

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of February 2018*

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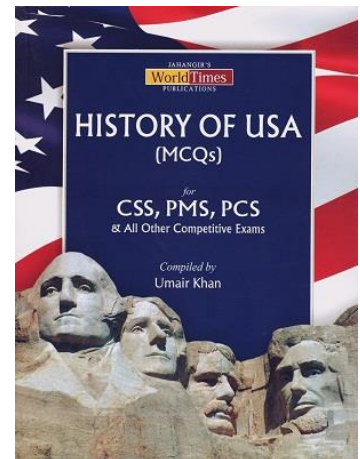
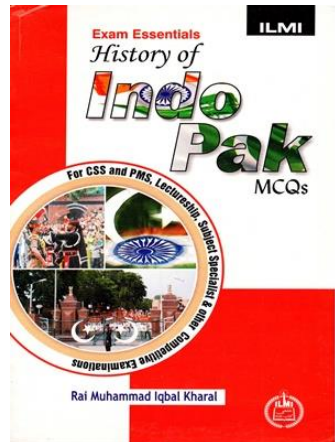
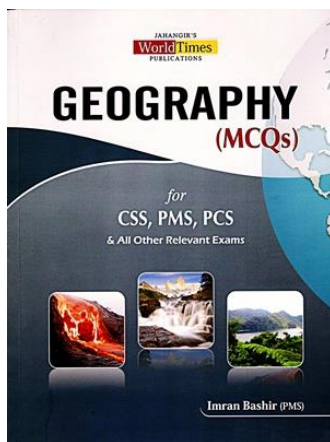
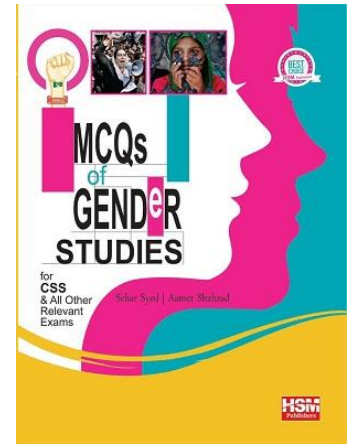
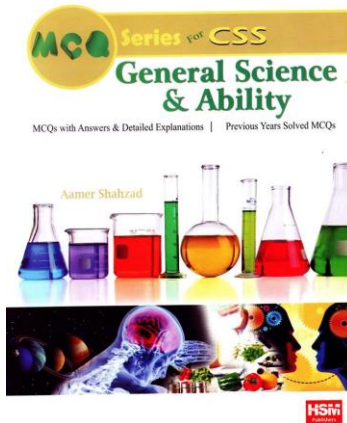
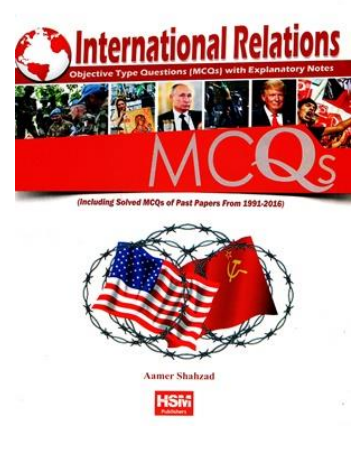
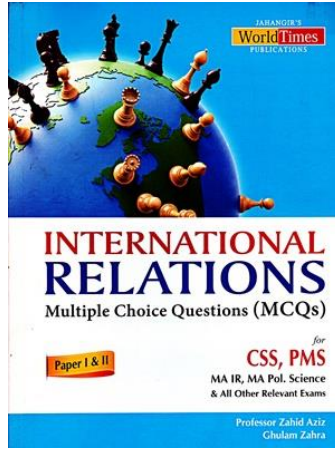
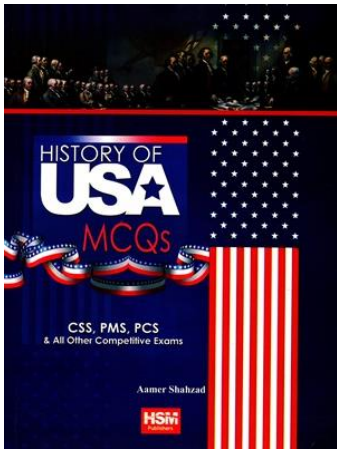
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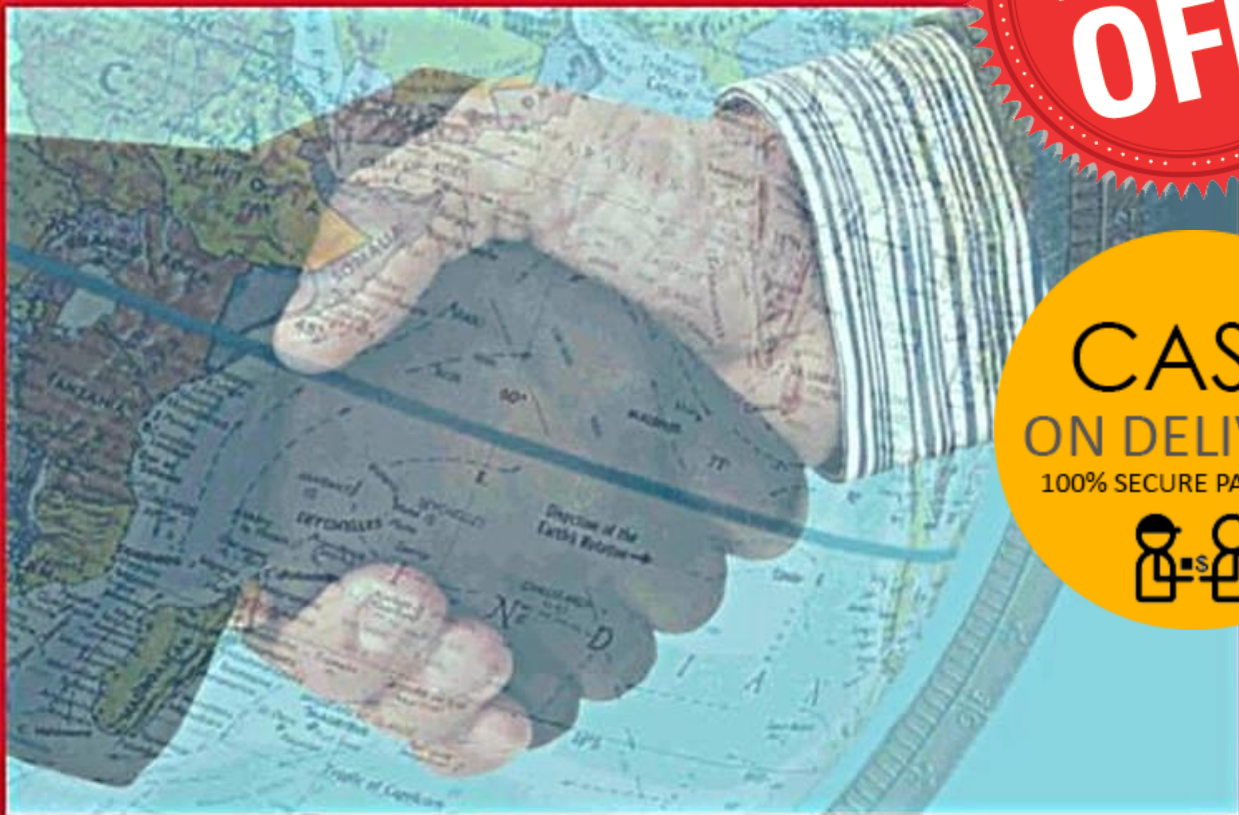
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# Trump's arrogance

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's first State of the Union address was an opportunity to allay the anxieties of much of the outside world that has been roiled by a presidency that veers from isolationism to threatening behaviour. It was a missed opportunity. While Mr Trump's speech has been received relatively positively inside the US and the president was disciplined enough to read from a prepared script, there were enough signals to suggest that the disruption unleashed by his administration in many parts of the world will not abate.

Three particular international issues stood out. On the decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, an occupied city that the majority of countries have refused to move their embassies to, Mr Trump threatened an aid cut-off to those who opposed the US move in the UN. The very idea that countries must automatically align themselves with America's divisive policies is anathema to national sovereignty. Pakistan has already faced an aid cut-off for separate reasons, but, as the US media has noted, if Mr Trump is to deliver on his promise, Congress would have to authorise a cut-off of aid to Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt and Jordan. That is unlikely and calls into question the value and purpose of Mr Trump's threat. Is it really worth aggravating other states merely because of pique, arrogance and disdain? Similarly, Mr Trump again attacked the Iran nuclear deal, demanding that Congress address unspecified critical flaws in the consensus document. Congress and Mr Trump both appear to be fundamentally hostile to the idea of any deal with Iran, no matter how meticulously crafted. But it is difficult to reject a deal when other countries party to it, many of them close allies of the US, are committed to upholding the agreement. The possibility of Mr Trump petulantly deciding to unilaterally scrap the Iran nuclear agreement could have damaging repercussions, but it may yet happen.

Finally, the decision to add to the prison population of Guantanamo reverses former president Barack Obama's halting and ultimately failed effort to close down the facility. From a constitutional and human rights perspective, Guantanamo has posed a challenge to the rule of law in the US. But Guantanamo also became a rallying cry for jihadists and militants across the world. Its expanded use will undoubtedly further militant propaganda and could also boost the recruitment of militants. The marginal benefit to the US in terms of seeming strong to its domestic population is surely overwhelmed by the negative external effects. The Guantanamo prison should be closed.

## Malnourished nation

THERE are few issues in Pakistan both as urgent and important as that of malnutrition. Despite becoming a food surplus country, the World Health Programme reports that 60pc of our population still faces food insecurity, and multiple national and international surveys have shown deteriorating nutrition indicators: 44pc of children are stunted, 15pc are wasted and more than half of all women of reproductive age are anaemic. These factors result in increased maternal and infant mortality rates, impaired physical and cognitive development, and overall poorer socioeconomic outcomes. With parts of Sindh being some of the worst-affected areas, it comes as some relief that, in the wake of the provincial task force on nutrition being informed that the issue has reached critical proportions, the chief minister announced the launch of an EU-assisted nutrition programme. This is not the first time that Sindh has received multi-million dollar funding to combat malnutrition, however, and tempting as it is to treat it as a province- and health-specific problem, malnutrition is in fact exacerbated by multiple complications — poverty, lack of education, food insecurity, climate change and political instability. This must also be addressed through strategic cooperation between the provinces and federal government, which is not contingent solely on donor aid.

It is not enough to provide dietary supplements and vaccinations, promote breastfeeding and ensure that children with diarrhoeal diseases are properly treated. Equally important is addressing the lack of sanitation facilities, eliminating open defecation and implementing WASH programmes. Similarly, the agriculture sector must harmonise the need for increasing production with ensuring that the agri-food chain is sustainable, climate-smart and free of harmful contaminants; improving the nutritional quality of crops through fortification; diversifying crops; and increasing production of plant-based proteins. As malnutrition is intrinsically linked with poverty and disease — each contributing to the other's pervasiveness — ultimately, the basic needs of the population for affordable food, housing and healthcare must be met. Breaking this cycle requires consistent political and socioeconomic intervention. If the tendency to view the issue in clinical terms somehow dilutes its urgency, consider the layperson's definition of 'stunting': failing to grow — and the words of Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral: "The child cannot [wait]. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'tomorrow'. His name is 'today'."



## Travesty of justice

THE extrajudicial killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud has sparked a much-needed national debate about excesses committed by law-enforcement agencies under the guise of ‘encounters’. There has been justified public rage over the trigger-happy ways of some within the security forces. However, to truly change the prevailing culture within law enforcement, this revulsion must be channelled into something more constructive — an effort to positively transform the criminal justice system. In the aftermath of Naqeebullah’s killing, other cases have emerged that point to the use of extrajudicial methods by the police to eliminate suspects. As reported, following the arrest of the prime suspect in young Zainab’s rape and murder case in Kasur, serious doubt has been cast over the killing of Mudassar, a 22-year-old man, by police in a so-called encounter in the Punjab town last year. Mudassar was accused of assaulting and murdering a minor girl; however, it has been reported that investigations showed that it was, in fact, the DNA of the suspect in Zainab’s case that matched that found on the victim Mudassar was accused of assaulting. Mudassar was killed by police on the day the victim’s body was found. In a separate case, the family of a man, who was killed along with Naqeebullah, has also demanded justice.

The thought that innocent men have been mowed down by police in ‘encounters’ based on the flimsiest of evidence is devastating. In order to prevent further such travesties of justice, two key steps need to be taken: firstly, those law enforcers involved in such heinous acts must face justice. Secondly, looking at matters in the long term, the criminal justice system needs to be revamped so that law enforcers do not resort to such crude, illegal methods. From gathering evidence in a scientific fashion to ensuring the prosecution has built a solid case, all arms of the state must work in unison to ensure that the guilty are punished, and no innocent citizen is wrongly prosecuted, or worse, cruelly eliminated in a hail of bullets in an ‘encounter’.

## Accountability delayed

A CURIOUS element of the national discourse at the moment is that the greater the political focus on accountability, the less there appears to be a concerted effort to try and fix the accountability mechanism in the country. It is almost as if the political leadership in the country considers accountability to be more of a campaign slogan than a process of incremental, meaningful, positive change. The skirmishes with the National Accountability Bureau of members of the PML-N government has transfixed the political landscape and could go on to have shattering effects on the biggest political party in the country ahead of what is expected to be a fiercely contested poll, but it will do little to address systemic flaws in the accountability mechanism. Ten years into the transition to democracy, that is an unacceptable state of affairs – and it does not appear to be a problem that the political leadership is keen to address.

Consider the vast, and often correct, criticism that has been directed at NAB over the years. There has been no organised attempt to clamp down on corruption in the public sector. But since the revelation of the Panama Papers, the problem of accountability has become progressively worse. It was necessary that the Sharif family, led by then prime minister Nawaz Sharif, be investigated first. Mr Sharif failed to provide satisfactory responses to questions about his family wealth, even if the grounds eventually chosen for his ouster were questionable and politically controversial. Yet, the accountability mechanism did not proceed further. There were several hundred Pakistani nationals implicated in the Panama Papers and none have been investigated satisfactorily since the bombshell revelations of 2016. It is simply unbelievable that an issue that has shaken the political foundations of the country has coyly been sidestepped by the entire administrative, legal and political setup in the country.

With a general election scheduled for later this year, it is likely that two consecutive parliaments will have failed to improve and strengthen the accountability mechanism in the country. Five years were wasted under the PPP-led coalition government in the last parliament, with arguments between the PML-N and PPP delaying legislative change. This time round, nearly five years have been wasted in denial and then Mr Sharif fighting his ouster by the Supreme Court. Surely, no political government will be able to satisfactorily address public, even anti-democratic, complaints if it does not create a mechanism that sees genuine, high-level, across-the-board accountability. Ten years is enough. If this government does not agree to fundamental, positive change, the next parliament must commit to immediate improvements. The democratic project itself is at stake. The PML-N and the rest of the national political leadership need to do better, and better now than never.

## Child porn ring

IT is as if a dam has broken. The revulsion that spread through the public when the rape-murder of little Zainab came to light has seemingly triggered Pakistan's #MeToo moment, specifically where child sexual abuse is concerned. Virtually every day, at least one incident is reported in the media. The circumstances span a variety of settings; madressahs, schools, even in the child's own home. Paedophiles can be anywhere; in fact most of them are known to their victims. The internet enables a proliferation of their despicable actions. The FIA in Punjab has unearthed three child pornography rings that were uploading and selling online pornographic content involving minors. In all three cases, tip-offs — from Norwegian and Canadian authorities in two of them and by families of victims in one — led the FIA to individuals allegedly running the racket. The law-enforcement body, however, appears to recognise its limitations on this score, suggesting that a specialised 'cyber patrol' unit equipped with the latest software be created to track down such criminal activity on the internet, a proposal worth looking into.

It is heartening that victims and their families are increasingly coming forward to lodge complaints. The culture of silence that surrounds the issue of child sexual abuse only benefits the perpetrators and puts more children at risk. Now that citizens are courageously doing their part in resisting this pervasive social evil, the state must step up and play a proactive role. Mechanisms of reporting complaints more easily can be instituted: for example, the number of hotlines can be increased and specialised desks introduced in police stations staffed by people trained in dealing with such cases. Any complaint should be followed up promptly and a wider net cast in case there are other victims of the perpetrator; child murderers or criminals running child pornography rings should be apprehended before they destroy so many lives. At the same time, child sexual abuse is more effectively countered when other state instruments are also involved and liaise with law-enforcement teams. For example, the agenda for school inspectors should include engaging with students to assess whether any sexual abuse is prevalent in the institution; a similar system is required for madressahs. Last but not least, prudish attitudes towards sexual abuse have left our children vulnerable to predators. Children must be taught to recognise sexual abuse and how they can protect themselves. A little less innocence will keep them safer.

## Pensioners' fight

A LONG and difficult struggle by pensioners from the banking sector is nearing an end, and one can only hope that it ends well for them. The biggest banks of the country froze their pension schemes starting as early as 1991, in some cases switching to a provident fund instead in an effort to contain their long-term liabilities. The decision might make commercial sense, but it has left many retiring employees collecting pensions as low as Rs800, in some cases even for officers who retired at a senior level. For those who have rendered a lifetime of service, collecting pensions of this minuscule amount must feel like an insult, and the employees have rightly gathered together to take their case to court. After a battle lasting more than a decade, it appears some relief might finally be on the horizon.

Banks have enjoyed a highly profitable run while the legal battle has waged in court. Since the original freezing of the pensions as far back as 1991, all large banks have been privatised except for National Bank. Compensation for top executives, the court was told, can be as high as Rs10m (per month). Such exorbitant remuneration is enjoyed only by a handful of senior executives. Perhaps the State Bank or the SECP, as the case may be, ought to make it mandatory for the banks to reveal the pay gap that exists between the highest- and lowest-paid employees. That would surely make for some stunning disclosures. Given the exorbitant profitability of the banks, and the kinds of dividends they have paid to their shareholders, it is truly surprising that they can be so harsh on pensioners. This is one of the big downsides of privatisation, where bank operations may have turned around, and branches become more lavish, but where the key functions that the banks are supposed to perform have suffered. Amongst those functions is taking care of their retired workforce.



## Afghanistan rethink

THE inherent, deep and continuing difficulties in the Pak-Afghan bilateral relationship are on display once again.

Despite what appeared to be a relatively positive set of meetings by a high-level Afghan delegation, led by the Afghan interior minister and NDS chief, to Pakistan and a reciprocal visit by Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua to Afghanistan scheduled for the weekend, the Afghan side has once again gone public with allegations against Pakistan.

This time the allegations centre on the recent devastating attacks in Kabul, with Afghan officials claiming that the attacks were planned and coordinated from alleged Afghan Taliban sanctuaries inside Pakistan.

Perhaps that is a political necessity for an Afghan government under fresh and intense pressure domestically following a series of troubling attacks by militants, but both Afghan and Pakistani authorities should focus on security and intelligence cooperation between the two countries and avoid blame games that can quickly spiral out of control.

Certainly, Pakistan should investigate claims made by Afghan officials. Pakistan needs Afghan government cooperation when it comes to eliminating anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan, and should recognise that the most recent series of attacks across the border, especially in Kabul, are deeply troubling and destabilising.

The Taliban's ability to penetrate Kabul and launch deadly attacks during what previously was considered a winter lull in fighting has created fresh uncertainties, while the IS continues to demonstrate its staying power and strength.

Pakistan should help Kabul in this moment of great peril to the Afghan state. But both the Afghan and US governments need to recognise that they are wrong in either rejecting or not seriously seeking to restart a dialogue process with the Taliban.

President Donald Trump appears to have rejected the possibility of dialogue with the Taliban until the balance of power in Afghanistan tilts back towards the state there and away from the insurgents. However, the old formulation of talking only from a position of strength has consistently failed in Afghanistan, in part because it is not clear if the state can strengthen itself much beyond its current capabilities.

The Afghan government too has been inconsistent in the search for sustained dialogue with the Taliban. The Taliban's insistence that they speak directly to the US is part of the problem, but so is Kabul's reluctance to urgently seek talks.

As Afghanistan bleeds, it may be difficult for the Afghan government to discuss reconciliation and peace with the very enemy that is inflicting such damage on the country. But it has long been clear that a political settlement is the only realistic possibility of ending the war in Afghanistan.

Statesmanship requires hard decisions sometimes. The alternative is a messy, bloody, endless war in which all Afghans suffer. Afghanistan has suffered too much already; it is time to give peace a chance.

## Battling street crime

CLEARLY, Karachi's foremost law and order problem remains rampant street crime, with armed criminals striking during traffic jams, accosting citizens at ATMs as well as in crowded public places. The authorities regularly vow to crack down on the menace, but little evidence of reduction in crime is seen on the ground. In this regard, the Sindh government recently set up a committee to suggest ways to ensure speedy trials and convictions of suspects accused of involvement in street crime. It has also been suggested that dedicated courts for the trial of street crime suspects be set up. Indeed, legal reforms to ensure quick conviction of suspects are important so that criminals end up in jail instead of back on the streets. However, equally important are efforts to improve the police's capabilities to nab suspects and prevent crimes from being committed. Much has been said and written about the effects of the ongoing operation against violent crime in the metropolis. By all means the effort, launched in 2013, has yielded results in bringing down levels of heinous crimes such as targeted killings, extortion and terrorism. Unfortunately, the level of street crime, including mobile snatching and theft of vehicles, has either remained the same or increased slightly. It is also true that theft and snatching incidents may be underreported. This suggests that while the militarised style of policing — including the involvement of the Rangers — may have delivered results in apprehending hard-core militants and killers, the operation has failed to clamp down on thugs and muggers who profit from street crime.

There have been various suggestions given by different stakeholders on how to bring down street crime figures. Some have said dedicated street crime units must operate out of each police station. Indeed, if officers from the local thana patrol their respective areas, this may well bring down crime stats. Moreover, the CPLC has identified various 'hot spots' for mobile snatching across Karachi; officers in plain clothes could be deputed in such areas to catch criminals in the act. And as a Senate committee has rightly noted, it is vital that criminal elements within the police be identified to prevent abuse of power and criminal activities patronised by those in uniform. If the Sindh government wishes to come up with a workable plan to tackle street crime and enforces it in earnest, there is every possibility that the metropolis can become a much safer place.

## A heavy price to pay

AN unfortunate episode in the now long-running tussle between sections of the PML-N leadership and the Supreme Court has ended in an uncomfortable manner. Nehal Hashmi's tirade against the Supreme Court last May was unconscionable and unacceptable. The now denotified senator himself appears to have finally realised his error by submitting an unconditional apology to the Supreme Court for his incendiary remarks. While politicians are entitled to defend their party and its leadership fiercely in the court of public opinion, Mr Hashmi's remarks quite clearly amounted to contempt of court. Following Mr Hashmi's unconditional apology, however, perhaps the Supreme Court ought to have demonstrated greater forbearance. Instead, a member of parliament was stripped of the privilege to be a public representative for five years and sent to prison for a month. The harsh punishment may cheer political opponents of the PML-N, but it also drags the judiciary deeper into the murky world of politics.

The PML-N is likely to interpret Mr Hashmi's sentence as a warning shot against Nawaz Sharif and his allies, who have continued to lash out against the judiciary because of Mr Sharif's disqualification from holding public office. The judicial norm is for a court to use its discretion and hand down a minimal punishment in cases of contempt where a defendant apologises unreservedly to the court. But some PML-N leaders, including Mr Sharif, continue to speak publicly in strident terms about the superior judiciary and its treatment of the Sharif family. Both sides need to reconsider their approach in what is already shaping up to be a fierce campaign season and with accountability trials of the Sharif family members possibly concluded in the middle of the election season. Mr Sharif and the PML-N have every right to question a controversial judicial decision that stripped Mr Sharif of the prime ministership, but they need to be mindful of democratic constraints.

The judiciary, meanwhile, ought to consider the impact on the institution of the ever-increasing judicialisation of politics.

## Attack in Swat

ANOTHER militant attack, another reminder that the long war against militancy continues.

Eleven military personnel died and several more were injured in a suicide attack in Swat on Saturday. The first major bombing in five years in the region has shattered a steady peace that had been painstakingly built.

A spate of gun attacks had disrupted the peace more than a year ago, but the intelligence and security apparatus has progressively helped Swat in particular and the Malakand region in general return to peaceful normality.

There are no known militant hideouts left in the region and it is likely that the suicide bomber entered Swat from the adjoining Dir district or Bajaur Agency, which border Kunar province in eastern Afghanistan.

Kunar is believed to be where Maulana Fazlullah, the head of the Swat faction of the banned TTP, has found sanctuary.

Certainly, without facilitation inside Pakistan, the suicide bomber would not have reached his target and that is a challenge that the Pakistani state must address.

Yet, the attack in Swat has underlined a broader truth about the regional war against militancy: cross-border attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan will not end until the two states find a way to step up security cooperation and sustain that cooperation over the long term.

The shocking and brutal attacks in recent weeks in Afghanistan have shaken the government there and led to urgent security consultations with Pakistan.

There has been finger-pointing by some Afghan officials, but the two country's security and political leaderships by and large have indicated that cooperation is what they are seeking.



Now, with Swat attacked again and significant military casualties suffered by Pakistan, renewed efforts will likely have to be made in the middle of an already tense diplomatic situation to prevent a fresh round of accusations and recriminations breaking out.

An original truth still applies: when Afghanistan and Pakistan ties fray, it is the militants who benefit.

Clearly, Pakistan cannot simply wait for the Afghan government to extend greater cooperation and for the Afghan security forces to be able to exert greater influence in eastern Afghanistan, where the anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries primarily are.

The remnants of the Swat TTP network need to be uprooted and the paths into Pakistan from Afghanistan that militants use better monitored or closed off.

But the steps taken ought to be sensible and balanced against the need to keep Pak-Afghan relations from unravelling.

Periodic and intensifying efforts to eject Afghan refugees from Pakistan, for example, are unnecessary, unwise and wrongly vilify an entire community of vulnerable people.

Militants and sanctuaries are a problem on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border, not the wider populations that reside there.

After so much bloodshed, after periodic eruptions and frequent dips in Pak-Afghan relations, surely the two countries must recognise that cooperation is unavoidable and inevitable.

# Indian budget

THE first point to note in the latest budget announced by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the gap between reality and rhetoric.

For a government that claims it is focused on outcomes, the spending on social sectors speaks volumes. Despite the tall claims made by the finance minister during his speech on the various programmes run by his government to enhance outcomes in health and education — two areas in dire need of urgent state action not just in India but in all countries of South Asia including Pakistan — the actual allocations made in these sectors remains woefully inadequate.

Some have calculated that the combined allocation for health and water and sanitation has actually come down in the budget, even as the total allocation for health rose by a nominal 2.8pc of GDP. Likewise for education, the total allocation has increased by 4pc, which is less than the CPI inflation rate, showing that rhetoric is more important to the government than actual outcomes in this crucial area. This is particularly noteworthy because it runs against the government's own stated goals. In the health sector, for example, the goal is to bring resource allocation to 2.5pc of GDP by 2025 (it stands at 1.4pc today).

The second point to note is that the home-grown programme of shock therapy that was the demonetisation drive has produced limited results. The cash-to-GDP ratio was supposed to come down suddenly, but instead it stabilised by June 2017. After that, according to the Economic Survey, the reduction in cash-to-GDP was 1.8pc, which is appreciable but still cannot be considered a satisfactory outcome given the massive shock to the economy that it entailed.

The government appears serious in its efforts to promote documentation, by introducing the GST as soon as the shock of demonetisation receded. But the finance minister's claim during the budget speech, that large-scale formalisation is happening in the Indian economy following the demonetisation drive, is largely hype. Now the government is trying to present itself as a pro-farmer, rural economy amongst other things, but the challenge in India is to separate hype from reality. Here in Pakistan, thankfully, the task is more limited and focused.

How far does the budget help us understand the intentions of Prime Minister Modi towards Pakistan? The answer is in the numbers, which thus far are telling a weak tale.

## Children's safety

IT is a conversation for which the time has come. The brutal rape and murder of young Zainab in Kasur has brought into focus the issue of children's safety and awareness of their personal rights. To this end, as reported recently, the Punjab government has come up with a booklet for schools on the issue. According to Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah, the age-appropriate Secure Children, Strong Pakistan publication has been prepared and is shortly to be distributed in primary schools (addressing children up to the age of 10). The Urdu-language, eight-page booklet, carrying colourful illustrations, contains information about safety and the responsibilities of parents and teachers in terms of protecting the young. It also presents ideas on the invasion of privacy and inappropriate behaviour. Usefully, clerics belonging to the Muttahida Ulema Board have been consulted; further, the auqaf minister has said that the publication will be distributed in 53,000 mosques and khateebis too will be asked to make the discussion about child protection a priority. Meanwhile, according to the provincial education secretary, reading material for older students is in the works.

The initiative — hopefully acted on in an age-appropriate and suitable manner — greatly deserves being replicated in the rest of the country. Conservative notions have for far too long dictated that child sexual abuse remain a taboo subject, brushed under the carpet, leaving the most vulnerable to suffer. But, as much of the rest of the world has discovered, it is immensely important for children to have knowledge about and control of their personal selves and bodies. That said, it is of even greater importance for caregivers — parents and teachers — to be aware of the dangers that may stalk their charges, and the predators who are constantly on the prowl. It has taken a terrible assault and murder case for Pakistan to finally wake up to one of the biggest monstrosities that exist in society. This should be a clarion call for education and awareness-raising, with Punjab improving on its efforts and other provinces following suit

# Property and the tightening noose

FOR a number of years now, the mood in the capitals of advanced industrial countries has been changing against the use of their financial systems and asset markets by holders of black money.

It began after Sept 11, 2001, but intensified much later, around 2010.

Countries are now being required to earn a clean bill of health from international bodies, such as the Financial Action Task Force, for their banking system, as well as comply with a growing panoply of sanctioned entities and individuals listed by the governments of the US and UK, and by the UN.

The latest addition to this expanding system of surveillance of global financial systems is a new set of rules passed via a circular from Britain's Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism.

This empowers a variety of enforcement authorities to issue an Unexplained Wealth Order, or UWO, to any individual or entity asking for an explanation on the source of the funds that were used to purchase any given property in the UK.

Such orders can be issued to politicians and other officials, as well as people known to be connected to them, from anywhere in the world, provided they own property in the UK.

Failure to satisfy the authority issuing an UWO can lead to a civil suit for the recovery of the properties in question.

Even though the new rules appear to target property purchases by Russian oligarchs, the fact that many Pakistani politicians have bought property across the UK with funds whose origins will be difficult to explain to enforcement authorities means that the tightening noose can now, at least theoretically, net a number of high-profile people in this country.

At the very outset, two names have already arisen in connection with the new rules. One is, predictably enough, that of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, whose link with the Avenfield properties can be pursued under the ambit of the new rules.

The other name is that of Dawood Ibrahim, who has an outstanding red notice from Interpol and is on the UK Treasury sanctions list.

The first name has been raised by Transparency International's UK chapter, and the second by The Times.

With the passage of time, more individuals and entities are going to be named by different bodies, and the rules could become an albatross around the necks of those who have bought properties in the UK with money whose provenance they would prefer to keep hidden.

The tightening of the noose around ill-gotten gains and other forms of black money is accelerating across the world. It is high time the state, as well as individuals in Pakistan, began to take it seriously.

The old way of doing things, where the clandestine movement of funds was little more than a logistical challenge, are coming to an end.

## Nawaz must apologise

THE politics of grievance that PML-N supremo and ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif has been honing in his campaign-style rallies across the country is centred on a contrast.

Elected civilian leaders are ousted on one pretext or the other by the courts, while the illegitimate rule of military dictators has always been sanctified by the superior judiciary.

Mr Sharif is, of course, right. But the juxtaposition of civilian governments with military rule conveniently and self-servingly overlooks Mr Sharif's historical role in propping up and defending military rule and supporting anti-democratic interventions.

A thrice-ousted prime minister, Mr Sharif is entitled to change his politics, and it is encouraging that the leader of one of the largest mainstream political parties in the country is now adamantly opposed to anti-democratic rule.

But Mr Sharif would gain more credibility if he were to publicly apologise for his own political past.

Arguably, had it not been for the brutal and society-changing dictatorship of Gen Ziaul Haq, the PML-N electoral juggernaut would not have come into existence, and a Sharif political dynasty may never have become a possibility.



Not once has Mr Sharif publicly denounced the Zia era or apologised for his role in sustaining it.

An apology would certainly matter. Zia's brutal regime was neither the first dictatorship nor the last, but its pernicious effects continue to be felt across state and society to this day. Some allies of Zia eventually recognised their error and apologised for it.

The father of Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif, Khawaja Muhammad Safdar, was a close ally of Zia, a fact that the son has publicly regretted on several occasions.

A willingness to acknowledge fundamental mistakes in politics is important because as the democratic process is once again under stress from anti-democratic elements, there are civilian politicians eager and willing to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Mr Sharif may denounce present-day facilitators and collaborators of anti-democratic rule, but without a sincere apology for his role in propping up the Zia era, his present-day fulminations against his opponents will appear to be little more than factional warfare among a permanent political elite.

It is also strange that while Mr Sharif is keen to remind institutions of the state of their role in anti-democratic interventions in the past and denounce them for it, he is unwilling to speak of his own political past openly and forthrightly.

A Sharif apology for the Zia era is needed.

## Singer's murder

IN our deeply conservative society, patriarchy is a system of social governance that allows men to silence women when the latter dare call out misogyny or sexism, or fight back for their basic rights.

When male-centric power structures are challenged, or even cracked periodically, they are reclaimed through force, violence and even the murder of women.

A few days ago, 25-year-old Sumbul Khan, a singer from Mardan, was shot in cold blood in her home by three men for apparently refusing to perform at a private party.

The suspects included a former police officer who has since been arrested.

While the state must ensure severe punishment for her killers, it must also ensure that the heinous crime of murder is not 'forgiven' by victims' families who are often financially destitute and so under duress to make unnatural compromises.

In such instances, the state must become a complainant in murder cases so that the perpetrator is punished instead of forgiven.

When such problematic settlements are reached in murder cases, attackers can kill again with impunity.

Sumbul's murder is a case in point — one of the suspects was previously convicted for murdering his wife in 2012.

Identified as Jehangir Khan, the suspect was the husband of Pashto singer Ghazala Javed whom he shot six times because she had filed for a divorce when she discovered he had a second wife.

Even though it was her right to refuse her husband's polygamous behaviour, her decision was taken as an act of defiance in a conservative society where a woman's divorcing her husband is seen as dishonouring the latter.

Though convicted by the court for Ghazala's murder and that of her father, her killer was pardoned by her family under the law.

When, fuelled by conservative mindsets, the murders of innocent women by intimate partners show no signs of abating, it is the responsibility of the state to strengthen legal protections so that women are not dehumanised to the point of death

# The great coal rush

FOR almost a quarter of a century, Pakistan's dependence on imported oil for power generation has been growing, placing an increasingly unbearable strain on our balance of payments, as well as driving up the cost of electricity.

Successive governments have made attempts to break out of oil either by encouraging international investment in domestic coal, particularly in Thar, or by trying to locate resources for more investment in hydroelectric projects which carry very high upfront costs.

Till today, those efforts have not borne any fruit. Nobody denies there is a dire situation here, one that has been decades in the making.

This is the story the government invokes to justify a big push for coal-fired power plants in the country, with a total of almost 6,000MW in the pipeline, representing more than half of all the generation capacity coming under the CPEC framework.

Even five years ago, it was possible to argue that we in Pakistan have no choice but to walk down this road. Back then, there were few alternatives available, and most of the world's power was generated through coal. It was possible to argue that our carbon footprint was very low and our contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions negligible.

Today, those arguments are difficult to accept. Anybody who thinks environmental worries regarding coal are bucolic concerns compared to the power requirements of our cities and industry is invited to take a walk through the respiratory wards of Lahore's Mayo Hospital, to use one example, when the smog is in full swing to discover otherwise.

The supposedly cheaper price of coal power is also not looking any more attractive with each passing year as the price of renewable energy plunges.

For instance, some of the coal tariffs operative in the country today are as high as 11.1 cents, whereas solar is now being contracted around the world at below 2 cents in some cases.

The problem is that our policy community is working within a highly outmoded framework that was put in place more than a quarter of a century ago.

This was the system of upfront tariffs, capacity charges, sovereign guarantees and fuel supply agreements that we call the Independent Private Power Policy.

The world of power generation and distribution has moved on since then.

Today, point of consumption generation and net metering are the norm, and old concepts of baseload capacity are being left behind.

The rush into coal now appears deeply misguided, and although it is difficult at this point to expect a change of course, it is still possible to argue that from here onwards coal-fired generation capacity should be capped, and the focus of the forthcoming power policy should shift towards finding ways to bring to Pakistan the renewable revolution that is currently sweeping the world.

## Streamlining justice

WHAT can one say of a legal system where it takes on average 25 years for a case to wind its way through the courts before it is finally disposed of?

While no one has been under any delusion as to the glacial speed at which cases progress in Pakistan, this is nevertheless a startling figure which emerged from a study conducted by the Supreme Court on the orders of retired chief justice Jawwad S. Khawaja.

The finding was included in a joint petition by several legal practitioners filed before the apex court asking that the National Judiciary Policy Making Committee be directed to revise the national judicial policy and devise new rules for the lower courts to streamline and expedite citizens' access to justice.

Another study conducted by one of the petitioners also indicates that in the civil courts in Punjab, each case on average takes a little over three years, and an astounding 58 hearings, to be resolved.

The petitioners requested that the lower courts be given time limits within which to decide suits, petitions and appeals, and also argued for activating the high courts' oversight role in ensuring access to justice.

One may be certain that the vast majority of litigants in Pakistan would agree that the legal system in this country tends to compound and prolong their misery rather than mitigating it.

Their experience perfectly illustrates the axiom, justice delayed is justice denied. There are reportedly over 2m cases pending before the courts.

While the legal system in Pakistan as a whole is broken, corrupt and inefficient, the situation at the lower court level is especially dire. It is therefore high time that the rules governing the lower courts' workings are streamlined to facilitate litigants.

As matters exist, overburdened judges tend to adjourn cases rather than get into extended hearings; lawyers themselves seek endless continuances on one pretext or another which discourages the petitioners and hikes up their costs beyond affordable levels.

Protracted court proceedings can in some cases also exacerbate security risks for petitioners and witnesses. For defendants as well, the logjam in the lower courts compromises their right to be heard in a timely manner and their cases decided within a reasonable period.

The interminable delays can take a permanent toll on the litigants' financial and emotional health. A chaotic legal system cannot deliver on its very *raison d'être*; it deserves a thorough overhaul.

## Safe schools and colleges

WHILE the wave of fear among parents sending their children to schools and universities, generated by the 2014 APS attack in Peshawar, might have subsided to a large degree, the security of schools in many places still continues to be a challenge.

True, schools, colleges and universities should not be turned into impenetrable fortresses that cause students to fear terrorists around every corner, but non-intrusive yet effective measures should be in place, especially in venues that are considered vulnerable.

As an example, police recommendations in the case of Peshawar's Agriculture Training Institute — renamed the Agriculture Services Academy — attacked by Taliban militants last December, have not been fully implemented.

For instance, only four of the recommended 18 trained guards have been hired. Often, procedural delays and shortage of funds impede efforts to make schools safe.

Equally, poor coordination between provincial and school authorities, the lack of a coherent plan coupled with vague threat alerts from the intelligence agencies make the task of beefing up security a difficult one.

However, fortifying security at schools also hinges on how effectively the wider battle against the militants is progressing.

As the attack on the agricultural institute showed — indeed, as more recent attacks such as the one in Swat over the weekend have demonstrated — terrorist networks still exist, despite the military operations that have sought to purge large areas of their presence over the years.

While there is no doubt that the level of militancy has come down in recent years, there is no room for complacency.

The threat of cross-border attacks, staged by TTP and other militants taking refuge in Afghanistan, is especially alarming in this context.

More vigilant border control and cooperation with the Afghan and American forces across the border are needed. Quite simply, the safety of our educational institutions goes hand in hand with boosting general security in the country, including of more vulnerable cities like Peshawar.

It is a long-term challenge that requires more than ad hoc measures to overcome

## Curbing patronage

THE disbursal of so-called development funds for pet projects of parliamentarians is a controversial and wasteful practice. Several governments have pledged to either end or curb it, but most have eventually caved in to pressure from parliamentarians, especially in the run-up to a general election. It is encouraging, therefore, that Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi appears to be trying to put an end to the practice and has rebuffed the demands of cabinet ministers seeking the release of development funds for MNAs ahead of the general election. The funds usually amount to little more than patronage tools for MNAs seeking to bestow favours on supporters and punish local opponents. And in the presence of third-tier local governments, development funds for MNAs at the constituency level can be disruptive and lead to contradictory and wasteful spending. While micro projects at the constituency level, particularly in underdeveloped constituencies, can be important for the welfare of the public, service delivery by the state should be systematic and well planned.

Although the governments of Mr Abbasi and ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif have tried to curb wasteful development spending by MNAs, they have not been entirely successful in eliminating the practice. According to a report in this newspaper, a son-in-law of Mr Sharif is among a handful of parliamentarians who have managed to secure vast amounts of development funds for their constituencies. Presumably, those with influence with and direct access to the very top of the PML-N leadership have had their



funding requests accepted, while less fortunate MNAs have not. A selective distribution of development funds is likely to build pressure for all MNAs to get their share, especially with a fiercely competitive general election on the horizon. Mr Abbasi will have to stand firm and ought to consider offering more transparency on the matter so that parliamentarians are aware of equal treatment for all.

The relatively sensible administrative leadership of Mr Abbasi has also highlighted the existence of a political leadership outside the otherwise tight circles of control that the Sharifs and other party leaders insist on. Mr Abbasi is a stalwart ally of Nawaz Sharif and has held important ministerial portfolios, but it wasn't until Mr Sharif's ouster that he was considered for elevation to the top executive job. Similarly, among younger leaders in the PML-N, the rise to the top appears to have more to do with their loyalty to a member of the Sharif family rather than their executive or political competence. Certainly, political loyalty is an important quality in a system with myriad threats and challenges, but governments exist to serve the people, not the leaders of political parties. The inadvertent ascension of Mr Abbasi to the prime minister's office has demonstrated that leadership qualities are not necessarily correlated with a famous last name.

## Climate warning

PAKISTAN lives on its water resources which fuel our agriculture and contribute a large share of our power generation, especially during the summer months when river flows are at their peak. It has been repeatedly emphasised that climate change threatens the hydrological economy upon which the entire country's system of livelihoods depends, affecting rainfall patterns, glacial melting and ultimately impacting cropping and power generation. The latest warning on the country's vulnerability to climate change comes from the Asian Development Bank, which points out that the annual mean temperature in Pakistan has risen by 0.5°C in the last half century. If this does not sound very much, consider that this seemingly minor change alone is responsible for giving us unprecedented flooding and repeated heatwaves. In the years to come, the ADB says, this rise could be as high as 3°C, which means a climate of extremes — of heat and cold, and of drought and flood — making it difficult to support sustainable livelihoods in the country.

The most common response to these warnings is that Pakistan's own carbon footprint is tiny in per capita terms, and there is little that can be done to address the problem by the state itself. The view is, in significant part, a reflection of the very short time horizons within which most collective decisions are made here. There may be little we can do to change the situation, but there is plenty that can be done to prepare ourselves to better meet the challenges that are fast coming our way. The report provides a list of the

cascading consequences that could descend upon the country as this warming takes place: greater water requirements due to greater evaporation, more power generation due to air conditioning, declining wheat and rice yields, rising mortality among the poor and vulnerable segments of the population, storm surges affecting coastal infrastructure, and so on. The challenges go far beyond a few extreme weather events and require a wide array of responses — from how we build our homes to how we water our crops — to be successfully met. The report is yet another reminder in a long series of similar warnings that climate change is something we need to be far more alive to than we are at the moment. Referring to our carbon footprint, as if that helps in mitigating the impact, is a grossly misplaced response.

## Where is Rao Anwar?

WHILE the extrajudicial killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud in Karachi last month has truly shaken the nation's conscience over the detestable practice of staged encounters, one of the central characters in this sordid saga — fugitive police officer Rao Anwar — has yet to be captured. Mr Anwar was last seen at Islamabad airport trying to flee the country on a Dubai-bound flight on Jan 23 before he was stopped by immigration officials.

Since then, there has been no trace of the absconding officer, despite the fact that the Supreme Court has given a deadline for his arrest and called upon the intelligence agencies and FIA to help the Sindh police nab him.

On Tuesday, a Sindh police team arrived in the capital to quiz officials and workers at Islamabad airport about the now suspended police officer's last-known whereabouts. This is the second police team to come to the federal capital from Karachi to look into the case.

It is highly bizarre that in this day and age such a high-profile suspect remains on the run.

Serious questions need to be asked about how Rao Anwar managed to slip away from the airport after he was denied boarding, and where he has been since. It is hard to fathom how the suspect can remain 'incognito' in the federal capital area — if that is where he remains — as this is supposed to be one of the most secure areas in the country.

The security forces need to double their efforts to trace him; this is important in order to investigate the case and punish those involved in wrongfully killing Naqeebullah. Bringing the perpetrators to justice will also send a strong message to rogue cops involved in staged encounters. Members of the Mehsud tribal jirga reiterated their demand for the arrest of Rao Anwar in their meeting with the prime minister on Tuesday.

The state needs to deliver on its promise of bringing Naqeebullah's killers to justice; the first step towards this goal must be to arrest the main suspect.

## Mashal Khan verdict

A LYNCH mob in a university was shocking enough.

But in the hours and days after Mashal Khan's tragic and vile murder, the true dimensions of the horrifying crime became apparent — a young man brutally murdered in an institution of higher learning after a lie was deliberately spread that he had committed blasphemy in alleged posts on social media.

The lie was invented by members of the university who were threatened by Mashal's courageous activism on issues ranging from alleged corruption in the university to a hike in university fees.

Everything the public has come to learn about Mashal since the despicable murder has shown him to be an exemplary university student and an upright, morally conscious citizen. April 13, 2017, was a dark day in the country's history.

So it is with some relief, though mixed with concern, that the first phase in the quest for justice for Mashal has concluded.

One death sentence, five life sentences, 25 three-year imprisonments and 26 acquittals are itself evidence of the sheer number of people involved in the crime and the difficulty of securing convictions in a case involving false but religiously motivated accusations.

It is encouraging that the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has declared its intention to file an appeal against the acquittals by the anti-terrorism court, but the retraction of statements by witnesses to Mashal's murder will likely pose challenges.

KP police and prosecution were surely aware that pressure would be brought to bear on witnesses to deny statements implicating the murderers and others involved in the lynching.

Fear for personal safety and the security of family members of witnesses would have been an unfortunate reality for the witnesses in the highly charged trial.

The KP government should have taken steps to protect key witnesses and encourage full and accurate testimonies.

If in a case that sparked national outrage and scrutiny, the police and prosecution were unable to secure convictions of all the accused, what hope is there for cases that do not attract such intense media coverage and national interest?

Shocking though not surprising has been the response of some religious parties to the ATC verdict. The acquitted individuals have been greeted as heroes and hailed for their role in the murder of a man against whom accusations of blasphemy are demonstrably false.

With a general election on the horizon, all political parties are likely to try and gin up support among their respective bases.

But it is depressing that parties such as the Jamaat and JUI-F would take the violent death of an innocent young man and insist that it is those who had a part to play in his murder who have been wronged.

The state should consider instituting a scholarship or naming a centre of education after Mashal Khan.

There should be no ambiguity allowed on the fact that a tremendously brave young man was brutally killed by liars and bigots.

## Nation without joy

THE notification by Pemra barring all satellite TV channels, FM radio stations, and cable operators from promoting the upcoming Valentine's Day is the latest example of how reluctant the state is to allow the people an opportunity to enjoy themselves. As basis for the notification, the electronic media regulator reprinted an interim court order by the Islamabad High Court from February last year; the court had issued the instructions while hearing a petition in this regard. That petition was never taken up during the past year and remains pending — hence Pemra's reprinting of it in its notification that has disappointed those who might have been looking forward to joining the world in presenting their loved ones with a flower or two on Feb 14. This is both discouraging and disturbing, especially when we consider that Pakistan is a country that has had more than its fair

share of tragedy and suffering — on account of militancy, intolerance, crime, poverty and a host of other factors. In such a situation, the state should have been doing its best to open up new avenues of entertainment, instead of adopting a moralistic approach egged on by conservative elements for whom happiness in any form is anathema. By letting people indulge in harmless diversions such as Valentine’s Day, the state might even have given citizens a sense of shared bonhomie and street vendors selling flowers and balloons a chance to make some extra money. Instead, officialdom seems bent upon actively stamping out any avenues of light-heartedness to which this beleaguered citizenry might take recourse.

However, it is not only about Valentine’s Day; a much larger and worrying trend is evident in the country. The centuries-old festival of Basant is just one of the many other examples of the regression we see. There was a time when this kite-flying festival earned Lahore millions in revenue and provided joy to young and old alike. It was banned ostensibly for reasons of safety as the kite twine could prove lethal and the risk of careless kite-flyers falling from rooftops was a concern. Instead of actively finding a way to make Basant safe, the state has imposed an outright ban on a festival that the right-wing lobby associates with ‘Hindu’ traditions. Sadly, Pakistan is on its way to becoming an island with its face turned towards regression, isolation, and a complete lack of heed for future consequences. Deep introspection is required — urgently.

## Cruelty to animals

BOTH man and beast have it quite rough in this country, though for the latter things are much grimmer, mainly due to the excesses of the former. It is not uncommon to see animals such as dogs and cats being treated cruelly in streets and alleyways, while beasts of burden are often loaded with much more than they should be carrying. Then there are cruel ‘customs’ and ‘traditions’ such as fights between animals including roosters, dogs etc. However, two recent developments in the legal arena have given some hope to those who wish for Pakistan to be a more humane place for animals. The Senate Standing Committee on Interior recently passed the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Amendment) Bill, 2018; the bill updates the 1890 colonial-era law by increasing fines for cruelty to animals, which up till the recent amendments were still being levied as per 19th-century standards. For example, the fine for killing an animal “with unnecessary cruelty” has been raised from Rs200 to Rs300,000. The second development came in the shape of a Sindh High Court order banning all ‘games’ and races that cause animals to suffer. These include animal cart races as well as fights between beasts. As the bench observed, “these

acts are potentially harmful for our society ... [and] may promote a tendency of violence. ...” The bench observed that adding the fig leaf of ‘custom’ to such brutal practices did not make them legal.

The Senate committee must be lauded for finally updating the law, while the Sindh High Court also deserves appreciation for disallowing in clear terms such cruel abuse of animals. However, the upper house as well as the honourable court’s efforts will go to waste unless these prohibitions are enforced. Also, the state should — with help from NGOs working for animal welfare — organise programmes in public and private schools that can sensitise youngsters about animal rights. General public-awareness campaigns could also be carried out highlighting the need to treat animals with more compassion.

## Pak-China FTA

AN announcement by the commerce secretary says that his Chinese counterparts have “agreed to accommodate” the demands of Pakistan’s exporter community in the amended free trade agreement between the two countries. Details of specifically which demands have been accommodated have not been provided, except to say that the new FTA is scheduled to be signed in March. This could be the government’s last hurrah before handing over power to an interim government. How much success has actually been scored in those negotiations will only be known once the amended FTA is signed, but if the announcement is to live up to expectations, then Pakistan’s largest export items to China should see considerable tariff concessions extended to them.

Pakistan’s trade deficit with China has tripled in five years, touching \$12bn in the last fiscal year. Chinese imports stand at 29pc of Pakistan’s total imports, while exports to China are 8.8pc of the total exports. This is a very large gap for an economy like Pakistan whose total exports are just about double the trade deficit with China. The argument that much of this is accounted for by machinery imports as the country’s economy grows and imports of capital goods rise to service an expanding market cuts little ice with the business community. Such a rapid expansion in the trade deficit is cause for concern, regardless of the composition of the imports, because the country’s capacity to finance a trade deficit of such size is not growing in tandem. We are told to wait till the capital goods being imported are installed for a boost in exports, but the same argument was made by the Musharraf regime when the current account deficit began to swell from 2004 onwards, to little avail. It is understandable that people remain unconvinced by this argument and prefer to see more forceful action to first articulate Pakistan’s commercial interests in its growing China relationship, followed by an equally strong representation of these interests at the negotiating table.



The business community argues that some of the leading Pakistani exports — cotton, textiles and rice — to China enjoy no tariff concessions under the old FTA. If Pakistan's exports to China registered an increase of \$1.4bn between 2006, when the FTA was signed, and 2015, then textiles accounted for \$729m of this amount, which is more than half the absolute increase. Rice is the second-largest export item, accounting for almost \$194m of the total increase in exports, yet it sees the highest applicable tariff. These high-potential categories should be on the list of items that either have concessional access, or, better still, are zero rated. Getting our interest clear in advancing the relationship with China is becoming an increasingly urgent priority for Pakistan, and the government's departing hurrah will testify to the quality of their curation of this vital effort.

## MQM-P in disarray

IT has all the trappings of a cinematic blockbuster: loads of action, emotional dialogues and plenty of suspense. However, the real-life drama being acted out nightly on TV screens across the country regarding the internal turmoil roiling the MQM-Pakistan is more gripping than anything currently playing in the nation's multiplexes.

In the post-Ataf Hussain era, this is perhaps the darkest hour for the MQM-P, as the wing of the Muttahida that split from the loyalist faction after Mr Hussain's outrageous 2016 speech is known.

It has been anything but smooth sailing for Farooq Sattar, the party stalwart who has led the MQM-P since the split with Mr Hussain, and now challenges to his leadership have come into the open.

The impasse at the moment centres on the award of party tickets for the upcoming Senate election, with Dr Sattar pushing for certain candidates, while much of the old guard that forms the coordination committee has resisted his choices.

In the Ataf Hussain era such dissent would have been unthinkable, but today the Muttahida leaders are very publicly criticising each other. The sniping continued on Friday with a resolution to the internal crisis not imminent.

For sure, this is not the first time internal fissures have threatened to lead to the disintegration of the MQM.

After all, in the early 1990s, the Afaq Ahmed-led Haqiqi faction split from the party and became a distinct entity. Much later, in 2016 former Karachi mayor Mustafa Kamal formed the Pak Sarzameen Party, launching a vitriolic verbal campaign against Mr Hussain.

And after the latter's infamous speech later that year, the mainstream party leadership came together under Mr Sattar's banner, while Altaf loyalists dismissed the new wing. Today, rival candidates are threatening Dr Sattar's claims of leadership.

It can be argued that the system Mr Hussain nurtured — one-man rule — did not allow the creation of any genuine second-tier leadership; Altaf Bhai's word was law and there was very little internal democracy. However, even if there is a patch-up within the MQM-P, it may only be temporary and more factionalism cannot be ruled out.

It is ironic that a party that once ruled Karachi — often through strong-arm tactics — is today facing disintegration. A very real question of who will fill the MQM's void in urban Sindh arises. The PSP, for one, is waiting to deliver the knockout blow. Things will definitely remain interesting in urban Sindh in the run-up to the general elections.

## Favourite projects

THERE are government projects, and then there are favourite government projects. In the Pakistani context, the mention of favourite projects invariably brings Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif into the picture. Mr Sharif is known for prioritising certain development schemes and then pursuing them with what has in recent times been termed as 'Shahbaz speed'. Danish schools, the Lahore metro bus and orange train, and the multi-billion Pakistan Kidney & Liver Institute, again in the Punjab capital, are all projects that have benefited greatly from the unconditional and total patronage of the chief minister. Quite often, such preferred development initiatives are justified as models that can be replicated in other parts of Punjab and elsewhere in the country. But the truth is that inspiration may or may not follow. Moreover, these buses, Danish schools and the kidney centre also have the potential to cause a lot of resentment among people in areas and fields that have not quite made it to the determined chief minister's priority list. The constant protest says that these favourites come at the expense of other urgently needed measures that a responsible administration is expected to undertake on a war-footing.

The saddest part is when a favourite project loses its appeal in the eyes of its inventor and is replaced by another initiative which comes to hog all the attention and patronage. Take the example of the famous Punjab Institute of Cardiology which enjoyed pride of place in the official books of Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif in its initial years.

Subsequently, the PIC has often been presented as a specimen of what happens to an important institution after it loses its charm and is substituted by other fancy things on the royal roll of honour. It can be well imagined what kind of upkeep is to be expected in the case of institutions which are vital to the public but which predate the Shahbazian development in Punjab. They do suffer in silence at a considerable distance from centre stage.

## Asma the fearless

THE shock at the sudden loss is palpable, but so is the intense pride that she lived among us.

Asma Jahangir was a citizen that all of Pakistan could be proud of and whom most can only hope to emulate.

Principled and courageous, Asma's willingness and determination to confront evil, defend the vulnerable, and insist on Pakistan living up to the ideals of its democratic, constitutional and secular foundations made her truly iconic.

A woman who lived the majority of her adult life in the public eye, Asma eschewed self-promotion for a steadfast and remarkable focus on the issues that ought to be of concern to every right-thinking and sensible citizen.

Asma was a formidable lawyer and a person of remarkable intellect, but always spoke in a universal language of the rights of the vulnerable and accountability of the powerful.

Her eloquent yet forceful defence of victims and the vulnerable everywhere will be greatly missed.

While Asma Jahangir tirelessly travelled the country and the globe to promote human rights and other admirable causes, it is her lifelong struggle against dictatorship and authoritarianism that is perhaps defining.

Her father, Malik Ghulam Jilani, bravely denounced military atrocities in what was then East Pakistan, and before long, Asma was fighting the dictatorship of Ziaul Haq in the streets.

Jailed by Gen Zia and placed under house arrest by another military dictator Pervez Musharraf, she never ceased to speak out against the harms of dictatorship and authoritarianism.

While her criticisms would have surely stung, most authoritarians and praetorians appeared to be afraid of Asma.

They needed to be.

Asma's principled positions made her a formidable opponent. In recent years, the depth of those principles has been on display when it comes to the MQM.

Long detested by Altaf Hussain for her vociferous denunciations of MQM militancy and violence in Karachi and other parts of urban Sindh, Asma was also emphatic in her criticism of vicious state action against the party and vigorously defended the right of voters to elect their chosen representatives unimpeded.

Losing an iconic champion of human rights, a lion of democracy and the rule of law would be difficult for any society.

For Pakistan, the loss of Asma Jahangir has come at yet another brittle historical moment, with uncertainty plaguing the democratic project in the country.

Democracy may find a path to continuity, but the challenges to the democratic project, both from anti-democratic forces and from within the political class, are significant.

The institutions of democracy are weak and the already attenuated systems for protecting fundamental rights are under further attack.

Till her last days, Asma Jahangir fought the good fight. Her work is now over, but Pakistan's is not as darkness continues to sweep across the country.

May new champions of democracy, rights and human goodness arise — and soon.

## Smearing LNG

A SUSTAINED campaign against the long-term LNG deal that the government signed in 2016 continues unabated, with the Supreme Court now taking up a petition to decide whether the terms of agreement are disadvantageous to Pakistan. The campaign appears to be politically motivated mainly because the reasons being advanced to cast the deal in a bad light are without merit. In one place, for example, one hears the detractors complain that the price at which LNG will be purchased by Pakistan is too high. That price is 13.37pc of the prevailing cost of oil in the market. But each time, the comparative price the detractors pick up to make their case is either from the spot market, or from agreements signed long after the original deal with Qatargas. This is entirely wrong, because spot market prices vary a great deal, and if they are lower at one point in time, they can be much higher at another as they were in the preceding two months. In fact, in recent spot market tenders, Pakistan reportedly ended up saving \$76m because the spot prices at which the supplies were contracted were higher than the price from Qatargas.

The two subsequent long-term supply deals that were signed in January 2017 about a year after the Qatargas deal were indeed lower, but there is also nothing unusual about this. The price of long-term supply of LNG varies from month to month, depending on the outlook prevailing at the time, as well as the creditworthiness of the buyer in LNG credit markets. The Qatargas deal was the first that Pakistan signed for the long-term supply of LNG, and as such it would necessarily carry a slight premium. Secondly, the outlook on LNG demand turned negative down the road, further driving the price down. But now many LNG journals are forecasting more robust demand as India enters the markets in a bigger way, so future contracts may come with a higher price tag. Unlike fruit and vegetable markets, LNG pricing is a complex matter and the markets operate in ways the layperson has difficulty in understanding. Pakistan paid a heavy price for politically motivated smears against the first LNG deal in 2006 that caused the entire project to collapse. For a decade after that, the country was gripped by crippling gas shortages. It would be a monumental folly if that story were allowed to be repeated.

## Access to legal aid

DEMOCRACY in any country should be underpinned by a legal system that is fair and accessible to all. Pakistan has yet to achieve the goal; thousands upon thousands of court cases linger on for years, and many petitioners die without seeing justice. This is all the more apparent in the case of prisoners who languish for years behind bars in this country. Deprived and destitute, they can hardly afford legal assistance. Given its constitutional

duty to ensure a fair trial, the state must intervene when prisoners cannot navigate complex legal processes without financial aid. So it was heartening to note that Punjab has endorsed a legal aid agency offering free counsel for financially disadvantaged prisoners. Surely, this move could also help reduce prison overcrowding. While legal aid has been available to destitute prisoners in Punjab since 2015, the amount earmarked by the government has been insufficient for lawyers' fees, eg Rs 25,000 is offered for a case in the Lahore High Court and Rs 20,000 for a case in the sessions court. A revised fee structure and improved legal expertise should help in the speedy disposal of cases.

There are several other loopholes in the system that must be addressed to make justice available to all. The reliance on state lawyers for criminal cases often results in substandard representation because of clients' limited resources and the counsels being overburdened. Hence, free legal counsel at all stages (investigation, conviction and sentencing) is a vital component for a streamlined judicial system. Other provinces should also focus on improved legal aid — especially for juvenile offenders and mentally ill prisoners. Under the lapsed Public Defender Legal Aid Office Ordinance, 2009, a chief public defender assesses cases for legal assistance; this law should be enacted with the provinces focusing on the matter in their respective jurisdictions. Denying legal aid to poor prisoners not only contravenes human rights rules; it also fails to help rehabilitate offenders languishing in prison sans legal representation.

## More attacks in IHK

TWO attacks in India-held Kashmir have sent tensions in the region soaring and prompted an extraordinary verbal attack by Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, against Pakistan. Before Ms Sitharaman's bellicose statement, the Pakistan Foreign Office had already issued a statement suggesting that India should not presumptively blame Pakistan for violence in IHK, as in the past such accusations have been created as an excuse for India to attack across the LoC and Working Boundary. The attack on an army camp in Jammu on Saturday and another on a Central Reserve Police Force camp in Srinagar yesterday have so ratcheted up tensions between the two countries that IHK Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, has been forced to speak out. Ms Mufti has said on Twitter, "Dialogue with Pakistan is necessary if we are to end bloodshed. I know I will be labelled anti-national by news anchors tonight but that doesn't matter. The people of J&K are suffering. We have to talk because war is not an option."



Her words should be heeded by the Indian government. The strident response of Ms Sitharaman may satisfy anti-Pakistan hawks in India, but such sentiments can only pave the way to greater conflict, not less. The events of September 2016 should serve as a reminder of unrestrained rhetoric leading to unmanageable consequences. An attack on a military brigade headquarters in Uri that India blamed on Jaish-e-Mohammad led to a clamour for action against Pakistan. Less than two weeks later, the Modi government, which itself appeared to fan the flames of war, launched so-called surgical strikes across the LoC. While the details have been disputed by Pakistan, the propaganda unleashed by India dangerously increased the possibility of conflict between the two states. The claim of surgical strikes was clearly meant to placate the Indian public, which had been whipped up into a nationalist frenzy, but it also threatened a cycle of violence, propaganda and counter-propaganda that could have spun out of control.

Interventions by IHK politicians such as Ms Mufti may help calm tensions in the short term, but the chief minister's advice squarely addresses the underlying problem. Dialogue is essential between India and Pakistan because in its absence, hardliners will hijack the discourse and push agendas of self-interest that could have disastrous consequences for the people of both countries. The past five years have proven that waiting for the right time to attempt dialogue is futile. Elections in one country or the other, change of governments and the ebb and flow of violence will always be an excuse to delay dialogue when neither side is sincere. But without dialogue, the threat of violence can only grow. The Indian and Pakistani states owe it to their people to find peaceful solutions to seemingly intractable disputes.

## Power of protest

WHAT began as a protest with a simple call to action — justice for Naqeebullah Mehsud — transformed into an astonishing movement as thousands from Fata and KP marched together to the federal capital. The now-concluded sit-in had a much greater grievance than bringing absconding police officer Rao Anwar to account.

Essentially, the protesters diagnosed the many malignancies in our CT strategy that have rendered us brutalised and inured to injustice. It is these eroded rights and unjust policies, which systematically disenfranchise the Pakhtun in particular, that laid the groundwork for the brutal murder of Naqeebullah.

Much of Fata has witnessed a battle raging between the militants and the military. Pakhtuns have paid a heavy price; caught in the crossfire, many among them have been subjected to extrajudicial killings and secretive detentions. Restrictions have been imposed on their movement, while thousands have fled their homes to find safer abodes. The protesters brought the case of these Pakhtuns to public notice.

While it may be premature to declare the protest a success, it still holds important lessons. First, despite having no clear leadership and presenting no sensationalist saviour-villain binary, the protesters were able to stay organised and on message.

This they managed through staging their resistance through the simple act of providing testimonies of their experiences. Young and old, men and women; all were invited to bear witness. Reminiscent of Bacha Khan, the conviction that the truth will out, without recourse to violence or partisanship, brought them much support across political, ethnic and class lines.

Because their demands were rights-based and focused on systemic reforms, they resonated for being inclusive and universal. Hardened political hacks should take note; this is how you build consensus.

Second, the protesters were able to subvert some of our most pernicious tropes: the colonial construct of the Pakhtun as unruly warlords; the neo-colonial hangover of profiling certain groups as being extremists; and the patrician narrative of protesting youth as little more than angry miscreants.

Although there have been allegations that the lack of televised coverage was the result of an enforced blackout, it is also possible that the cameras were not trained on this particular sit-in precisely because the protesters did not sate the appetite for spectacle over substance. But it is incumbent upon the media, the state and society to pay attention to this particular moment; this is what democracy in action looks like

## Drug-resistant typhoid

IN a country that can ill afford the outbreak of another preventable disease, multidrug resistant typhoid has spread in many parts of Karachi and certain districts in Hyderabad. To this effect, a study by the Aga Khan University uncovered over 800 cases of drug-resistant typhoid in Hyderabad between 2016 and 2017 — an alarming development since only six cases of drug-resistant typhoid were reported in Pakistan between 2009 and 2014. Possibly at the cusp of another public health crisis, the Sindh health department, in collaboration with AKU and international donor assistance, has launched

a four-month emergency vaccination campaign in Hyderabad's worst-hit areas of Latifabad and Qasimabad. Although typhoid vaccinations are not implemented as routine measure, despite the low price of the vaccine and the high cost of typhoid treatment, vaccination in high-risk areas is a WHO-recommended control strategy. To measure the efficacy of this vaccine, this campaign will vaccinate 250,000 children administering the new Typbar-TCV vaccine. Of concern is the fact that the cases in Hyderabad are the world's first outbreak of typhoid that is resistant to standard antibiotics such as ceftriaxone used as treatment globally. It is shameful that the authorities failed to pay heed to obvious reasons for the prevalence of typhoid in Sindh, including the lack of potable water, unhygienic food, and unsanitary conditions.

To avoid serious social and economic long-term consequences, it is imperative our health authorities invest resources and expertise in disease-prevention strategies. Improved surveillance for drug-resistant bugs should also help public health officials figure out whether or not the typhoid vaccine should become part of the national immunisation programme and what type of antibiotics can treat local typhoid infections. It is because of overuse of antibiotics over decades that there is an urgent need to use frontline drugs wisely by placing strict controls on ad-hoc prescribing, and ensure diagnostic tests are done for such medicines.

## Clarity on banned groups

A MUCH delayed legislative intervention, though only in the form of a presidential ordinance, may finally allow Pakistan to align its domestic law with international obligations. Days before an important Financial Action Task Force meeting in Paris — a meeting in which many believe action could be taken against Pakistan for non-compliance with terrorism-financing and money-laundering rules — the government has perhaps acted to forestall punitive action against the country. Therein lies a problem. Has Pakistan done the minimum it needs to prevent punitive action by the international community for allegedly harbouring militant groups, or is this the beginning of a genuine attempt to rid Pakistan of all forms of militancy whether externally directed or internally? The timing, on the eve of the meeting, and the method, a presidential ordinance that can be promulgated overnight as opposed to an act of parliament, suggests that the former may be true.

Welcome as the latest move to include UN-designated banned groups in a Pakistani list of proscribed organisations is — ending the earlier ambiguity — there need to be sustained efforts against all militant groups in the country. At every point, there have been and continue to be explanations and unconvincing justifications for Pakistan's inability to adopt zero tolerance against militancy. Too often, the arguments against a zero-tolerance policy have been embedded in expedient reasons. Sometimes it is that Pakistan is not in

a position to absorb a blowback from militants who find themselves suddenly under pressure from the state, at other times the justification offered is that Pakistan does not need to militarily act against groups that have not taken up arms against the Pakistani state and society. But the quasi-justifications always have the effect of allowing a significant part of the militancy, terrorism and extremism spectrum to continue to proliferate in the country. At some point — arguably, a point that has long since been passed — it is important to have ideological clarity about who are the enemies of peace, stability and constitutional democracy in the country and to fight them with determination and consistency.

The unfortunate reality is that Pakistan appears to have neither the will nor the capacity to stamp out militancy of every stripe and colour — despite persistent official claims to the contrary. Time and again, the state has insisted that Pakistan's fight against militancy is its own. That is unequivocally and undeniably true. But it makes little sense to claim a fight as necessary to the stability and long-term existence of Pakistan and yet not adopt a zero-tolerance policy against militancy. Pakistan does not and should not need external pressure and cajoling to shut down networks of militancy that are inimical to modern, peaceful societies based on the rule of law. Organisations like the LeT, JeM and affiliated groups ought to have no space in present-day Pakistan.

## Choices in LNG

NOW that the Supreme Court has done the needful and dismissed what was from the beginning a frivolous petition against the long-term supply agreement for LNG between the governments of Pakistan and Qatar, the focus of attention needs to shift towards the real and substantive question of reforms in the gas sector. In the years to come, as the volume of LNG in our system increases and the share of domestic gas declines, the shares of both will become equal. That point is only a few years away now, given the speed with which new LNG terminals are being erected. Very soon, difficult choices will begin to assert themselves, especially in the matter of pricing. Imported gas, in the form of LNG, is more than twice as expensive as domestic gas, and in the case of some consumer categories, even more than that. Given the huge role that gas plays in our economy, accounting for almost half our primary fuel needs, a time is coming when many stakeholders in industry will be asked to arrange their future supplies of gas from international markets, at market prices. The problem is, many segments of our industry are likely to be rendered instantly uncompetitive when that happens.

The major stakeholders in the country's gas economy include fertiliser, textiles and power generation. Only a few years ago, gas was also being widely used as a vehicular fuel, but the CNG sector was the first that was asked to arrange its supplies from imported LNG.

That sector largely shut down as a result. Now it will be the turn of the bigger players to take on the burden of market pricing for their gas needs, and there's a fair chance that they too will struggle with the consequences. Our textile exports are already complaining about the high cost of doing business in Pakistan, where energy pricing is central to their argument. The fertiliser sector is also likely to struggle if the subsidised rate at which feedstock gas is provided to it is withdrawn and producers are asked to arrange future feedstock supplies at market rates. In order to prevent the situation from turning ugly, much like the wrangling around gas allocations and the merit order list during the years of shortages, pricing reform is key, as well as a regime that defines clearly who gets priority access to domestic gas.

## Nutrition survey

THE quality of nutrition is of critical importance to the quality of an individual's life and, by extension, what he or she can contribute to society as a whole. A government report in 2017 estimated that Pakistan lost \$7.6bn, or 3pc of its GDP, each year due to malnutrition. It is not a moment too soon, therefore, that a countrywide nutrition survey has been launched by the health ministry. The study will seek to deduce how much progress Pakistan has made on improving the nutritional status of women and children, food security and household water quality over the past six years since the first such survey was carried out. That study had produced some dire results, among them that 44pc of children in Pakistan are stunted and that more than half the households face hunger or the threat of hunger. It had also revealed massive deficiencies of micro-nutrients among women. Organised on a district-wise pattern, the latest survey will take 13 months to complete, with teams gathering information from 115,500 households, going from door to door in villages, towns and cities across the country.

The result of such an exhaustive exercise will be invaluable in planning policy and designing targeted health interventions. But the next logical step is to enhance the outlay on nutrition. For a country that is, according to its power elite, poised on the cusp of a 'game changer', it is abominable that the government spends only 3.7pc of its GDP on nutrition, the lowest in Asia. Human rights and the duty of the state aside, such an inequitable distribution of resources has consequences that span generations and hobble a country's progress. Women with anaemia and other nutrition-related health complications are not only at greater risk of dying in childbirth; they also bear underweight children, who are at a disadvantage in physical and cognitive development throughout their lives. Once the fact-finding is done, attention must turn to a more rational allocation of funds for nutrition.

## Shift in Lodhran

FORMER prime minister Mian Nawaz Sharif has reason to revel in the PML-N's victory over arch-rival PTI in Lodhran, the last by-poll before the next general election.

The seat was vacated by Imran Khan's ace aide Jahangir Tareen on his disqualification. An ex-prime minister who has been persistent in demanding the reasons for his ouster can justifiably see this as a popular verdict: evidently, the people are still willing to vote for Mian Sahib's candidates, and in big numbers.

It was a huge defeat for the PTI, that many believed was at the peak of its popularity. Some experts are now debating how the familiar Sharif bandwagon can be stopped from sweeping the home province again in the next general election — the Lodhran result has certainly left the PTI with a lot of worries.

There is no doubt that the PTI candidate, the young Ali Tareen, got a huge number of votes in the NA-154 contest, but already senior PTI leaders have acknowledged that complacency was one of the factors which denied them a win.

Read: Lodhran's message for PTI

This shows that the PTI, like other formidable opponents of the PML-N in the past, has failed to realise just how good the Sharif machinery can be on polling day. There were instances in the past where the PML-N ran a deceptive low-key pre-poll campaign, catching the competitors by surprise.

In Lodhran on Monday, it was an ambush that, too, had been quietly prepared, even as the PTI went around receiving congratulations over the 'victory' it was anticipating. The PML-N let the PTI form this impression, working quietly with the help of local actors firmly behind PML-N candidate Syed Iqbal Shah; there was no rowdy display of support. They were apparently unaffected by the erroneous tales that projected NA-154 as a Tareen constituency. The fact is that Jahangir Tareen first contested this seat in 2013. He lost then, securing the seat in a by-election later. This hardly made it a hereditary safe seat for his son Ali Tareen and did not justify the confidence of those predicting a PTI walkover.

The overconfidence has dealt the PTI a blow which can have serious consequences not just in southern Punjab but all over the province — in fact across the country. Mr Tareen has long been seen as Imran Khan's number two man. He remained a stalwart with influence despite the ban on his contesting the polls. In the aftermath of the Tareen failure to retain this seat, severe doubt has been cast on the worth of Mr Khan's lieutenants. Can



Mr Khan take on the might of the Sharif juggernaut on his own? This is a sign that, short of some divine help, the PTI chief is going to have a very tough time living up to his billing as the alternative.

## Pak-Afghan action

RECIPROCITY is at the heart of a solution to militant violence in the region and army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa has done the right thing by publicly urging the Afghan state to match Pakistan's actions against militancy and terrorism. Certainly, Pakistan has pledged before to help curb cross-border militancy and act on intelligence provided by the Afghan state against militants who may have found sanctuary in Pakistan and have used it to plan and execute attacks inside Afghanistan. Similarly, Afghanistan has for long either denied that anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries exist on Afghan soil or shown little interest in taking Pakistan's concerns seriously. But in publicly calling for reciprocal action by Afghanistan, Gen Bajwa has staked out a position that could help put an end to the blame game and target militants who have rocked Afghanistan with violence in recent times and others that have continued to periodically attack Pakistan. The devastating violence inside Afghanistan and a stubborn rate of continuing attacks inside Pakistan are untenable for both states and it has long been understood by independent observers that without a significant degree of reciprocal action, militants would continue to have the space to plan and coordinate attacks. Indeed, the more tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan spike, the more militants in the region benefit.

Ultimately, while evolution in militant tactics and operations may require both Afghanistan and Pakistan to adjust their tactics, the broader steps that need to be taken by both countries have long been apparent. Afghanistan and the US have long tried to shift blame for political and security failures of their own making inside Afghanistan, but it is also true that Pakistan has not always treated legitimate complaints seriously. The US also continues to err in strategy and is ambivalent about talking to the Afghan Taliban when it is apparent that only a political settlement can bring relative stability inside Afghanistan. Yet, the hideous attacks inside Afghanistan this year have made clear that no state absorbs such violence without dangerous repercussions for the region. A political settlement in Afghanistan does not mean simply tolerating the violence until then. Similarly, persistent attacks inside Pakistan that are coordinated from TTP sanctuaries inside Afghanistan have threatened to roll back significant gains in Fata, Swat and other parts of the country. If Gen Bajwa is willing to speak publicly of reciprocal action, Afghanistan should take him up on his pledge.

## MQM rift and KMC

THE MQM-P is currently experiencing an existential crisis, with two rival power centres — the Bahadurabad and PIB wings, respectively — competing for control of the party.

The situation is complex and nearly every day a new twist in the saga emerges, as Dr Farooq Sattar, who assumed control in the post-Ataf Hussain period and who is currently head of the PIB faction, tries to retain control over the whole party.

While the power struggle is an internal matter of the Muttahida, it is undoubtedly having an impact on Karachi's political situation, as the MQM has been urban Sindh's dominant political force for over three decades. Particularly, the crisis has begun to affect the metropolis's local government: not only does the city's mayor, Wasim Akhtar, belong to the MQM, but the Muttahida controls three of the city's six district municipal corporations.

On Tuesday, Mayor Akhtar, who has sympathies with the Bahadurabad wing, called a meeting of city councillors belonging to MQM-P; as reported, only about half of the councillors showed up, indicating split loyalties within the City Council between the Bahadurabad and PIB factions. The mayor further asked councillors to quit their posts if they wanted to do politics.

Civic services in Karachi are already badly compromised due to the power struggle between the PPP-led Sindh government — which has assumed control of numerous municipal functions — and the MQM-controlled city government.

Now, with the Muttahida's internal tensions boiling over, whatever little work the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation was carrying out may also be affected. For citizens, this may practically translate into more trash on the streets, overflowing gutters and dilapidated infrastructure.

Surely, this is not the fate the inhabitants of Pakistan's largest city deserve. In an ideal world municipal powers should rest with the elected mayor. But with the mayor embroiled in a political tussle and the provincial government unwilling to pay any attention to Karachi, the unfortunate status quo will seemingly continue for the metropolis, adding to its citizens' miseries.

## Women without agency

YET again, the low status of women in this country stands exposed in all its ugliness. A United Nations report released on Wednesday examines the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their impact on the lives of women and girls. According to the findings, 4.9 million women between the ages of 19 and 49 years in Pakistan are simultaneously deprived in four SDG-related dimensions, with health being one of them. The disaggregated results are an indictment of not only cultural mindsets that keep women in subjugation but also of governmental apathy. On average, 48.1pc of women and girls between 15 and 49 years of age have no say in decisions about their own health. Those in rural areas are 1.3 times more likely to experience such lack of agency than their counterparts in urban locations. Sindhi and Pakhtun women and girls are the most disadvantaged in this category with between 62pc and 65pc reporting no say in health matters. Notably however, Pakhtun women and girls, regardless of income level or location, are the most suppressed on this score with higher than the national average unable to participate in decisions about their health.

Pakistan's deeply entrenched patriarchy relegates women to the bottom of the pile in an already inequitable system. They are expected to defer to men in decisions that can affect the rest of their lives; where health is concerned, these could include questions about how many children to bear, when to seek medical attention for themselves and their children, and so on. Consider the skewed gender ratio in Pakistan — 105 men for every 100 women in a world where the longer life expectancy of women means they outnumber men in most countries. But what else can be the outcome given the traditional preference for males in our culture? Girls get the shorter end of the stick from infancy onwards, leading to higher levels of malnourishment and anaemia among women, increased risk of death in childbirth and chronic health conditions.

However, cultural patterns are not immutable. As successful polio-vaccination campaigns have demonstrated, community-based interventions are the most effective in changing attitudes subtly and non-threateningly. Lady Health Workers, using the same approach, have also made considerable strides in spreading public awareness about other health-related issues, especially pertaining to pregnancy and childbirth; their numbers can be further enhanced to reach more women. But decisions about one's health are no different from decisions about other aspects of one's life. For women to acquire that level of autonomy requires whittling away at age-old notions. An enlightened education curriculum, more schools and colleges, increased employment opportunities for women, and implementation of pro-women laws all have a role to play. It is to our detriment as a nation that half our population does not have the tools or the agency to lead a more fulfilling existence.

## NAB's pressure

IN a state where powerful individuals facing the prospect of accountability or court trials routinely find an excuse to travel abroad and not return, there are generally good reasons for prosecutors and courts to ensure the presence of the accused in the country. There is also a possibility, however, of the Exit Control List being used to harass and put undue pressure on individuals who have fallen out of favour with the state. The National Accountability Bureau requesting the interior ministry to place Nawaz Sharif and family members facing accountability trials on the ECL is arguably a case of undue pressure and harassment. Mr Sharif and his daughter, Maryam Nawaz, had requested the accountability court to grant them an exemption from personal appearances until the first week of March. The reason given is to visit Mr Sharif's wife, Kulsum Nawaz, who is undergoing medical treatment for a serious ailment in the UK. Until now, despite a flurry of rumours each time Mr Sharif and Ms Nawaz have left the country, they have appeared before the accountability court when required. While father and daughter have continued to stridently attack the judiciary and the judicial process against them, they have also complied with court orders every step of the way.

What has changed to prompt NAB to now seek the inclusion of the Sharif family on the ECL? Mr Sharif continues to tour the country, addressing rallies and preparing the PML-N base for the approaching general election. There is no indication that he intends to stop, which necessarily implies that he will return to the country after travelling to meet his ailing wife in the UK. Certainly, Mr Sharif and his family should not be accorded special treatment simply because they are a prominent political family. But neither should NAB act in a politicised manner. Prosecution should not become persecution. Indeed, given the controversial ouster of Mr Sharif from the prime ministership, it is all the more important that the accountability trials scrupulously adhere to the letter and spirit of the law. In the hyper partisan political environment in the country, even otherwise normal legal procedure tends to be interpreted as partisan concession. There are undeniable political ramifications of the accountability trials of Mr Sharif and his family. But the bitter experiences of the 1990s should not be repeated. NAB should focus on its prosecutions and allow the Sharifs to handle their family medical issues.

## Axing smart meters

THE government has decided to terminate a long-term programme to instal smart meters that can automate the process of meter readings at the last minute, but the more interesting part of the story actually lies in the reasons being given for the decision. Energy Minister Awaiz Leghari tells us that the entire business of billing and meter readings is so riddled with rackets that no distribution company will be able to properly oversee the installation and smooth operation of the new meters that were to be installed on 30pc of the connections in two distribution companies in the first phase of a project financed through an ADB loan. This is a common problem, and the minister is right in feeling that the rackets will be too much of an obstacle for the new technology to do its work, leaving the distribution companies with nothing but loans to repay.

But we are all entitled to ask why this thought occurred to the government at the last minute, when the loan that had been under negotiation since 2012 was about to kick off. And more importantly, if the rackets are indeed as deep and wide as the minister says, and he is probably right in this assessment, what exactly is the game plan to improve the billing and recovery machinery of the distribution companies? Adding more generation capacity to this system only makes it more urgent to rectify billing and recoveries, because otherwise the increased number of units sent out in the future would add to the circular debt, potentially leading to forced shutdowns. The minister says privatisation is the better answer, and the government would prefer to let the future investor handle the problem. Now if only we had a clear pathway to that goal, we might have reason to believe that the structural problems underlying the power sector are getting the attention they deserve.

## Terror financing

THE juncture that Pakistan stands at today — of potentially being ‘grey listed’ by the Financial Action Task Force for failure to take action against groups and individuals designated by the United Nations as terrorists — is not new. For three years, Pakistan was on this grey list from 2012 to 2015 for failing to enact an anti-money-laundering law. Once that was done, under the guidance of the then finance minister Ishaq Dar, the country was taken out of the grey list, and the financial sector breathed a sigh of relief. Then, a new set of commitments had to be delivered on: proscribe those groups designated as terrorists by the UN, and seize their assets, restrict the movement of their leadership and halt their fundraising. From 2015, the country struggled with this, because the groups in question, ie the Falah-i-Insaniyat and the Jamaatud Dawa, appeared to enjoy support from powerful quarters and were set to be ‘mainstreamed’ in Pakistani politics in preparation for the 2018 general election.

Now on the eve of the FATF meeting in Paris, we are seeing action being taken against these very groups. Previously, the country witnessed only cosmetic action being taken against groups designated as terrorists by the UN just before a review by the FATF. On completion of the review, action would not be pursued. This is why many are asking whether or not history is set to repeat itself. But could there be reason to believe that things may be different now? One positive aspect is that in the days following the promulgation of the presidential ordinance harmonising the list of proscribed organisations maintained by Pakistan and the UN, a crackdown more wide-ranging than previously has been in evidence. One must hope that somewhere deep inside the state’s decision-making structures, something has changed.

In any case, it is in Pakistan’s own interest to ensure that crackdowns and bans on specific organisations have the desired effect and that these groups are defanged permanently and do not have any opportunity to resurrect themselves under a different name. The actions being taken now, which include the seizing of the financial assets of the groups, hopefully indicate a change of heart at the top levels of government; but the state should ensure that these extend to all militant groups in the country — and not only to those proscribed internationally. The organisations in question have struck deep roots in Pakistani society with their charity work, and making a meaningful change in their modus operandi will require a sustained, detailed strategy. The current steps against these groups may well satisfy the international obligations that the government is seeking to fulfil. But the real commitment is to the people of Pakistan who want to be able to live and breathe in a country free from extremism.



## Extrajudicial killings

THE scale of corruption and crime in the police forces of the country is often guessed at, but rarely is it described in clinical detail. The killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud and the revelations about Rao Anwar and his associates' vast empire of criminality, abductions and murder have shocked a nation inured to police brutality and wrongdoing. It has also spawned fresh public interest in the widely known but barely investigated issue of extrajudicial killings. An investigative report in this newspaper yesterday has added important details to numerous allegations against Mr Anwar and his gang in police uniform. Patronised and protected by political and permanent elements of the state, it seems that the disgraced policeman Rao Anwar had set up a virtual mafia of his own in his jurisdiction and established nothing short of a reign of terror. The general public is keenly aware that it must be wary of the police, but Mr Anwar's rule in Malir, Karachi, was grotesquely violent — violence that is perhaps only outdone by the impunity with which he carried out his activities. In death, Naqeebullah has become a symbol of hope that positive change is both possible and desperately needed. The culture of the police acting outside the law has to be brought to an end.

In truth, there is little that can be done when the political and security arms of the state are both deeply involved in and connive with the police to commit crimes. The long fight against militancy and terrorism has created fresh justifications for extreme violence, even summary executions, against all manner of citizens, whether criminal or not. The case of Naqeebullah cannot be an isolated incident and a full official investigation of Mr Anwar's record will surely unearth new horrors and shocking evidence. What is clear is that public pressure, scrutiny by legislatures and the judicial process can combine to put pressure on the state to reform. Undeniable flaws as there are in the judicial system, extrajudicial killings are not a solution; such killings perhaps only worsen the cycle of violence. The problem is manifestly not limited to Karachi in general, but is a national problem. With policing mostly a provincial matter, coordinating reforms across the provinces will need significant effort. Commendable legislative reforms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are a step in the right direction, but cannot be judged as effective yet. A line in the sand must be drawn: no more extrajudicial killings.

## Transgender voting rights

IT seems that in an increasingly intolerant Pakistan, not even legal protections are enough to safeguard the rights of the transgender community. When it comes to matters of inheritance, employment and election registration, this community is among the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised. But even as its members grapple with sexual abuse and intimidation, there are some advocates among them — such as Farzana Jan — who have been campaigning relentlessly for their rights. This week, Ms Jan who leads the TransAction Alliance — a network of KP transgender activists — was party to a joint petition in the Peshawar High Court requesting that the ECP ensure electoral participation for transgender people. Pointing out anomalies in the poll nomination forms, the petitioners want the inclusion of a column for transgender and intersex persons desiring to contest elections. Current ECP rules do not define whether transgender persons can cast their votes in male or female booths — their gender is mentioned as ‘X’ on CNICs. If unable to give access to female or male polling booths, the ECP should work out specific polling arrangements for transgender voters. Disenfranchising an already marginalised community is unacceptable. It is only when polling officers are trained in inclusive electioneering that gender discrimination will end. While the census found the transgender population at 100,000, only 1,500 persons are registered voters. The logical next step is to issue CNICs to transgender people followed by voter registration.

Despite a series of watertight legal protections — including the recent amendment to a 2017 transgender protection bill stating a medical test is not required to identify one’s gender — the community’s reality calls for urgent action. Consider the surge of attacks on transgender women in recent years, and the police’s failure to respond. The impoverished state of transgenders serves as an indictment of the state’s shameful disinterest when it comes to preserving the basic rights of such vulnerable groups with bare recourse to opportunity and justice.

## Nutrition crisis

EVEN in a generally underdeveloped country, it is easy to identify those in positions of governance that have taken their responsibilities with less seriousness than many of their counterparts. In this regard, the PPP's performance in Sindh has, time and again, stood out as being utterly pathetic when it comes to the uplift and welfare of the millions in whose name it governs. Not too long ago, regular reports of infants and children dying in Thar — from preventable illnesses — led to much consternation among the public. But the government had nothing to offer except platitudes. What concrete action has been taken to address the lack of basic health facilities, poor health awareness among the residents of Thar, and chronic malnutrition? In terms of the latter challenge, it was as far back as January 2011 that Unicef warned that the levels of malnutrition in rural Sindh could be compared to those in Chad and Niger. Now, it appears, the situation has deteriorated even further. The latest UN report on gender equality, *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda*, highlights how females among the most disadvantaged groups in Sindh fare even worse in terms of malnutrition than their counterparts in Nigeria. The report makes for shocking reading. To quote just one of the several unpalatable facts it contains, 40.6pc of the poorest rural Sindhi women are underweight, as compared to 18.9pc of Fulani women from the poorest rural households in Nigeria.

True, the problem is not restricted to Sindh alone. The report also provides details of how overall food insecurity amongst women in the country is 11 percentage points higher than amongst men, as compared to, say, Albania where females were seven percentage points less likely than men to report the same. Even so, given the repeated alarm bells that have over the years been rung regarding malnutrition in rural Sindh in particular, stringent criticism is warranted. Unfortunately, it is difficult to discern what it will take to bestir the PPP behemoth.

## Forgotten poll promises

AS the dust settles after a surprise result in the Lodhran by-election and the Sharif family's legal woes continue, both the PTI and PML-N appear to be returning to full-attack mode. A vigorously fought, hyper-competitive general election seems inevitable at this point, but perhaps the leadership of both parties ought to realise the possible repercussions of a take-no-prisoners style election campaign. To be sure, both sides have some legitimate grievances. The ouster of Nawaz Sharif from prime ministership was controversial and poorly reasoned by the court. To expect a three-term prime minister who heads the largest vote-getting party in the country to simply walk away from politics after a controversial disqualification verdict was unreasonable. But the PTI is also right in demanding that the PML-N stop attacking institutions, particularly the judiciary. An electoral contest that is turned into a referendum of trust in national institutions is unlikely to yield any kind of stability.

Part of the problem is that neither the PTI nor the PML-N seems interested in a positive message for voters. While election manifestos have mostly been regarded as a procedural necessity by political parties, manifestoes have the potential to set out realistic and positive governance agendas. Yet, the parties themselves quickly dispense with their manifestos after a general election, and few in the public or the media bring attention to promises contained in them. What, for example, were the principal pledges that the PTI and PML-N made in their 2013 general election manifestos? The PTI's relentless focus on the political shortcomings and alleged misdeeds of the PML-N clearly appeals to a section of the electorate, but it does not necessarily have a wider appeal. Simplistic slogans such as the PTI's claim that it will end all corruption if elected do not translate into a plan of action, even as the anti-corruption message remains necessary and laudable.

For the PML-N, the challenge remains to move on from a narrative of victimhood. Mr Sharif and his family may feel aggrieved at his ouster from the prime minister's office and upset that the Sharifs' legal woes are endless, but the democratic process is larger than the fate of a few individuals, no matter how important the latter consider themselves to be to the democratic process. For all the controversy that surrounded Mr Sharif's ouster from public office, the fact remains that in over a year of political and judicial scrutiny after the Panama Papers were revealed to the world, the Sharif family was unable or unwilling to provide a full account of the family's wealth and assets. An election ought to be about the people's needs and aspirations, not the victimhood of the political candidate.

## Oxfam abuse scandal

IN the aftermath of humanitarian catastrophes, it becomes the task of courageous aid workers to save lives in underdeveloped regions of the world. It is absolutely outrageous, then, that charity staff in certain countries are known to procure and pay underage girls and women for sex, or indulge in debauched sex parties. This month, an investigation by The Times revealed that senior staff from the British charity Oxfam had paid for sex in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. As Oxfam was rocked by a week of shocking allegations — the worst in its otherwise uncontroversial history — it acknowledged that an internal investigation into the Haiti incident in 2011 had confirmed sexual misconduct which the charity failed to properly address. Not only have these lurid revelations, many involving sex with underage children, eroded public trust in the UK's charity sector, these allegations could trigger a fall in donations to British charities, including the fundraising biennial appeal by Comic Relief in March. Funds through this appeal are funnelled into global social development projects in health and education in Asia and Africa. Hoping to redeem its reputation, Oxfam has publicly apologised for the 'reprehensible' behaviour of its senior staff, pledging to create an independent commission to review existing practices and culture. Continued government aid to Oxfam is dependent on the organisation disclosing full facts about the 2011 Haiti incident.

As recent events have shown, NGOs working in unstable and dangerous environments can be used as a 'respectable' cover by abusers. Because poverty and opportunism are linked, building a culture that does not tolerate sexual misconduct in this sector is necessary. Equally important is vetting applicants to eliminate those with a history of abuse. In the Oxfam case, a senior director who worked in Haiti obtained a high-level position with a French charity in Bangladesh. Though Oxfam bosses were aware of a culture of sexual abuse as far back as 2007, and anecdotal evidence in 2012 also confirmed this, negligence and complacency were the reason why they ignored the large-scale sexual misconduct. While this scandal must not be allowed to overshadow the compassion of those aid workers who often risk their lives to help the world's poorest communities, honesty and transparency under a moral leadership are required so that such a scandal is not repeated and the dignity of the world's most deprived people is not violated by those who have been tasked with improving their lives.

## Afghan Taliban offer

A RENEWED offer of negotiations by the Afghan Taliban, though once again insisting on direct talks with the US rather than the Afghan government, has been made as Kabul faces what could be a growing rebellion in the provinces. Once again, then, the news from Afghanistan is mixed, with both threats and opportunities dominating the political and security landscape.

The offer of talks by the Taliban can be treated with scepticism for several reasons. A difference in approach between hardliners and dialogue-favouring Taliban has long been speculated about, though it has not translated into policy as yet.

Perhaps the Taliban, recognising that US President Donald Trump is opposed to dialogue and prefers a military-led strategy in Afghanistan, has made the offer of talks to sow further confusion and uncertainty among the disparate groups that comprise the Afghan government and its foreign backers.

The spectre of the militant Islamic State group in Afghanistan has also been of concern to the Taliban in recent years and an endless war cannot be in the latter's interest.

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Yet, every realistic assessment and independent analysis of the war in Afghanistan suggests the conflict can only be ended through dialogue. If for whatever reasons sections of the Taliban are once again expressing a desire for dialogue, Kabul and the US should explore the possibility of taking some insurgents off the battlefield by engaging them in talks.

The growing political tension between Kabul and the provinces will undoubtedly make it more difficult for the government led by President Ashraf Ghani to organise a dialogue with the Taliban and to pursue it vigorously, but there is no obvious alternative.

With a second provincial governor, Abdulkarim Khaddam of the northern Samangan province, defying Mr Ghani and refusing to step down, a constitutional crisis may be brewing. Samangan may not have the strategic importance of the neighbouring Balkh province, but the inability of Mr Ghani to resolve the crisis in Balkh and the continuing defiance of Governor Atta Mohammad Noor may encourage other governors to defy Kabul.

Negotiating with the Taliban while on the defensive politically and in terms of security may be especially difficult.



There is, however, no realistic alternative to dialogue. If President Ghani is weak and even the dialogue-seeking factions of the Taliban seek to bypass Kabul, perhaps regional powers such as Pakistan, Iran and Russia should use their influence inside Afghanistan to nudge the Taliban and the Afghan government closer to talks. President Trump is unpredictable, especially over Twitter, but the US State Department and other agencies continue to understand the need for dialogue.

Eventually, an intra-Afghan peace process with significant participation by the US, which remains the largest international actor in Afghanistan, will be needed. Even the slightest of opportunities for dialogue should be fully explored.

## Witness protection

IN Pakistan, witnesses are particularly important for prosecuting criminal and terrorism cases given the state's nascent forensic regime, and the fact that scientific evidence — including DNA — is considered expert opinion and, therefore, on its own not enough to make a case for conviction. Yet, due to the lack of state protection, witnesses (including victims and cooperating criminals) are especially vulnerable to being bought off, exploited, intimidated, even killed. This is a setback to the dispensation of justice, with the resultant delays and dried-up lines of inquiry amounting to depressingly low conviction rates. The long-overdue finalised draft of the Punjab Witness Protection Act, 2018, has the potential to greatly improve this shortcoming. The bill outlines the creation of a provincial witness protection programme whereby any person connected with criminal or terror-related proceedings may apply for protection if they fear that they, their family and/or property are threatened, or are at higher risk by virtue of being a person with disability, a minor or a victim of a sexual offence. Such protection can include safe lodging, financial assistance and security arrangements; concealment or change of identity; recording of testimony through video link; and in-camera or jail trials. Significantly, it also empowers the court to disallow prejudicial and irrelevant questioning of a sexual assault victim's sexual history, as well as prescribes punishment for reporting that violates press injunctions imposed on a case in order to protect witness anonymity.

But, as seen in Sindh where similar legislation was passed in 2013, such laws are utterly irrelevant if not backed by a commitment to swift implementation. This was not evident when even in a high-profile case such as that of Sabeen Mahmud's murder in 2015, the sole witness was killed only a few months later. Nor can the state expect witnesses to bear the heaviest risk of putting violent offenders behind bars while legal loopholes and poor practices in evidence gathering, forensic testing and prosecutorial case building go unreformed, venturing an overturning of convictions on appeal. With the Supreme Court

currently hearing a petition to reduce delayed and lengthy court proceedings, it is important to note that the chronic backlog in our legal system cannot be addressed by issuing new legislation and policies unless they actually dovetail with systemic, bottom-up changes. Plenty has been said about improving access to justice; now it is time to match rhetoric with resolve.

## Saving Ranikot Fort

REGRETTABLY, it is only after the loss or wilful destruction of heritage and culture that our government is moved to assign resources and expertise to save ancient sites. For decades, the ruinous state of Ranikot Fort in Jamshoro district in Sindh was overlooked by state officials charged with its protection. Its dilapidated look should be attributed to the lack of know-how, funding and most certainly absentee political will. Fortunately, the Endowment Fund Trust for Preservation of the Heritage of Sindh intervened a few years ago to restore sections of the fort, including its wall and gates. This past weekend, visitors were taken to view the ongoing restoration works at Shahpar gate which is located along its southern wall. Given its majestic proportions, the fort's present structures were reconstructed by the Talpurs in 1812 though its original architect remains unknown — some historians believe it was the Sassanian dynasty; others claim the Bactrian Greeks were the prime architects. With ramparts at par with the Great Wall of China, it is listed under the Antiquities Act, 1975, which means it should have been protected from ruin. Instead, entire sections of its wall were reduced to rubble. While more than 50pc of the restoration work remains, funding dependent on a cash-strapped government is problematic. However, solutions should emerge when there is international and local expertise involved.

with the history of other sites in Sindh eg Makli and Moenjodaro about to disappear, the state must find the funds to address the challenge. It must act as a custodian of cultural heritage instead of sanctioning countless, characterless concrete buildings for the sake of placating voters. One way to preserve history and generate revenue at the same time is to tap into international cultural donors to convert spectacular historical ruins into tourist attractions. It is only when a nation learns to value its diverse culture and heritage that it can figure out its true sense of identity.

## Role of institutions

IT is a good idea, but much will depend on the quality of the debate itself.

Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has called for a parliamentary debate on the role of institutions and the supremacy of parliament — topics that are close to the hearts of democrats, but of particular concern to the PML-N in recent times.

Clearly, the legal woes of the Sharif family and ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif's tirades against the superior judiciary and, occasionally, other state institutions have prompted Mr Abbasi to suggest the particular parliamentary debate.

If the PML-N's purpose in calling for a parliamentary debate is to pit one institution against another and use the cover of parliamentary legislative supremacy to allow Mr Sharif to once again become eligible for public office, the debate will be a missed opportunity, and potentially damaging to Pakistan's democratic project.

Now is the moment for serious, thoughtful debate, not wild political gesticulating.

Certainly, the centrality of democracy and parliament's supremacy have been weakened by a number of events in recent times.

The resurgence of anti-democratic forces and encroachment on the domain of elected representatives by other institutions have combined to leave questions marks hanging over not just the continuity of the democratic system but also the quality of democracy in the country.

While much of Mr Sharif's and the PML-N's criticism of the superior judiciary in particular has been excessive and ill-advised, there are legitimate questions that can be asked about the surge in judicial activism and the constitutional reasoning employed in certain judicial interventions.

Moreover, the security establishment's assertiveness in the foreign policy and national security domains has reached arguably unsustainable levels.

A democracy in name only may suit anti-democratic forces but is a troubling possibility for anyone seeking the influence of democracy on the country's foreign policy and national security goals.

Yet, Mr Abbasi and the PML-N should also examine their own role in diminishing the standing of parliament.

While all political parties have failed to live up to the highest standards of parliamentary conduct that can be expected in a democracy, the PML-N has adopted a particularly dismissive stance.

Mr Sharif was famously disdainful of parliament, preferring to skip the vast majority of sessions in his third stint as prime minister.

Just this week, the PML-N's defence minister declined to inform the Senate, even in an in-camera session, of where Pakistani troops have been deployed in Saudi Arabia.

As several opposition figures have repeatedly pointed out, the PML-N turns to parliament when it is in political trouble, often of the self-inflicted kind, and then reverts to type.

Parliamentary debates on matters of national importance are certainly welcome and should be encouraged.

But the PML-N needs to demonstrate a sustained commitment to both the form and substance of democracy.

## Decriminalising suicide

ALTHOUGH many outmoded laws still remain on our statute books, perhaps one of the cruellest and most damaging is that pertaining to the criminalisation of suicide.

Ours is one of the few countries to still cling to the colonial-era codification of mental illness as criminal deviancy, embedded in Section 325 (attempt to commit suicide) of the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860, and the Lunacy Act, 1912.

The latter was finally repealed and replaced by the Mental Health Ordinance in 2001, followed by the passage of related provincial legislation post-devolution, yet the former remained.

This could change very soon, following the Senate's unanimous decision to pass an amendment to repeal Section 325 on Monday.

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Initially held up over religious concerns, the passage of this bill is representative of the growing consensus — not just within the medical community — that providing treatment

to a person who attempts suicide is the appropriate moral response of a society that upholds the sanctity of life.

Suicidal ideation is a symptom, not a crime.

To subject people who in their despair and under the influence of a medical condition that impairs their mental cognisance sought to take their own lives to punitive action (or the threat of it) is injurious not only to them but to entire communities.

With up to 34pc of our population suffering from some form of mental disorder, and suicide as the second leading cause of death among 15- to 29-year-olds, it is no coincidence that stressors such as poverty, discrimination and exposure to violence exacerbate the prevalence of mental illness.

Stigmatising those who are most vulnerable, and preventing families and healthcare professionals from being able to provide support and treatment are collective failures we must rectify. Such efforts cannot end with mere decriminalisation.

Ensuring that policy guidelines for improving Pakistan's mental health indicators are enacted will have far-reaching economic and social benefits.

Given that our inadequate health budgets cannot accommodate such a sea change, interim measures should include a transition from institutionalisation to community-based rehabilitation; collaboration with NGOs working on suicide prevention and other mental health-related issues; and capacity building and training in schools, communities and workplaces to help identify at-risk individuals, develop resilience and support mental well-being.

As this election cycle gears up, our prospective representatives must take note: a more people-centric government is one that prioritises our mental health needs.

# Curbing human smuggling

DESPITE Europe's restrictive measures to keep migrants out, refugees from Asia and Africa make perilous journeys by land and sea spurred by injustice, adverse economic conditions and conflict at home.

Since 2012, the flow of refugees from Pakistan to Europe has increased.

When the root causes of young people fleeing our country remains unaddressed, even Europe's extreme anti-migration measures do not deter.

In fact, poverty and desperation allow the lucrative smuggling trade to benefit as migrants continue using the Eastern Mediterranean route to reach Greece via Iran and Turkey.

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To check organised human smuggling, the FIA, tasked with preventing and investigating illegal migrant trafficking, has revealed plans to open representative offices in Iran and Greece.

On the surface, this is an effective response.

The complexity of this crime and prosecuting criminal groups entails collaborative international efforts and cross-border assistance.

However, the FIA should crack down on smugglers' agents promising recruits work in Europe.

The desperately poor embark on perilous journeys after paying hefty sums to ruthless traffickers, despite the high risk of drowning at sea, and the threat of indefinite detention.

The cost of smuggling services from Pakistan to mainland Europe is estimated at approximately Rs2m per migrant.

In most cases, borders are not even crossed and recruiters disappear with the money.

Visa and document fraud is another element of this criminal racket that should be curtailed.

While maintaining border-control mechanisms, assigning resources and expertise to the FIA is also imperative.

Take the case of 20 illegal migrants who were killed by militants in Turbat, Balochistan, while attempting to cross the Pakistan-Iran border sometime ago.



The FIA conceded in court it had limited capacity to investigate local smuggling rings involved in this case.

The state must be reminded that the lives of Pakistan's poorest will remain at risk from greed-driven human smuggling unless it fails to adequately fund those authorities tasked

## FATF reprieve

AN international organisation has forced a reckoning inside Pakistan — once again reminding this country that in an interconnected, interdependent world, pursuing policies that are seen as inimical to regional peace and stability will have damaging consequences.

It appears Pakistan has won a three-month reprieve from the Financial Action Task Force, giving the state further time to comply with new anti-terrorism financial and legal requirements or risk being placed on a watch list.

Security hawks inside Pakistan have interpreted the move in the FATF as an attempt by the US to heap further pressure on Pakistan in alliance with India and have argued that it further demonstrates bad faith on part of the US while underlining the need for Pakistan to build stronger relations with other regional and international powers that are more sympathetic to it.

Certainly, Pakistan can and should pursue stronger ties with friendly and sympathetic countries, but the events in FATF need to be understood in their proper context.

Two issues need to be clarified.

First and foremost, the Pakistani state has a responsibility to the Pakistani people to keep this country safe and secure.

Fundamentally, that means the elimination from Pakistan of all non-state actors who embrace terrorism, militancy and extremism.

Too often, the demand that Pakistan be cleansed of all militants, terrorists and extremists is labelled as an externally driven agenda to weaken this country.

But across the mainstream political spectrum and institutions that comprise the permanent state, there is public unanimity that the long fight against militancy is Pakistan's own fight that must be waged and won for this state.

It is time, then, for confusion and doubt to be cast aside and the logical implications of a militancy-, terrorism- and extremism-free Pakistan to be taken up: a zero-tolerance policy towards all variants of militancy, terrorism and extremism.

Offshoots of terrorist groups and hiding behind charitable or welfare work should no longer be tolerated.

Second, it is necessary to understand that Pakistan is on the wrong side of a global consensus, not just a policy pursued by countries that it has uneasy ties with.

There are no obvious circumstances in which countries such as China or Russia, for example, will in perpetuity avert their gaze from the presence in Pakistan of militant and terrorist elements that can destabilise the region.

Robust regional competition does not mean regional powers will accept dangerous levels of regional conflict.

Similarly, European countries that Pakistan has stable relations with and that may not always agree with US policy in this region are unlikely to shield Pakistan from common-sense global measures against terror financing and money laundering.

The complicated relationship with the US should not blind Pakistan to the reality that international consensus, too, has not been favourable.

## Withholding taxes

THERE is little doubt that the present government has taken some strides towards lifting the revenues of the government during its five years in office, but the rub lies in seeing how this has been achieved. The total revenue collected by the government since FY2013, the last year of the preceding administration, rose by 65pc till FY2017, representing an average growth of 13pc per year. This outstrips inflation by a wide margin and can only be attributed to an aggressive revenue effort. Unfortunately, though, the widening of the taxation base has not kept pace; this means that incremental revenues have been squeezed out of those within the tax net more than through mobilising new taxpayers. This is the case although the current rulers have launched more amnesty schemes than the preceding two governments, besides committing themselves to broadening the tax base through serving notices to those identified by the tax authorities as people leading a lavish lifestyle while filing no returns.

The number of people filing tax returns has increased, but the figure is nowhere near what it should have been by now. Moreover, recent data from the finance ministry shows that withholding taxes account for 67pc of all direct tax collections in FY2017, representing a growth of 13pc, the same as the average growth of revenues over the five-year term of the government. According to the report of the finance ministry, shared with parliament, there was a growth of 21pc in salaries paid this year, accounting for a large part of this increase. Additionally, the government has resorted to this measure perhaps more than any other, applying withholding taxes to bank transactions as well as imports, since it presents the path of least resistance. Lately, this measure has been supplemented with regulatory duties, which are packaged as import compression measures, but are more likely motivated by revenue considerations. This may be an aggressive revenue effort, but it is highly regressive, and not likely to yield incremental revenues for much longer. For decades, it has been understood that widening the taxation base is what is needed to break away from the ever-shrinking revenue base to which the state is tethered. The government may have the numbers to show for its revenue effort, but it has little to no bragging rights considering how these numbers have been achieved.

## Women voters in Dir

AT last, it seems the wheels of change are turning in some of the most regressive parts of this country, though not without some firm prodding from the Election Commission of Pakistan. On Tuesday, over 1,000 women in Lower Dir exercised their right to vote, a sign that their disenfranchisement in the area may be coming to a long overdue end. The women cast their votes in a by-election to select candidates for 21 seats of local government councils; the earlier election had been cancelled by the ECP because no women had turned up to vote on that occasion. This time around, a substantial percentage of registered women voters exercised their right of franchise, even though the numbers varied widely from one polling station to another. Nevertheless, it is a beginning and that in itself is something to welcome.

Lower Dir is among those areas where the pretext of tradition has repeatedly, and disingenuously, been used to disenfranchise women. Earlier, local chapters of political parties would openly strike agreements to disallow women from choosing their representatives — anathema to those who consider the public space, and the decisions made in it, as belonging to men alone. When rights activists and the ECP began to take notice, the agreements became more tacit, and were enforced subtly through social pressure. The recently enacted Elections Act, 2017 has given more teeth to the legal

provisions against women's disenfranchisement, and the recent by-poll proves that if there is sufficient political will, regressive traditions can be whittled away. Credit goes to the ECP — and the lawmakers that have strengthened its hand — for taking steps to signal to political parties that business as usual will no longer be tolerated. To further cement the participation of women in the electoral process, the 12pc gender disparity among male and female voters countrywide must be urgently addressed. It would also be a productive exercise to make gender-disaggregation of votes a regular practice so as to help discern voting patterns among women with countering criminal networks.

## Regrettable verdict

THE immediate implications may centre on the political future of one individual, but the judgement has the potential to be hugely disruptive to the democratic process itself.

The highest court in the land should be accorded the highest respect. Without the judiciary, the rule of law is impossible.

But — and it is with profound regret that this caveat has to be stated — the judgements of the Supreme Court of Pakistan need to promote the rule of law and constitutional democracy, not add to the national confusion.

Nawaz Sharif, already ousted from the prime minister's office last year, has now been ousted from the presidency of the PML-N.

In its short order, a bench of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar has ruled that because Mr Sharif has been disqualified from parliament and because the office of president of a political party has direct implications for the composition and working of parliament, Mr Sharif is ineligible to be president of the PML-N.

The ruling is extraordinary and seemingly pits a fundamental right, Article 17 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of association, against the qualification and disqualification criteria for parliamentarians, also part of the Constitution.

Perhaps the detailed judgement, to be issued at an unspecified later date — not unusual for the superior judiciary, but an unfortunate norm that ought to be discouraged because

it can create constitutional and legal uncertainty — will provide reasoning that independent analysts and jurists may find they can support.

Already, however, it is apparent that a profound departure from democratic norms is under way.

A member of parliament has the power to legislate and can be part of the federal government — power and privilege that demand exceptional scrutiny of those who possess them.

A political party has no such power and privilege, and democratic norms ought to encourage, not discourage, all members of society to be part of the political process.

Certainly, no one can be above the law, even if that person is a three-term prime minister and the head of the largest political party in the country.

But a responsibility flows in the opposite direction too: the law and its interpretation by the courts must promote justice, be fair and not person-specific.

Mr Sharif's barbs aimed at the judiciary since his ouster last July have been unedifying and uncomfortable.

Polluting the electoral reforms package by introducing a person-specific clause to restore Mr Sharif to the position of party president was an unwise and unnecessary act on the PML-N's part.

The responsibility of the judiciary, however, is to interpret the law, not invent it.

The retrospective effect of the court's decision, nullifying all decisions taken by Mr Sharif since his re-election as party president, is also deeply troubling.

The judicialisation of politics should be resisted by the judiciary itself.

# No place for newborns

UNICEF'S latest report, identifying Pakistan as the riskiest place for newborns, is a heartbreaking indictment of this country's indifference to our most defenceless citizens.

One in 22 Pakistani babies will not survive her first month — ie 46 out of every 1,000 will perish before even having had a chance at life.

There are many tragic, senseless ways to die in this country — and a long litany of dismal health trends — but this one fact alone is a shock to the system.

There is no cold comfort to be had here; no amount of boasting about economic development or military prowess that can sweep this ignominy under the rug.

For, as the report highlights, although newborn survival is closely linked to a country's income level, wealth inequality and wide variations in access to and quality of healthcare are also significant contributing factors.

This explains why Pakistan, with a much higher per capita income than the Central African Republic and Afghanistan, has a newborn mortality rate comparable with the runners-up.

Nor is it a coincidence that the 10 worst countries for newborns are conflict-ridden, and have weak institutions and a poor record of gender parity.

The report, released in conjunction with the launch of Unicef's Every Child Alive campaign, outlines a road map for turning this tide.

Given that over 80pc of deaths among newborns result from conditions and illnesses that are preventable or treatable, the first, most obvious step is to guarantee quality health facilities and skilled workers within reach of every woman and child.

Access is not enough; although the proportion of Pakistani mothers who gave birth in a health facility or with a skilled attendant more than doubled between 2001-2013, the newborn mortality rate fell by less than a quarter.

This is largely due to a healthcare industry with minimal oversight and poor quality of care, as well as a dysfunctional drug regulatory authority and shortages of lifesaving medicines.

Commitment to providing functional, equipped and staffed health services must be prioritised, but it cannot end there —we must be accountable to women.

Consider the frequency of reports of mothers seeking treatment only to be forced to give birth just outside a hospital.

As the primary stakeholders in this venture, women must be empowered to exercise their rights and demand quality care, offered with respect.

We are responsible for ensuring this, and the life of every child born on our soil.

## Syria's nightmare

EVEN after seven years of a brutal civil war, there appears to be no light on the horizon for the Syrian people.

Over the past few months, it seemed as if the levels of violence had dipped following 'de-escalation' efforts and parallel peace parleys backed by different world powers and the UN.

However, the lull was illusory as over the past few days, there has been a serious uptick in bloodshed in the Arab country.

In the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, the Syrian government has been carrying out a relentless assault to recapture one of the last major areas held by the rebels.

Though Bashar al-Assad's regime, aided by Russian airpower, says it is battling 'terrorists', the assault has taken an unacceptably high civilian toll.

The UN secretary general has termed Eastern Ghouta "hell on earth", with over 300 civilian casualties.

Elsewhere, in Afrin near the Turkish border, the situation is equally critical, as Turkish troops have crossed the border to battle Syrian Kurdish militants.

The Kurds have called upon the Syrian government to help repel the Turks, and in the past few days, there has been plenty of tough talk from both Ankara and Damascus.

Meanwhile, earlier this month, Israel — long a destabilising force in the region — attacked multiple targets in Syria after one of its jets was shot down by Damascus for violating Syrian airspace.

It would not be an exaggeration to say Syria is one of the most volatile and complicated regions in the world today.



It was long feared that the civil war — which from the very start featured heavy external involvement — would expand into a larger regional conflict.

Today, it seems we have reached that grim stage; as the Iranian deputy foreign minister told the BBC on Thursday, fears of a regional conflagration sparked by the Syrian conflict are very real.

With the international order in disarray and multilateral diplomacy lacking impact, is it only a matter of time before a new regional conflict in the Middle East materialises?

## Senate poll challenge

AN unusual problem has been solved in an unusual manner, giving rise to the usual speculation of partisanship and bias. A troubling Supreme Court judgement ousting Nawaz Sharif as the president of the PML-N and voiding all decisions taken by Mr Sharif since his re-election as party president has created a significant problem: with Senate elections scheduled for March, what would happen to the tickets approved by Mr Sharif as PML-N president? A quick resolution was needed and the Election Commission of Pakistan responded with alacrity. But the ECP has opted for an astonishingly poor solution: allowing the PML-N candidates to contest the Senate elections as independents. Neither has any rule been cited nor has a convincing explanation been offered by the ECP for its highly unusual solution to an urgent problem.

Particularly striking is that one of the four options considered by the ECP was to give the affected PML-N candidates time to resubmit their paperwork, but the option was rejected. It is not clear why the option was rejected, especially since the PML-N chairman, Zafarul Haq, visited the ECP on Thursday to sign fresh party tickets. Compared to unilaterally stripping candidates of party affiliation — a drastic step — while maintaining their candidacies as independents, the option of allowing the PML-N to recertify the very same Senate candidates of the party would appear to be relatively straightforward. Now, an unfortunate impression has been created that a sequence of events was put into motion to deny the PML-N automatic seats in the Senate and allow horse-trading to take place. The old practice of horse-trading appeared to have been buried until a sudden resurrection in the Balochistan Assembly recently — also an episode that stripped the PML-N of its members in the provincial assembly.

If the PML-N opts to elect its Senate candidates as originally intended, the incoming senators will be independents, who have the option of choosing a political party to join in

the Senate or form a party of their own. Surely, attempts at horse-trading will be made by other political parties in the Senate and perhaps by anti-democratic forces outside parliament. An election held without candidates from the largest political party in the country is an undeniable farce. To be sure, the PML-N's recent skirmishes with the judiciary have helped contribute to a sense of national political crisis. But that is arguably all the more reason for the ECP to have chosen a course that would shore up a teetering democratic process in the country. Shocking as the decision to only allow PML-N to field independent candidates is, there are other potentially destabilising implications of the ECP's interpretation of the Supreme Court judgement disqualifying Mr Sharif. Will recent by-elections, for example, the fierce contest in NA-154 Lodhran, be nullified? An independent ECP must act fairly if its independence and autonomy is to be accepted by all.

## Back to load-shedding

ENDING load-shedding was Nawaz Sharif's biggest campaign promise, and has been the backbone of his narrative since his disqualification. All through the GT Road march last summer, the main question he asked of his supporters was: 'Did I not promise to end load-shedding? Has load-shedding not ended in your area?'

One of the most consistent areas of focus for his government has been the power projects that are coming up, as well as the LNG terminals that are supposed to provide the vital fuel to many of them. And now, at the very moment when the ruling party is on the cusp of delivering on that promise and hitting the campaign trail for the next general election, the energy minister has announced that it will take more than more power-generation capacity to end load-shedding.

If recoveries in the power sector are not improved, he recently said in a written statement, and theft and other losses from the distribution system not curtailed, the power sector would be set to rack up losses of Rs360bn, triple of what they were back in 2013 when the promise to end load-shedding was first made. New generation capacity is indeed coming online, but the leakages of the old system remain firmly in place, which means as we pump more power into this leaky grid, we lose more as well.

Read: Zero loadshedding: Election gimmick or lasting solution?

The financial drain that the losses amount to is too large to be met through government resources, the minister warned, meaning it will become necessary to resort to load-

shedding in large areas where recoveries remain weak, even though surplus power-generation capacity would be available.

It is encouraging to see the government finally acknowledge that there is more to resolving the persistent power shortages than raw megawatts alone. Reforming the power bureaucracy and improving recoveries to maintain its financial health is equally important. But the problem is that reforms are not high-visibility projects, and afford no ribbon-cutting opportunities; therefore, the government never attached the same priority to them as it did to the power plants coming online now.

This neglect has created an embarrassing situation, where surplus power capacity may be left idle because the funds to operate it are not available. In a sense, when delivering on its campaign promise, the government may have put the cart before the horse by starting off with adding more generation capacity.

## Dangerous nexus

INEXTRICABLY linked, illicit economies and organised crime pose extreme threats to societies. In Karachi's underprivileged and volatile areas, the proliferation of drug mafias is historically attributed to complex connections between drug traders, powerful political patrons and corrupt law-enforcement personnel known to support criminal gangs. This week, the dangerous and highly complex nexus between drug mafias, law enforcers, lawyers and politicians was revealed in a damning police report compiled four months into an ongoing anti-drug operation in Chanesar Goth. Operation Detail Report — Chanesar Goth, PS Mehmoodabad unveils the shocking levels of law enforcers' complicity with drug mafias — including officials from the police, Special Branch and the Excise Department. It also discusses the patronage of selected political actors. For three decades, this entrenched network has increased impunity for criminal activity ranging from drug peddling to targeted killings, extortion and kidnapping. Out of the 160 or so arrests made, many were police personnel stationed at the 'lucrative' Mehmoodabad police station for years and bankrolled with drug money. Not only is this a stark reminder of the deep rot within the institution mandated to fight crime and protect citizens, it also demonstrates that cleaning up Karachi warrants a depoliticised police force.

When impunity for criminal activity increases, it undermines the credibility and deterrence effects of law enforcement, the judicial system, and government authority. The report

rightly calls for the prosecution of those guilty of patronising criminals in order to send a clear message that corruption and criminality undermine institutional ethics. Moreover, residents from violence-prone areas say that even though law-enforcement deficiencies and social-service provision are addressed intermittently, the drug mafia remains unstoppable despite the continuing Karachi operation. Anti-crime strategies combining law-enforcement approaches with socioeconomic policies are likely to be more effective in suppressing crime than tough-fist measures.

## Questions after FATF

THE FATF debacle has exposed not just a crisis of policy, but also of the process of making policy in the country. Most immediately, the meeting in Paris was a known event, as was the attempt by the US and other countries to return Pakistan to a terror-financing watch list. But neither the political government nor the military leadership, which is otherwise highly active when it comes to key national security and foreign policy decisions, appears to have prepared for or even been adequately aware of imminent action against Pakistan. That is simply unacceptable. A post-mortem of the run-up to last week's events ought to be conducted. Among the Prime Minister's Office, the finance ministry, the foreign ministry, the National Security Committee, GHQ and the intelligence agencies blame must be assigned and shared. Too often, decisions fundamental to the future of the people of Pakistan are treated as private debates between institutions of the state and the political leadership. They are not. Whether the permanent state or elected representatives, they ultimately work for and must be answerable to the people of Pakistan for the decisions, and mistakes, made.

Longer term, it is clear that de facto control of national security matters by the military leadership while a civilian government is left to defend policies it does not necessarily agree with is unworkable. Set aside the ongoing tussle between Nawaz Sharif on one side and a widespread perception of a judicial-military combine on the other. Ten years since the democratic transition began, there have been two parliaments, several prime ministers and one recurring theme: civilians under pressure for advocating what are eminently sensible national security policies. What really is the alternative to systematically cleansing Pakistan of all forms of militancy, terrorism and extremism? On occasion, the idea of mainstreaming has been mooted by the military establishment. While theoretically possible, the terms and conditions of mainstreaming have never been

publicly spelled out. Militant ideology is almost universally opposed to constitutional democracy. The closest approximation of on what terms militant groups may embrace the democratic project is of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Does Pakistan want to be Afghanistan?

Worse yet, the few, halting examples of mainstreaming that have been evident recently appear to be aimed at chipping away the vote banks of existing political parties. Is it possible for the civil and military arms of the state to work together to achieve an outcome that will weaken the standing of existing political parties in the country? Certainly, the civilians, and in particular the PML-N, have exacerbated the crisis in national security policymaking by a cavalier attitude towards institutional decision-making. No explanation has been offered for why the Foreign Office did not have a full-time, full-fledged minister for most of the PML-N's current term. The finance ministry operated like a personal fiefdom under Ishaq Dar. The attitudes are wrong, systems are not in place – is a crisis not inevitable?

## Used car imports

LAST October, the government tried to take a decisive step to prevent the abuse of a scheme that allows nonresident Pakistanis to bring their car back at reduced duty and tax rates when returning to their homeland. The scheme was being utilised by importers of used cars to import vehicles into the country for onward sale to clients. The new rules announced by the commerce ministry to clamp down on this abuse required all duties and taxes on cars imported under the scheme to be paid through a bank account in the name of the person who was returning. The slight modification instantly meant used car importers could no longer take advantage of the scheme to clear the cars they were importing for commercial purposes, and somewhere around 10,000 vehicles were left stranded at the port while further imports of used cars ground to a halt. The noise made by the importers was the clearest proof that the government had correctly identified abuse of the scheme. Sadly though, by early this month, the government caved in to pressure from the used car importer lobby and reversed its decision. The stranded cars are now set to be cleared, while fresh imports are also ready to begin.

Import of used cars is not something that should necessarily be opposed, but allowing the practice to run through rackets and abuse of import schemes is no way to conduct policy. If the government feels that used car importers deserve duty and tax incentive, it should be made part of a policy framework, rather than tacitly allowing the abuse of a scheme

meant for returning expatriates. Otherwise, the government will have no control over these imports, which in large numbers do, indeed, threaten the local auto sector. But in each case, wilfully turning a blind eye to the abuse of special schemes and incentives cannot be the answer. The way in which the government took back its decision of early October smacks of weakness and bowing before special interests, some of whom are in parliament. It would have been better if the cabinet had searched for a formal policy path that would allow used car importers to continue their business, rather than reopening a back door for them to bring their wares into the country. The decision is tantamount to endorsing the rackets that riddle our imports, and signals government weakness.

## Funds for ‘jihad university’

EITHER the PTI is completely blind to the optics or its political ambitions have trumped all other considerations.

At a time when Pakistan is regarded with suspicion for allegedly not having done enough to stop terror financing, KP’s PTI-led government is set to approve a grant of Rs277m for Maulana Samiul Haq’s Darul Aloom Haqqania, otherwise known as the ‘jihad university’.

The sobriquet is well-deserved, for the seminary — located in KP — has churned out thousands of militants since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In fact, so many Afghan Taliban leaders have studied here that the maulana, who also heads his own faction of the JUI, is often dubbed the ‘father of the Taliban’.

These are dubious credentials, and the PTI ought not to dismiss them lightly.

Indeed, this is not the first but the second time that the madressah is to be the recipient of such largesse.

The provincial government in its 2016-2017 budget allocated it a grant of Rs300m.

The flimsy pretext offered by the PTI then was that the money would go towards implementation of reforms by the Darul Aloom Haqqania to bring it into the educational mainstream.

No doubt there is an urgent need for changes to seminary curriculums in order to curb radical ideologies.

Nevertheless, in the two years since the first grant, it is far from clear what reforms, if any, have been carried out at a madressah whose chief cleric was, not too long ago, unabashedly vocal in his support for Osama bin Laden as well as the banned TTP.

There has, however, been a significant political development in the interim, with the JUI-S and PTI declaring their intention to form a 'joint strategy' in the coming election, an alliance presumably designed to counter the JUI-F, their nemesis in KP.

In the run-up to elections, incumbent governments do take steps to shore up their chances at the hustings, but the PTI's move is a cynical one, and deeply troubling in its disregard for the consequences.

## Property black hole

IN an exercise to ascertain the amount of money pouring into Islamabad's real estate sector, the Federal Board of Revenue has discovered the astonishingly high figure of approximately Rs100bn over three years, at DC rates. This is the official declared rate at which property transactions are disclosed, and as most people already know, the real amount is far higher. It is difficult to put a figure on what the real amount could be, but it is not unrealistic to estimate that it would be as much as four times the declared number. This is only for those property transactions done under the Capital Development Authority. The amount is staggering, and what is even more startling is the fact that almost half the investors involved in the transactions do not even possess a National Tax Number.

All this may sound astonishing, but few are actually surprised. The real estate sector has long been known as a major parking lot for black money, and successive attempts to try and raise the DC rates or increase the rate of capital value tax applicable on property transactions have been met with fierce resistance. The last amnesty scheme which offered yet another 'one-time' opportunity to whiten assets parked in real estate yielded more than Rs300bn, perhaps more than all other amnesty schemes combined. Real estate is the black hole in Pakistan's economy, sucking in investible resources while yielding up nothing by way of assets that can either be collateralised, or otherwise play a useful role in the economy.

It is vital to find a way to plug this gaping hole in the heart of our economy. It has damaging effects in multiple ways. For one, it provides the single largest area of investment for tax-



evaded and illicit wealth. For another, it necessitates the creation of massive money-laundering schemes to periodically whiten the money that goes into real estate, should it choose to leave the sector. Thirdly, it attaches an undue premium to speculation as the main driver for reinvestment of profits, as opposed to trade or manufacturing. This has damaging consequences for the ways in which our urban landscape is shaped and stymies the key problem of land supply and housing shortage for the poor. If tax-evaded wealth engaged in real estate speculation is to drive property market prices, then the losers would necessarily be the poor and the public interest would be pushed further to the margins of the housing market. The FBR authorities have done the right thing in undertaking the exercise with the CDA — and following up with all those who have invested outlandish amounts in property while not even possessing an NTN is crucial. In time, the exercise should be broadened and conducted in the larger cities of the country such as Karachi where the big predators roam.

## Defenceless minorities

RELIGIOUS minorities in this country often find themselves marginalised and persecuted by both state and society.

This was evident recently in the horrific case of a Christian man who was compelled to jump from the fourth floor of the FIA office in Lahore after reportedly refusing to sexually assault his cousin — an accused in a blasphemy case who is charged with posting objectionable material on Facebook.

Miraculously, Sajid Masih survived with fractured legs and a broken jaw to tell his bone-chilling story.

While interrogating Sajid, an FIA cybercrime team allegedly tortured him, confiscated his mobile phone and tried to force him to assault his cousin. The thought itself is utterly contemptible: how can elements of the state misuse their authority to denigrate people, defenceless minorities among them, in such a manner? How can they push them towards the abyss?

Sinking to this new low of abhorrence for religious minorities is not surprising when the tyranny of an intolerant majority is visibly encouraged by certain politicians, even lawmakers.

Further, the complainants in this case, the religious outfit TLYRA, recorded their statements at the same time the accused and his family were at the FIA office which is right before Sajid jumped from the fourth floor.

Therefore, the urgency for a thorough investigation to ascertain the truth behind this sordid episode and identify the culprits and instigators cannot be stressed enough. It is only when the guilty in this case, and in many other instances where injustice in the name of religious intolerance is deemed kosher, are brought to task that religious minorities in this country can heave a sigh of relief.

When the blasphemy law is misused to persecute minorities for their faith or to settle personal scores — as evidence overwhelmingly indicates — state oversight must ensure severe punishment for the culprits.

Then, over the weekend as Rome's ancient Coliseum was lit up in blood red in solidarity with persecuted Christians globally, we were reminded by the family of Aasia Bibi — condemned to death in 2010 under the blasphemy laws — that the fate of Pakistan's minorities is often one of heartbreak.

If our state seriously wishes to improve its human rights credentials — if just to retain its association with international organisations that insist on better treatment of the country's minorities — it must ensure security to vulnerable Christians and those of other faiths, and stop ceding space to violent ideologues.

## Executions of 'IS brides'

WHEN it was reported last year that the Iraqi authorities were holding 1,400 foreign women and children related to fighters of the militant Islamic State group, one army official said, "[W]e discovered that almost all of them were misled by a vicious Daesh propaganda". Many were also tricked or forced into joining their militant husbands in Iraq. Yet, dozens of women are now being sentenced to hang for being IS 'members'. Under Iraq's counterterrorism law, anyone convicted of this charge faces the death penalty. Judgements make no distinction between a whole spectrum of associations — from bona fide combatant and non-combatant members, to relatives, or even bystanders such as doctors who continued to provide care in IS strongholds. It is not just women who are being arbitrarily prosecuted. Human Rights Watch notes that the process of trying men and boys for IS affiliation often relies on dubious tips motivated by enmity, or on confessions extracted through torture.

Besides this paper's opposition to the death penalty as cruel and irreversible, these trials are a gross miscarriage of justice that threatens to inflame Iraq's sectarian landscape. Along with claims that relatives of IS suspects are being denied documentation such as birth certificates, it amounts to little more than collective punishment — retribution that harms women in particular. It is arguable whether such trials should even take place in the criminal courts instead of a UN-backed tribunal. There must be a review of charges and corresponding punishments based on actual acts of collaboration rather than tenuous links of complicity. And while some returnees might pose security risks to the countries from which they came, this cannot be a reason for the world to ignore their plight and stall the need for deradicalising repatriation programmes. To the atrocities of IS we cannot add more motherless children in a state of limbo. For Iraq to reconcile its violent history, it must be committed to justice and the rule of law, and immediately halt these executions.

## Still 'missing'

AN air of stultifying inaction has descended over the issue of enforced disappearances, even as people continue to go 'missing'.

In fact, a three-judge Supreme Court bench hearing the missing persons' cases admitted as much on Monday when it noted the government's failure in locating the individuals and asked the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances to submit a report on its "perceptible progress" in the matter.

According to the statement made in court by a ColoED representative, it has disposed of 3,000 cases and 1,577 are still pending before it.

The Supreme Court bench, while asserting its intention to continue hearing the cases of missing people, asked the government to consider providing a subsistence allowance to some of the affected families facing hardship on account of the misfortune that had befallen them.

### ADVERTISEMENT

Form without substance — that, more or less, defines the efforts thus far against the vile tactic of enforced disappearances.

Umpteenth court hearings and multiple meetings of the commission have achieved virtually nothing, and thousands of families continue to exist in limbo, not knowing whether their loved ones are alive or dead.

On the contrary, the abductions have become more brazen. From the backwaters of Fata and the provinces, and the dark of night, they are now taking place even in broad daylight in major urban centres.

The increasing audacity makes the response by the government and the justice system seem doubly pathetic; that in turn further emboldens the perpetrators.

First, it was suspected anti-state militants, Baloch insurgents and their sympathisers who were targeted; when the pushback was not unequivocal enough, the net expanded to include bloggers, journalists and civil society activists.

Matters have come to such a pass that now, anyone, anywhere can be picked up if they express, or are suspected of harbouring, a point of view that is secular and/or questions the national security policy.

The message from the establishment, or at least some elements of it, is clear: it is above the law, even the law that underpins the state itself. Eyewitness testimony does not matter, nor does the fact that the commission has recommended — to no avail — that criminal cases be filed against 117 law-enforcement officials.

There never seems to be enough evidence to actually hold anyone accountable for a gross human rights violation, the absence of which distinguishes civilised countries from those where the law of the jungle prevails.

Enough is enough.

It is time to throw down the gauntlet; prevarication, empty gestures and toothless inquiry commissions cannot suffice. The former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's aggressive approach — at least for a brief period — towards enforced disappearances is instructive, even though it did not have lasting results.

For it proved that only when hard questions are asked of those who have the answers, will there be any hope of bringing enforced disappearances to an end.

## Saudi Arabia reforms

SAUDI Arabia, custodian of the most sacred sites of Islam and the Arab world's most important economy, has been experiencing rapid changes over the past few years, particularly since the death of King Abdullah in 2015.

These changes encompass domestic issues, such as increased rights for women and more relaxed social norms, as well as external postures, most notably a more muscular foreign policy emanating from Riyadh. The driving force behind the kingdom's rapid changes is Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, an ambitious royal who has swept aside potential challengers and power centres with stunning speed.

Read: Reformist crown prince with firm vision

Last year, the prince had rounded up a number of royals as well as leading business magnates to probe them for 'corruption'; most of the detainees have only recently been released. Another shake-up was orchestrated late on Monday with the government sending the military's chief of staff, as well as a number of other senior generals packing, while changes were also made in political offices.

Perhaps the change in the military's top brass reflects frustration over the Yemen war — a war the crown prince has been instrumental in launching and overseeing as defence minister. However, after nearly three years of hostilities, the Riyadh-led coalition is far from defeating the Houthis.

Read: Don't dare mention Yemen

In the social sphere, the prince has lifted the ban on women driving, while a recent report also said that women could join the military. Moreover, Riyadh and Jeddah have of late been serenaded by jazz musicians, opera artists and rappers, as the government plans to pump millions of riyals into promoting entertainment activities.

Perhaps only a year ago, such entertainment activities would have been hard to imagine. The relaxation of social norms and promotion of women's rights are welcome. For too long, Saudi Arabia's moral compass has been in the hands of a group of ultra-conservative clerics who have clamped down on all things fun. However, greater social freedoms must be accompanied by more political freedoms.

Allowing song and dance while crushing dissent does not indicate a progressive direction.

In the same period that Saudi Arabia has been experiencing a moment of cultural glasnost, the state apparatus has clamped down on numerous government critics,

including clerics and civil society activists, for disagreeing with the state, or criticising foreign policy.

The crown prince must realise that an open, modern society cannot be built unless people have the freedom to speak their mind and criticise their government.

## Measles wake-up call

THE country's challenges vis-à-vis health issues are both formidable and well known. Unfortunately, the focus on political issues tends to take attention away from other gaps in the system. One glaring example, an indictment, in fact, comes from the World Health Organisation that, in a recent report, concluded that over 65pc of the total number of cases of measles in the eastern Mediterranean region — 22 countries clubbed together by WHO for the purposes of health surveillance — were reported from Pakistan last year. The figure is quite stunning when the details are probed. In 2017, 6,494 measles cases were confirmed in this country, as compared to the second highest number of 1,511 that came from Afghanistan, and 513 from Syria. And, as health experts here concede, many cases of measles in this country are simply not reported as a result of low public awareness and a weak health surveillance system.

Reportedly, the Ministry of National Health Services plans to administer 35m doses of the measles vaccine in September to children under the age of five. However, it is likely that this task — even if achieved — will not be good enough. Vaccine coverage in Pakistan is about 50pc, while controlling diseases such as measles requires a routine immunisation rate of 90pc or so. Put simply, most children have to be vaccinated, and herd immunity built up. But this country is seeing the rates of routine immunisation gradually falling, despite the operations of the Expanded Programme for Immunisation (of which the measles vaccine is a component). Whether it is because of lack of awareness, or more immediate challenges dominating the headlines, or an increasingly sketchy healthcare cover in many parts of the country — especially in the backdrop of a burgeoning population — many parents simply fail to have their children immunised against preventable illnesses. The state needs to take charge, and quickly. Losing children to illnesses for which vaccines are available is a tragedy that could easily have been averted.