Extended Fund Facility of 2013 being an important exception. It was meant to be the single-most important way to document the economy, by getting business enterprises to submit the input and output prices of every item they sell and pay tax only on the difference. And it was a critical component meant to replace customs duties as the main revenue earner for the government as the base of taxation shifted away from taxing international trade towards taxing domestic consumption. That move proved abortive in Pakistan, which is one of the principal reasons why the country's tax-to-GDP ratio has lagged behind, the state has been running persistent deficits and the tax system weighs on the economy like an albatross.

If this government decides to pick up this three-decade-old agenda item and give it one more push, it would be well advised to learn a few lessons from past. The last attempt to usher in a value added tax was under the stewardship of none other than the newly minted financial adviser, Hafeez Shaikh, when he was finance minister under the PPP government from 2010 till 2013. That episode saw a spectacular collapse as the draft legislation failed to pass in parliament. Stiff opposition from traders which was capitalised upon by the PML-N led to that situation. VAT faces an uphill task because too many of the goods being sold in Pakistan cannot come into the documented economy as they are smuggled, under-invoiced, or transacted using black money. It has practically nil political support. And the tax bureaucracy itself is opposed to it. Besides, the PTI government lacks the numbers in parliament to see the legislation through. VAT is a good idea, but it has costs if it fails.

## **Immunisation campaign**

TAKING a step in the right direction, on Friday the Balochistan governor called upon the provincial health department as well as NGOs, to play their role in eradicating preventable childhood illnesses in the province. At a meeting with a health department delegation, the governor was informed that a one-week immunisation campaign — in observance of World Immunisation Week — spearheaded by the provincial authorities, is to begin on April 24. Given the alarming rate of childhood illness, especially in a province with some of the worst human development indices in the country, it is necessary to educate more and more communities about the importance of having their young ones vaccinated to ensure herd immunity; this can spare parents much anxiety — and grief — later. The essential vaccinations are free or subsidised under the Expanded Programme on Immunisation that was launched in 1978. While the EPI covers a range of diseases, it is polio that is of special concern, especially as Pakistan remains one of the last reservoirs in the world of the debilitating virus. Given Balochistan's difficult terrain and the remoteness of many areas, access for vaccination team has been difficult.

Of course, it is not only Balochistan that presents a challenge to state capacity and resources in this regard. In Punjab, for example, the sheer numbers of the population pose a burden. In KP, the situation is aggravated by the lack of trust in vaccination campaigns, much of it due to misinformation propagated by local clerics who specifically see the anti-polio drive as a Western conspiracy. Several polio workers have been killed by militants, while apprehensive parents routinely refuse to have their children inoculated during door-to-door campaigns. Clearly, Pakistan has to work hard and invest more resources and time in its vaccination programme — and not just for polio — to expand coverage, if it is to attain the SDG goal of ending preventable deaths of its children. Awareness-raising is necessary, but it should continue throughout the year.

## **Polls in former Fata**

THE passage of the 25th Amendment last year finally set into motion the long overdue process of bringing the former tribal agencies into the

constitutional fold. Soon, a newly enfranchised electorate will go to the polls to elect their representatives in the KP Assembly. These districts are now the staging ground for a historic election in which the political parties pitch their visions of reform and development to a hitherto conflict-riven and rights-deprived populace. Though the reforms process has been mired in delay, false starts and confusion, and is still in search of ownership and direction, it is now an unstoppable juggernaut. In the turf war between the status quo of entrenched interests and the uncertainty of new alliances, at stake is a referendum on what defines the future of erstwhile Fata.

Interestingly, both the incumbent PTI and opposition parties appear to be framing their position in relation to a newcomer on the political circuit. The Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement's massive rally in North Waziristan a week ago is testament to the sustained impact of the movement in the Pakhtun (and even national) consciousness since it emerged last year — despite receiving little media coverage or mainstream political engagement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the timing, this convening was soon followed by an unprecedented meeting between their representatives and a special Senate committee, and a stated commitment to further dialogue. Then, in his speech in Orakzai on Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan endorsed the core tenets of the PTM's agenda but repudiated the tenor in which they articulate their demands as counterproductive and backwards-looking. His prescription focused on boosting socioeconomic indicators in the districts with particular emphasis on health, education and employment.

Clearly, the movement's ethnic nationalist narrative is deeply resonant for it to factor so prominently in other's electioneering. Yet, despite displaying a consistent commitment to voicing their constitutional demands in a nonviolent manner, the inhibited public debate on the PTM has tragically obfuscated the indisputable reality they seek to redress — the devastation of the social fabric, and distortion of the social contract, in the tribal areas caused by decades of draconian governance, neglect, militancy and military operations. Pressure exerted by the mainstream political parties can help lift unofficial press embargos on coverage of the movement, and the persona non grata status of its activists. Courage and compassion must be shown to recalibrate the discourse. Yes, the people of this region desperately need development, but without an honest effort to reckon with the unintended fallout of military interventions, peace, stability and progress can never take

hold. There is no looking forward unless the past is reconciled and faith restored. Freedom and justice are the mainstays of our constitutional democracy. In this maiden election, to these voting citizens, this electoral promise must be universal.

## **The debt trap**

TO mark International Peasants' Rights Day, the Hari Welfare Association launched its report The State of Peasants' Rights in Sindh in 2018 at an event organised by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research in Karachi last week. While outlining the problems faced by the peasants of Sindh, the speakers pointed to how the agriculture sector continues to practise the worst form of labour exploitation, encouraging slavery in the shape of bonded labour. According to the Global Slavery Index 2018, there are over 3m people working as bonded labourers in Pakistan. While many laws have been enacted to combat this societal and economic evil since the Land Reforms Act of 1977, little has changed on the ground. Despite the National Assembly passing the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992, the system of entrapping the desperately poor through debt bondage continues to exist due to the lack of innovation in agriculture, a deeply entrenched feudal setup that is protected by the ruling landowning class which occupies parliament, and urban apathy towards the suffering of those outside the ruling elite's limited worldview. Additionally, millions of children toil in the fields and kilns as bonded labour, inheriting their parents' and grandparents' misfortune. Despite laws against child labour and the constitutional right to an education, most never get to attend school, continuing the cycle of poverty.

Since the passing of the 18th Amendment, the province approved the Sindh Bonded Labour (System) Abolition Act, 2015, but, again, there seem to be no signs of its implementation. According to the law, district vigilance committees were to be formed to monitor the abuse of power, but there is a glaring absence of their operation. There is also the problem of the lack of agriculture-specific laws. For instance, the Sindh Industrial Relations Act, 2013, mentions agriculture in passing, but does not even specify the rules of business for registration of agricultural workers, which deprives them of forming their own unions. Pakistan cannot progress until it introduces

revolutionary land reforms that entitle its most marginalised classes to a certain acreage of land along with the required paperwork that formalises their ownership. Secondly, the laws that exist need to be made operational. Lastly, the majority of the bonded labour force consists of landless members of the scheduled castes, who are often shelterless as well. There should be no room left for caste-based discrimination and marginalisation in the 21st century.

## **Earth Day 2019**

TODAY marks Earth Day. As Pakistan is hit once again by heavy rains and winds that have destroyed the wheat crop in parts of Punjab, while Sindh protests water shortages that have restricted farming, there is a need for greater awareness of the impact of the changing weather patterns. Whether we acknowledge it or not, climate change is having an effect on every aspect of our lives. Matters will get worse for future generations, unless we radically rethink our lifestyles. The destruction of planet earth is just one of the consequences of a capitalistic world that goes about its business unchallenged. Not only have we lost many lives due to extreme weather, the impact on largely agrarian economies has been catastrophic. Pakistan is indeed one of the countries that is most vulnerable to climate change, and has witnessed everything from flooding to heatwaves and droughts in recent times. And there are plenty of instances of climate-based migration, most recently in Badin. Along with destruction and the displacement faced by humans, the mass extinction of animals and plant life is ongoing through deforestation and the obliteration of their habitat, pollution and unlawful and excessive hunting.

The theme for Earth Day 2019 is to 'Protect Our Species,' which was created in response to the destruction of natural life due to human activity. Pakistan boasts an enviable biodiversity, but much of it is threatened due to the short-sightedness of our decision-makers. The current prime minister calls himself an environmentalist, but labels are meaningless until they are translated into action. Most people believe there is little that individuals can do at a private level to combat climate change, as the responsibility falls on large corporations and politicians. But then, we have the example of 16-year-old Greta Thunberg in Sweden. During a phone-meeting with a meteorologist in

June 2018, before she began her school strike, Greta told him: “You are not radical enough. I have to do something myself.” That should be hint enough.

## **Sri Lanka blasts**

EVEN in times like these when mass-casualty attacks have become frighteningly common, Sunday’s bloodbath in Sri Lanka stood out for the terrorists’ calculated brutality.

The Easter attacks, targeting churches and hotels, have claimed some 300 lives, while hundreds more are injured.

A number of victims were killed while attending Easter services, while others fell as they settled down for Sunday brunch. At this point, it is not clear who is behind the atrocity, though the Sri Lankan government suspects a local jihadi group of involvement.

Officials have not ruled out the possibility that foreign elements may have had a role.

However, the Sri Lankan government’s handling of news related to the massacre is to be appreciated; the state acted responsibly by not allowing fake news and misinformation to colour the narrative, and did not point fingers at any community. In such sensitive situations, misinformation can result in revenge attacks and retaliatory violence targeting members of the accused communities.

As the Sri Lankan government rounds up the suspects and starts investigations, it must continue to handle the situation with care.

Indeed, those involved in this heinous act of violence must face the full force of the law. But whole communities must not be demonised.

Sri Lanka has seen its fair share of ethnic and communal violence. It has been only 10 years since the brutal civil war — pitting the Sinhalese Buddhist majority against the mostly Hindu Tamil rebels, fighting for a separate homeland — wound down.

It was a conflict marked by great ferocity. In more recent times, a militant fringe of Buddhist monks has sought to isolate the island’s Muslim majority;

communal violence last year led to a state of emergency being declared in the country.

The country's leadership has done the right thing by appealing for unity in the wake of Sunday's attacks. Communal forces must not be allowed to fan the flames of hatred, as Sri Lanka cannot afford a return to the days of hostility between communities.

Transnational terrorism — due to its very nature — requires a global, coordinated response. Militant movements rarely recognise borders, which is why governments must share information and intelligence to thwart attacks beyond their respective frontiers.

Moreover, it is necessary for countries to conduct an internal stock-taking exercise, and take action against extremist nationalist and religious movements that thrive on exclusivity and hatred of the 'other'.

As is evident across the globe, the far right is on the march, and it appears that states — including those that swear by democracy — are not doing enough to rein in the hatemongers.

Challenging as it may be, all countries, regardless of their social, cultural and religious outlook, need to take firm, coordinated action against terrorism — especially at a time when hatred and extremism are outstripping all measures to maintain peace.

## **PbBC's resolution**

A DANGEROUS — and increasingly familiar — storyline about the integrity of the justice system is unfolding, laying bare the growing threat to judicial independence and transparency in the country. A six-member executive committee of the Punjab Bar Council has drafted a resolution demanding the removal of Justice Qazi Faez Isa, who it believes “ridiculed the armed forces instead of appreciating them” in his recent verdict on the Faizabad dharna. It has also lauded the removal of justice Shaukat Siddiqui by the Supreme Judicial Council, stating that he “transgressed limits”. The PbBC statement was in response to the Karachi Bar Association's move to file a petition in the apex court, in which it has asked that an inquiry be conducted



into Mr Siddiqui's allegations regarding the interference of intelligence agencies in judicial matters.

Although the Punjab council executive committee that authored this resolution is a smaller group which may not represent the full council, the implications of its actions betray the politics in our judicial system and the increasing vulnerability of the latter to external influence. While there also seems to be a strong element of inter-association rivalry between the PbBC and the KBA — which is supported by other lawyers' bodies in Sindh — the bigger picture of silencing dissent and criticism of the alleged role of the security agencies is troubling. In his role as a high court judge, Mr Siddiqui had established himself as a religious bigot furthering a hateful ideology. He was removed by the Supreme Judicial Council — not for being a polarising figure, but, apparently, for his hard stance on the intelligence agencies. Similarly, Justice Faez Isa, who in the Faizabad judgement directed intelligence agencies to operate within their mandate, is now being criticised — in addition to the PbBC resolution, there are eight petitions in the apex court asking for a review of the Faizabad verdict. In this environment, the Sindh lawyers' condemnation of the resolution is welcome. The KBA has rightly termed it malicious and turned the spotlight back on the allegations of Mr Siddiqui against intelligence agencies. It is no secret that the intelligence agencies have interfered in political matters; former spymasters have admitted as much as evident from the Asghar Khan case. In the interest of democracy, there is a legitimate basis for greater investigation — and redress — of such allegations by the judiciary. The Supreme Court would do well to handle the issue and thus prevent lawyers from maligning an honourable judge.

## **Medical malfeasance**

THE loss of a child is every parent's worst nightmare, and that grief is compounded by the knowledge that their death was utterly avoidable. Yesterday, nine-month-old Nashwa succumbed to the health complications she faced after allegedly being incorrectly administered medication at a private hospital in Karachi earlier this month. Across Pakistan, thousands of people like her parents put their loved ones' lives in the hands of doctors and hospitals every day, hoping to receive expert care and treatment. Yet

time and again, for this basic expectation, they are made to suffer the horrific, often tragic, consequences of medical malpractice, failure to follow protocols, gross negligence and blatant greed. To err is human, and healthcare providers do make honest mistakes. But from overtreatment to misdiagnosis, from profit incentive in private facilities to mismanagement in public ones, bad-faith actors within the healthcare system have corrupted the ethical standards of their profession and shaken the public's confidence in the quality of service.

That such malfeasance is seemingly proliferating is the result not only of negligent individuals, but the impunity afforded to them by the absence of a strong regulatory framework enforced by the medical community, hospital administrations, and the government. In Sindh, for example, consumer courts were only just established and are yet to be made fully functional — four years after the provincial consumer protection law was passed. The powers of the PMDC, meanwhile, are in disarray since the body was reconstituted under a controversial new ordinance. In the absence of strong oversight infrastructure to counter the deluge of malpractice and criminal cases, it falls on the press to apply pressure for medical practitioners to be held accountable when such cases come to light. But for every case that receives media coverage, there are dozens more that go undocumented. Standing in front of the cameras, Nashwa's grief-stricken father pleaded for action. A healthcare system in shambles failed her. That must change.

## **Security concerns**

PRIME Minister Imran Khan's statements on Monday at a joint press conference with President Hassan Rouhani during his first visit to Iran are significant for their clarity and forthrightness, even if he was savaged by members of the opposition yesterday for uttering them. In fact, his remarks have the potential to be a game-changer in a relationship that has seldom been little better than tepid. Mr Khan on the occasion acknowledged that militants have indeed used Pakistan's soil in the past to carry out attacks in Iran, adding that his government would ban such outfits, including the Jaishul Adl and the Lashkar-i-Khorasan. Granted there are wider geopolitical issues involved, but his stance has publicly referenced the most immediate impediment to improved ties between Pakistan and Iran — the accusations

on both sides that each country harbours militants who launch cross-border attacks against the other. Last week's horrific massacre in Balochistan of Pakistani security personnel was carried out by a coalition of Baloch separatist groups that, Pakistan believes, finds shelter in Iran. Earlier this year, a suicide bomber killed 27 members of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards in the Sistan-Baluchestan province; the Iranian leadership declared he was Pakistani, as was one of his accomplices.

This blame game, involving India, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan has been a recurrent pattern in the region. However, by conceding that non-state actors based in Pakistan have staged cross-border violence in Iran, Pakistan has shown the way for others to acknowledge that similar violence within its own territory is not entirely homegrown. The meeting of the ISI chief — who was accompanying the prime minister — with his Iranian counterpart can be seen as a concrete attempt to resolve shared security concerns. Setting up a 'joint rapid reaction force' as proposed by both sides will further enhance cooperation on this score and supplement the measures already in place. As the joint statement at the conclusion of the visit indicates, an improvement in ties could herald many trade and business opportunities, not to mention reinvigorate the long-pending Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline.

This is the right time for the country's chief executive, clearly on the same page as the military leadership, to articulate a more realistic position vis-à-vis extremist outfits. After all, law-enforcement agencies carried out an unprecedentedly sweeping crackdown only last month against Pakistan-based militant groups including those often named as being involved in cross-border attacks. Meanwhile, the opposition has pounced on the prime minister's words as causing the country international embarrassment. While the PPP, given its current tribulations, may have its own axe to grind, the PML-N seemed to have little issue when Nawaz Sharif said much the same as Mr Khan shortly before the 2018 election. One could argue, in fact, that the former premier compounded his travails, perhaps even hastened them, despite his far less categorical take on the subject.

## Anti-polio panic

PANDEMONIUM gripped KP amidst a province-wide polio eradication drive, threatening to stop this critical campaign in its tracks — which was ultimately the agenda of those who instigated the mass hysteria.

Thousands of children were rushed to hospitals by their panic-stricken parents on Monday after malicious rumours of adverse reactions to the oral polio vaccine were disseminated over community and mosque loudspeakers, and via WhatsApp and other social media platforms, and picked up and reported, uncritically and without verification, by sections of the mainstream media.

The fake news was soon exposed as a total, wilful fabrication in footage that soon emerged, but disinformation had already been spread, precisely because it fed into misconceptions about the OPV that have persisted despite the best efforts of public officials to dispel religious and medical concerns.

And though public officials scrambled to calm the public, holding a press conference within hours of the emergent crisis, by then, far too much damage had already been done.

In Mashokhel, where the rumour mill apparently originated, the local health unit was torched by rioters, and across the province, streets and hospitals were overwhelmed by a terrified public.

In the days ahead, there may be severe short- and long-term repercussions. Only yesterday, a police ASI assigned to a polio team was killed on his way to report for duty, and two new cases of the polio virus were detected in the province.

That a few malevolent individuals could hijack the vaccination drive, thus undermining the effort, dedication and courage of polio workers, is proof of how tentative the gains have been in building public confidence in vaccinations.

There are already doubts about the extent of coverage this polio drive is able to achieve in the face of what has transpired.

The government must now examine measures to anticipate the possibility of fake news proliferating via social media, which can spread like wildfire in the absence of basic digital literacy among the masses.

The mainstream media, however, should have known better. For years, it has reported on the lives lost — children who succumbed to the virus, and workers to the attacks of obscurantist elements — and the disease burden on the country.

There must be a wholesale adoption of strict coverage protocols recognising the sensitivity, fragility and security concerns of the anti-polio campaign. This is a dire setback, but it must not be allowed to derail the fight to eradicate this crippling, deadly disease once and for all.

## **Foreign tourists**

EARLIER this month, the Pakistan Tourism Summit kicked off with a host of well-known foreign vloggers in attendance.

While the vloggers spoke of Pakistan's tourism potential and praised the unique sights and sounds of the country in front of Prime Minister Imran Khan and other government and tourism officials, one voice was notably absent — or 'silenced', as she put it.

Alex Reynolds later released a video saying she felt she was sidelined from the main event as her presentation called for more caution amongst all the feel-good narratives that oversimplified and overlooked realities on the ground, thus presenting the country through solely rose-tinted glasses.

In her earlier talk, given to a nearly empty conference hall that did not include VIP guests, Ms Reynolds highlighted challenges that tourists may face in Pakistan — and what could potentially be done to overcome some of them.

Having travelled to Pakistan several times and facilitating travellers to explore the country, particularly women tourists, Ms Reynolds, too, is coming from a place of goodwill towards the country. To dismiss some of the concerns she raised — and that have been pointed out by local commentators as well — would be foolish.

At a recent tourism promotion conference in the capital, some entrepreneurs associated with the tourism sector echoed her concerns. The latter included infrastructure, accommodation, the difficulty in acquiring visas, and harassment of foreigners by officials.

While no one doubts Pakistan's natural, cultural and historical value or the vast potential it possesses, to deliberately ignore or brush aside concerns about whether or not it is ready for an influx of foreign tourists can only result in disappointment and possibly endanger lives, besides potentially having a negative impact on our global image.

in the words of an author who long propagated the merits of 'positive thinking': "The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.

## **Sri Lanka's IS link?**

AS the dust clears from Easter Sunday's appalling bloodbath in Sri Lanka, a grim reality is emerging: the militant Islamic State group — heretofore thought of as a mostly vanquished force in parts of Iraq and Syria — is still active and still capable of causing major havoc.

On Tuesday, IS, through its Amaq propaganda arm, claimed "Islamic State fighters" were responsible for the deadly bombings in Sri Lanka, in which several churches and hotels were targeted.

The death toll in the tragedy has crossed 350.

The Sri Lankan government had initially said that a local jihadi outfit was suspected, while adding that the perpetrators also had foreign help.

If the IS claim is true, it would confirm the government's suspicion that local extremists acting under the instructions of the group were responsible for the carnage.

The admission of guilt by IS raises some disturbing questions. While the self-styled caliphate may have crumbled in the Middle East, it is clear that the terror group still retains its lethality and brutal capabilities.

The large geographical expanse straddling Iraq and Syria has been cleared of the militants, but the ‘soldiers’ of the ‘caliphate’, realising their loss of territory, have decided to escalate their acts of terror in all directions in keeping with their millenarian ideology.

Regardless of the modus operandi, it is clear that claims by the West, particularly the US, which leads a coalition to fight the terrorist group in Syria, were premature. President Donald Trump proudly announced that IS has been “defeated”; however, while territory may have been recaptured, the group’s operational capabilities appear intact.

And this is where the challenge lies for the world community: the militants of IS will reach out to any disaffected pockets of Muslims, particularly amongst the youth, across the world and try to take them on board to forward their brutal mission.

In fact, the group will seek out ungoverned spaces in states where it can re-establish its geographical foothold to carry out its operations.

That is why transnational efforts are needed to defeat IS and those of its ilk. Governments, ulema and civil society must all work together to thwart the challenge posed by the group.

Apart from confronting the militants on the battlefield, states must improve intelligence-gathering and intelligence-sharing capabilities to ensure that terrorists do not exploit gaps in the system.

Social media and the internet are ripe recruiting grounds for IS, and without compromising fundamental rights, cyberspace must be closely monitored to ensure IS is not using technology to sign up new recruits.

Ulema can help ensure that the pulpit is not being used to fan extremist tendencies, while ungoverned spaces — such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and parts of North Africa — must be watched to prevent IS from establishing a caliphate from where it can sow havoc anew.

## **Pakistani prisoners**

WHEN Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman visited Pakistan in February, one of the highlights of his trip came at the very end of it. In an

April 2019

unprecedented move, Prime Minister Imran Khan made a humane appeal on behalf of the families of thousands of Pakistani prisoners languishing in Saudi jails: he asked the Saudi prince to look after the well-being of this largely poor and marginalised segment and treat them as if they were his own people, to which the prince smiled and said he could not refuse a request from Pakistan. The next day, there was news of over 2,000 Pakistani prisoners to be released from jail on the prince's instructions. The decision was applauded by all — but then what? Few bothered to follow up on the sudden announcement; two months have passed since it was made, but only some 200 convicts have been released so far. A recent report by Justice Project Pakistan titled, *Through the Cracks: The Exploitation of Pakistani Migrant Workers in the Gulf Recruitment Regime*, is a reminder of the state of the remaining prisoners who are still behind bars in a country that is known for its generous use of the death penalty and whose criminal court procedures lack transparency. The report's release is especially timely right after the brutal execution of a Pakistani couple earlier this month for allegedly attempting to smuggle heroin into the kingdom — the first incident of a Pakistani woman being executed in five years in the kingdom. The couple's eight-year-old daughter has returned home an orphan.

Out of the 11,000 Pakistanis stuck in foreign prisons, around 3,300 are in Saudi Arabia. Their families at home know little about their condition and are in a great deal of distress. There is evidence that many of the convicts are poor workers simply in search of employment or looking to perform their religious obligations in the holy cities, but get trapped by unauthorised intermediaries who operate illegally as overseas employment promoters and deceive or coerce unsuspecting victims into drug trafficking. These prisoners are not cold-blooded criminals, but victims of the system. Mr Khan said the right things in the presence of the Saudi prince and was correctly praised for his concern. But we have to move beyond that — and very quickly. The prime minister must not abandon the Pakistani citizens and their families that have reposed their hopes in him.

## **More provinces**

THE much-debated topic regarding the creation of new provinces in Punjab — and elsewhere in the country — has drawn some extremely emotional



responses of late. Tuesday's session of the National Assembly once again underscored the complications that overlie the ostensibly simple idea of a new administrative unit. Angry lawmakers in the house were divided along regional, rather than party, lines after the PML-N's Rana Sanaullah submitted a bill asking for the creation of two new provinces in southern Punjab. In addition to a janooobi Punjab suba, the bill sought the establishment or restoration of the Bahawalpur province. The move is consistent with the PML-N position which gives the party space for political manoeuvre in southern Punjab, where it lost in many constituencies, giving the PTI the seats it desperately needed to be in a majority in Punjab and at the centre. The Bahawalpur province demand, along with that of a south Punjab province, allows the PML-N to stay relevant in the southern districts without facing a greater threat to its hold on the upper parts of the province. And indeed, the enthusiastic reaction of the local politicians across the party divide to the call for a province comprising Bahawalpur and its surrounding areas does bring into focus just how overpowering the urge to self-govern is.

The pro-Bahawalpur-province politicians are quite categorical in their declarations: they are not prepared to be dominated by Multan — just as they desire to escape the long shadow of the rulers from Lahore. The smaller unit appears to the people to be the winning solution here, with some adding that the concept is as useful for parts of Sindh as it is a practical answer for Punjab or any other part of the country. There are likely to be more flashpoints on the national map signifying local aspirations for a 'province of our own'. The only element that can perhaps help rationalise the demand is the presence of powerful local governments that vest real authority in people at the grass-roots level.

## **Sexism in politics**

TERMINOLOGY is reflective of the mindset of those who use it. Anyone attempting to justify Prime Minister Imran Khan's use of the title 'sahiba' to refer to PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari is wilfully misrepresenting the issue.

It is not the word but the context that is inappropriate; applying it to a man, with the deliberate intent of causing insult, insinuates that womanhood is

inherently inferior. Verbal sparring in the realm of politics, no matter how irreverent, should never devolve into denigrating whole groups of citizens.

Mr Khan is certainly not the first elected representative to bandy about casual sexism to attack political opponents — several PML-N and PPP parliamentarians, some serial offenders, are also complicit — but the fact that even our prime minister would indulge in gendered slurs and stereotypes demonstrates an absence of moral leadership when it comes to representing women in national politics.

As leader of parliament, it is his responsibility to set the tone — within the house and without — of political discourse.

The prime minister's latest gaffe affords an opportunity that must not be missed, as it has too often in the past. It is time to acknowledge — and address — the fact that sexism in politics not only reflects deeply entrenched misogyny in this country but also perpetuates it.

Misogyny is a systemic issue. From accessing fundamental rights and basic services, to discrimination, harassment and abuse, women are oppressed because of their gender in both private and public spheres.

The only way this can change is if more women — from all socioeconomic, religious and ethnic backgrounds — are empowered to participate meaningfully in public life, in the social and political debates that impact them.

At present, gender in politics rarely factors in legislative discourse except to enforce sanctimonious notions of 'tradition' and 'culture' designed to browbeat women into submissive roles. And, as a Digital Rights Foundation report released on Wednesday reveals, even online, where conventional wisdom would suggest women would be safer, the majority of respondents reported being targeted by abuse, particularly if they had a public profile or spoke on gender-based issues.

Few expressed faith in official reporting mechanisms, for the obvious reason that the very institutions that ought to protect women also reflect misogynistic attitudes about them.

Combating regressive patriarchal norms is not irrelevant to men; there is a dire need for introspection on the myriad ways in which it is also hurting boys and men, and limiting this country's progress. Thus, the onus should not be singularly on female politicians to educate their male colleagues in gender-sensitive conduct and women's issues.

It is also on male parliamentarians — who are elected to represent all of their constituents — to push for greater gender awareness and hold each other accountable for inappropriate conduct. Political culture is enfeebled if it only represents the interests of one half of the population.

## **Human trafficking**

A RECENT report by the National Commission for Human Rights has revealed that over 80,000 Pakistanis were deported last year, over half from Saudi Arabia alone. The figure points to the unsettling scale of human smuggling and trafficking from the country, and includes a large number of women and children. Around 30,000 to 40,000 Pakistanis reportedly attempt illegal passage into Europe, the Middle East, Turkey and Russia through the border regions shared with Iran and Afghanistan. Others go for pilgrimage — but never return. They also attempt to travel to Australia through dangerous sea routes. Most of the victims of human smuggling are from the small towns and villages of Punjab, where agents with a vast network that extends to Tehran, Istanbul and the border regions of Greece operate and profit from human misery. While some are suffering from desperate poverty or belong to minority communities whose lives are threatened, others are fed false dreams of the wealth and freedom awaiting them in liberal societies by greedy and deceptive agents. Even if they survive the perilous routes by land and sea, what awaits them is usually further exploitation, language and culture barriers, and a lack of support groups. While human smuggling is undertaken by willing participants, human trafficking is a much darker tale and involves coercion of unsuspecting groups and individuals.

In interviews with some 50 Pakistanis caught in human smuggling or trafficking, the NCHR found disturbing trends that brings new information to light. For instance, some of the agents involved in these crimes are familiar with the routes as they themselves had taken the journey, tried to illegally cross over and failed at some point. Perhaps most disturbing was the

revelation that young girls and women who had travelled to the Middle East in the hope of securing employment got trapped in prostitution rings. Last year, Pakistan passed two noteworthy laws that were drafted by the FIA, along with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in line with international guidelines: The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act and The Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act. These were lauded as an important step in securing rights for victims of human trafficking and smuggling, while empowering law-enforcement agencies to take action against the culprits. But structural issues remain and the law's implementation leaves much to be desired.

## **Press freedom hero**

IF evidence of the perils of being a journalist in Pakistan today were still needed, the IPI's Press Freedom Hero Award for this year provides it — resoundingly so.

Dawn's Cyril Almeida has endured an over two-year long campaign both overt and insidious, conducted with the express objective of silencing him, even if it put his life at risk.

Since October 2016, when he reported on civil-military differences over tackling militancy in the country, Mr Almeida has been put on the ECL twice and subjected to relentless legal harassment through frivolous petitions, with charges of treason against him (the trial is ongoing).

Alongside that, there are threats of physical violence against him and relentless character assassination on social media.

But for a Pakistani journalist to be given this prestigious award by an association of print, broadcast and digital media professionals in nearly 100 countries, also has wider implications.

Consider the nationalities of some past recipients, and the extent of the unravelling of democracy in Pakistan becomes clear. They include, among others, journalists from Egypt, Syria, Iran, Angola, Ethiopia, Turkey and Russia.

All of them have shown remarkable resilience and integrity in standing up to autocratic regimes, doggedly uncovering state corruption, reporting from theatres of war, etc. Sadly, Pakistan's once vibrant, questioning media — albeit not without its faults — is largely in retreat, browbeaten into a supine conformity where self-preservation is predicated on self-censorship.

True journalism, the kind that holds power to account, has become a scarce commodity.

As noted by numerous press freedom reports, media persons have been abducted, beaten, arrested on flimsy pretexts, charged with terrorism and maligned as 'foreign agents' to destroy their credibility and mislead the public. (An entirely unwarranted, and still pending, FIR against the journalist Shahzeb Jillani accuses him of cyberterrorism.)

And that is not even taking into account the various pressure tactics exerted on media outlets which target their sources of revenue.

Only through a united front can journalism in Pakistan shake off this stranglehold and regain its real purpose.

## **Polio tragedy**

IT started with a rumour. As province-wide anti-polio efforts were under way in KP, around 75 students from a school in Badhber complained they had headaches, nausea and stomach aches after being administered polio drops. They were admitted in the Hayatabad Medical Complex, but were quickly discharged as doctors declared their condition stable. What had happened was likely a case of mass hysteria, given the fears that have been drilled in the population's mind about polio drops for years. A video of a man at the hospital claiming the vaccines were causing children to faint — and then, almost with comical effect, telling healthy children to 'fall asleep' for the cameras — began to do the rounds. It was clear what we were seeing was a hoax, the agenda of diseased mindsets. In another video, the same man claims some of the children have died. The man has now been arrested, but the damage is done. The fake news spread like wildfire. It is disheartening that one barefaced lie appears to have sent Pakistan's anti-polio efforts back, possibly by decades.

Outraged parents from school set a basic health unit on fire, smashing its windows and doors, while thousands of others filled KP's hospitals, panicking that their children would meet the same 'fate'. The events of a single day led to an 85pc rise in vaccine refusals across the province: 700,000 families refused to administer drops to their children. (During last month's anti-polio drive, the number of refusals was 57,000.) In Peshawar, some 164,000 families refused have their children vaccinated. On TV channels, charlatan intellectuals spoke against vaccinations, endorsing ideas by conspiracy theorists that have long been refuted, while a popular daily's headline declared that hundreds of children fell sick after being administered polio drops in KP. No questions asked, no research undertaken, no evidence of critical engagement, the news was consumed and reproduced as fact.

And then the worst happened — it always does when disinformation campaigns and fear-mongering are given free rein. A police officer responsible for protecting polio teams was gunned down in Bannu, followed by the killing of another police officer in Buner the next day. The day after that, a young woman health worker was killed in the line of duty. While the rest of the world has vanquished the polio virus, Pakistan lives with the shame of being one of three countries that have been unable to eradicate it due to obscurantist beliefs and a culture of paranoia and conspiracy that is so ingrained. In this critical time, disinformation and lies that endanger the lives of so many cannot be tolerated. Authorities must remain vigilant of those who espouse anti-polio propaganda — be it through mosques or the media. And security should be beefed up for polio teams and their protectors instead of suspending the polio campaign, as the authorities have done.

## **PM on Afghanistan**

SHARING a border as well as cultural ties, it is unfortunate that Afghanistan and Pakistan should have strained relations, especially since the latter half of the 20th century. Pakistan stepped into the Afghan quagmire after the Soviet invasion of 1979, and has been unable to extricate itself ever since. There have been accusations from Kabul that Pakistan is trying to influence the political process in that country through proxies. While history is the best

judge of the past, Pakistan is hardly the only country that has been accused of being a player in Afghanistan: most major regional and international powers have proxies in that unfortunate country, which is amongst the main reasons why peace has eluded it for several decades. The other reason, of course, is the infighting amongst the Afghans themselves. Keeping this backdrop in mind, it is welcome that Prime Minister Imran Khan has pledged to stay neutral in the conflict between the Kabul government and the Afghan Taliban. “The so-called offensives are condemnable and will undermine the peace process,” Mr Khan said on Thursday, referring to the violence between the two sides. Only a few weeks earlier, a statement by Mr Khan suggesting an interim government in Afghanistan had angered Kabul and led to further tension in diplomatic ties.

Indeed, regional powers and foreign states need to maintain neutrality and support the peace process, in particular because it must be an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process. For their part, both parties — the Ashraf Ghani-led government and the Taliban — must cease fire and work on confidence-building measures, instead of engaging in more violence. After a long time in many decades, there seems to be a genuine chance for peace in the country; forces within and outside Afghanistan cannot afford to let this opportunity slip through their fingers. While the Taliban have indulged in brutal violence, the government’s campaigns — backed by the US and Nato — have also resulted in an unacceptably high number of civilian casualties. As a UN report says, more Afghan non-combatants were killed by Nato and Kabul’s security forces than the Taliban and other militant groups in the first quarter of this year. The bottom line is that it is the Afghan people are suffering the most in this fruitless war, and have been doing so for decades. All stakeholders should make their best efforts for peace, before this window for a negotiated settlement closes

## **Punjab’s centres of power**

FROM Shahbaz Sharif to Usman Buzdar — it has been quite a journey for Pakistan’s largest province, especially when it comes to the quality of governance. Punjab had several issues with the highly centralised, one-man rule epitomised by Mr Sharif. It is undergoing an altogether opposite experience these days. It has a chief minister who doesn’t quite embody

command, and who is constantly reminded by everyone around him that his job is on the line because of his perceived inability to take the initiative. There are other interesting contrasts. For long, it was thought that the dictatorial manner in which Mr Sharif ruled would result in a rebellion in the ranks of the PML-N. The split never came, although there was much grumbling by those who were hurt by their chief minister's penchant for going solo. One explanation for this lack of open revolt against an arbitrary manner of governance is that despite his controversial methods, Mr Sharif was able to deliver on a few counts. A less charitable view is that no one from the flock dare question a member of the Sharif dynasty.

The PTI is another party. It is anti-dynasty and it took a bold decision when it appointed a lesser-known politician as Punjab chief minister in order to deliver on its promise of devolving power centred in a few hands to the common man. However, it must also deal with various centres of powers that have emerged — from the governor to advisers, to consultants to the provincial assembly speaker. It is these centres that require the prime minister and others to frequently issue statements about how they fully support Chief Minister Buzdar. Unfortunately for the PTI, statements of support cannot make up for the absence of a clear chain of command. It is no surprise that the loose arrangement is giving people a reason to ask how efficient governance in Punjab is right now. Much more can be done if the roles are better define.

## **Kashmir's example**

THE scheme that India's ruling BJP is working on is at variance with the basic tenets of democracy. By all indications, the BJP believes that its best shot at securing a victory in the general election in India is by driving a wedge between the majority Hindu community and the minorities, which by no means constitute 'small' sections of the population. Armed with Hindutva ideas that are blamed for pre-deciding the polls on the basis of religion, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has gone about employing tactics that are meant to intimidate and scare off opponents and force large-scale public surrender to the BJP doctrine. In this search for models to communicate the Modi message to large sections of the Indian people, the



long-smouldering occupied territory of Kashmir is but a natural hunting ground for the champions of Hindutva. Within India-held Kashmir, perhaps there is no leader who draws greater wrath from the rulers in New Delhi than Yasin Malik. Now in his 50s and accused of murder and abduction and much else, Mr Malik retains the old aura that links him and yet sets him apart from the other big names in the Hurriyat, the umbrella organisation of parties fighting to free IJK from Indian captivity.

There are a number of Kashmiri leaders who command respect from the people in their own right. Frequently, political analysts come up with their own assessments about who among them is more relevant or more active at a particular moment in time. The phased Indian general election that will conclude next month provides fresh proof of just how wary those who attempt to exercise their authoritarianism in IJK from Delhi can be of the Hurriyat leaders, collectively and individually. Mr Malik's arrest and the banning of his Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front mark the continuation of a policy of division that had only recently seen a harsh crackdown on other Hurriyat parties. The clampdown against the Jamaat-i-Islami has been particularly severe. Sane analyses of the situation warn the BJP against the serious repercussions that new measures of suppression can lead to. Even if there was no such advice, a party that has been around for quite long would be expected to understand that the seeds of discontent sown now can get it into dire trouble in the future — especially in an already troubled territory. But then, a BJP which thrives on communal strife of its own making, would be even less inclined to ponder over these 'fine' points at the time of an election. This world is not short of evidence about how democracy is used and defamed by the clever going overboard in their exuberance to win a vote. This is one such moment for the democrats — not just in India but around the world — to contemplate and denounce.

## **HIV cases**

IN a shocking development, 18 new HIV-positive cases were detected by the Sindh AIDS Control Programme during examinations in Larkana district.

The list of new cases included children as young as 16 months. It is suspected that medical quackery is behind the sudden outbreak, and this would not be the first time.

Larkana is also said to be one of the districts in Sindh with the highest number of HIV/AIDS patients.

In total, Sindh had an estimated 60,000 HIV-positive patients by August 2018, according to a report submitted by the Ministry of National Health Services to a three-member bench of the Supreme Court. That was the same month that Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah prematurely declared that the Sindh government had successfully controlled the spread of HIV/AIDS through the use of effective awareness drives.

However, by November 2018, a total of 889 new HIV-positive cases had been reported in the province in a mere six-month time frame.

Similarly, the number of HIV-infected patients had risen to over 5,000 by the end of last year in Balochistan. According to the NHS report, there are an estimated 150,000 HIV-positive patients in Pakistan: 75,000 in Punjab; 15,000 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. In Sargodha alone, which has been in the news for several outbreaks of HIV/AIDS, 869 people were diagnosed with the condition in the past 10 years.

Explore: A village in Punjab suffers as the government dithers

Health and health-related issues are given low priority in the national agenda, but the federal and provincial governments must treat the HIV outbreak as a health emergency, and act fast against medical malpractices suspected behind the rise in cases of HIV/AIDS.

Without proper attention and intervention immediately, the HIV emergence can develop into full-blown cases of AIDS, one of the most miserable conditions a person can endure.

The reasons for the high figures of HIV/AIDS in this country include unlicensed medical practitioners, or quacks, and large-scale medical malpractice via used syringes (which also leads to the spread of other blood-borne diseases, including hepatitis B and C) and unsterilised medical tools.

Besides, unsafe blood transfusions, contaminated razor blades used by street barbers, a migrant labour force open to commercial sex, along with lack of awareness of safe sexual practices, and taboos around sexual health and practices that make it difficult for those suffering from HIV/AIDS to seek

help or even find a support group are also responsible for the rise of HIV/AIDS.

## **Pre-Ramazan prices**

WITH Ramazan round the corner, the mercenary and cynical characteristics that can often motivate traders' dealings with their supply chain and their customers have not failed to rear their ugly head. As reported by this newspaper on Saturday, the prices of several essential food commodities have gone up, particularly sugar, the price of which in the country's biggest wholesale commodities market located in Karachi has risen from Rs65 per kilo to a new retail peak of Rs70. The price of sugar stood at Rs55 per kilo at the beginning of the year, rose to Rs58-60 per kilo in February, while in March it was being sold at Rs63 in retail markets.

Of course, it is not only the price of sugar that is of concern. Vegetable, fruit, dairy products and pulses have also seen a rise in rates. In fact, in one week alone, staples such as onions and potatoes witnessed a rise of 8.35pc and 4.71pc respectively. If this is the situation before the advent of Ramazan one can only imagine the price pressure on poor families when the holy month gets under way and the demand for food and other items of daily use goes up even more. Given the economic straits that the country is in, the gloomy prognosis is that the people will have to tighten their belts further, as inflation spikes and families have to make hard choices between putting enough food on the table and giving their children a decent education. For those lower down the economic ladder the situation is even more dire. The state has put in place mechanisms such as consumer courts, price committees and special price magistrates. But notified rates have been openly flouted and even the relief offered by subsidised food items in utility stores during Ramazan has been limited in past years. The state has been unable to curb profiteering or take action against those who manipulate prices in this season. Can some more resolve be found to ease the travails of the citizens

## **Belt & Road Initiative**

THAT China has transformed itself from a socialist giant into an economic powerhouse of the 21st century is not news.

However, what is noteworthy is the fact it now seeks to become a global player through its Belt and Road Initiative — an economic superhighway linking continents and cultures with China at the heart of the project.

And as interest from a growing number of countries has shown, the BRI could play a key role in shaping the socioeconomic and sociopolitical future of Eurasia and beyond.

The fact that 37 heads of state and government — including Prime Minister Imran Khan — attended the just concluded second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing proves that a growing number of states are seeking to jump on the BRI bandwagon and grab a slice of the pie.

It is indeed a massive initiative, envisioning an integrated network stretching from the shores of the Pacific to the heart of Europe, while extending to Southeast Asia and parts of Africa.

And CPEC is one of the key nodes of this network, reflecting both on the positive Pakistan-China relationship, as well as this country's potential as a hub for regional trade and commerce.

However, while the BRI may hold immense potential for the regional, and indeed the global, economy, the projects under its umbrella must be transparent, and the benefits mutual to both China and the partner countries.

There have been accusations of Beijing practising 'debt-trap diplomacy' by 'drowning' partner states in debt.

There is evidence of Sri Lanka having problems with Chinese debt in a port project, while Malaysia under Mahathir Mohamed has renegotiated a rail project with Beijing on reportedly better terms.

To allay fears such, China and partner governments in the BRI must ensure that the terms of the projects involved are clearly understood and transparent.

In Pakistan's case, there has also been criticism that the benefits of CPEC are not trickling down to all parts of the country. For CPEC to be a success, its fruits must reach all provinces, while Pakistan's economy must benefit from the project in the long term.

Under the vision of functionalism and regional integration, the dynamics of international relations have been transformed.

For example, from the ashes of old Europe rose the European Union, in which former foes discarded their mutual animosity and worked for unprecedented integration.

However, while the EU project may be facing turbulence, regional cooperation under BRI can — by interlocking economies — be the harbinger of better ties and prosperity for the people of Eurasia and other regions falling under the project's ambit.

South Asia, for example, can gain from mutually rewarding BRI initiatives. Indeed others, especially the US and its allies, who are mostly critical of the BRI, must let this ambitious vision become a reality and work to establish a complementary relationship.

## **Perilous work**

IN a time where large-scale disasters, both natural and manmade, seem to affect growing numbers of people, the role of humanitarian workers becomes correspondingly more important. However, aid workers — though protected under international law — are themselves becoming targets of extreme forms of violence, including kidnappings, gang rape and beheadings. Many also die in air strikes at the hands of state actors in theatres of war. According to IFRC's World Disasters Report 2018, titled 'Leaving No One Behind', the year 2017 saw 139 national and international humanitarian workers lose their lives in the line of duty. That is a 30pc increase from the previous year. During the decade before, 1,072 such individuals were killed, which amounted to almost double the number of similar deaths — 557 — in the 10 years preceding. Pakistan, as per the report, is fifth in the list of countries that are the most dangerous for aid workers, with around 80 — largely locals — killed between 2008 and 2017. The other countries on the list are Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, South Sudan and Pakistan.

It appears that humanitarian workers, once perceived to some extent as being 'above the fray' are increasingly seen as party to the conflict or proxies

for international powers. Given their work by definition involves interaction with local communities, often with minimal security — if at all — aid personnel are soft targets for non-state armed groups. There is also a growing inclination in some societies to view all international relief organisations — and those associated with them locally — as having sinister political agendas to undermine the security and/or the cultural values of the countries in which they are working. In Pakistan, during the years when militancy was taking root in the northern areas, international NGOs and their local partners were at the receiving end of relentless threats by extremist groups. Even government health workers are sometimes not spared: in the wake of the recent false propaganda against polio vaccination, three individuals associated with the anti-polio campaign have been killed in the last few days in Pakistan. Aid operations in countries with long-running civil wars, such as Afghanistan and Somalia, are also targeted by non-state armed groups for strategic reasons. For by driving away humanitarian workers, whom they view as potential threats to their dominance, these groups can further tighten their territorial control and delegitimise the government. What remains among the local populations is yet more suffering and despair.

## **Imprisoned in India**

YET another Pakistani national imprisoned in India has died, the third such reported death within the span of a few weeks. Though his cause of death is still unknown, it is deeply concerning given that the other two deaths were not of natural causes, but due to injuries inflicted in one case by inmates and in the other by jail authorities. Equally disturbing is the trend of delays in notifying and releasing their bodies, adding insult to injury for the family members. Given the BJP's irresponsible and cynical ratcheting up of anti-Pakistani and anti-Muslim rhetoric in the run-up to and during India's ongoing general elections, such prisoners are now even more vulnerable.

On either side of the border, there is callous indifference to the plight of these hapless victims of long-running bilateral tensions. Pakistani citizens have often complained of being provided little to no consular support in times of crisis. This is especially true for our fisherfolk, who are routinely picked up in the high seas by Indian coast guards and forced to languish for years if

not decades in appalling condition in Indian prisons. In the short term, the Foreign Office must exert pressure on India to ensure unobstructed consular access to Pakistani prisoners; to provide them with humane living conditions including timely medical care; and to keep them separated from the general prison population. In the long run, there is an urgent need to sustain the recent prisoner-exchange initiative. Though often touted as ‘goodwill’ gestures, the practice of using human bodies as bargaining chips must end. Prisoner releases must continue, but there is also a need to revise policies that have led to their pointless imprisonment in the first place. Most of these poor and illiterate prisoners inadvertently crossed over land and maritime borders. They do not deserve imprisonment — or to return home in body bags — but to be immediately repatriated to their home countries and reunited with their families. This goes beyond politics.

## **PTI in a bind**

THE exit of Asad Umar as finance minister continues to draw all kinds of explanations. The mystery remains despite the PTI’s attempts to clear the air.

In a report in this paper yesterday, one explanation for why the portfolio was taken away from the finance minister by Prime Minister Imran Khan identifies factors other than Pakistan’s engagement with the IMF.

Some powerful interest groups, apparently unhappy with Mr Umar, were responsible for his ouster at a time when the deal with the IMF was all but concluded, while, in the same report, a government spokesman has denied the alleged input of these groups in the prime minister’s decision.

Thanks to the absence of logical explanations from the PTI itself, much after Mr Umar’s removal and the cabinet reshuffle, the real reasons remain vague. What is abundantly clear though is that a party which had taken up the reins of power with such fanfare last August and had promised a quick overhaul of the system is now struggling to set long-term direction for the country.

Its approach to many of the concerns it has pledged to address — and this is not restricted to economic governance alone — has been more political

than a policy-oriented exercise, with frequent U-turns that have been justifiably criticised.

Fortunately, for the PTI, there is still time. Having been in power for only eight months, the party can turn things around if it draws lessons from its errors. In this regard, two aspects are especially worth focusing on: transparency in its political decisions, and engaging with, and not constantly fighting, the opposition.

As former Senate chairman Raza Rabbani recently pointed out, the fact that many ministries — including key portfolios — are in the hands of unelected advisers and special assistants to the prime minister is of particular concern. To appoint individuals who are under no oath of office to vital government posts is a far cry from the party platform promised by the PTI during the general election — accountability, reform and transparency — and a threat to electoral and legislative processes.

With regard to economic governance, few if any questions regarding investments made by China, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have yet been answered. Now, with portfolios under the control of individuals who have no role in parliament, decision-making seems more opaque than ever and relations with the opposition more tense.

The PTI's challenges are coming thick and fast as the economic situation worsens and a general sense of paralysis grips the country. Definitive policymaking and measured actions, along with a genuine attempt to make democratic governance as representative as possible, can be part of the solution that it is looking for.

## **Iran & NPT**

WITH regard to Iran, the major aim of the Trump administration is to ramp up confrontation with the Islamic Republic by cutting off its revenue streams, and isolating it internationally. However, the risk this questionable policy runs is that brinksmanship can one day give way to actual confrontation between Washington and Tehran. Perhaps that is the goal of the hawks in the US capital. However, Iran must act with caution and resist the temptation to answer in kind. But considering the kind of pressure Tehran is facing after



the US tightened the screws on the Iranian economy by threatening to penalise anyone who does business with it, this is easier said than done. It is in this context that Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said that his country may quit the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; Iran has also said it may pull out of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal unless European powers work out a mechanism to ensure economic activities with Iran remain unaffected by US sanctions.

Iran would be advised to avoid falling into a trap by withdrawing from its commitments. The IAEA has said that Tehran has been honouring its end of the JCPOA, as the nuclear deal is known, so Tehran should not give its detractors a chance to exploit actions it may take in the heat of the moment. True, the pressure on its economy is great: the US decision not to renew waivers granted to those states that buy Tehran's oil are designed to choke Iran's economy completely. As Iran sees it, this is a declaration of war, hence its alarming pronouncements. To prevent this situation from worsening, saner voices in Washington must prevail so that the warmongers that advise President Trump do not succeed in their aims of aggravating tensions. Further, the European states must continue to do business with Iran and allow it some economic breathing space. If Iran's economy is made to crumble, hardliners within the establishment will call for greater confrontation with America. Of course, some of Tehran's arch-enemies in the region — Israel and the Gulf Arabs — will be rooting for war with Iran. But that is not in the interest of the Iranian people, or the greater population of the Middle East. That is why the West, including America, must work for a modus vivendi with Iran, not a new war.

## **Antibiotic regulation**

RECENTLY, the government decided to regulate the sale of antibiotic medicine in Islamabad by introducing new control and audit mechanisms. All pharmacies in the federal capital must now ensure that antibiotics are not sold without prescriptions, while maintaining records of the sale and purchase of the drugs, which includes keeping copies of the prescriptions. Those who fail to comply with the new rules will be fined after a three-month period since the issuing of the notice. This decision taken by the authorities is undoubtedly a sensible one, given the wide use of over-the-counter

medication, and it must be extended to the rest of the country as well. The general assumption is that antibiotics offer a quick fix, and some stop taking them once they feel better, even if the bacteria has not been eliminated entirely. But in doing so, a greater and long-lasting health issue is created. Many doctors are also quick to prescribe antibiotics, without informing the patient about the potential side effects of the medication, or indeed, prescribing the tests necessary to ensure that antibiotics are needed in the first place.

The dangers of antibiotic resistance that develop with its misuse and overuse have been long warned about. The drug grows ineffective as bacteria develop the intelligence to combat its power. This leads to a greater burden on the already limited healthcare facilities in our country, as patients develop deadlier germs and consequently have to turn towards more expensive and potent forms of antibiotics for a cure. According to the Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, nearly 700,000 deaths globally are attributed to infections caused by drug-resistant pathogens. Without measures to counter this trend in place, that figure could rise to 10m by 2050. While antibiotic resistance is indeed a global phenomenon, its implications in low-income countries where basic health and sanitation awareness is severely lacking spells disaster — as we are slowly realising in this country where complaints of the weakening efficacy of antibiotics are growing. Besides, there is already a hike in medicine prices in Pakistan which is hurting the vulnerable — the poor and the sick — the most. The public's health is not to be taken lightly.