

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of August 2018

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Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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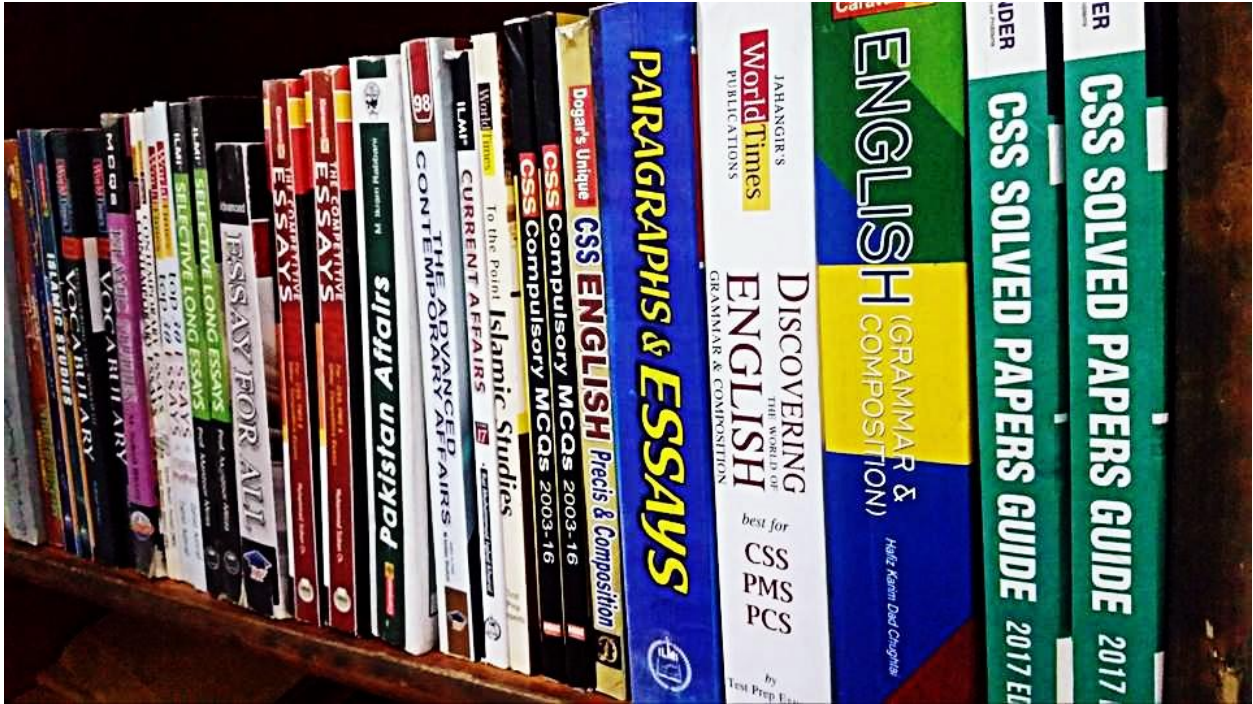
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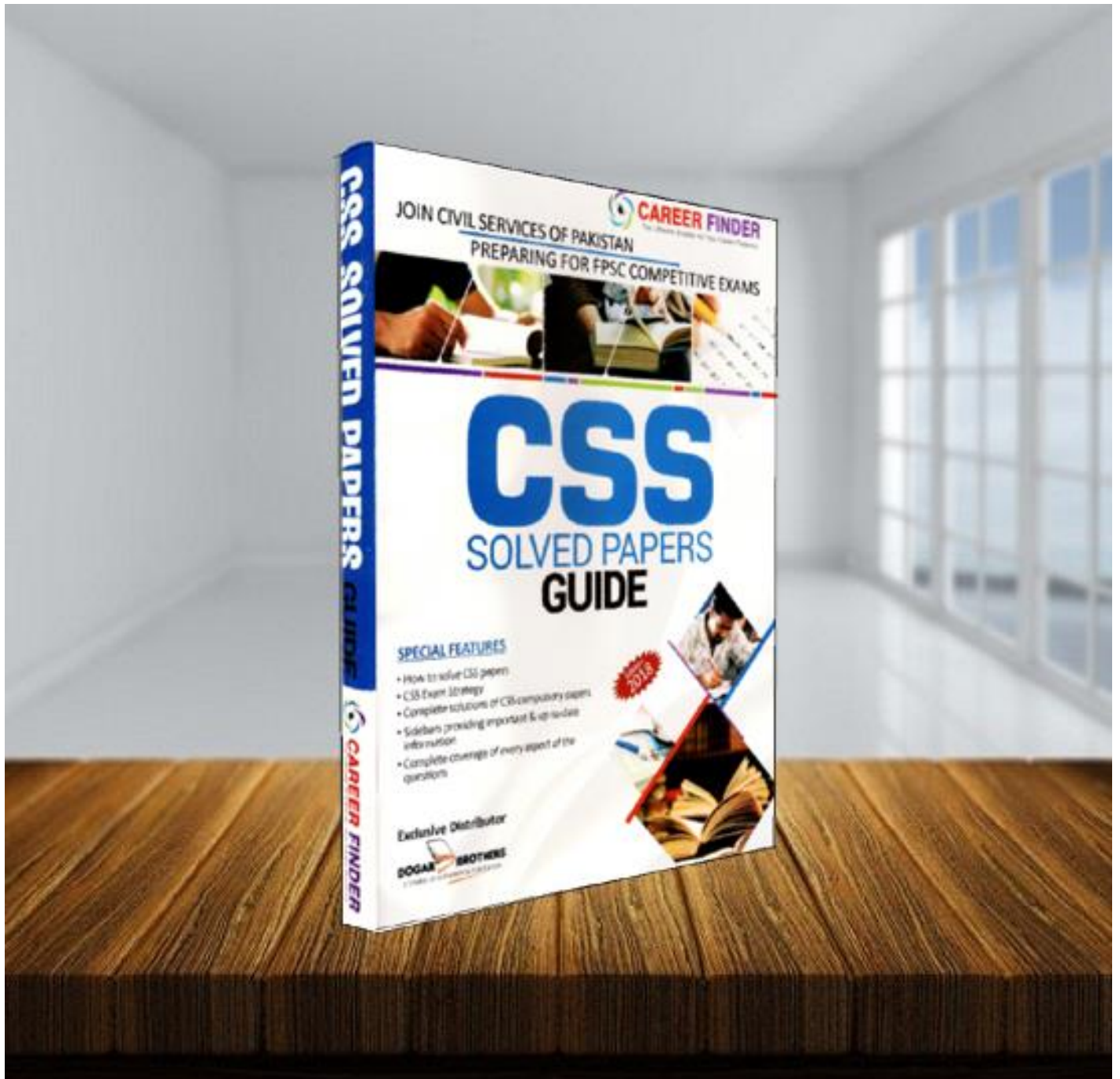
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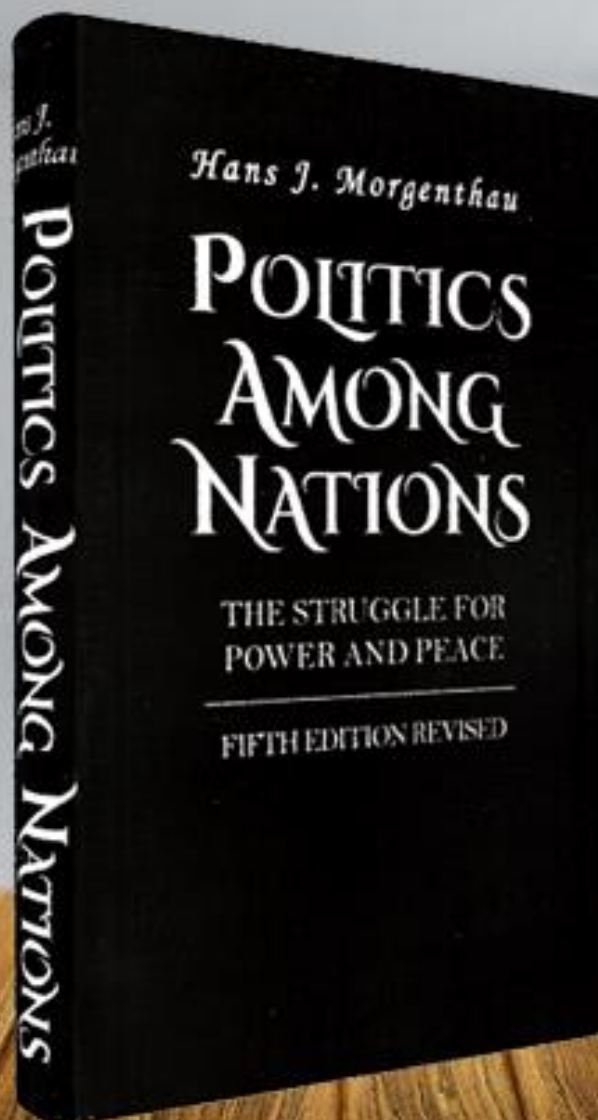
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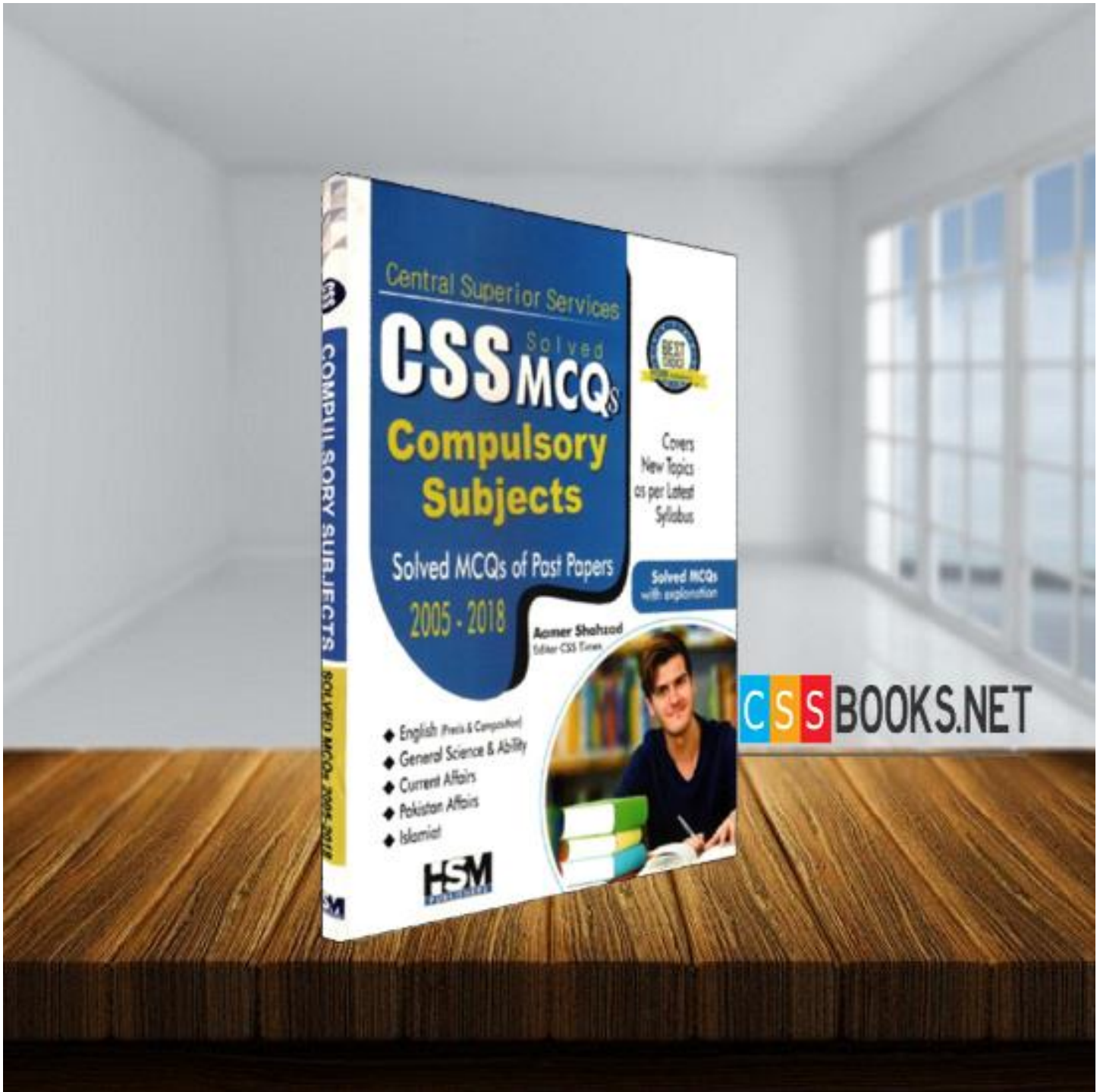
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Contents

The opposition's role	11
Trump's Iran overture	12
Polluted creek	13
ECP must explain.....	14
Plea bargains.....	15
Sealing Safma office	16
US arrogance.....	17
Climate challenges	19
Kohistan killings	20
Finding the missing	21
Women turnout	22
Working mothers	23
Attack on schools	24
Governing Karachi.....	26
Planned tourism.....	27
Political delays.....	28
Renewing NFC award.....	29
Deceased organ donation	30
Militancy fears	31
Kashmir unrest.....	32
Stranded passengers.....	33
Parliament's work	34
Risk of infection	35
Yemeni crisis	36
PTI's economic message	37
Sanctions on Iran.....	38
Tortured students	39
Parliamentary behaviour	40
CPEC indignation	41
Fuel additives	42
'Poll rigging' probe	43
Unending child rape.....	44

Why take sides?	45
Counterproductive move by the US	46
Curbing trade deficit	47
Changes in PCB?	48
Disjointed opposition role.....	49
Jinnah’s words.....	51
China mosque stand-off.....	52
Miles to go	53
Yemen prisoner abuse	54
Go for green	55
Battle for Ghazni	56
Police reform.....	57
Kiki Challenge furore.....	58
Provinces’ vital role.....	59
Turkey-US spat	60
Miners’ deaths	61
Modi on IHK	62
Twitter shutdown?.....	63
Neglected graveyards	64
FATF worries	65
With one voice	66
What Vajpayee represented	67
PM’s first speech.....	68
Kabul bombing	70
Power breakdown.....	71
PM Khan’s cabinet	72
Overseas voters.....	73
Housing crisis	74
The way ahead?	75
Trading with China	76
Ghani’s ceasefire offer	77
Setting foreign policy	78
Eid precautions	80

Nawaz & Maryam on ECL.....	81
Test of commitment	82
Wealth abroad	83
Post-Eid clean-up	84
PM-Pompeo spat	85
'Discretionary' funds.....	86
Faisalabad violence	87
Lahore zoo deaths.....	88
Railways turnaround?	89
Opposition politics	90
RTS failure	91
Rohingya protest.....	92
Nargis bronze at Asiad	93
Gas pricing conundrum.....	94
Mistake in Pakpattan	95
Tracing missing victims	96
No ordinary abduction.....	97
Contraception access.....	98
Pollution & intelligence.....	99
Media regulation.....	100
Arrests in India	101
UN report on Yemen.....	102

The opposition's role

THE tentative emergence of a so-called grand opposition alliance could help re-energise parliamentary politics after neither the governing party nor the opposition paid much heed to parliament in the last term.

The PPP and PML-N numbers in the next National Assembly, along with support from the MMA and the ANP, could create a formidable opposition for the first time in a decade. Between 2008 and 2013, the PML-N was the lead opposition party in the National Assembly.

Read: Opposition parties mull joint strategy to tackle PTI in parliament

But the absence of party boss Nawaz Sharif from the house and the PML-N's general disinclination to take parliamentary affairs seriously combined to leave the opposition in parliament adrift.

In 2016, the PTI ended its boycott of parliament; even though it was only the second-largest party in the opposition, it could have positioned itself as effectively the lead opposition. But the PTI preferred to pursue its politics largely outside the assembly and there were few spells of robust parliamentary opposition.

The PPP, the PML-N and other parties that have announced their intention to be a part of the opposition in the next parliament have also made a number of serious allegations regarding the fairness and transparency of last week's polls. Those complaints will have to be addressed in due course in the appropriate forums and should not affect the collective opposition's preparations for parliamentary politics.

The PTI's reforms agenda and attempts to stabilise the economy will require a role for parliament and the opposition should be prepared to contribute effectively. It ought to be remembered that the architect of the PML-N's economic policy, Ishaq Dar, consistently called for a national consensus on economic matters, and now the party has a chance to help support such a consensus in the opposition.

Meanwhile, the PPP's redistributive economic policies highlighted in its latest manifesto can be lobbied for inside parliament as the PTI tackles reforms.

At a time when the democratic process is seemingly being pulled in opposite directions — the PTI and its allies euphoric and seemingly determined to push through meaningful reforms; the opposition parties denouncing what appear to have been significant distortions to the electoral process — there is a greater need than ever to stabilise politics and democracy.

Now is the time for the opposition to renew its commitment to democratic institutions and to shore up democratic norms. The PPP will have both the party chairman and co-chairman in the National Assembly for the first time. The PPP's commitment to parliamentary politics has been fairly consistent in the last decade. A third consecutive assembly could see that commitment rejuvenated.

Meanwhile, with the de facto PML-N boss seemingly determined to strengthen democracy, the party's legislators should demonstrate a hitherto missing resoluteness to improving democratic institutions. A parliamentary democracy demands that parliament itself be the focal point of politics.

Trump's Iran overture

FOR students of international relations, the way Donald Trump has conducted foreign policy presents a fascinating, if bizarre, case study. Until recently, the US president was breathing fire against Iran, threatening the Islamic Republic with dire consequences in an angry tweet last week. However, in a news conference on Monday, Mr Trump made a surprising overture to Tehran, saying he was willing to meet President Hassan Rouhani "anytime they want", and with no preconditions. Considering Mr Trump not too long ago ripped up the nuclear deal, which appeared to be serving its purpose and was being honoured by all sides, this is a highly unexpected development. Mr Trump's recent overture to Iran — strange though welcome — mimics his diplomacy with North Korea. Until June's US-North Korea summit in Singapore, Mr Trump and Kim Jong-un were publicly trading schoolyard insults. However, the summit, though low on substantive breakthroughs, was projected by both sides as a master stroke of diplomacy and statesmanship. Where Tehran is concerned, though the US offer of talks is indeed welcome, not too long after Mr Trump's remarks, senior members of the US establishment signalled that there would be no sudden embrace of Iran. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said there would be preconditions — Iran would have to reduce its "malign behaviour". The Iranian

side was also circumspect; an adviser to Mr Rouhani said talks could only take place if the US showed “respect” for Iran and returned to the nuclear deal.

Considering the air of hostility that has surrounded Iran-US relations, especially since the beginning of the Trump presidency, the offer — if it is a sincere one — of unconditional talks from Washington should be welcomed. However, Mr Trump should realise that to rebuild trust with Tehran after torpedoing the nuclear deal will take deft diplomacy and confidence-building measures. As Mr Pompeo’s comments have indicated, CBMs are highly unlikely. The mixed messages emanating from Washington are unlikely to find a receptive audience in Tehran. If Mr Trump is serious about his desire for dialogue with Iran, by all means he should pursue it; perhaps Europe can act as a bridge between the Americans and Iranians. And any genuine offer of friendship from the US should be taken up by Iran in the interest of peace. However, for such an offer to succeed, the shrill cries for war from the hawkish lobby that surrounds Mr Trump must be ignored.

Polluted creek

MAN-MADE destruction of the environment has acquired monstrous proportions in this country. Yet another instance of this appalling state of affairs is highlighted in a study of the impact of untreated effluents in Korangi Creek carried out by Karachi University’s environmental institute. A number of factories from the Korangi and Landhi industrial areas, and the nearby Cattle Colony constantly discharge industrial effluent, and solid and liquid waste into this tidal channel, whose name is familiar to most Karachi residents. Adding to the environmental nightmare are settlements and fishing villages along the banks that do not have a proper sewage disposal system. The study, based on 38 samples of water and sediment, shows — to cite but a few alarming indicators — high levels of organic pollutants, such as phenol and cyanide, and the presence of heavy metals, particularly lead. The concentration of oil and grease in the samples is described as being “exceptionally high”, a factor detrimental to marine life. That in turn adversely affects the livelihoods of some 100,000 people directly or indirectly connected with the fisheries industry.

This creek is where the Malir nadi is supposed to bring rainwater from the Kirthar mountain range enabling it to flow into the Arabian Sea. That, however, is how nature intended it to be. The reality is very different. Pollution along Karachi’s shoreline has in fact come to such a pass that, according to the Karachi Port

Trust chairman, KPT spends up to five times more than it needs to on maintenance of its ships due to sea pollution, a factor that could lead to foreign shipping lines refusing to come to Karachi port. The incoming provincial setup must ensure that laws pertaining to environmental pollution are implemented and a viable plan for treatment of toxic waste devised. Moreover, given that leather and textile exports and the lucrative fisheries sector are partly controlled by the centre, the new federal government should also dedicate all available resources to clean up pollution off Karachi's coastline.

ECP must explain

THE ECP appears more interested in lashing out at critics of its disastrous performance after the close of polling hours on July 25 than investigating the shambolic vote counting and results transmission processes that so delayed the announcement of preliminary election results.

On Tuesday, ECP secretary Babar Yaqoob held an extraordinary news conference in which the ECP appeared to all but declare war on political parties and candidates who have cried foul since election night. As an autonomous, constitutional body tasked with organising Militancy fears

A SPATE of terror attacks in the Diامر district of Gilgit-Baltistan is worrying and mystifying. A sudden eruption of violence over the weekend, with arson attacks on a number of schools in the Diامر region, and helter-skelter attempts by the security apparatus to find the culprits, took another turn on Sunday. Militants on higher ground attacked security personnel and government officials travelling by road below, effectively cutting off two tehsils of Diامر district and narrowly failing in an assassination attempt on a district and sessions judge. The sudden eruption of violence in a region that has been relatively calm in recent times has brought quick explanations from security officials. One is that anti-Pakistan militants in Afghanistan are the architects of the attacks. But security officials in Kohistan, the KP district which shares a boundary with Diامر in GB, have claimed that neither is there an organised presence of militants in Kohistan nor has unusual cross-boundary movement been detected between the latter and Diامر. The second theory, then, is that elements hostile to CPEC and China's Belt and Road Initiative may be trying to spread unrest in a region that is a choke point for a transformative regional economic programme.

A thorough investigation and transparent sharing of the facts with the public alone can establish the immediate reasons for the upsurge of violence in GB. It is possible that anti-Pakistan militants based in Afghanistan have played a role in organising the attacks, and it is also possible that elements hostile to CPEC and BRI are involved. Inevitably, however, all externally directed attacks require a local infrastructure. If militants based in Afghanistan are responsible for the violence in GB, they can only carry out attacks if facilitated by a network inside Pakistan. Similarly, if external elements trying to destabilise a region critical to the success of CPEC and BRI are involved, they surely cannot conduct attacks without creating local networks. Necessary as it is to expose the so-called foreign hand that is frequently alleged to have its fingerprints all over acts of terrorism inside Pakistan, the long internal fight against militancy and violent extremism will not be won until local networks are identified, found and permanently deactivated. Indeed, the eagerness to point fingers externally often obscures local and domestic failures.

Perhaps most telling is that it was schools, a number of them all-girl institutes, that the militants attacked. There remains a violent extremism embedded in communities across Pakistan that needs to be forthrightly addressed. The incoming provincial and federal governments will have a relatively poor track record of fighting extremism to build on. The National Action Plan exists, but it needs to be reinvigorated and expanded. The price of further inaction could be the Damer violence replicated in other parts of the country.

Plea bargains

It is unfortunate that plea bargains in Pakistan have become a convenient route for the corrupt to 'whiten' money by paying a pittance to the state, and thereafter keeping the lion's share of misappropriated loot. Rather than penalising the beneficiaries of ill-gotten gains, the state appears to be encouraging them with this approach. Former Balochistan finance secretary Mushtaq Raisani, and former adviser to the provincial chief minister Khalid Langove, arrested in 2016, are accused of misappropriating over Rs3bn in state funds meant for Balochistan's local governments. The duo had earlier struck a plea bargain with NAB, with Mr Raisani surrendering assets worth Rs800m. However, the Supreme Court had nixed the deal, forbidding NAB from reaching a plea bargain

with the accused. Yet on Tuesday, the Balochistan High Court granted bail to the duo. NAB has said it will file an appeal in the apex court against the decision.

Considering the large sums of public money allegedly misappropriated by the suspects, the earlier plea bargain and the recent granting of bail are difficult to comprehend. When politicians and officials in Pakistan are tried and convicted for not declaring foreign income or residency permits of another country, it is strange how public servants accused of much graver financial crimes can strike a deal with the state, or be out on bail. The pervasive culture of corruption here needs to be combated; treating the accused in such high-profile cases with kid gloves certainly won't help anti-graft efforts. While plea bargains may have their utility, using this option as standard operating procedure should be discouraged as it sends the wrong signal to those intending to commit financial crime. In the case of the Balochistan officials, the case must be thoroughly investigated and brought to a conclusion. Looking at the bigger picture, accountability was one of the key issues in the July 25 elections. Indeed, Nawaz Sharif was brought down in the name of accountability, while the PTI campaigned on the slogan of accountability for all. Therefore, it is expected that the incoming dispensation will make it a priority to combat the culture of graft and embezzlement, especially in the public sphere. Part of this must revolve around streamlining the plea bargain process in cases of financial impropriety. Overall, accountability must be thorough and not vindictive, and all those accused of misappropriating public funds or committing other financial crimes — politicians, legislators, judges and generals — must face the law.

Sealing Safma office

ON Tuesday, the Lahore Development Authority sealed the Lahore office of the South Asian Free Media Association, a non-profit that promotes media networking in South Asia for regional peace. The LDA claims it had acted on the complaints of some inhabitants of the locality who had approached the court several years back, requesting it to direct the government to stop Safma's 'commercial activities' in the residential area. We must ask to what extent can running a library and a school for teaching journalists the media code of ethics be classified as a commercial activity. Especially when the LDA has not taken action against those in other residential areas of the city who are seen as 'causing disturbance to the people' living there. The LDA should have come up with a

better explanation for its sudden action as the case, according to Safma officials, is still with the Lahore High Court pending a final decision.

The action against Safma comes at a time when different media outlets, journalists and local and international rights groups are complaining of increasing pressure on the media and restrictions on free speech in Pakistan. It is no secret that a few Safma officials have been vocal in raising their concerns over this growing pressure on major media outlets to toe a particular line and they have questioned the fairness of the July elections. At a news conference immediately after its office was sealed, a top Safma official alleged that the association had long been targeted by the government. The haste shown by the LDA in sealing the Safma office in this situation has raised many an eyebrow, lending credence to allegations that the organisation is being punished for its stance on the freedom of expression and the quality of the elections. The LDA would do well to unseal the Safma office forthwith and sit down with its officials to settle the issue if the organisation's activities are actually causing problems for neighbourhood residents.

US arrogance

AN incoming government faced with a familiar economic crisis on the external-account and budget-deficit fronts will also have to contend with arguably new but predictable global politics.

An arrogant warning by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that an IMF bailout of Pakistan must not be used to help repay Chinese debts that Pakistan has incurred under CPEC has made clear that the incoming PTI government will have little time to adjust to the realities of power at the national and international levels.

Three points need to be made here. First, the US ought to reconsider the naked politicisation of assistance by the IMF and other Bretton Woods financial institutions. Pakistan and dozens of other countries have engaged with the IMF and the World Bank for purely economic reasons over the decades.

To now explicitly suggest that IMF and World Bank assistance for developing countries is linked to how those countries may engage with other regional and global powers that the US may have difficult relations with is preposterous.

Such tactics reek of bullying and could further undermine the so-called rules-based post-Second World War international order led by the US.

Second, Pakistanis need greater clarity and transparency on CPEC. The last PML-N government boasted of vast investments by China, but until the very end declined to share the true financial picture with the nation. That can no longer be countenanced, and the incoming PTI government should make public the necessary details of CPEC-related investments and fiscal responsibilities.

CPEC is a historic opportunity recognised by one and all for its potential to help Pakistan revamp its woeful infrastructure networks and improve economic productivity and export potential. Pakistan should engage boldly and creatively with China in all areas that are beneficial to this country.

Goodwill between China and Pakistan already exists and can be further increased to mutual benefit. But the last PML-N government often appeared to view CPEC through a domestic political lens and short-term fiscal breathing space.

China's own phenomenal economic rise in recent decades ought to be the template followed by Pakistan when it comes to negotiating bilateral investments and financial arrangements. CPEC can go on to become an unprecedented national success, but first its terms must be shown to be transparent and fair.

Third, the incoming PTI government should consider the factors that appear to inevitably return Pakistan to the IMF embrace government after government.

At present, there may be an argument that problems on the current account side are inexorably pushing Pakistan's towards a bailout scenario, but problems on the budget deficit side are also significant.

It has long been apparent that fundamental tax reforms and restructuring of the public sector are needed, along with increasing economic productivity and exports. If a few years from now another bailout is to be avoided, meaningful economic reforms must be enacted.

Climate challenges

YEAR after year, the findings of the annual State of the Climate report make increasingly evident the rapid pace at which climate change is affecting the ability to sustain life on Earth. Its report on 2017 is no different; based on global temperatures, last year was the second or third warmest year (depending on which dataset is analysed), and the hottest non-El Niño (a climate event that warms the Pacific) year ever. Sea levels rose to a record high last year, as did greenhouse gas emissions. The Arctic and Antarctic both experienced considerable ice melt, glaciers lost mass for a 38th consecutive year, and prolonged warm oceanic temperatures decimated vast swathes of the world's coral reefs. Scientists across the globe all agree that these changes are endangering the world's food and water supplies, and contributing to the devastating climate events — heatwaves, flooding, storms and wildfires — witnessed of late. Ironically, the report initiative is spearheaded by a US government agency — the very same government whose leader, President Donald Trump, torpedoed hopes of the Paris Agreement's impact to mitigate the impending disaster when he decided to withdraw the US from the list of signatories.

In Pakistan, on May 28, 2017, the temperature in Turbat reached 53.5°C — an all-time high for us and the world's highest temperature for May — while the summer monsoon rainfall was also 22.5pc less than the long-term average. Though our carbon footprint is relatively minuscule in terms of global emissions, we bear the brunt of extreme weather events, and for that reason alone must take action. Yet, here too building climate resilience is absent in the national discourse and does not even register at the tail end of policymakers' priorities. This lack of political will is manifest in the window dressing that is the Ministry of Climate Change — demoted to a division in 2013, then notified as a ministry again in 2015, only to be led by a minister with no expertise on the subject and with a tiny budget. Planning and development still rely heavily on carbon-intensive energy projects and unsustainable water management solutions. The PTI, in its 2018 manifesto, dedicated an entire section to climate change and made bold promises. With the new government to be formed in a matter of days, it is hoped that it delivers on at least some of these by ensuring that allocated funds for climate adaption come closer to matching the true, gargantuan scale of Pakistan's environmental challenges.

Kohistan killings

THAT it has taken seven long years and two fact-finding missions before an FIR has been filed in the suspected 'honour' killing of five girls in Kohistan, speaks volumes.

The case came to light in 2011 when reports emerged that an online video of a young man dancing before a group of teenage girls had led to murder.

The mixed gathering had taken place in a village located in an extremely conservative part of KP. In the eyes of the locals, the youngsters had violated tribal norms and brought dishonour upon them.

Reportedly, five girls in the audience, as well as the man who was dancing and his two brothers, were later murdered on a jirga's orders.

While the fact-finding missions were unable to definitively establish whether the murders had taken place, circumstantial and empirical evidence strongly suggested that was the case.

Moreover, Afzal Kohistani, a brother of the male victims, had been alleging the same, and the FIR was registered on his petition to the Supreme Court.

Read more: Kohistan video case: Girls declared alive by SC had actually been killed, says Bari

The delays in the resolution of a matter involving such mediaeval barbarity illustrate how law enforcement's indifference to crimes of 'honour' can stand in the way of justice.

In a social milieu where not much remains hidden within the community, the local police could have solved the case had they expended a little effort.

Instead, Afzal Kohistani himself, for much of the intervening period, had to live in hiding because of threats to his life.

The remoteness of the location also made it more difficult for human rights activists to ascertain the truth.

In fact, if not for the video — which by being available on the net for all to see possibly compounded the youngsters' 'crime' — the truth may never have come out.

While improvements to the honour killing law are important, they cannot compensate for a primitive mindset.

The justice system needs to send a very strong message to those who commit crimes of 'honour' and those who neglect their duty to investigate them.

Finding the missing

CHIEF Justice Saqib Nisar has issued a stark warning that should be heeded by any elements within the state structure who may be abusing the fundamental, constitutional rights of citizens. Addressing a high-level meeting of security and government officials convened in the Supreme Court to help identify, find and recover missing persons, the chief justice rightly warned state institutions to desist from actions that violate their oaths to protect the public and uphold the Constitution. He specifically mentioned the possibility of using Article 184(3) of the Constitution to more vigorously pursue the issue of missing persons. The original jurisdiction of the Supreme Court under Article 184(3) allows the court to issue orders in matters where “a question of public importance with reference to the enforcement of any of the Fundamental Rights” is deemed to have arisen by the court. Colloquially known as the suo motu powers of the Supreme Court, the court's powers under Article 184(3) could, if used with clarity and purpose, achieve significant breakthroughs in the quest to put an end to the practice of enforced disappearances and missing persons.

Following a recent landmark decision by the Islamabad High Court in a case of a missing person, Chief Justice Nisar's blunt but welcome and necessary remarks could help shake state institutions out of their denial, torpor and intransigence. Rather than work with the civilian-led executive and the judiciary to formulate a lawful and robust approach to detaining individuals suspected of involvement in terrorism, militancy and violent extremism, it appears that elements within the security apparatus are more interested in holding on to a seeming carte blanche when it comes to dealing with such matters. From the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, led by a retired Supreme Court justice, to representatives of various security organisations, their aim often appears to be

less to help the superior judiciary recover missing persons and more to downplay the existence of the problem altogether. Certainly, not all individuals who are reported to be missing by their families are necessarily in the custody of elements within the state, and there is a need to create, as the Supreme Court has suggested, a mechanism for finding out if alleged missing persons have left the country, for example. But the onus should be on the state to either recover a missing person or reasonably identify where the individual could be.

It ought to be reiterated every time that in fighting a necessary war against terrorism, militancy and extremism, the state must not use tactics that blur the line between what is right, moral and lawful and what is not. Defeating terrorism is essential, but so is retaining the laws and values that separate the lawful state from the militant who must be defeated.

Women Turnout

WHILE there were several flaws in the July 25 polls, modest, yet consequential, achievements were nonetheless made.

One is that, in Dir, Kohistan and Waziristan, women made clear what they thought of having had their suffrage denied to them for generations by leaving the confines of their homes to vote for the first time.

While women voter registration and turnout levels are still nowhere close to what they ought to be, the ECP's efforts to shore up these figures, bolstered by mandatory benchmarks established in the Elections Act, 2017, are paying off.

Yet, while the minimum requirement for women's participation was set at 10pc of total votes in a constituency, there were still areas where female turnout fell short. In NA-10 Shangla, of the 128,302 total votes (including rejected votes, for which there are no gender disaggregated figures in Form 47 to subtract from), 12,663 or 9.87pc were cast by women.

In NA-48 North Waziristan, of the 63,954 votes cast, 6,354 or 9.94pc were women's. In a report published in this paper yesterday, a source in the ECP stated that a summary had been moved to declare the results of both constituencies null and void for this reason.

Granted, women's participation in both constituencies undershot the 10pc minimum by a hair's breadth, yet the ECP is well within its rights to annul the results. Indeed, the bar is set low enough as it is.

However, before by-elections are held, and for their results to be valid, the ECP must establish an inquiry to determine the reasons turnout was low, and investigate allegations made by some candidates (including the winning candidate for NA-48) prior to polling day, that potential women voters were being threatened, and that polling stations were often too far for women to access them.

The ECP must take these claims seriously, including acknowledging its own possible shortcomings, in order to mitigate the likelihood of a similar experience.

Meanwhile, legislators should consider setting the bar higher by introducing an amendment to increase the minimum percentage of women's turnout in urban constituencies. Institutionalising such provisions can help ensure that there is further progress in the drive to equalise women's franchise.

Given the pushback witnessed every time there is an attempt to legislate on women's rights, and efforts that are still made to roll them back, it is not hyperbolic to suggest codifying safeguards against a regression.

Working Mothers

JACINDAMANIA may only grow internationally now that the New Zealand prime minister has returned to official duties with a refreshing candour about the difficulties mothers face in balancing work and personal lives. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is the second sitting world leader to give birth while in office; in 1990, the iconic Benazir Bhutto became the first. In interviews to the media on her first day back at work on Thursday, Prime Minister Ardern acknowledged the heightened global interest in her work and family life: "I absolutely accept this layer of interest because it's not our normal yet. But one day it will be." In words sure to cheer mothers of infants everywhere, Ms Ardern spoke charmingly of perhaps having to attend "the odd press conference with a little bit of spill on me"; her feelings of guilt in making everyday choices between work and personal life; and pride in her husband, who will be a stay-at-home parent and "not a

babysitter”. The young New Zealand first family represents much that is to be admired in modern, progressive households and parents across the world.

That Ms Ardern has followed in Benazir Bhutto’s footsteps is perhaps not as surprising as the reality that it has taken almost 30 years for another global leader to give birth while in office. Arguably, more women internationally have more rights and more control over their bodies and in their work and personal decisions today than they did three decades ago; but there is still a long way to go for equal rights to be achieved by women. In Pakistan, there have been piecemeal improvements in the legislative protection offered to women and working mothers, but the practical realities that women must contend with at the workplace are still challenging. Economic realities, particularly in urban and urbanising areas, and changes in the social environment have also helped turn female employment into more of a norm. But sustained focus is needed before a secure workplace environment can be guaranteed to all women.

Attack on Schools

AN assault on education, particularly girls’ education, brings back some of the most terrible memories of Pakistan’s fight against extremism.

Early Friday morning, at least 13 government and private schools in Gilgit-Baltistan’s Diamer district were vandalised; several were set on fire. Most of them were girls’ schools, including one which has been attacked five times since 2004.

Fortunately, there was no one present on the premises at the time. According to law enforcement, preliminary investigations indicate that the perpetrators were not associated with any militant group but locals opposed to girls’ education.

It is therefore some consolation that a good number of other locals in the area hold very different views: members of political parties, student groups and local organisations came out in droves to hold protest demonstrations, shouting slogans against extremism and demanding that the culprits be severely punished.

Deliberate, wilful attacks on schools in any setting — and by definition, on education itself — are worthy of condemnation in the strongest terms, but they have a particularly symbolic significance in the context of Pakistan’s recent history.

They are associated with some of its worst tragedies, and also its most enduring acts of bravery. In fact, a campaign of intimidation against girls' education from 2008 onwards was among the initial indications of the TTP's increasing hold over Swat Valley, when it started asserting itself outside Fata.

In early 2009, the terrorist group ordered a complete ban on girls' education. Resistance to these ominous developments coalesced in the form of young Malala Yousafzai, whose bravery very nearly got her killed by the TTP, and who went on to become an international icon for the right of girls to education.

In early 2014, 15-year-old Aitzaz Hasan gave his life while preventing a suicide bomber from attacking his school in Hangu, KP.

Later that year, on Dec 16, a group of TTP militants targeted the Army Public School, Peshawar, and slaughtered 132 students and 17 staffers in one of the country's deadliest acts of terrorism.

Hundreds of schools, mostly for girls, have been bombed by militants during the last decade or so.

Opposition to girls' education is a trait common to violent extremist organisations, and Friday's attack in Diamer is evidence that a similar mindset continues to prevail in parts of the country; indeed, the district has long been known as a hotbed of radical and sectarian groups.

The authorities must act swiftly to find the perpetrators before their actions embolden others to once again make the obliteration of girls' schools the centrepiece of an obscurantist agenda.

Literacy rates in Diamer are abysmal and in terms of education indices, it ranks among the 10 lowest-ranking districts in Pakistan.

Fortunately though, it seems many of its residents are prepared to fight for the right of their girls to go to school. The state must not let them down.

Governing Karachi

KARACHI belongs to everyone, but no one seems to want to govern the southern megapolis responsibly — the former is the great strength of Pakistan's largest city, the latter has brought much frustration and despair to its denizens. Perhaps, then, the agreement reached on Friday between the MQM-P and the PTI could bring fresh hope to the provincial capital of Sindh, which has seen a stable security situation in recent years but still suffers from sweeping governance and service delivery problems. The July 25 election produced both a familiar and an unfamiliar scenario for Karachi. The PPP swept the polls outside urban Sindh, guaranteeing it a third consecutive term in the provincial government. But in Karachi itself, a swing away from the MQM has given the PTI a significant parliamentary presence from the city, while leaving the MQM-P essential to the PTI's plans for forming the government at the centre. The three-way power sharing that voters have effectively delivered for Karachi could become the latest bane for the provincial capital, but it can be turned into a boon. The stunning defeat of Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, in his maiden election contest, in Lyari ought to lead to some introspection in the PPP leadership. Whatever the concerns about the election process, it is also clear that voter anger at the PPP played a part in Mr Bhutto-Zardari's defeat in Karachi.

Certainly, if the PTI, MQM-P and PPP do commit themselves to the betterment of the people of Karachi, instead of engaging in never-ending political conflict, there are a number of areas in which positive change can be introduced. Before the election, the PTI announced a plan of action for addressing Karachi's chronic water, waste disposal and electricity woes. Aspects of the plan have been fairly well received by experts, and now that the PTI has an unprecedented parliamentary presence in the city, it should turn to quickly implementing its election promises. Similarly, the MQM-P and PTI deal signed on Friday can, if fleshed out with purpose and clarity, help introduce meaningful reforms. Of course, for sustainable reforms the PPP itself will need to lead the way. Police reforms, for example, are a provincial subject and the vast powers transferred to the provinces under the 18th Amendment have yet to be adequately shared with local governments. Positive change is desperately needed in Karachi. Will the PTI, MQM-P and PPP be able to rise above party politics and grievances?

Planned tourism

THE story of the residents of Shishkat and Ainabad in Gilgit-Baltistan is that of a path forward carved doggedly out of misfortune, but followed by looming danger. The two villages were submerged in 2010, when a massive landslide blocked the flow of the Hunza river and created the Attabad lake. At least 20 people were killed and hundreds were displaced; large tracts of cultivated land, orchards and forests were swallowed up, as was a slice of the Karakoram Highway, cutting upper Hunza off and disrupting trade between Pakistan and China. The situation led a Rawalpindi-based businessman to establish an enterprise ferrying passengers and cargo across the lake, while some of the displaced also found jobs here. Once the road link was restored, though, the businessman pulled out and the villagers tried to turn the situation to their advantage by pooling whatever money they had and buying the boats and motorboats he had brought in. Since 2016, these vessels and the tourists that the idyllic area draws have allowed some 300 families to eke out an income, even offering the hope that the venture may be worthy of expansion.

Recently, however, a Lahore-based businessman started the construction of a large-scale tourist resort that is set to open next summer. This leaves the boatmen very apprehensive: deeper pockets could easily put them out of business entirely. The businessman insists that jobs will be created for the local population, but the fears remain: will this actually be a blow to their livelihoods? Will it upset the area's delicate ecological balance? And what of managing traffic and resources? The situation is a lesson in the need for tourism and development projects to be undertaken in collaboration with those directly affected, rather than over their heads. Other such initiatives have failed for precisely these reasons, a prime example being the New Murree Development Project. Measures need to be taken so that locals' lives are not destroyed — and in the case of this region, destroyed again.

Political delays

WHILE haste must be avoided, delay should be explained. A controversial general election did at least provide relative clarity on which parties and coalitions are likely to govern in the provinces and at the centre. In Sindh and KP, single-party majorities have been achieved in the provincial assemblies and in both provinces political continuity is guaranteed: the PPP looking ahead to 15 consecutive years of governing Sindh and the PTI to a further five years of provincial rule in KP, this time without being hobbled by the need for allies. The Balochistan Assembly will have yet another political jigsaw that has to be pieced and held together, but the parties likely to dominate the assembly are already known. In the National Assembly, the PTI is short of a majority, but it is arguably a mere formality before a PTI-led government assumes power. The Punjab Assembly is evenly divided between the PML-N and PTI, with both parties individually short of a majority, but there too it appears a PTI-led government will assume charge. Recognising the electoral mosaic, however, there is still an apparent problem: the incoming ruling parties across the country appear to have given little thought to cabinet selection and governing.

While it is true that the PTI will be governing at the centre and likely in Punjab too for the first time, the same cannot be said for KP. The PTI was an early favourite in the election in the province and never looked to be seriously challenged. Surely, then, the PTI should have drawn up plans before the election and quickly unveiled its nominee for chief minister and the big provincial ministries. Given the PTI's aspiration for ruling at the centre and in Punjab too, it ought to have been apparent that to debate cabinet positions in multiple governments after the election was going to lead to delay and uncertainty. But while the PTI could be given the benefit of the doubt as a first-time ruling party at the national level, the PPP's tardy approach in Sindh is confounding. It is a winning political party's prerogative to select its own team to govern, but the delay in Sindh could contribute to a perception that the PPP is all too willing to take its voters for granted and remains uninterested in serious improvements in service delivery in the province.

Perhaps a major contributing factor to the confusion and inordinate delay in the government-formation processes is that none of the major parties consider shadow cabinets to be an important part of the parliamentary process. In more

advanced democracies, the opposition has a shadow cabinet that is prepared to quickly take on governing responsibilities if elected to power. If the PML-N is truly interested in strengthening democratic institutions it could set a welcome precedent by nominating and empowering a shadow cabinet in the assemblies.

Renewing NFC award

THE politics of recent days notwithstanding, the moment when all the parties in parliament will have to sit down and work together for national progress is fast approaching. One recent reminder of the responsibilities of the incoming government came from the interim finance minister who stressed the importance of finalising the new National Finance Commission award as soon as possible. The NFC award has been delayed for far too long, and not finalising a new one was among the PML-N government's biggest policy failures. The new government will have to take on the task and see it through to completion in its first year, unless it too wants to limp along with a fiscal framework hamstrung by an ad hoc arrangement governing the NFC award.

As the interim finance minister warns, though, far more than fiscal transfers may be at stake. Social-sector spending is the domain of the provincial governments, and the majority of the resources with which this is undertaken is transferred from the centre via the NFC award. Additionally, the award and its generous transfers to the provinces have become the subject of much debate in recent years, with powerful quarters like the IMF and the security establishment questioning whether such large transfers are sustainable and healthy for the federation. Of course, the Constitution allows no path to reduce these transfers, but a new award can find ways to ensure that the resources that are given are better utilised and targeted. The new award also needs to program better incentives for the federating units to coordinate their social service delivery programmes, and in some cases, work closely with federal authorities to fashion a national response to issues such as climate change that cannot be left to each federating unit to tackle individually. Between realigning the underlying incentive structure and revisiting the federal transfers, there is much for the new government to do, and it will take every ounce of political capital and skill to steer the negotiations. No 'Islamic welfare state' can be created without navigating the politics of the NFC award, and the provinces controlled by those parties that may not be part of the government at the centre cannot move forward with their own mega projects and

social service programmes without a revamped NFC arrangement. All parties vying for control at the centre should bear in mind their shared responsibility to work together once the new government is in place.

Deceased organ donation

IT is an unfortunate truth that Pakistan is among the few Muslim states where deceased organ donation is yet to gain mainstream acceptance. This is despite the fact that experts and activists have spearheaded campaigns for wider acceptance of this noble cause, while the state and ulema have also been brought on board to convince citizens to sign up for donation. Experts have stated that a single deceased donor can save up to eight lives, but as per available figures, since 1998 less than 10 individuals have donated their organs after death. This is the state of affairs in a country where one person dies of organ failure every three minutes. To raise awareness of this key issue, the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation organised a walk to the Quaid's mausoleum in Karachi yesterday.

Indeed, all available means must be employed to raise awareness about deceased organ donation. Along with such walks, seminars and other public events, the state and the media must also come forward to play their roles to create awareness of the need for organ donation. Along with the fact that gifting one's organs after death would help save many lives in the country, there needs to be a sustained campaign to crack down on illegal organ transplants. Until recently, when action against organ traffickers brought down the incidence of the crime, Pakistan was known in the world as a bazaar of cheap organs and hosted a steady market for transplant tourism, as highlighted in the past by this newspaper. While a law to regulate transplants and prevent commercial transplants exists, its implementation is erratic. As pointed out by SIUT and other bodies of experts, there is a need to establish vigilance committees to check violations of this law. A sustained public awareness campaign — through which lawmakers, ulema, opinion leaders and celebrities can endorse the message — combined with consistent action against illegal transplants in Pakistan, can help save countless lives and bring an end to the racket of transplant tourism.

Militancy fears

A SPATE of terror attacks in the Diamer district of Gilgit-Baltistan is worrying and mystifying. A sudden eruption of violence over the weekend, with arson attacks on a number of schools in the Diamer region, and helter-skelter attempts by the security apparatus to find the culprits, took another turn on Sunday. Militants on higher ground attacked security personnel and government officials travelling by road below, effectively cutting off two tehsils of Diamer district and narrowly failing in an assassination attempt on a district and sessions judge. The sudden eruption of violence in a region that has been relatively calm in recent times has brought quick explanations from security officials. One is that anti-Pakistan militants in Afghanistan are the architects of the attacks. But security officials in Kohistan, the KP district which shares a boundary with Diamer in GB, have claimed that neither is there an organised presence of militants in Kohistan nor has unusual cross-boundary movement been detected between the latter and Diamer. The second theory, then, is that elements hostile to CPEC and China's Belt and Road Initiative may be trying to spread unrest in a region that is a choke point for a transformative regional economic programme.

A thorough investigation and transparent sharing of the facts with the public alone can establish the immediate reasons for the upsurge of violence in GB. It is possible that anti-Pakistan militants based in Afghanistan have played a role in organising the attacks, and it is also possible that elements hostile to CPEC and BRI are involved. Inevitably, however, all externally directed attacks require a local infrastructure. If militants based in Afghanistan are responsible for the violence in GB, they can only carry out attacks if facilitated by a network inside Pakistan. Similarly, if external elements trying to destabilise a region critical to the success of CPEC and BRI are involved, they surely cannot conduct attacks without creating local networks. Necessary as it is to expose the so-called foreign hand that is frequently alleged to have its fingerprints all over acts of terrorism inside Pakistan, the long internal fight against militancy and violent extremism will not be won until local networks are identified, found and permanently deactivated. Indeed, the eagerness to point fingers externally often obscures local and domestic failures.

Perhaps most telling is that it was schools, a number of them all-girl institutes, that the militants attacked. There remains a violent extremism embedded in

communities across Pakistan that needs to be forthrightly addressed. The incoming provincial and federal governments will have a relatively poor track record of fighting extremism to build on. The National Action Plan exists, but it needs to be reinvigorated and expanded. The price of further inaction could be the Damer violence replicated in other parts of the country.

Kashmir unrest

OVER the past three decades, the struggle for freedom and rights in India-held Kashmir has gone through many phases, sometimes manifesting itself through armed struggle, sometimes through the political process. However, despite the passage of 30 years, the Kashmiris' disenchantment with Indian rule has grown, and today, one can say with certainty that there is immense public support for fighters taking on New Delhi's law enforcers in the disputed territory. The reason for this is not hard to fathom; the Indian government over the years, especially under the BJP's watch, has adopted a heavy-handed approach towards dissent in Kashmir, and some half a million troops are stationed in the occupied territory. This militarised approach to resolving a political problem has completely failed — protests are increasing as Indian troops and paramilitaries attempt to subdue Kashmiri citizens, smothering them and using brutal tactics to silence them. As media reports have noted, today Kashmir has seen the rise of a 'new-age militancy' whereby tech-savvy fighters active on social media have opened up a new front against India. Young Hizbul Mujahideen fighter Burhan Wani, who was slain by Indian forces in 2016, has become the face of this new rebellion.

It is a fact that now unarmed Kashmiris often come out to defend fighters from being apprehended by Indian forces. Senior Indian officials have admitted on record that public sympathies for fighters are a major challenge that New Delhi has to confront. While the BJP-led government has adopted a tough position on resolving the Kashmir imbroglio, as the writing on the wall has shown, such an approach has failed and will continue to fail as the average Kashmiri is tired of living under the suffocating grip of Indian rule. In his speech after the elections, incoming prime minister Imran Khan had mentioned the need for better relations with India, and specifically mentioned the Kashmir issue. The Indian establishment should seize the opportunity, shed its rigid stance and talk to Pakistan about Kashmir, with Kashmiris being the third party in this trilateral dialogue. Repeating nationalistic slogans that Kashmir is an 'unbreakable part of

India' will do little to quell discontent in the valley. The fact is, Kashmir is a disputed region, and until a practical solution is found that is acceptable to its people, and supported by Islamabad and New Delhi, the vicious cycle of violence and repression in the region will continue. The way to bring calm to held Kashmir is not to crush its people, but to talk to them.

Stranded passengers

CAUGHT in the middle of a dispute between Shaheen Air International and the Civil Aviation Authority, scores of Pakistanis stranded in the Chinese port city of Guangzhou — many for over a week — have finally landed on home soil. These passengers had to endure this tremendous inconvenience owing to a dispute that arose last month, when the CAA suspended SAI's international operations, except its Haj flights, over non-payment of arrears of more than Rs1.5bn — despite the Sindh High Court's order annulling the CAA's decision. Taking note of media reports, the chief justice of Pakistan ordered that the stranded passengers be immediately repatriated. The CAA then granted the airline special permission to fly the passengers out of China, only to find that its aircraft was not airworthy. Rather than book a chartered flight through PIA, which it had earlier approached, SAI spent additional time repairing the faulty plane before finally dispatching it to recover the passengers.

Yet again, what should have been speedily resolved was only truly addressed once there was sufficient media spotlight on the issue, followed by the chief justice's intervention. But this is not a sustainable solution — indeed, it reflects the dysfunction and casual cynicism pervasive in the public and private sectors, in which human lives are considered subservient to the bottom line. That these marooned citizens were provided with food and accommodation during their protracted stay in a foreign land is mere sop compared to the stress of worrying about unforeseen expenses, lapsed visas and responsibilities back home. Though the Foreign Office stated it had been in touch with the passengers and was coordinating with the relevant bodies, it is often observed that consular services for overseas Pakistanis is patchy to say the least. It is shameful that, in the midst of their blame game, the CAA and SAI lost sight of the bigger picture — the innocent bystanders.

Parliament's work

AFTER victory, a distancing from the public and most elected representatives usually begins. The distancing is blamed on the rigours of high office and security constraints, and tightly scripted public appearances quickly replace meaningful interactions with the public and the media. But incoming prime minister Imran Khan is vowing to approach his job in a more accessible manner than many of his predecessors. On Monday, he pledged to set aside one hour a week as prime minister for a so-called people's hour to answer questions from the public. If implemented with purpose and sincerity, Mr Khan's people's hour could set a new precedent for an incumbent prime minister facing the public and answering the people's concerns directly. In previous administrations, attempts at a people's hour quickly devolved into little more than PR exercises and propaganda. As an opposition figure, Mr Khan has been one of the most visible national politicians and relatively accessible to the media, his party and supporters. As prime minister, he should be accessible at public forums to all Pakistanis, not merely individuals who agree with his politics.

While a people's hour is a laudable choice, a prime minister's responsibilities to parliament are central to strengthening democratic institutions. As an opposition figure, Mr Khan has been largely indifferent to parliament and its work; as prime minister, his attitude must surely change. Parliament has suffered gravely from the treatment meted out to it by its leaders over the past decade. Yousuf Raza Gilani as prime minister did routinely participate in parliamentary proceedings and was frequently present in his chambers, but the prime minister's office during the last PPP-led federal government was arguably eclipsed by the presence of party boss Asif Zardari in the presidency. Yet, the undermining of parliament as the focal point of democracy was surely the greatest in the past decade during Nawaz Sharif's term as prime minister. Once elected by the National Assembly as prime minister, Mr Sharif rarely participated in parliamentary proceedings. This lack of interest was quickly emulated by most members of Mr Sharif's cabinet and by PML-N MNAs generally, leaving the National Assembly struggling to maintain quorum for the most part.

If Mr Khan is truly committed to strengthening democratic institutions, he must not only regularly participate in parliamentary proceedings but also present himself for questioning and accountability by the opposition. In the UK, Prime Minister's Questions is held in the House of Commons every Wednesday at noon when parliament is in session and is broadcast live to the nation. It has provided some memorable and riveting political exchanges. If Mr Khan does opt for such a

mechanism, the opposition should rise to the occasion too and put meaningful questions to the prime minister rather than merely indulge in grandstanding.

Risk of infection

THE country's health burden, already daunting, can only be reduced by instituting stringent medical protocols. It is therefore disturbing to learn that the oldest hospital, not in some rural backwater but in Pakistan's capital city, is falling far short of standard operating procedures in this respect. On Monday, the Senate Standing Committee on Capital Administration and Development Division learnt that the Polyclinic Government Hospital does not have an autoclave — which is among the more modern methods for sterilising most surgical instruments — but instead uses the outdated manual method for the purpose. The fact that 23 operations on average are carried out every day at the facility — where the daily patient load varies between 7,000 and 9,000 — is cause for further concern. To gauge from the statements of Polyclinic representatives at the meeting, the hospital is beset with multiple problems. Among these is a shortage of staff: there are only 45 specialists against a sanctioned strength of 147; similarly, only 246 out of 309 sanctioned posts for medical officers are filled; and a paucity of space creates further problems, given the many patients who visit the facility every day.

All invasive procedures entail contact between a medical device or surgical instrument and the patient's sterile tissue or mucous membranes; they thus carry an inherent risk of pathogenic microbes entering the bloodstream. As pointed out by some committee members at the meeting on Monday, shoddy medical protocols in something as basic as sterilisation of surgical instruments can have extremely serious consequences; among them is the spread of hepatitis B and C. One can quite plausibly conclude that if such an appalling situation prevails in a government hospital in the federal capital, it is certainly not an anomaly and other medical facilities in smaller towns and the hinterland are even worse. Pakistan is faced with an uphill battle against hepatitis C; it has the second highest incidence of the disease in the world after Egypt. According to experts, reused syringes and improperly sterilised medical equipment play a large role in the spread of the infection. So does the practice by barbers of reusing blades, but one expects far better from medical professionals. Sadly however, the shambolic state of affairs at government facilities is symptomatic of the inequalities in our society and the corruption that riddles the public sector. With a new government about to take charge, public healthcare must get the priority it deserves.

Yemeni crisis

AS fighting between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi militia in Yemen continues, there appears to be little hope on the horizon for this impoverished country's people. Hostilities at the moment are focused on the strategic Red Sea port of Hodeidah (currently under Houthi control) as the coalition fighting to restore President Hadi's rule tries to wrest the city away from the militia. While there appears to be a stalemate in Hodeidah, sporadic bursts of violence show that the situation can deteriorate at any time. Last week, several civilian targets were bombed in the city, including a market, a hospital and the port. While the coalition was earlier blamed for the attacks, in which over 60 people died, the Saudis have denied involvement. Unfortunately in Yemen's murky situation, the coalition and the rebels both have been accused of killing civilians. Particularly appalling was the 2016 bombing of an MSF-run medical facility in which a number of children were killed, as well as a strike on a wedding party in the same year, which killed around 70. The coalition was believed to be responsible for both attacks. In other atrocities, funerals and marketplaces have also been targeted.

It is not only death from the skies that haunts Yemenis; starvation and displacement add to their miseries. Around 22m people in the country are believed to require food aid while over 2m are internally displaced. Despite all this death and suffering, all parties involved — especially the coalition — must be asked what this ruinous war has achieved since it was launched in March 2015. Yemen, already a poor country, has been devastated and the coalition, particularly the Saudis, who infamously believed the war would be won in 'weeks', must be asked how close they are to achieving their goals of restoring Mr Hadi. Instead of continuing this abominable war, all belligerents must cease fire, open the doors to dialogue and encourage a Yemeni-led, Yemeni-owned political solution.

PTI's economic message

AS an exercise in managing expectations, the message sent out by Asad Umar of the PTI at a news conference on Tuesday is timely. Nobody should expect revolutionary changes at the outset of the new government's term, he seemed to say. The fact that these expectations have been built up by the party's own campaign, however, is difficult to miss. It is possible to see the news conference as an attempt to manage expectations, or as a face-saving way to climb down from some of the positions taken by the PTI in the run-up to the elections. His message went directly against the one put out by the party in its 'first 100 days' event.

Whatever view one chooses to take, one thing is clear: Mr Umar is doing the right thing. Anxious nerves need soothing, and the voice of someone who is widely tipped to be the next finance minister needs to be heard. The period of the interim government has seen much uncertainty and has had its fair share of silliness that needs to end. His other priority should be to convey apolitical vibes and present himself as aloof from the politics of the transition. Keeping the economy on an even keel should be the PTI's top priority, as should breathing confidence into investor sentiment. He was right to discuss possible options for stabilising the external sector as well as giving assurances that contracts and deals signed by the previous government would not be tampered with, unless real evidence of corruption surfaced. Having done so, it looks increasingly likely that the new government will begin its term by approaching the IMF, since the other options pointed to by Mr Umar are unlikely to bring in foreign exchange in the quantities required.

In the days to come, he should also elaborate further on the party's plans for state-owned enterprises as well as the direction of policy reforms. We know that there are plans to move all SOEs into a holding company of some sort, what is being referred to as a 'sovereign wealth fund', to insulate them from political interference. But does the party plan large-scale privatisation or layoffs? Will the power-sector companies also move into this holding company? What about administered pricing? Will that be deregulated? How does the party view the sagging fortunes of Pakistan's exports? Reforming the SOEs is a mammoth job and the party has done well to focus its attention on this problem. But now, the incoming government has to show that it knows what it is talking about. That

begins with realistic appraisals of the problems at hand, as well as serious discussion of the solutions being contemplated by the party leadership. The job of communicating the party's economic vision has begun; keeping that conversation going should be the next step.

Sanctions on Iran

IF anyone was under the impression that US President Donald Trump's recent offer of talks with Iran signalled a possible thaw in the Washington-Tehran relationship, that illusion came crashing down on Tuesday, as the US reimposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic. Terming them the "most biting sanctions ever imposed", Mr Trump also issued a grim warning to the global community: anyone doing business with Iran will not be able to trade with the US. Considering that the US is the most powerful economy in the world, many global corporations have succumbed to the scare tactics and have cancelled deals with Iran. While the Iranian economy is suffering, if the US follows up with a second set of sanctions, due to take effect in November and which will target Tehran's oil exports, major turbulence can be expected as Iran's financial health is greatly linked to its petrochemical exports. Coupled with Mr Trump's abrupt withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May, the Iranians view the sanctions as a declaration of economic war. President Hassan Rouhani has termed American efforts "psychological warfare against the Iranian nation". Indeed, if America continues on the same pugnacious track, a full-blown confrontation between Washington and Tehran cannot be ruled out.

It is apparent that Mr Trump, and more specifically the warmongering clique that advises him on Middle East policy, wants regime change in Iran. Despite the fact that the US president has said he is taking these ill-advised steps for 'world peace', this can hardly be achieved by driving a sovereign country to the brink of war. The fact is the Americans are pushing Iran to the edge. The Iranian president has said that if his country's oil exports are blocked, no one else will be able to ship oil through the Gulf. If Iran is economically strangulated, it may well take such a desperate step, and the blame will squarely fall on America. Instead of forging 'world peace', Mr Trump is pushing the Middle East into another destructive war. It should be remembered that despite over three decades of sanctions and hostilities, Iran has not changed course ideologically. There is still time to walk back from the brink. Perhaps the first step could be to ease US

sanctions on Iran, and discard the option of blocking Tehran's oil sales. However, if Mr Trump and his advisers maintain course, we can expect a very rough ride ahead in the Gulf and the wider Mideast.

Tortured students

GROWING up is never easy — though daunting, the journey of finding one's sense of self, one's place in the world, while negotiating the pressures and choices that will ultimately define adulthood, is an inevitable rite of passage for every child. While millions of Pakistani children today are growing up stripped of their right to education and the chance of a brighter future, for those lucky to be in school, the possibilities an education affords them are mired in the pervasive tendency of parents and teachers to inflict mental and physical abuse on them. Two years since a teenage boy sustained severe physical and mental injuries after being assaulted by his schoolteacher at Cadet College Larkana shocked the nation, the legislative action and behavioural change our society ought to have undertaken has yet to come. Meanwhile, more students continue to suffer in unimaginable ways.

On Tuesday, an eight-year-old girl in Multan succumbed to her injuries after allegedly being tortured in the madressah she was enrolled in. A young boy in Karachi died under similar circumstances this January. In May, a video clip showing students of Cadet College Mastung being beaten en masse provoked widespread outrage. Yet these (and many more) incidents disappear from our collective consciousness almost as quickly as they do from our news cycles. There are other insidious ways in which students are traumatised, such as through the inordinate pressure to excel academically no matter the cost, including the devastating psychological damage to young minds. This week in Chitral, three students attempted suicide on the day their Intermediate exam results were announced. The educational experience is supposed to be about exploring and expanding one's horizons and critical thinking, about learning to confront success and failure with grace and resilience — not about being berated into blind obeisance or, appallingly, beaten to death. A society that condones corporal punishment, instead of cultivating the well-being of its children, is one that is dooming the next generation to failure.

Parliamentary behaviour

AMIDST the serious allegations that the democratic process in the country has suffered setbacks and has been weakened, the ECP's rap on the knuckles for senior politicians for violating the election code of conduct by using "abusive, insolent and derogatory" language against political opponents may appear to be a minor matter.

The ECP has made the right decision by ending proceedings against Imran Khan, Fazlur Rehman, Ayaz Sadiq and Pervez Khattak for using abusive language during campaign speeches after each of the political leaders apologised to the ECP. But the warning issued to the four should serve as a reminder to all politicians that the strident political discourse in the country needs to be moderated as a new parliament gets ready to be sworn in and the PTI assumes the responsibilities of governance for the first time at the centre and in Punjab.

While political grievances run deep and may increase, they ought to be settled in a manner that demonstrates that the civilian political leadership in the country is capable of addressing their differences without bringing the democratic process into disrepute.

Certainly, democracy requires robust political competition, and flaws in the democratic process ought to be candidly discussed. But national political leaders ought to lead by example and demonstrate that politics is about policy and governance disagreements, not about personal vendettas, abuse and rancour.

The PTI leadership may have played a role in the coarsening of the national political discourse in recent years, but Ayaz Sadiq and Fazlur Rehman's comments during the election campaign served as a reminder, if one was needed, that unacceptable political rhetoric has a long, undesirable history in national politics.

No mainstream party can claim to have never transgressed when it comes to reasonable boundaries on political speech against its opponents. Indeed, the bitterly partisan and personalised politics of the 1990s demonstrated the great danger to democracy itself when politics became little more than tearing down an opponent.

Thus far, since winning the general election, the PTI has set a welcome and conciliatory tone in its political statements and appears to want to focus on issues of governance. It remains to be seen if that new sentiment will prevail when inevitably political and governance crises erupt.

The PTI should pay particular attention to its choice of speaker of the National Assembly. A credible and firm but fair MNA in the speaker's chair can help defuse potential unpleasantness and guide the parliamentary proceedings towards substantive matters.

But much will also depend on the tone that the opposition, particularly the PML-N, chooses to adopt. The PML-N does not have a very good record in opposition, with poor choices made and few democracy-strengthening actions taken.

The incoming parliamentary leadership of the PML-N should prioritise policy over personal attacks.

CPEC indignation

A recent angry statement issued by the government about “media reports questioning the viability of CPEC” has only fuelled scepticism, instead of addressing concerns.

The statement appears to be in response to a few articles that appeared in the international media regarding the terms on which loans have been given by China; the articles have questioned the ability of the Pakistani economy to service these loans.

For a number of years, former minister for planning and development Ahsan Iqbal had used similar language to swat away sceptical talk and all the questions raised about CPEC — to little avail. It is similarly useless for the caretaker government to resort to such indignant language.

The fact is that uncomfortable questions as well as pesky media commentary swirl around the entire CPEC enterprise because of the sheer lack of transparency which characterises the project. Asad Umar, who is widely expected to be the next finance minister, has said publicly that his government will place all CPEC agreements before parliament; indeed, he must be held to this commitment.

Once the project is discussed and debated in parliament, with greater details provided, much of the irritating analysis and commentary will automatically go away, provided that the information bears out what the government is telling the people and their elected representatives.

Additionally, the new government must also place before parliament the full text of the Long Term Plan that was finalised with the Chinese side in November 2017. The previous government may have touted CPEC as a 'game changer' for the country, but it made a mistake by deliberately concealing important details about the project at the same time.

If CPEC is indeed a 'game changer', it is all the more imperative that its terms and conditions, and other details, be known, understood and debated by all stakeholders, including the public, when the next government begins its rule.

When the government tries to advance the project under opaque conditions, feeding a largely cosmetic public relations line to us all, then it naturally arouses suspicion and scepticism. One of the big challenges for the incoming government, therefore, is to remove the veil of secrecy wrapped around the project and encourage a more inclusive conversation.

That is what will finally settle this whole debate about what exactly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is, and how Pakistan can best manage it to serve its own interests.

Fuel additives

SIX months of wrangling have elapsed and now finally the government is ready to roll out a plan to phase out manganese additives from all vehicular fuels. This is a big moment, and ministry officials must ensure that it goes through, regardless of the fact that there is a political transition under way. If the next government wants to interfere in the plan, let it come out and say so openly. Manganese is a terrible additive for petrol that many oil-marketing companies and refiners were using to increase the RON count of their fuel and bring it in compliance with government regulations. The whole affair was exposed when one automaker sounded the alarm, saying the fuel additive was causing severe damage to some of the engines of its cars. That is when it first became known to the general public that the oil and gas regulator had not set any upper limit for

manganese content in petrol, leaving the door open for oil companies to meet regulatory requirements on the cheap.

But now, the refineries have made the necessary modifications to produce higher RON petrol without requiring manganese additives. There is no longer any obstacle to enforcing the limits on manganese content by Nov 1, as the plan reportedly calls for. Manganese is a very harmful fuel additive that is regulated around the world because it ruins urban air quality, and is injurious to human health, particularly in the case of children. It is a neurotoxin and directly impairs brain development and function. In 2003, the American Association of Paediatrics recommended phasing out its use in fuels altogether because of its effects on the growth of children's brains. It is astonishing that its use continued here for so long without anyone noticing. By now, there is no excuse whatsoever to not implement the caps, which should be further tightened in the months to come. Ultimately, it would be right to phase out this compound from our fuels altogether.

'Poll rigging' probe

SHAHBAZ Sharif has demanded that a parliamentary commission be created to inquire into the allegations of a number of political parties and candidates that the July 25 general election was flawed and possibly systematically rigged. Mr Sharif's demand ought to be accepted by the incoming PTI government and a commission set up at the earliest. To be sure, there are a number of other appeals and investigations that must also be carried out. Losing candidates are entitled to an appeals process that begins with the ECP and can culminate in the Supreme Court — the legal challenges of candidates ought to be decided fairly in the appropriate forums. Similarly, the ECP has pledged to investigate the reasons for the failure or otherwise of the Results Transmission System on the night of the election, a controversy that has yet to be adequately explained by any official. But a parliamentary commission can have a role too.

Parliament is the forum in which both the winning and losing parties are represented and where legislative changes can be made. There is reason for scepticism that a meaningful inquiry is possible inside parliament: the winning side has every incentive to preserve the legitimacy of its electoral victory by downplaying problems in the election, while the losing parties have clear political incentives to exaggerate the challenges. But the last parliament suffered from

similar problems at the outset and yet parliament was able to draft an electoral reforms package that was historic in its sweep and had broad political support. The final electoral reforms bill may have been rendered controversial by a PML-N decision to allow Nawaz Sharif to be re-elevated to the position of party president and a contrived religious dispute that snowballed into a political and security crisis. However, the core of the reforms drafted by the last parliament continue to have widespread political support.

While the allegations against the general election are of a serious nature, even otherwise a parliamentary commission may have been a welcome proposal. Poll reforms introduced by the last parliament have now been tested in a general election and there are areas in which further changes may be necessary. For example, the revised declaration forms submitted by candidates to the ECP that the Supreme Court objected to could be re-examined by parliament. Similarly, the ECP's code of conduct and requests for administrative and security assistance were all lawful, but parliament may wish to revisit the ECP's exercise of its powers and the rules governing them. Finally, it has become apparent that in addition to being constitutionally autonomous and legally empowered, a truly independent ECP requires a chief election commissioner and members who are able and willing to defend the ECP's turf from all institutional encroachment and interference. A parliamentary commission could help produce new ideas and proposals for strengthening the democratic process.

Unending child rape

SEVEN months have elapsed since the rape and murder of little Zainab triggered national horror. Seven months in which this country — hungry for justice — intently scrutinised every detail of the investigation of the case, and the arrest, prosecution and conviction of her assailant. Yet, over this period, behind the scenes, official statistics reveal that 141 child rape cases (excluding those dismissed over 'lack of evidence' or other reasons) were reported in Lahore alone — with none so far resulting in a conviction, and the accused being granted bail by the courts in all cases. The dissonance between these and Zainab's case underscores a fact that is unfortunately taken for granted during periods of collective outrage — that extensive media coverage and suo motu actions, which serve to expedite only a handful of cases, are no substitute for sustained reforms that permeate the entire edifice of a moribund criminal justice

system. Though there is not enough newsprint to spotlight each case as much Zainab's, it is essential to focus on some of the prevalent obstacles these young victims and their families face in their interactions with the criminal justice system.

First, of the few families who do officially report an assault, many find that the police refuse to even register their case, either due to indifference or, ironically, to avoid media scrutiny. Past this initial hurdle, investigations are typically mishandled. Interviews with child victims are rarely conducted with sensitivity, often leading to further trauma, and little effort is made to liaise with organisations that can provide counselling and legal aid, or to determine whether the victim is in need of protective services. Protocols for evidence gathering and the chain of custody are regularly flouted, invalidating the results of DNA testing — despite the fact that Lahore has one of the country's few purportedly functional forensic laboratories. Even if properly collected and tested, most judges, wedded to arcane jurisprudence, put little stock in forensic evidence in the absence of eyewitness testimony. During trial, cases are often undermined by a combination of lethargic public prosecutors and defence attorneys (and at times even judges) who resort to victim blaming. This is what most parents seeking accountability for the horrific violence inflicted on their child must face in one of Pakistan's largest cities, with a relatively well-staffed and well-resourced police force. The situation across the rest of Pakistan is equally, if not more, appalling. Will it ever change?

Why take sides?

It is a dispute that Pakistan can and should have stayed out of, or at the very least waded into sensibly and with diplomatic tact.

Instead, a one-sided position has been taken that makes Pakistan look weak and may introduce wrinkles in a relationship with a friendly Western country.

Saudi Arabia's disproportionate response to arguably clumsy attempts by Canada to highlight human rights violations in the former country is a lesson in how not to conduct bilateral relations. For Pakistan, however, the choice was more straightforward: hew to previous formulations of neutrality in bilateral disputes between friends and allies, and avoid getting entangled in a dispute where the country had little to gain and much to lose.

The caretaker administration is to hand over the reins of government to the PTI for the first time in a few days' time — a manifestly valid reason for postponing a policy decision until the new government finds its feet. But for reasons that the caretaker government has not made clear, it has chosen to side with Saudi Arabia in its dispute with Canada.

Perhaps an argument can be made that Saudi Arabia is on the diplomatic warpath and with Pakistan suffering acute pressure on the external account front, the possibility of financial aid, oil imports on preferential terms and sustaining crucial foreign remittances from Saudi Arabia has meant having to choose sides.

See: Saudi-backed IsDB ready to help Imran-led govt with \$4 billion loan

But Pakistan has not overtly taken sides in the Saudi Arabia-led Gulf embargo against Qatar, and prime minister-elect Imran Khan has pledged to try and ease tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Surely, the Saudi-Iran and Saudi-Qatar differences are of far greater importance to Saudi Arabia than its dispute with Canada.

For Pakistan to so unnecessarily align itself against Canada is also to disregard trade relations and diplomatic ties with a friendly Western power and the thousands of Canadians of Pakistani origin. Better sense ought to have prevailed. Pakistan should maintain neutrality and promote peaceful relations wherever it can.

Counterproductive move by the US

THE arrogance of the decision reeks of a hubris that surely cannot be beneficial to bilateral ties. Rather astonishingly, the US administration of President Donald Trump has suspended the International Military Education and Training programme to Pakistan, denying a handful of Pakistan military officers exposure to and training in US military programmes for allied forces. It appears that the suspension may have a minimal effect in terms of the numbers of Pakistani military officers affected, but the potential impact on wider bilateral relationship is so unreasonable, ill advised and preposterous that it raises the question of whether the higher authorities in the US any longer understand the implications of the decisions they are making.

At no point has any Pakistani official suggested or even implied that a continuing training relationship between the Pakistani armed forces and the US is fundamental to the preparedness required of military officers. Yet, the small-mindedness of the US decision suggests a willingness to alienate the Pakistani state and its armed forces in a manner that surely can have no positive effect on the bilateral relationship. Indeed, since 9/11, when Pakistan-US ties were reset, there has been an understanding that Pakistan's cooperation with the Western powers — not simply what is sought by the West, but what has been provided in fact — is rooted in a mutual understanding and cooperation that rises far beyond the immediate grievances that exist between the two states. Pakistani officials may be quick to point out the deleterious effects of a suspension in bilateral military ties, but the effect goes far beyond the training of a handful of individuals. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the armed forces would not suffer in fundamental ways from the sudden and uncalled-for suspension to military training programmes, but there is a possibility that halting the latter will unnecessarily harden Pakistani resistance to even legitimate American demands.

History itself suggests that such attempts are counterproductive and may lead to undesirable consequences including but not limited to the rise of anti-American feelings in the country. Perhaps the administration of US President Donald Trump is under the mistaken impression that heaping pressure on Pakistan in any way that it can think of, even if the measures chosen are manifestly counterproductive, will lead to positive change in the bilateral relationship. But that assumption ignores Pakistan's legitimate and continuing concerns when it comes to US actions in the region. It could be that the US believes denying Pakistani military officials access to and limiting interactions with their American counterparts will hurt this country more than it does the US. But the only obvious effect of such actions is to further remove the Pakistani state from dealings with not just the US superpower but the wider Western world as well. Please stop making the wrong choices.

Curbing trade deficit

ONE of the biggest challenges the incoming government will face when it goes about the business of fixing the imbalances of the external sector is to find a way to shrink the trade deficit. The growing gap between imports and exports, which touched a historic high of \$37bn in the last fiscal year, is the prime reason why

the economy is losing foreign exchange reserves to the point of near depletion. Shoring up the reserves in the short term through a bailout, either bilateral or multilateral, is only the first step. If the trade deficit is not brought under control, the bailout will amount to little more than a short lease of life. And if reserves are to be protected in the face of such a massive deficit, the currency will have to plummet to historic lows that are difficult to forecast. The menu of options for the incoming government is not a good one, and at the heart of it lies the trade deficit.

Perhaps in anticipation of this, the Commerce Division and Customs are reportedly working on a plan that can be presented to the incoming government upon arrival to help curb imports. This is the right approach certainly, since lifting exports will be a longer exercise. Finding a way to compress imports is the first step but here a conundrum arises. The previous government took liberal recourse to regulatory duties as the way to curb 'nonessential imports', but this did not work largely because the demand for these 'nonessential imports' is largely inelastic to price. Then came a series of currency depreciations that gave a temporary fillip to exports, but did little to curb the growth of the trade deficit. So now bureaucrats in commerce and customs are working on a model to suggest other ways to curb imports, including, according to some reports, outright bans. It is possible that matters may come to this, and if they do, it will signal a real economic emergency. Import quotas were done away with many years ago, and their return will mean that the government is comprehensively out of ideas. More regulatory duties also carry their disadvantage since they induce great distortions in the economy. Whatever road the incoming government chooses, there is little doubt that managing the fallout from the trade deficit is going to be one of the biggest challenges.

Changes in PCB?

AS speculations mount over the fate of Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Najam Sethi, incoming prime minister Imran Khan has kept his cards close to his chest. Pakistan cricket has a history of the board's top officials being picked according to the wishes of the rulers of the day. Critics, however, denounce government interference, and say the practice discredits Pakistan cricket. Instead, they advocate the well-established principle of modern sporting governance that national federations be autonomous in the administration of their affairs. Sensing

yet another tug of war amid rumours that the new government will ask the PCB's top hierarchy to step down, and appoint new faces, caution has once again been advised to safeguard the game and its newfound stability. There's little doubt that things are looking up for Pakistan cricket after nearly a decade of despondency. From the rising graph of the national team to the blossoming of PSL into a multimillion-dollar venture to the return of international cricket at home to rich dividends vis-à-vis the allocation of major tours, the achievements under the current PCB have been impressive. Moreover, wisdom has been shown in the choice of capable coaches and selectors. Stadiums have been renovated and, crucially, a zero-tolerance policy on corruption introduced. Even so, this praise must be diluted with some reservations. The PCB under Mr Sethi and his colleagues have been found woefully wanting when it comes to streamlining the domestic cricket structure, which has been in dire need of reforms for a number of years now.

There are reports that the incoming government may have plans to make changes in the PCB, primarily because of their leader's long association with the game and the political acrimony that has existed between him and the PCB chairman. However, there are those who see a glimmer of hope as they cite Mr Khan's victory speech in which he hinted at letting bygones be bygones and making a new beginning with one and all. Hopefully, professional attitudes will prevail.

Disjointed opposition role

WITH the PTI slowly unveiling its choices for the senior posts it has to fill in various governments across the country, the combined opposition led by the PML-N and PPP is attempting to put forward consensus candidates in the upcoming election of the prime minister, chief ministers and speakers and deputy speakers of the assemblies.

While the opposition talks are continuing, they appear to centre on the old rules of power politics without much heed to the true parliamentary role of opposition leaders.

Part of the problem may be that while the PPP and PML-N have an incentive to combine their parliamentary strength in opposition to the PTI, the two parties are themselves competitors.

Particularly in Punjab, where a precipitous decline in the PPP's electoral fortunes now appears to be a long-term trend, it seems that the parties are more concerned with protecting their party positions than assembling a coordinated and effective opposition.

While political parties and alliances are within their right to choose their candidates for high office, it is rather dispiriting that the PML-N is mostly focused on extending the Sharif dominance of the party while the PPP has deployed familiar faces to lead its side in the talks.

For the PML-N, with its leader and seemingly the heir apparent in jail, the next parliament could have been an opportunity to present a new, diverse face of the party.

Instead, after a lacklustre campaign run by Shahbaz Sharif with a hitherto mostly behind-the-scenes role for his son Hamza, the father-son duo have effectively nominated themselves for the top opposition slots in the National Assembly and the Punjab Assembly.

The PML-N's unwillingness to consider figures from outside the Sharif family does not bode well for the nurturing of a new leadership.

Meanwhile, the PPP appears unsure of what role to play in the various assemblies, seeking to partner with the PML-N in the centre but reluctant to form a powerful opposition bloc in Punjab.

The PTI's relative struggle in announcing its cabinets at the centre and in three provinces is rooted in a lack of interest in parliamentary matters and oversight when in opposition.

The unwillingness of all major political parties to take the opposition role in the assemblies seriously plays a part in the overall governance crisis in the country.

When the switch is made from opposition to governing, incoming governments are woefully unprepared for the immediate challenges they must contend with.

Equally damaging, governments are left without firm parliamentary oversight of the executive, allowing misgovernance to continue.

The opposition's decisions ought to be rooted in a desire to strengthen the overall democratic process.

Jinnah's words

AUGUST 11 is of particular significance to Pakistan's minorities. It reminds them of the iconic words spoken by the founder of the nation, Mohammad Ali Jinnah on that day in 1947, words that contained the promise of a country where they would not be discriminated against on the basis of their faith. "You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the state...." declared the Quaid-i-Azam in his inaugural address to the Constituent Assembly. In 2009, Aug 11 was designated National Minorities Day by the PPP-led coalition government, an initiative continued by the PML-N. Participants at a convention held this year to mark the day emphasised the importance of including members of minority communities in national decision-making processes and in all tiers of governance. They also called for Mr Jinnah's iconic speech to be made part of the Constitution so it could provide guidance for the formulation of laws and policies in the country.

It is deeply unfortunate, but not surprising, that 70 years after Independence, minorities in Pakistan should still have to ask for a more inclusive society. Most leaders who came after Mr Jinnah disregarded his words. Some appeased right-wing elements, even actively patronised them. In fact, matters have come to such a pass that religion is often the touchstone of one's worth as a citizen of Pakistan, and what one can expect from the state. Non-Muslims cannot aspire to the highest offices in the land for which only Muslims, according to the Constitution, are eligible. That in itself makes non-Muslims second-class citizens, excluded from serving their country in certain capacities, a discrimination based solely on faith. Religious triumphalism means anyone advocating a secular ethos — essentially what Mr Jinnah was doing in his above-quoted speech — invites the risk of being called a traitor or an infidel, allegations that can result in a grievous outcome to the individual. Meanwhile, a landmark judgement by Justice Tassaduq Jilani which ordered the state to take specific policy measures to address the persecution of minorities and ensure their rights has been gathering dust since 2014. A constitutional democracy can only be strengthened when all citizens, regardless of their faith, actually believe they are equal before the law.

China mosque stand-off

A STAND-OFF between the Chinese state and the Muslim community in the country's Ningxia region threatens to harm communal harmony if not approached delicately. The dispute is over a new mosque in the region; the state says the mosque "had not received proper permits"; Beijing is apparently irked by the domes used in its structure — a feature of mosques across the Muslim world. However, members of the local Hui Muslim community have strongly objected to the government's intentions of demolishing the mosque, and have staged a sit-in to prevent this. While the People's Republic has, in a positive move, delayed the action, as reports coming out of China indicate, believers of all faiths have come across restrictions, as the Communist Party seeks 'Sinification' of religion.

Muslims in China have a history that goes back centuries and at present they number over 20m. However, as has been the case with many communist states, there have been tight curbs on religious practice there. While the Chinese state may have legitimate concerns over extremism within the Uighur community, the methods it has used to clamp down on the Turkic Muslims in their home region of Xinjiang can only be described as harsh. Now, beyond the Uighurs, it appears that the party is cracking down on Muslims of other communities as well. The Hui are ethnically Chinese; however, that has not stopped the state from limiting their religious practices, as the Ningxia stand-off shows. Instead of ostracising ethnic and religious minorities in China, Beijing should adopt a more inclusive policy and lift restrictions on religious and cultural practices. By cracking down and pushing communities to the wall, the state will only alienate them and strengthen the extremist narrative. As far as the Ningxia matter is concerned, the state should find an amicable solution together with the local Hui community. Where the Uighurs are concerned, a more relaxed policy and positive interaction with the locals of Xinjiang can help deter extremism and separatism.

Miles to go

Independence day this year has a special resonance. A new parliament has been seated and the PTI is preparing to assume governing responsibilities at the centre and in more than one province for the first time.

The democratic process may be wobblier than it has been at most other points over the last decade, but democratic continuity can help create the space necessary for its strengthening.

Independence Day is an important reminder of the distance that has been travelled since 1947 as well as the many miles that have yet to be covered in order to achieve Mr Jinnah's vision of a democratic, progressive and inclusive Pakistan.

Despite deep political divisions and institutional strife, there is an important consensus in Pakistan today: the country must hold regular elections and be governed by the Constitution. With three major parties dominating, there is also a degree of choice available to the voter.

Yet, a mixed bag of incremental gains and repeated setbacks does not make for a welcome democratic picture. One of the key problems to which there has been no solution apparent over the decades is institutional encroaching on the terrain of other institutions.

While institutions need vigorous oversight and checks and balances, the mechanisms must come from within the democratic system. A controlled democracy wherein other institutions circumscribe the authority and writ of an elected government and parliament, and impose their own policy prescriptions and priorities, is a recipe for enduring conflict.

Perhaps the PTI as a new governing party that does not have a history of institutional conflict will be able to strive for a rebalancing of the constitutional, democratic order. Whether well-intentioned or otherwise, interference by other institutions in the functioning of a government and parliament destabilises multiple facets of national life.

Incoming prime minister Imran Khan could consider inviting the superior judiciary and the military leadership to a national dialogue on respecting institutional

boundaries and constraints. Clearly, business as usual must not be allowed to continue.

The civilian leadership, the security establishment and the superior judiciary tend to individually behave in a manner that suggests all fault lies with the others. Certainly, a service-oriented, publicly accountable civilian leadership can gradually create the circumstances for the installation of true civilian supremacy as the Constitution mandates and the founding father envisioned.

But there is a strong perception that the other institutions also need to cultivate within an unflinching commitment to democratic rule. As various phases of civilian rule in the country have demonstrated, a government that must constantly worry about the security of its tenure is simply unable to give its best to addressing the profound governance challenges that have endured and multiplied.

Democratic rule — true democratic rule — is not a gift that the country must wait to receive when deemed worthy of it; democratic rule is an inalienable right of each and every citizen of Pakistan.

Yemen prisoner abuse

WHERE the impoverished, war-torn country of Yemen is concerned, it appears as if international law and human rights conventions do not apply. Ever since a Saudi-Emirati-led coalition intervened in 2015 to dislodge the Houthi militia and restore the country's president, there has been a steady stream of news regarding abuses perpetrated by all sides, though mostly involving the coalition, emerging from Yemen. The civilian death toll has been unacceptably high but the combatants seem unmoved by the 'collateral damage'. Just last week, a bus carrying mostly schoolchildren was bombed by the coalition; some 30 children perished. Now evidence is emerging of prisoner abuse by the UAE's troops and their Yemeni partners. As reported by Al Jazeera, Emirati and Yemeni personnel have been accused of torturing and sexually assaulting detainees in southern parts of the country. The details are chilling. A number of detainees are reported to have died.

These are serious allegations. While it is true that Al Jazeera is Qatari owned — and the emirate is currently engaged in a toxic feud with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi

— the grim accounts cannot be dismissed out of hand as similar reports were released by American news agency AP in June and taken note of by Amnesty. What is needed is a thorough probe. While many of those interned in the prisons are said to be militants belonging to the militant Islamic State group and Al Qaeda's Yemeni branch, nothing can justify torture. If the detainees are indeed dangerous militants then they must be tried and punished as per the law; torture and abominable abuse in the name of 'justice' are unacceptable. The reports bring to mind Abu Ghraib, the notorious American gulag that made headlines for the US military's prisoner abuse following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In fact, in the aftermath of Sept 11, several so-called black sites were set up in different parts of the globe by the Americans and their allies to torture and punish suspected militants, away from the norms of justice and human rights. Are we seeing the same dark history being repeated in Yemen? Whether it is abuse of prisoners or the mass murder of civilians in Yemen, the world community, led by the UN, needs to take stronger steps to bring this ruinous war to an end. And as a first step, foreign forces that have brought misery to the people of Yemen need to silence their guns.

Go for green

THE seasonal rains under way these days in many parts of the country make it the ideal time to put in some spadework towards a greener future. But our track record in this regard is unfortunate. A 25pc or higher forest cover is internationally recommended; yet, Pakistan has steadily eaten away at its natural heritage so that a pitiable 2pc of its forest cover remains. The country's deforestation rate is the highest in Asia, and, according to the Worldwide Fund for Nature-Pakistan, between 2000 and 2010 we lost an average of approximately 43,000 hectares of forests — or an area roughly half the size of the federal capital.

That the issue remains on the radar, then, must come as a matter of relief. Although awareness is generally low, it is growing — albeit agonisingly slowly, and prompted in no small part by international and development organisations. Plantation drives are initiated sporadically in different parts of the country, and all these must be welcomed. On Sunday, in Karachi, for example, the WWF-P kicked off a campaign to plant 1.4m trees across the country within the span of a year. Meanwhile, in the Rawalpindi / Islamabad area, the Forests Department

recently distributed over 200,000 saplings for plantation, and in the capital city a private initiative kicked off to plant 20,000 trees in different areas in collaboration with the city administration. These attempts are all praiseworthy, as are other gains such as those made in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over the past few years. Yet it is worth asking, after the cameras have stopped rolling and good intentions withered away, will the outcomes of these drives be helped to survive and flourish? Have the custodians of the law the wherewithal and determination to take on the related problem of the timber mafia, and do city planners display the wisdom to temper urbanisation requirements with concerns about deforestation? Certainly, it is imperative that all these challenges be met — and most importantly, be delinked — from political capital. Instead, they should centre on the future prosperity they signify.

Battle for Ghazni

THE Afghan Taliban attack on Ghazni city is another indication of the increasing disarray inside Afghanistan and US policy circles. While the numbers are in dispute, it appears to be fairly clear that hundreds of people have already died in the fighting. Not only is the city of Ghazni itself under attack, the vast majority of the province's rural districts are either disputed or under the control of the Taliban. If the latter do succeed in capturing the whole province, it would be the first time they controlled one in the 17-year-old US-led war in the country. Given the proximity of Ghazni to Kabul and its connecting the capital city to Kandahar in the south, the Afghan security forces, in coordination with US troops, may eventually succeed in a counter-offensive to at least push the Taliban outside the city limits and secure the highway again. But the Taliban offensive has already underlined the need for a more urgent dialogue process among the warring sides in Afghanistan.

The endless war in Afghanistan has only one solution: a political peace process. Hawks in Afghanistan and US policy circles may use the latest Taliban attack to argue that now is not the time to engage in dialogue with an enemy that, if still far from winning the war, has battlefield momentum on its side. Similarly, inside Taliban circles the continuing weakness of the Afghan security forces and the relatively limited effect of the aerial bombardment that the US has militarily limited itself to could be reasons to argue against immediate dialogue. Why engage in talks now when dialogue later — at a stage when the Afghan

government is weaker still and US political will to sustain an endless war virtually nil — could win the Taliban greater concessions in a post-war framework for the country? But the logic of the hawks is only to perpetuate war in a country that has already suffered near-continuous conflict for two generations.

The Taliban may be able to contest half of Afghanistan's districts and control swathes of the countryside, but the state supported by the outside world is not on the verge of collapse. Neither are the Afghan government and its military forces, with the limited foreign assistance at their disposal, going to decisively win the war against the Taliban. Protracted conflicts are immensely complicated and the path to peace anything but easy. A short-lived Taliban ceasefire earlier this year demonstrated that the leadership is still capable of enforcing discipline while the joyous reaction of ordinary Afghans showed that the country is looking for and willing to make peace. Some details of preliminary talks between the US and the Taliban have emerged in recent weeks. The Afghan government does not appear to want to be a spoiler at the moment. It may only be half a chance, but all sides must grasp the possibility of peace eagerly.

Police reform

AS Karachi's newly appointed police chief Amir Ahmed Shaikh said recently after taking up his post, the megacity's biggest problem remains street crime. The brutal murder of a young girl late on Monday night in a reported mugging attempt in the Gizri area has underscored the dangers street crime poses to citizens' safety. Mr Shaikh said while talking to the media, that around 40 to 50 complaints related to street crime are being lodged at the city's police stations on a daily basis. While the law-enforcement operation under way in the city since 2013 has brought down violent crime including targeted killings, kidnappings and extortion attempts, opportunistic street crime remains a major problem. Karachi's top cop has also announced the launching of a dedicated WhatsApp number where citizens can lodge complaints, including against the "undesirable attitude" of the police, as well as the setting up of a cell for accountability of police. There is also a plan to post commandos at street crime 'hotspots'. Similar efforts have been launched in the past, including a complaint cell inaugurated by the Sindh IG, but have not met with much success. One can only hope that this latest endeavour is effective in reforming the force and curbing the abuse of power.

The latter issue is not limited to Karachi; it affects the entire country at varying levels. Indeed, with new provincial governments taking charge, police reform should be at the top of the agenda of the dispensations. Much has been said and written about police reforms under the PTI's previous administration in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Now with Imran Khan's party back in the saddle in the province, and likely to form the government in Punjab as well, citizens will expect it to carry the reforms further to make the police truly accountable to the people. The PPP-led Sindh government, as well as the coalition set to take power in Balochistan, will also need to do much more to improve the performance of their respective provincial police set-ups. It bears repeating that the police are meant to protect and serve the citizenry, and the colonial mode of policing must be jettisoned in favour of community policing where members of the force know the areas, and the people, under their watch. For this to happen, though, internal accountability of the force, as well as external oversight by legislators and civil society, are essential.

Kiki Challenge furore

IT speaks volumes for a country's psyche when a playful stunt is taken not with the smile and the mock censure that it deserves, but with bellows of outrage and grievously lacerated sentiments.

The latter was in considerable display in the wake of a video that, earlier this week, was uploaded to the internet showing a young woman sashaying her way down the aisle of a stationary and empty plane and then stepping out onto the tarmac to perform what is known in the online world as the 'Kiki Challenge'.

This game, currently causing young people around the world to bestir themselves, is played by stepping out of a vehicle to indulge in a few dance steps while being filmed, and then putting the sequence on public display.

The 'challenge' is giving parents and traffic police everywhere a headache, but here it has turned into a full-blown controversy, with no less than the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) ordering a probe into the 'transgression'. For, argues NAB, the young lady was pictured wrapped in a Pakistani flag, in a PIA plane — thus disgracing the 'chaand tara'.

The woman in question is Polish tourist Eva zu Beck, and while NAB may demand how she got access to a parked aircraft in an ostensibly high-security zone, according to a tweet that went out on Aug 12 from the national carrier's official account: "[...] global citizen [...] has been exploring Pakistan flying #PIA. She will be celebrating Independence Day in a style never before attempted in the world! Stay tuned for updates". (PIA later said the tweet had been deleted).

Ms Zu Beck has apologised, though it's beyond anyone's guess why she should be made to feel the need to.

More importantly, has NAB nothing better to do than play morality police and make a ridiculous exploit look like a national security breach?

On its part, PIA, instead of being on the defensive and instituting its own inquiry, should have asked NAB to stay out of the affair.

Provinces' vital role

WITH the National Assembly and the provincial assemblies elected at the same time, much of the attention and scrutiny after a general election tends to focus on the National Assembly and the incoming federal government.

Yet, since the passage of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, the provincial assemblies and governments are more important than ever to the delivery of a range of services to the citizenry.

From the critical sectors of public health and public education to women development, youth affairs and the environment, provincial assemblies and governments have an enormous number of responsibilities.

So, as the provincial assemblies are sworn in and provincial governments take shape, it is hoped that the elected representatives of the people at this level will bring fresh energy, purpose and direction to the execution of their constitutional responsibilities and obligations. The challenges are many and urgent improvements are needed in several areas.

Perhaps what the new provincial assemblies and governments should keep foremost in mind is the cynical lobbying by anti-democratic forces in the country to undermine and reverse the great achievements of the 18th Amendment.

The argument that the provinces are taking away too much money from the federal tier, where the centre's priorities require greater resources than currently available, is a step in the direction of returning Pakistan to a top-down state where the people's voices are drowned out by institutional concerns and demands.

To truly strengthen the provincial tier and further cement the legacy of the 18th Amendment, however, the provinces must look to their own patchy records this decade.

While some provinces have made progress in the public health and education sectors, it is clear that there are enormous service-delivery gaps that need to be filled. Pakistan will not make meaningful economic progress until all Pakistanis are healthier and better educated.

It is welcome that the PTI, PML-N and PPP all emphasised public health and education in their manifestos.

What the provincial tiers must also reject is a centralising tendency away from local governments. The PTI-led government in KP did enact a fairly comprehensive devolution of power to the local governments, but implementation has been uneven and slower than it ought to have been.

Meanwhile, Sindh and Punjab have local governments systems that are an affront to the constitutional imperative of devolution. Balochistan was the first province to hold LG elections, but there is a wholesale governance crisis in the province.

While the July 25 general election is controversial, it did partly demonstrate that where a government's performance is unsatisfactory and a political alternative exists, the voter does prioritise change.

The PTI will likely form a government in three of the four provinces, but the PPP and PML-N remain formidable competitors. Five years is enough time for governments to demonstrate a commitment to genuine reform.

Turkey-US spat

FEW US presidents have shaken up the international order as much as the current incumbent of the White House. While the Donald Trump-led

administration has trained its guns on traditional foes such as Iran, even close allies of the US — such as the Europeans and Turkey — are not immune from the American president's abrasive style of 'diplomacy'. In fact, the row with Turkey threatens to scuttle the relationship between Washington and Ankara, an alliance that dates back to the Cold War. However, the detention of an American pastor by the Turks has not gone down well with Mr Trump; the man has been accused of being involved in the 2016 Turkish coup. As is usual with the American leader, he announced a major foreign policy decision via Twitter last week, saying that he was doubling tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminium, and apparently gloated over the slide of the lira. "Our relations with Turkey are not good at this time!" he bluntly added in the tweet. Expectedly, Turkish President Recep Erdogan has not taken well to the US moves, saying that if "this trend of unilateralism and disrespect" were not reversed, Turkey would "start looking for new friends and allies".

Ever since he took office in 2017, Mr Trump's foreign policy approach has been unorthodox, to put it mildly. Where Iran is concerned, he seems convinced that pushing the Islamic Republic to the brink is the best option for Middle East peace. His trade war with China also threatens to rattle the global economy. Yet while Iran and China can hardly be described as American allies, the Europeans — long 'special partners' of the US — have also not been spared, as Mr Trump has raised tariffs against EU states. Turkey, meanwhile, is a member of Nato and a long-time US ally. However, tensions between Ankara and Washington have been simmering for a while, especially over Syria, where the Americans have backed Kurdish fighters whom the Turks have termed 'terrorists' allied with the PKK. The pastor's imprisonment, it seems, has only been the straw that broke the camel's back. Rather than pick fights with both enemies and friends, Mr Trump and his hawkish foreign policy team need to reassess their approach where bilateral and multilateral ties are concerned. If anything, these policies are putting the global community on the road to conflict in a world already wracked by terrorism and war. Better sense should prevail and the Turkish leadership should respond in a statesman-like manner and not be provoked. While Mr Erdogan is indeed free to choose his allies, he can take the moral high ground by opting for dialogue instead of confrontation.

Miners' deaths

THIS is not the first time that we are seeing miners die in a coalmine accident, in this case in the Sanjdi area of Balochistan. Neither, unfortunately, will this be the last such incident. After a three-day rescue effort launched largely by volunteers, the bodies of all 13 workers in the hellish mine have been retrieved; two rescue volunteers also died of suffocation while trying to retrieve the bodies, bringing the total death count to 15. Like all those who have lost their lives in previous mining accidents in the country, the dead coalminers and rescuers will now be forever a statistic. And there have been many over the years who still lie buried in the mines after an accident.

Such fatalities are becoming far too common now, and perhaps it is time to place some sort of a ban on mining if contractors cannot put in place proper security procedures. In the latest instance, the explosion that caused large sections of the mine to collapse, burying the workers inside, was triggered by a pocket of methane gas. In fact, this is a common trigger for such accidents but not the only one. Yet despite numerous such incidents, there are no discernible rules for how a mine can be run, what qualifications a contractor must meet before obtaining permission, and what safety training must be given to workers. All around the world, extraordinary care is taken by mining companies to ensure that no open flame is allowed anywhere near a coalmine, let alone inside it. But here it is common to see kerosene lanterns being used to light up mining shafts. This is just one example of the hazards to which workers are routinely exposed. There is, of course, hardly any concept of compensation that must be paid in the event of the death of or injury to miners. The sector is one of the most dangerous in Pakistan, and provincial governments need to give more attention to it.

Modi on IHK

IN a fifth and final Independence Day speech ahead of a general election in India next year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi struck a welcome tone on India-held Kashmir. What remains to be seen is if Mr Modi is, in fact, willing to follow up on his words with positive actions in IHK. Last year too, on Aug 15, the Indian prime minister spoke of a need to embrace the people of IHK and reject the coercive path of 'goli and gaali' (bullet and abuse); but a year of turmoil, bloodshed and political upheaval followed. This year, however, Mr Modi also invoked his BJP predecessor as prime minister, the late Atal Behari Vajpayee, in claiming that a path of development ought to be followed in IHK based on Mr Vajpayee's pledge

of ‘insaniyat, Kashmiriyat, jamhuriyat’ (humanity, Kashmiri identity, democracy). Mr Modi also pledged to hold delayed panchayat elections in IHK.

The problem with the approach adopted by Mr Modi (and previous Indian governments) to IHK is that there is no acknowledgement of two realities: the special status of IHK and the need for dialogue with Pakistan for a permanent solution to the Kashmir dispute. Even as Mr Modi spoke of a softer policy towards IHK, there are deep apprehensions that the hard-line BJP national government is seeking to revoke Article 35-A of the Indian constitution, an act that would be a virtual declaration of war against the oppressed people of IHK. The special status of IHK is resented by hardliners in India precisely because it protects the vulnerable people of IHK from mass demographic, economic, political and social change. By stripping IHK of its constitutionally protected special status, hardliners in IHK and in federal India want to achieve what extreme violence and the acute militarisation of IHK have not been able to accomplish. The active resistance of the people — all people, young and old — of IHK is rooted in an inalienable Kashmiri identity that no pressure or violence can cause to disappear.

In addition, the government of India, whether led by Mr Modi and his hard-line allies or any other government, must recognise that a solution to the Kashmir dispute intrinsically lies in a dialogue with Pakistan too. The Modi government has found many reasons to not engage Pakistan, but all Indian governments eventually return to the logic of dialogue: there is no alternative to the eventual normalisation of bilateral ties and peace in the region. A scheduled general election in India next year could become an excuse for Mr Modi to balk at dialogue with the new civilian government of incoming prime minister Imran Khan. But Mr Modi ought to understand that openings when spurned can lead to even more complex future circumstances that may be inimical to peace and normalisation. The region needs and deserves peace; India should act sensibly.

Twitter shutdown?

THE spectre of an internet clampdown has once again reared its ugly head. In a recent Senate body meeting, a PTA representative stated the possibility that Twitter could be banned in Pakistan if it ignored an Islamabad High Court notice to comply with requests to block “certain offensive material” from its platform. We have been at this juncture before; then, as now, this practice is ultimately self-

defeating, not least because website bans can easily be circumvented with VPNs. Trying to “teach Twitter a lesson” may or may not work, but it will certainly have an impact on its over 3m users in Pakistan — including almost all political parties and many public institutions, local businesses and start-ups, and social activists — all of whom rely heavily on the platform. This is not to say that Twitter is without fault; its policies are frequently criticised for allowing hate speech and abuse to proliferate with little checks — but no country that purports to stand for democratic values would suggest resorting to a blanket ban. Indeed, the flippant remark that Twitter is essentially expendable by virtue of its relatively small local presence betrays an inability to appropriately measure the need to tackle illegal online activity against the greater responsibility of upholding the people’s constitutional rights to information, free speech and expression. Blocking any social media platform would violate this mandate.

Amidst the furore, it is important not to ignore another disquieting suggestion made at the meeting. Stating that it cannot adequately investigate and prosecute cybercrimes under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2017, the FIA asked that it be amended so that the authority can conduct arrests, searches and seizures without court-ordered warrants — essentially a demand for *carte blanche*. This, too, would be an unreasonable curtailment of citizens’ rights. Peca is problematic, but not because it is too onerous for the authorities. By its design, Peca allows for mission creep, and as such implies bad faith. Much of its language is vague and subject to arbitrary interpretation. In the two years since it was passed, its rules have yet to be finalised. Transparency matters; the people have a right to know what constitutes ‘objectionable content’, not just to avoid inadvertently breaking the law but also to constructively scrutinise it and demand safeguards against state overreach. Hopefully, the PTI will keep its promises to undo this culture of secrecy, and fight for free speech, now that it is in office.

Neglected graveyards

AS a society, conditions for the living here are far from ideal. However, even the dearly departed are not allowed to rest in peace due to the mismanagement of graveyards. The issue was raised during Wednesday’s session of Karachi’s City Council, as elected members of the local government deplored the state of cemeteries in the metropolis. As highlighted during the session, clean surroundings in graveyards is an alien concept, while there is also insufficient

lighting. And the land mafia — a scourge that seems to be unstoppable in Karachi and many of the country's other cities — has also not spared the dead, for the council session was told criminals were encroaching on graveyard land. Some councillors also raised the disturbing point that in the city's graveyards stray dogs roamed freely, and there were reports that in some cemeteries the animals were digging up graves and devouring body parts. These shocking revelations should move the city government into action to ensure that the state of graveyards is improved.

Many of the city's graveyards have long been filled to capacity, yet the practice of fresh burials in these overburdened spaces continues. As the mayor observed during the session, a 'model graveyard' is being constructed in the Surjani Town area. The fact is that along with new graveyards that are properly managed, the city's existing cemeteries need to be cleaned up and appropriately maintained. It is sheer disrespect to the dead and to their loved ones when sewage inundates graves, animals and drug addicts roam about in cemeteries, and filth surrounds burial grounds. The local bodies need to pull up their socks where the maintenance of cemeteries is concerned. Some communities have set up burial grounds off the Superhighway; these graveyards are orderly, mostly clean and devoid of encroachments and wild animals. Perhaps the KMC can learn from civil society how to properly maintain burial grounds and implement these best practices in Karachi's cemeteries.

FATF worries

THE first review to monitor Pakistan's compliance with its counter-terror-financing and money-laundering action plan has not gone as well as it needed to.

The delegation from the Asia Pacific Group that is carrying out the review ended its visit without a word, but according to unofficially sourced reports from government representatives who could not speak on record, the review found deficiencies in Pakistan's legal framework that could prove to be a considerable challenge for the new rulers.

True, some progress has also been noted, but it is the deficiencies that will matter once the review comes up for discussion at the next FATF meeting. To some extent, the deficiencies can be attributed to the fact that implementation of the action plan began under an interim government that had a limited mandate

and was, therefore, unable to take some of the steps required of it. In light of this handicap, the APG has agreed to conduct another review in a month, so that it can engage with the newly elected government on the commitments. Next to arranging a bailout, this looks like the new big challenge that awaits the government.

The main flaw pointed out by the APG is the legal framework around non-profit-making and charitable organisations.

The reference is clearly to those groups operating in Pakistan as charities but that are listed by the United Nations as terrorist outfits. It is not yet clear what adjustments to the legal framework the action plan is committed to making, but getting together the votes required for the legislative changes would be one of the big tasks. In addition, the APG has flagged issues like cross-border movement of currency, weak investigation and prosecution in terror-financing cases, as well as poor implementation of UN Resolution 1267, which lists banned entities and persons.

Some elements of the action plan require administrative attention, such as improving the quality of human resource in sensitive departments or better coordination to speed up the processing of suspicious transaction reports. These will be relatively easier to address. But other elements that require legislative changes, tackling vast deficiencies in the economy such as the prevalence of the black market, or negotiating civil-military relations will be the tricky part.

The incoming government will find its attention focused on key weaknesses in Pakistan's polity and economy when it goes about the task of implementing the action plan. How it walks this path, and how well it can conduct itself before FATF could become a litmus test of its ability to deliver on the wide range of promises it has made in its manifesto.

Addressing the black economy, for example, is key to tackling terror financing since the relationship between terrorism and racketeering is well entrenched. It will take immense sobriety and maturity to follow this road.

With one voice

ON the eve of Pakistan's 71st Independence Day, the International Press Institute addressed a letter to our now elected Prime Minister Imran Khan,

petitioning him to “restore media freedom and create an environment where journalists and media organisations are able to function without fear”. The IPI once again outlined a series of coercive tactics deployed in recent months that have drastically caused Pakistan’s media landscape to deteriorate — from verbal and physical assaults on media workers to legally unwarranted blockades on newspapers’ distributions and TV channels’ broadcasts, not to mention effective embargos on reporting on a growing number of ‘red lines’ demarcated under the guise of protecting ‘national security’. The new prime minister would do well to listen to and address the grievances of the national press. The current stranglehold on the fourth estate, and the severe limitations this places on the people’s right to know, is inimical to the vision of Pakistan — democratic and accountable — promised by Mr Khan. A truly new dispensation, in which institutional weaknesses cannot be exploited to engineer an acquiescent press, is in everyone’s best interests.

The responsibility to reclaim the shrunken space for journalistic inquiry and scrutiny, however, does not rest with the government alone. The media must acknowledge its own culpability in allowing the situation to escalate. While several media organisations have been raising the alarm, the absence of a collective stance and cynical exploitation of the current impasse by sections of the press itself have enabled anti-democratic forces to flourish. Dawn has long maintained that the most effective bulwark against the erosion of an independent press is unity on one key, nonpartisan issue: freedom of the press. Yet this democratic tenet has not only been taken for granted but made controversial, both at home and around the world. On Thursday, hundreds of US newspapers published editorials defending press freedom in a coordinated effort to counter President Donald Trump’s persistent attacks on US media, including the recent rhetoric of labelling members of the media critical of his administration’s policies as ‘the enemy of the people’. Such terminology is deeply reflective of the ideology of those who use it, and almost always a precursor of more tangible reprisals. Here at home, with our own long history of struggle under far more hostile circumstances, it is all the more necessary for the press to speak with one collective voice in defence of our hard-won freedoms.

What Vajpayee represented

A POLITICAL career with many highs and lows defies easy summary. But this much does appear to be certain: where the political right in India is struggling to produce a true statesman and national leader today, Atal Behari Vajpayee once combined a formidable intellect with political skill and organisation to widen the political mainstream in that country. A nonagenarian who was thrice prime minister of India and entered politics as a teenager in pre-Partition British India, Vajpayee represented a kind of politics that was without precedent before him and that is not likely to be emulated by others anytime soon. From a Pakistani perspective, the Pokhran-II nuclear tests and a historic bus trip to Lahore where a joint prime ministerial declaration was signed with Nawaz Sharif are the two standout moments of Vajpayee's stints as prime minister. The Pokhran-II nuclear tests ushered in an era of overt nuclearisation in South Asia and have arguably forever changed the security equation in the region. No peacenik can favourably look upon Vajpayee's decision to campaign for and then conduct five nuclear tests as prime minister in May 1998.

Yet, Vajpayee undeniably showed great courage and vision in travelling to Pakistan by bus at the invitation of then-Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif. The Lahore declaration that was signed by the two prime ministers in February 1999 is a high point in the last two decades in the quest for the normalisation of relations between the nuclear-armed rivals. Vajpayee's successor as a BJP prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, invoked Vajpayee's approach to India-held Kashmir in his Independence Day speech on Wednesday, but Mr Modi has not shown a willingness to engage Pakistan in a sustained and meaningful manner. The Lahore Declaration remains a template for governments in both countries to follow today. Less welcome was the marginalising of Vajpayee in BJP politics and a takeover of the party by far-right elements. It is hoped that the Vajpayee path with Pakistan can be returned to by the BJP and by India.

PM's first speech

THE 22nd prime minister of Pakistan will have to contend with a set of circumstances that few leaders before him have had to face: familiar but significant governance and economic challenges; sky-high public expectations, especially among an ardent support base; and substantial scepticism and political opposition.

If Prime Minister Imran Khan succeeds in his economic and governance agendas, all of Pakistan will be stronger for it.

If Prime Minister Khan delivers credible civilian leadership, the constitutional order in the country will be strengthened.

Therefore, all Pakistanis and well-wishers of Pakistan ought to wish Mr Khan the very best in his first term as prime minister, which began yesterday.

Surely, however, Mr Khan has a special responsibility to his many supporters who have carried him from the margins of politics to its very epicentre.

In a fiercely divided polity and an era of hyper-partisan politics, the core PTI supporter has stood by Mr Khan because of his promise that he will be a different kind of leader — modern, efficient, results-oriented and clean — to what national politics has mostly offered so far.

But if Mr Khan is to deliver on even a modicum of what he has promised his many supporters, he will need to quickly pivot away from the angry, oppositional figure that he has cast himself as in politics for more than two decades.

The contrast between Mr Khan's victory speech a day after the general election and Prime Minister Khan's first speech from the floor of the National Assembly yesterday is an unfortunate one.

Confronted by a rowdy PML-N opposition that was quite obviously determined to mar Mr Khan's election as prime minister, Mr Khan appeared to lose his cool.

So, instead of a speech focused on healing political wounds and setting a positive tone for the incoming PTI government, Mr Khan was backwards-looking and seemed more interested in settling political scores.

The speech itself ultimately may not matter, but in a polity where the opposition is mostly focused on tearing down a government, Mr Khan will need to rise above petty insults and provocations.

If he does not, he may quickly find his governance agenda overwhelmed by a familiar internecine politics.

The small margin by which Mr Khan was elected as prime minister can quickly become a big political problem if the PTI and Mr Khan succumb to emotion instead of governing steadily.

Amidst the rowdy scenes in parliament on Friday, there was a bright spot: a maiden parliamentary speech by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari.

The PPP is clearly still firmly led by Mr Bhutto-Zardari's father, former president Asif Zardari, and the party once again made a shabby contribution to parliamentary politics by abstaining from the prime ministerial vote. But Mr Bhutto-Zardari did at least remind everyone that parliament needs more substantive speeches.

Kabul bombing

WHILE the devastation caused by the militant Islamic State group in the Middle East is all too obvious, IS has also begun to leave its bloody footprint in Afghanistan. A grim reminder of this came recently when the terrorist outfit claimed responsibility for a gruesome bombing targeting an educational centre in Kabul. At least 40 people were killed in the atrocity, most of them students studying for their exams, in a predominantly Shia neighbourhood. IS has been involved in several sectarian attacks in Afghanistan in the recent past. While there are numerous violent actors in that country, the presence of a jihadist, overtly sectarian player such as IS spells greater trouble for the region, including Pakistan. What is needed is a coordinated strategy involving all major regional actors, Kabul, the Americans in Afghanistan, as well as the Afghan Taliban, to address the threat.

According to the Russians, there are some 10,000 IS militants in Afghanistan; many of them have reportedly come from Syria and Iraq. The Russian anxiety is understandable, as the IS presence in Central Asia is a security challenge to Moscow. While a peace deal between the Kabul government and the Afghan Taliban may be far off, coordination is needed to prevent IS from establishing a firm foothold in Afghanistan. If the outfit were to find sanctuary as it did in Syria and Iraq, the consequences for this region would be devastating. Cooperation is needed between Kabul, the Afghan Taliban and the Americans who run the show in Afghanistan. Moreover, a successful strategy cannot be implemented without the involvement of regional states such as Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia and the Central Asian states. The mistake that was made in the Middle East — allowing IS to transform from a small-time terrorist outfit to a hydra-headed terror group — must not be repeated in Afghanistan. While the Afghan Taliban may have no love lost for the Kabul government, they must realise that if IS were allowed to

flourish, the so-called caliphate would have no qualms about wiping out the Taliban as well. And the US-led Nato force in Afghanistan also needs to do more to dislodge IS. Considering the firepower and resources at its disposal, and the length of time it has spent in Afghanistan, it must take greater responsibility to root it out. IS is a vicious movement that shows no mercy; it must not be allowed to succeed in its aims.

Power breakdown

HOW normal is it for the national grid to experience a breakdown so immense that the country's largest city, along with several other smaller cities and large swathes of rural areas, are plunged into darkness for almost eight hours? This is what we just witnessed in Sindh and Balochistan and it is something which occurs with distressing regularity in many parts of the country. In May, a similar power breakdown triggered by a fault in a switchyard at the Guddu thermal power station led to another large swathe plunging into darkness for a prolonged period, this time in Punjab. In both cases, it was the transmission grid that was at fault.

These incidents happen every year. An inquiry is ordered, a report is produced, cosmetic action is taken and the matter is forgotten and buried. All this shows that the staff in the power bureaucracy has no concept whatsoever of the importance of their job, and the scale of their responsibilities. They are merely killing time, and appear far more focused on internal rivalries and perks instead of the service that they are required to perform. Such power outages that impact the lives of tens of millions of people in the country are proof that the growth and evolution of the power system has moved beyond the capacity of the government bureaucracy to manage, calling into question the latter's ability to carry out its responsibilities in the future. The new government should make it a priority to ensure that power-sector reforms are carried out to gradually minimise the role of the government bureaucracy in the future running of the sector. The blueprint for how this ought to be done was drawn up a long time ago. It includes bringing in outside management into the distribution companies, changing their boards, and moving towards market pricing for power. Without such measures, the power system will continue to degenerate, giving us more spells of large-scale breakdowns and a skyrocketing circular debt. It is time to change.

PM Khan's cabinet

TODAY, the first members of Prime Minister Imran Khan's cabinet will be sworn in.

The cabinet is central to all governments' aspirations in office, but Prime Minister Khan's cabinet will have particular importance. A political veteran at this stage of his career, Mr Khan is a novice in the executive branch. Moreover, with the PTI forming provincial governments in KP and Punjab; partnering in the Balochistan government; and having an important opposition role in Sindh and dominating the National Assembly seats from Karachi, the PTI that Mr Khan leads will need a great deal of the prime minister's time and attention.

Finally, in his address to the nation on Sunday, Prime Minister Khan has laid out an ambitious governance and reforms agenda; only an empowered and capable federal cabinet will be able to deliver what Mr Khan has demanded. It is, therefore, disappointing that Mr Khan has selected among his first cabinet members a number of individuals who represent status quo.

The thin majority by which Mr Khan was elected prime minister in the National Assembly on Friday hinted at the difficulties the PTI has faced in forming a federal government. The sheer number of members from parties other than the PTI in the first cabinet batch indicates that good governance will be difficult to deliver. Coalition allies handed plum cabinet posts are not usually known for investing a great deal in the lead party's governance agenda. The PTI has a further, intra-party division to contend with: the so-called electables and individuals mired in power politics that the PTI has attracted in recent years dominate the front lines of the party and few young or core PTI members have found themselves elevated to positions of real executive strength.

Perhaps Mr Khan believes that the driver of change will be himself and the Prime Minister's Office he now occupies, and therefore compromises in cabinet selection are not an important matter. But the over-centralisation of power is a problem itself and quickly leads to governance gridlock, arbitrary decision-making and nepotism.

Also surprising is Prime Minister Khan's decision to retain the interior portfolio for at least the time being.

The interior ministry is a vast portfolio that is not only critical to the maintenance of law and order in the country, but to which vital public service organisations such as Nadra and the passports department report. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was widely and persistently criticised for refusing to instal a foreign minister or defence minister for much of his last term and the critics were right.

Efficiency in government suffers and decision-making is mired in confusion when important ministries are left without full-time ministers. Prime Minister Khan appears to be aware that the first few months in office will be critical to the public's perception of the PTI as a national governing party. The early stages of a government are also when political capital can be expended in pursuit of its agenda.

Mr Khan can and should choose more boldly and imaginatively than he has so far. It is hoped that the federal cabinet will soon have more members who reflect the politics and values that Mr Khan claims the PTI will represent in government.

Overseas voters

NOT many would quibble with the contention that overseas Pakistanis should have the right to vote. However, to translate the objective into reality is another matter. Yet this is the conundrum the ECP must contend with in light of the order passed by the Supreme Court on Friday while hearing a dozen petitions on the issue.

The three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice Saqib Nisar directed the electoral body to make arrangements forthwith to enable overseas Pakistanis to exercise their right of franchise in the coming by-elections on Oct 14. The chief justice proclaimed that with Nadra having designed an internet voting mechanism for the purpose, the ECP should complete its pilot projects to ensure the process is foolproof and flawless.

We need look no further than the recent election to realise the pitfalls in any electronic system that has not been extensively tested and retested. The last thing this country needs is a voting exercise that is as controversial as the one on July 25, in which the results consolidation and transmission process proved so shambolic that the bitterness and suspicion it gave rise to will linger for a very long time.

The issue of expat Pakistanis casting their vote is not a new one, and Section 94 of the Elections Act, 2017 deals explicitly with it, empowering the ECP to carry out pilot projects to “ascertain the technical efficacy, secrecy, security and financial feasibility of such voting”.

One may recall that the electoral rolls for the 2013 elections turned out to contain major flaws because the ECP, under pressure from the apex court to compile the voters’ lists by its stipulated deadline, was unable to verify a significant percentage of voters. In that case, it was only voters resident in Pakistan; neither was there a newfangled electronic method involved.

The report of the task force set up by the ECP in April this year and made public just a few days ago details the daunting challenges involved in e-voting for overseas Pakistanis. There are an estimated 6m-plus eligible voters, which would make it the biggest exercise of the kind in the world by far. Moreover, one cannot discount the possibility of the process being compromised by foreign intelligence agencies, nor vouch for the votes having been cast in secrecy, and with free will.

Housing crisis

EXPERTS had for years been warning of a housing emergency — especially in Pakistan’s urban centres — and a new report, prepared for the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights, appears to back up their dire diagnosis. As the palatial residences of the rich continue to expand, the poor are being squeezed out onto the streets. The report notes that in Karachi and other urban centres there are a considerable number of people who now sleep in the open. Much of this is, of course, due to greater urban migration, as people from rural areas head for the cities in search of jobs. It appears there is a shortage of 8.5m housing units in Pakistan, with urban demand said to stand at 350,000 units per year. The housing shortage, especially for the poor and working classes, is met by katchi abadis or informal settlements. In many cases, the land mafia profits from grabbing others’ real estate and creating katchi abadis, in which they sell or lease out houses to lower-income groups. In fact, much of the existing housing lacks even the basic necessities. For example, numerous ‘colonies’ dot Karachi, in which the poor are stuffed into small hovels that lack proper sanitation. Successive governments have neglected the housing issue, especially affordable

housing for the poor, and it is due to this official apathy that the crisis has ballooned.

As experts have noted, there is a serious need for urban land reform in this country. They say that land use should be based on social and environmental considerations, and that non-utilisation of land should be penalised, while suggesting that a person who has taken one house loan should not be allowed to take another. Indeed, instead of caring only for the interests of the rich, the state must confer with civil society to come up with a sustainable housing policy targeted at the poor and working classes. That would be a noble aim for those seeking to build a naya Pakistan.

The way ahead?

AN inaugural address to the nation as prime minister saw a vintage performance by Imran Khan — one that has given cheer to his supporters and elicited scepticism from his political opponents. What is clear is that Mr Khan will need a quick prioritisation of aims, a coherent strategy and an effective team to deliver what he has promised the nation.

Mr Khan's politics have revolved around a domestic governance, social and economic agenda, so it is no surprise that he chose to focus on those areas in his address on Sunday. While foreign policy, national security, and the fight against terrorism, militancy and extremism are vital to Pakistan's long-term success as a nation, the domestic social and economic arenas have been undeniably underemphasised and underserved by the country's leadership.

Surely, then, whatever the political differences with or opposition to Mr Khan and the PTI, all Pakistanis can only wish Prime Minister Khan well in his fight to reduce child stunting, combat climate change and improve the quality of urban life.

Mr Khan may be a newcomer to elected high office, but it is not for the first time that the country has heard the promise of great, positive change being imminent. If Mr Khan is to deliver even a modicum of what he has promised the nation, he will need to do so through constitutional, parliamentary and executive structures that are necessarily complex and that can be frustrating to deal with.

The prime ministerial address to the nation on Sunday was perhaps not the forum in which to lay out a detailed road map for improved service delivery across the various tiers of government, but Mr Khan will need to quickly demonstrate that he understands the complexities of the executive branch of government and the constitutional division of governing responsibilities between the centre and the provinces.

Having a governing role in three of the four provinces will give the PTI substantial space to deliver on Mr Khan's multi-tiered agenda, but there must be clarity, purpose and direction at the very top.

To put it another way, Mr Khan appears to have the will, but does he know the way? Thus far, among the many choices Mr Khan has made for senior positions in the federal and provincial governments, there are few, if any, individuals who can be identified as transformative change-makers.

Mr Khan's decision to retain the interior ministry portfolio for himself is surely an unwise choice. Just as it was wrong of Nawaz Sharif to retain important ministerial portfolios for himself as prime minister, it is wrong of Mr Khan to believe that corruption can be effectively combated through personal oversight rather than the strengthening of institutions.

It is hoped that in the days and weeks ahead, Mr Khan's domestic agenda will emerge in a set of clear priorities and a coherent strategy.

Trading with China

ONE of the weightiest economic challenges that the new government will have to tackle is the erosion of Pakistan's competitiveness in the global market. Over the decades, Pakistan's economy has lost more ground to its competitors, and the base of the economy's exports has narrowed. One country stands out in particular now in Pakistan's balance of trade. That country is China. Pakistan's trade deficit with China has been growing continuously year after year, and is today the primary reason for the country's external-sector imbalances. Last fiscal year, it touched \$9.7bn where the overall trade deficit was \$37.7bn. Clearly, a way needs to be found to bring this growing deficit under control before it swamps not just Pakistan's external sector but also its manufacturing base. Unfortunately, in today's world, the tools available with which to rectify a country-

specific trade imbalance are very blunt, and present Pakistan with very few options.

In light of this, the matter of the growing deficit has been raised in a number of high-level contacts between Pakistani and Chinese officials, most recently by the Senate chairman. Now we hear news reports that the Chinese ambassador has offered increased trade denominated in local currency as a solution, through expanding the currency swap agreements. This is no solution since it simply denominates the deficit in a different currency. If Chinese imports continue at the present pace, Pakistan's next challenge will be to find ways to earn enough Chinese yuan to be able to finance this deficit. The honest fact is that China's trade deficit has grown with respect to almost every country in the world, and it is up to each to find ways to protect domestic manufacturing. Two separate priorities emerge in the face of this deficit: protecting industry and shoring up the health of the external sector. First decision to be made is regarding which of these the government will embrace as its own. Second decision will be on how best to do this. It would be a mistake to adopt a hands-off approach to this question like the previous government did, or to use instruments like regulatory duties to choke off what is essentially a natural influx of cheap commodities. A smarter strategy needs to be devised, and with the kind of talent available to the PTI government and its finance and commerce teams, they are ideally placed to develop it.

Ghani's ceasefire offer

IN the wake of the outrageous and shocking violence that Afghanistan has recently suffered, the offer is a bold and courageous one.

Repeating a temporary ceasefire offer ahead of Eid, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has for the second time this year declared that his country will cease military action against the Afghan Taliban for up to two months if the latter reciprocate.

Mixed signals from the Taliban camp — announcing that some prisoners in their custody will be released, while attacking several passenger buses outside Kunduz city and taking many hostages — have left unclear the insurgents' intentions.

It is hoped that better sense will prevail and the Taliban will allow all of Afghanistan, including their own fighters, a peaceful Eid. The joyous scenes from Eidul Fitr this year of Afghans across the war divide embracing each other and celebrating together were a blessed reminder that not only do all Afghans deserve peace, but that harmony is, in fact, possible.

Successive Eids celebrated with a nationwide ceasefire in place are both needed and deserved by the Afghan people.

Encouragingly, it appears that President Ghani's ceasefire offer has the support of the US too. A ceasefire is the gateway to talks, and with the US not only endorsing Afghan talks but having demonstrated a willingness to bilaterally engage the Afghan Taliban in preliminary negotiations, the insurgents ought to recognise that a historic opportunity beckons.

With Pakistan having consistently demonstrated that it is willing to do its part to encourage and support an Afghan dialogue process, China supportive of Afghan talks, and regional powers such as Russia and Iran concerned about the presence of the militant Islamic State in the region, conditions exist for a coordinated push for discussions with the fighters.

the Taliban ought to recognise the futility of trying to militarily win a war in Afghanistan — eroding US political will does not amount to the world turning its back on Afghanistan again. May Eidul Azha bring good tidings to Afghanistan.

Setting foreign policy

The Foreign Office needs serious, full-time and empowered political leadership — a reality that PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif ignored for a full parliamentary term between 2013 and 2018.

So, it is welcome that the new PTI foreign minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, has immediately faced the media and attempted to give the country and the outside

world an indication of the PTI government's approach to and priorities in the foreign policy domain.

“Let me be clear: the foreign policy will be made here, at the Foreign Office of Pakistan,” Mr Qureshi has commendably stated. He also indicated his preferred approach to healing the civil-military divide: “I will engage with all the institutions for the betterment of the country. It is the policy across the world. Feedback is sought from national security institutions.”

Taken together, Mr Qureshi's comments suggest that the PTI will indeed seek to increase the space civilians have in the foreign policy and national security domains and that it will do so by engaging in an inter-institutional dialogue.

If the PTI is to succeed in crafting a civilian-led foreign policy, Mr Qureshi and his boss, Prime Minister Imran Khan, will also have to develop a coherent strategic vision. All newly installed governments have talked of dialogue, good neighbourly relations and a focus on trade. But the strategic environment that Pakistan must contend with is fraught with risk and needs careful management.

Even in a relationship as seemingly rock solid and on a path to greater strategic convergences than ever as with China, there are serious financial issues in CPEC projects that will have to be resolved.

Mr Qureshi's claim that his government's new foreign policy will “begin and end at Pakistan” — seemingly a version of US President Donald Trump's ‘America first’ policy — will be quickly tested by both friend and rival.

India, Afghanistan and the US are perennial challenges for Pakistan to deal with and the PTI ought to be prepared for bruising discussions on an array of issues. The PTI government could benefit from Mr Qureshi's tenure as PPP foreign minister in that regard.

Perhaps what the PTI's foreign policy team should keep in mind is that much will depend on how engaged Prime Minister Khan remains and the overall state of the civil-military relationship. Mr Khan's politics has long revolved around a mostly, arguably wholly, domestic agenda. A victory speech the day after the general election was widely welcomed perhaps because for the first time Mr Khan had spoken in some detail about his foreign policy vision.

So if Mr Qureshi is to have a successful term as foreign minister, he will need the regular engagement of his boss, the prime minister, particularly when it comes to

forging an inter-institutional consensus on key foreign policy and national security issues. It will be difficult, but it is possible.

Eid precautions

AS the nation celebrates Eidul Azha today, there will be two important points to remember while carrying out the sacrifice: firstly, the hides of sacrificial animals should not end up in the hands of militant outfits, and secondly, both citizens and the state have a responsibility where the removal of offal and maintenance of cleanliness are concerned.

Across Pakistan, hundreds of thousands of animals will be sacrificed today; this translates into a large amount of hides. While citizens will be donating these to charity outfits and religious institutions (who then sell them to tanneries) militant outfits will also be on the lookout for hides to generate income.

The interior ministry has published a list of banned outfits, along with organisations under observation — mostly consisting of jihadi and sectarian groups as well as ethno-nationalist separatists —and citizens need to consult this list to ensure their sacrificial hides do not end up in the hands of terrorists.

The state should also remain vigilant; while publishing the list and announcing a code of conduct where collection of hides is concerned are important steps, law enforcers must keep their eyes open to ensure hides don't end up funding violent actors, and that citizens are free to donate the skins to legitimate institutions of their choice, without coercion. The state should demonstrate it is serious about cutting off all funding sources to militants, as sacrificial hides can earn the latter billions of rupees.

Meanwhile, both the PAF and the CAA have issued appeals to citizens to dispose of animal waste properly to avoid attracting scavenging birds that pose a serious risk to aircraft. Those living in the vicinity of airports and air bases must be extra careful when disposing of offal.

In general, a greater effort is needed to ensure that public hygiene is maintained during the Eid days. While the sacrifice is a religious obligation, so is keeping the environment clean; hence, offal must be deposited at designated spots.

Moreover, civic bodies throughout the country must remain alert to collect the animal waste and dump it in landfills, and to keep roads and streets clean. Big cities like Karachi are already awash with garbage; unless civic bodies pick up animal waste efficiently, the situation will only deteriorate.

With the cooperation of the citizenry and the state, a more hygienic atmosphere during Eid can be ensured.

Nawaz & Maryam on ECL

IT'S a new take on that old aphorism, locking the stable door after the horse has bolted.

The former premier and his daughter are behind bars, having returned voluntarily from the UK following their conviction on graft charges.

Moreover, their bail pleas were rejected by the court and a decision on petitions seeking suspension of their sentence has been deferred.

However, the new government, in its very first cabinet meeting on Monday, made the decision to place Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz on the Exit Control List.

NAB had sent several requests to the PML-N government since last year asking that this be done, but the previous administration refused to do so.

The federal accountability body was finally granted its wish, but one fails to see the point.

However, though short on logic, the move makes for good optics.

It demonstrates the new government's avowed zeal in dealing with corruption with an iron hand, particularly when the individuals at the receiving end are some of those seen as personifying the PML-N government's excesses.

At the same time, the action is so superfluous as to betray a certain unsettling vindictiveness.

After all, the decision to place Nawaz and Maryam on the no-fly list could have been taken in the event of the court suspending their sentence or granting them bail.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's address to the nation on Sunday evening unveiled a wide-ranging agenda which requires extensive work in areas long neglected; his administration should be looking ahead to the task at hand while the legal process against the former premier takes its course.

The ECL has long been a handy tool for witch-hunting political opponents, or indeed any individual who falls foul of the powers that be.

And why would it not be seen as such, considering it is a holdover from the dark days of Gen Zia, specifically his Exit from Pakistan (Control) Ordinance 1981? Surely the new government would like to chart a better, more democratic course.

Test of commitment

STATE-run media can appear to be an anomaly in the age of the internet and in an era of social media, but there are legitimate public-interest reasons for state-run media to exist. The challenge is to promote the public interest while shielding state-run media from political interference that erodes credibility and quality. The newly installed PTI government and Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry have made a familiar pledge to depoliticise PTV and Radio Pakistan. It is a wholly welcome pledge and it is possible to implement — if Prime Minister Imran Khan and Information Minister Chaudhry demonstrate clarity and an iron will. Virtually all newly installed governments have made some version of the pledge to depoliticise state-run media and all have failed to do so. In previous eras, controlling PTV and Radio Pakistan gave political governments and military dictatorships a substantial political advantage; PTV and Radio Pakistan were the primary sources of news and information for a majority of Pakistan. Today, in a seemingly cacophonous but in reality controlled media landscape, the temptation to keep PTV and Radio Pakistan under political control will also be great. At all times, there is a cadre in state media willing to serve political masters in return for avoiding professional scrutiny and evaluation.

If the PTI is to succeed where no other government has before, it will need to put in a place governing structures in state-run media that are either bipartisan or apolitical. Information Minister Chaudhry has suggested that it will take three months for changes to become apparent and that foreign examples, such as the BBC, will be studied. A possible path to both depoliticising PTV and strengthening the institution of parliament would be to create a powerful

bipartisan parliamentary oversight committee to monitor state-run media. The primary victims of politically biased news coverage and programming are often the opposition in parliament, so giving the opposition an equal role in oversight of state-run media could substantially mitigate the problem. Information Minister Chaudhry's announcement yesterday that PTV's editorial board will include a representative of the PPP and the PML-N is a step in the right direction. The quality of news coverage and programming in state-run media needs vast improvement. Whatever the path chosen, a professional management dedicated to the needs of the viewer and listener rather than the demands of political bosses ought to be the outcome.

The quest to depoliticise PTV and Radio Pakistan could have two additional benefits at this juncture. First, with the mainstream private media facing pervasive interference and coercion, a reinvigorated state-run media could help right the balance in the overall media landscape by creating a professional, depoliticised product. Second, the PTI has not championed the cause of a free and independent media as much as it could have as a major political force. Fixing PTV could help demonstrate the PTI's commitment.

Wealth abroad

NOBODY can deny that large amounts of money have been "looted" from Pakistan and laundered into accounts and assets abroad. Likewise, nobody can deny that going after such funds and mounting an effort into retrieving them can be an important priority. But it is equally important to be mindful of what exactly it takes to identify such funds and get them restituted to the country. Such an effort can easily turn into a witch hunt, or a never ending saga that ultimately costs more than it actually yields in the form of restituted money. And more importantly still, such an effort can backfire if it is unsuccessful because the signal that will be sent will be the opposite of what the government intends. So if the PTI government is serious about mounting a strong effort to locate, seize and repatriate "looted" funds around the world, it should start by taking a good stock of what all is involved in the process and how far the last such effort launched by Pervez Musharraf actually went.

Finance Minister Asad Umar argues that much has changed from the early 2000s till now, including especially the passage of laws in many countries that facilitate the seizure of assets acquired from illicit funds. In the UK, for example,

a new law has made it easy to furnish a politically exposed person with an “unexplained wealth order” (UWO) if they hold significant assets in the UK. That law is currently being tested in the courts and how easy it makes it to seize assets then arrange for their restitution is yet to be discovered. What is worth keeping in mind though is that the UK courts will decide whether to serve a UWO, and whether the replies submitted in response are satisfactory or not. This means the so-called Panama Papers case fought here in Pakistan’s Supreme Court might need to be fought all over again in a UK court if the government decides to move against properties owned by Nawaz Sharif using a UWO. The government should make a serious and sober effort to determine whether all the evidence in their possession will be sufficient to carry the day in a UK court before proceeding in the matter since a court defeat over there could be extremely embarrassing over here. The effort to recover looted money is worthwhile only if it is unambiguously successful.

Post-Eid clean-up

WHILE the Eidul Azha festivities serve as a point of familial and communal bonding, following the sacrifice there are genuine concerns about the maintenance of cleanliness in Pakistan’s cities and towns. This is especially true for the megacity of Karachi, where a solid waste management crisis of considerable proportions already exists. Add to this the massive amount of offal and other animal waste produced during the festival — hundreds of thousands of animals are sacrificed in the city alone — and the citizenry’s fears are justified. This year the situation in Karachi was mixed; while in some areas the civic authorities were quick to move in and remove the waste from roads and streets, in other neighbourhoods offal was left to rot. Perhaps the main reason for this patchy performance is that in the city, there is a dichotomy of powers where solid waste management is concerned. Waste removal comes under the provincial government — carried out by the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board — whereas the elected local governments claim picking up garbage is not their job. Whether it is removal of offal during Eid, or clearing up the trash during regular days, this dichotomy needs to be addressed to help clean up Karachi.

Under the 2013 Sindh local government law, the provincial administration has kept civic powers under its control. Critics point out this is the chief reason for Karachi’s civic woes, as clearing up the trash and making sure sewage is not

overflowing is not the job of provincial ministers or MPAs; this falls under the purview of the elected mayor and city councillors. While the provincial government should have supervisory powers over local governments, municipalities should not be micromanaged by a top-heavy provincial bureaucracy. The PPP is back in the Sindh government saddle; it should not make it an issue of ego and consider retooling the 2013 LG law as clearly, it is failing to deliver. In consultation with the province's elected municipalities, a new mechanism of empowered local governments needs to be evolved.

PM-Pompeo spat

IT quickly degenerated into a Trump-level farce, but the US president has not been involved so far. A routine congratulatory call by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Prime Minister Imran Khan has caused an immediate and wholly unnecessary wrinkle in the relationship between the Trump and Khan administrations. A readout of the call between the secretary of state and the prime minister issued by the US State Department stated that “Secretary Pompeo raised the importance of Pakistan taking decisive action against all terrorists operating in Pakistan” — seemingly a brusque warning to the new civilian dispensation that the US intends to continue with its do-more mantra. In response to the State Department readout, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi chose to flatly contradict the US version of the call where Secretary Pompeo allegedly referred to “terrorists operating in Pakistan”, presumably a reference to externally orientated militants on Pakistani soil that the world accuses Pakistan of being lenient towards.

The US's counterreaction to the Pakistani reaction has been cautious and emphasised other, positive aspects of the call between Secretary Pompeo and Prime Minister Khan. Belatedly, Foreign Minister Qureshi has also said that Pakistan looks forward to Secretary Pompeo's visit in the first week of September. Prime Minister Khan is a novice in international relations. He can reasonably expect to be ably guided by a Foreign Office steeped in the ways of a rocky but important bilateral relationship with the US. In a maiden press conference on returning to the Foreign Office after seven years, Foreign Minister Qureshi had emphasised his past contacts with US foreign policy principals. Surely, then, Mr Qureshi and the Foreign Office he now leads ought to have handled the matter better. What the State Department has claimed its secretary

said to Prime Minister Khan is hardly a surprise given the hawkishness of the Trump administration. If the disputed words were in fact said by Secretary Pompeo, Prime Minister Khan could easily have responded with boilerplate diplomatic language. The Foreign Office also ought have been aware that the State Department will issue a readout of the call, allowing it to either coordinate press releases or issue a Pakistani version. To flatly accuse the State Department of lying ought to have been the last of all possible actions taken. Mr Qureshi will need to do better.

The US too should recognise Pakistani compulsions and approach matters in a spirit of cooperation rather than confrontation. The second part of the disputed sentence in the State Department's readout should be reason enough for cautious US diplomacy: Pakistan's "vital role in promoting the Afghan peace process." A political settlement to end the war in Afghanistan and deny space to Islamic State in that country should be the urgent priorities of all regional and international powers. Now is not the time for boorish US diplomacy.

'Discretionary' funds

IF the government is serious about eliminating what it calls "discretionary funds", which are basically development grants routed through politicians to their constituencies at the discretion of the prime minister, it should prepare for very strong pushback. Diminishing discretionary authority in the matter of government spending is an admirable goal, but there is a reason why it is so entrenched. Pakistani politics revolve in significant measure around the ability of political personalities to bring government spending to their constituencies, and whenever any government has tried to constrict this pipeline, it has faced stiff opposition even within its own ranks.

What prompted all this, it seems, is the discovery by the new government that the PML-N used some of the funds from the development budget in a highly discretionary manner to support the political efforts of a handful of their own MNAs. Specifically they point to Rs20 billion programmed under the Prime Minister's Global SDG Achievement programme which they believe were spent in a highly discretionary manner by getting pet projects of various PML-N parliamentarians to be placed under the SDGs. The government should, therefore, release further details regarding this. We now need to know how much money was spent in this manner and in which constituencies. They should also

release details about where the additional Rs31bn was spent, in the total Rs51bn that they claim has been spent purely along discretionary lines to support the political fortunes of a handful of PML-N associates. It needs to be made clear whether this is a political blame game or a genuine effort to take on one of the largest deformities in Pakistan's politics: the tendency of legislators to behave like councillors in local government. But beyond the specifics, if the government is now aiming to shut down the vast patronage machine that drives politics in Pakistan, it will need to present a credible vision of reform. Strengthening local bodies will require strong buy-in from the provincial governments, and it is not clear how far the PTI has taken them on board. Eventually the stiffest resistance will come from within their own ranks, since most MNAs and MPAs enter electoral politics for the very purpose of getting into the patronage game. Closing off discretionary authority in the matter of public spending is fine, but the government needs to share much more before this promise of theirs can be considered credible.

Faisalabad violence

AN unfortunate communal incident in Faisalabad on Thursday highlights the fact that if we are to build a 'new' Pakistan, deep changes are required both at the state and societal levels. As reported, at least 18 people were injured in a riot that occurred over a trivial issue in the Punjab city involving members of the Ahmadi and Muslim communities. Apparently, someone knocked down a rooster belonging to an individual of one community and what followed was a series of ugly incidents. In the aftermath of the riot, in which gunfire was exchanged, an Ahmadi place of worship was attacked. Over 200 people have been booked under charges of terrorism following the riot. This is of course not the first incident of its kind, and while the attack on the worship place is worthy of strong condemnation, it is a relief that no lives were lost.

The federal information minister has said that the riot should not be given a religious colour. While he may be correct, the fact is that there have been far too many incidents of violence targeting minorities, and it is the state's lack of action over decades that has mainly emboldened extremists and rabble rousers. For example, an Ahmadi worship place was demolished in Sialkot in May; those responsible for that incident have yet to be punished. If a new Pakistan is to be made, then tolerance and equality must be built into its foundations. On the state

level, those involved in violence and perpetrating hate speech against minorities must be punished as per the law. On the societal level, communal bridges must be built and mechanisms at the local level must be formed so that minor issues don't explode into full-blown communal flare-ups. This will of course be difficult because for years — especially since the Ziaul Haq era — the state has tended to encourage obscurantist trends in society. Promoting tolerance and rights for all citizens must, however, be on the top of the new government's agenda.

Lahore zoo deaths

THERE appears to be no limit to the injuries that Pakistan's various bureaucracies and zoo authorities are willing to inflict on wordless creatures. Over the years, the lists of animals dead or dying, but always overwhelmingly treated in less than a satisfactory manner, has mounted so that the import of animals for the entertainment of the public has itself become questionable. It is not a matter of individuals having their heart in the right place, but of institutional capacity and coordination. Consider, for example, the fact that in the Lahore Zoo, two giraffes died within a month of each other. A trio of the beasts imported from South Africa had arrived on June 25: one of the females died just four days after arrival. Another female imported in early August died on Aug 23. According to the zoo vets, the animal that died in June had developed wounds in her mouths during transportation as well as a gastro infection, while the second giraffe had arrived in a frail condition.

The vets say they prepared a report on the second animal and submitted it to the relevant authorities, but zoo officials said that under an agreement with the supplier, no report may be issued about an animal within 30 days of its import. Further, there exists no quarantine facility for imported animals — which ought to deeply concern the Wildlife Department. While these gaps in the system remain unaddressed, the treatment of 'exhibits' in the facilities that house tends also to be thoroughly inhumane. Islamabad's Marghazar Zoo has lost 15 animals over the past couple of years, including an ostrich, lion cubs and nilgai, in addition to a bear just last month. Meanwhile, neglect at the Karachi Zoo also continues to cause similar losses. Running such facilities is about animals' welfare as opposed to being a public attraction and a city landmark. Until the realisation dawns and the authorities break out of their calcification, it is better that such facilities be shut down.

Railways turnaround?

SHEIKH Rashid Ahmed is back at his old job as the Minister for Railways, with a plan to financially turn around this loss-making enterprise. Speaking to the press at the Rawalpindi railway station on Thursday, the minister pledged to put the collapsing railways back on track by eliminating its deficit of Rs40bn by the end of the present financial year. He aims to achieve this target by cutting expenditure and increasing income from its core business of cargo and passenger operations. He called upon private businessmen to build luxury hotels and commercial plazas on railway land, and rent its tracks to operate cargo and passenger trains. His revival plan further includes selling the railway resthouses and handing over hospitals and schools to private investors, as well as making its large properties available for outdoor advertising. Additionally, Sheikh Rashid vowed to eliminate political interference in the railways' affairs, and to weed out theft and corruption. He, nevertheless, did not say how he intended to slash the huge expense incurred by the company on account of more than 73,000 workers, the majority of whom are either underemployed or idle — the railways' annual pay and pension bill of Rs54bn constituted around 68 per cent of its total expenditure in 2017.

The state-owned railways has been hampered by years of low investment in infrastructure, poor maintenance of its rolling stock, frequent accidents, corruption, theft, bureaucratic lethargy, gross mismanagement, and overstaffing, etc. Consequently, the quality of the service has decayed and losses have spiked. In the last five years, the government has injected nearly Rs185bn to fill the hole created by ever-increasing expenditure. The previous government had tried to revitalise the company through soft reforms and investment in passenger and freight operations. Although it succeeded in raising the revenues from Rs18bn to Rs40bn by transporting more cargo, the surge in expenditure mainly owing to pay and pension bill from Rs48.5bn to Rs80.8bn had also pushed the deficit to a new high. The minister's plan appears to be quite doable, but it may take several years and the investment of billions of rupees before it can bear fruit. Private investors are unlikely to invest in the railways' assets unless they are assured of the protection of their capital, because their experience of past dealings with the company hasn't been very pleasant. In the meanwhile, the railways could focus on facilitating the traffic of daily commuters and increasing cargo operations.

Opposition politics

THE combined opposition's inability thus far to agree on a joint candidate in the upcoming presidential election is perhaps another sign of the struggle to assemble a cohesive and effective opposition to the PTI in parliament. In a polity where opposition politics has often focused on merely attacking a governing party or coalition, the important parliamentary role of the opposition is often overlooked. It is the opposition in parliament that must lead the way in effective oversight of the executive; a fractured and weak opposition renders more difficult the task of strengthening democratic institutions. The PML-N and PPP ought to be aware of democratic imperatives: the two parties negotiated and signed the Charter of Democracy in 2006, and have had governing and opposition roles at the centre and in the provinces over the last decade of elected governments. At the moment, however, neither party's leadership appears confident about the path it wants to take in opposition at the centre.

Arguably, one of the factors contributing to the combined opposition's tentativeness and lack of unity is the emergence of a tri-party political system in the country. Unlike 2002-2008, when the PML-Q was created by a military dictator expressly to suppress the PPP and the PML-N, there is a genuine third force in politics today: the PTI. In addition, in a post-18th Amendment governing landscape, the role of provincial governments has increased significantly. Therefore, the political calculations that the PPP, PML-N and PTI need to make are more complex than ever. Within the PPP and PML-N, there are also leadership troubles to consider. The PML-N is formally led by Shahbaz Sharif, but the party supremo is quite evidently the jailed Nawaz Sharif. There is also a question about which side of the family will lead the party in the future: Maryam Nawaz as successor to the elder Sharif or Hamza Shahbaz as successor to Shahbaz Sharif?

In the PPP, a different leadership crisis of sorts is apparent. Former president Asif Zardari quite clearly controls party decision-making, but Mr Zardari and his allies face potentially grave anti-corruption inquiries. Meanwhile, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari appears to be the future leader of the PPP, but is often undercut by decisions seemingly made by other power centres in the party. Yet, for all the internal and external troubles that the PML-N and PPP must contend with, they have constitutional and democratic responsibilities as the leading opposition

parties in parliament. A joint opposition candidate for the upcoming presidential is not a constitutional requirement, but it would signal that the PPP and PML-N are aware of and willing to fulfil their duties in opposition going forward. Better for the two opposition parties to work out a modus vivendi now than to struggle to fulfil their constitutional and democratic parliamentary duties going forward.

RTS failure

IT is a political hot potato that no one in a position of accountability or executive authority appears to be in a hurry to address credibly. But the particular stain on a deeply controversial general election will not be removed until there is a full and transparent explanation for what transpired on the night of July 25 in the hours after polls closed across the country. The alleged failure of the Results Transmission System (RTS) has consistently been denied by Nadra and thus far no inquiry has been initiated that can be considered truly independent. The Election Commission of Pakistan has passed the buck to the cabinet division, effectively asking the PTI government to investigate an election that brought the PTI to power at the centre and in three provinces. Meanwhile, the PTI has conducted what is in reality an internal party probe and that inquiry has heaped blame on Nadra without presenting the necessary proof.

To be sure, a failure or breakdown of the RTS does not automatically suggest that polling-day rigging took place. Proof of rigging in the counting of votes and transmission of results will need to go beyond the suspension of the RTS on July 25. There are surely several technical and human reasons for RTS failure that do not necessarily involve deliberate manipulation by anti-democratic forces. But without a credible and full explanation for what the ECP has claimed and Nadra has denied vis-a-vis the RTS, the fairness and legality of the election results will remain in doubt. Moreover, while the opposition parties are focused on the election that they have recently lost, the troubling events on the night of July 25 could be repeated in future elections if the problem is not adequately addressed. So, irrespective of whether the ECP or Nadra is right, there will remain questions of how to address the failures or interference in future.

It ought to be apparent that in addition to whatever inquiries the executive and political parties themselves conduct, parliament must also investigate in a meaningful and bipartisan manner the alleged failure of the RTS and a host of other pre- and post-poll allegations made by virtually all political parties other

than the PTI. But not only is the opposition already divided on a number of issues, the leading opposition parties seem content for the time being with making bombastic statements and issuing meaningless denunciations of the poll process. The last parliament made significant changes to the electoral process and the July 25 election was the first test of the reforms legislated by parliament. Even without the troubling events in the run-up to the elections and on polling day itself, a comprehensive review of the new process would have been justified. The PTI and the opposition parties must move quickly to setting up an empowered and bipartisan parliamentary inquiry.

Rohingya protest

FOR the Rohingya, whom the UN has referred to as “the most persecuted minority in the world”, the wounds of Aug 25, 2017, are still fresh. This was the date on which the Myanmar military launched an offensive targeting the community settled in the country’s Rakhine state after Rohingya militants reportedly attacked police units. The response from the Myanmar forces was brutal: hundreds of thousands were displaced, with many taking refuge in Bangladesh next door, while independent observers, such as Doctors Without Borders, say nearly 7,000 Rohingya were killed in the first month of violence, including hundreds of children. Moreover, if the murders and mass displacement were not enough, there are horrific accounts of Rohingya women being raped by Myanmar troops. In fact, it is these atrocities that led the UN to label last year’s violence “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.

While relations between the Muslim Rohingya and the Buddhist majority in Myanmar had been strained for years, last August’s violence did indeed have the distinct colour of a state-sponsored pogrom against a persecuted minority, whatever the spark that ignited it may be. Perhaps that is why tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh observed the grim anniversary: it is a crime too horrific to forget. There was one demand on the protestors’ lips: justice. While the Myanmar government has said Rohingya can return to their abodes in Rakhine, many are simply too afraid to do so, fearing that conditions are not conducive for their return. While the Rohingya claim they have been settled in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, for generations, the military-controlled state refuses to acknowledge them as nationals, referring to them as ‘Bengalis’ instead. Denied nationality rights, they are cut off from all the benefits citizenship

brings. What is more, a resurgent Buddhist nationalism has made life for Muslims in Myanmar difficult, with the Rohingya particularly targeted. Fire-breathing monks have railed against the community and have often incited violence against Muslims. Through all of this, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, has barely spoken out in defence of the Rohingya, perhaps afraid of the generals who still wield considerable power, as well as the Buddhist clergy. For Myanmar to show it is serious about respecting human rights, it must punish all those responsible for the rape and murder of the Rohingya, while the community must be assured that its rights will be protected in the country.

Nargis bronze at Asiad

THE country's young female martial arts athlete Nargis has illuminated our rather insipid campaign at the 18th Asian Games in Indonesia by winning a bronze medal at the karate competition. The talented 19-year-old, who belongs to the beleaguered Hazara community in Quetta that has braved years of violence, defeated her Nepali rival to become the first female karateka from Pakistan to win a medal at the Asiad. A reigning national karate champion, Nargis, who previously won a gold and a silver at the Asian karate championship in Sri Lanka two years ago, won many hearts as a self-assured individual who spoke to the media in Jakarta about her journey. Drawing inspiration from her compatriot Kulsoom Hazara, who became the first female karateka to represent Pakistan in international events in 2012, Nargis enrolled at a Quetta academy at the age of 11 and has not looked back since.

The road to success for any athlete, particularly those who rise to the top of their respective games, is never an easy one. For female athletes, though, the challenges are far greater and much more complex, that could range from struggling with identity in a society built around gendered stereotypes to thwarting harassment from male coaches, to striving for the same recognition and compensation as that granted to their male counterparts. And yet, the rise of female athletes in Pakistan, especially in the past decade or so, has been heart-warming. Thanks mainly to determined, talented women such as national women's cricket captain Sana Mir, football captain Hajra Khan, athlete Naseem Hameed, swimmer Kiran Khan, tennis sensation Ushna Sohail and scores of others making their mark on competitive performances, Pakistan's sportswomen have begun to garner a decent amount of attention and respect in society and in

the media. Hopefully, the Nargis success story and her achievement at the mega event will catapult her as a role model that could go on to inspire scores of other young women to defy the odds and realise their dreams in sport.

Gas pricing conundrum

IT is a problem growing quietly in the heart of the economy. The CEOs from both the gas distribution companies recently cautioned a Senate committee that growing distortions in the pricing regime for natural gas were having an increasingly adverse impact on their companies' cash flows, and could eventually force very difficult choices onto the government if they were not addressed in a timely manner. Ordinarily one could see this as a technical matter to be resolved in the relevant committee, but the numbers involved have become too large for any single government department to manage on their own, and the pricing reform required in the sector is growing in its urgency as the quantum of imported natural gas grows.

Almost half of Pakistan's fuels needs are met with natural gas. It is the fuel that has powered our industry, run our power plants, heats our homes and on which large numbers of people rely to cook their food. It has a vital role in the country's agriculture since it is the feedstock for our fertiliser supplies, where it is given out at a steep subsidy. The importance of pricing reform was always a central question once the turn was made towards inducting imported gas at market-based prices. Almost immediately the pricing regimes of the imported gas versus the domestic gas clashed, and difficult choices had to be made about who will have to pay the higher cost and who will continue enjoying the subsidy.

In days to come, the subsidy will become more and more unsustainable, and difficult choices will have to be made all over again on who will be next to be evicted from the regime of subsidised gas. The last time it was the vehicular CNG sector that was evicted, resulting in that sector's virtual decimation. Next in line are textiles and fertiliser. The CEOs of the gas companies gave figures for how much of a loss their balance sheets have to carry because of the inability of the government to meet its so-called "price differential" commitments, meaning those commitments where the government agrees to pay the difference in the price at which the gas has been procured and that at which it is allowed to be sold. For SNGPL, the total receivables came to Rs165 billion and for SSGCL it came to Rs203bn. These are massive numbers and they represent distortions

created by the pricing regime for domestic gas. Imported LNG is a separate matter since it has a different pricing regime. So the big question looming for the next petroleum minister is how to address these distortions, and who to evict from the regime of domestic gas to bring demand under control. It would be a mistake to underestimate the scale of this issue.

Mistake in Pakpattan

This is far from an ideal start PTI supporters must have wished for their party. Reforming the police and empowering the force was one of the things to look forward to after the PTI assumed power.

Expectations were high as the party had claimed to have scored well on the subject as it went about reforming the police system in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where it has been in power since 2013.

All the projections based on PTI leader and Prime Minister Imran Khan's intentions, his abilities and his promised non-compromising approach have received an early jolt in the background of a rather unsavoury episode in Pakpattan.

The district police officer of Pakpattan has just been censured and transferred following an instance reportedly involving the ex-husband of Bushra Bibi, who is now married to Mr Imran Khan, and a son and daughter of hers with her former husband, Khawar Fareed Maneka.

The details of the incident have been flashed in the media, sometimes the 'facts' cited in one report not tallying with those provided in another. Allegedly at the base of it all is a desire of the habitually privileged that they may always be treated with deference by those 'there to serve them'.

It could be that some crucial pieces in the puzzle are yet missing but whatever the sequence of the events that led to the summary exit of the DPO, it is quite clear that this was one problem — among a few that have cropped up immediately after Mr Khan's much celebrated ascent to power — that needed to be diligently avoided or quickly dealt with. This has unfortunately not been the case.

The PTI is a party for reform. It has been pleading passionately about laying to rest the ghosts that have held this country hostage for so long. It does not paint a pretty picture when the name of the party and its leader name is dragged into potentially so embarrassing a controversy as this — must we re-emphasise, so early into the term.

But if these facts as they have been brought out are true, this is a missed opportunity. There it was, a chance for the PTI to prove that it wanted to treat everyone out there with an even hand. A more level-headed tackling of the situation would have prevented the new setup from perpetuating the same attitude where the policemen and other government officials are reduced to appear as puppets for the rulers to tale their frustrations out on.

No amount of sloganeering and vows about ending the VIP culture would have an effect on people if these incidents continue to take place in the ‘new’ Pakistan.

Tracing missing victims

KARACHI is a megacity and people travel long distances for work, education, trade etc. Mishaps such as road accidents can of course occur, while the danger of violent street crime is ever-present. In such a scenario, every family’s worst nightmare is that of a loved one falling victim to a mishap, and lying in a city hospital unable to give personal details. However, a project initiated by the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee is helping families identify and track down loved ones involved in road accidents or other mishaps. As reported recently in this paper, under the Shanakht project the CPLC is using biometric technology to identify unconscious victims lying in public hospitals following an accident or illness, and informing their next of kin. This is an exemplary project based on humanitarian concerns and deserves to be replicated in other cities of Sindh, and indeed nationally. In fact, the Shanakht project was initiated three years ago to identify unidentified bodies buried in Karachi. Together with the help of the Edhi Foundation and Nadra, the CPLC has helped trace the families of around 1,700 people who died in accidents and remained unidentified. Now, the project has been taken a step forward in an attempt to identify unconscious victims and alert their families.

Considering the importance of this project, the Sindh government should offer the CPLC and Edhi Foundation its full support, whether it is financial, logistical or

technical. Families go through an excruciating time not knowing where their loved ones are in case of a mishap. Therefore, identifying unconscious victims, or those who have died in accidents, is an important public service. Through this project, victims can be reunited with their loved ones, or families can have a sense of closure by claiming the mortal remains of their kin. Perhaps DNA samples of the bodies/unconscious victims can also be maintained to aid identification. Forensic scientists and other technical experts can also be consulted to help improve the project, streamline it and expand it to other cities.

No ordinary abduction

There can, there must, be no two views about enforced disappearances.

It is an abhorrent practice, a hallmark of some of the world's most despotic regimes that is calculated to terrorise the people into silence. And any appearance of downplaying the gravity of this illegal act only emboldens the perpetrators.

One could argue, therefore, that retired Justice Javed Iqbal, chairman of the Commission of Inquiry on Missing Persons, took a most unfortunate stance on Tuesday while briefing the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights. According to him, the issue of missing people “has always been politicised” and that “the situation was not as bad as it is made to sound”.

To support his contention, Mr Iqbal cited the claim of Baloch activist Mama Qadeer that 40,000 Baloch were missing, although, he said, the commission had been given no details of their disappearance; that several ostensibly missing individuals in one part of the country had been located elsewhere in Pakistan; and that a number of them may be incarcerated in Afghanistan.

The fact is, unlike an ‘ordinary’ abduction, enforced disappearances always have a political dimension. Whether Gen Pinochet in Chile from 1973 to 1990, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in present-day Egypt, or the Indian state against the Kashmiris — to cite but a few examples — it is a tactic employed by repressive governments that demand total compliance and carte blanche to operate.

Certainly, there can be a difference over the numbers of the missing, but the numbers are irrelevant: that it happens at all is an abomination.

The theatre of enforced disappearances has spread from the remote areas of Balochistan to the urban locale of the capital itself; earlier the targets were political activists and journalists; then bloggers — indeed anyone espousing progressive ideas — began to be picked up.

That means, there are multiple, credible eyewitness accounts of such abductions. Moreover, while Mr Iqbal offered various reasons why we should not be unduly concerned by these happenings, and even defended internment centres run by the security establishment, the commission headed by him has failed to hold anyone publicly accountable for disappearing citizens.

It was during Iftikhar Chaudhry's tenure as Supreme Court chief justice that tough questions were asked of security forces personnel who, it is alleged, are significantly involved in enforced disappearances. In recent months, Chief Justice Saqib Nisar has also displayed a welcome resolve to hold state elements accountable for the crime.

Nevertheless, Mr Iqbal's criticism before the Senate Committee of successive governments' lethargy over the issue is valid, and the committee is correct in approving the idea of criminalising enforced disappearances.

Although the right to due process is guaranteed by the Constitution — a right manifestly violated when people are disappeared — such an action by parliament will convey an unequivocal message about where the people's elected representatives stand on the matter.

Contraception access

GIVING women and girls the right to choose for themselves whether, when and how many children they want is not only a fundamental right but also contributes towards a sustainable population growth rate. On Tuesday, at the launch of the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, a UNFPA representative noted that 2.2m abortions occur annually in Pakistan. This scenario should sound alarm bells for the newly elected government but also make clear that untimely pregnancies are avoidable if accessible family planning programmes are instituted — particularly targeting underprivileged communities where poor healthcare services adversely impact maternal and child well-being. Women are at risk when they resort to clandestine terminations. Recurrent pregnancies are

due to varied reasons including poverty, early marriage, lack of education and intermittent access to family planning services. What is clear is that the long-term benefits of lowering fertility and controlling population growth rates can yield economic dividends when women are schooled and empowered to make independent choices.

Despite Pakistan's pledge to increase the contraception prevalence rate to 55pc by 2020, the current rate remains stagnant at 35pc, implying that vital aspects of women's health have not received sufficient attention. To encourage birth spacing, the cost and unavailability of contraceptives must be addressed, and the lack of reproductive health knowledge as well as cultural and social taboos removed as impediments. The solution, therefore, lies in accessible reproductive health services at primary healthcare centres — especially in rural districts — where doctors are trained to offer specialised services. In fact, the Population Council notes that, contrary to popular belief, neither religious barriers nor patriarchal attitudes are the main reason for the lack of contraceptive usage; it is the decrease in contraceptive supplies that poses the real challenge. Public messaging campaigns on radio and television are one way to educate communities in far-flung districts. More important, the vast network of Lady Health Workers must be better resourced to inform families about family planning benefits as well as to distribute free contraceptives. In equal measure, eradicating child marriages, changing the mindset of men who believe they are entitled to deny women control over their own fertility, and educating girls — because when they go to school they will have fewer children — should be goals to attain the longer-term objectives of our family planning programme.

Pollution & intelligence

A NEW study has found a link between air pollution and impaired cognitive performance, with the effect impacting all age groups, particularly those over 64. In previous such studies, a link has been established between air pollution and cognitive development in students. The latest study, conducted mostly in Chinese cities but with universally applicable findings, looked at a sample of 20,000 families across a four-year period, the results of the tests administered to them measuring cognitive performance and how far they had been exposed to nitrogen dioxide and sulphur dioxide. The findings showed that the longer people were exposed to these compounds, the more their intelligence was damaged, in

some cases enough to destroy a year's education. Language skills were harmed more than mathematical skills, and men were affected more than women.

The findings are troubling for medical professionals everywhere because the compounds in question are common components of urban air pollution. The authors of the study said 95pc of humanity is now breathing dirty air and is susceptible to harm. For Pakistan, the work is of particular importance given the massive investments being made in coal-fired power plants. Burning coal releases huge quantities of sulphur dioxide that can spread over an area of hundreds of square kilometres, depending on wind conditions. Urban air quality is also particularly bad due to unregulated fuel additives and other industries, contributing to large amounts of combusted impurities. The new link between air pollution and intelligence should add another measure of urgency to the government's agenda of prioritising environmental issues. Greater regulation of industry and the vehicular fleet of the country will be necessary to bring this menace under control. Such work can only be done in coordination with local bodies, and the new government must immediately begin its task. The quality of our future human capital depends upon it.

Media regulation

PERHAPS Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry and the PTI federal government he represents are well-intentioned and mean no harm in proposing a 'Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority' to replace existing regulatory bodies for all forms of media. But before any steps to disband the existing media regulators and replace them with PMRA are taken, the information minister will need to share a great deal more information on what the government's vision and purpose are, and the PTI government must hold wide-ranging consultations with all stakeholders in the media industry. On a day when the HRCP released a damning report on manipulation and intimidation of the media in Pakistan, a hastily mooted idea by the federal government to centralise all media regulation in the county must be viewed with significant scepticism by both the media and its consumers across the country. History suggests that a push for media regulation by the state is often only a pretext for greater state control of the media.

Certainly, the PTI has made a number of positive promises when it comes to the management and editorial control of state-run media, particularly PTV and Radio

Pakistan, and the proposal to establish PMRA may be part of an effort to move quickly to effect positive change in the media industry. But as a first-time ruling party at the centre, the PTI may not have enough familiarity with and experience of media structures and regulation in the country and could be approaching the issue naively. Media regulation, to the extent that it is ever necessary and constitutionally justified, is a highly sensitive matter and cannot be done in a one-size-fits-all manner. Print, broadcast/electronic and social media are fundamentally different news, information and analysis platforms and it is unrealistic, unwise and even anti-democratic to club them together for the purposes of regulation. Moreover, unlike the very new social media and the relatively new private broadcast media, print media is a settled industry with several well-established regulatory and oversight bodies. What possible legitimate reasons could there be for imposing a new regulatory regime on print media?

In the case of regulation of television news channels, there is a strong argument to be made that Pemra is not fundamentally and irreversibly flawed in design, but it is the political and state capture of the authority that is the problem. If there are excesses and mistakes in news coverage and opinion programming in the electronic media, a professional and independent Pemra could almost without doubt adequately regulate TV news channels with the cooperation and consent of media houses. Finally, in the realm of social media, the world at large is increasingly aware of problems with the medium, but in Pakistan social-media monitoring has already raised the spectre of unlawful and anti-democratic interference by elements within the state. Media regulation must always be minimal, transparent and fully justified.

Arrests in India

ARE India's democratic credentials in danger given the spate of arrests and raids in that country in recent days? On Wednesday, historian Prof Romila Thapar, along with four other senior academics, petitioned the Supreme Court to protect the rights guaranteed by the Indian constitution, including the freedom of thought and speech that have been severely harmed over the last four years, ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed power. The petition has sought the immediate release of five popular human rights defenders who had been arrested in a countrywide swoop the previous day. Another group of like-minded

intellectuals has been languishing in jail since June. The petition prayed for them to be tried under the Supreme Court's supervision. Equally urgently, they should be released until a decision is made on the charges. Among those arrested on Tuesday was law professor Sudha Bharadwaj who returned her American passport to work with the most defenceless tribespeople, particularly their womenfolk. Another one who was picked up is the elderly Varavara Rao, a self-declared Maoist sympathiser and revolutionary writer.

The main issue pertains to Maoism, a euphemism in the current Indian context for the poorest tribespeople defending their land from corporate encroachment. The tribals want the removal of the politician-contractor-trader nexus that they claim is destroying their forests and exploiting their people. Rather than seek to address their concerns, the government has sent in paramilitary battalions to combat the desperate resistance. The supreme court appears to have a grip on the issue. In response to the petition, the court revoked police custody, asking the accused to be placed under house arrest till Sept 6 when it will hear the government's charges. The case relates to a Dalit protest in December last year in Koregaon-Bhima village near Pune, which the Maharashtra government says led to caste violence involving other groups. The government sees this as the handiwork of Maoists, and links the accused with the banned group. The court has made its intent clear, however, saying: 'dissent is the safety valve of democracy and if dissent is not allowed then the pressure cooker may burst.' It is good for India's troubled democracy that the apex court seems to think there is merit in the petitioners' worry.

UN report on Yemen

A RECENTLY released report on the Yemen war compiled by UN human rights experts says all parties involved in the conflict may have committed war crimes. While this comes as no surprise, considering the frequent accounts emerging from the battered country of civilian deaths, it is important that a UN body has highlighted the massive suffering of the people of Yemen. The Group of Experts says the Yemeni government, the Saudi-led coalition supporting it, as well as their nemesis, the Houthi rebel group, have not done enough to prevent the targeting of civilians. The harshest criticism is reserved for the Saudi coalition; the group says its air strikes have caused the most civilian casualties, as people have been targeted in markets, weddings and funerals. The UAE has also been

censured for its alleged abuse of detained persons, while the Houthis are said to have indiscriminately targeted civilians in Taiz. The parties involved in the Yemen war have also been accused of deploying child soldiers. While the Houthis have not responded to the claims, the coalition has rejected the report.

The UN report needs to be followed up with more in-depth investigations and all those involved in crimes against the Yemeni people must be held to account. However, what is clear is that no one's hands are clean where the Yemen conflict is concerned. While the countries and forces named in the report need to answer for their actions, those supplying the deadly weapons being used against defenceless people — such as the US and the Europeans — also cannot be exonerated. This report is a damning indictment of the warring parties and reiterates the need for an immediate ceasefire and lifting of the blockade of Yemen. While all those involved may be playing cruel geopolitical games, it is the people of Yemen — millions of them hungry and sick — who are paying with their lives. To prevent further suffering, the Yemen war must be brought to a close swiftly.