

**THE CSS POINT**



**DAWN**

# **EDITORIALS**

**JANUARY 2025**

**DAWN EDITORIALS – ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS  
FOR CSS & PMS ASPIRANTS!**

**EDITED AND COMPILED BY**

**AGHA ZUHAIB KHAN**

**DANISH KUMAR & FAHEEM KHAN**

# DOWNLOAD

**CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines**



**THE CSS POINT**  
Yes We Can Do It!

**WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM**

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

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

Email: [info@thecsspoint.com](mailto:info@thecsspoint.com)



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

Visit Now:

[WWW.CSSBOOKS.NET](http://WWW.CSSBOOKS.NET)

For Oder & Inquiry  
Call/SMS/WhatsApp

**0333 6042057 – 0726 540141**

## Contents

Avoiding reform .....	8
On the front lines .....	8
Looking ahead .....	9
Economic plan .....	10
On life support .....	11
Harsh sentence.....	12
Kurram peace deal .....	13
Pension reform.....	14
The Indian hand .....	15
Falling temperatures .....	15
Agriculture census.....	16
Biometrics for kids .....	17
Confused state .....	18
Born into hunger .....	19
Tourism triumph.....	20
Poll petitions' delay.....	21
Migration racket.....	21
Power planning .....	22
Fragile peace .....	23
Captive power cut.....	24
National embarrassment .....	25
Closed doors.....	26
Debt burden .....	27
GB power crisis.....	28
Taking cover .....	28
A living hell .....	29
A right denied.....	30
E-governance .....	31

Khuzdar rampage .....	32
Beyond wheelchairs .....	33
Afghan outreach.....	34
Fragile recovery.....	35
Destination Europe .....	36
Increased inflows .....	36
Gwadar’s potential .....	38
Broken metropolis.....	38
Odious trade.....	39
Treasure of the Indus .....	40
Anything goes.....	41
Left behind .....	42
Mining tragedies .....	43
Winter sports .....	44
Missing justice.....	45
Racist talk .....	46
Faceless customs.....	47
Peshawar meeting.....	47
Cyber circus.....	49
Anti-abuse action .....	49
Never again .....	50
World Bank loan.....	51
India’s dangerous game .....	52
Al Qadir ruling.....	53
Atlantic tragedy.....	54
Cheap promises?.....	55
Kurram conundrum.....	56
EV policy.....	57
Varsity woes .....	57

At breaking point.....	58
Lower growth .....	59
Nutrition challenge .....	60
Trump 2.0 .....	61
GB's status .....	62
Panda bond .....	63
Errant ECP.....	64
Fast-tracking M6.....	65
A dying light .....	66
Controversial canals .....	67
Killjoys .....	67
Digital dragnet.....	68
USC closure .....	69
Hindu exodus .....	70
Bureaucratic approach .....	71
Stalled talks .....	72
West Bank's turn .....	73
A free lunch .....	74
Murder on the seas.....	74
Gag orders.....	75
Learning losses .....	76
World Bank's view .....	77
Trumpian purge.....	78
Unstable outlook.....	79
'Poor' lawmakers .....	80
Digital security .....	81
Cricket spin .....	82
A second Nakba?.....	82
PTI no-show.....	83

Court in crisis..... 84

Death blow ..... 85

Enhanced inclusivity..... 86

Deep shock..... 87

Provincial AIT laws ..... 88

Cost of control..... 88

## Avoiding reform

PAKISTAN'S economic growth significantly slowed down to a modest 0.92pc during the first quarter of the present fiscal year to September from 2.3pc the previous year, according to new National Accounts Committee data. This fall in the growth rate is not surprising given the massive cuts in public development stimulus due to the stabilisation policies being carried out under the IMF programme, the continued impact of a tough macroeconomic environment on industry and private investment, and the decline in major crops, owing to climate change and higher costs. However, the economy is still expected to expand by up to 3pc to 3.5pc during this fiscal year as the cost of borrowing is being slashed on plunging inflation and the external account stabilising, creating room for higher imports.

Any attempt at this moment to push the growth rate beyond this will require significant public development investment and unfettered imports to boost domestic consumption, which will lead us back to another balance-of-payments crisis — perhaps even default — accompanied by high inflation. Our ruling elites have tried this formula in pursuit of rapid growth for political gains too many times, always driving the economy back to the IMF's door for bailouts to tackle one financial crisis after another. If anything, the increasing frequency of boom-and-bust cycles in recent decades have underlined that the country's growth woes are rooted in our structural imbalances: low industrial and agricultural productivity, extremely low exports, meagre tax revenue collection, etc. Without fixing these imbalances, any attempt to boost the economic growth rate will produce the same results. With the world wary of our habit of living beyond our resources, the shortcut of pushing consumption-based growth with borrowed money is already closed. If the economy is to survive and grow, the policymakers will have to take the longer and tougher route of reforms they are still trying hard to avoid.

Published in Dawn, January 1st, 2025

## On the front lines

THE human cost of terrorism in 2024 was staggering. The ISPR reports 383 officers and soldiers embraced martyrdom while neutralising 925 terrorists through nearly 60,000 intelligence-based operations.

When combined with losses among civil law enforcement, the total toll on security personnel reaches 685 lives lost across 444 terror attacks, according to CRSS, making it the deadliest year in a decade for those defending our front lines. And these are besides the civilian casualties. The concentration of these casualties in KP and Balochistan, accounting for 94pc of all fatalities, points to the particular vulnerability of our western borderlands. The sharp upward trend in violence



since 2021, coinciding with the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, suggests that militant groups have not only regrouped but have also enhanced their operational capabilities.

This resurgence demands an urgent reassessment of our counterterrorism strategy. Despite the initiation of Operation Azm-i-Istehkam earlier last year, aimed at reinforcing CT efforts, the persistent and escalating attacks indicate that existing measures are insufficient. The state's strategy appears reactive rather than proactive, often limited to immediate kinetic responses post-attacks, allowing militants to regroup and strike anew.

A paradigm shift is imperative. The formation of specialised CT units within the military and police, trained to combat asymmetrical warfare, is essential to dismantle the evolving strategies of terrorist groups. In addition, our intelligence apparatus must be strengthened to prevent attacks rather than merely responding to them. The repatriation of 'illegal Afghan nationals' may mark a positive step in border management, but more steps are needed to deny militants trans-border hideouts. It is vital to engage with our neighbours to address the cross-border sanctuaries of militant groups. While the onus of securing our territory lies with us, regional cooperation can play a pivotal role in dismantling terrorist networks operating across borders.

Furthermore, addressing the socioeconomic disenfranchisement in regions like KP and Balochistan is crucial. Economic development, education, and infrastructure improvements can serve as bulwarks against the spread of extremist ideologies. Engaging local communities in dialogue and development initiatives will foster trust and cooperation, undermining the influence of terrorist groups. The sacrifices of our security personnel necessitate decisive and sustained action. Let 2025 be marked with the resolve to end the spectre of terrorism. There has been too much bloodletting.

Published in Dawn, January 1st, 2025

## Looking ahead

THOUGH the nation failed to achieve much-needed stability in the year just concluded, largely due to a controversial election and the associated political dissonance, the dawn of 2025 brings with it the hope that new opportunities can be seized to adopt a more constructive path.

There was much to bemoan in 2024: political discord; institutional atrophy; rising terrorism; lack of dynamic economic growth; a crackdown on the internet; multiple climate challenges, as well as the resurgence of polio. Yet it can be argued that all these issues are interlinked, and the key to addressing them is political stability and good governance undergirded by an unhindered democratic process. Without these key elements, the nation will continue to lurch from crisis to crisis, year after year.

Many had hoped that the 2024 general elections would end the three-way political deadlock between the PML-N and its allies, the PTI and the establishment. Yet this was not to be, as the Feb 8 polls — widely seen as unfair and non-transparent — have only exacerbated Pakistan's political crisis.

But there is some hope that the impasse can be resolved democratically, as the PTI and government parties have started to talk. Yet unless these parleys arrive at a conclusion that prioritises the welfare of the people, and strengthens the constitutional order, instead of further weakening it, we may be back to square one.

The need to tackle economic problems is just as critical as resolving the political stalemate, as both are complementary. Without a political arrangement that emphasises stability and democratic continuity, long-term economic growth will remain a mirage, and Pakistan will not be able to break out of its debilitating debt trap. While back-breaking inflation levels may have come down, the common Pakistani is still struggling to make ends meet. Growth, meanwhile, is slow. A new economic order is needed that taxes the untaxed, protects the weak, focuses on growth and job creation, and stresses financial self-sufficiency over handouts.

Among the other major challenges facing Pakistan is terrorism, as deadly militant attacks spiked considerably in 2024. Defeating the ogre of terrorism requires a united effort with buy-in from all political and security stakeholders. Moreover, the choking smog of the past few years, as well as searing heatwaves and destructive floods, require the ruling class to address climate change with solid policies, not just promises.

Equally, there is a need to tackle the explosion in polio cases with the alacrity it deserves. But all these matters — security, health, climate adaptation and others — can only be dealt with when the political class stops bickering, and focuses on tackling the actual issues of the people. Meanwhile, in order to allow civilian rule to succeed, it is essential that other institutions stay within their constitutional domains.

Published in Dawn, January 1st, 2025

## Economic plan

THE 'home-grown', five-year economic plan Uraan Pakistan, which was unveiled by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif this week, hopes to build on the country's nascent economic recovery to boost growth. The initiative is based on the ruling PML-N's five-point development agenda referred to as the '5Es Plan'. It focuses on exports, information technology, environment and climate, energy and infrastructure, and justice for all as a "unified roadmap" to make Pakistan a trillion-dollar economy — roughly triple its present size — by 2035. The roadmap aims to address

key economic challenges through a 'National Economic Transformation Plan', providing short- to medium-term solutions for stabilisation and growth.

However, the targets are ambitious, if not unrealistic, as they seek to achieve a sustainable growth rate of 6pc by 2028 and attract \$10bn in private investment each year to double exports to \$60bn over the next five years. But then, the state minister for finance has downplayed the focus on the plan's targets. According to him, the plan was an effort to give the economy direction so that it does not heat up when the growth accelerator is pressed.

The plan is elaborate regarding what the government desires to achieve over the five-year period but it does not offer any glimpse into the policy reforms or solutions it intends to implement to fix the problems ailing the economy. At best, it has set up a delivery unit at the Prime Minister's Office to coordinate the implementation of sectoral plans and roadmaps with a view to executing the initiative and ensuring transparency and accountability. The nine-month track record of this government on promised structural reforms also does not inspire much confidence in its ability to follow through on its pledges. For example, we have seen the government capitulating on retail tax and SOE reforms.

That is not all. Many of its policies run counter to Uraan Pakistan's objectives. On the one hand, it envisages encouraging IT exports and supporting start-ups; and on the other, it has slowed down internet speeds, despite warnings of IT export losses.

Furthermore, the programme points at decades of political instability, policy inconsistency, and repeated military-led disruptions in the political process as reasons for the current state of the economy. Yet, there has been little inclination to address these challenges. The absence of clear mentions of policy reforms backed by a solid strategy to execute the targets allows the bureaucracy a lot of space to wriggle out of responsibility. While monitoring and evaluation of progress on the initiative is important, they cannot be a substitute for real reforms and policy changes when it comes to fixing the economy to put it on the road to sustainable growth.

## On life support

PAKISTAN stands at a precarious crossroads as we embark on a new year. Pildat's Quality of Democracy report has painted a sobering portrait of democratic regression in 2024, marked by systematic efforts to centralise power and curtail fundamental rights. What makes this erosion particularly alarming is that it occurred not under martial law, but through legal mechanisms wielded by the civilian leadership in apparent cooperation with the establishment. The delayed 12th general election, marred by alleged pre- and post-poll rigging, has emerged as a symbol of this backsliding. The disenfranchisement of opposition parties, most notably the PTI, through manipulation of poll symbols and reserved seats, has raised doubts about the ECP's impartiality.

Constitutional ‘re-engineering’ through the 26th Amendment, which altered judicial independence, and the unprecedented extension of service chiefs’ tenures to potentially 10 years during peacetime, represent a concerning consolidation of authority. These changes, rushed through parliament with minimal debate, indicate our political leaders’ willingness to compromise democratic principles for short-term gains.

Equally disturbing is the increasing restriction on civil liberties. Media censorship has intensified, with the government blocking X and disrupting other platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram under the guise of national security. More troublingly, citizens’ discourse on social media has been labelled as “digital terrorism” by the establishment, setting a dangerous precedent for further curbs on digital rights. Military trials of civilians have raised particularly grave concerns about due process and judicial independence. After keeping 85 civilians in custody for over a year without clear legal status, military courts handed down convictions with prison terms ranging from two to 10 years. That these proceedings continued despite international outcry about fair trial rights, and that they were justified as serving “Pakistan’s public” rather than addressing their constitutional validity, speaks volumes about the state of civil rights. In addition, the ban on the PTM and the continuing incarceration of political opponents signal shrinking space for dissent and political opposition. The only glimmer of hope lies in the recent initiation of dialogue between the government and the PTI. However, for this dialogue to yield meaningful results, both sides must move beyond ultimatums and grandstanding. Democracy in Pakistan is on life support. Its revival can only occur with bold reforms and unwavering commitment to constitutional principles.

Published in Dawn, January 2nd, 2025

## Harsh sentence

USING lawfare to swiftly get rid of political opponents makes a mockery of the legal system, especially when millions of Pakistanis have to wait years to get justice from the courts. The punishment meted out to former Gilgit-Baltistan chief minister Khalid Khurshid Khan by a local antiterrorism court “for threatening security institutions” is a clear example of the state using law codes to penalise an opponent way beyond the severity of the alleged crime. Mr Khan, who belongs to the PTI, has been ordered to serve 34 years in prison along with paying a monetary fine, while the court has commanded that his CNIC be blocked. The ex-CM’s sentence exceeds the duration of a life term that courts in Pakistan hand out. Khurshid Khan has been convicted for a speech he made in Gilgit; he also faces other cases. Though Mr Khan’s whereabouts are not known, and he did not appear in the hearings of the aforesaid case, he issued a video statement in which he defended his speech, saying that he had criticised what he termed were undemocratic methods employed by certain state functionaries in removing his government. Mr Khan was disqualified in 2023 for allegedly having a fake degree.

While politicians and public figures often make controversial claims during speeches and rallies, it is a stretch to apply the antiterrorism law to such utterances. Mr Khan can appeal his harsh sentence before the GB higher judiciary. The state needs to reconsider its use of such legal tactics against opposition figures. The sad fact is that using lawfare against critics of the state has a long history in Pakistan, as towering political figures of the past have been accused of being 'anti-national', and worse. Ironically, those actually involved in terrorism and fanning hate manage to escape the long arm of the law. Moreover, using the legal system to target opponents will further reduce the confidence of the public in the governance structure.

Published in Dawn, January 2nd, 2025

## Kurram peace deal

THE volatile situation in KP's Kurram tribal district appears to have been defused as the parties to this tribal-cum-sectarian conflict signed a 14-point peace deal on Wednesday. While the area has a decades-old history of conflict, the present round of bloodletting was sparked after a convoy was attacked last November, resulting in at least 40 fatalities. In the subsequent cycle of violence, at least 130 people were killed; in three particularly gruesome cases, the victims were beheaded.

As a result of the hostilities, Parachinar — Kurram's main town — was under de facto blockade, resulting in a critical humanitarian situation, with shortages of edibles and medicine reported. Particularly appalling were reports that a large number of babies died due to lack of treatment or medicine. Hopefully, with the signing of the latest accord, this cycle of bloodshed and suffering will come to an end, and Kurram's people can live in peace.

At face value, the peace accord appears to cover all the key factors fuelling violence in the region. The pact calls for a ban on the display of arms while bunkers will also be destroyed. Moreover, land disputes — amongst the main irritants behind tribal tension — will be resolved, while safe passage will be assured on thoroughfares. While such peace agreements have been signed — and broken — in the past, it is sincerely hoped that this time all involved, particularly the tribes of Kurram as well as state institutions, will go the extra mile to ensure that the pact does not fail.

Too many precious lives have been lost in this conflict, while routine life in Kurram has been paralysed for weeks. Furthermore, as this paper has observed in these columns, the sectarian dimension of Kurram's disputes has the potential to disrupt communal harmony in other parts of Pakistan. Sit-ins in solidarity with Kurram were held in other cities, particularly Karachi, and matters threatened to get out of hand when Shia demonstrators and the police came face to face at the main protest at Numaish. When the banned ASWJ entered the fray and announced to hold sit-ins of its own, there were palpable fears of sectarian clashes. Luckily, efforts to give the matter an ugly sectarian colour were averted, but only by a hair.

Returning to Kurram, it is the state's responsibility to ensure that people of all sects can travel to and from the district without fear of violence. Moreover, militant and sectarian groups active in the area need to be neutralised, while effective conflict-resolution mechanisms need to be in place to deal with any emergent disputes. The past few months have been a nightmare for Kurram's people. The state must ensure they do not have to live through such an ordeal again by making sure the peace pact is honoured in full.

Published in Dawn, January 3rd, 2

## Pension reform

THE federal government has finally implemented several parametric reforms introduced in the last two budgets to reduce its annual pension payout, which is estimated to have soared to more than Rs1tr for the current fiscal year and become the fourth largest expense on the shrinking financial resources. These changes in the retirement income system will also slow down the pace of accumulation of the future pension liability. The notifications issued by the finance ministry discontinue multiple pensions, reduce both the first take-home (the lump-sum payments after commutation received upon retirement) and monthly pension, and lower the base for determining future increase in the retirement benefits.

In addition to these changes, the reforms revise the pension calculation methods, ending annual compounding of the benefits by restricting application of increments to the primary pension received by an employee. More significantly, all future pensions will be calculated on the basis of the retiring employee's salary during their last 24 months of service. This change affects the calculation of any subsequent pensions an individual might receive. There's no doubt that these measures will significantly slash the retirement incomes of the current federal civil and military employees retiring from Jan 1, but these changes are crucial for future budget stability given the quadrupling of the liability from Rs245bn in 2019. However, the reforms provide for a periodic review of the baseline pension — the net pension (gross pension minus commuted portion of pension) calculated at the time of retirement — every three years by the Pay and Pension Commission to protect the pensioners from the rising cost of living due to inflation and changing economic conditions. Further, digitisation of the pension system for over 300,000 government employees will improve the accuracy and transparency in pension calculations and disbursements, cutting the red tape, delays and corruption. With a contributory pension fund already announced for the employees hired from July 1 this year, the rationalisation of defined pension benefits for those already in the employment of the federal government, especially military personnel, was necessary for the management of the liability in future.

Published in Dawn, January 3rd, 2025

## The Indian hand

OFFICIALS of the Modi regime were operating under a rather warped sense of reality, playing out Bollywood fantasies without a worry about the possible ramifications of their activities. It was only last year, after the assassination of a prominent Sikh leader in Canada and a foiled attempt on another in the US, that they finally received a long-overdue reality check. They learned that no matter what India's economic heft, no sovereign nation takes kindly to assassination attempts orchestrated by foreign governments against individuals residing on their soil. The acknowledgement by the governments in Washington and Ottawa of the involvement of high officials in the Indian government in international murder plots was also a validation of Pakistan's long-held position that India not only finances, but actively oversees terrorist activities on foreign soil. A recent report in the Washington Post has all but confirmed Pakistan's assertions: the publication has uncovered details of an international assassination programme allegedly run by India that has killed about half a dozen individuals in Pakistan since 2021.

Indeed, the Post has found reason to believe that India was emboldened to begin targeting individuals in the US and Canada based on the assassination programme it had already tested and refined in Pakistan. Its network, operated through middlemen in the UAE, was uncovered because of mistakes very similar to the ones New Delhi made in the US and Canada, including using sloppy tactics and hiring untrained hitmen. It must be pointed out that the then ISI chief had raised Pakistan's concerns regarding India's cross-border killing campaign to CIA director William J. Burns in 2022, well before similar plots were uncovered in the US and Canada. Now that the Indian hand is clearly visible, there must be consequences. Any impunity in this regard for New Delhi cannot be countenanced. Whatever its reasons, the fact is that the Modi regime has been murdering people and needs to be stopped.

Published in Dawn, January 3rd, 2025

## Falling temperatures

THERE'S a welcome chill in the political atmosphere as talks proceed between the government and the PTI over several outstanding issues. The groundbreaking for negotiations appears to have been done, with two meetings held in recent weeks, of which the latest is said to have concluded on a positive note. Another huddle is expected next week, once the PTI consults with its incarcerated founder to finalise its charter of demands for the government. If parleys begin in earnest, January could prove an important month: the PTI has previously stated that it wants negotiations to conclude before February.

It appears that the party may stick to two initial demands: the release of its workers, incarcerated in various cases, and a judicial commission to probe the events of May 9, 2023, and November 26, 2024. Though these have yet to be presented in writing, it seems the bar is low enough for the government to engage without incurring political costs.

It is encouraging also to note that the participants of these meetings have an eye on the bigger picture. According to a statement attributed to the National Assembly speaker, all participants have agreed to engage in dialogue for the country's betterment, "covering issues such as the economy, terrorism, and other critical matters." This is just as well because though some measure of economic stabilisation has now been achieved, the growth needed to support the country will remain elusive till political stability returns.

In a recent meeting of the Special Investment Facilitation Council, the prime minister observed that the strength of any economy is rooted in its political framework and that Pakistan's development is, therefore, directly linked to its political stability. Though Pakistan has secured memoranda of understanding worth billions of dollars with various countries, it will have great trouble realising them till the persistent uncertainty in the political equation is eliminated.

Regardless of the intentions of the negotiators, however, there remain many little hurdles in the way of a political resolution. The representatives in the dialogue committee, for example, cannot achieve anything on their own: they will need validation from the heads of their respective political parties at each step of the process.

Such hurdles could, of course, be swiftly cleared if the heads of the PTI, PML-N and PPP were to sit down and work out a modus vivendi directly with each other. The biggest barrier is the seeming inability of the opposition and government to come to terms with their respective situations. It remains vitally important for stakeholders to acknowledge and understand that politicians can still challenge opposing parties' narratives without also being in a constant state of war with each other. It is hoped and prayed that this realisation hits home sooner rather than later.

Published in Dawn, January 4th, 2025

## Agriculture census

ACCURATE information relating to agricultural activities is vital for data-driven future planning, policymaking, as well as targeted interventions to increase the sector's productivity and contribution to the economy. The periodic agricultural census is the most extensive way of collecting reliable information. Thus, the launch of field operations by the PBS for the country's 7th agricultural census to digitally gather information on its activities gives hope of better informed planning and policymaking for the sector that contributes nearly a fifth to the GDP, and is an important driver of growth and the largest employer of the country's labour force. Even



though the census is being conducted after a delay of four years, it is hoped that the information collected through it on total area of land, location, size, use, and ownership; types of crops planted; farming techniques; use of irrigation; characteristics of the households; and many other topics will actually be used by the planners for policymaking and devising interventions to revive productivity, and the data will not be filed and forgotten in state archives

Pakistan's agriculture sector, in spite of its importance for agro-based exports, food security, employment generation etc, is the most neglected segment of the economy. It has been facing several challenges for decades. These challenges are not just affecting the crop sector but also the livestock segment, negatively impacting agro-based industrial exports and food security. In recent years, we have seen events like floods, droughts, heatwaves, etc due to rapid climate change depress farmers' incomes and increase rural poverty and unemployment. There is no doubt that successive governments have strived to revive and boost agriculture output through input and other indirect subsidies, including but not limited to fixation of a minimum procurement or support price for crops like wheat and sugarcane. But these subsidies are mostly pocketed by large landholders or arhtis (middlemen). Smallholder farmers and landless tenants rarely benefit from government intervention and support because the policies are neither data driven nor evidence-based. Information collected through the agriculture census and disintegrated by experts can provide a treasure trove for the agriculture planners and policymakers, provided they are inclined to actually use it.

Published in Dawn, January 4th, 2025

## Biometrics for kids

ALTHOUGH the move has caused a panic among weary parents mortified at the thought of carting their children to Nadra offices, the interior ministry's recent directive to incorporate biometric features into Form B for 10-18-year-olds is not without its merits. While the immediate catalyst for this decision remains unclear, historical instances of identity document misuse underscore the necessity for such measures. In 2009, a sitting federal minister faced allegations of human trafficking, involving the manipulation of Nadra records to facilitate unauthorised travel. Although she attributed the misconduct to a staff member, the incident highlighted vulnerabilities within the system. Last month, Nadra dismissed a director general for possessing a fake degree, raising concerns about the integrity of officials within the organisation. Additionally, in February 2024, five Nadra employees were implicated in the unauthorised issuance of CNICs to foreign nationals, further exposing systemic weaknesses.

These episodes, among others, reveal significant lapses in the management and issuance of identity documents, potentially facilitating illegal activities such as human trafficking and unauthorised immigration. The new requirement of fingerprints and photographs for Form B,

coupled with mandatory parental presence and computerised birth certificates, creates multiple layers of verification that could help prevent identity theft and document forgery. However, the success of this initiative will depend heavily on its execution. Nadra must ensure that its centres are adequately equipped to handle the increased workload without creating bottlenecks. Parents and guardians must be adequately informed and facilitated to comply with the new requirements. Moreover, Nadra must ensure that its internal processes are transparent and that its personnel adhere to the highest standards of integrity to prevent internal exploitation of the system. While these measures may initially cause some inconvenience, they represent a necessary step towards securing our identity documentation system. The government should

complement these technical measures with stronger prosecution of identity-related crimes to create an effective deterrent against document forgery and human trafficking.

Published in Dawn, January 4th, 2025

## Confused state

**WHEN it comes to combatting violent terrorism, the state's efforts seem to be suffering from a lack of focus. The policy confusion at the top tier was evident in the remarks made by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif during a recent meeting of the Apex Committee of the National Action Plan. On the one hand, PM Sharif seemed worried about terrorist infiltration and stressed the need for all stakeholders to collaborate with security forces to eliminate the threat. At the same time, however, he also took the opportunity to make divisive remarks targeting the main opposition party, describing it as being involved in "anti-state activities" and seemingly equating its confrontational activities with the violence perpetrated by actual terrorists. As prime minister, he really should have spoken more circumspectly.**

While it is true that some of the criticism levelled by the opponents of this government has been unfair and rather harsh, even downright condemnable in some instances, the beauty of democracy is that it is tolerant of even the most critical viewpoints. It is, therefore, reasonably expected that there be some clear distinction drawn between people who are critical of government policies, and people who dismiss the idea of Pakistan altogether and wish to replace it through violence with a fascist state. Terrorism is a serious challenge that needs to be met with a united resolve. If anything, the prime minister should be more worried about how his government has been treating rival politicians and the media, and the negative consequences of these policies on the general health of society. By repeatedly attacking critics of government policies and by branding all criticism as 'fake news' or 'digital terrorism', he is only alienating this government in the real fight against terrorism.

With opposition leaders unanimous in their complaints about [censorship](#) and coercion by the state, the media left debilitated by curbs and restrictions on what can and cannot be reported, and public dissenters being targeted and silenced by the state, fringe elements, which are already adept at operating from the shadows, can take over the narrative-setting function, as we are witnessing now. This should serve as a lesson that when people's representatives and responsible journalists are not allowed to speak freely, the public can turn to much more undesirable elements to fill that void. Therefore, instead of 'othering' critics and stifling their voices, the government must provide them space so that built-up pressures and frustrations can be released in reasonable ways. Not allowing dissent risks creating a pressure-cooker like situation which can explode in very unpredictable ways. The government needs all the support it can get against the growing threat from violent terrorism. It must stop complicating the task for itself. Branding criticism as anti-state activity has never worked, and will not work in this case either.

*Published in Dawn, January 5th, 2025*

## Born into hunger

OVER 18.2 million children — 35 every minute — were born into hunger in 2024, with Pakistan accounting for 1.4m of these births. This sobering statistic was shared recently by Save the Children, which also found that we stand second only to the Democratic Republic of Congo among countries with over 20pc of the population undernourished. Such distressing findings demonstrate our collective failure as a nation. As one of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations, Pakistan finds itself caught in a perfect storm of environmental disasters, economic instability, and systemic poverty. The devastating floods of 2022 were not merely a temporary setback but a harbinger of the climate-driven challenges that continue to threaten our food security. The connection between climate vulnerability and hunger is no longer theoretical — it is playing out in real time across our provinces. Throughout Pakistan, particularly in rural areas, mothers face impossible choices daily. Many are forced to reduce portions, skip meals, or choose which child gets enough to eat — heart-wrenching decisions no parent should have to make. Behind each statistic is a family struggling to provide their children with basic nutrition, their suffering compounded by rising food prices and limited access to healthcare services.

While the Benazir Income Support Programme has provided crucial support to vulnerable families, these programmes need substantial expansion and better targeting. The Ehsaas Nashonuma programme, specifically designed to address stunting in children, must be scaled up beyond its current reach. Additionally, the government should revitalise the National Food Security Policy, integrating it with climate adaptation strategies and modern agricultural practices. Pakistan needs to strengthen its early warning systems for food insecurity, enhance the coverage of nutrition-specific interventions through lady health workers, and improve coordination

between federal and provincial food security initiatives. The non-profit Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund should prioritise agricultural microfinance and climate-smart farming techniques. And while international support is crucial, domestic resource mobilisation is equally important. The government must increase health sector spending with a specific focus on nutrition programmes. Moreover, the National Disaster Risk Management Fund needs enhancement to better respond to climate-induced food crises. The fact that more babies are being born into hunger today than in previous years represents not just a humanitarian crisis but a national emergency that threatens Pakistan's future. We must ensure that the next generation of Pakistanis is not condemned to a life of hunger and deprivation.

Published in Dawn, January 5th, 2025

## Tourism triumph

THE inclusion of Gilgit-Baltistan in CNN's list of top 25 destinations to visit in 2025 is a proud moment for Pakistan. It validates what adventure seekers across the world have long drawn attention to: the region's breathtaking landscapes that are home to towering eight-thousanders, glaciers, meadows, and crystal-clear lakes. GB truly offers an experience that rivals the world's leading destinations. CNN's endorsement comes as visitor numbers have climbed steadily — from 2,100 foreign adventurers in 2023 to 2,380 in 2024. This is a golden opportunity for Pakistan to position itself as a hub for eco-tourism and adventure travel.

To truly capitalise on this achievement, the state must address the longstanding challenges that hinder GB's potential. Accessibility remains a significant hurdle. Unreliable flight schedules and seasonally blocked roads discourage many prospective travellers. Investing in dependable air travel, improved road infrastructure, and alternative routes can make the region more accessible. Additionally, digital connectivity, an essential part of modern tourism, must be prioritised to enhance the visitor experience and facilitate local businesses. Streamlining permit processes and developing a more efficient booking system would enhance accessibility. Furthermore, sustainable tourism must take centre stage. GB's pristine environment is its biggest asset, and unregulated tourism could lead to irreversible damage. The government should enforce strict environmental policies, promote eco-friendly practices, and educate tourists about minimising their footprint. Pakistan can also learn from Nepal's structured tourism model, where guided tours are mandatory for certain areas, ensuring both visitor safety and local employment. Initiatives like community-based tourism can empower GB's residents, ensuring they directly benefit from the industry's growth. Other regions could gain from similar focused approaches.

Published in Dawn, January 5th, 2025

## Poll petitions' delay

THOUGH electoral transparency and justice are essential for the health of any democracy, the relevant quarters in Pakistan seemingly remain unconvinced of the need to address poll disputes with alacrity. While nearly a year has passed since 2024's controversial general elections, only 27pc of poll petitions have been decided by election tribunals. Though the process may have picked up pace, the speed at which it is proceeding is still unacceptably slow. By law, petitions have to be decided within 180 days of their filing.

The figures, released by electoral watchdog Fafen, point to the fact that tribunals in Punjab, Sindh and KP are moving particularly slow, while those in Balochistan have performed relatively better. It should be pointed out that due to a legal dispute between the ECP and LHC, eight election tribunals were only notified in Punjab last October. Initially, only two tribunals had been notified in Pakistan's most populous province, even though most of the petitions had been filed in Punjab. Of the petitions that have been decided so far, most have been dismissed by the tribunals.

The road to a functioning and dynamic democracy will remain a long and winding one unless key lacunae affecting Pakistan's electoral process — such as post-election disputes — are resolved with speed and fairness. A cloud continues to hang over last year's polls, and when tribunals take an inordinate amount of time to decide disputes, popular doubts about the whole process are only solidified.

From the controversy of issuance of Forms 45 to the slothful resolution of poll disputes, it seems that the stakeholders are not concerned about the need to present Pakistan's electoral process as free, fair and transparent. This attitude needs to change for the betterment of Pakistani democracy. While the tribunals need to pick up the pace, political parties must highlight the need to reform the electoral process, so that elections in this country are free from controversy.

Published in Dawn, January 6th, 2025

## Migration racket

A KEY part of dismantling human smuggling and illegal migration rackets in the country — along with busting the gangs involved in this sordid business — is to identify and punish the individuals within government agencies that help facilitate these illegal activities. There has been a sudden burst of activity in this regard after last month's tragedy off the coast of Greece, in which several boats carrying migrants capsized. Around 80 Pakistanis are believed to have drowned; the deaths of nine individuals have been confirmed. This is the second tragedy of its kind in recent years, as a similar disaster in 2023, also off the Greek coast, resulted in the deaths of over 350 Pakistanis. In the wake of last month's debacle, the prime minister ordered action against human smugglers

and the officials involved in the racket. As a result, the Federal Investigation Agency says, according to a report in this paper, that 35 personnel have been dismissed, while criminal cases have been filed against 13 FIA men.

The action against errant officials is welcome, but internal accountability must be a continuous process, and must not be a reactive exercise, with the state swinging into action only after a tragedy occurs. It is hard to believe that criminals involved in the smuggling and trafficking rackets can operate without help from compromised state functionaries. Migrant smuggling is big business, with individuals forking over thousands of dollars per person to try to get to Europe, and it can be assumed that many officials also have a cut in this booty. Therefore, there needs to be constant vigilance of state functionaries, particularly at airports and border crossings, to ensure no government official gets away with abetting the illegal migration trade. In the long term, the state also needs to address the triggers that force people to spend huge sums, and risk their lives, in a bid to get to greener pastures abroad. While some leave the country due to discrimination and persecution, the vast majority are economic migrants, many hailing from relatively prosperous parts of Punjab. Victims have said economic hardship made them opt for illegal migration, while others are inspired by compatriots who made it 'big' in Europe. Hence, ensuring social and economic justice is essential if people are to be convinced to not put their lives on the line by making these risky journeys.

Published in Dawn, January 6th, 2025

## Power planning

THE National Electric Power Regulatory Authority, the power sector regulator, has rightly blamed poor planning for generation overcapacity, which has made electricity unaffordable not just for residential consumers but also for industry. In a new report, the regulator has noted that "overinvestment in generation capacity to meet peak demand" is one of the key contributors to rising consumer tariffs and a burden on government finances. "Despite the fact that existing installed electric power generation capacity often remains underutilised in Pakistan, the IGCEP (Indi-cative Generation Capacity Expansion Plan) is developed with the aim to meet the peak demands that occur for less than few hours annually," Nepra said. Other factors driving up consumer tariffs, according to the report, include delays in the expansion of Thar coal power and discouragement of rooftop solar adoption.

At the close of the 2024 fiscal year, the installed generation capacity was 42,512MW while the transmission and distribution network could bear a maximum load of only 25,516MW. That is not all. The maximum demand had peaked to 30,150 MW for a limited duration while the minimum demand stood at 7,015MW. The average annual load served was 18,463MW. In other words, Pakistan still has much more generation capacity than what it actually needs. However, these are

the facts that most of us knew and which have widely been discussed. The question is what policymakers and planners can do to find a solution to the challenge of excess generation capacity combined with fluctuating demand and the system's inability to consistently meet maximum demand.

The fact remains that the National Transmission and Despatch Company, one of the power sector regulators responsible for planning future needs of generation, transmission and distribution, has repeatedly proved that it does not have a vision or capacity to predict future demand and requirements. Not just that; a look at the last draft of the IGCEP, a document that projects future demand for the next 10 years, clearly indicates that the NTDC is also incapable of ensuring the development of new generation capacity on least-cost basis. That draft has now been retracted and a new version is being developed. With new developments being reported in renewable energy and battery technology helping slash the installation costs and increasing storage capacity, it is now only a matter of time before solar power disrupts and displaces the national grid. The Nepra report has correctly pointed out that the adoption of solar power should not be seen as a challenge but as an opportunity. The new IGCEP draft should focus on encouraging renewable energy, especially solar, rather than looking towards expensive hydel and dirty coal power. The reliance on fossil fuel-based generation technologies will only make electricity more expensive at the expense of economic progress.

Published in Dawn, January 6th, 2025

## Fragile peace

WHILE a peace deal to end the violence in Kurram tribal district was signed on New Year's Day between the warring tribes, the fact that the local deputy commissioner was attacked in the district mere days after the signing shows how difficult the challenge of maintaining calm in this region will be. DC Javedullah Mehsud and members of his security detail came under attack in the Bagan area on Saturday. Reportedly, a protest was underway in the locality, and the attackers were amongst the demonstrators, the KP government spokesman said. Luckily, Mr Mehsud survived the attack and was rushed out of the area. However, the question arises: if the state cannot protect one of its senior functionaries, how will it keep Kurram's ordinary citizens safe from violence and terrorism?

Fortunately, the peace deal has held despite the attack on the DC, while the KP government has promised to apprehend the perpetrators. Arrests have reportedly been made, while a meeting held to review the situation in Kohat, headed by the KP chief minister, decided that the provincial administration will take punitive measures against those who breach the peace. Notably, it has been decided that anyone carrying a weapon will be considered a militant. It is clear that there are elements in Kurram who do not want to see peace prevail in the district. The state, backed by

the local tribes, must isolate and punish these malignant actors so that the fresh cycle of bloodshed in Kurram can be brought to a close.

The recently concluded peace deal offers a roadmap to lasting calm, but it can only work if the state has the will to enforce it, and the local tribes agree to abide by all its points. The primary criteria for calm in Kurram is a need to deweaponise the district, and neutralise all militant and sectarian groups active in the area. This includes keeping a close eye on the Afghan border, from where terrorists can and do infiltrate. Moreover, there must be freedom of movement across the district, and there cannot be any 'no-go' areas closed off to certain tribes or sects.

The blockade of upper Kurram has created a grave humanitarian situation, and the state must guarantee the district's people have access to food, fuel, medicines etc at all times. Also, those who have lost loved ones, as well as those whose property has been destroyed in the recent clashes, must get justice. And the land and water disputes that have long fuelled tension in the area must be addressed judiciously. None of this will be easy in a tribal area which has seen decades of on-again, off-again skirmishes, exacerbated by sectarian differences and geopolitical factors. But the state cannot ignore the suffering of Kurram's people.

Published in Dawn, January 7th, 2025

## Captive power cut

THE IMF's refusal to relax its demand for discontinuation of massively subsidised gas supplies to mostly inefficient captive power plants owned by wealthy textile producers, in order to eliminate cost distortions between power supply from the national grid and in-house generation, is understandable. Where power supply is a problem, captive power producers would be asked to pay additional Rs1,700-1,800 per mmBtu on top of prevailing LNG prices to strip them of the cost benefits of in-house generation. The condition, one of the key structural benchmarks of the ongoing \$7bn funding programme, is aimed at compelling the government to wean the industry off energy subsidies, and encourage factory owners to shift to the national grid to stem falling power production — a major reason for soaring capacity payments to IPPs and unaffordable consumer tariffs. The electricity price subsidies for the industry have mostly been withdrawn under IMF oversight.

On the face of it, the condition appears harsh for exporters, as it would somewhat raise the cost of textile exports. But it isn't. Generous energy and other subsidies doled out to textile exporters over the past several decades have made them inefficient, preventing product diversification and value-addition. Once they are weaned off subsidies, we may see some inefficient industries close down, with others investing in new technologies to stay competitive in the international markets. This action will also give small and medium textile exporters, who can't afford captive power to



slash their production costs, a fair chance to compete with the large producers in the market and grow bigger. It should also help divert gas to the much more efficient RLNG-based power generation plants, reducing the burden of growing capacity payments on the national exchequer and consumers. Indeed, the gas utilities have concerns about the drop in their sales amidst “250 surplus LNG cargoes” that Pakistan must procure under long-term contracts with suppliers. The concerns aren’t totally misplaced, but the growth in demand from the on-grid power sector is expected to significantly offset the gas companies’ projections of losses due to the decrease in demand from the captive power sector. No doubt, it’s a complex situation where stabilisation of one segment of the energy sector is affecting the other. Yet these challenges need to be confronted head-on, sooner rather than later.

Published in Dawn, January 7th, 2025

## National embarrassment

PAKISTAN has utterly failed in protecting its children from polio, a preventable disease that has been eradicated nearly all over the world. With 68 cases reported in 2024 compared to Afghanistan’s 25, we find ourselves in the embarrassing position of being the worst performer among the only two countries where polio is still endemic.

Officials from Pakistan’s polio programme point to our superior reporting mechanisms and suggest that Afghanistan’s numbers may be underreported. However, this can in no way excuse our dismal performance. The fact remains that Pakistan, with its considerably stronger infrastructure and institutional capacity, should not even be in the same conversation as war-torn Afghanistan when it comes to public health metrics.

Polio in our parts has spread to 83 districts. Our environmental surveillance has detected the virus in 591 sewage samples across 106 sites. These are scary numbers. Security challenges in erstwhile Fata, Karachi, and Peshawar have indeed hampered vaccination efforts.

Yet, this narrative of perpetual hurdles is wearing thin. Pakistan’s polio eradication programme, active since 1994, has lately been hurt by mismanagement, vaccine refusals, and gaps in immunisation coverage. Despite nine vaccination campaigns and mapping efforts, 12pc of our infected children had zero doses of the oral polio vaccine. This failure cannot solely be attributed to external factors; it underscores systemic inefficiencies and lack of political will.

The formation of a new team by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, including focal person Ayesha Raza Farooq and national coordinator Anwarul Haq, suggests recognition of the crisis — but we have seen similar initiatives before with little lasting impact. The programme’s officials must adopt innovative strategies to overcome resistance, improve access, and ensure accountability at every

level. The global eradication of polio is within reach, and Pakistan has no excuse to remain an outlier. It is time to end this national disgrace once and for all.

Published in Dawn, January 7th, 2025

## Closed doors

SOMETHING is afoot in Islamabad, but few seem willing to venture a guess about what is really going on. It is curious that both the PTI and the government seem much more elastic than at any point since the former's banishment from the corridors of power.

Officially, the two are engaged in negotiations; however, there has been little by way of tangible progress in their talks, with matters still stuck on what the PTI's formal demands are and the PTI's insistence on unrestricted access to its incarcerated founder-leader. Meanwhile, there has been a constant cycle of speculation and denial about back-channel talks between the PTI and the military establishment. Whatever the truth of those may be, it is widely understood that no talks can progress unless there is some sort of understanding between the two, especially given the latter's expanded involvement in running the affairs of the state.

The distrust between the PTI and the incumbent regime has grown into a chasm over the last few years. Bridging it is, therefore, no simple task. The mere fact that official negotiations were initiated was itself a major accomplishment, given the circumstances. That they have continued for more than two weeks, despite apprehensions on both sides, piques one's interest. After all, one of the negotiating parties had, till recently, dismissed the other as having no real authority at all; the other still paints the former as a 'terrorist' entity involved in 'anti-state activities'. It has been said that shared concerns over terrorism and the economy have, at least temporarily, helped overcome the mutual contempt both hold for each other. It is unfortunate, however, that whatever rules of engagement are being agreed upon are being decided in secret, without the public given much of a hint about what, precisely, is under discussion.

It would have been much better had the ongoing dialogue been conducted in the public eye. Perhaps a bit of secrecy is still needed given how polarised the country is at the moment and because none of the parties may be comfortable making necessary concessions that may lower their public standing in any way. Still, the public deserves to know what terms are being negotiated so that there is a broader consensus on how matters will proceed thereafter.

The nation's fate has been decided through secret deals for too long, with the result that the citizenry has become increasingly alienated from the state. It is hoped, therefore, that the final round of dialogue, at least, will be conducted in the public eye so that there is a wider debate on

each side's positions. For there to be closure, all stakeholders, including the citizenry, must be brought on the same page. Once there is consensus, the nation will move forward.

Published in Dawn, January 8th, 2025

## Debt burden

THE federal government's total debt stock soared by above 11pc year-over-year to Rs70.4tr at the end of November, new State Bank data shows. But that does not come as a major surprise; debt growth is primarily driven by fresh borrowings for budgetary support. However, the pace of debt accumulation during the current fiscal year has been slower than expected as the stock rose by just 2pc in five months. It is the decreasing burden of interest payments on the back of falling interest rates, and a drastic improvement in the primary balance, which determines the size of the loans that the government must secure to cover the income gap. The SBP slashed its policy rate by 900 bps to 13pc since June as headline monthly inflation plunged to a single digit. Likewise, the primary balance has improved to 2.4pc of GDP from 0.4pc in the last fiscal year. The record non-tax revenue contributed by the SBP from its profits has also helped the government throw up a fiscal surplus of 1.4pc of GDP.

While the government has accumulated fresh debt in the first five months of the year, the SBP data shows that federal and provincial borrowings from the scheduled banks for budgetary support have experienced a significant decline with debt retirement of slightly over Rs2tr against borrowings of Rs2.89tr in the same period in FY24. The federal government repaid an amount of Rs1.575tr to the banks compared to Rs3.4bn of borrowings a year ago. The future debt trajectory largely depends on the Federal Board of Revenue's performance and a decrease in wasteful public expenditure through the restructuring and sale of state-owned enterprises, besides a drastic reduction in the size of the oversized federal government. The rise in federal debt highlights persistent fiscal challenges as Pakistan navigates one of its severest economic crises, marked by heightened borrowings, to address budgetary deficits as well as balance-of-payments troubles. The situation underscores the need for structural reforms to ensure sustainable fiscal management and to reduce reliance on short-term debt. This is precisely what the SBP had emphasised in its latest monetary policy statement released last month when it called for continued fiscal consolidation to support macroeconomic stability and reiterated the need for fiscal reforms, focusing on broadening the tax base and curtailing the SOEs' losses.

Published in Dawn, January 8th, 2025

## GB power crisis

MASS protests are not a novelty in Pakistan, and when the state refuses to listen through the available channels — which it often does — people take to the streets and disrupt life to get their message across. Protests have been continuing in Gilgit-Baltistan since last week over 22-hour power outages in the region. Demonstrators, braving the mountainous area's harsh winter weather, have blocked the Karakoram Highway in Hunza, affecting trade with China. Similar protests have also been held in other parts of GB. Civil society groups, political parties, and traders have all backed the demonstrations. Locals say that the lengthy blackouts, and resultant internet breakdowns, have affected students as well as online businesses and trade activities. Such mass protests were held in January 2024 too; at that time, along with regular electricity supply, GB's people were calling for a withdrawal of an increase in the subsidised wheat price, among other demands. A GB government spokesman says "90pc" of the protesters' demands have been met, while promising that new power projects would be completed by "next year".

The centre, which dominates GB's governance, as well as the regional administration, must ask why local people take to the streets so often. Clearly, the state machinery is failing to adequately respond to the population's needs. Where power is concerned, it is indeed a problem to ensure regular electricity supply due to the region's rugged terrain and limited infrastructure. Yet there are solutions that have been suggested for mountain communities, for example wind and solar energy, which can ensure relatively regular power supply. Economic opportunities in the region are already limited, and when there is no power for most of the day, the impact on life is debilitating. CNN has recently listed GB as amongst the top 25 places to visit in 2025. Yet to fully tap the region's potential, pressing local issues need to be addressed forthwith.

Published in Dawn, January 8th, 2025

## Taking cover

IT is unfortunate that, instead of taking ownership of important decisions, our officials usually seem keener to make even the good ones appear to be the result of some unavoidable obligation to the country's foreign creditors. This constant shifting of responsibility, or rather, blame, to external stakeholders has meant even necessary changes in state-level policy come to be seen publicly as the result of interference by unforgiving and unsympathetic foreign lenders rather than necessary steps that must be taken in the country's best interests. Take, for example, the finance minister, who, in a recent press conference on government rightsizing, seemed to be at pains to explain that the decision to reduce the size of our arguably bloated government had to be taken because of structural benchmarks set by the IMF. Though the minister admitted that the

measure was also in Pakistan's best interests, one wonders why it was made to sound like an IMF prescription rather than a willingly embraced reform.

The fact is that the size of the government needs to be cut. The country cannot continue to shoulder the burden of a large and inefficient bureaucracy, given its severely deteriorated economic position. The minister, during his press conference, himself revealed that many of the public sector entities, departments and their managements that were put on the chopping block admitted they had not much to show by way of their accomplishments over the past 20-30 years, but still wanted another six months to deliver results. This would seem to be an admission that, though these entities knew how to turn things around, they chose not to do so — and for decades, no less. While they thankfully did not get another lifeline, one still wonders why the move to cut them to size had to be framed as an obligation to a foreign lending agency.

Indeed, the government should have taken pride in announcing that it was taking a major step to hold public servants and their departments accountable for funds they had been wasting for decades. That it did not seem eager to do so not only suggests a lack of concern for how the country's resources have been and continue to be squandered but also a seeming unwillingness to end such wastefulness. Perhaps this is why the finance minister dodged questions at the same press conference regarding why judges and certain categories of bureaucrats had been granted hefty salary increases in recent months. He also would not directly answer questions about whether certain 'favoured' ministries and departments would face cuts. The finance minister, himself an appointed technocrat, may at times feel obligated to deflect responsibility from the elected government. However, it is hoped that this is not also preventing him from taking the right decisions.

Published in Dawn, January 9th, 2025

## A living hell

WHAT Donald Trump does domestically when he enters the White House in just under two weeks is frankly the American people's problem — after all, they voted him into power for the second time. The only exception may be his immigration policy, which would concern many foreigners, including Pakistanis. But the shape US foreign policy takes during the second Trump administration is a matter of concern for the entire globe, as American military and economic decisions have an impact in climes far beyond US borders. Though his support base includes both isolationist MAGA hardliners, who want little to do with the outside world, as well as neocons who favour unbridled American imperialism, it appears that the latter grouping may have the upper hand in forming foreign policy. During a presser on Tuesday, Mr Trump gave broad outlines of his external aims. If he is serious about even half of these promises, the world should be very concerned. For example, he refused to rule out using force to occupy the Panama Canal as well

as Greenland. Moreover, he threatened to use “economic force” against Canada, and described the border with his North American neighbour as an “artificially drawn line”. But his most dangerous rhetoric was reserved for Gaza. Reiterating previous threats, Mr Trump said that unless Israeli captives held by Hamas were returned by the time of his inauguration, “all hell will break out in the Middle East”.

Mr Trump must realise that Gaza is already a living hell, thanks to Israeli barbarism and American weapons provided by the Biden administration. The Palestinian people have been constantly burying loved ones; they have been starved to death, and several babies have frozen to death in the Levantine winter. It is difficult to imagine how much more hellish the incoming American leader intends to make conditions for the people of Gaza. What is needed in the Strip is a long-term ceasefire and immediate provision of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. But it is naïve to expect Mr Trump to pressure Israel into silencing its guns in Gaza, surrounded as he is by fanatical Zionists for whom the extermination of the Palestinian people is almost an article of faith. His views on Iran are equally hawkish. Therefore, his promises to bring more ‘hell’ to the Middle East may be fulfilled quite soon.

Published in Dawn, January 9th, 2025

## A right denied

DESPITE citizens possessing the constitutional and legal right to access it, federal ministries are failing to disclose public information. This was revealed by Fafen recently in a report that paints a troubling picture of governmental opacity. Fafen’s analysis of 40 divisions across 33 federal ministries reveals that none fully comply with the mandatory disclosures outlined in the Right to Information Act. Even the best-performing divisions, such as the Cabinet and Inter-Provincial Coordination Divisions, achieved only 42pc compliance. Several divisions — including those responsible for Housing and Works, Information and Broadcasting, and National Health Services — registered compliance rates as low as eight to 19pc. Compounding this issue is the widespread non-responsiveness to RTI requests. Fafen says nearly half of the ministries ignored information requests, while only 27pc responded within the mandated timeframe. Ministries like Climate Change and Commerce adhered to the law’s timeline, but many others, including Finance and Interior, failed to respond altogether.

Adding to the dysfunction are the five right to information commissions — one at the Centre and four provincial ones — each staffed with three commissioners. These commissions, instead of ensuring compliance, appear to just be sitting pretty, earning hefty salaries while neglecting their duties. Fafen, as an NGO, may have managed to secure some responses, but what hope does the common citizen have in accessing information? The situation demands urgent reform. First off, these commissions must be streamlined — a single commissioner per jurisdiction would suffice,

provided they are empowered with clear performance metrics and accountability mechanisms. The resultant savings could fund implementation and monitoring systems. Secondly, an independent citizens' commission comprising civil society representatives, journalists, and legal experts should be established to audit the performance of RTI bodies. This commission could publish quarterly scorecards rating ministerial compliance and highlighting cases where citizens accessed information. Without such reforms, the RTI Act will remain what it currently is — a paper tiger.

Published in Dawn, January 9th, 2025

## E-governance

DURING his recent visit to Karachi, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif is said to have remarked on the need to integrate the entire economy through an 'e-governance' system.

But in a country where stable internet connectivity is not guaranteed, where communication networks are deliberately compromised to facilitate state snoops, and where the government still mostly does business on ink and paper, wishing for a viable e-governance system seems like a pipe dream.

One can only imagine the chaos that would be unleashed every time the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority felt like throttling or shutting down the internet, both things which it demonstrated an alarming penchant for over the course of last year. Such measures would not only leave a lot of young people very bored, frustrated and unhappy, but could also mean there may be no official business on shutdown days, compounding the economic losses from internet disruptions.

As it is, the Pakistani state has a rather poor reputation when it comes to implementing technological solutions at the national level. Early last year, the nation was treated to the spectacular failure of one such 'technologically advanced' system, which was touted as having the ability to withstand all challenges that could be thrown at it, including internet shutdown or disruption.

This was, of course, the Election Management System created under the supervision of the Election Commission of Pakistan, which was extensively extolled as a panacea for all the ills that had afflicted the 2018 general election. Quite comically, it proved even more inept than its predecessor once it was finally put to the test.

With that in mind, one feels something of an anticipatory anxiety thinking about a future where many such systems have been rolled out and integrated into one. Anyone who has been to a

government office on a 'system down' day can well imagine what routine dealings may become in such a scenario.

Of course, the idea itself is commendable and must be encouraged. The only point being made is that the state needs maturity and a lot more expertise than currently seems available in those it has tasked with dealing with technology and its various applications in both civil and government use cases.

E-governance is, indeed, the future. It is also not a novel idea. However, our state's staggering, stumbling progress towards it underlines that the country needs proven experts leading all IT-related affairs instead of retired military personnel or professional paper-pushers drawn from the nation's burgeoning bureaucracy. The prime minister is right when he stresses the need to integrate systems for better governance. However, his government has a lot of work to do to create the conditions necessary for his vision to be realised.

Published in Dawn, January 10th, 2025

## Khuzdar rampage

THE two most lethal terrorist threats that confront Pakistan are religiously inspired militants, led by the banned TTP, and separatist elements in Balochistan, particularly the proscribed BLA. On Wednesday, the latter showed that it is capable of unleashing major havoc, with the state unable to mount a matching response. In a brazen attack, BLA militants rampaged through the Zehri area of Khuzdar district, pillaging at will.

According to reports, a band of at least 80 militants descended from the nearby mountains and proceeded to destroy government buildings, along with looting a private bank. They also managed to take local Levies personnel hostage. The Kalat commissioner says the episode lasted for nearly eight hours.

Thankfully, no loss of life was reported. The episode bears a resemblance to the coordinated assault last August, also carried out by the BLA, in which the terrorist group attacked security personnel as well as civilians, resulting in over 70 fatalities.

The first thing that strikes one about the Khuzdar attack is the delayed response of the security forces. Those responsible must explain how terrorists were able to commandeer the area for eight hours. The episode unfortunately shows that the state is unprepared to tackle such situations. When a major mass-casualty attack was launched last year, the relevant quarters should have prepared accordingly to prevent a similar situation. Clearly, this was not done.

Independent experts are of the view that the BLA has become the single biggest security threat in Balochistan. Its attacks have displayed increasing sophistication, indicating its fighters are



receiving proper training. It has also launched terrorist assaults as far afield as Karachi. Therefore, the security establishment, the centre and the Balochistan government must take relevant countermeasures to safeguard the lives and properties of the province's people.

Counterterrorism strategies should be adapted to match the nature of the threat. It is not enough to say that separatist forces are receiving external help. Such links should be exposed with proof, while the required action must be taken domestically to prevent terrorists from establishing safe havens on Balochistan's soil. Kinetic measures should be accompanied by socioeconomic steps to address the province's backwardness, while the democratic process must be allowed to proceed unhindered. As per World Bank figures, the poverty rate in Khuzdar is over 71pc. It is such misery and neglect that militants exploit.

Published in Dawn, January 10th, 2025

## Beyond wheelchairs

THE KP government's Rs370m assistance programme for persons with disabilities is a positive step, not only in terms of material support but also the use of more respectful terminology. However, our journey towards genuine inclusion requires more than semantic changes and financial packages. While legislation such as the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981, the more recent Disability Rights Act, and provincial laws exist on paper, implementation is weak. The promised 2pc job quota in government departments is rarely fulfilled, and most workplaces lack basic accessibility features. Our urban infrastructure — from public transport to government buildings — remains largely inaccessible, effectively excluding a portion of our population from public life.

KP's initiative can be a model for other provinces, but must go beyond financial assistance. True inclusion demands major reform. The federal government must focus on integrating our disability laws into provincial and municipal frameworks. Infrastructure projects must adhere to universal design principles, ensuring physical accessibility in schools, workplaces, and transport. More importantly, social attitudes must shift through awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes and promote the idea of equal opportunities for PWD. Education plays a critical role in this regard. Public and private educational institutions must be incentivised to create inclusive environments, while training programmes should equip teachers to cater to diverse needs. Similarly, while several companies have employed PWD, making this practice the norm, providing vocational training opportunities can enable them to lead economically independent lives. Most crucially, policy planning must directly involve PWD, following the principle of 'Nothing About Us Without Us'. Digital accessibility should also be prioritised alongside physical infrastructure, ensuring government services and information are available to all citizens regardless of ability. We must

ensure PWD are not merely supported but also empowered to thrive as equal members of society.

Published in Dawn, January 10th, 2025

## Afghan outreach

AS much mistrust marks Pakistan's relations with the Afghan Taliban, Kabul's rulers are reaching out to regional states in order to break out from their isolation and deepen economic ties.

While no one has formally recognised the Taliban regime, states are doing business with Kabul just short of recognition. In a significant development, the Taliban foreign minister met the Indian foreign secretary in Dubai recently, with the Afghan side describing India as a "significant regional and economic partner."

Trade relations were apparently the key area of discussion. It should be remembered that India was a major player in Afghanistan before the 2021 Taliban takeover. According to media reports, New Delhi had pumped \$3bn into Afghanistan for 'reconstruction' projects, and the erstwhile Northern Alliance members had warm relations with India. The Indians have reacted cautiously with the Taliban, but matters are proceeding nonetheless. The Taliban also maintain significant links with China and Russia.

These developments should concern Pakistan, and make its policymakers revisit their Afghan strategy. The stark fact is that while the Afghan Taliban may be difficult customers, Pakistan cannot afford a hostile neighbour to its west. Islamabad's concerns about TTP bases in Afghanistan are valid, but it needs to perhaps change its strategy with the Taliban so that the message sinks in.

At a recent seminar in Islamabad, some experts were of the view that instead of communicating with the rulers in Kabul, Pakistan must raise the TTP issue with the Taliban leadership in Kandahar, from where the real power in Afghanistan flows.

Though Taliban supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada is a reclusive figure, if Pakistan were to successfully engage him or those close to him, and convince them to relocate the TTP and other anti-Pakistan terrorists away from the border, this might improve the security situation in the country with minimum costs. Such moves have been tried before — with limited success — when the Taliban leadership issued a fatwa in 2023 stopping its cadres from waging a 'jihad' inside Pakistan.

The Taliban are welcome to keep the TTP, as long as they pose no harm to Pakistan. The present strategy — limited talks with and kinetic action against Kabul — has failed to resolve the problem.

As others are making diplomatic inroads with the Afghan Taliban, including unfriendly governments, Pakistan must reassess and readjust its strategy.

Islamabad should work with other regional states to stress that the Taliban must take stronger counterterrorism measures, so that militant groups cannot threaten Afghanistan's neighbours. Yet it must also engage the Taliban high command in Kandahar, as well as the politicians in Kabul, so that the doors of negotiation are not closed. If relations sour further with Afghanistan, it will add to insecurity in this country, and give hostile states room to manoeuvre.

Published in Dawn, January 11th, 2025

## Fragile recovery

STATE Bank Governor Jameel Ahmed appears to be quite optimistic over recent economic gains. That is not unusual; after all the nation has made a comeback from the edge of default. Speaking with business leaders in Karachi the other day, he said the policy measures (implemented by the bank) have set the stage for full restoration of economic activities in the country, adding that an uptick in remittances and a dip in inflation would lend (further) stability to the economy this year. There are signs that the country's economy has stabilised after nearly three years of a full-blown crisis. Indeed, the role of the SBP in pulling off this stability cannot be overstated. Headline inflation is down to just 4.1pc and is expected to fall further to around 3pc this month, the rupee-dollar exchange rate remains stable, the haemorrhage of foreign exchange has been stemmed, the country's international reserves have grown from \$3bn to over \$11bn despite debt payments, and the current account is running a surplus on soaring remittances and somewhat improved exports. The interest rates are coming down and private credit is said to be picking up pace. Today, the economic environment is a lot less volatile and uncertain than it was even a few months ago.

These are all positive developments and must be appreciated. That said, the recovery remains fragile and dependent on bilateral debt rollbacks and IMF crutches. The drying official and private capital inflows offer little reassurance about the future. The economy still remains trapped in a low-growth equilibrium despite improving macro indicators. Many believe that growth will remain elusive for some years, at least as the economy is yet to recover the kind of strength it needs to support faster expansion without hitting yet another, deeper crisis. The government is slow in implementing structural reforms and the price of this inaction is being borne by citizens and organised businesses. Rather, the ruling PML-N appears divided over reforms needed to put the economy on a sustained growth path and showing signs of impatience with the stabilisation policies due to political challenges from its rivals in Punjab. A lot of hope is attached to the promised investments from the Gulf nations, which the ruling party policymakers expect could offer them space to pursue faster growth. Until that happens, they can try selling ambitions like Uraan Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, January 11th, 2025

## Destination Europe

THE country's aviation authorities can rest a little easy. After a four-year banishment from European skies, Pakistan International Airlines flight PK-749 departed yesterday from Islamabad for Paris Charles-de-Gaulle Airport shortly after noon. There seemed to be quite a bit of interest in the event, with the flight among the top 10 being followed by aviation enthusiasts on FlightRadar24, a website that tracks airlines, for more than half an hour after its departure. It marked a welcome break from the serial crises that have chased the national airline for years, which suffered immense setbacks after the devastating crash of PK-8303 near Karachi airport in May 2020 led to revelations about inadequate pilot training and air safety measures. The repercussions were severe and included flight restrictions on PIA in many lucrative markets. Much effort has gone into reversing global perceptions about PIA since then, and it is encouraging to note that international regulators now seem more receptive when considering the airline's safety profile.

The reopening of the European market to PIA will improve the airline's viability, and it is hoped that the UK will be next to allow it to operate direct flights there again. The state has long wanted to rid itself of the burden of running a commercial airline but has found no serious takers, given PIA's financial troubles and operational limitations. The fact that it has now demonstrated that it is ready for re-entry into more markets and compliant with stringent air safety requirements laid down by foreign regulators will sweeten the deal and aid privatisation efforts. Regardless of how the privatisation effort proceeds, however, the airline should keep its focus on reviving international operations, especially in the UK, which is a particularly important market considering the size of the expatriate population living there, as well as its social and economic linkages with Pakistan. The PIA management must not falter in this task.

Published in Dawn, January 11th,

## Increased inflows

REMITTANCES sent home by migrant Pakistani workers have been a saving grace for the country's faltering economy for the last two decades.

With export revenues growing at a painfully slow pace — and often stagnating for years in between — and foreign capital and investment inflows drying, successive governments have

relied on remittances to push import-based consumption to boost growth. Thus, even a tiny increase in cash sent home by overseas Pakistanis can always be a moment for celebration.

The ongoing fiscal year has proved to be exceptional for remittances, with inflows soaring by a third to a record level of \$17.8bn in the first half of the year to December from \$13.4bn a year ago. This lends hope that the country will be able to meet the targeted inflows of \$35bn in remittances, far surpassing export earnings, this year. No wonder the prime minister has used this occasion to “congratulate’ the nation and boast of his government’s success in stabilising the economy while underlining the commitment of overseas Pakistanis to their country’s development.

The market players attribute the surge in remittances through formal banking channels to numerous factors: clampdown on illegal currency trade and smuggling to Afghanistan, stricter controls on exchange companies, exchange rate stability, and increased labour migration, especially young IT professionals, from the country in recent years. It is believed that remittances have a potential to grow to \$60bn a year if illegal currency trade is stemmed and customs controls strengthened against under-invoicing of imports by major traders from China, Dubai and elsewhere.

The increase in remittances is indeed a positive development for the economy as these have been driving the current account surplus for the last several months, contributing significantly to exchange rate stability and improvement in the State Bank’s forex reserves in the absence of foreign direct investment, as well as any meaningful bilateral and multilateral inflows.

But it is not a wise policy to rely on them for external account stability. Remittances have their downsides as well. Studies have shown that higher remittances boost consumption and imports, lead to decline in domestic manufacturing and exports, and make economies of recipient nations more vulnerable to global and regional economic crises. No matter how favourable an impact these have on economic growth, remittances cannot be a substitute for exports and foreign private investment, which increase domestic productivity and generate jobs. Moreover, the quantum of remittances a country receives can never be predicted.

Remittances represent hard-earned money by migrant Pakistanis that must be channeled into productive use for the country’s social and economic development instead of squandering on imported luxuries. At the same time, the government needs to devise a strategy to increase industrial and agricultural productivity to boost exports and reduce reliance on uncertain remittances.

Published in Dawn, January 12th, 2025

## Gwadar's potential

THE Gwadar deep-sea port, completed in 2007, was supposed to be a shining success for the other newly built ports in the region and beyond. Yet eight years after the official launch of port operations — an event marked by the first-ever container ship with cargo from China passing through it — it lags behind even other China-built ports in Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Cameroon. Barely any vessel calls at Gwadar. Given the situation, it is not surprising that the planning and special initiatives minister is vexed over the failure of relevant authorities to “market the Gwadar port to expedite its commercialisation”. Built as part of the multibillion-dollar CPEC transport and energy infrastructure project, the port remains a non-starter and, in the words of the minister, a “white elephant instead of becoming a regional transshipment hub”. During a meeting the other day, he blamed the maritime ministry and the NLC for their unprofessional handling of what would be the ‘crown jewel’ of the corridor initiative.

There's a reason the government is concerned over the fact that the Gwadar port has not kept pace with similar facilities in the region. Robust trade through Gwadar is crucial to develop the region and alleviate rampant poverty in Balochistan. Hence, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has recently ordered to route 60pc of all public sector cargoes through Gwadar to “trigger port activities’. That is unlikely to happen anytime soon due to capacity constraints and much higher cost of transportation from Gwadar to the rest of the country compared with Karachi. On his part, the planning minister has directed the relevant authorities to hire an international consultant to prepare a plan to compete with other regional ports in attracting business for Gwadar. But a market plan, no matter how grand, cannot improve the security situation in Balochistan or bring peace to Afghanistan, without which it is impossible to get business from Central Asia. Nor can it convince China to relocate its industry here for export westward, or start importing oil through Gwadar. Moreover, it won't help address the capacity and power supply issues that constrain trade through the port. Unless the issues containing the potential of Gwadar are addressed, no executive order or marketing plan can make the port city a regional shipping and trade hub.

Published in Dawn, January 12th, 2025

## Broken metropolis

KARACHI, Pakistan's economic juggernaut, is the largest contributor to the nation's tax revenue. The Federal Board of Revenue's latest data reveals that Karachi's Large Tax Office accounted for 30.74 per cent of the total tax collection during 2023-24, generating a staggering Rs2,522 billion. Despite this, the metropolis is a picture of neglect, suffering from chronic infrastructural decay and a lack of basic amenities. The state of Karachi's roads is a case in point. They resemble war zones, with crater-sized potholes even on major thoroughfares, turning daily commutes into

hazardous ventures. Meanwhile, public transport remains grossly inadequate for a city of over 20 million people. Residents are forced to rely on private transport, exacerbating traffic congestion and air pollution. The Green Line BRT, while operational, barely scratches the surface of the city's mass-transit needs.

The energy crisis compounds Karachi's woes. Gas shortages and persistent electricity loadshedding disrupt daily life, affecting households and industries alike. It's ironic that the city that drives Pakistan's economy is left grappling with such crippling power outages. Water scarcity is yet another pressing issue. The majority of Karachi's residents are deprived of access to clean and sufficient water, relying on private water tankers at exorbitant rates. This basic human necessity has turned into a lucrative black market, further burdening citizens. Despite Karachi's unparalleled contribution to the national exchequer, it continues to languish without adequate investment in its infrastructure and services. This neglect is not just unfair but counterproductive, as a deteriorating Karachi threatens to undermine the very economy it bolsters. The federal and provincial governments must urgently prioritise Karachi's development. A city that gives so much deserves better roads, reliable utilities, and efficient public services. Investing in Karachi is not just about fairness; it is essential for Pakistan's future growth and prosperity. Anything less would be a betrayal of its citizens and economic self-sabotage.

Published in Dawn, January 12th, 2025

## Odious trade

WHEN home feels like a sinking ship, people are forced to make ill-fated journeys for a better life. Last month, numerous Pakistanis died in yet another Greek boat tragedy. According to the US State Department's 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report, the Pakistani authorities fell far short of meeting minimum criteria in several important areas. For a country viewed as a human trafficking hub, the absence of an official database of victims and trafficking rings, coupled with the inability to ensure efficient investigation, expedient prosecution and conviction of traffickers, is not only alarming, it also fuels unbridled exploitation. In this bleak scenario, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's orders to take severe legal action against the human trafficking mafia, including the confiscation of their assets, are encouraging. But as necessary as it is to clamp down on trafficking networks who prey on poverty and desperation, it is equally crucial to reflect on the circumstances that compel citizens to risk their lives.

The vast and multilayered crime of human trafficking requires a wider, pre-emptive and result-driven strategy from the government. Battling complicit officials and powerful interests tops the list of major challenges — an insurmountable reality without unrelenting political commitment. Moreover, as influential perpetrators get away with the imposition of fines instead of incarceration, the on-ground enforcement of the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018

remains insignificant, rendering it ineffective as a deterrent. Eradicating human trafficking is one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. But estimates show that traffickers dupe thousands of Pakistanis every year due to acute poverty, lack of education, unemployment and violence. Hence, the prime minister's call for technical training is a long shot because urgent financial support is any household's priority. Besides, eliminating human traffickers begins with a toughened legal system and a security apparatus empowered enough to withstand political pressure. An invisible side of the odious practice is the growing web of digital trafficking — in 2023, reportedly, online syndicates made up to \$37bn from targets across East and Southeast Asia. A UN report in October revealed that online gangs use AI as a weapon of deception. Pakistan's anti-trafficking measures depend on the speed with which its fractured digital space is restored so that digital slavery rackets, and fraudulent charity enterprises, are successfully thwarted. In short, we must fight fire with fire.

Published in Dawn, January 13th, 2025

## Treasure of the Indus

THE Indus dolphin, or bulhan as it is known locally, is a remarkable species found only in the Indus River. Unlike other dolphins, it is functionally blind, but has sophisticated sonar capabilities to navigate and hunt in our murky river waters. Its distinctive side-swimming and remarkable adaptations make it invaluable for scientific study and a critical indicator of river ecosystem health. Unfortunately, with a population of approximately 1,960, the bulhan remains critically endangered. Organisations like WWF-Pakistan and community volunteers have made significant strides in reversing its decline. Awareness campaigns have curbed harmful practices, such as killing dolphins for oil, and promoted dolphin-safe fishing. Volunteers also educate local communities on alternative livelihoods, such as kitchen gardening, to reduce dependence on fishing.

Current conservation efforts rely heavily on foreign NGOs, an unsustainable model that sidesteps state responsibility. The federal and provincial governments must take the lead. They must allocate dedicated funding, support research, and create permanent positions for local conservation officers rather than depending on volunteers. The private sector should pitch in with corporate social responsibility programmes focused on river conservation and eco-tourism development. These programmes can be incentivised by the government through tax benefits. For their part, communities along the Indus must participate in citizen science programmes to monitor dolphin populations and maintain riverbank habitats. Moreover, educational institutions should integrate river ecosystem studies into their curricula. This means not just textbook learning but hands-on field visits to the Indus, where students can participate in dolphin monitoring, understand river health indicators, and learn practical conservation techniques. Most



crucially, Pakistan must develop its own cadre of marine biologists and conservation experts through specialised university programmes and research grants. The Indus dolphin isn't merely a species to preserve — it's a symbol of our ecological heritage. Its survival depends on collective action. We must come together to secure the future of this irreplaceable treasure of the Indus.

Published in Dawn, January 13th, 2025

## Anything goes

IT seems that the dark days of the freewheeling internet have returned.

Two of the largest global social media companies have already abandoned important efforts and initiatives aimed at moderating speech on their platforms in a sign of their capitulation to alt-right mega-influencers and their war on 'woke media'.

The backsliding seems to have started when multi-billionaire Elon Musk bought out Twitter in 2022, seemingly with an eye on leveraging its reach to influence the 2024 American presidential election. As part of his plan to remake the platform in his own image, part of which was to rename it 'X', Musk has gradually removed restrictions for accounts violating various platform policies, especially on racial, gender and religious equality. X has resultantly turned into a toxic cesspool of hate.

It may be recalled that US president-elect Donald Trump was barred from Twitter, Facebook and multiple other platforms following the brazen attack on the United States Capitol in January 2021. Now, with Mr Trump about to make a defiant re-entry into the most powerful office in the world, those tech companies seem to be scrambling to get back on his good side.

The new 'X', under Mr Musk, has already proven its loyalties by pushing Mr Trump's campaign and getting him elected. This has earned it enough favour that Mr Musk has even been invited to join the new government. Meta now seems eager to catch up: it has announced that it is abandoning third-party fact-checking initiatives and easing moderation of sensitive topics because its founder believes Mr Trump's election has signalled a "cultural tipping point" towards free speech over moderation.

There have been enough signs of what the future holds: on X, Mr Musk has, in recent weeks, led repeated attacks on immigrants, Muslims and British Pakistanis, using abhorrent crimes like child grooming and sexual violence to paint a highly offensive picture of these groups for millions of his followers. It seems that this trend will now spread on other social media platforms as well.

No matter how it is being window-dressed, the "cultural tipping point" in fact seems to be dangerously tilted towards out-and-out xenophobia endorsed by powerful moguls in America's Silicon Valley.

Mainstream media, which has been relentlessly abused and discredited by the self-appointed shepherds of the social media masses, will need to resist going the same way merely to protect its interests. Indeed, we are now entering a period where responsible journalism and adherence to factual reporting will be critical in keeping the world sane as social media companies abdicate their responsibility and cosy up to the new regime.

Mainstream media must step up and embrace the responsibility of shaping global discourse, especially around flashpoint issues, in ways that prevent or at least limit harm to the alt-right's targets.

Published in Dawn, January 13th, 2025

## Left behind

FOR a country that produced the world's youngest Nobel laureate for championing girls' education, Pakistan's statistics make for tragic reading.

Some 22.8m children are out of school — roughly equal to the entire population of Sri Lanka — and the female literacy rate languishes at 49pc. Last week's International Conference on Girls' Education in Muslim Communities in Islamabad laid bare these truths, though solutions remained elusive. The gathering had a notable absentee. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan, where girls are banned from secondary education, declined to attend. This was not surprising: its interpretation of religion appears mediaeval; even Muslim societies of yore valued learning more highly than today's Taliban do.

Pakistan's own educational woes, while not so extreme, are scarcely less worrying. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's declaration of an "education emergency" joins a long list of similar pronouncements that have produced more hot air than actual learning. We spend a paltry 2.5pc of GDP on education, well below the Unesco-recommended 4pc. In contrast, Malaysia and Turkey, fellow Muslim-majority nations, boast female literacy rates of above 90pc. Bangladesh has surged ahead with over 70pc of its women able to read and write. The economics of ignorance are stark.

In an era where AI and quantum computing dominate conversations about the future, Pakistan's tech sector remains stunted thanks to its educational shortcomings. The World Economic Forum ranks the country near the bottom in educational attainment and economic participation — a double whammy that threatens to leave us behind in the global knowledge economy.

Some bright spots exist. The Danish schools initiative in Punjab, which provides quality education in underdeveloped rural areas, shows what targeted intervention can achieve. The newly established Pakistan Education Endowment Fund aims to support children from low-income families in higher education. But such initiatives are few. The conference concluded with the

signing of the Islamabad Declaration, a 17-point document that recognises girls' education as both a "religious obligation" and a social necessity. The declaration will be presented to the UN Security Council, though cynics might wonder whether it will join the growing pile of well-intentioned but ineffective international commitments.

Malala Yousafzai, who attended the conference, put it bluntly: 12.5m Pakistani girls remain out of school. Ms Yousafzai, who survived a TTP assassination attempt in 2012 for advocating girls' education, is a powerful symbol of both Pakistan's educational challenges and its potential. But symbols alone cannot teach children to read.

The path forward is clear: substantially increase education spending, dismantle cultural barriers to girls' education, and transform declarations into concrete action. Until then, Pakistan risks condemning another generation to ignorance — and itself to economic irrelevance in an increasingly knowledge-based world.

Published in Dawn, January 14th, 2025

## Mining tragedies

TWO recent deadly mining tragedies in Balochistan have once again exposed the hazardous nature of work in this sector, and the lack of safety protocols for miners. Two workers have been confirmed dead after a coalmine collapsed in Harnai on Sunday, while 11 bodies have been recovered from a mine in Sanjdi near Quetta. The labourers were trapped thousands of feet underground in the latter incident when a methane gas explosion occurred on Jan 9. While the mining sector can bring significant riches to owners, the lives of those who toil underground doing back-breaking work appear to come cheap. Last year, too, we saw a number of fatal incidents, mostly in Balochistan; 12 miners perished in a gas explosion in Harnai in the deadliest accident. Each time such tragic incidents occur, the state promises to look into the matter. Even after the latest incidents, the provincial mines and minerals department has promised an inquiry. If past precedent is any guide, these unfortunate episodes will soon be forgotten, and the colliers, who live a hand-to-mouth existence, will continue to risk their lives in the mines.

It does not have to be this way. In fact, Pakistan's mining sector could benefit if workers were protected by adequate safety protocols and compensated well for their work, and received adequate compensation in case of injury or accident. The Pakistan Central Mines Labour Federation has demanded all of these. It has called for ratification of ILO-C 176 — the Safety and Health in Mines Convention, 1995 — as well as awareness programmes focusing on workers' safety. Activists add that the state has failed to enforce the relevant regulations. Moreover, the IndustriALL Global Union says Pakistan's workers lack health facilities and medical care in the vicinity of mines. If these facilities were made available at the mining sites, many lives could

possibly be saved if affected workers were administered immediate medical care. But sadly, greedy owners and a callous state care little for these toilers. This attitude must change; those mine owners found to be cutting corners in implementing safety standards must be penalised while the state should ratify ILO-C 176 to signal that it values the health and safety of miners. There is no doubt that mining is a dangerous profession, but attempts could be made to minimise the hazards.

Published in Dawn, January 14th, 2025

## Winter sports

FOR a country with huge winter sports potential, events in Pakistan are few and far between. Therefore, the start of the seventh season of the Karakoram Winterlude is welcome. It shows that the organisers have done well to keep interest afloat and promote new talent. Ice hockey on the frozen Altit pool in Hunza draws a huge crowd and it was heartening to see corporates getting involved in the opening match as Allied Bank and HBL clashed. At a time when many corporates have downsized or closed down their sports wings, this is a positive sign. However, that is where it all ends. For a country blessed with three of the world's most famous mountain ranges and areas where there is snow almost the whole year, Pakistan has produced precious few Winter Olympians. Only three skiers, namely Mohammad Abbas, Mohammad Karim and Syed Human, have represented Pakistan at the top winter sports event. Ice hockey's popularity is growing, but not much is being done to promote the sport. Similar is the case with snowboarding, which is popular among residents in the north. For now, only local talent participates in sports festivals to prove their mettle.

Last week, the Pakistan Winter Sports Federation announced its annual calendar, which features just one snowboarding championship. There is nothing for ice hockey while ski events dominate. Once again, skiers will lead Pakistan's participation at the Asian Winter Games in China next month, with Karim taking part in the alpine skiing event and Mohammad Shabbir in cross-country skiing. Other winter sports are lagging behind. There is plenty of talent but very little has been done to hone it to allow superior athletes to emerge and compete against the very best in the world. Winter sports athletes need not only specialised training but also the best equipment. If the government can provide a framework to ensure their availability, Pakistan can realise its winter sports potential.

Published in Dawn, January 14th, 2025

## Missing justice

IT has taken a tour of Pakistan's provinces for Chief Justice Yahya Afridi to be "jolted" by the crisis of enforced disappearances. The issue has long been an open wound in Pakistan's body politic, one that successive chief justices have observed with varying degrees of concern but insufficient action.

The CJP told reporters that complaints from bar associations across the country have "disturbed" him but that it is imperative to also "hear the other side". However, these cases have languished in various courts for years. Why has the judiciary not been more proactive in addressing them?

Chief Justice Afridi's position that such cases fall under the high courts' jurisdiction per Article 199 of the Constitution, while technically correct, risks becoming another bureaucratic shield behind which justice can continue to be delayed. The Supreme Court's apparent reluctance to "interfere" with subordinate judiciary must not result in it abdicating its role as the ultimate guardian of fundamental rights. The mathematics of delay is simple but devastating.

Each day a person remains missing represents 24 hours of anguish for their families, who are left to navigate a labyrinthine legal system that seems designed to exhaust rather than deliver justice. The high courts, already burdened with backlogged cases, have treated these cases as routine litigation rather than the human rights emergencies they are.

While the CJP's broader vision for judicial reform — including plans for financial aid to underprivileged litigants and the professional development of district judges — is commendable, it should not distract from the immediate need to address enforced disappearances. The comparison of the SC to the Titanic, requiring time to change course, is unfortunate given how long the court has had to adjust its heading on this issue. The judiciary must recognise that its institutional credibility is intrinsically linked to its handling of missing persons cases.

Each delay not only denies justice to the affected families but also erodes public faith in the legal system. If the high courts are indeed the appropriate forum for these cases, then the SC must at least ensure they are heard with the urgency they deserve. What Pakistan needs now is not merely acknowledgment of the problem but a clear timeline for addressing it.

The 'jolt' should translate into concrete directives to high courts to expedite these cases, with regular monitoring of progress. The time for careful deliberation has long passed — what is needed now is swift action to ensure that Pakistan's missing persons are either produced before the courts or their fate explained to their families. Anything less would represent a continued failure of justice and a tacit acceptance of practices that have no place in a democratic society.

Published in Dawn, January 15th, 2025

## Racist talk

WHEN racist tropes are amplified by the expansive reach of social media, the affected communities face real-world danger. That is why it is important to address the narrative — being pushed principally by X owner Elon Musk — seeking to vilify British-Pakistanis over the UK's past child grooming scandal. The crimes of those involved are indefensible and they must face justice; however, this does not mean that dark forces should be allowed to exploit this tragedy, and malign whole communities. In this respect, the Foreign Office has condemned the “racist and Islamophobic” narratives in the UK, while calling out efforts to demonise the “large and diverse” British-Pakistani community. Though the crimes in question date back to 2008, Mr Musk has of recent chosen to dredge up the Rochdale case and go after ‘Pakistani grooming gangs’, while accusing Labour — including the current British prime minister — of covering up the matter as British-Pakistanis form a major voting bloc for the party. The Conservatives and the British far right, have jumped onto the Musk bandwagon, bringing the grooming issue back into the spotlight.

Of course, in the face of spin doctoring, facts are of little value. While most of the perpetrators of the Rochdale atrocity were indeed British-Pakistanis, a 2020 UK Home Office study said that “group-based child sexual exploitation offenders are most commonly white”. Yet those looking to target Muslims or Pakistanis cherry-pick information, or manufacture alternative ‘facts’ to suit their dangerous agendas. For example, after three little girls were brutally murdered in the British town of Southport, disinformation was spread that the perpetrator was a Muslim migrant. Though patently false, this rumour led to intense anti-Muslim rioting. According to one researcher, posts suggesting that the crime was carried out by a Muslim or a migrant received 27m impressions. It is particularly dangerous when a man with obscene wealth — and running one of the world's largest social media firms — chooses to amplify hateful and divisive rhetoric. It should be remembered that similar propaganda was used by the Nazis to justify the extermination of Europe's Jews. Therefore, progressive forces must counter this hateful campaign of the far right and big tech with solidarity and the truth. Those involved in wrongdoing should face the law regardless of their ethnic origin or religious background. But whole communities cannot be vilified.

Published in Dawn, January 15th, 2025

## Faceless customs

THE launch of the faceless customs assessment system as part of the government's Tax Transformation Plan is a significant reform that makes use of technology to maintain anonymity in the customs process to determine taxes on import shipments. The initiative was launched last month at the Karachi port, which handles the bulk of imports before their transportation to the rest of the country. The system in Karachi is set to become fully functional from next month. In the interim, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif wants the initiative to be extended to other upcountry ports and border stations to streamline imports. Under the project, customs appraisal functions would be relocated outside the customs collectorates.

Under the initiative, a goods declaration or bill of entry submitted by an importer or his agent is randomly assigned to an assessing officer, who is physically located at a customs station, which is not the port of import in the automated system, for appraisal of duties and taxes. Thus, it separates the assessment process from the physical location of the port through the use of technology. In this way, it also delinks the goods' clearance procedure from the geographical location where the goods are available for examination, increasing transparency in tax assessment. The introduction of faceless customs assessment is expected to usher in a significant change in the overall working of the customs department and facilitate trade by reducing the goods' clearance time, besides improving efficiency and transparency. Other advantages include reduced discretion for customs officials in appraising import duties and taxes, and fewer chances of corruption and tax evasion by ending collusion between officials and importers/ agents. The results so far are said to be encouraging, and underscore how digitisation and technology to reduce human interventions can help the government plug tax evasion and under-invoicing of imports to boost its revenues.

Published in Dawn, January 15th, 2025

## Peshawar meeting

THE message from politicians regarding Afghanistan is clear: the state needs to talk to the Afghan Taliban, using all channels available.

This was the core point that emerged after representatives of several mainstream and religious parties met the army chief in Peshawar earlier this week.

Those familiar with the lengthy discussions told this paper that the parties wanted engagement with Kabul, whether formal or informal. For his part, Gen Asim Munir observed that the Afghan Taliban "don't listen to us".

State media also quoted him as saying that while Pakistan wanted good relations with Afghanistan, the presence of the banned TTP on Afghan soil, as well as cross-border attacks emanating from that country, were the key hindrances in the way of cordial ties.

These developments more or less encapsulate the Afghan conundrum for Pakistan, which has tried both the diplomatic route and force to get the message across to Kabul; neither strategy has obtained lasting results.

However, while Pakistan must defend its frontiers against all hostile actors, the political forces have a point when they say that negotiations with the Taliban must not be abandoned. Some suggested “other ways for engagement”.

Those that have put the suggestion on the table should brief parliament and the Foreign Office on how we can proceed through alternative channels.

Pakistan has every reason to be concerned about TTP terrorism originating from Afghanistan. The last year was a bloody one for Pakistan; most of the attacks are believed to have been the handiwork of the TTP.

Therefore, the matter needs to be taken up repeatedly with Kabul until the threat of terrorist violence abates. Simultaneously, Pakistan must improve its own counterterrorism capabilities so that malevolent actors — both internal and external — are not able to threaten its security.

If the Afghan Taliban are not listening, Pakistan can try giving them incentives to cooperate.

This can include easing regulations with regard to people-to-people contact, particularly medical facilities, as well as removing barriers to the Afghan transit trade. In return, Pakistan must demand that the TTP and all other terrorist groups not be allowed to operate from Afghan soil, and that there is no more cross-border infiltration.

Dealing with the Afghan Taliban is necessary not only for Pakistan’s internal stability but also to ensure that Afghanistan is not isolated regionally.

Recently, the Taliban foreign minister met the Indian foreign secretary. Kabul is free to establish relations with whosoever it wishes; but Pakistan would be making a mistake if it severs ties with the Afghan Taliban, which would allow unfriendly states to strengthen their presence in Afghanistan.

Therefore, while Pakistan must continue to reiterate its concerns regarding terrorism, skilful diplomacy is required to ensure that ties with Kabul do not break down.

Published in Dawn, January 16th, 2025



## Cyber circus

PAKISTAN'S cybercrime-fighting apparatus is proving rather good at harassing journalists and remarkably poor at catching actual criminals. With a conviction rate hovering below 5pc, the digital enforcers have mastered the art of making noise while achieving little. The numbers tell a sorry tale. Of the 7,020 people arrested on cybercrime charges since 2020, only 222 have been convicted. Meanwhile, the authorities have shown more enthusiasm for deploying the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act against 'troublesome' journalists and activists. The law has become less a shield against cybercrime and more a sword against dissent. The government's approach to institutional architecture has been equally hapless. In May 2024, it established the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency with great fanfare. Seven months later, the agency had been shuttered, its responsibilities shuffled back to the FIA's cybercrime wing. Such institutional musical chairs hardly inspires confidence. Rather, it wastes resources on administrative restructuring and leaves cybercrime investigators perpetually readjusting to new reporting hierarchies.

The statistics are particularly damning given Pakistan's digital footprint. With 143m internet subscribers, one might expect more than 160,000 annual cybercrime complaints. The FIA's own spokesperson admits the number should exceed 200,000. The gap suggests not a dearth of crime but a lack of faith in the system. Recent 'reforms' appear more cosmetic than substantive. Police stations can now register cybercrime cases, and some even boast dedicated cyber desks. But without proper training, resources, or technical expertise, these amount to little more than digital suggestion boxes. The real work of fighting cybercrime — investigating banking fraud, thwarting ransomware attacks, and prosecuting data breaches — demands sophisticated digital forensics, trained prosecutors, and clear jurisdictional protocols. Pakistan has none of these in adequate measure. The government's priorities appear particularly misplaced given the sophistication of modern cybercrime. While the authorities busy themselves with social media posts, organised criminal groups are making hay. The conviction statistics suggest they are doing so with relative impunity. If Pakistan wishes to be taken seriously as a digital economy, it must first demonstrate it can police its digital streets. That means less emphasis on controlling online discourse and more on protecting citizens from genuine cyberthreats. At present, it is doing neither particularly well.

Published in Dawn, January 16th, 2025

## Anti-abuse action

IN what is a social minefield for women, the Punjab police investigation department's decision to deploy 1,450 trained personnel for the Special Sexual Offences Investigation Units in the province — established under Section 9 of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 — is reassuring.

Punjab has thrown up distressing statistics for long: a report from the Sustainable Social Development Organisation in 2023 showed that 10,201 cases of violence against women were registered in Punjab alone. Most cases go unreported. In addition to patriarchal societal structures, judicial and institutional apathy, apparent in attitudes and judgements, keeps conviction rates low, prevents reforms in the criminal justice system, and impedes the enforcement of progressive legislation, leaving victims without justice. In fact, the Lahore High Court chief justice recently observed that the failure to implement the anti-rape law allows the accused to go unpunished, and the volume of rape cases now exceeds that of murder cases.

Sexual crimes lead to physical and mental dehumanisation. As the law also stipulates more efficient legal procedures, the authorities should not delay introducing limited-duration trials in special courts for sexual offences. Moreover, many challenges, such as poor resources, pending cases, insensitivity towards a survivor, and the lack of identity protection, contribute to protracted rape trials and distrust in the system. Empathy among officers, rape crises centres with helplines, and a fast-track legal system for women and girls are warranted across Pakistan. The Anti-Rape Act did bring about significant amendments in our regressive system for the safety and support of survivors. Hence, in addition to these measures, arresting the ecosystem around rape, which is pitted against the victim, is equally necessary. The government must comply with the UNFPA's support for 'life-skills-based education' as a prevention method, and advocate bodily autonomy and positive values for youngsters to recognise and forge wholesome relationships.

Published in Dawn, January 16th, 2025

## Never again

AFTER 15 long months, Israel's genocide in Gaza has been put on hold. Whether this will lead to a permanent end to hostilities in the occupied Palestinian territories is anyone's guess. But for the time being, the battered people of Gaza can mourn their dead — over 46,000 of them, and more likely buried under the rubble — without the threat of Israeli bombs falling on them, and tend to their wounded.

The three-stage ceasefire deal reached on Wednesday, overseen by Qatar, Egypt and the US, envisions an exchange of prisoners between Hamas and Israel, as well as the provision of aid to Gaza's people, and an eventual Israeli withdrawal from the Strip, among other points. Much will depend on Tel Aviv's sincerity towards honouring the deal. Even after the truce — which takes effect on Sunday — was announced, Israel continued its killing spree in Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had earlier boasted that the fight would continue till the destruction of Hamas. That obviously did not come to pass; instead, Tel Aviv has signed a truce with the Palestinian armed group. This shows that even the world's best-equipped

militaries, armed with advanced American weaponry, cannot break the will of an occupied people, who have sacrificed thousands of lives, but have refused to give up their land.

While it is hoped that the peace deal matures into a permanent ceasefire, and the people of Gaza are provided urgent succour, the world must not forget what Israel has done in this tiny coastal Strip. The thousands of deaths; the reports of rape and abuse of prisoners; the babies freezing to death, a population starved and denied access to clean water — all these war crimes must be thoroughly investigated, and the criminals brought to book. The war crimes proceedings at the ICC, and South Africa's genocide case at the ICJ, must be brought to their logical conclusion so that Israel is never again able to commit these monstrous crimes against the Palestinian people

Regarding the 'day after' the war, many plans are being proffered, but the only long-term solution to the Palestine question is a viable and independent Palestinian state. For this to happen, Israel must vacate all occupied Palestinian territories, and agree to a contiguous Arab state capable of supporting itself. Palestinian Bantustans, surrounded by Israel and vulnerable to its barbaric onslaughts, will not solve the problem. The Gaza genocide has also revealed the utter helplessness of the Palestinian Authority in projecting Palestine's case globally.

All Palestinian factions — principally the PLO and Hamas — will have to put up a united front, and face the occupation with solidarity. If Israel goes back to its murderous ways, shielded by its close friends in Washington, the Palestinians will have no choice but to resist.

Published in Dawn, January 17th, 2025

## World Bank loan

THAT the World Bank will give \$20bn to Pakistan in the next 10 years to address some of the country's most acute development challenges, including but not limited to stunting, learning poverty, climate change, and a collapsing energy sector, is a promising development for our struggling economy. The funding, says the bank, "aims to support inclusive and sustainable development through a strong focus on building human capital; fostering durable private sector growth; and building economic, social and environmental resilience in the country". However, the lending, which includes \$14bn in concessional debt, will start from next year and likely depend on the execution of the IMF-mandated reforms to correct structural imbalances in the economy.

The promised loan is part of the multilateral lender's Country Partnership Framework, a document that sees the growing militant violence in Balochistan and KP as a major risk to investment under this package in the targeted areas of the economy in those provinces. The bank may not have directly mentioned unresolved political tensions as a risk to the execution and outcomes of its future interventions in the country in so many words, but does appear concerned about it. "The economy has been subject to successive boom-and-bust cycles driven by structural

imbalances and unsustainable fiscal policies, which invariably resulted in ... short-lived reform episodes. The most recent [reform] cycle was exacerbated by political instability... ." the CPF document reads. The new funding package is a major opportunity for Pakistan to "durably take another course" and catch up with its peers in key development metrics by investing in health, education, water and sanitation, and other public services. Nevertheless, success in this endeavour will depend on removal of the causes of low investment and growth: shifting macroeconomic policies fuelled by a volatile polity, a complex and inconsistent business environment, and distortive trade and investment policies that benefit few and limit productivity and exports. The question is, do our politicians and policymakers have the will and patience to undertake the required reforms? Pakistanis have suffered a lot in the last few years and paid a huge price for the failures of our ruling elite. Failure to build on the hard-won, and still fragile economic stability will mean that despite going through long and harsh economic measures, the people would have suffered for nothing.

Published in Dawn, January 17th, 2025

## India's dangerous game

THE latest inflammatory remarks by India's military brass about Pakistan mark a troubling departure from the professional restraint expected of senior defence officials. Gen Upendra Dwivedi's labelling of Pakistan as an "epicentre of terrorism" and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's thinly veiled threats regarding Kashmir suggest a worrying politicisation of India's armed forces. The timing is particularly awkward. Just as Western media uncovers India's hand in assassination plots against Sikh activists in North America, and the Washington Post details a systematic campaign of extrajudicial killings on Pakistani soil, New Delhi's military leadership launches into theatrical accusations. It is rather like a burglar crying theft while clutching a stolen wallet.

One can only describe these outbursts as attempts to deflect attention from India's brutal oppression in occupied Kashmir. The defence minister's claim that "Jammu and Kashmir is incomplete" without what he calls "PoK" not only dismisses UNSC resolutions but also reveals India's expansionist mindset. Meanwhile, the presence of Kulbhushan Jadhav — a serving Indian military officer caught red-handed orchestrating terrorism within Pakistan — is proof of India's deceit. As the Foreign Office notes, India must address its own documented involvement in orchestrating targeted assassinations before levelling accusations at others. The world response has been telling. Western nations, hesitant to criticise India, find themselves increasingly uncomfortable with New Delhi's aggressive posturing and covert operations. The exposure of India's transnational assassination programme has stripped away the veneer of respectability it cultivated. Such politically motivated statements from India's military leadership not only undermine professional conduct but also pose a serious threat to regional stability. For the sake

of peace in South Asia, India's generals would do well to stay away from engaging in provocative rhetoric. The path to regional stability lies through dialogue and respect for international law, not dangerous sabre-rattling and unwarranted accusations.

Published in Dawn, January 17th, 2025

## Al Qadir ruling

THIS was, perhaps, the only case in which there seemed to be ostensible malfeasance involved. Alas, the way the Al Qadir Trust case was conducted, and the delays in pronouncing the verdict have cast a shadow over it, and one wonders whether the matter is as closed as the PTI's critics would have one believe.

It may be recalled that a substantial sum of money, originally seized by the UK's National Crime Agency on suspicion that it was "derived from bribery and corruption in a foreign country", was repatriated to Pakistan in 2019 under a settlement between the NCA and property tycoon Malik Riaz. Instead of being put directly to public use, this money was diverted by the PTI government to settle payments owed by Mr Riaz's Bahria Town to the Supreme Court.

The most obvious question that arose was how could money seized from an individual on suspicion that it was dirty be used to benefit that same individual in a different case.

Following this settlement, Mr Riaz donated a sizable tract of land for the creation of Al Qadir University, to be run by a trust overseen by Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi. Many observers found another reason to believe there was quid pro quo involved in Mr Khan's decision, as prime minister, to divert the NCA's repatriated funds to the Supreme Court's accounts and Mr Riaz's contemporaneous decision to fund a major project thought to be close to the PM's wife.

The accountability court, which heard the case since last February, has now sentenced Mr Khan and his wife to 14 and seven years, respectively, for corruption.

Mr Khan and his supporters have asked how the two could be convicted if they did not and could not derive any material benefit from the Al Qadir Trust.

However, this seems to deflect from the fact that the former PM knowingly got himself involved with an individual accused of shady business dealings and walked away with something, no matter how intangible, for himself and his wife.

Despite the accountability court judge's decision to convict the former PM and his spouse, there are many questions that remain unanswered, such as what agreement the then government entered into with the UK's NCA regarding the funds it was to receive.

It is said the details of this arrangement are only known to Mirza Shahzad Akbar, former special assistant to the PM on accountability, who has remained absconding from the case.

Without it, the finding of guilt may be on shaky grounds. With the announcement of the verdict, the PTI legal team now has recourse to the high courts and will seek to challenge the decision.

For now, the former PM's battles continue, both within the legal system and without.

## Atlantic tragedy

AS reports emerge of another migrant boat sinking — this time in the Atlantic off the coast of Western Sahara — a fresh approach to the crisis must be urged to prevent more lives from being snuffed out in distant waters.

The boat set sail earlier this month from Mauritania and was reportedly headed to the Spanish Canary Islands. It remained adrift for nearly two weeks. Most of the passengers on board were Pakistani and at least 44 are believed to have perished.

This is the second such incident after a vessel capsized off the Greek coast last month, which reportedly left scores of Pakistanis dead, while a shipwreck in the Mediterranean waters in 2023 claimed 262 Pakistani lives.

Following the December tragedy, the state sprang into action, rounding up human smugglers. But far more sustained action is needed to stop this illegal racket, while the only long-term solution lies in addressing the root causes of illegal migration: financial misery and a lack of economic opportunities at home.

According to the International Organisation for Migration, migrant arrivals from Pakistan in Europe have surged since 2023, with economic and political uncertainty fuelling the trend. The IOM says that nearly half of the migrants leaving Pakistan are men aged between 25 and 34; the vast majority hail from central Punjab.

Many migrants are choosing the North African route through Libya and Egypt. From here, they risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean or the Atlantic in rickety vessels in search of a European El Dorado. But, instead of fulfilling their dreams, many of them meet a terrifying end in the sea, or are tortured at the hands of the smugglers.

Dismantling the wide network of human smuggling and trafficking gangs that operate across borders is a challenge but Pakistan must smash these rackets, while officials who facilitate this odious trade must face the law. Better coordination with foreign LEAs is also important.

Moreover, as the IOM suggests, awareness must be created in districts with high rates of illegal migration, by “targeting tech-savvy youth”. These young men must be convinced that their risky journeys are not worth it.

Unfortunately, in their desperation, they are unlikely to heed such advice, unless the state shows that it is serious about creating job opportunities for them to live a life of dignity on their own soil.

## Cheap promises?

TALK is cheap. Can electricity also be? The government has recently announced that Pakistan will benefit from the lowest electricity tariff in this geographical neighbourhood within the next few months.

Several measures have been and are being taken towards this end, the most prominent among which is the cancellation and renegotiation of old contracts with IPPs, appointments of fresh, ‘non-political’ boards to run power companies, and anti-theft campaigns to nab miscreants and defaulters.

The spiralling circular debt seems to have been arrested and even modestly reversed, and losses posted by distribution companies have shrunk in the first five months of the ongoing fiscal year. These are, undoubtedly, good signs. However, fixing the country’s messy power woes sustainably requires an iron will and an ability to walk the tightrope while making tough decisions.

The government has been under pressure from certain quarters to push for an extension to the deadline to cut gas supply to captive power plants by the end of January, agreed to with the IMF under the conditions of its bailout programme for Pakistan. The government had previously consented to the measure but then realised it would create new problems for connected stakeholders.

Be that as it may, Islamabad’s inability to show consistency and adhere to agreed terms creates doubts regarding its capacity for long-term reforms. Every time it changes its stance, the government signals that, firstly, it is not confident about its policies, and, secondly, its decisions are not engineered to deliver long-term solutions. This lack of consistency is also what encourages lobbyists and special interest groups to continue attempting to derail reforms that affect their interests.

The promise of the cheapest electricity tariff in the region is a welcome one, especially for Pakistan’s inflation-weary masses. However, if it is to be achieved, the government will need to stay the course, make bitter choices, and take responsibility for its decisions.

Published in Dawn, January 18th, 2025

## Kurram conundrum

THE validity of the claim by state functionaries that the violence in KP's Kurram district stems from a 'tribal dispute' has been severely put to the test by recent events.

After an attack on a convoy in the Bagan area on Thursday led to the loss of security personnel, a counterterrorism operation seems imminent, and the state has prepared plans to shift civilians to safer areas. While tribal disputes over land and water have played a key role in exacerbating tensions in Kurram, the fact is that sectarian groups and terrorist outfits have exploited these differences to establish footholds in the district, as the state has fumbled for responses.

At least two security men were martyred in the convoy attack, which is the second of its kind; an earlier attack had targeted the then Kurram DC, who survived the ambush. In the latest outrage, militants looted the trucks carrying goods to Parachinar, while four drivers have been found dead, with their hands tied and their bodies bearing signs of torture.

Unfortunately, if the state — all institutions, including the centre, the KP government, and the security establishment — had moved with alacrity when violence initially flared up last year, such bloodshed could have been avoided. But it seems that the administration was in denial, letting the Kurram cauldron boil until it was ready to explode, which it certainly has. Now, thousands of people will be displaced as the security forces go after militants. Besides, matters will be complicated by the fact that the local militants — including those fighters allied with the banned TTP and IS-K — have ideological comrades just across the border in Afghanistan.

Sadly, the state took a slothful approach to addressing the underlying land and water disputes which have fuelled conflict. Moreover, the government displayed great callousness by allowing Parachinar to be blocked off from the rest of the country for months following the deadly targeting of a convoy in Lower Kurram in November. This resulted in a grave humanitarian crisis in Kurram's main town, with children and newborns particularly affected due to lack of food and medicine.

But the state took its time to address the 'tribal dispute'. Even the peace pact hammered out by a jirga on Jan 1 has failed to stem the violence, as the recent convoy attacks show, and now a CT operation is being seen as the last resort. If terrorists and sectarian groups — regardless of their confessional affiliations — had been neutralised earlier, we would not be at this juncture today.

Furthermore, the blockade of any region even for a single day should not have been tolerated by the state. The days ahead will tell whether the government succeeds in bringing peace to this forsaken area.

Published in Dawn, January 19th, 2025



## EV policy

IT is pleasantly surprising that the authorities are moving with such purpose to potentially revolutionise transportation. Over the past few days, the government has announced a 45pc cut in the tariff for electric charging stations, quicker permissions for businesses looking to set up charging and battery-swapping facilities, and assistance in arranging green energy loans for owners of two- and three-wheelers to purchase batteries. On Thursday, Power Minister Awais Ahmad Khan Leghari also approached French ambassador Nicolas Galey with a proposal seeking support for transitioning small vehicles to electric technology. Previously, under its New Energy Vehicle Policy, unveiled in November, the government had announced it wanted 30pc of all vehicles on the roads to be electric by 2030. Under the policy, a subsidy of Rs50,000 for motorcycles and Rs200,000 for rickshaws had been earmarked with a total initial budget of Rs4bn, while the government had targeted the installation of 40 sites along the Karachi to Peshawar Motorway for EV charging stations and 3,000 charging stations nationwide. If these measures are rolled out consistently, cheaper and cleaner transportation could quickly be placed within reach of most Pakistanis, solving not one but three major challenges for the state.

Pakistan shells out about \$6bn in yearly fuel imports while having a surplus installed electricity generation capacity. The latter has become a major burden for the exchequer owing to the capacity payments guaranteed to power generation companies, which raise tariffs if demand is insufficient. By pushing ordinary Pakistanis to adopt electric vehicles for everyday use, the government is aiming to not only reduce its fuel import bill but also to boost electricity demand and dilute the impact of capacity charges. This will have significant benefits for citizens, too: not only will the cost of adopting EVs be subsidised, but the lower announced tariff will also result in savings on fuel. Widespread adoption could also see electricity tariffs decline for everyone as higher electricity consumption dilutes painful capacity payments. There are also environmental benefits. According to government figures, transportation is responsible for 43pc of all airborne emissions in the country, and with major cities suffocating in smog, moving small vehicles to electric technologies will cut down a major source of pollution and allow citizens to breathe easier. Talk about a win-win solution.

Published in Dawn, January 19th, 2025

## Varsity woes

GIVEN that most bureaucrats in our country are not really known for contributions to pedagogical excellence, it seems like a good idea to keep them away from the administration of higher education institutions and let professional academics do the job. This issue has flared up in Sindh in recent days, with teaching staff at public sector universities on strike since Thursday to protest

what they see as an encroachment on the autonomy of their institutions via a proposed change to the Sindh Universities and Institutes Laws Act that will allow non-PhD candidates and bureaucrats to be appointed vice-chancellors of higher learning institutions. Their stance has been endorsed by the Higher Education Commission, whose chairman has criticised the plan as a “retrogressive step which will not only have serious consequences on the academic standards, but would also affect academic freedom and critical thinking”. Clearly, there needs to be reconsideration of its consequences.

Of all the challenges faced by higher education institutions in Sindh it is strange that the provincial government chose to focus its energies on who should oversee their affairs. After all, its concern for the welfare of higher education institutions could have been much better demonstrated by, for example, increasing the size of its budget for the sector and by providing much-needed resources to assist the universities under its purview in competing globally for the pursuit of academic excellence. Instead, while most public universities in the province paint a picture of neglect and general apathy, the Sindh government made it a bigger priority to make it easier to appoint individuals who do not meet commonly held standards for academic rigour to head their administrative affairs. How this will help higher education is difficult to understand. It is no wonder that key stakeholders are up in arms about the proposal. The provincial authorities should heed their concerns.

Published in Dawn, January 19th, 2025

## At breaking point

PAKISTAN’S prisons have become a masterclass in how not to run a correctional system. With facilities bursting at 152pc of their capacity and three-quarters of inmates merely awaiting their day in court, the country’s jails serve as monuments to bureaucratic paralysis rather than justice.

A recent report, Pakistan’s Prison Landscape, tells a compelling story: 102,026 prisoners crammed into spaces designed for 65,811. Karachi Central Prison, operating at an eye-watering 355pc of capacity, resembles a sardine tin more than a correctional facility.

Most troubling is that 74,918 of these inmates are still awaiting trial, caught in the quicksand of a sluggish judicial system that makes Dickens’ Jarndyce v Jarndyce look expeditious.

Pakistan’s lawmakers have only worsened matters. The 2022 amendment to the Control of Narcotics Substances Act, which axed parole and probation options for drug offenders, has achieved precisely what any first-year criminology student could have predicted: a surge in incarcerations.

In Punjab alone, drug-related imprisonments account for nearly 30pc of the prison population.

Behind the prison walls, conditions would make a mediaeval jailer blush. Inmates navigate an obstacle course of unhygienic conditions, dirty water, meagre food, and exploitative labour practices. Family visits and legal consultations are treated as luxury items rather than basic rights.

The solutions are not rocket science. Pakistan must first drag its pre-trial detention system into the 21st century. The practice of tossing people behind bars for minor offences does not make any sense.

A proper bail reform package, paired with readily available legal aid, could thin the crowds considerably. Alternative sentencing desperately needs a seat at the table. Community service programmes — absent from Pakistan's penal menu — could offer a more sensible approach for minor offenders while giving overcrowded cells some breathing room.

The Pakistan Prison Rules of 1978 have aged about as well as telegram in the age of smartphones, and cry out for modernisation across all provinces.

With an incarceration rate of just 40 prisoners per 100,000 population — barely a third of the global median — Pakistan's crisis becomes even more perplexing. This low rate, far from being a success story, masks a troubling reality: a justice system too overwhelmed to process cases effectively, with informal dispute resolution filling the vacuum. That such a modest caseload has still managed to overwhelm the prison system speaks volumes about its structural deficiencies.

The failure to address these issues suggests Pakistan's commitment to justice is weak. An independent oversight mechanism through the National Commission for Human Rights, empowered to conduct surprise inspections and handle prisoner complaints, could shine some much-needed light on these dark corners.

While its prisoners have lost their freedom, a civilised society cannot justify stripping them of their fundamental dignity.

Published in Dawn, January 20th, 2025

## Lower growth

THE IMF has slightly marked down its previous growth forecast for Pakistan's economy from 3.2pc to 3pc for the current fiscal year, underscoring the fragility of the recent stability. Though it has not elaborated on the reasons for the downgrade, its concerns over the erosion of the economy's capacity to support growth are unmistakable. This also shows that the economy is caught up in a low-growth equilibrium in the absence of any significant domestic or foreign stimulus. Almost every international agency expects growth prospects for Pakistan to remain subdued for the next few years. International developments too are adding to risks to growth, even though the forecast for the global economy remains unchanged at 3.3pc in the IMF's latest six-monthly World

Economic Outlook Update. For example, the ongoing slowdown in the eurozone, a major export market for Pakistani goods, is likely to keep our industrial output suppressed. Moreover, the threat by the incoming US president to impose additional tariffs on imports from China, the EU and the rest of the world, has further deepened uncertainty for the global economy, including Pakistan's.

Economic stability without growth should be worrisome for the ruling PML-N, which has recently devised its five-year 'homegrown' economic development programme, Uraan, promising to boost growth to 6pc by the end of its term. But is it worried enough to undertake critical reforms to address the imbalances that always lead us back to the door of the IMF for bailouts and to end our growth drought? Not really. True, the signs of recent macroeconomic stability are encouraging. But that is not enough as any attempt to push the growth accelerator without first implementing structural economic changes will again propel us towards a balance-of-payments crisis. There is a reason why no private foreign investment is coming to Pakistan in spite of promises of billions of dollars from the wealthy Gulf nations. This basically underlines a lack of investor confidence in the country's commitment to reform itself. Besides, the resurgence of militant violence in KP and Balochistan, and unresolved political divisions in the country are keeping investors away. Without heavy private investment in the economy, a growth rate greater than 3pc to 4pc will remain elusive. We are no longer in a position to pull off higher growth rates by encouraging imported consumption with borrowed money.

Published in Dawn, January 20th, 2025

## Nutrition challenge

WHEN a country's children go hungry, its future withers. In Pakistan, where over 40pc of children under five are stunted, nearly 18pc are wasted, and more than half suffer from anaemia, malnutrition threatens to undermine a generation. For a middle-income country with nuclear capabilities and significant agricultural output, such statistics are appalling. Yet amid this troubling landscape, there are glimmers of hope. Recent data from Sindh shows some progress. Infant mortality rates in the province now stand at 2.9pc, below the national average of 5.4pc. The province's public hospitals are achieving mortality rates comparable to private institutions, demonstrating that public healthcare, when properly managed, can deliver satisfactory outcomes. This success stems from Sindh's embrace of public-private partnerships in paediatric care. The establishment of emergency facilities across major cities and telemedicine services in 106 tehsils shows how strategic collaboration can expand healthcare access.

The disparity within territories is striking. Punjab, despite its greater resources, has established only two emergency rooms in Multan and Lahore. Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and other regions have made minimal progress, while KP and Azad Kashmir still lack paediatric emergency facilities.

Sindh's progress highlights the urgent need for similar initiatives across Pakistan. To begin with, Pakistan must address the basic issue of food security, with 7.9m people facing acute food insecurity. The successful public-private partnership model needs replication beyond Sindh's borders. Moreover, there must be greater focus on preventive care and nutrition education, particularly given that only 38pc of infants are exclusively breastfed in their first six months. Granted that the challenges are enormous — and include funding constraints and weak inter-sectoral coordination — but progress is possible with political will and smart partnerships. Pakistan's economic future is in great peril. We can either invest in our children's nutrition now or pay a far heavier price in lost potential and productivity. The clock is ticking.

Published in Dawn, January 20th, 2025

## Trump 2.0

DONALD J. Trump is back in the White House. A hard-fought re-election campaign culminated yesterday in him becoming only the second US president in history to secure non-consecutive terms at the White House.

His inauguration, watched by millions worldwide, marked a stark reversal of fortunes from just four years ago, when a high-profile defeat to Joe Biden had dropped curtains on a first term that featured much turmoil and controversy.

However, the trajectory and force of his political comeback have since demonstrated just how strongly his policies, distilled into slogans like 'America First', continued to resonate with ordinary American voters, who in 2024 handed him for the first time not just the majority of electoral votes but also the popular vote. He made it clear in his inaugural speech yesterday that he intends to deliver on those promises, even if doing so comes at the cost of antagonising the rest of the world.

Few have forgotten how disruptive Mr Trump could be as president. So far, there has been little indication that his second term will be any different. As his first order of business, Mr Trump yesterday vowed to start arresting and deporting illegal immigrants and put a stop to what he has described as the "invasion" of America, which is likely to have far-reaching implications for minority communities in the country. He also spoke about "taking back" the Panama Canal to protect American trade. He announced that he would reverse various environmental policies, especially those that incentivised electric vehicles, and bring back fossil fuels like never before.

On the plus side, he acknowledged that his ultimatum to Israel and Palestine seems to have enforced a long-elusive ceasefire, with both sides quickly suspending their hostilities and exchanging prisoners before he took office. Ukraine may now be on the top of his agenda, and we may soon see an abrupt drawdown of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

Mr Trump yesterday said that he wants to be known globally as a peacemaker, does not want to get involved in conflicts and wars, and made it clear that his number one priority is his own people. That is a worthy position for a president to take.

However, the presence of high-profile xenophobes in his team will remain a concern. Paranoid and unapologetic about their views on race relations, these individuals have already openly supported the far right in Europe and the UK. Their insistence on describing their views as 'freedom of speech' raises fears that xenophobia and bigotry may become normalised and more commonplace. Such narrow worldviews may even dictate the Trump administration's foreign policy.

This is why, though his speech yesterday was almost statesmanlike in some respects, many will continue watching Mr Trump to see whether he has really changed.

Published in Dawn, January 21st, 2025

## GB's status

THE demand raised by the people of Gilgit-Baltistan for constitutional clarity and provisional provincial status is not new. The region's political parties and civil society groups often remind the Pakistani state that they want constitutional reform — as they did at an event in Islamabad last week. At the meeting, representatives of political and religious parties as well as activists pledged to launch a movement to secure constitutional status for the northern region. They called upon the state to implement the recommendations of the Sartaj Aziz committee and other official bodies regarding GB. The GB Legislative Assembly in 2021 had also passed a resolution demanding that the centre grant the region provisional provincial status. The people of GB want greater self-government, representation in Pakistan's constitutional bodies and key institutions, and a working local government system. Because their demands have not been met, and the regional administration has failed to deliver on promises of good governance, the people have often taken to the streets to press their demands.

Since independence, reforms have been incremental in GB. Major milestones include changes in the Bhutto era, during Gen Musharraf's regime, and under the post-2008 PPP government, as well as in 2018 under the PML-N's watch. Yet all these measures, though significant, have failed to meet the people's demands. One key issue is the fact that if Pakistan were to accept GB as a province, it would negatively affect the Kashmir question. One way to grant GB its demands, and not compromise Pakistan's principled stand on the Kashmir dispute, is to give GB an AJK-like set-up, or full autonomy short of provincial status. The Sartaj Aziz-led body had recommended de facto integration of GB, giving the region representation in the NFC, Irsa, etc, ensuring the GB Assembly has full devolved powers, and 'special representation' in Pakistan's parliament. It is not

known when the Kashmir question will be resolved, and chances of a plebiscite in the occupied territory are slim. Therefore, till the day that dispute is resolved, Pakistan should consider giving GB greater representation under a provisional framework. Meanwhile, it is crucial for the elected local leadership to do a much better job of delivering services to the people while GB waits to secure greater political and economic rights.

Published in Dawn, January 21st, 2025

## Panda bond

ISLAMABAD'S plans to raise \$200m from China's capital markets through the inaugural issue of a Panda bond this year to boost its finances and diversify funding sources will be a major test of investor sentiment. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb has on multiple occasions reiterated plans to enhance Pakistan's presence in China's capital markets through the yuan-denominated Panda bond. Though it may not be difficult for the country to raise these funds, it will not be a walk in the park either as Chinese investors seem wary of Pakistan's heavy dependence on continuous Chinese debt rollovers and its request for rescheduling of energy loans of nearly \$15bn due to a liquidity crunch. A recent media report suggests that China's Exim Bank is not too enthused about giving "concessional loans to Pakistan, citing a limited window and concerns over non-payment or delayed payments to Chinese power generation companies".

The success of the bond will also help determine how quickly Pakistan can return to the international bond markets to raise the planned \$2.5bn in Eurobonds. Islamabad has not tapped the global bond markets since 2021, when it sold a debt of \$3.5bn in five- 10- and 30-year tenors to international investors, due to a balance-of-payments crisis which had led it to nearly default in 2022 before the IMF came to its rescue. Even though the crisis has been managed and international rating agencies somewhat upgraded the country's credit ratings, international investors remain concerned over the slow implementation of structural policy reforms amidst stagnant foreign official and private inflows. This is in spite of official optimism that the ratings will further be upgraded from the present junk category to investment grade in the coming months as the IMF-mandated reforms are executed to boost the recent economic stabilisation. The optimism notwithstanding, investors, including the Chinese, would want speedy and tangible progress on reforms before they bet their money on us.

Published in Dawn, January 21st, 2025

## Errant ECP

THE ECP has once again earned a detailed reprimand from the Supreme Court, this time over its decision to de-seat an independent lawmaker whom the ruling PML-N had 'claimed' as one of their own.

Finding that the ECP does not have jurisdiction to conclusively determine whether an affidavit stating that the lawmaker in question had joined the PML-N was genuine or not, the SC had set aside the commission's decision to de-seat the lawmaker in question for not voting in line with the PML-N's directives on the 26th Amendment.

Furthermore, the court also made note of substantial evidence suggesting that the lawmaker had declared his allegiance to the Sunni Ittehad Council both in the form of a written and signed declaration to the ECP and publicly. Not only that, but the PML-N's party head had also failed to provide a single instance that demonstrated that the lawmaker had been a member of their parliamentary party. That the ECP chose to adopt the ruling party's stance despite it being "contrary to the weight of the material on record" has prompted a separate note from Justice Ayesha Malik, who has questioned why the commission continues to exceed its bounds by repeatedly taking cover behind its status as a constitutional body.

Recalling that "the primary duty of the ECP is to ensure free, fair and transparent elections", Justice Malik has reminded it that "on a constitutional plane, the ECP is not the master rather the forum or organ that must perform the task which lies at the heart of the constitutional democracy." Underlining that the ECP is "duty bound to ensure that those elected by the people remain in government", the honourable justice notes that it is a solemn observance of this duty that maintains the integrity of the elections and later gives legitimacy to the government.

"It is unfortunate that despite clear pronouncements by this Court, the ECP conducts itself in a manner that is not in line with its constitutional duty rather aligned with the notion that they have the constitutional power to disregard other constitutional institutions and the basic right of the vote," Justice Malik regrets in her conclusion.

It is not the first time the commission has acted thus. Indeed, time and again, it has behaved as if it has no obligation to uphold the standards of freedom, fairness and transparency that have been prescribed to it along with the duties delegated by the Constitution.

The results of its institutional contemptuousness have been plain for all to see: a government that struggles daily to establish its legitimacy, pervasive and persistent political instability, and increasing disillusionment among the public regarding the Pakistani state's capacity to fulfil its existential needs. That it still refuses to correct course is ominous indeed.

Published in Dawn, January 22nd, 2025



## Fast-tracking M6

GRAND infrastructure projects in Pakistan often progress at the pace of a bullock cart rather than a bullet train. The Hyderabad-Sukkur Motorway (M6), a vital 306km artery meant to complete Pakistan's north-south transport corridor, is one example. While Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif recently urged acceleration of its construction, the project remains mired in the quicksand of bureaucratic inertia and financial uncertainty. The M6's significance extends beyond mere tarmac and concrete. It represents the final piece in an ambitious puzzle: the Peshawar-Karachi Motorway network. Once complete, this network would create Pakistan's first uninterrupted high-speed corridor, stretching from the bustling port city of Karachi to the historic frontier town of Peshawar. For Sindh, historically the country's economic powerhouse, the stakes are particularly high. The motorway promises to slash journey times and boost safety along one of Pakistan's busiest freight routes, which currently sees thousands of heavy vehicles navigate congested national highways daily. Sindh's agricultural heartland, currently operating like a landlocked island despite its proximity to Karachi's port, would gain swift access to national and international markets. The improved connectivity would likely catalyse both local and foreign investment in industry and tourism. The project could transform the region's economic geography, much as China's highway expansion revolutionised its rural economy in the 1990s.

Yet the road to completion is proving bumpy. The project's cost has swollen by 25pc in two years, now approaching Rs400bn. Last year's tender cancellation sparked fresh delays, while funding remains uncertain. The government's pivot to a public-private partnership model, while pragmatic, adds another layer of complexity. The World Bank's involvement and the project's inclusion in the CPEC discussions offer hope, but neither guarantees swift execution. For Sindh's rural population, the M6 represents more than economic opportunity. It promises better access to healthcare, education and markets — basic services that much of Pakistan's rural population still struggles to reach. But these benefits remain theoretical until construction begins in earnest. The project's fate will test Pakistan's ability to execute large-scale infrastructure projects efficiently. Previous motorway projects have shown that the country can deliver when political will aligns with administrative competence. The M6 needs similar alignment, and quickly. Pakistan's history is littered with infrastructure projects that began with fanfare but ended in disappointment. The M6 must not join that list. Otherwise, Pakistan's missing link risks becoming its missing opportunity.

Published in Dawn, January 22nd, 2025

## A dying light

IT appears that some Supreme Court justices will not go gently into the night. Though the institution's authority and esteem now seem to wane with every passing day, their fight to resist total capture, as ordained by the 26th Amendment, continues undeterred.

They may be up against formidable odds and gravely disadvantaged by their institution's inability to maintain a united front, but their continued refusal to surrender is what gives the public hope that at least a part of the institution still clings to life.

As the concepts of lawfulness, fairness and justice become ever more remote, power must be reminded where the lines are drawn. It may be that the lines will still be crossed — such is the conceit of those who feel they are themselves the law — but as long as there are those who will insist on calling a spade a spade, hope will not be lost.

There is currently an ongoing dispute within the SC over a case that was transferred from a regular bench that was already hearing it to the constitutional bench.

Several senior justices and members of the legal community have highlighted that the case, once it started being heard, could not simply be taken from the bench hearing it and handed to another. That this was done in this case via an administrative order even prompted one of the justices to reportedly remark, "Where it is felt that the decision may be against the government, then the case is withdrawn from the bench. This is not correct."

The wider community, too, has raised serious concerns about the implications of this incident on the independence of the judiciary, with the All Pakistan Lawyers Action Committee reminding the judiciary that "[The judges] are duty-bound to act as guardians of justice, not facilitators of vested interests."

It must be pointed out here that disputes and confusion over who gets to hear what case were anticipated and warned of by many jurists when the 26th Amendment was being passed.

Since its enactment, the repercussions have been devastating not just for the SC but also for its judges, whose power and prestige seem to have been reduced to that of a junior officer. Even the office of chief justice of Pakistan has not been immune to its ravages.

Meanwhile, the constitutional bench has emerged as a parallel court that seems to enjoy overarching jurisdiction and authority over all consequential matters. The problems this is creating will soon come to a head.

The apex court must acknowledge the objections that have been raised regarding the 26th Amendment and fix the matter before a full court. It is important that they are settled quickly and comprehensively for the sake of the institution.

## Controversial canals

THE Punjab government's contentious plans to build new canals to facilitate corporate farming in the province under the Green Pakistan Initiative in complete disregard for Sindh's objections to the project have intensified the water conflict between the two provinces. The heat generated by the debate on the controversial scheme in the Senate on Tuesday is only a trailer of things to come unless a resolution of the conflict is found, and soon. The plan has already triggered protests across Sindh, bringing opposing political parties, civil society groups and nationalist organisations onto one platform to vehemently oppose it.

As the lowest riparian in the system, Sindh is rightfully worried about the new irrigation schemes due to insufficient water availability in the Indus basin system. On paper, as pointed out by a JUI-F senator during the debate, the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord has nearly 117 MAF water to distribute among the federating units, but in reality the water available in the system for apportionment is always far short of it. No wonder the Indus delta is struggling with the disastrous consequences of shrinking annual average ecological flow below Kotri Barrage, which has decreased to 14 MAF between 1999 and 2022 from 40.69 MAF between 1976 and 1998. Rapid climate change is exacerbating these shortages and their impact on agriculture and ecology of the province. Shortages apart, some of these schemes also face certain legal and technical issues since the water availability for these canals is not sanctioned in the 1991 accord. These issues could be overcome easily if surplus water was available in the system. But this is not the case, with climate change often resulting in lower-than-normal rainfall, causing drought or drought-like conditions across the country. Thus, the argument made by PML-N Senator Irfan Siddiqui in the upper house that the water accord permitted Punjab to build new canals using its permissible allocated share does not have a leg to stand on. The only way for the PML-N government to prevent this issue from getting out of hand is to heed the advice of lawmakers and others and bring the matter to the CCI for discussion and decision. Arbitrary decisions on such issues as the ones related to water sharing by the centre have done enough damage to interprovincial harmony. Continuation of this practice will further harm the federation.

Published in Dawn, January 23rd, 2025

## Killjoys

THE skies over Lahore have fallen silent. Punjab's latest legislation banning kite flying represents a troubling overcorrection that conflates legitimate safety concerns with cultural suppression. The new law, which threatens kite flyers with up to five years' imprisonment and steep fines of Rs2m, transforms a centuries-old tradition into a serious crime — equivalent in severity to many violent offences. While the government's concern for public safety is legitimate — metal-coated

strings have indeed caused tragic accidents — the response is disproportionate. Kite flying, celebrated in spring as part of Basant festivities, is a cherished tradition in Pakistan. Around the world, from Japan’s vibrant Hamamatsu festival to India’s International Kite Festival in Gujarat, authorities have successfully balanced safety with tradition by designating specific areas for kite flying and enforcing strict regulations on string materials. The recent religious decree declaring kite flying “un-Islamic” further muddies the waters, mixing matters of public safety with religious interpretation. This risks setting a troubling precedent where harmless cultural practices are threatened by overregulation.

A more measured approach would focus on the real culprit: the manufacture and distribution of dangerous string materials. Instead of criminalising children for flying kites — with fines starting at Rs50,000 for minors — law enforcement resources would be better spent disrupting the supply chains of metallic and glass-coated strings. The Basant festival, once a herald of spring that drew tourists from across the globe to Lahore, now joins the growing list of traditions sacrificed at the altar of overreach. The economic impact is not insignificant; local artisans, kite makers, and tourism workers all bear the brunt of this sweeping ban. The solution lies in smart regulation. Designated flying zones, certified safe strings, and seasonal permits could preserve both public safety and cultural heritage. Punjab’s lawmakers would do well to remember that governance requires a scalpel, not a sledgehammer.

Published in Dawn, January 23rd, 2025

## Digital dragnet

CONSIDERING the extensive damage it has already wrought to Pakistan’s digital aspirations, one would have expected this government to have picked up a few lessons along the way. Not so, it seems.

The latest bright idea from its policymakers is to turn the digital ecosystem into even more of a minefield, with fresh laws that can and very likely will be weaponised against any citizen who refuses to toe state-set lines.

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Bill, 2025, passed by the National Assembly on Thursday, seems aimed at providing new means to state authorities for cracking down on various digital platforms and the ‘mischief makers’ who use them.

The amendments seek to jail those who spread disinformation for three years, replace the FIA’s notorious Cybercrime Wing with a brand-new investigation agency, and establish a new authority with the power to partially or fully block social media platforms that do not comply.

Peca, since its introduction in 2016, has been widely criticised as a black law created mainly to punish dissent. In the eight years since its enactment, it has been used extensively against politicians, journalists, rights activists, and even ordinary political workers to impress the might of the Pakistani establishment onto those who dare to challenge it.

It has condemned those it has touched to incur immense personal, professional and psychological costs, yet not a single meaningful step has been taken to address or even limit its abuse.

Indeed, the country's three biggest political parties have each contributed to either implementing or augmenting Peca to make it even more dangerous than it should have been.

The law's apparent fixation with the criticism of state institutions and their functionaries is indicative of the simple fact that the interests it seeks to protect are not public or national interests, but the vested interests of the country's power elite.

There are examples aplenty of individuals who have been harassed over Peca complaints based on highly frivolous reasons to support digital rights activists' assertion that this law needs to be revised and retrenched, not expanded.

With the country's justice system in a shambles and the authorities time and again displaying an abject lack of regard for due process or human rights, there is a very strong likelihood that the amendments made to Peca by the government can and will be abused by the authorities.

There is no doubt that the rise of social media has greatly complicated some of the challenges faced by modern nation-states and created the potential for unprecedented instability. However, it would be folly to attempt to tackle these challenges with blunt tools like Peca.

The Pakistani state must stop inflicting wounds on itself and learn to resolve its internal issues through social and political means.

Published in Dawn, January 24th, 2025

## USC closure

THE PML-N government seems to have finally firmed up its mind on the future of the Utility Stores. The cabinet has formed a committee led by the industries and production minister to frame a 'comprehensive' strategy in the next seven days to 'promptly' shut down the loss-making Utility Stores Corporation, and absorb its employees in the federal surplus pool or post them against vacancies in other departments. The idea is to eventually sell the assets and properties owned by the USC across the nation as part of the plan to cut wasteful public expenditure. The corporation is one of the many white elephants the government has been struggling to save from extinction in the name of providing relief to the low-income segments of the urban populace at

the expense of taxpayers. This was in spite of the Utility Stores run by the 53-year old USC having lost their utility years ago, with rapid urbanisation and population growth making it impossible for the authorities to extend the network of subsidised groceries to the targeted communities. Mismanagement and corruption to the tune of billions of rupees plaguing the corporation reinforces the case for its privatisation.

The strong case for the corporation's closure notwithstanding, the government has the responsibility to find an effective mechanism to help low-income households battered by years of soaring costs of food, healthcare, education, housing and transport, and stagnating wages. With Ramazan just around the corner and the prices of food being gradually jacked up by traders, the urgency of finding a way to ensure provision of essential kitchen items to this segment of the population cannot be overstated. That said, the provincial governments have now a bigger, rather central role to play in providing economic relief to citizens since the passage of the 18th Amendment. It, however, is sad to note that in spite of spending billions on food subsidies and Ramazan bazaars every year, no province has been able to evolve a durable mechanism to support the low-income, inflation-stricken households. This calls for devising an effective framework wherein the authorities can ensure provision of essentials for the urban population at below-market rates while ensuring the quality and minimum burden on public finances. The Punjab government's 'model bazaars' project in Lahore and other cities is one such example.

Published in Dawn, January 24th, 2025

## Hindu exodus

THE vision of this country's founding father was that of a Muslim-majority state where members of all religious communities could live in security, and with dignity. Sadly, we have come quite far from that noble vision, as the plight of Sindh's Hindus illustrates.

According to a recent study by the HRCP, a number of factors are fuelling the Hindu exodus from Sindh towards India. It should be noted that Sindh is host to the largest number of Hindus in Pakistan.

The HRCP says that the key reasons forcing Sindhi Hindus to migrate from their ancestral land are forced conversion and marriage of girls and young women, kidnapping of Hindu individuals, as well as the generally poor law and order situation in the province.

Moreover, economic issues are also causing Hindu Pakistanis to leave the country. As HRCP head Asad Iqbal Butt observed, there were reports that around 300 people left Kashmore alone for India last year, but the actual number may be higher.

It was also mentioned at the study's launch that while wealthier Hindus led relatively comfortable lives across the border, poorer members of the community were living in refugee camps.

It is also true that India is encouraging this trend; in 2024 the Citizenship Amendment Act took effect in that country, which allows non-Muslims from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh facing 'persecution' in their home countries to seek Indian citizenship. Muslims from these states are pointedly excluded.

Hindus are an essential part of Sindh's culture, and Pakistan's religious tapestry. The fact is that there is no state-sponsored anti-Hindu campaign in the country. Rather, extremist elements and criminals are targeting the community.

But the state cannot absolve itself of the responsibility to protect Hindu citizens, and assure them of safety. The key factors behind the exodus need to be addressed, while those Pakistani Hindus that have left for India should be given an amnesty, and allowed to return home.

Published in Dawn, January 24th, 2025

## Bureaucratic approach

WHEN bureaucrats fancy themselves as scholars, universities suffer. It's a pity this is a lesson the Sindh government has yet to learn. Its latest scheme — to allow civil servants to head universities — has produced precisely what bureaucrats least enjoy: protest and disorder. The province's campuses have erupted in demonstrations, much to the chagrin of Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, who has responded with that most bureaucratic of solutions: threats. The government's logic is circular enough to make a geometry professor dizzy. Universities are failing, it claims, so they need bureaucrats to save them. Yet these same institutions just showcased 417 research projects at a technology expo, suggesting they are rather more alive than advertised. The real dysfunction may lie elsewhere: the current system of appointing vice chancellors involves interviews shorter than a tea break, with results seemingly predetermined. Mr Shah's evidence for the needed change is equally puzzling. He cites cases of misconduct among current PhD-holding VCs, rather like a doctor diagnosing a broken leg by pointing at a headache. If existing leaders are failing, it rather raises questions about who appointed them — which would be Mr Shah's administration, responsible for selecting 38 VCs.

Pakistan's higher education challenges are real enough. The country desperately needs to reduce its dependency on foreign technology and boost innovation. But imagining that bureaucrats — whose own departments are hardly paragons of efficiency — will spark an academic renaissance is like expecting a traffic warden to conduct an orchestra. After the 18th Amendment devolved education to the provinces, Sindh had a chance to nurture world-class universities. Instead, it seems intent on creating what might be called 'Yes, Minister U'. The Federation of All Pakistan

Universities Academic Staff Association, now in its sixth day of protests, fears that academic independence will be sacrificed on the altar of administrative convenience. The irony is rich enough for a business school case study: in trying to fix universities, Sindh risks destroying what makes them work. Bureaucrats may excel at many things, but fostering innovation is rarely among them. Mr Shah might do better to reform his selection processes than replace scholars with civil servants. As it stands, his solution risks turning centres of learning into outposts of officialdom — a transformation that would earn an F in any economics class.

Published in Dawn, January 25th, 2025

## Stalled talks

ONE step forward, two steps back. That had been the progress so far in long-awaited negotiations between the opposition PTI and the ruling coalition, but all talks have now been called off by the PTI's incarcerated founder after a 'raid' on an allied lawmaker's residence.

Following the raid, former prime minister Imran Khan decided on Thursday that the government was being 'non-cooperative' and, therefore, there was little to be gained from continuing negotiations with it. One wonders if he was a tad impatient in making that call.

After all, his party had previously announced that talks would be given a chance at least till the end of January, after which it would take decisions regarding its next steps forward. The government, too, had promised to respond to the PTI's written demands by Jan 28 and had repeatedly asked the party not to abandon the committee set up for parleys between the two political camps.

It was, no doubt, a poor play by the authorities to sanction a raid on the residence of Sunni Ittehad Council Chairman Hamid Raza, who also serves as the PTI's spokesperson for the talks committee. The PTI chief saw it as an attack on the negotiating committee, noting that "negotiations based on ill intentions cannot succeed."

However, Mr Khan should not have let the incident distract him from the bigger picture. Any negotiation with the government was never going to be easy, given the chasm between the two camps. His party has also been aware that there are spoilers who were unhappy with the process from the start. It would have been wiser, therefore, not to react to the provocation. However bitter their differences, both parties need something from each other if they hope to keep their share in the country's political future. They should have remained committed to the process.

Perhaps there is an opportunity yet to salvage the talks. Though he has ended negotiations, the PTI founder still wants judicial commissions to probe the events of May 9 and Nov 26. Given the government's confidence and conviction regarding its position, it does not make sense for it to



delay the matter any further. It should let independent arbitrators investigate the facts so that these chapters may be closed and the country can move on.

There is a dire need for all national leaders to act sensibly if they wish the best for the country's future. Much damage has been done by their inability to resolve their differences through political channels, and yet it seems that the temptation to keep looking to the 'third umpire' has not yet gone. A mutually acceptable solution must be found to return executive power back to the people, where it rightfully belongs. The status quo is not sustainable.

Published in Dawn, January 25th, 2025

## West Bank's turn

MERE days after pausing the Gaza genocide, Israel has turned its guns on the occupied West Bank.

Though Israel had been conducting raids in the West Bank while simultaneously carrying out the slaughter in Gaza in the aftermath of Oct 7, 2023, with the ceasefire taking effect in the Strip on Sunday, Tel Aviv is now free to concentrate its attention on the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories.

Raids were stepped up earlier this week, with around a dozen people killed, while residents of the Jenin refugee camp have been forcibly evacuated.

As a UN official has noted, Israel is applying "war fighting" methods in the West Bank. While Tel Aviv had cited Hamas as the casus belli for the Gaza rampage, the West Bank is ruled by the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority. This shows that Israel has a problem with all Palestinians, regardless of their political affiliations.

Israel's actions in the West Bank have very swiftly shattered the illusion that the Gaza ceasefire would bring peace to the occupied territories. The Zionist state — as it has shown over the decades — thrives on conflict, and peacemaking is not a priority for the Israeli ruling elite.

Couple this with the fact that the current occupant of the White House is surrounded by zealous Zionists, and the future for the Palestinians does not look good. It is highly likely that Israel will try and annex the West Bank, with the Trump administration egging it on. This will likely turbocharge the Palestinian resistance, as Arabs in both Gaza and the West Bank fight for survival.

It is also a fact that the Lebanon ceasefire is due to expire in a few days, and Tel Aviv has no plans to withdraw from south Lebanon. While Hezbollah may be weakened, it can still put up a fight. Therefore, it may only be a matter of time before the 'multifront' war resumes in the region.

Published in Dawn, January 25th, 2025

## A free lunch

THE federal government appears to have gone back on its word to rescind the facility of free electricity for both in-service and retired power sector employees, judges, bureaucrats, public office holders, and others. This is obvious from a written response submitted before the National Assembly by the Power Division in reply to a lawmaker's query. Justifying free electricity for employees of the government-owned power sector, it said that the provision, like medical and accommodation facilities, was part of the terms and conditions of employment and in accordance with practices in public and corporate sectors.

Each year, around 441.5m units of free electricity is given to 200,000 employees in the public sector, including state-owned corporations. Of these, 308.2m units of free electricity are given to existing employees, while 133.2m units are provided to retired employees. Who bears the cost of this largesse? Other consumers. The cost of free electricity to employees across the country's energy infrastructure is incorporated into the operations and maintenance charge on top of massive system losses as part of the consumer tariff; a similar facility allowed to the others is paid by the government from taxpayers' money. The resistance within the government to any proposal to withdraw the freebies — free electricity, transport, housing, and other perks — which are being enjoyed by bureaucrats is understandable. Various past proposals to monetise the perks of bureaucrats have met with severe opposition and have been abandoned in spite of the heavy cost to taxpayers. Effecting change and upending the status quo has always been a difficult task. But it is the job of the political leadership to scrutinise the costs and benefits of these perks, overcome the resistance and get the beneficiaries to pay upfront for these facilities. Sadly, no government has been able to reform the bureaucracy and strip it of costly freebies due to lack of political will.

Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2025

## Murder on the seas

IT is time Pakistan asserted itself more forcefully and played a bigger role in busting international human trafficking networks. As a wide crackdown continues across the country, it has emerged that most of the 44 Pakistanis who perished in the recent Moroccan boat tragedy died at the hands of African smugglers, who reportedly tortured and murdered their 'cargo' while ferrying them from Mauritania to Europe. Around half a dozen suspects have reportedly been picked up by the Moroccan navy, who have initiated legal proceedings against them under local laws. However, this should not be enough for Pakistani authorities, who must pursue this case till its logical end and get justice for the murdered souls by making sure these merchants of misery can never ply their evil trade again. Meanwhile, the crackdown on human smugglers within Pakistan must not stop; any individual found involved in the transnational trafficking trade should be

prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. The authorities have identified smuggling hotspots. They must now map the networks, identify those involved, disable this trade, and create strict deterrents to ensure such tragedies do not recur.

It is commendable that the prime minister has taken a personal interest in this tragedy. He has also taken it upon himself to head a special task force formed to combat human trafficking syndicates in the country. Given the global outcry against illegal migration, it is extremely important for Pakistan to demonstrate it is taking proactive measures. Its reputation should not be tarnished by this reprehensible practice. For too long, human smugglers have exploited vulnerable and impressionable young folk and extorted millions from their families after promising them tickets to greener pastures. Many of those who have been trapped in their web have paid not only exorbitant sums of money, but also with their lives during the perilous journeys they were forced to take. Meanwhile, upstanding citizens also ended up paying the price, as many foreign countries have implemented much stricter scrutiny for travellers from Pakistan and often deny them visas for no fault of their own. There is, therefore, an urgent need for officials to demonstrate zero tolerance for human trafficking and to take the lead in international investigations wherever possible. The world must be assured that Pakistan is serious about eliminating the problem.

Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2025

## Gag orders

THE proverbial might of the pen is, in reality, unable to hold out against the barrel of the gun.

The new HRCP report, Harsh Sentences, charts the extent of capitulation in a dark media landscape where freedom of speech is throttled through covert means, including institutional and legal pressures. A record of the troubling state of freedom of expression during the last two years, it pinpoints “new battlegrounds and unholy alliances” where the noose tightens for selected media outlets.

Over the years, the cyclical template of censorship in Pakistan has become eerily familiar: the cost of speaking truth to power gets heavier, while freedoms peak for voices aligned with state narratives and interests. Although journalists are no strangers to hard seasons, recent times have been particularly dystopian for Pakistan’s mediascape with threats, enforced disappearances, manipulative press advisories, undeclared red lines and mass harassment.

Many maintain that journalist Arshad Sharif’s killing in 2022 combined with suffocating curbs shaped an atmosphere of fear in newsrooms. Widespread loss of trust in mainstream and legacy media was the fallout as powerful stakeholders and extremist groups moved in to exploit the

situation by raising a generation of social media consumers with the purpose of amplifying their narratives, irrespective of the truth.

The counterproductive approach adopted by successive governments to force the media to buckle is a sad commentary on Pakistan's fragile state structure; brutal suppression experienced today exposes how hard it is for the state to make peace with democratic ideals of acceptance and the coevolution of diverse opinions in a modern society.

As noted in the HRCP report, "the space for freedom of expression ... can become constricted due to collusion between the state and the political forces... . In Imran Khan's heyday... the PTI's social media machine would specialise in targeting journalists ... labelling them 'lifafas'... ."

These tactics are tantamount to a slow slicing of media and democracy; depriving news organisations, which uphold editorial integrity, of vital advertising income — the financial ventilator in the current media minefield — is censorship at its most insidious and destructive. Worse, there have been reports that federal and provincial authorities capitulate to establishment directives to withdraw advertisements. It reeks of a synchronised demolition of independent media outlets through legal and monetary harassment to stagger authentic news broadcasting.

The establishment should know that the federation is weakened by a submissive press. Coercive policies must be abandoned for constitutional freedoms to be inviolable. Amnesty International's latest warning that the proposed changes to the draconian cybercrime laws will strengthen the government's control over Pakistan's heavily monitored digital space, should also serve as a harbinger of terrible global consequences — shrinking rights can be violative of international agreements. Repression portends disaster.

Published in Dawn, January 26th, 2025

## Learning losses

WHEN thermometers in Lahore hit 48°C last May, it led to closures across the region. From Dhaka to Manila, some 128m Asian students found themselves locked out of classrooms, victims of what Unicef calls an unprecedented convergence of climate and educational crises. The numbers, published in a new report, are troubling: globally, one in seven students saw their education disrupted by climate events. Most were in Asia. That should worry everyone. Education has long been the subcontinent's favoured escape route from poverty. Now nature is blocking the exit. Three-quarters of affected learners live in low and lower-middle-income countries, where rickety school infrastructure struggles to serve mushrooming populations. When temperatures soar, these schools become literal hothouses, forcing authorities to choose between risking heatstroke and halting lessons.

The timing is particularly unfortunate. The post-Covid learning crisis, where two-thirds of children cannot read competently by age 10, is being compounded by these climate-induced interruptions. More worryingly, the disruption is driving an uptick in child marriages across South Asia, as desperate families seek economic relief during climate emergencies. April 2024 marked the peak of this educational exodus, with heatwaves affecting 118m children across Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, the Philippines, and Thailand. By September, when schools reopen, at least 18 countries had suspended classes. The pattern suggests climate disruptions are no longer seasonal inconveniences but structural challenges to education systems. Solving this requires more than air conditioning. Climate-resilient architecture, robust remote-learning systems and teacher training in climate education are essential. Yet education is absent from climate finance discussions. Fortunately, some countries are taking note: India has trained 121,000 educators in climate education, while Vietnam is exploring solar power for 50,000 schools across 63 provinces. The arithmetic is simple: Asia's 'demographic dividend' assumes functioning schools. Without action to climate-proof classrooms, that dividend risks becoming a debt. For Asia's education ministries, the heat is on.

Published in Dawn, January 27th, 2025

## World Bank's view

PAKISTAN is at a critical point. Inconsistent and poor economic policies of the past have had an adverse impact on living standards, businesses and the environment. Resistance from the ruling elite to reform has exacerbated the situation for ordinary citizens, with recurring crises hitting them harder than ever before. No wonder the country has fallen far behind its peers in recent years. The World Bank, which has committed \$20bn in lending to Pakistan over the next 10 years to focus on development issues such as the impact of climate change and private sector growth, wants the government to implement wide-ranging economic reforms to rectify matters. During an exclusive conversation with Dawn last week, the bank's vice president for South Asia Martin Raiser attributed many of Pakistan's long-standing challenges to the country's failure to carry out energy, water and revenue reforms over the past decades. In his view, it is crucial to implement reforms to address the myriad challenges the country faces in order to ensure improved economic development and prosperity for its citizens.

The World Bank is not the only creditor that consistently emphasises the urgent need to execute policy reforms to correct the deep-seated structural imbalances in the economy, which are impeding growth. Other multilateral agencies and bilateral creditors, too, have urged Islamabad to course correct. The reforms suggested by Mr Raiser — who was at the launch of the bank's Country Partnership Framework under which \$14bn have been committed in concessional loans and \$6bn at higher rates — are not new or unique. He has basically argued in favour of major

policy shifts to put the economy on the path to growth by improving public services and helping the poor through social protection programmes, improving fiscal management to reduce the burgeoning budget deficit and address distortions in economic, trade, energy and farm policies. Many countries, including Indonesia, India and Vietnam, have previously leveraged their economic crises to pursue reforms to achieve large private foreign investments and higher growth rates to substantially cut poverty and improve living standards. If they can do it, why can't Pakistan? It is time our politicians and policymakers listened to the world and took the decision to jettison past patterns and move towards a new economic policy paradigm. Ambivalence is not likely to get us anywhere.

Published in Dawn, January 27th, 2025

## Trumpian purge

IN his efforts to restore America's supposed greatness, Donald Trump has launched a crackdown on migrants — mostly undocumented but also some with papers.

Soon after re-entering the White House a week ago, the US president signed a raft of executive orders designed to deliver on his campaign promises. These orders have included the rounding up of migrants signalling the start of what the White House press secretary has termed "the largest massive deportation operation in history".

Moreover, a 'Muslim ban-plus' has been announced; it goes even further than the 2017 order, which prevented citizens from certain Muslim-majority countries from travelling to the US.

Foreign students in America who dare to speak up for Palestine also risk being put on a plane back home. Also, the US president has frozen the asylum and refugee programmes; at least 25,000 Afghans waiting to move to the US in Pakistan now find themselves in limbo.

For Mr Trump and his MAGA support base, these moves are necessary to preserve what they view as the American way of life. The fact is that the world over, the far right tends to blame foreigners and migrants for all of society's ills.

And as history shows, such developments have occurred previously as well. For example, Chinese individuals were barred from entering the US under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

For the atavist in Donald Trump, these are probably models worthy of emulation to restore America's 'greatness'. Yet it should be noted that Mr Trump himself has a close connection with migration. His wife Melania was born in Slovenia, which was then part of Yugoslavia, while his late ex-wife Ivana was born in communist Czechoslovakia.

If the directives President Trump is championing had been in effect then, both these women from socialist countries would have likely been kept out of the US. Clearly, the US leader does not have a problem with all migrants.

He once observed that America should admit more people from countries like Norway, and not Haiti and El Salvador. Perhaps the colour of one's skin, and the religion one follows, are the key determinants qualifying one as a 'good' migrant in Mr Trump's world.

Immigrants from around the world have made the US what it is today. Yet these realities matter little to the champions and supporters of Trumpism. Mr Trump's moves are likely to fuel greater racism and xenophobia in the US, as all foreigners will be seen as standing in the way of America's greatness.

The US is basically following Europe's lead, where the far right has practically declared war on migrants. People from across the globe who seek to reach American shores must now accept the new reality: Mr Trump has pulled the welcome mat.

Published in Dawn, January 27th, 2025

## Unstable outlook

HAVING slashed its key policy rate by yet another 100bps to 12pc, the bigger question for the State Bank now is whether or not it should pause the ongoing monetary easing cycle, which has seen the rate being cut by 1,000bps since June to preserve the recently achieved fragile stability.

Though the bank had long stopped providing forward guidance on interest rates, the latest monetary policy statement and its governor's post-policy briefing offer some insights into the SBP's thought process. On the one hand, it believes that a "cautious monetary policy stance is needed to ensure price stability ... for sustainable economic growth". This demands that the real policy rate "remain adequately positive on a forward-looking basis to stabilise inflation in the target range of 5-7pc".

Moreover, the risks to inflation — volatile global commodity prices, protectionist policies in major economies, timing and magnitude of administered energy tariff adjustments, volatile perishable food prices, and any additional tax measures to meet the FBR target — call for a pause on monetary easing, or at least moderation in the pace of rate cuts.

On the other hand, the current account is expected to run a surplus of 0.5pc of GDP, with international reserves rising on increased remittances and a slight growth in exports in spite of heavy debt payments, while the bank has revised down its projections for the average annual inflation to 5.5pc-7.5pc, or close to its targeted range, from its original estimate of 11.5pc-13.5pc

for this fiscal year. This means that the SBP still has enough room to continue the monetary easing cycle as real interest rates stand at 790bps, much higher than the historic average of 200-300bps.

Indeed, the economy appears to have turned a corner in the last several months. The improving indicators can be tempting enough to act boldly in order to accelerate economic growth. But must the bank go for this path and repeat past blunders?

In spite of the recent recovery, the economy remains on edge. The 45.5pc reduction in interest rates in seven months should be enough, at least for now, to send a positive signal to the private sector. It is time to prioritise long-term stability over unsustainable faster growth driven by imported consumption. We have seen the economy experiencing severe balance-of-payments crises as recently as in 2018 and 2022 due to the elites' impatience with stabilisation policies.

Chasing growth without executing structural reforms in an uncertain global environment — in which the possibility of a global trade war in the wake of President Donald Trump's threats to impose tariffs on America's trade partners and rivals alike — can be suicidal. The wealthy elites will escape the impact. But it will crush middle-class households who have borne the brunt of the economic instability.

## 'Poor' lawmakers

WHILE the average Pakistani is expected to carry the burden of austerity as he struggles to put food on the table, our lawmakers believe that their 'exceptional' performance entitles them to a substantial pay raise — on top of their considerable perks. A proposal by the National Assembly's Finance Committee calling for hefty pay hikes for members of both Houses is currently with the prime minister. As per the details, lawmakers will see their monthly salaries jump from Rs180,000 to Rs519,000. The original suggestion had been to jack up remuneration to Rs1m a month, but the NA speaker reportedly felt this may have been a tad too much. According to media reports, the last time our hardworking lawmakers received a raise was seven years ago. Obviously, inflation has been biting and the MNAs and senators sorely feel their compensation should reflect the tough economic realities of the day. They may also have been inspired by Punjab Assembly members who gave themselves fat raises last month. Oddly, while political parties are usually at each other's throats, members from across the aisle have united to secure this key human right.

If Pakistan were a First World economy, and if our lawmakers had been delivering like their elected peers in developed democracies, this proposed pay raise could have been justified. But we are struggling to stay solvent, while our lawmakers' output is far from stellar. And with the centre slashing government jobs in the name of rightsizing to meet IMF demands, how can such massive pay hikes be justified? Moreover, the minimum wage in Pakistan is Rs37,000 per month in most provinces; can the people's representatives justify such hefty salaries when the working man is



expected to survive on a meagre amount? It is not, of course, only the lawmakers who grant themselves gracious pay raises. Members of the bureaucracy, judiciary and the military are all compensated handsomely at the taxpayer's expense through salaries as well as perks. But the people's representatives need to set an example to show they care about the common Pakistani. A raise can be considered, but not such an unreasonable jump. Also, such pay raises should be part of the budget and not appear out of the blue. The prime minister must do the right thing and ensure that any increase in the lawmakers' salary stays within reasonable bounds.

Published in Dawn, January 28th, 2025

## Digital security

A RECENT advisory issued by the National Telecommunication and Information Technology Security Board has caused a bit of a stir, while also bringing attention to the important function the board quietly performs. The NITB, which works under the Cabinet Division and issues policy directives for technology use and security in the government sector, recently flagged 16 'browser extensions' for their vulnerability to hacking and data breaches. Though its advisory was a fairly routine one, it triggered much confusion when a few social and even mainstream media outlets misinterpreted it to mean that the NITB had found security issues with major artificial intelligence applications that are in vogue these days. The issues were, in fact, found in free tools created by third parties to integrate directly with internet browsers, but this got lost in the noise. The episode highlighted how easily average citizens, including those 'reporting' for the public, can be misled when there is inadequate understanding of modern technologies.

The NITB, a high-powered forum, mainly serves state interests in securing information and telecommunication technologies. Its mandate also covers the private sector. Unfortunately, its work does not seem to get the attention it deserves, even though ordinary citizens who use modern technologies daily could benefit immensely from the advisories it issues, especially those that pertain to circulating disinformation or security-related issues uncovered in widely used technologies. Over the past two years, for example, it has issued pertinent guidelines about how to use modern smartphones safely and securely, and also warned about serious issues with common CCTV solutions that are used to secure residential or commercial premises. With new technologies coming out almost every day, it is important for entities like the NITB to continue protecting the safety and interests of not just the Pakistani state but also its citizens. Meanwhile, it is the responsibility of those reporting on the work of such watchdogs to do so with care.

Published in Dawn, January 28th, 2025

## Cricket spin

PAKISTAN seemed to have found the blueprint for Test success at home: raging turners that had brought three wins in a row. After winning the opening game against the West Indies in their last series of the World Test Championship, they seemed headed towards ending a disappointing campaign on a high note. The West Indies, though, ended the two-match series on level terms, beating Pakistan in the final Test in Multan. The loss ensured the hosts finished at the bottom of the WTC table. It is a position they had not foreseen before the start of what was billed as a bumper home season, with skipper Shan Masood setting his sights on making the WTC final. Following a whitewash at the hands of Bangladesh, Pakistan turned to spin after losing to England in the opening Test of their three-match series. They fought back to win that series and were on top after the opening session of the second Test against the West Indies, only for the tourists to fight back and win their first Test on Pakistani soil since 1990.

Pakistan's batting crumbled in the face of West Indies' spin firepower while chasing 253. They fell 120 runs short. Later, Shan indicated that similar turning pitches — instead of flat tracks — were likely in the upcoming domestic season to give batters the practice to thrive in such spinning conditions. Perhaps if Pakistan had picked the best batters against spin, the outcome might have been different, but as the old adage goes, practice makes perfect. Amid murmurs of a two-tier Test system, Pakistan are looking to spin as the way to win at home. Shan already backs the system. Which tier Pakistan end up in could well be decided at the end of the next WTC cycle with their first Test series coming in nine months' time, giving Shan and his fellow batters time to improve their prowess against spin.

Published in Dawn, January 29th, 2025

## A second Nakba?

WHILE candidate Trump was able to get away with making outrageous statements on the campaign trail, what President Trump says will be construed around the world as American policy. In this regard, the US leader's recent remarks about Gaza are deeply troubling. Over the weekend, Donald Trump suggested that the devastated Palestinian Strip be "cleaned out", and its people be shipped off to Jordan and Egypt in a "temporary" move, or perhaps even something "long term". These suggestions sound ominously like a plan to ethnically cleanse Gaza of its Palestinian inhabitants, and pave the way for Israeli reoccupation. There has been opposition to this dubious plan across the board — with the exception of the Israeli far right. Egypt, Jordan, the Europeans as well as some of Mr Trump's Republican allies have said the proposal is a non-starter, and it would be a bad idea to empty Gaza of its people. As some experts have noted, any forcible expulsion of the Strip's people could be considered a crime against humanity. Of course, Israel

has been committing plenty of crimes against humanity in Gaza over the past 15 months until the ceasefire took effect. But the Palestinians — by returning to northern Gaza in droves — have shown the world that even savage bombardment and starvation will not make them abandon their land. Their forefathers were forced off their land during the Nakba; the people of Palestine seem convinced not to repeat this dark chapter of history.

Wild ideas such as settling the Palestinians in other Arab states — some have even recommended dispatching them to Indonesia — are dead in the water. This land belongs to the Palestinian people, and the only viable and just option is the two-state solution where the Arabs rule over sovereign, contiguous territory able to sustain itself. Unfortunately, far too many amongst the Israeli elite, along with their fervent Zionist supporters in the American political establishment, wish to devour more and more Arab real estate to recreate the supposed biblical land of Israel. That is why the occupied West Bank, Gaza, Syria's Golan and southern Lebanon are all on the wish list of Israeli extremists. If Tel Aviv were to go ahead with bringing the plans for a 'Greater Israel' to fruition, and if the US were to aid this dangerous endeavour, it would be a guarantee for setting the Mideast alight.

Published in Dawn, January 29th, 2025

## PTI no-show

THEY waited for nothing. The PTI, making good on its threat to boycott the fourth round of negotiations between the opposition and the ruling parties, remained a no-show at the Tuesday session.

The government committee waited for about 45 minutes before the meeting was finally called off. It is hoped that this does not prove to be the end of the line for the process. National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq, whose office has been hosting the negotiations, graciously left a door open for the PTI, expressing hope that it would realise that talks were still the only way forward.

However, the spokesperson for the government in the committee, Senator Irfan Siddiqui, had earlier taken a harder line over the weekend, warning that the dialogue would be called off if the PTI's representatives did not show up for the meeting. Similarly, the PTI had shown rigidity in making the fulfilment of its demands a precondition for its attendance.

It is a shame that what had initially seemed to be a genuine attempt to solve problems with talks fizzled out thus. Both sides certainly lived up to their worst expectations of each other: the PTI exhibited fickleness by withdrawing suddenly and prematurely from the process, while the government demonstrated ill intent by first dragging its feet and then allowing a raid on the opposition committee spokesperson's house.

Indeed, the outcome was always what had seemed to be the most likely one, even if it was not hoped for. It can only be prayed that both sides realise their errors and make amends to salvage the process. If they think bravado can hide the fact that they are individually weakened and need a breakthrough, they are mistaken. The two sides can continue to play their political cat-and-mouse games, but they will likely come full circle.

It had earlier been noted that the negotiations would have trouble continuing as long as the bigwigs from each party were not directly involved. Second- or third-tier leaders alone cannot take talks forward. They need a constant line of communication with their party's leaders to discuss possibilities and get approvals.

In this case, the PTI's negotiating team should have been allowed free access to Imran Khan, which it was not. It is strange that the government remained reluctant to facilitate their meetings and still expected a positive outcome from the talks.

There is no shaking off the growing impression that an entire country is being held hostage by the egos of a few powerful individuals. Bad laws continue to be enacted to prolong the status quo, and bad decisions keep delaying the possibility of a turnaround. This will have deeply negative effects on the health of the country for years to come.

Published in Dawn, January 29th, 2025

## Court in crisis

THE Supreme Court faces a crisis of legitimacy. A growing chorus within the legal community has been calling for challenges to the 26th Amendment to be heard by a full court, but the appeal has fallen on deaf ears.

There is increasing frustration over the complications created by the law, especially as it has begun interfering with the independent functioning of the judiciary. The growing public perception is that the judiciary has been hijacked by other branches of the state, with judges being appointed to senior positions not on the basis of individual merit but on what 'services' they may be able to offer in return for their appointments.

While it would be unfair to believe such criticisms without supporting evidence, the fact remains that there has been very little effort on the part of the institution and its leadership to address such concerns in good faith.

Recent remarks by one of the senior-most judges of the Islamabad High Court have underlined the fact that criticism of the 26th Amendment is not simply political in nature.

Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani, senior puisne judge of the Islamabad High Court, on Tuesday lent his support to the caucus calling for a full court to hear the 26th Amendment challenges. He seemed convinced the amendment was moved in response to a “letter”, ostensibly the one written by six justices of the IHC detailing brazen meddling in court affairs. Many others seem to share very similar views.

Meanwhile, that same day, the constitutional bench of the Supreme Court set aside a ruling issued by a regular bench regarding the administrative jurisdiction of the committees that oversee case assignments.

The decision prompted a recusal from one of the judges of the constitutional bench, who left with a note that the court should “preserve and safeguard the sanctity of judicial orders”.

Clearly, there is much unrest within the superior judiciary over the 26th Amendment and its resultant complications and controversies. There is force in the position taken by many fair-minded individuals within the legal community that the challenges against the amendment must be heard by all justices of the Supreme Court so that they are conclusively decided.

The judges assigned to one bench do not become superior in their legal acumen compared to those assigned to other benches merely by virtue of their appointment. Therefore, there is no reason why only some should decide the challenges and others should not.

There are also several past precedents of a full court hearing challenges to constitutional amendments to support this demand. There is no denying that the integrity and independence of the present Supreme Court seem to be in doubt, even among those within the judiciary. It seems prudent to settle all concerns fairly instead of allowing them to fester.

Published in Dawn, January 30th, 2025

## Death blow

JOURNALISTS took to the streets in protest; human rights groups warned against the dangers; and digital rights experts cried themselves hoarse. But it all fell on deaf ears.

And now, after the president’s assent, the Peca amendments have become law, dealing democracy what might as well be termed a death blow. The haste with which this has occurred is astounding. Civil society pleaded for consultations, for a pause, for a moment of reflection. They were met with silence. Now, as the ink dries on this draconian law, the chilling effect on free expression is already setting in. The new law introduces Section 26(A), criminalising so-called fake news — a term left deliberately vague — subjecting individuals to up to three years in prison or fines of up to Rs2m. But what constitutes fake news? Who decides what information is “likely to cause fear, panic, or unrest”? As history has repeatedly shown, such ambiguities do not lend

themselves to fair application. The PPP's support for the legislation marks a spectacular ideological somersault that would score perfect tens in any gymnastics competition. Having once championed press freedom, the party now appears to believe that the best way to protect democracy is to strangle it. Information Minister Attaullah Tarar's distinction between "working journalists" and citizens who "just pull out their phones" suggests a touching nostalgia for an era when news travelled by horseback.

The government's claims that these amendments are meant to protect citizens hardly sound sincere. In fact, the establishment of a new National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency and the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority makes clear its true intent: unprecedented control over Pakistan's digital space. This law extends beyond curtailing dissent — it seeks to erase it altogether. It should never have been passed. The government had an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue, to strengthen media regulations through fair and transparent mechanisms, and to counter disinformation without trampling on fundamental rights. Instead, it chose coercion over consultation. Pakistan's journalists, digital activists, and ordinary citizens must now prepare for a long battle against a law designed to silence them. The question is: will the courts, the last line of defence for civil liberties, stand up to this legislative overreach? The answer may well determine the future of free speech in the country.

Published in Dawn, January 30th, 2025

## Enhanced inclusivity

TWO fresh initiatives involving new features in people's CNICs should help enhance inclusivity for special persons, along with promoting organ donation amongst the public. Nadra has recently amended its rules to allow for a special wheelchair logo for persons with disabilities to be displayed on their CNICs; these cards will have lifetime validity. Moreover, citizens who wish to donate their organs will now have a special donor logo printed on their identity cards. The prime minister had last year announced the latter initiative to promote organ donation, and thereby save lives. Those wishing to avail these new services will be able to do so upon applying for fresh CNICs, or renewing their cards.

With regard to PWDs, having CNICs with lifetime validity will save special persons from the trouble of having to visit Nadra centres for renewal. In a similar vein, the Punjab government last year launched the Himmat Card, which provides those PWDs who cannot work with financial support. These initiatives are welcome, but the state should also keep in mind that it needs to adapt infrastructure so that it is accessible to PWDs, and allows them to live their lives independently, and with dignity. For example, public transport infrastructure and vehicles should be PWD-friendly, while buildings also need to have ramps, elevators, etc, in place for special persons. As for the organ donor logo on CNICs, this initiative should be promoted by lawmakers, celebrities,

influencers, and others, in order to increase the trend of deceased organ donation. As it is, there is considerable deficit in the legal demand and supply of organs, leading to transplant rackets. Moreover, a person's blood type should also be mentioned on the CNIC; this can help first responders save lives in emergency situations. These are progressive moves to further integrate PWDs into national life, and promote organ donation, and need to be accompanied by complementary measures by the state.

Published in Dawn, January 30th, 2025

## Deep shock

THE AI wars have begun. For years, America sought to hold China back when it hindered access to its semiconductors, and more recently, its AI chips. The plan failed spectacularly this month when Chinese AI company DeepSeek took the tech world by storm with its own model that rivals the performance of the best that ChatGPT has to offer, developed at a fraction of the cost. Since its launch on Jan 10, the app has shot to the top spot on the Apple App Store. The real ripple it has created, however, is wiping nearly \$1tr off the market capitalisation of major US tech firms as investors reassess the global AI playing field. The writing had been on the Great Firewall, for those who bothered to read it. While US officials fretted over Taiwan Semiconductor's fabs, China's tech giants were busy perfecting the art of algorithmic efficiency. DeepSeek's success has shown us how constraints can breed innovation. Denied access to Nvidia's most powerful AI chips under US sanctions, Chinese engineers optimised older, less powerful hardware to train DeepSeek. According to the Financial Times, DeepSeek developed its model in just two months with an investment of under \$6m, while OpenAI reportedly spends over \$5bn annually.

This technological leapfrog has profound implications. The notion that American sanctions could meaningfully delay Chinese AI development now appears naive. More concerning for Western policymakers is the possibility that China's AI sector has evolved to be more resilient precisely because it was forced to innovate under constraints. The result is a new world order in artificial intelligence. For the West, the challenge remains in maintaining its technological edge, while engaging with a rival whose capabilities can no longer be dismissed. What might surface tomorrow is not known at this point. The only certainty is that America's strategy of containment has failed. The dragon, it seems, is finally spreading its wings.

Published in Dawn, January 31st, 2025

## Provincial AIT laws

HARMONISING the provincial agriculture income tax regimes with federal personal and corporate income tax rates is one of the key goals of the ongoing \$7bn IMF funding programme. The provinces had committed to the lender and federal government, at the time of the finalisation of the loan agreement, that they would execute this condition by making the relevant legislative changes before the start of this year. The success of the first biannual performance review of the programme, beginning either late next month or in early March, will largely be determined by tangible progress on this critical issue as the failure to harmonise the provincial and federal rates could jeopardise the loan or at least delay the release of the next tranche. Apart from that, the harmonisation of the rates is also critical for a fair, transparent and equitable tax system in the country, as well as for plugging the loopholes that have contributed to tax evasion by both industry and wealthy individuals.

So far, the provinces are trying to resist the condition. For example, even though Punjab was the first province to make the required changes in its AIT law — and that too well before the IMF deadline — it has yet to notify the new, updated personal and corporate AIT rates matching the federal income tax slabs. For inexplicable reasons, the amendments to the law delegate the powers to notify the new rates to the Punjab cabinet. KP has just passed a bill after a delay of almost a month. Sindh and Balochistan have so far given no indication as to when they intend to amend their respective AIT laws. Sindh is understood to have drafted the amendments to its existing AIT law. Nevertheless, the ruling PPP in the province is believed to be stalling in order to exert pressure on Islamabad regarding the latter's plans to construct new canals for corporate farming under the military's green initiative. Indeed, politics is driving critical policy decisions in the case of both Punjab and Sindh, which together account for nearly 90pc of Pakistan's farm output. With time running out, it is crucial for Punjab to notify the updated rates to address public doubts, and for Sindh to amend its law quickly in accordance with the agreement with the Fund whose support remains critical to an economy that is still in the early stages of recovery.

Published in Dawn, January 31st, 2025

## Cost of control

AT some point, those currently responsible for this nation of 240m souls will be confronted with the question: what have their policies achieved?

What objective good has been accomplished by upending the foundations of the Pakistani state and enforcing a new contract on its unwilling citizenry that could not have been achieved if the democratic political process had taken its course?



Much ink has been spilt on the economic contagion resulting from the political upheaval that has destabilised this country for the last three years. And, in the elite's quest to regain control, citizens have paid many additional costs that have yet to be properly accounted for. But things, instead of getting better, seem to be progressively worsening.

Recent amendments to Peca, disruption of the digital economy, and the crisis in the judiciary are cases in point. The concern arises: how much longer before we start to correct course?

In case our policymakers are swayed only by direct, tangible outcomes, a warning about Pakistan's GSP-Plus status, issued by a European Union envoy, should serve as a wake-up call. Since 2014, Pakistan has enjoyed preferential access to the EU market in the form of tariff exemptions and reductions for its exports, mainly textiles. In exchange for this preferential treatment, it has made a number of commitments, including to protect human and labour rights and ensure good governance, among others.

Given the precarious condition of Pakistan's economy and its reliance on exports to keep matters on an even keel, one would have expected that the rulers would have gone out of their way to protect such beneficial trade agreements. Instead, the EU's Special Representative for Human Rights Olof Skoog was greeted on his ongoing visit with amendments to the Peca law, amendments which rights activists strongly believe will further restrict Pakistanis' already limited freedom of expression.

The worrying state of affairs seems to have prompted Mr Skoog to warn that Pakistan's GSP-Plus status should not be taken for granted. Last year, the government had attacked the main opposition party for 'lobbying' to get the GSP-Plus revoked; this year, it has only itself to blame for weakening Pakistan's position by taking a number of regressive measures.

Mr Skoog has conveyed the EU's concerns to important quarters, including the chief justice, the army chief, and the law and commerce ministers, as well as the deputy prime minister. It is strongly hoped that those concerns were received with all the seriousness they deserve.

How Pakistan runs itself may, on most occasions, be an internal matter. However, where international trade agreements are concerned, Islamabad cannot expect to get away with violating the commitments it has made to foreign partners. Those responsible must consider the consequences of their actions.

Published in Dawn, January 31st, 2025